

THE OMDA'S BOY

An Egyptian in Transition

by Alan W. Horton

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He often says he is up from the peasantry, but this is not strictly true. His father was a village omda, or headman, owning some 65 acres of good land—a landed fortune relative to the holdings of the peasant mass—and though he was brought up in peasant surroundings, he probably never had to put his hand to a plow. He is right, however, when he implies he has risen in the world: it is a long way from omda's boy to university professor.

Professor Ahmad Yusuf—or so I shall call him—is one of the leading younger professors in the Faculty of Science at Cairo University. He is loaded with success and the object of envy of many colleagues. Though only 47 years old, he has already reached the top academic rank and is in almost constant demand as a consultant to various development projects, an activity for which he is sometimes paid fees. He holds two theoretically full-time jobs in addition to his university professorship: one is a lectureship in a new training and research institute, the other a membership on a prestigious government council on scientific affairs. Dr. Ahmad Yusuf is a busy man.

One of the reasons he is busy is a financial one. His professorship brings him only 1,200 Egyptian pounds a year, a pegged government salary whose adequacy was long ago destroyed by inflation. He gets no income from the land back in the village, and hence he needs the other salaries and fees to support his wife and five children in professorial style. The law says generally that Ahmad's additional jobs should not bring in more than an amount equal to 50% of his principal salary, but the law has fortunately made careful exceptions for persons of genuine ability and influence, and in good months Ahmad can even triple his university earnings.

Ahmad is also busy for another reason, probably more important, and this is his enormous energy. A short stocky man who finds it difficult to be still and silent, his fidgety agony is perhaps greatest on those rare occasions when he must listen to someone else give a lecture. When he himself is busy at something—lecturing, driving, persuading, working in the lab—his face moves less and his habit of nervously narrowing his eyes is not as evident. His friends are immensely loyal to him, but they admit he is something of a strain in large doses. Few now try to involve him in an evening of polite chatter, for the strain on the host is too intense: Ahmad, smoking continually, unwilling to sit down and risk social captivity, prowls the parlor searching subconsciously for a way out. At meetings of committees and commissions, Ahmad, fiddling and fussing with papers and fingers while others proceed, is a thorn in the chairman's flesh, but he is forgiven at the moment he begins to speak because his words usually express neatly the ideas and conclusions that others have been struggling with unsuccessfully. An Egyptian friend who had studied in Oregon once said: "Ahmad always reminds me of a power saw: when it's idling and not cutting wood, it sputters and coughs and is unhappy, but when it's accomplishing the work it's intended for, its efficiency and style are marvelous to behold."

What causes this restless energy is difficult to know, but I have one clue that many of his friends do not have: I once went with Ahmad to his village and stayed there several days. On the second day I suddenly realized he had relaxed into something like serenity. Surrounded by relatives, eating from fly-covered tables, engaging in the solid conversation about crops and personal events, he was the returning prince of unquestioned nobility and knowledge, patient with his people and courteous to his father, listening quietly and responding gently. The metamorphosis from busy urbanite to rural lord was so startling that I brought the matter up. Ahmad seemed surprised at the idea and perhaps a bit annoyed by it; but as we sat in the train from Tanta to Cairo on the way home, and as he began increasing the tempo of his thinking and his speech, he suddenly grinned and asked, "Is this what you meant?"

On another occasion he said he would sacrifice a lot to be able to move back and live permanently in the village. He could no longer, of course, do this: he could not sentence his children to the village school, nor his city-bred wife to village living—nor could he himself, finally, sever connections for very long with his new urban world. But certainly the village is terribly important to Ahmad and seems to represent an ideal but untenable situation, a place too perfect in spirit for the likes of a city sinner. When his wife speaks about the village in terms of filth, bad sanitation, and the sameness of things, Ahmad

always listens as if he were hearing criticism of someone he loved, an embarrassed hurt showing in his eyes, and he will tell his wife curtly that she has been willing to visit the village only twice and understands little about it. She then responds—almost jealously—that twice is enough to understand the character of the place.

