

Egyptian Nasserite Memories on African Liberation (1956 – 1975) A Personal Experience*

Introduction

The need for oral history as exemplified in personal narratives of the actual actors, in the history of Africa in particular, is obvious in view of the scarcity of authentic sources for that history. The same is true for social and cultural histories of societies in periods of social transformation. Thus, these personal narratives fill the many gaps that are sure to occur if we rely solely on official documents that may be biased by the interests and policies of the people in power. My own experience in Egyptian politics – and probably in others – shows that official history is often subjected to processes of deconstruction and reconstruction of the facts to suit the changing moods of the main actors in power, or those who follow them. Thus, the multiplicity of narratives may be a source of better control rather than cause for confusion as some may think.

The relations between Egypt and the rest of Africa after the 23rd July 1952 Revolution, are a model for the importance of

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oral history of those relations, whether in the fields of political and economic development or in the common struggle against foreign domination. The radical change of policy of the Sadat regime in 1971, immediately after the death of President Nasser, resulted in an obvious lack of adequate documentation of the Nasser regime and hence the need for the contributions of oral history. My present recollection in this area is a modest addition that needs to be complemented by contributions of other actors in this field, either from Egypt or the of Africa. Indeed, I have had the chance to record the memories of Mohammad Fayek, the assistant to President Nasser on African Affairs (2002). I also had a long interview with the late Kwame Nkrumah in Conakry (1970)

after he was ousted from power, and with former President Ben Bella in Bamako. Added to this is my direct personal relationship with a number of the leaders of African liberation movements that are mentioned in this article, or were referred to in my previous contributions.

The scope of this article will not allow a detailed expose of all the events that took place after the end of the Second World War that led to the involvement of Egypt of the Nasser Regime (1952–1970) in the process of national liberation. I believe this was prompted more by the course of events rather than by any prior belief that nationalist leader as expressed in his booklet: “Philosophy of the Revolution” published in 1955, where he mentioned three spheres of interest of Egypt’s foreign policy.

After the end of World War II, the nationalist fervor in Egypt was very high, while at the same time there kept cropping up imperialist projects of alliances in the Middle East trying to include our countries in anti-Soviet blocs, and creating imperialist

military bases. Confronting the popular attempt to gain full independence from Britain, we were faced with the occupying British troops in the Suez Canal Zone, and the attempts to lure Egypt into the membership of the Baghdad, then the Cento pacts. We also had to face imperialist bases in Tripoli in Libya and Canio Station in Ethiopia, apart from direct colonial rule in Africa. At the same time, Sudan was nominally under joint Anglo-Egyptian rule but it was in fact a simple British colony. The new “revolutionary” regime had to face such a situation, so it allowed forms of resistance against British troops, while going into negotiations for the evacuation of those troops from both Egypt and the Sudan. However, it was careful to keep away from all imperialist military pacts in the region, not to become implicated in the cold war, taking into consideration that Israel was one of the foremost bases of imperialism in that war.

Joining Up

One may consider the effects of this atmosphere on a young man born in 1935, and joining Cairo University with his background of Wafdist and Muslim Brotherhood influences, and beginning his studies of philosophy and sociology in a leftist atmosphere at the university. Amid the wide nationalist propaganda of the Free Officers, he started frequenting the African Association in Zamalek in 1956 where he met young African students of Islamic Studies, many of whom had rallied to the popular defense of Egypt against the Anglo-French-Israeli aggression that year. That aggression was to punish Egypt for its nationalist spirit in the Arab world and Africa (including Algeria), and its insistence on getting rid of all occupation troops, and breaking the monopoly of the West for arms’ supply, and its nationalization of the Suez Canal Company.

In long sessions of dialogue in 2002 with Fayek I got to learn of Nasser’s instructions during the Sudan negotiations with Britain in 1953, to deploy much effort against the British and American influence and to gain the support of the Peoples of Sudan’s neighbors in Ethiopia and East Africa after relinquishing the old slogan of Egypt-Sudan unity, under the Egyptian crown. At the time, the Egyptian Broadcasting System started its dedicated transmissions in Tigrean (for Ethiopia and Eritrea), and in Swahili (for East Africa). By the 1960s, these transmissions were extended to cover 30 African languages.

The central pole of attraction for those youth was the late Mohammad Abdel Aziz Ishak, the well known intellectual. They also met Mohammad Fayek who was keen to keep in touch with African youth, mostly Azhar students with a few from Cairo University. For me, this experience of getting acquainted with these youth, full of enthusiasm to go back to their respective countries to help in their liberation and development efforts, was very instructive and eye opening on a new world and cultures; needless to point out that their activities were much influenced by the fervor of the Nasserist media.

I have always pointed out that Nasser’s mention in his booklet “Philosophy of the Revolution” of the three spheres of interest in Egyptian politics (Arab, African and Islamic, in this order) did not indicate the real priority given to our relations with Africa. Indeed, in 1955, Nasser was exploring the Asian experience when he met in Bandung with the leaders of China, India and Indonesia (as well as Ethiopian and Ghanaian representatives).

Until that time, his interest in Africa was mainly concerned with securing the situation of the newly independent Sudan; and hence, he deemed it fit to support the independence efforts of the Nile basin countries: Kenya, Uganda, Eritrea and Congo. The regime had created the Tahrir Publishing House to publish its own newspapers: *Al Gomhouria* daily and the weekly *Al Tahrir Liberation*. In this latter, we read about American military bases, and the Kenyan revolution “Mau Mau” under Jomo Kenyatta. Between 1956 and 1958, there were many African and Asian developments that were followed by the Syrians asking for unity with Egypt and thus shifting our priority, once more, to the Arab sphere.

Thus, the interaction with the Nile countries and the rest of Africa came before this talk about the three circles of interest. It seems to me that this latter theory was the brain child of some petty bourgeois intellectuals who were obsessed with the role of Egypt and its influence in this or that region, while the feudal land owners considered the right of self determination for Sudan to be a huge surrender to British colonialism.

