







[About \(/about/\)](#)
[Blog \(/blog/\)](#)
[Edu \(/asymptote-for-educators/\)](#)
[Book Club \(/book-club/\)](#)
[Submit \(/submit/\)](#)
[Join \(/join/\)](#)
[Support \(/support/\)](#)
[Donate \(/donate/\)](#)

from *An Egyptian African Story*

Helmi Sharawy



Artwork by Naomi Segal

An Important Meeting

Muhammad Faiyq and his colleagues always visited the African Association unannounced, and all we knew then was that he was a senior figure in the world of the presidency and intelligence, personally close to the president of the republic. On one such visit, he noticed me carrying the newspapers that I had just collected from Professor Ishaq. He was kind and warm and voiced his surprise that I read such publications. Wondering how he could benefit from this, he asked Professor Ishaq whether I could present him with a good summary of the information they contained. His request was a boon for several reasons: these papers began to be delivered more regularly, I was benefitting from details about the world of the colonies (the British ones at least) that nobody in Egypt knew, and I was presenting an important source of information to a senior figure in the presidency. And, more important than all that, I was earning five pounds every month for my valuable work! My relationship with Mr Faiyq grew as strong personally as it did professionally; he made friends easily and had a special respect for intellectuals that was rare amongst many of the officers, making him a real star in the political leadership. Meanwhile, his relationship with Abdel Nasser gave him confidence in himself and guaranteed him the confidence of others.

Faiyq began to bring me some of the books he owned but did not have the time to read. The first comprehensive book which showed me another side of the life of the African peoples was that of American journalist John Gunther, *Inside Africa*. I discovered from Faiyq years later that this had also been an important source for him, at the beginning of his professional specialism in the African Bureau of the presidency. As my knowledge improved, he asked me to translate parts of Lord Hailey's book *African Survey*, which comprised about 1,800 pages and was an important reference text with encyclopaedic entries and documents on African developments from that period.

I still moved in the world of folklore now and then, whenever Professor Rushdi Salih or Dr Abd Al-Hamid Yunus asked me to participate in their fieldtrips, but in practice I was increasingly preoccupied with the demands of the work and activities at the African Association. Indeed, its moral value was enhanced for me when one evening I met the family of the martyr Kamal Al-Din Salah. He had been the Egyptian consultant to the United Nations in Mogadishu in Somalia, during the preparations for the independence from Italy of what was then called Italian Somalia. His position in defence of the interests of the Somali people prompted one of the Italian intelligence agents to assassinate him with live fire on 16 April 1957. Amina Murad, his wife, was a strong and magnetic personality; her brother Helmi Murad was a leader in the Young Egypt and later the Socialist Party at the beginning of the 1950s (which I had been sympathetic to for some years). I was delighted to join Professor Ishaq in welcoming them at a planning meeting ahead of the event we were holding to commemorate the first anniversary of Kamal Al-Din Salah's martyrdom. It was a grand affair: several Egyptian diplomats and government representatives attended, as did the leader of the Moroccan Rif Muhammad ibn Abd al-Karim al-Khattabi, the leader of the Moroccan Rif, and the Somali leader Al-Hagg Muhammad Hussein, to whom I was introduced, much to my surprise, by the young Somali Ahmad Al-Azhari. I would later meet the leader of so-called French Somalia (now Djibouti) Mahmud Harbi, also at the Association.

I relished being in this environment at the African Association, which was giving me opportunities that I could never have imagined having before. Not a week would go by without us meeting delegations of personalities whose influence in their homelands we had only read about in the press. They would meet ministers and senior officials by day and come to us for popular meetings in the evening. Often something akin to a people's congress would be organised for them, and I would find myself—in the presence of a North Nigerian delegation from Kano and Sokoto, or a delegation of Ashanti Muslims from Ghana—called upon to provide English–Arabic translation, given the substantial attendance of ordinary Cairenes, families and youth. This was both difficult and embarrassing, because my skills did not extend to live interpreting! Nevertheless, I had become a competitor for the top job, working alongside Muhammad Fayiq: he used to attend some of these events, and several young Egyptian members of the Association would try to become close to him.