What is the character of the place? Though it has a special meaning for Ahmad, the village where he was born is pretty much like other villages of the Egyptian delta. Mud-brick houses, separated by dirt paths and lanes, are jammed together near a large canal, and a network of smaller canals covers the surrounding lands, which grow at least two crops a year of cotton, wheat, clover, sorghum, and vegetables. Donkeys, water buffalo, bullocks, sheep, and dogs are everywhere. Groves of trees—fruits and date palms—and lines of tall eucalyptus shading the canal banks lend occasional variety to the flat landscape. A new macadam road leads out for one kilometer to the main road that goes to the market town, some twelve kilometers and eight villages away. One is never away from people: no corner of a field or cranny near a canal is deserted for long, and no view from the village is without human movement in foreground and background. Indeed, neighboring villages, squares of brown on fields of changing green, are visible in all directions.

Two houses of the village are different—two-story, red-brick instead of mud, several rooms and a courtyard—and in one of these, in 1917, Ahmad was born. He was the omda's first-born, and the rejoicing was perhaps greater than usual because the omda's first wife had borne no children at all during ten years of marriage. It was the first wife who had begged the omda to marry again—unlike others of the village, he could afford the luxury of a second wife—and in subtle ways she guided her husband toward the selection of the young girl who was to become Ahmad's mother. The whole affair was enormously successful. While Ahmad's mother bore four boys and two girls, the first wife retained command of an expanding household and directed the rearing of the omda's children. The wives got along well and, with rare exceptions, the omda was spared the unpleasant task of arbitration. Both women gave affection and care to the children, but Amma, as Ahmad and the others called their stepmother, was certainly a more decisive influence in their lives.

Unlike her husband, Amma was illiterate, but somehow—perhaps during the ten childless years—she had understood the importance of literacy for all. Ahmad remembers enchanting tales told at dusk, stories of exciting men and women whose greatest control of the super-

natural world was demonstrated by a sudden ability to read and write. From the earliest days the children, including the girls, wanted to learn this kind of magic at the first opportunity, and Amma would say she was waiting patiently for the day when the children would come and read to her the great stories out of books she could not read for herself. Ahmad remembers clearly his delighted resolve to spend his grown-up days in this happy way. In his first years at the village primary school he would come home in great excitement, primer in hand, and insist on reading the day's lesson to Amma, who to outward appearances was not only full of admiration but also deeply interested in the story plot surrounding such sentences as "The boy went into the town . . . The boy left the town . . . The boy went to his house and saw his father."

Amma had no difficulty in convincing the omda of the value of securing an education for the four boys. He himself had been educated at the kuttāb, the village's religious school located near the mosque and presided over by the village sheikh, and he could not only read and write with some facility but also still knew most of the Koran by heart. And as headman of the village, the omda had been partly responsible for the establishment of a government primary school, a miraculous event whose prime mover had been Hafez Bey, the urban owner of 500 local acres and a wielder of considerable influence in Cairo. Of all the omdas of the local villages, Ahmad's father—perhaps because Ahmad had just been born—was the only one to welcome this new kind of school and the only one willing to stand against the opposition of his village sheikh and other conservatives who foresaw creeping secularism. The school was built near the omda's house, and he was considered one of its patrons.

Though the omda was eager to have his sons educated, he did not feel the same about his daughters—and Amma found herself up against a stone wall of resistance reinforced by rural tradition. Amma was a woman of quality and of dedication to an idea, however, and she did not accept the inevitable. She chipped away at the wall during the infancy of Nabila, the oldest daughter, and refused to be discouraged that it had not yet crumbled when Nabila reached school age. The omda remained under constant but indirect pressure. He could never quite say that Amma was flouting his authority, and he dared not accuse her directly of being the cause of the apparently random feminist suggestions and arguments that seemed to be in the air much of the time. On one frustrated occasion, he had accused her of "fomenting trouble," but the personal and infuriating defeat that followed—the weapons included injured innocence and the kind of careful overindulgence bestowed on a hungry child—was not the sort of experience he wished to repeat.

Yet his confidence in the rightness of tradition remained unshaken until the moment when Hafez Bey, who occasionally came for country weekends to the village's other red-brick house, intervened on Amma's behalf.

