

# THE MEANING OF الثَّقَافَة IN CONTEMPORARY ARABIC<sup>1</sup>

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THE term 'thaqāfa', like the concept 'culture', which it is supposed to express, seems now to be more generally accepted and used than understood and appreciated; it is in fact one of the most over-worked terms in contemporary Arabic, and some abuse of it and of its derivations is perhaps inevitable. The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the various contemporary uses and abuses of the term, to explain their very recent history, and to offer in conclusion a simple suggestion.

It is acknowledged that the use of 'thaqāfa' as the equivalent of 'culture' is a recent practice, but it is a practice which is no doubt in keeping with the adaptability of the Arabic language. In the absence of a comprehensive modern dictionary to give us the recent history of the word it may be assumed that its use in the sense of 'culture' is one of the results of contact with and translations from European languages which began during the last century.<sup>2</sup>

But the classical uses of the term are our firm starting-point. According to *Lisānu 'l-'Arab*<sup>3</sup> for example تَثَقَّفَ ثَقَافَةً means 'he became skilful and light', and تَثَقَّفَ الشَّيْءَ 'he learnt the thing quickly'. Another shade of meaning is derived from تَثَقَّفَهُ تَثْقِيفًا which originally meant the straightening of spears, but also acquired the meaning of moral or mental disciplining, as in 'Ā'isha's description of her father in these terms: وَأَقَامَ أَوْدَهُ (sic) أَوْدَهُمْ) which is explained as 'he straightened the crookedness of the Muslims',<sup>4</sup> and as in Ikhwān aṣ-Ṣafā's<sup>5</sup> 'setting the mind aright and directing it towards the truth': تَسْدِيدُ الْعَقْلِ وَتَثْقِيفُهُ نَحْوَ الْحَقَائِقِ. Finally this very short glance at the evolution of the classical meaning of the term

<sup>1</sup> This is the text of a paper read at the 23rd International Congress of Orientalists, Cambridge, England, on Friday, 27 August 1954, revised in the light of remarks made by Sir Hamilton Gibb whose kindness I acknowledge with gratitude. The length of the paper, however, is determined by the time limit imposed by the Committee of the Congress.

<sup>2</sup> Writing in 1931, Dr. Maṣṣūr Fahmī states that through Western influence the term 'thaqāfa' in the

sense of 'Kultur' was introduced only 'some twenty years ago'. See the Cairo monthly *al-Ma'rifa*, i (June 1931), pp. 144-5.

<sup>3</sup> Volume x (Bulaq, A.H. 1301), p. 362.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 363. Cf. Lane's *Arabic-English Lexicon* (London, 1863), i, pp. 342-3.

<sup>5</sup> *Rasā'il* (Cairo, 1928), i, p. 4; *ar-Risālah al-Jāmi'ā* (Damascus, 1948), i, p. 263.

may take into account two more meanings. The one occurs in the Muqaddima of Ibn Khaldūn and appears to refer to sportsmanship when speaking of حُسْنُ الثقافة;<sup>1</sup> the other is quoted by Dozy from Ibnu 'l Khatīb's al-Iḥāṭa and refers to public security and defence in these terms:<sup>2</sup> قد تَقَفَّ البلدُ تَقْفِيَةً شَدِيدَةً بِالْعَسَسِ وَالْحَرَسِ.

Taken as a whole, and together with further evidence preserved in the well-known Arabic lexica and other sources, these examples tend to show that various derivations from ث ق ف mean: intelligence, prudence, sagacity, skill, exactitude, lightness, nimbleness, vigilance, encounter,<sup>3</sup> acquisition of knowledge, straightening of the crooked, and overcoming the enemy in combat. Thus the classical usage is very wide in range, covering as it does the mental, moral, and physical aspects. But what about current usage?