I had another embarrassing translation episode on a very different occasion, this time nothing to do with events at the Association. Professor Ishaq was forever telling Fayiq to find me some kind of employment either at the Association or in the presidency. One day, I was astonished to learn that Fayiq had asked for me to join the Translation Division of the cabinet at its building in Qasr Al-Aini Street. There they put me in charge of a stream of news and press agency materials, for example, from Reuters and the Associated Press, exclusively on Africa. This gave me a daily dose of knowledge about developments on the continent. One day, the division leader summoned me and asked—with a piece of paper in front of him which I had translated—what exactly I thought the position was of the person described in the text, a member of the high commission investigating the Mau Mau events in Kenya and whose name was prefixed by 'ex officio'. I replied that it meant 'former employee', thinking that logically, ex meant former . . . He mocked me for having come close to misleading the authorities and indeed the public, since the phrase of course meant 'by virtue of one's position'.

I praised God for saving my skin, as I imagined how some of my translations might well be presented before the president of the republic himself! And I learned never to believe a claim without carefully checking it first.

After the tripartite aggression of 1956, Cairo was in a 'victorious state'. This period saw Egypt achieve a beneficial rapprochement with the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc—or the 'socialist' bloc states, as they were known at that time—in a world in which the United States was trying to mitigate the 'West's' loss of Egypt. And so, amidst these victories of Abdel Nasser's, there began to be signs that he was being intentionally provoked and harassed. (. . .) I imagine Abdel Nasser was fully aware of the conspiracies being plotted against him, given how he had spoiled the West's plans in the Middle East. (. . .)

It became necessary then to move in the world of Bandung, the landmark 1955 Asian-African Conference in Indonesia, at which Abdel Nasser gained insight into the positions of the aligned and non-aligned states. He welcomed the Indian leader Jawaharlal Nehru's similar orientation, perhaps out of his own reservations against Sino-Russian influence on the one hand, and out of a desire to build a non-aligned bloc on the other. Nehru's contacts with Abdel Nasser led to the convening of the Asian African Peoples' Solidarity Conference in turn in December 1957. Hosted at Cairo University, this conference led to a surge of feeling for the significance of the struggle for national liberation. Abdel Nasser appeared to be containing Western

designs in Asia and Africa by consolidating a powerful African presence after the conference and through his already familiar relationship with the Asians. Meanwhile, Egyptian–Soviet relations were developing markedly, directly connected to Egypt's domestic social ambitions.

The Solidarity Conference and the Liberation Movement Leaders

I would like to reflect here on the significance of the Asian African People's Conference for me personally during my time at the African Association. Its premises soon began to host numerous African personalities who had reached an agreement with the Egyptian leadership on keeping their representatives in Cairo. I will come to that in detail shortly, but I wanted to note first my delight at meeting figures who were renowned leaders in their own countries. My modest knowledge of English allowed me to talk to them, even those who spoke French, and who also used a modest English for communication, such as Félix Moumié, champion of the armed struggle in Cameroon, and leader of the Union of the Peoples of Cameroon Party, or Ignatius Musaaazi, leader of the Uganda National Congress Party, or Joshua Nkomo, leader in Southern Rhodesia and of the Zimbabwe African People's Union, as well as leaders from Kenya and South Africa. At the same time, popular delegations began to come to Cairo, some of whom were Muslims from countries such as Nigeria; even the leaders of the Ashanti Muslims in Ghana came to the city.

Some events and encounters stay with you . . . In that spring of 1958, the Permanent Secretariat of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO) was founded in Cairo, and the Egyptian president's instructions were that it be housed in a venue befitting Egypt's role in the movement. Yusuf Al-Siba'i had been chosen as the AAPSO's General Secretary, following the appointment as conference president of Anwar Sadat, who continued as president of the AAPSO thereafter. The presidency's Public Relations team chose a building in Manyal on the Nile as AAPSO's headquarters. It was elegant, and an appropriate venue for the hosting of representatives from India, China, South Africa, and other permanent members of the AAPSO Secretariat.