Hafez Bey was a liberal landowner and a nationalist. He had played a part in the 1919 uprising against the British, and he was a personal friend of Saad Zaghloul. He believed in the slow emergence of a new Egypt, and he believed—in particular—that universal education was the key to betterment. Amma was totally unaware of these beliefs when she approached his French-educated wife on another matter, but in her single-minded fashion she could not avoid mentioning her concern about the lack of schooling for her husband's daughters and his adamant opposition. When this conversation was repeated to Hafez Bey, he saw an opportunity to further a favorite cause, and one afternoon, accordingly, he paid the omda a visit. Very carefully and indirectly, he spoke generally of the Egyptian future and the changes that were shortly coming to the countryside. Peasant customs would now begin to change rapidly, he said, and among many other things he predicted that within a decade an educated girl would be more in demand as a marriage partner than a girl traditionally trained in the house. He also implied that he and the omda were the two hopes of local progress. The omda, who entertained an enormous respect for Hafez Bey and whose chief concern had indeed been the marriageability of his daughters, found himself saying that he had for some time been planning to have his daughters learn to read and write. After the bey's departure, he called Amma in and tartly informed her of his decision; he then called in the schoolteacher and arranged for classes at home outside school hours. Thus, Nabila did not start her education until she was nine, but Laila, Ahmad's other sister, started when she was five.

As one of the omda's boys, Ahmad was expected to excel at school, and this he did—if only because he had little competition from the village's less literate households. As if to make up for the lack of competition, Amma instilled in the children a dislike for error, a desire for precision that in Ahmad's case was to become a professional habit. The schoolteacher, who was a young bachelor from Tanta, was an uninspiring drillmaster; he saw virtue in sheer work, and Ahmad soon came to understand that knowledge in the academic world should seemingly always be demonstrated at greater length—a simple sentence copied 50 times was clearly more praiseworthy than one copied only half that many. When he finished his primary years and moved on to secondary school in Tanta (in those days there was no intermediate stage), he

applied the same formula for success and produced an enormous amount of precise copying that won him the highest praise. He also learned a great deal, however, particularly in the last two years of secondary school when the quality of the teaching was considerably better and the competition keener. In these later years, in fact, he did not always come away with the highest praise, even though he worked harder and produced more written work than any other student in his class. His response to these rare occasions was to redouble his efforts and to increase his output still further.

During the years at secondary school, he lived in Tanta with his mother's brother, to whom a small sum was paid for his expenses, sharing a small family bedroom with his uncle, his uncle's wife, and four small cousins. On Thursday afternoons, he would make his way—partly by crowded rural bus, and partly by donkey—back to the village where much of Friday was spent in the spacious relaxation that his uncle's household could not provide, telling Amma and the others of the week's successes in the city. Increasingly, the weekend visits became an important break in the grinding rhythm of work away from the village. On one of these weekends, when Ahmad was about 14 years old, the omda decreed that his oldest son should proceed to train himself for city life by continuing his studies at Fouad University in Cairo; he also decreed that Kemal, Ahmad's brother next in age, who had shown less academic aptitude, should cut short his studies and train himself to take over the family's 65 acres. Because the decrees coincided with their wishes and because Amma had prepared them well, the boys were neither unhappy nor surprised, but Ahmad remembers that his selection as the one to carry the family banner into the city put a new responsibility on his shoulders.

Ahmad entered the Faculty of Science at Fouad University in the fall of 1933. His father accompanied him to Cairo and, with the help of an urbanized second cousin, succeeded in locating a small room in a dirty-gray apartment house that catered to students. Food was available in a dozen shabby restaurants near the university buildings in Giza. After his father's departure for the village, Ahmad suddenly realized the new immensity of freedom he had and was puzzled and somewhat depressed by it; faced with the lonely impersonality of things, he clung to his time-tested formula for success and happiness and from the first moment began to work very hard. He made friends slowly—one or two from the building he lived in, one or two science students like himself—and felt his way carefully into the class structure of student life. Because he could seldom get back to the village, the hardest times that first year were the weekends, and rather than face either

the crowded two-room ménage of his second cousin in Sayeda Zeinab or the equally unappealing hours of lonely idleness, he would work unremittingly at improving those subjects at which he was weakest—especially mathematics and English—breaking off his labors only to pick up ful sandwiches from the white pushcart at the corner. He remembers that one Friday afternoon, when he was momentarily off guard because he was eating, tears of longing for home came uncontrollably into his eyes, and he was able to stop them only by throwing himself unsparingly into three difficult chapters on English irregular verbs.

