

THE EGYPTIAN WORKER

*I sew shoes for you, and walk in the dirt;
I plump up mattresses for you,
and live squatting in a shack.
Is this my due, my portion?
Let God settle the accounts!
You live in proud houses, but it is I who build them;
You sleep in silken sheets,
but it's I who wove them;
You own rivers of gold,
but it's I who made them flow.
With God there is no envy;
But I, I score it up against you.
From dawn to dusk the hammer is in my hands,
Workday and holiday alike I bear it.
The sun of the streets is warm,
While I shiver in my rags,
And watch you flinch as I pass by –
Too low to be spoken to.
I house you, clothe you, feed you
and then you treat me so!
On the day of my death there will be
no money for a coffin.
And you, for my last journey,
Will grudge me even a sigh.*

EDITOR'S NOTE

Bayram al-Tunisi (1893-1961) is a hero in Egypt and in Tunisia because of his political activism and the popular orientations of his literary work, particularly his satiric poetry in colloquial Arabic. He was born in Alexandria, his grandfather having immigrated there from Tunisia, and grew up in the Maghribi sub-culture of the city.

The Maghribi community in Alexandria, at least the less wealthy members, clustered near the shrine of the city's 13th century patron saint, Abu l-'Abbas al-Mursi, in the quarter of Anfushi. This was the spiritual centre for Alexandria's fishermen, and the shrine was the rallying point for nationalist demonstrations and for students. Here Bayram drew the inspiration for his poetry at a time of social disorder and economic distress for the lower classes. He had little formal education other than initial religious training, married early and supported himself as a petty trader. At the same time, he immersed himself in the urban popular culture and the vibrant nationalist politics of the period during and after World War I. There was in the newspapers and cafés of the time an inseparable mixture of literature and politics and Bayram soon became part of a generation of angry young people who considered themselves caught in their nation's struggle against the British occupation. Soon recognised as a talented poet, he began a life of actively participating in nationalist politics through literature.

The corpus of his work that began to take place then was marked by its satiric tone and its biting social criticism. One of his first poems was an attack against the Municipal Council of Alexandria. From it his reputation began to rise. One of the verses of that poem is still associated with his legend:

O vendor of radishes, one for a penny,
How much goes to the children and
How much to the Municipal Council?

He was voicing a sentiment of resentment against the Council that was strongly felt in the local Arabic press which opposed the practices of tax collection. It was also an attack against a symbol associated by that press with European rule and domination in Egypt. Bayram soon became a significant voice in the lively nationalist Arabic press of Alexandria, some of which appeared

clandestinely. In his poems he directly and harshly criticises not only the occupying power, but the Sultan and the Grand Mufti for their alliances with the British. In all of this he drew upon traditional forms and the legacy of Egyptian humour and wisdom. He did not limit his satire to his political adversaries, and at least on one occasion left Alexandria in anger because of its inhabitants' lack of interest in poetry or politics: "There is a sea and beauty, but the Alexandrians only look at it to observe ships coming from Cyprus bearing pomegranates, grapes, cheese and olives. And the flower vendor... making his rounds among a people diverted from flowers by backgammon..."

Bayram's poetry in Alexandrian newspapers directly led to his banishment from Egypt by the British authorities supported by the Palace in October 1919. He was not to return to Egypt until 1938, having spent most of his exile in France and Tunisia. But he never stopped publishing in the Egyptian press during and after his exile. The range of his work is immense: poetry, short stories, essays, verse and prose parody, serial dialogues, musical comedy, film scripts, songs, radio serials. In none of his work was he ever identified with the educated elite. The master of Egyptian neoclassical poetry Ahmad Shawqi is said to have remarked that the only tyranny he feared was that of Bayram and his folk literature. For a definitive study of his writing, see Marilyn Booth, *Bayram al-Tunisi's Egypt. Social Criticism and Narrative Strategies*. Ithaca Press, Exeter 1990.

The English version of the poem "The Egyptian Worker" appeared in a book called *Egypt Now* that was prepared by a left-wing organization of foreigners and Egyptians in Cairo called *Le Groupe Études*, formed after the outbreak of World War II. The book was intended to provide foreign troops with historical and contemporary information about Egypt. It was edited by Hilary Wayment, Cairo, 1942. There is no mention of the name of the translator. It is reproduced in Selma Botman, *The Rise of Egyptian Communism, 1939-1970*. Syracuse University Press 1988, p. 8.