On the occasion of the first Arab Cultural Conference which met in September 1947 in Lebanon, the present writer contributed an article<sup>4</sup> in which he called attention, among other things, to an increased tendency in modern Arabic usage to confuse *thaqāfa* (culture) with *ta'lim* (education). A year later the poet, T. S. Eliot, published a book<sup>5</sup> in which he exposed what he considers a general abuse of the term 'culture' in current English usage, making incidentally the same point. His book stimulated me to develop my original theme by trying to discover more precisely the meaning of 'thaqāfa' in contemporary Arabic.

Is there any modern guide to help us in this direction? Practically none. Such dictionaries as were compiled during the modern Arabic renaissance last century are too fettered by classical standards and rarely if ever admit modern usage. An exception may be found in Buṭrus al-Bustānī, but he also does not really break new ground when he allows the metaphorical use of تَقْفِيَةٌ in the sense of تَأْدِيبٌ and تَهْذِيبٌ.<sup>6</sup> He does, however, extend the meaning when he concludes that we can say تَقَّفَ الْوَلَدُ in the sense of 'taught him, amended him, and refined him': عَلَّمَهُ وَهَدَّبَهُ وَلَطَّفَهُ. The admission of تَقَّفَ for عَلَّمَ is only one step removed from the present use of

<sup>1</sup> Quoted and interpreted by Muṣṭafā Jawād (the *Journal of the Iraqi Academy*, iii, p. 97) and seen in proof through the kindness of the author: يلبسون على الناس في الشارة والزي وركوب الخيل وحسن الثقافة يموهون بها وهم في الاكثر اجبن من النسوان على ظهورها

<sup>2</sup> Dozy, *Supplément aux Dictionnaires Arabes* (Leiden, 1881), i, p. 160.

<sup>3</sup> Koran, ii. 187; lx. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Qāfila, Jerusalem, 5 September 1947. Cf. his other article on the same subject in the *Arabic Listener*, vol. x, no. 3, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London, 1948).

<sup>6</sup> *Muḥīṭ al-Muḥīṭ* (1869), i, pp. 191-2; *Qaṭr al-Muḥīṭ* (1869), i, pp. 209-10. Cf. Anthony Salmoné, *Arabic-English Dictionary* (London, 1890), i, p. 77, where 'educated' and 'trained' are admitted as new meanings.

ثقافة for تَعْلِيم, and the consequent confusion, vagueness, and looseness which it engendered.

Other nineteenth-century sources add very little to Bustānī, so that the student must depend almost entirely on his own knowledge of the language and its literature. Not only is there no detailed modern dictionary similar for example to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but as it will presently be explained, the three Arabic academies engaged in research in this field seem to accept the present vague use of the term as inevitable.

As in English, the looseness in usage seems to spring from a confusion of 'education' and 'culture' and sometimes even 'civilization'. But in Arabic the confusion is aggravated by the use of at least three terms for education, namely مَعَارِف in reference to administration, and تَرْبِيَّة or تَعْلِيم or تربية و تَعْلِيم jointly, in reference to function.<sup>1</sup> Recently the word ثقافة has become fashionable as a fourth, and has thus increased the confusion. The first term (ma'ārif) is a legacy of Ottoman rule, and its restricted use is hard to question. And the use of the dual term (tarbiya wa ta'lim) 'upbringing and instruction' is very apt and may be preferred to (tarbiya) or (ta'lim) on its own. But the invasion of the territory by (thaqāfa) must be questioned. Here it is pertinent to say that the frontiers between 'culture' and 'civilization' in certain European languages are far from defined, and this indefiniteness is transmitted by translation to the Arabic.

For the second term Arabic has حَضَارَة and مَدِينَة (تَمَدُّن<sup>2</sup> is now rather less used), and for the first ثقافة; but we now often read المدنية الأوربية where it is meant الثقافة الأوربية, much the same as we read in English 'European civilization' for 'European culture' and vice versa. The concept of neither seems to be clear.