It was a period of rich experiences for Egypt and for a youthful student of Cairo University, who witnessed, among his newly acquired African friends (many of whom undertook military training with the

Egyptian National Guard) the defeat of the imperialist aggression of 1956. Soon after came the first “Afro-Asian Peoples’ Solidarity Conference” (December 1957/ January 1958) where scores of young delegates from African and Asian countries thronged the halls of Cairo University.

Together with my African friends, I accompanied many of those delegates and thus improved my previous superfluous information about their countries (despite my studies on sociology and anthropology). Such contacts prompted my increased interest in the African Association, and acceptance to contribute some modest articles to the new periodical “African Renaissance” about African journalism as well as African music and sculpture. This periodical (1957) was the best known about Africa at the time, and an issue in English soon followed to make it more accessible to a wider audience. At the time, I was also a researcher at the Egyptian Folklore Institute.

The period 1956 – 1960 was rich in nationalist fervor, both in Egypt and Africa where the struggle for independence was the first priority. Contacts with the socialist powers (The Soviet Union and China) were needed in the struggle against colonialism in its various manifestations. Thus, the Youth Festival in Tashkent saw many participants from African countries, but many of them were among the students in Cairo because of the obstacles put up by the colonial powers against travel to the Soviet Union. So, it was decided to hold the Afro-Asian Peoples Conference in Cairo, and it was attended by hundreds of young delegates, although many of them also came from countries of voluntary exile. Some of these extended their stay in Cairo, while many more left permanent representatives to found their offices, their best opening to the outer World. The rule was for the leader to hold a personal meeting with Nasser before leaving the country, and he would obtain Nasser’s instructions for founding that new office, and allotting time on the Broadcasting System. Some other members of the office would be posted at the Secretariat of the Afro-Asian Peoples’ Solidarity Organization (AAPSO). Thus, Zamalek was crowded with many black Africans such that we nicknamed it « The African Colony! » It became a refuge for revolutionaries and a venue for many students in Egypt, and even for Egyptian students and journalists, and sometimes some nationalist leaders such as Fathi

Radwan, Helmi Murad, friends of our delegate assassinated in Somalia Kamal Ed Dine Salah. Their presence introduced me also to Egyptian political life.

Involvement

Among the leaders received early by Nasser (1957/58) was Sheikh Ali Mohsen Al Berwani, the leader of the Zanzibar National Party (ZNP) who pointed out his dilemma as a nationalist leader but was accused by the Africans as being an Arabist. Nasser rallied to his support by allotting a special guest house named "The East Africa House" to accommodate some forty students from all East African countries (including Zanzibar). I was appointed as supervisor of this group in 1958, after graduating from university. My background as a frequenter of the African Association must have been taken into account for this appointment. I spent two years in this job that were to prove very useful to my later work (1958/1960).

The declarations of self rule or independence came one after the other from the African French colonies that eventually led to their independence, while the Algerians kept up their armed struggle against France with full Egyptian support. It looked as if Egypt was getting back on France's part in the Suez aggression of 1956, but it was the natural reaction to its arrogant claim that Algeria was a province of France. The same attitude, with regard to Britain, meant that we support the struggle for independence by their colonies in Africa. Our support for the Somalis and Eritreans was easier to explain because of their strong Arab connections. This support was crowned by Nasser joining other leaders of the World in New York to promulgate the "Declaration of Decolonization of All Colonized Peoples", a declaration that we continued to celebrate for many years.

The peoples' opposition to French and British colonialism flared up by the end of 1958, such that within a few months we saw Felix Moumie the leader of "Union du Peuple du Cameroun (UPC) visit the African Association, followed immediately by Musazi the leader of the Ugandan National Congress (UNC) who left the brilliant John Kalekezi (Kaley) to manage their office in Cairo. Then came Oginga Odinga to start the office of the Kenya African National Union (KANU), followed by Oliver Tambo to open the office of the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa.

At the same time or a little earlier, came Wold Ab Wold Mariam who directed the Tigrean Broadcasting, followed by Adam Mohammad Adam and Sheikh Ibrahim Soltan the leaders of the Eritrean Liberation Front before they fired their first shot. They had come to present their demand for self determination for Eritrea to the United Nations. As for Haj Mohammad Hussein who belonged to the Ogaden (part of Ethiopia populated by ethnic Somalis), he led the Somalian LIGA that called for grouping all Somalis in Greater Somalia. He solicited Egypt's support for this cause in view of the assassination of Kamal Ed Dine Salah Egypt's representative in the Somali Council of Trustees. We also received Harbi and his comrades in Djibouti, Joshua Nkomo and his comrades in Southern Rhodesia, and Kenneth Kaunda and his comrades of UNIP from Northern Rhodesia. As a young man, I was really overworked by my duties in the East Africa House and the African Association with all these leaders to look after and help solve problems (appended at the end of this article is the list of the African Liberation Movements coordinated in Cairo).

The sources of information about the rest of Africa were very scarce in Egypt at the time, and Fayek, in his reminiscences, told me his only source of information in the fifties was John Gunther's book, *Inside Africa* and a few booklets in Arabic. Thus, I was happy when he instructed me to translate certain articles in some African newspapers he managed to subscribe to. So I could read papers from Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Rhodesia and Uganda (all of them not available in Egypt today!). I was also happy to lay hands on Lord Healy's book *Survey of Africa* (1958) that was later updated in Colin Legum's treaties in the 1960s. Afterwards, the Information Authority translated books by Kenyatta and Nkrumah among others. The Sudanese Studies Research Institute was also transformed to become the African Research Institute.

We had the feeling that Israel was trying hard to circumscribe Egypt's role in the Nile Basin and we countered this by deep solidarity with all liberation movements in the region. The close alliance between Israel and the racist segregation regime in South Africa was a clear warning to Egypt of the similarity between the settlers colonization systems in both Palestine and Southern Africa. This was a

lesson for me about the various systems of colonization.

