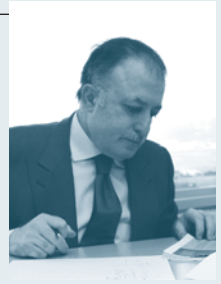


The Tent Part 5



“A Sultan’s orders are empty words until they are written; then they become laws”, govern countries, and sway opinions, once said Ibn Khalkan. “Writing is the tool of the Sultan”. Concurred Ibn Khaldoun.

In this issue, we visit the tent of the intellectuals, journalists, writers, and broadcasters, particularly those who orbit the political realm. For they adorn the tents of the zu’amas and make them whole.

A pupil was once listening to the heated and ever-present debate between three ‘intellectuals’. The first raising the controversial truism of ‘Phoenician Lebanon’, the second touting the nationalistic ‘Arab-Lebanon’, while the third trying to strike a balance between those two perpetually deliberated opinions within Lebanese society.

Just to remind the reader, the first opinion proclaims that Lebanon has in fact been this way for thousands of years, alluding to the birth of the letters of alphabet in the seaport city of Byblos, the sun rising through the robust columns of the temple of Ba’albek. And Beirut ... Beirut ... the “mother of laws.”

Doesn’t that make us Phoenicians?

The second ‘intellectual’, proud of his Arabic heritage, believes that the Lebanese people hail from deep into the Arabian Peninsula, from Yemen. Lebanon’s identity is Arab, because the Lebanese are Arabs. The Lebanese people can’t be Phoenicians! “Phoenicians were traders and slaves,” how can we be Phoenicians, unless we consider them to be ‘Arabs’, at which point it becomes alright if we are.

Isn’t that enough proof that we are Arabs?

The third ‘intellectual’ was flipping between both points of view, raising doubts in the pupil’s mind. Luckily, he had been warned; his father had told him, flip floppers in Lebanon are partly ‘coerced’ and partly ‘ambitious’. The third ‘intellectual’ was brandishing the position of his Za’im; the one he works for editing his newspaper, or his evening broadcast news. Indeed, ambition requires compromise, and wasn’t he well compensated for relinquishing his principles?

The pupil developed his own logic: it must be that we are ‘Phoenicians’ sometimes, ‘Arabs’ other times. As a matter of fact, ‘Phoenicians’ and ‘Arabs’ are sometimes French or Americans, depending on the regional and international upheavals.

Skimming through old history books, the pupil wondered, a ‘Phoenician nation’? What about Phoenicians in North Africa and along the Syrian coast, near Latakia? How about Phoenicians in Palestine? If there was a Phoenician nation, why did Saida conspire with Alexander against Tyre? (Back then neither Saida was Sunni, nor was Tyre Shia’a) What about the discovery of an arrow engraved with Phoenician writings -Hajji Abbas? Where did the name Abbas come from anyway? Isn’t Abbas a Shia’a name? Did it exist before Islam? Before Shia’as? How about Zeinab? When did queen Zanoubya live? Before Islam, before Shia’as? And if the people of Lebanon come from Yemen at the southern most tip of the Arabian Gulf, why were the Northern regions which Lebanon is a part of virtually uninhabited, while the south was over-populated? The pupil was fast to conclude that those empty arguments were nothing but idle talk.

The student found himself in the Gulf, lured there by his own Arab nationalistic feelings. Landing in Abu Dhabi’s International Airport, he was bewildered by a mix of accents and dialects he had never heard before. Hesitantly, he approached an airport official, asking in his native Arabic, for directions. “Me no understand Arabic! Me Indian!” was the reply. Disappointed but not discouraged, he tried again and again falling on all sorts of languages from Farsi to Urdu to Tagalog to Russian, but no one would answer him in Arabic. The universal language is English; no doubt, when he spoke it he finally found his way.

It was all coming together in his mind. Had the Pan-Arab paid a visit to the Gulf before he so confidently proclaimed his Arab nationalism, he would have certainly had a change of heart. And, had the “Phoenician intellectual” visited Tunisia; he too would have realized that Hannibal was indeed not Lebanese.

As far as the third, the flip flopper, he should be awarded an Oscar for his outstanding acting performance.

The pupil like the rest of us is waiting for the curtain to come down on ‘intellectuals’, ‘journalists’, and ‘broadcasters’, when the ignorant, the manipulated, and the mercenaries will cease their domination, while they watch Lebanon being crucified.

— Jawad N. Adra