But is the concept 'Arab culture' clear to the educated Arab?<sup>3</sup> Is it clear to all the Arabists among Orientalists? If the concept is clear, language should not fail us. But to judge from evidence the confusion of usage appears to be born of insufficient definition of ideas with regard to 'education', 'civilization', and 'culture'. Arab culture—indeed any

<sup>1</sup> تَأْدِيب, 'correction' and تَهْدِيب 'amending' are also used, though not often. Cf. *Muḥīt al-Muḥīt*, i, p. 191.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Massignon, *Recueil de textes inédits concernant l'histoire de la mystique en pays d'Islam* (Paris, 1929), p. 129, says that this word makes its first appearance in Ibn Sab'in (d. 669/1270): على أن جميع ما ذكره (ابن سينا) فيها هو من مفهوم النواميس لافلاطون وكلام الصوفية وركب شبه ذلك للتمدن والبحث الفلسفي

<sup>3</sup> Cf. H. A. R. Gibb: 'I have not yet seen a single book written by an Arab of any branch in any Western language that has made it possible for the Western student to understand the roots of Arab culture. More than that, I have not seen any book written in Arabic for Arabs themselves which has clearly analyzed what Arabic culture means for Arabs.' See his paper 'Social Change in the Near East' published in 1942 in the University of Chicago's series of papers on 'The Near East—Problems and Prospects.'

culture—is a way of life. The Arab is so much part of it and takes it for granted that he is at a loss to define it if called upon to do so. The Orientalist is generally outside it and can only capture it in glimpses or master it piecemeal. It is given only to the very few, native or foreign, to catch its total emotional undertones, to feel its whole sentiments and to appreciate its comprehensive symbols, before they can safely proceed to study its physical structure, past or present, in part or as a whole.

Hence our comparative poverty and inadequacy, not only in expounding the culture itself but in referring to it in definite, consistent, and expressive language. We are concerned here with the second deficiency. The examples which will now be cited are simple explanation of existing practice. It is by no means a rare occurrence in the history of languages that erratic usage becomes rationalized and accepted as part of the linguistic heritage. The same could happen in Arabic with regard to the word 'thaqāfa'.

The first example is the use of the word ثقافة for تربية or تعليم (or for تربية وتعليم). It is perhaps futile to quote instances from the daily press or even the periodicals, as then an objection may be advanced that most of these are ephemeral and not authoritative, although of course they are responsible, in no small measure, for the confusion which they propagate, partly through translation but partly through actual lapses. Nevertheless, let us confine ourselves to certain authoritative publications that have appeared during the last twenty years. Dr. Ṭaha Ḥusain's *Future of Culture in Egypt*<sup>1</sup> has, perhaps, a misleading title. While it argues in its introductory part that Egypt's cultural heritage is a Mediterranean one with a westward orientation and not an Oriental one with an eastward orientation, it proceeds to criticize in detail the Egyptian educational system and to make suggestions for its reform. Of its 536 pages only the first 70 can be said to deal with culture as such, while the rest of the book is a parochial educational report on primary, secondary, and higher education. Throughout the book the word 'culture' is often used where the word 'education' is clearly the right one. The following are among the glaring instances:

p. 118. The author recommends 'easy evening instruction' for pupils who leave school prematurely so that, he says, 'they can advance in culture slowly'. المضي في الثقافة على مهل.

p. 259. In connexion with the teaching of foreign languages, he says that after the end of British control Arabic became the language of culture. أصبحت اللغة العربية لغة الثقافة.

p. 526. Speaking of Egypt's responsibility to spread education in the

<sup>1</sup> مستقبل الثقافة في مصر: 2 volumes (Cairo, 1938).

neighbouring Arab countries the author says that 'some might object that Egypt is too burdened to be able to undertake such extension of culture outside its frontiers while it is in the greatest need to extend it within its own frontiers'. هذا قد يُقال إن أعباء الدولة المصرية أثقل من أن تسمح لها بمثل هذا التوسع في إذاعة الثقافة خارج حدودها على حين أنها في أشد الحاجة الى إذاعة الثقافة داخل هذه الحدود

The second example has deeper causes than mere reckless choice of words or imperfect definition of terms. A well-known Arabic scholar put the difference between the current expressions of رَجُلٌ مُتَعَلِّمٌ and رَجُلٌ مُتَقَفٌ briefly thus: 'Every cultured person is educated, but not every educated person is cultured.' كُلُّ مُتَقَفٍ مُتَعَلِّمٌ وليس كُلُّ مُتَعَلِّمٍ مُتَقَفًا. This is an apt epigram, but like most antithetical pronouncements it does not show us a clear way out of the muddle, for we still do not know who can be considered مُتَقَفٌ and who مُتَعَلِّمٌ. Doubtless the master key is still nothing less than clear definitions of the two terms 'education' and 'culture'. The trouble is that in our minds culture seems to be irretrievably confused with education.