At the time I was getting involved with the leftist trend in Egypt, and I knew from our friends in the African Association that most African Liberation Movements were also leftist. Thus, it was an unpleasant surprise when George Padmore visited Egypt as an advisor to President Nkrumah. This author of *Pan Africanism or Communism* whose anti-communist trends were very pronounced did not fit in the guise of advisor to Nkrumah who championed the liberation movement and the unity of all African peoples. Indeed, Padmore met with little welcome among the delegations in Egypt, especially as the Soviets and the Chinese had established friendly relations of cooperation with all these movements, and had their representatives in the secretariat of AAPSO in Cairo. I shall touch later on the problems caused by the competition between the Soviets and the Chinese over their support to the different liberation movements.

Later on, I understood why our government concentrated such great efforts on the liberation movements in Zamalek to stress the difference of the Egyptian support for these movements from that accorded by the communist states. However, my role in this direction was negatively assessed by those Egyptians who were aware of my leftist tendencies but that did not reduce my enthusiasm for the Nasserist leadership. I overcame this ambiguous feeling only after coming into close contact with David Dubois and his mother Shirley Dubois who explained the leftist content of the Nkrumah concepts. They had come to Egypt after the great Pan-Africanist William Dubois had passed away in Accra in 1963, and we read together the poem where that great man had celebrated the "Triumph of the Nile Pharaoh (Nasser) over the British Lion" in 1956. We also reviewed William Dubois' concept of African unity and his influence on President Nkrumah who considered him the father and teacher of all African nationalists. Strange to note that few African intellectuals give much attention nowadays to this internationalist Marxist thinker. I also noted how George Padmore tried to eradicate the influence of Dubois on Nkrumah, and even tried to sow discord between Nkrumah and Nasser over the Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity by holding the All African Peoples Conference in Accra only one year after the AAPSO Conference in Cairo (1958).

I was surprised when the delegates returning from Accra told me of the non-violence policy announced in that conference, that Fanon had opposed. I decided to study the effect of Fanon's teachings in Africa and whether the presence of Asian citizens there had spread some of Gandhi's non-violence policies. Indeed, we were concerned in Egypt that some of Nkrumah's advisors may have made him believe that Nasser was competing with his policy of African unity in favor of Arab leadership. Such ideas were manifested by Padmore's concept of "Black Zionism" (when talking about the return of the American Blacks to Africa), and Kojo Botsio, Nkrumah's advisor disapproving the so-called Arab influence. Indeed, we always suspected in that atmosphere that any anti-Arab policies in Africa were the outcome of Israeli instigation.

Yet, we were all pleasantly surprised when President Nkrumah asked President Nasser to help him marry an Egyptian lady. As Fayek told me, this was done in a very friendly manner, and disproved all rumors about competition for influence between the two men. Indeed, we jokingly called this marriage a marriage of pan-Africanism with pan-Arabism! Later Mrs Dubois chose, in 1966, to stay in Cairo after the coup against Nkrumah, and I found her a nice flat overlooking the Nile that Dr Dubois had been fond of during his stay in Cairo in 1958. She was so happy with that flat and treated me as a close member of the family. Her son, David Dubois, lived in that flat until his death in 2006 when he bequeathed it to an Egyptian friend.

During the Nasser era, the political culture of liberation did not have the monopoly of the arena as some may believe, but the conservative cultures also flourished because of the depth of religious feelings among the people. The big changes Nasser applied to the scope of study at Azhar by introducing secular and scientific curricula did not alter significantly this situation, but on the contrary increased its role in the higher education system. Thus, the number of African students seeking education at Al Azhar in the mid-1960s exceeded twenty thousand. The non-Muslim African countries complained that their students could not easily follow studies in other branches of higher education, and Nasser decided to remedy this shortcoming by founding new institutes of higher education where

tuition was carried out in English and French.

Bureaucracy too was an obstacle for any insertion of the representatives of liberation movements into Egyptian society despite their acceptance by some responsible people. Indeed, the efforts of our Bureau of African Affairs were decisive in this direction, and it did not suffer from the internal political strife within other offices such as those concerned with Arab or Sudanese affairs. The different members of the Free Officers Movement sometimes competed for influence in such a way as to adversely affect the various spheres of activity. African affairs sometimes suffered when we had to solve some problems involving a myriad of centers of influence which included the centers in charge of foreign students (at Azhar or elsewhere), the Secretariat of AAPSO, the Federation of Labor, the Nasr Company for Export and Import, the Higher Islamic Council, the Parliament, the Socialist Union, the the President's assistants, etc. The young responsible that I was, would sometimes feel dizzy trying to unravel all such entangled connections. Even the African Affairs Bureau sometimes suffered from internal differences of opinion that needed a Presidential decision.

The above is some sort of auto-criticism of a period rich in movement where the objectives were always greater than the movement itself. This criticism was directed at the Egyptian system, but it also applied to many of the representatives of the African movements themselves. Indeed, few of them were ambitious enough to study the Egyptian society, or even raise their own political consciousness to make known their society in revolution against colonialism. Only a few, among them Archie Mafeje, John Kaley (Kalekezi) and Belesso were those with whom I managed to make rich intellectual dialogue. However, my personal and human relations were very fruitful with many of those leaders as my home was always a welcoming venue, and my wife and children were familiar with many of those friends. It seems to me that this lack of political culture among many of those cadres of the liberation movements may explain many of the setbacks that befell some of the countries liberated through the struggle led by well established movements. In many cases, internal ethnic or communal strife wasted much of the gains of independence and hampered development

efforts, such as to cause the perplexity of some observers such as Basil Davidson or Gerard Chaliand. Such reflections may need a detailed study well outside the scope of these memories, and may explain the preponderance of the military over political action during the liberation struggle.