When he first came to Cairo, Ahmad understood little about the problems of social class—and one of his virtues has always been his essential classlessness. The omda, who was habitually aware of such matters, tried once to explain that the university would have a student body quite different in composition from that of the government secondary school in Tanta; he spoke of the differences between themselves and other villagers on the one hand, and between themselves and Hafez Bey on the other. Ahmad understood his father's words, if not the implications, but in Cairo he gradually came to recognize the existence of a large category of students markedly different from himself in that they spoke foreign languages with facility and carried on a special kind of social life away from the university. Because Ahmad was basically disinterested in taking part in their way of life, he was, within mutually acceptable limits, on terms of considerable cordiality with several of his well-born classmates. In this respect he differed from numerous socially ambitious friends.

Indeed, one of Ahmad's strengths was his willingness to be out of the student crowd, and he did not participate in several generally accepted student activities. He was not, for example, interested in politics and joined no student political organization. His membership would have been gladly accepted, but it was not eagerly sought (the organizations could get little political help from an omda). A small group of his close friends joined the Moslem Brotherhood, and another group joined the Wafd; perhaps his closest brush with politics was to learn that the two groups could not always be mixed. Nor did Ahmad participate in student strikes, which were increasingly called for decreasingly important matters; and his reputation among his fellow students was that of a man single-mindedly devoted to his own education. Though he occasionally went to the cinema—he could justify this activity on the grounds that it helped him with his English—he went very little compared to most of his classmates, and he never went with them to the brothels in Sharia Clot Bey. In fact, in matters of sex Ahmad was a shy puritan. He did not even admit to himself his curiosity about what went on in that notorious street.

Ahmad's shy puritanism came out in his relations with the girl who was later to become his wife. Amina, a student of English literature in the Faculty of Arts, was one of the relatively few girls at the university in those days. Her father was the principal of a government secondary school, and she had been brought up in Cairo and sent to the American Girls College for both primary and secondary instruction. She was not unattractive—her tendency to heaviness was offset by a special femininity of manner—and she dressed very conservatively in the drab Western clothes that typified the lower middle class of that era. Ahmad knew her from afar because he ordinarily bought his lunch at the same counter and ate in the same area of university lawn; she would eat with a group of friends, but he was usually by himself some fifty yards away, silent and unacknowledged. Yet Amina came to know she was being courted, and her friends would remark jokingly but quietly about her constant and distant lunch companion. The courtship, which began in the fall of Ahmad's third year at the university, continued its unspoken course until the late spring when Ahmad and Amina were driven into nodding acquaintance by the force of the noonday sun: their luncheon area of lawn had only one tree, whose patch of shade was not large enough to include everybody without some sign of recognition. Certain that the normal distance between himself and the girls had to be maintained, Ahmad sat for a week in the unshaded summer heat of May, but finally one of Amina's friends, bolder than the rest, called out and told him to come into the shade. Startled at this admission of his existence, Ahmad stammered his thanks and moved to a new luncheon place on the other side of the tree. The following day he nodded and murmured a greeting, and the others did the same.

Ahmad was asked to stay on as a junior member of the teaching staff of his department, so his chaste romance with Amina continued. With his new status he found it possible to exchange occasional bits of conversation at lunchtime, and he would sometimes manage to leave the university in time to walk with Amina as far as her bus stop. When it came time for Amina to leave the university—she planned to teach English in a private school—Ahmad realized that he had either to give up seeing her or in some way to admit his interest more formally. Then, during one of his rare weekends in the village, he told Amma (in the tone of one making an idle observation) that he thought marriage prior to achieving his doctorate would be a mistake. With unerring instinct, Amma quickly extracted the story of Amina and arranged for a serious discussion between father and son. The omda, whose youth had included visits to the urban fleshpots, was inclined to view marriage for Ahmad as something less than an immediate physical necessity, but in a flash of insight he realized Ahmad's problems had never been his own and he offered to pay the costs of a marriage, even

an urban marriage if Ahmad could not be persuaded to marry a village girl. On his return to Cairo, Ahmad went to a friend, not a very close friend but one who had social experience, and asked him to inquire of Amina's family if marriage was a possibility.