It was there that Yusuf Al-Siba'i resided. He was general secretary of the organisation and several other literary and cultural organisations in Egypt, as well as a celebrated romantic novelist, beloved by the daughters of the rising bourgeoisie. AAPSO's headquarters acquired a reputation for Al-Siba'i's pretty girls, Mursi Sa'ad Al-Din's jokes, and Edward Kharrat's work ethic. Kharrat carried the burden of the General Secretariat and its conferences with genuine competence. It was only years later that I discovered that he was also a gifted novelist, as he would only ever show us his bureaucratic face.

The political tradition was that every liberation movement accepted in Egypt would nominate one individual to be based in the African Association, and a representative (the same individual or an assistant) in the AAPSO Secretariat. And for a reason I never understood, there was a little sensitivity between some government officials and this secretariat. I sensed this from my position in the African Association, even before I moved to my official position in the presidency, as I will explain. Generally, the dual arrangement placed me in the position of observer, and even competitor, for the cordiality of the representatives of the African liberation movements.

Thanks to the prestige of the Egyptian president, the year 1958 was filled with activity on every international front, so much so that the country's social policies and domestic system seemed secondary to us. The National Union, the government's party, was in fact the subject of constant sarcasm—it did not appear to pay as much attention to African activity as it did to protecting the opportunists and those with 'personal projects' wishing to gain power. As a result, none of the Association's young members had any aspiration to join it, although I myself had a personal interest in political organisation. I understood its importance in those colonies whose leaders I was responsible for in Egypt.

The leaders of Asia and Africa began to arrive in Egypt, bringing their concerns from Sudan and Somalia, Lebanon and Iraq, and following the simmering tensions between India and China. These developments were of course the talk of Cairo's literary salons, and I hope the reader will forgive me if I do not repeat what has appeared in memoirs and journalistic accounts since, but rather focus on the context of my personal formation in Egypt's African activity, during a period (1958–60) which was foundational to it—much to my good fortune.

The arrival of some African leaders, and the outcomes of their visits, was of particular and direct significance for Egypt, in addition to the presence of the liberation movements as a whole. The martyrdom of Kamal Al-Din Salah in Somalia had of course had a lasting effect. Al-Hagg Muhammad Hussein, the president of the Somali League, or 'Liga' Party, would always tell me the story of how Salah had joined the Ogadeni people in their struggle for liberation from the yoke of the Ethiopian regime, and how he had joined the people of the five Somalias. Their flag with its five-pointed star, reflected their subjection to a five-way colonial division—British, Italian, French, Ethiopian, and Kenyan. Al-Hagg Muhammad was one of the most prominent of the Somali leaders, from the Ethiopian Somali (Ogaden) area himself.

The Algerian Revolution was another draw for us all, and after the French attack on Egypt, the Egyptian leadership was particularly attentive to Algeria and North Africa's confrontation with France. Every day at 8:00 p.m., Cairo's 'Voice of the Arabs' radio would broadcast its special programme, announcing in ringing tones, 'North Africa is our land, its freedom is our freedom'. This continued with the ongoing successes of the Algerian Revolution. The film *Jamila, the Algerian* was made in 1958, celebrating the freedom fighter Jamila Bouhired. It was the highest cultural expression of this special relationship between the Egyptian and Algerian peoples. And whereas Muhammad ibn Abd al-Karim al-Khattabi was present at the African Association as a political refugee and freedom fighter from the 'Kingdom of Marrakech' (now Morocco), the Algerians cherished their status as a temporary government in exile, with special headquarters in Garden City, and with some of their representatives living like ministers in Cairo. As a result, I did not have the pleasure of links with them at the Association.

I did enjoy the opportunity to get to know Dr Félix Moumié, the leader of Cameroon, however. His supporters were resisting in the mountains too, just as the Algerians were, and his goal was to strike at the influence of France's stooges, just as Egypt's was. It often pained me to see the Egyptian media's failure to celebrate this man, whose prestige was significant among Africans from across the continent. I used to follow his statements in French against Ahmadou Ahidjo, prime minister during the transitional period in Cameroon (1958–60) and proponent of a 'French style' independence. France had been preparing for the year 1960, as had the dependent Francophone states. No wonder they feared a personality like Moumié's so much. He was poisoned in Switzerland in November that year . . .