We could assess the effectiveness of a particular liberation movement by the activity of its office in Cairo and the effectiveness of its representation. Thus, Moumie, the president of the UPC of Cameroun headed in person their office in Cairo, and he was a well known opponent of the French colonial policies, such that his assassination was obviously imputed to the French Secret Service. John Kaley (Kalekezi) was the deputy president of the Uganda Congress Party, and Robin Kamanga was elected as deputy president of the Zambia Independence Party while resident in Cairo. Similarly, Alfred Nzo was elected Secretary General of the ANC while resident in Cairo, and later appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs in Mandela's administration after apartheid. Also, Mokhehle, the president of Basoto Congress Party and its representative Shakila were often seen in Cairo, then their party won a great majority and they were recalled to form government. These close political – and personal – relations with accredited leaders of their countries were a cause for pride to all of us in the African Affairs Bureau, and to me in particular.

All these leaders occupied modest offices at the African Association, but they were all a model of activity and vitality. The financial help given to such powerful parties in their respective countries was generally modest. (I remember that Kaunda was given only 25,000 dollars to carry out a country-wide election campaign in Zambia). Other cases were not so brilliant, e.g. Nquqo the leader of the Swaziland Congress was a frequent visitor to Cairo, and was vocal in his denunciation of British imperialism and the king in his country, but his party did not win one seat in parliament. In answer, he held a press conference where he claimed that he was the strongest opponent of colonialism and as such was ferociously opposed by the colonialists and their lackeys!

As for the defeat of Joshua Nkomo and his ZAPO Party by ZANU Party led by Sithole and Mugabe, we find it hard to explain unless it is related to tribal loyalties, an explanation I find very unpleasant.

The concept of National Liberation at that moment immediately after independence still needs some deep thought. Indeed, I never attended any real debate during those two decades (1955–1975) about the real content of Fanonism, Guevarism, or even Nasserism or Nkrumism that were coined rather lately. We were all the time taken up by the day-to-day events and the progress of this insurgency or revolt in this colony or the other, but we never had the leisure to debate the theoretical or social content in a methodical fashion. We might have discussed the actions of the different leaders and the rivalries or cooperation that affected their action, or invoked the memories of Fanon or Guevara as nationalist leaders to be emulated, but we never debated their political or social thought in order to follow their example or otherwise. We shall discuss the Sino-Soviet differences and their negative effects on the liberation movements later.

Thus, the armed struggle as the sole means for political liberation, and the rivalries that sometimes led to fratricidal strife in pursuit of supremacy after independence was the salient facet of the picture. However, there were exceptions where some leaders had enough social and class consciousness as in the case of South Africa, and the thinking of Amilcar Cabral and a few other leaders. Indeed, it is hard to expect that the concepts of the necessary social transformations not developed during the period of national unity, during the liberation struggle, can be addressed seriously during the less exacting situations after independence. I recall that when I met Nkrumah in Conakry on 20/12/1970 after his ouster, he explained at length his views about such matters in retrospect, and about which he wrote in his book: *The Class Struggle in Africa*. He gave me a copy of that valuable book explaining the state of classes and the role of intellectuals, and even the conditions for a successful guerilla warfare in Africa and the social background for such success.

Getting into the Framework

The year 1960 was of crucial importance to the National Liberation of Africa, not only because the “Declaration of Independence of All Colonized Peoples” was adopted by the United Nations on the 14th of December, but also because it was the year in which much was achieved by way of clarifying the difference between the

concepts of formal independence and real national liberation.

In 1960, the Algerian revolution was advancing despite the fierce repression of the French colonialists after their recent defeat in Vietnam. The Algerians had created their government in exile, and that government had a strong representation in Egypt, and was recognized by Nasser as a legitimate government of an independent country. Before that, France had maintained that Algeria was simply a province of France, and tried to gain as many votes as possible in the UN to corroborate its claim. Then, all of a sudden, it “granted independence” to ten French colonies in Africa, hoping to muster their votes in the General Assembly, together with some other British colonies granted independence that year. All these newly independent African countries had to decide their position towards the French claim about Algeria, but only a few of them rallied to the strong stand of Egypt that year, despite the fact that world public opinion was slowly accepting the principle of independence for Algeria.

France had taken a violent attitude towards Guinea two years earlier when Sekou Toure rejected the constitution proposed by France and unilaterally declared his country’s independence. I now recall the great impact of the articles published by Ahmed Baha Ed Dine on his return from the celebrations of Guinea’s independence that year. Sekou Toure was a trade union leader, and his clear understanding of colonialism as system of exploitation and class struggle was an eye opener for our generation on the essence of liberation from colonialism. This differed greatly from our attitude towards “Mau-Mau” resistance of the Kikuyu in Kenya, under Kenyatta, which bore a folkloric guise.

The national liberation countries were limited to three: Ghana, Guinea and Mali in sub-Sahara Africa, and the Algerian Government in exile and Egypt in the Maghreb, together called the Casablanca Group. This small group took a distinctive attitude in supporting the popular regime of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo against the imperialist supported Kasavubu and Moise Tchombe. I remember the workers and students’ demonstrations in Cairo against the Belgian Embassy. The name of Tchombe was considered an insult in Egypt at the time, while Lumumba had the same esteem as Ben

Bella and his comrades after their abduction by France.

I must stress here that Egypt’s role in this liberation struggle was not just some fiery speeches of the type common in the Arab world, but a serious sense of national responsibility that led to the mobilization of the military forces during the Congolese crisis, and the involvement of Egyptian diplomatic personnel. I remember how Mohammad Abdel Aziz Ishak accompanied Lumumba’s widow and children who were smuggled out of Congo by our diplomatic staff after his assassination by Mobutu and Tchombe in defiance of world public opinion. They were given the full support of the President, and I was detached to arrange for their accommodation in Cairo, and proper schooling for the children. Nasser always cited the example of the Congo to stress Egypt’s commitment of support to all liberation struggles on the continent and to make sacrifices if necessary, and the Casablanca group mentioned above supported his position. This was the main topic among the Egyptian public opinion that made fun of Tchombe being “sequestered” in the Republican Palace when he came to attend the African Unity Summit in 1964. I found a comparison for this nationalistic position of the Egyptian public opinion of those years with the public craze about the football “Mondial” in the years 2009/10!