If culture, as stated above, is a way of life, then it must include the social system, beliefs, customs, arts, and the interaction of all these. Education is an acknowledged instrument for preserving and transmitting parts, though by no means all parts, of culture, through imparting knowledge and training of the intellectual and moral faculties. If these are accepted as working definitions, do we consider the unlettered badawi of pre-Islamic and Islamic times a cultured or uncultured person, at least in the sense culture is defined in the lexica?<sup>1</sup> Is the contemporary illiterate tribal chief in, for example, Sa'ūdī Arabia and 'Irāq devoid of culture in that sense? Does Arab culture belong exclusively to the town-dweller (madanī), or does it also belong to the villager (qarāwī) and the nomad (badāwī)? Who were and are the makers, preservers, and transmitters of Arab culture? In short, is culture—any culture—a social or an individual possession? Unless such questions are resolved conclusively and in detail we are not likely to see the end of the present maltreatment of the term 'thaqāfa'.

Two or three illustrations of recent usage will suffice. First, the committee of literature and fine arts of the Fuad I Arabic Academy compiled a list of technical terms which they published 'for the cultured public and students of Arabic'.<sup>2</sup> على جمهور المثقفين والمشتغلين باللغة العربية. The expression 'cultured public', coming as it does from such an authoritative body,

<sup>1</sup> Dr. 'Abdu 'r-Rahmān Shābandar once wrote I owe this reference to Maître Khalil Mardam Bey. لا ثقافة يُعْتَدُّ بها حيث لا حضارة. See the Syrian journal 'ath-Thaqāfa', Damascus, vol. i, no. 2, p. 3. <sup>2</sup> مجلة مجمع اللغة العربية الملكي for 1934, p. 54.

is too vague, and seems to mean in its context no more than 'the well-educated' if taken in a general sense, or 'the specialists' if taken in a particular sense. Secondly, among books published in 1949 and listed by the Department of Culture in the Egyptian Ministry of Education there is one entitled<sup>1</sup>: الثقافة الزراعية: بحوث مبسطة علمية وعملية في فنون الزراعة. It may be strange to find 'culture' treated as a subdivision of 'education', and not vice versa, but this is an administrative convenience which has to be described by some sort of jargon, good or bad. However, the title of the book in question, which would have been somewhat incongruous as 'agricultural culture' in English, betrays the same fascination with the use of the ill-defined 'thaqāfa'. From the author's sub-title the use of the term seems to be too ambitious. The last two words of the sub-title فنون الزراعة or simply فن الزراعة would have been ample, and thaqāfa could have been spared.

Thirdly, there is a well-written book entitled *The Culture of the Literary Critic* which advances the thesis that 'a sufficient measure of scientific culture' (ثقافة علمية) is necessary for the Arabic literary critic whose present 'purely literary culture' (ثقافة أدبية محضة) is insufficient for him to discharge his duties satisfactorily.<sup>2</sup> There is much to be said for the idea as such, but what is meant by the word culture here? Not education in general or as a whole, but obviously a branch of it or a branch of knowledge.

All this tends to indicate that as with expounding the connotation of the concept 'thaqāfa' so with detecting the modern usage of the term, the native scholar is so little conscious of it all, that sometimes he hardly notices the change that is constantly taking place. And with only few exceptions, the Western Arabist is perhaps so much engrossed in classical usage that he may sometimes be insufficiently informed about contemporary developments, with the result that there are remarkably few studies of modern Arabic by Orientalists. Thus in English, for example, one finds very little besides the early studies by Professor Gibb<sup>3</sup> and the more recent translations of modern verse by Professor Arberry.<sup>4</sup> And these are strictly speaking literary, not linguistic studies.