Cameroon's armed struggle was certainly important in the resistance against France. However, the exit of Guinea-Conakry from French control through Ahmed Sékou Touré's unilateral declaration of independence in October 1958 was significant on both official and popular levels in Egypt. Delegations were formed to go from Cairo to Conakry to offer congratulations and support. New figures now appeared on the scene of Egypt's African activity: Dr Fuad Galal, speaker of the Parliament; Ahmad Fahim, president of the Trade Union Federation; and Ahmad Bahaa' Al-Din, the journalist and editor, whose writings turned the issue into an extremely popular one. He publicised Egypt's assistance to the people of Guinea in a host of fields, following reports that France had closed down all existing services in the country when it left in defeat.

Alongside Dr Moumié was Joshua Nkomo, who had come to set up the office of 'Rhodesia' (now Zimbabwe) for the African National Congress-South Rhodesia, the 'SR-ANC'. Nkomo needed to meet Abdel Nasser first, so he stayed several days in Egypt. Muhammad Fayiq asked me to accompany Nkomo in Cairo for a day, until his meeting with the president was arranged. I enjoyed many absorbing conversations with the African leader, and we formed a strong bond of friendship which continued for many years—he even personally invited me to Zimbabwe, along with other friends, after independence in 1980. In these, our first meetings, he explained to me the idea behind the name 'African National Congress' in his country, and in most of the southern African states. It was influenced, he said, by the significance of the National 'Congress' established by the Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi, after his experience in South Africa. We also discussed the problem of the settlers, and their desire to rule Africa or large parts of it. This was the policy of Paul Kruger and Cecil Rhodes at the start of the twentieth century: they were in touch with the Zionist Theodor Herzl, given the similarity of the project in Palestine.

*

Nkomo's meeting with Nasser was further delayed, so I accompanied him on an outing in Cairo—also following instructions from Mr Fayiq. With my limited experience of the world of entertainment, the best thing I could think of was a visit to the Cairo Zoo in Giza, as this was the only trip we got to enjoy as children and in our youth! The zoo was located pleasingly close

to the university. Just as Nkomo and I were leaving, we bumped into Dr Muhammad Anis, with whom I had become friends during his fruitful if somewhat chaotic meetings with his students. I introduced him to the African leader and told him that we had just been at the zoo. Anis laughed heartily and said, ‘This man comes from the country of the National Park, from the touristic savannahs of wild animals, and you take him to Cairo Zoo, Helmi?!’ He then proceeded to translate this colloquial jest for Nkomo, although gently, before engaging him in a conversation about colonial policies in Africa. His knowledge made Nkomo wonder with some admiration about universities and academics in Egypt, and indeed about my own friendship with professors of this calibre. And then in an apparent effort to lighten the joke’s effect, he described to me the significance and location of the National Park in his country, as well as in South Africa and Kenya. As for me, I could not imagine that tourism could possibly take place in the wild, even as we lived amidst the wildest of humanity, with far worse fears . . .

Nkomo also tried to understand the areas of similarity that I had hinted at between Rhodesia and the question of Palestine, and I explained to him the problem with the racist settler colonial claim to Palestine, Algeria, and Kenya, and equally to Rhodesia and South Africa. But I got the sense very early on that the Zionist movement, and the concentration of Jews in South Africa, had made a cultured leader like our friend overlook the connection between Zionism and the terrible issue of settler colonialism in his country too. ➔

translated from the Arabic by Reem Abou-El-Fadl

Read the original in Arabic (/nonfiction/an-egyptian-african-story-helmi-sharawy/arabic/)

Listen to the original read by the author:

00:00

04:37

Read translator’s note

[-]

The extracts here come from *Sira Misriyya Ifriqiyya: Mudhakkirat Hilmi Sharawi* (‘An Egyptian African Story: The Memoir of Helmy Sharawy’), the memoir of Helmi Sharawy, published in Arabic by the independent Cairo press Dar Al-Ain in 2019. Sharawy is Egypt’s foremost Africanist, a renowned leftist activist, and a living legend in Arab and African oppositional and academic circles. Sharawy’s memoir charts the transformation of Cairo into a leading Third World capital during the Cold War, through his own extraordinary life story. I was fortunate enough to be invited to edit the Arabic memoir and translate it into English.