Here, I must show the parallel between the struggle of Lumumba and his comrades in defense of the mineral riches of their country coveted by imperialism, and the defense of the Egyptian people of their Suez Canal, also coveted by the same imperialism. Indeed, the picture of the assassinated Lumumba and his family as refugees in Egypt had an impact on our public opinion far in excess of any enthusiastic speeches.

The Congolese crisis led to a situation where the newly independent African States fell into two clear cut camps: the Casablanca Group and the Monrovia Group. The first took its name from the meeting held in that city in January 1961 when it was decided to support the legitimate government of Lumumba, even by military action; by sending armed forces. The second grouped made up of mostly new francophone states but took its name from an old conservative states: (OCAM) in Liberia. The Casablanca Group had a special significance for our generation as

it included the Arab North Africa with various progressive countries both Francophone and Anglophone. It also had the revolutionaries Nasser and Ben Bella with the nationalist King Mohammad V, and favored the policies of revolutionary struggle advocated by Fanon, and where President Nkrumah advanced his old policy of "Positive Action". Indeed, I was told that when Fanon attended the first Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Conference in Accra in 1958, he was offended when he saw the slogans containing quotations by Nkrumah extolling positive action and non-violence and insisted they be removed.

At the time, we were impressed by reading the Arabic translation of Fanon's books, and thrilled by the revolt of the Angolan political prisoners on a Portuguese ship. We were also dismayed by the abduction by France of the Algerian leaders, but happy for the liberation of Kenyatta, the leader of Kenya.

I had the privilege of attending the Uhuru celebrations of Tanganyika's independence on 9/12/1961 (and later attended the celebration of Kenya and Zanzibar's independence in January 1963). On such occasions I would wonder at the significance of the independence of this or that country for the peoples of the continent, or the role of this or that leader. At the time, Julius Nyerere was intent on the Union of East Africa only, while President Nkrumah was campaigning for the United States of Africa, and Tanganyika was somewhat worried by his support for the various liberation movements, many of which were neighbors to Dar es Salaam. President Nyerere was also worried about Nasser's influence on Zanzibar and the Arabs of East Africa. Thus, we were not very happy in Cairo with his policies until the social changes of Tanzania and the Arusha Declaration in 1966.

The representatives of most liberation movements were unhappy about the policies of Nyerere that did not seem revolutionary enough and in opposition to Nkrumah's call for African Unity. I was acquainted with Abdel Rahman Babu, the progressive from Zanzibar who maintained the necessity for change, and also with Ali Mohsen who was accused of being an advocate of Arabism there. I was not surprised when Babu, with Salim Ahmed Salim, led a secession in the Nationalist Party that led to the bloody events on that island. I was dismayed by

those events as I had personally known the families of the forty Zanzibari students in the East Africa House. I recall meeting Babu in a café in Dar es Salam in 1964 and he was frustrated after being ousted by the new regime in Zanzibar, and expected little good from Dar es Salam, such that he chose self exile in Britain as an internationalist who wrote about socialism in Africa.

I must admit how I was thrilled when witnessing the British flag being brought down to be replaced by that of Kenya or Tanganyika and thought it was a huge step forward, surely to be followed by other social advances. However, I soon found Nyerere's policies to be not so progressive and in collision with Nkrumah's policy of United Africa.

The leaders of the Casablanca Group were also frustrated because of their failure in the events of Congo and the triumph of Tchombe and Mobutu and the fleeing of Gizinga and his colleagues to eastern Congo. Finally, Nkrumah accepted a compromise policy to succeed in gathering both progressive and moderate leaders, and with Nasser called for a summit in Addis Ababa where they declared the creation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). Thus, 25th May 1963 was celebrated as the birth of African Unity that concentrates political efforts against imperialism while putting off any social progress to a later stage.

In Egypt, we had to face the problem of countering the role of Israel as an imperialist agent in Africa, and in the face of the support it got from the former colonial states. We were pained in particular by the relation of Israel with Ghana of Nkrumah, while Israel boasted of relations with Ethiopia and Tanzania as well. Israel at the time, tried to present itself as a developing country, while the statements of the Afro-Asian conferences as well as the Casablanca Group exposed it as an advanced base of "new colonialism".

At the OAU conference, Nasser declared that he would not ask the African leaders present to state their standpoint against Israel, but asked them to find out for themselves its reality as an agent of imperialism. He succeeded in leading the conference to a moderate policy and struck the correct balance between Nkrumah and Nyerere, on the one hand, and Cote d'Ivoire as three distinct trends in the meeting. Thus, Nasser and Emperor

Haile Selassie assumed the role of the Big Brother to all their colleagues.

Many were those who came to Cairo after the conference, asking for support, especially as Cairo was chosen as the venue for the next meeting in May 1964, supposed to be the first summit of the OAU. As a token of the organization's role in liquidating colonialism, the "Coordination Committee for Liberation of the Colonies" was created. Thus, Cairo took a position on the leaders of Ghana and Tanzania, as well as on Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire, competing among the OCAM Group of francophone countries. The tendency among the participants was to liquidate all regional groupings and the Casablanca Group did so while the OCAM Group continued as such.

Those were glorious days for African activity in Cairo where Egyptian media showed great interest in the activities of the liberation movement's offices in Zamalek. Liberation activity including armed struggle was acclaimed by everybody without fear of talk about "intervention". A positive factor in this connection was the anecdote of sequestering Tchombe in one of Cairo's presidential palaces with the group of Belgian Belles who accompanied him to prevent him from attending the OAU Conference of 1964, which caused much fun for the public in Cairo, and compromised the francophone group that arranged for his uninvited visit to Cairo.