During the following three weeks, Ahmad did not have lunch in the usual place—nor did Amina when she learned from her older brother what was afoot. Ahmad's friend would report to him every two or three days, but there was little to be reported until Amina's family had "thought the matter over," which meant not only consulting Amina but also doing research on Ahmad's background and prospects. When the word finally came that Ahmad was considered eligible, he and his mediating friend were invited to tea—and, all things considered, the village boy came off well. While Amina sat silently in a corner, Ahmad answered questions in the manner of one who sees his way clear to success. During subsequent months, Ahmad came to call on chaperoned occasions, and of course the two had lunch together—now often without the other girls—and shyly reached for each other's thoughts. On one late afternoon, when Amina's older brother had deserted his chaperon's post to run an errand, they kissed for the first time—only to be interrupted by the brother's voice saying, "So this is how you repay my trust." But, in fact, the kiss was a pledge, and the omda came to Cairo to arrange for the marriage and the furnishing of an apartment for the bridal couple.

The marriage contract was signed in the summer of 1939, and from the beginning the partnership was a successful enterprise. Amina went ahead with her plans to teach English and provided the household with extra income. Though the outbreak of the war forced the postponement of the department's plan to send Ahmad abroad to get his doctorate, he was not discouraged and continued to astound his colleagues with his willingness to work. By spending long evenings in the laboratory, he was able to conduct a series of experiments that led to the publishing of several articles—whose impressive English owed a great deal to Amina's editing and reading of proofs. The war, which came close to Cairo and then receded across Northern Africa, involved neither of them personally beyond the undoubted prosperity it brought to Egypt and the barrier it erected to further study in England. Amina bore one son, then another, and they moved to a larger apartment and arranged for a 12-year-old girl from the village to help with the housework.

Ahmad was finally sent "on mission" to get his doctorate in the summer of 1946. The money provided was ample, and he took Amina and the two boys to London and found—miraculously—a large bed-sitting room (with tiny kitchen and bath) within easy bus distance of the univer-

sity. He was made welcome at the university, not only because he was a member of the first postwar batch of foreign graduate students but also because he came modestly with a publication record already behind him. Several professors, noting his intelligence and his startling energy, identified him as a "comer," and when he finally came to write his dissertation he had no difficulty in finding advice and encouragement. He completed his doctorate in the remarkably short period of three academic years.

What he achieved academically was not without cost to the family enterprise, however. Both Ahmad and Amina relished living in England, but for different reasons, and in some ways England drove them apart. Ahmad was now on the high road to success; he gloried in the conviction that he had finally reached the frontiers of scientific knowledge; and for three years he spent a major portion of every day in the laboratory or in the library. For the most part he spent time in the bed-sitter only to eat and sleep. Amina had found a reliable Irish woman to help with the children, and her facility with English allowed her to enter circles from which foreigners would ordinarily be excluded, circles in which Ahmad certainly could have no place whatsoever. In December of their final academic year, Amina lost a baby after a pregnancy of seven months, and perhaps Ahmad—engrossed in the laboratory phase of his dissertation—did not spend the time with her he should have. Because this was also a time when Amina's special English friends were involved with Christmas, her loneliness was acute and she often wept for Egypt.

What struck Ahmad on their return to Cairo in the summer of 1949 was the atmosphere of political machination. The twilight of the old regime had come, and candidates for the succession were everywhere at hand. During Ahmad's absence, political assassination had become almost expectable, and the nonparliamentary parties such as the Socialists and the Moslem Brotherhood had grown greatly—indeed, the Brotherhood had become a powerful political force exercising everywhere its special fascination for those whose only avenue to self-respect was now violence. Ahmad is essentially a nonpolitical being, but politics intruded upon his life in those pre-revolutionary years by way of his indignation at political interference with the teaching process. Not only had student strikes become more numerous, they had begun to hit at the heart of the system. In Ahmad's department, for example, some students looked at a difficult examination and walked out of the room in protest—succeeding in having the examination changed and made easier. Contrasting this incident with his memories of the University of London, Ahmad was incensed and ready to do battle,

but "wiser" heads prevailed as political pressures were applied or anticipated from across the river. The fact was that student political organizations had become important, even crucial sources of power; and enjoying this feeling of power, students were no longer prepared to submit to academic indignity.

