

A Life like no other

I have been fortunate to experience first-hand the development of human societies over time, and witness the evolution of civilizations and participate in some of their important events. And because civilizations go through difficult transitional periods before change is completed, living the life I have lived has given me a unique opportunity to feel the pain and hopes of people in such circumstances.

I was born in Yazour, an enchanting agricultural town, three miles from the Mediterranean Sea, on the road from Jaffa to Jerusalem. However, Yazour had neither electricity nor running water, only one paved road. People and animals were used to plow the land, plant the seeds, harvest the crops, and transport them to the local and Jaffa markets. The community in which I spent most of my childhood was probably quite similar to a typical agricultural community in Europe during the middle of the 18th century with few exceptions; the existence of trains and cars and radios were the major ones. Every family in Yazour owned some land and had thousands of orange trees; no one in the town was landless or poor.

As I was growing up and becoming aware of my sociocultural and economic environments, war erupted and caused my family and most of my generation to become refugees. The refugee camp in which I spent about five years of my youth was outside Jericho at the edge of a vast, desolate desert. For about two years, my older sister and I were assigned by our father the task of spending the weekends roaming the neighboring desert searching for dry and dying bushes and shrubs to make fire for cooking. During late winter and early spring, the task was expanded to include the collection of wild vegetables to feed the family. Two of these vegetables are now domesticated, and every time I taste them I remember the days and events of a childhood lived as a gatherer. Other circumstances surrounding my life led me to share with nomads their food, listen to their songs and stories, spend time in their tents and observe their daily life, and even go with shepherds about their daily tasks. It was a life that represented the first stage of the development of human society on its way to civilization. Having been uprooted from an affluent

and secure existence to living in abject poverty and insecurity led me to become aware of the new life, evaluating every change with a critical mind that never stopped thinking and wandering beyond the known and into the unknown.

By the time I entered high school, my family had moved to Jericho, the neighboring agricultural town, which is considered the oldest city in the world. Nevertheless, all nine of us lived in a one-bedroom apartment that had none of the basic modern amenities. The family, moreover, had neither the money nor the space to buy a desk, a table, a chair, or any piece of furniture. My father rented and cultivated a small piece of land on which we lived and whose produce provided most of the food the family needed to survive and a little money to support a mostly subsistence life; children who were old enough to help were required to do so. Domesticated turkey, chicken, pigeon, and rabbits provided the meat the family needed to supplement its mostly vegetarian diet.

Upon graduation from high school, I received a scholarship from the United Nations to study in Cairo, one of the largest and most vibrant cities of the Third World at the time. The trip from Jerusalem to Cairo gave me the first opportunity to fly in a plane and spend a night at a hotel in Beirut. Living and studying in Cairo gave me a valuable chance to observe affluence and abject poverty coexisting side by side, and watch modern and primitive cultures living their separate, estranged lives in one place. Third World nationalism and socialism were thriving along with anti-imperialism in an atmosphere that inspired the young and gave hope to the deprived. It was only there that I was able to live in a house with electricity, running water, modern sanitation, and even a refrigerator. Life in Cairo represented what I call the transitional period between two civilizations, the agricultural and industrial ones.

Five years later, I traveled to Germany, where I witnessed the “German Economic Miracle” and lived in a mature industrial society for almost two years. In Germany, I pursued a graduate degree and worked few months in a publishing house. Most of my free time was spent visiting as many German cities and towns and villages as possible and immersing myself in the culture of the land. In the mid-1960s I moved to the United States where I completed my higher

education, received a Ph.D. degree in economics and taught at three American universities. While living in the United States, I witnessed two of the most important social and political movements in the US modern history, the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement that opposed the war in Vietnam.

In 1970, I left the United States to Kuwait to teach at its newly established university. And while at Kuwait University, I managed to change the educational system and the curriculum and participate in the cultural life of the Kuwaiti society; I also got to know how the non-Kuwaiti immigrant society lived and viewed life conditions in that part of the world. For six years, I witnessed a tribal society losing the major characteristics of its traditional culture and way of life as money was transforming it into what I call "petroleum society." It is a society whose roots were deep in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and whose aspirations were touching the 21st century; a society that thought it could buy anything and employ anyone with money.

In 1976, I returned to the United States to teach first at Georgetown University in Washington DC and then at other universities. And while living in Washington, I witnessed the transformational impact of the Reagan and Clinton years on the American economy, society and culture which gave me the opportunity to live through the transitional period that lead a mature industrial society into the age of knowledge. And in addition to teaching at a few American universities, I got involved in business, research and publishing. In 2002, I returned to the Middle East to spend two years teaching at a university in Morocco and two more years living in Jordan. So for the second time in forty years, I had the opportunity to witness life during a transitional period separating the agricultural from the industrial age, where globalization has caused traditional cultures to loose most of their traits and characteristics.

Since boyhood, my life has been an ever-evolving, most fascinating story that took me to visit and live in many interesting places in the Middle East, Europe, Asia, North Africa and America, enabling me to look back at the primitive roots from where I started and explore the unknown future in my thoughts and ways of living. And throughout the period since graduation from college, I have continued to travel, give lectures and teach seminars, write articles and publish

books. My perspective thus goes beyond the ups and downs of ordinary life in one society or in one civilization, and my connections to all the places and historical phases I have experienced first-hand have continued to fascinate me and challenge my intellectual capacities. As a result, I can say with confidence that I have experienced, within my life time, starting with the tribal age and into the knowledge age, the life of 400 generations, going back to the pre-agricultural times.

Mohamed Rabie

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