The new liberation movements kept coming to Cairo, especially from the Portuguese colonies, looking for support which they readily got from Nasser, and I watched their happiness after such audiences. Indeed, Fayek and our group of his assistants did a good job in accommodating some twenty such offices. The big number was partly due to receiving more than one delegation from one country, and this was my personal dilemma as I had to coordinate their demands such as to render them acceptable to Fayek's Presidential Bureau. Those demands included scholarships for students, military training, allotted time for broadcasting, etc. I was sometimes torn up by my happiness that Cairo was helpful to these young revolutionaries and having to decide who were worthy of that help and who were not, who were "authentic" and who were not. The legitimacy of different levels of liberation struggle was a good reason for such variety, and Cairo was one of the few capitals to accept this

diversity. I eventually, in good time, got to understand the deep reasons for such an attitude.

At times, there were three movements from one country such as the case of South Africa and Angola. Sometimes, we accepted movements that were the outcome of a secession from another, as in the case of ZAPO and ZANU, or SWAPO and SWANU, or even movements that had no weight at all such as COREMU in Mozambique. Thus, some movements would group together as authentic, such as ZAPO, PAIGE, FRELIMO, SWAPO, MPLA and ANC. The others could not meet as authentic, and we labeled them pro-China! There was a real "cold war" waged at the African Association where the socialist states were competing for adherence to the different movements in a manner more open than that between the respective embassies.

This cold war would become quite hot when the AAPSO conferences were held, the Soviets would provide air tickets and accommodation for everybody at the conference held in a friendly city. In such cases, the friends of the Soviets seemed to be in a strong position and posed as the only "authentic".

Such situations were somewhat embarrassing to me. I was a reader of Fanon and Mao Ze Tung and Lin Piao's article on the center and the peripheries where the countryside rejects the influence of the cities. In this context, the countryside stands for China and the Third World, and the cities stand for the Western bourgeoisies and the imperialist socialists who emulated them!

To a "Fanonist", this was an attractive representation, but the pro-China group in Cairo presented little thought of value, and had little to boast of in the way of active struggle at home. On the other hand, the discussions with the authentic group were always deep and reflected clear cut concepts, and concrete political and diplomatic action. Also, the leftist movement in Egypt had not given much attention to the Chinese Revolution and its Asiatic neighbors, and the Cultural Revolution and the Red Book were rather scorned. The Nasser regime and most Egyptian intellectuals accepted the Soviet concepts, including the non-capitalist road to development, the democratic revolutionaries and the countries on the road to liberation. All such concepts were welcomed by the Nasser regime and other

leaders of the Third World, but rather frustrating to any radical trends, and to radical youth, including myself.

The Sino-Soviet conflict was not the only cause for our concern in Cairo during the 1960s, as the Maoist Group soon began to lose ground as they failed to consolidate their organizations. They looked like a group of unruly persons whose main task was to oppose their competitors in the authentic group, in the public meetings, while they showed no progress in their respective fields of struggle. On the other hand, the influence of the "authentics" was on the rise as their liberation struggle in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea, and this gave them better ground to counter those "Maoists".

I recall that President Agostinho Neto of Angola would not accept my invitation to the premises of the African Association because UNITA and GRAI had offices there, and he had his office and the lodging of his men outside that building. This position seemed more significant when he insisted on not signing the cease fire agreement with Portugal in Lisbon but at the point of the struggle in Angola. President Sam Nujoma was more tolerant as he was bolstered by a UN resolution in favor of SWAPO, and the UN Namibia Institute in Lusaka gave him moral support, such that the competing SWANU was soon liquidated as its leaders were not worthy of respect.

It seemed to me that there was some sort of competition between Cairo and Algiers over our relations with liberation movements. Cairo seemed more intent on national liberation policies in general, and providing diplomatic contacts and media coverage. Algeria, on the other hand, was more intent on military training and providing arms for the armed struggle through the Committee for the Liberation of Colonies.

I asked Ben Bella about this in Bamako in 2003, and he confirmed that there had been a sort of gentleman's agreement with President Nasser over a difference in the role played by each country.

I felt that creating the OAU had set aside the liberation activity to the benefit of the ruling bureaucracies, some of which were openly despotic. This was noticed in many cases, such as Ethiopia's position towards Eritrea, or in the conflicts in Somalia and the Comoros. As regards France's treatment of its former colonies,

we reduced our former level of criticism as a token of our regard for Gaullist France. Indeed, we gave a warm welcome to Senghor in 1966, while neglecting the progressive Cheikh Anta Diop who extolled the ancient Egyptian civilization in his book. Indeed, I did not fully accept Senghor's claims except after naming Dakar University after Diop, to whom I extended my apologies when I met him in the early 1980s in his laboratory at Dakar University. Zambia was oscillating between the role of a confrontation state, and some sort of acceptance of the racist regimes southern Africa, while Egypt respected Kaunda's nationalism and considered his dilemma with the racist South that seemed somewhat similar to our dilemma with Israel. Thus, Cairo welcomed Kaunda warmly and omitted taking issue with him as Ghana did, despite the decline of its influence in the OAU embraced by Haile Selassie, and the Committee for the Liberation of Colonies embraced by Nyerere. The liberation movements responded to Cairo's moderation by deepening their direct ties with the Soviet Union and the Scandinavian countries. This policy of moderation was strengthened by the series of military coups that took place in the Congo, then Ghana, and some other Francophone countries.

The moderate national regimes were weakened by this succession of setbacks during the 1960s, while the liberation struggle in the Portuguese colonies was getting tougher under leaders such as Amilcar Cabral, Neto and Eduardo Mondlane who got active support from socialist countries. I recall that the late great leader Cabral told me in Accra (January 1973), only two weeks before his assassination, that they were at the point of getting anti-aircraft guns from the Soviets, and that would send a message to the Atlantic powers that Bissau would thus become a new Vietnam. I remembered this when only a short time later, these powers decided to get rid of the Salazar Regime, when Spínola took over in a coup and decided to start negotiations with their colonies in the mid-1970s.