Ahmad decided that the only solution was a student sense of responsibility. The university authorities—vice-chancellor, deans, chairmen—were clearly reluctant to do much to maintain academic standards, and the government's only answer to student demonstrations and riots was to close down the university. The teaching faculty—disunited and frightened at the developing chaos—could do nothing collectively. With a few other younger men from various faculties, Ahmad got in touch with the student organizations in an effort to persuade them of the importance of maintaining a separation between their academic lives and their politics, and he addressed several meetings of the Wafd and of another organization that fronted for student cells of the Brotherhood. Because Ahmad was known to be nonpolitical, and perhaps because he was a guest, the students listened respectfully, but they had other matters on their minds. Later, when Ahmad gave failing grades to several students and, after various intercessions, refused to change them, he was assaulted one evening by a group of young men and severely beaten with sticks. The incident occurred near his apartment, and he was just able to stagger home. When he had finally recuperated, he had become a politician to the extent that he now advocated strong government—the kind of government that would bring public security and permit the properly disciplined administration of Egyptian education.

When strong government did arrive by way of a coup d'état in July 1952, Ahmad was surprised and delighted. He heard the news when he emerged from the laboratory late one afternoon, and he made the rare concession of going to a café in the university area and sitting down with friends. His delight proved justified: the teaching faculty began to regain control of the grading system, and the backs of deans were stiffened to resist outside pressures. Except for the growing student population, which was not yet a pressing problem in the Faculty of Science, the university was again free to fulfill its role in society. Ahmad felt all was right with the world. His work was going remarkably well, his students were faithful, and his promotions were well assured. Amina was contentedly pregnant with their fourth child, and his sister Laila and two younger brothers were now studying in Cairo under his social supervision. During Ramadan, there were happy moments at sunset when the larger clan—pleased with its new urban image—gathered in Ahmad's apartment to break the fast.

The family's fortunes have been even brighter in recent years, though Ahmad might admit that things are somehow less exciting than they used to be. Amma finally died in 1958, and the omda's death followed a year later. Ahmad's mother remains in the old house with Kemal, the brother who stayed home, and his peasant wife. Nabila, the older sister for whose literacy Amma worked and plotted, married well and lives in a neighboring village. Kemal has succeeded his father as omda of the village, and Ahmad is "omda" of the family's city branch, which receives no portion of income from the family land because the old man had made it clear from the beginning that investment in education was a substitute for inheritance. Though Ahmad visits the village a good deal less than formerly, he still gets there occasionally with one or two of his children. With Amma's death, however, it is no longer the same, and the harsh urban world has him increasingly in its grip. His energy is seeking outlets more nervously than ever, and he smokes some 60 cigarettes a day. The danger is that he may begin to seek activity for its own sake—the same old success formula suddenly overapplied—and spread himself much too thin at a time when depth would help him. The other day he accepted a new post as a member of the governing board of a large state industry.

My hunch is that Ahmad will increasingly play a managerial role in the widening public sector. Indeed, when one analyzes his present activities, he is scarcely a professor any more: he directs some research but seldom gets to the laboratory himself, and he gives the lectures in only one course, farming out the grading and correction of examinations to colleagues less blessed with outside jobs. His graduate students see him too rarely. One of his close friends is convinced that Ahmad should openly become a major bureaucrat and planner in the industrialization program. Ahmad, the friend not unkindly says, likes orderliness and is not at all worried about freedom of speech. This analysis has some truth in it. For most of his life Ahmad has been interested in little beyond the academe of science, and he has probably never had to suppress a thought important to him. As a bureaucrat, he would speak firmly to his superiors and require resoluteness from inferiors, and he could be relied upon to plunge decisively ahead with scientifically sound projects. After meeting Ahmad, a visiting American asked me what made him "tick," and I found it a difficult question. If it is patriotism, it is not the obvious kind that is currently popular. It is certainly not socialism: when I once asked him if he was a socialist, he told me he didn't mix in politics. The fact is, I suppose, that Ahmad's motivations are human and complex, and he has been much too busy living and changing to spend time wondering about his identity and purpose. The omda's boy has had a long way to come.

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