In Chapter Three, Sharawy follows the rise of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s. He recalls Nasser’s nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company, his challenge to the European colonial powers, and his policies of Afro-Asian solidarity and nonalignment. Sharawy then relates his own unorthodox path into the civil service, where he became responsible for dozens of African liberation movements hosted by the Egyptian state. In the extracts translated here, Sharawy introduces us to the world of the African Association—the headquarters of these movements in Cairo—and how it became a kind of accidental salvation for him. He provides colourful profiles of its chair, Abd Al-Aziz Ishaq, and its supervisor, African Affairs Minister Muhammad Fayiq. He then weaves together the story of the rise in stature of the Egyptian capital, which hosted the first Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Conference in 1957, with his own increasing responsibilities, until his appointment to the presidency’s African Affairs Bureau in 1960.

Sharawy is a Marxist of pan-Arab sensibilities, and an Egyptian of African horizons. His story spans encounters with future leaders from Sudan to South Africa, and a critical yet unabashedly partisan look at African and Arab cultures and societies. This makes the task of translating his memoir at times dizzying. I have had to navigate a complex geography, contextualising diverse political positions and historical information. I have occasionally introduced or brought forward paragraph breaks to ensure clarity, and had permission from the author to edit out or add explanatory detail as I saw fit.


I have also had to move as nimbly as Sharawy does between the local and the global—from an Egyptian phrase to an international treaty, on to a regional conference and back to a personal friendship. In these extracts, I enjoyed the intertextuality of translating stories from Arabic of Sharawy’s own tribulations translated from English. The process has also been a rich education, not only in histories of decolonisation but also in the meaning of taking constant risks on principle.

Read bios

[-]

Helmi Sharawy is president of the Arab African Research Centre in Cairo and a renowned scholar of African and Arab affairs. He is recognised for his role in coordinating state support for African liberation movements during the presidency of Gamal Abdel Nasser, and for his opposition to former presidents Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak. Sharawy was an Executive Committee member of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, alongside Samir Amin. His publications in Arabic include *Al-Thawra al-Ifriqiyya fi-Angola* (The African Revolution in Angola, Iraqi Ministry of Culture, 1978), *Afriqya: Qadaya Al-Taharur wa-l-Tanmiya* (Africa: Issues of Liberation and Development, Dar Al-Thaqafa Al-Gadida, 1981), and *Al-Thawrat Al-Arabiyya wa Afriqya* (The Arab Uprisings and Africa, Dar Gazirat Al-Ward, 2012), and in English, *The Heritage of African Languages Manuscripts (Ajami) in Arabic Letters*, Vols I and II (Institut Culturel Afro-Arabe, 2005 and 2017) and *Political and Social Thought in Africa* (African Books Collective, 2014). He has also translated African scholarship, including Kwesi Prah’s *African Languages for the Mass Education of Africans* (Dt. Stiftung für Internat. Entwicklung, 1995), and Mahmood Mamdani and Ernest Wamba dia Wamba’s *African Studies in Social Movements and Democracy* (CODESRIA, 1995).

Reem Abou-El-Fadl is Senior Lecturer in Comparative Politics of the Middle East at SOAS University of London. She is the author of *Foreign Policy as Nation Making: Turkey and Egypt in the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2019) and the editor of *Revolutionary Egypt: Connecting Domestic and International Struggles* (Routledge, 2015). Her work explores the politics of protest, national liberation, and transnational solidarity in Middle Eastern and Afro-Asian spaces. She is a heritage speaker of Arabic and studied Turkish as a postgraduate at the University of Oxford, and she uses Arabic- and Turkish-to-English translation extensively in her research. She also takes this experience into the classroom, particularly as a collaborator with Shadow Heroes, an organisation promoting critical thinking through creative translation workshops in schools. *An Egyptian African Story* will be her first full-length literary translation project.

 Print this article

Join us at  (<https://www.facebook.com/Asymptotejournal>)  (<https://twitter.com/@asymptotejrnl>)
 (<https://asymptotejournal.tumblr.com/>) | **Subscribe to Mailing List** (</newsletter-signup/>)

Asymptote© 2021