Sam Nujoma took advantage of this change and took a tougher stand towards the UN and consolidated his ties with Angola to provide his guerillas with arms. He was also strengthened by the presence of Cuban forces in the region, but he complained to me that the authorities in Angola sometimes treated him with some reservation, as they suspected that he had some contacts with UNITA. When

I met President Neto during the independence anniversary in 1976, he explained to me much of the machinations of the racist regime in South Africa and their trying to sow differences between the nationalist forces in the southern Africa whose only support came from the socialist countries. Indeed, even the Soviets were not so forthcoming in their aid and had to be urged by threats to shift to the Chinese for help to make good their deficiency!

The 1970s were very frustrating, both for my personal duties and for my feelings towards Egypt's position, with regard to supporting liberation movements. At the time Sadat went hand-in-hand with the Americans in confronting what he called the communist influence in Africa, he stigmatized the Cuban presence in countries such as Ethiopia, Angola and Mozambique.

All progressive forces in Egypt and most national liberation countries faced an impasse, and we would recall the atmosphere of the 1960s that we used to criticize as moderate! In those days, the liberation movements in the progressive countries were supported by popular forces, but the successive military coups changed the situation. The popular bases included the trade unionists in Egypt, Ghana, Tanzania, Sudan and Kenya. At times, there was competition that obstructed the smooth cooperation between Ahmed Fahim in Egypt, Al Sediky in Maghreb, Tettegah in Accra, Kambona in Dar es Salaam and Shafii in Sudan against the moderates such as Mboya in Kenya, Aashour in Tunis and others. The first group would ask the leader for help to liberation movements, and sometimes other forces, such as the students in Dar es Salam University campus or the October Revolution intellectuals in Sudan, but it was always the leader who took the decision. After the successive coups and the transformations of the 1970s, these popular forces lost their influence.

To illustrate the contrast between the two situations, let us compare the reaction to the colonial action in Rhodesia in 1965, and the position towards the racist regime in South Africa in the late 1970s. I recall that when we heard about the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in Rhodesia in November 1965, Egypt was intent on socialist transformation, Ghana was actively developing by building the Volta Dam, in Tanzania there was the euphoria of the Committee for the Libera-

tion of Colonies, and we all considered UDI as a serious challenge to the liberation of the colonies.

I recall that, in my position as a researcher in an important institution, I received urgent instructions to gather all pertinent information about the event, and in particular the role of Britain as protector and instigator. The same day, I felt similar fervor in the President's Bureau and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the next day a memorandum prepared by Mohammad Fayek on the President's instructions, addressed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to explore with Ghana, Algeria, the Casablanca Group and others the possibility of freezing political relations with Britain as being responsible for its colony, Rhodesia. It was thought that the new independent state would bolster a similar type of colonization of Palestine by foreign settlers, and that at a time of the rise of nationalist resistance in Palestine at the hands of the PLO and support from the Arab liberation countries (Egypt, Syria and Algeria), a strong and effective action will surely be taken within days.

Indeed, certain agreement was reached and, within two weeks, Britain found its relations with eleven African countries severed. That action was the cause for great celebration at the African Association for all representatives of the liberation movements. It was also remarked by diplomatic observers who noted that at the time when Britain was actively attacking the nationalist activists in Aden, and Egypt's armed forces engaged supporting the republic in Yemen, Egypt did not take such a step.

Indeed, I felt the deep contrast between such reactions and the very limited reaction of the African states at the General Assembly of the UN when trying to pass a strong resolution calling for Israeli withdrawal from the Egyptian and Arab occupied territories after the Israeli aggression of 1967, and Guinea was the only African country to sever its relations with Israel. Of course, there was much American pressure on these African countries, but no doubt the main reason for such behavior was the attitudes of the new regimes towards the liberation movement. This was a cause of great shame to us of the African Affair after all the support given to the liberation movement, that seemed to us as a lost cause to crown our failure to eradicate colonialism.

I remember that Egypt's defeat in the 1967 war with Israel came as the high point in the series of military coups in Africa that included Ghana, Mali, Uganda, Congo and some francophone countries and seemed to seal the demise of the national liberation movements on the continent, and the end of the Committee for the Liberation of Colonies. I felt miserable when meeting our Egyptian nationalist forces insisting on fighting a popular war till the full liberation of Egyptian territories. Our only solace was to repeat the slogan coined by some leaders of the Portuguese colonies: *A Lutta Continua, Victoria Certe* (The Struggle Continue, and Victory is Certain).

However, the armed struggle was progressing, especially in the Portuguese colonies, and eventually the Polisario Movement started in the Spanish colony of the Rio de Oro in the western desert of North Africa. At the same time, the Palestinians started some forms of liberation struggle, including armed resistance, and these advances gave us new hope. I recall that the discourse around democracy and social transformations in these struggling colonies was reminiscent of our discourse about the democratization of the Nasser Regime. I would discuss with leftist friends, with a sense of pride as a protagonist of the African liberation movements, about the continuing national struggle, or defend Soviet-Egyptian cooperation. Some of these friends would argue that Nasser was unrealistic in trying to go back to war with such a defeated army, but it was those same efforts that resulted in the successful war of 1973. It seems to me that Nasser at last understood the necessity of democratic freedoms as a basis for effective defense of the homeland, and he tried to remedy some shortcomings of his regime by appointing some leftist cadres at the head of some media institutions, and gave more latitude to democratic and leftist trends in theatre, the cinema and some publications. This meant a more balanced attitude both in the internal situation and the military position as well.