But with regard to 'thaqāfa' in particular, there has recently been an attempt on the part of an Arab scholar to secure common agreement on its present usage. In 1950 Ahmad Hasan az-Zayyāt read a paper to the Fuad I Arabic Academy in which he claimed for the modern Arabs the

<sup>1</sup> السجل الثقافي for 1949, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> ثقافة الناقد الأدبي by Dr. Muhammad Nuwaihī (Cairo, 1949).

<sup>3</sup> H. A. R. Gibb, *Studies in Contemporary Arabic*

*Literature* (Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, London, vol. iv, pp. 745-60; vol. v, pp. 311-22, 445-66; vol. vii, pp. 1-22).

<sup>4</sup> A. J. Arberry, *Modern Arabic Poetry: an anthology with English verse translations* (London, 1950).

right 'to innovate' in language: حَقَّقَ الْمُحَدِّثِينَ فِي الْوَضْعِ اللُّغَوِيِّ.<sup>1</sup> In 1951 he followed this up by submitting to the Academy some fifty words which are now used in senses different from those assigned to them in the lexica. The word 'thaqāfa' was one of them. Its use was approved in the terms submitted as follows:<sup>2</sup> "الثقافة: مصدر تَقَفَّ: صار حَادِقًا. والمحدثون يستعملونها 3  
اسمًا من التثقيف وهو التعليم والتهديب. ومنه قول القائل 'لولا تثقيفك وتوقيفك لما 3  
كنت شيئاً، فهي عندهم تقابل لفظ culture عند الإفرنج"

It will be readily perceived that this decision is nothing more than an authoritative sanction of present practice. It is by no means a rationalizing and systematizing of an erratic and chaotic usage. In effect it seems to say 'continue mixing up ta'lim, tahdhīb, tarbiya, and thaqāfa, and the innumerable derivations of every one of these'. But why, we may ask, do we need 'thaqāfa' if we have already more than one adequate word for 'education'? What shall we use for the exact equivalent of culture as distinct from education? Why did the Academy bring in the term tahdhīb to mean both education and culture? Why did they ban, at least by exclusion, the term tarbiya<sup>4</sup> which has hitherto been very widely used?

There appears to be only one answer to these questions. Let us be more precise. No one wants a repetition of a well-known fault of dictionaries and to be faced with a circular route when one tries to find the meaning of one term only to discover that it is explained by the other, so-called مُرَادِف. Thus ta'lim would mean thaqāfa, thaqāfa = tahdhīb, tahdhīb = tarbiya, tarbiya = ta'lim, and so on.

Enough has been said to show the rambling evolution of the usage of the term 'thaqāfa'. It is not for an individual either to attempt a final definition of it or to offer suggestions for its usage. The definition ventured above is a tentative one necessitated by the argument, and the suggestions made explicitly or implicitly in the foregoing pages are nothing more than illustrations to prove that both the concept and the term 'thaqāfa' call for more study. The three academies in Damascus, Cairo, and Baghdad, with their membership including eminent Orientalists, are the right authorities for that. Is it too much to hope that through the combined efforts of Arab scholars and Orientalists we shall soon witness a more determined effort to rescue 'thaqāfa' from its present plight?

<sup>1</sup> *Ar-Risāla*, no. 932, 14 May 1951, pp. 560-3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 933, 21 May 1951, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> According to another version, it is 'مَا كُنْتُ'.

<sup>4</sup> In the received translation of Unesco's full name, the United Nations Educational, Scientific

and Cultural Organization, as منظمة الأمم المتحدة للتربية والعلم والثقافة, the word tarbiya is restored as the equivalent of education. See *Arab Cultural Annual*, i, p. 573 (Cairo, 1949), issued in Arabic under the auspices of the Cultural Department of the Arab League.