Soon, the armed struggle in the colonies began to show positive results with active support from the Committee for the Liberation of Colonies, and we began to hear of "liberated territories", and I felt great happiness on meeting some African activists who had visited these liberated territories. I was happy when I was nominated as Egypt's representative on that

committee, but “somebody” intervened to block that nomination. I hoped this participation would give me the chance to visit some of these liberated territories, and that was eventually fulfilled when I visited some liberated areas in Eritrea in the company of some Eritrean revolutionaries in the late 1970s.

I recall that we, the nationalist youth, were frustrated by our defeat in the 1967 war by Israel, while we got some relief from the presence of many delegations that came to Cairo from many liberation movements including Palestine, Guinea Bissau, Angola, Mozambique and even Vietnam. The slogan coined by Nasser said: “What was taken by force can only be retrieved by force” had an encouraging significance, and it meant strengthening the ties with the Soviet Union, as China was largely preoccupied with the consequences of the Cultural Revolution.

I could not overlook the fact that some liberation forces were not completely routed as was generally thought. I thought the explanation was that such countries had some nearby focus of armed liberation struggle, what I called a supporting “Hanoi”. Of course, this did not mean the same staunchness as exhibited by the Vietnamese, for after all, Vietnam had China and the USSR supporting it. Such cases of support from adjacent revolutions showed in the case of Guinea adjacent to Guinea Bissau, and Tanzania neighbor of Mozambique, or Congo Brazaville (or even the revolutionaries in Congo-Kinshasa) near Angola. It seemed the social relations as the basis of armed struggle had a positive effect on the social relations in their independent neighbor being more progressive.

I must state here that we sometimes overestimated the social progress in the liberated territories, and the possibility that such transformations would make a solid base for the regime after independence. I had little theoretical knowledge at the time, except my readings of Cabral and cultural liberation, but I also heard some negative information about what took place in Mozambique, or in South Africa despite the high theoretical background of the revolutionaries there.

In Egypt, we were dismayed by the rejection by the Nasser regime of the idea of the popular resistance to the benefit of the regular army fighting to regain our lost territories. This meant relying on the Soviets supplying Egypt with advanced

weapons, but this retained the supremacy of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie instead of developing the social action of the popular masses. However, Nasser’s personal leadership compensated for the great shortcomings arising from his compromises with the religious trends on one hand and the military hierarchy on the other hand.

A sudden end was put to this debate in the cultural and democratic circles by the sudden death of Gamal Abdel Nasser on 28th September 1970. His successor, Anwar Sadat, made a complete turn around of all Nasser’s policies under the slogan that 99 per cent of the playing cards were held by the United States.

After relying on the Soviets to supply the advanced weapons that eventually helped secure the 1973 victory over Israel, he sent back the Soviet military mission that was training our soldiers on the use of such weapons; he used the limited success of this war to prepare the ground for a peace agreement with Israel; he even threatened to wage war against the Mengistu regime in Ethiopia with the pretext that it threatened the supply of the Nile water; he supported Mobutu against the revolutionaries in eastern Congo; he supported UNITA and Savimbi in Angola; he imported tobacco from the UDI regime in Southern Rhodesia; finally he replaced the Nasser planned development economy by an open capitalist liberal policy. All these policies were the exact opposite of the policies adopted by the previous Nasser regime.

The Bureau of African Affairs of the Presidency was dissolved after the arrest of its leader, Mohammad Fayek, and sentencing him to ten years imprisonment for allegedly plotting against Sadat. All members of the bureau were scattered across various government departments. After the 1973 war, I was put on pension (after only 15 years of service) in a move to get rid of all Nasserists and Marxists from office!

After 1975, I embarked on a personal tour of the realm of culture that took me successively to the Committee for the Defense of National Culture, the African Association of Political Sciences, the Council for Development of Social Research in Africa (CODESRIA), teaching at Juba University in southern Sudan, the Arab League Educational Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) in Tunis and, lastly, founding the Arab and African Research Center (AARC) in Cairo in 1987.

Note

* This preliminary study of the role of Nasser’s Egypt in the process of African Liberation stems from the author’s personal experience when he was attached to the Bureau of African Affairs of the Presidency (Nasser’s) at a crucial period (1956–1975). His duties included the coordination of the offices of the various liberation movements that proliferated in Cairo during that period, and acting as liaison officer between them and the state and other public institutions. The man in charge of African Affairs from 23rd July 1952 was the Assistant to the President, Mohammad Fayek until he was imprisoned by President Sadat in 1971. After that, the support for liberation movements went on the decline until Angola and Mozambique gained their independence in 1975.

Annex

Cairo Offices of African Liberation Movements

1. African National Congress (ANC), South Africa
2. Basoto People’s Congress (BPC), Lesotho
3. Djibouti Liberation Movement (DLM), Djibouti
4. Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), Eritrea
5. Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), Eritrea
6. Etudiants de Tchad (ET) Tchad
7. Front do Liberacion do Mozambique (FRELIMO), Mozambique
8. Governamento do Angola Independente (GRAI), Angola
9. Kenya African National Union (KANU), Kenya
10. League for Liberation of Somalia (LIGA), Somalia
11. Mouvement de Liberation du Congo (MLC), Congo
12. Movimento Popular do Liberacion do Angola (MPLA), Angola
13. Parti Africaine do Independance do Guinee, Capo Verde (PAIGC), Guinee and Cape Verde
14. Swaziland Peoples Party (SPP), Swaziland
15. South West Africa National Union (SWANU), Namibia
16. South West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO), Namibia
17. Uganda National Congress (UNC), Uganda
18. Union do Independente Angola (UNITA), Angola
19. United Northern Rhodesia Independence Party (UNRIP), Zambia
20. Zanzibar National Union (ZNU), Zanzibar
21. Zimbabwe African People’s Organization (ZAPO), Zimbabwe
22. Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), Zimbabwe
23. Arab Maghreb Office, Maghreb
24. Provisional Algerian Government, Algeria

N.B.

The last two offices were not affiliated to the African Association.