

# Agrarian South Network Research Bulletin

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Towards Reclaiming a Pan-African Agenda"*

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## EDITORIAL

### **Fare thee well, Prof Helmi Sharawy: Towards Reclaiming a Pan-African Agenda**

Africa and the Arab world suffered a deep loss on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2023 when Prof. Helmi Sharawy transitioned. Helmi Sharawy was a founding director of the Arab and Africa Research Centre (AARC) and member of many progressive bodies such as CODESRIA. In a tribute published by CODESRIA, its Executive Director Dr. Godwin Murunga befittingly described his passing on as “an end of an era”. That era of prolific debate and commitment to a Third World liberation agenda is reflected in Sharawy’s extensive contributions. He belonged to a generation of intellectuals who combined theory and praxis and worked tirelessly towards the decolonization of the African continent. Nation building under the Pan-Africanist banner also inspired people such as Helmi.

Informed by the Bandung spirit, Helmi clearly understood that the national liberation without continental unity was an exercise in futility. His works and legacy should serve as an inspiration to the younger generation which no longer sees Pan-Africanism as a necessary liberatory ideology. It must also serve as a wake-up call to the current generation of intellectuals to be much more involved in

shaping national and continental affairs given the multiple crises facing the world today. The task requires a careful reading and analysis of Helmi’s work, together with that of other African giants such as Samir Amin, Dani Nabudere, Kwame Nkrumah, Archie Mafeje and Sam Moyo who made huge contributions towards understanding the subordinated role of Africa in a highly globalized world.

This special issue of the Agrarian South Network Research Bulletin contains three pieces from a group of scholars and political activists who worked very closely with Helmi Sharawy. Pieces from Ahmed Shindy Ibrahim, the Africanist Group and Kribsoo Diallo all take us back to his life, intellectual contributions and political beliefs. From the pieces we see a robust intellectual who was committed to the achievement of continental unity. The desire to see Egypt which is integrated to the rest of the continent as well as the total decolonization of the continent will continue to define his legacy.

Enquiries, responses and submissions may be sent to the editors at: [agrariansouthresearchbulletin@gmail.com](mailto:agrariansouthresearchbulletin@gmail.com)

## **Africa as a Post-colony: Where we were and what we have become**

**- A vision by Helmy Sharawy**

Ahmed Shindy Ibrahim

As a tribute to Helmy Sharawy who was a remarkable scholar and a pioneer of African studies in Egypt and Arab World, this piece serves a purpose of highlighting some glimpses of his pioneering contribution to scholarship which inspired many researchers in Egypt and the Arab world. With both sadness and respect, I hope that the piece captures Sharawy's lively spirit and stunning contributions to the understanding of African thought. His late writings and interviews are used to highlight his contributions.

Sharawy's professional life represented a form of intertwining world of ideas and political practice, which provided a deeper understanding of African thought in practice. A significant part of his vision came from his own lived African experience which was extended for more than fifty years since March 1956. In 1956, he held meetings with young people who came to Cairo to study, or delegations to Afro-Asian people's conferences. He was also a representative of African liberation movements. There is no doubt that his intellectual and cultural formation was partly informed by two decades of his daily participation in coordinating activities of the African liberation movements in the sixties and

seventies as an Egyptian state representative in Cairo.

His great involvement in the world of thought dates back to the times when he attended various meetings during Tanganyika's independence celebrations in 1961, and after that, Zanzibar and Kenya. He also attended meetings of the Colonial Liberation Committee of the Organization of African Unity held in Dar es Salaam and Accra from 1970 to 1973. Moreover, his participation in the founding of the African Society in Egypt in the early seventies, the African Association of Political Science in Dar es Salaam 1973, and the advancement of The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in Dakar 1994/95, opened a strong bond with African research society.

During all these active participations, Sharawy touched on the influence of the thought of Frantz Fanon, William Dubois, Amilcar Cabral, Archie Mafeje, Samir Amin and even Mahmood Mamdani on a large scale with focus being on linking the North and the South. He also felt the impact of the wave of democratic transition from the apartheid regime in South Africa and the meaning of the "African Renaissance" project advanced by former South African

President Thabo Mbeki at the turn of the millennium. In addition, he understood that social and political transformation was fundamental towards the attainment of a vision for South Sudanese people.

### **African thought and Coloniality**

In a post-independent Africa, Western countries and the rising capitalist circles in the West supported African leaders in an attempt to advance 'modernization' tendencies despite the authoritarian character of the regimes. With the fall of Nasser and Nkrumah's movements in the late sixties, many African leaders retreated from revolutionary ideals despite their popularity and importance at this juncture. Frantz Fanon and Walter Rodney's ideas were considered to be too radical and thus were treated with skepticism by these leaders who were now under the influence of neocolonial leaders. Sharawy believed that despite the emergence of this trend which rejected such political thought associated with change and revolution, the armed struggle began in Palestine, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and Angola, African revolutionary thought remained of greater significance for the total emancipation of the continent.

Perhaps, clear examples of that correlation between the depth of intellectual discourse and armed movements came from Amilcar Cabral from his book "The weapon of theory". Cabral had at some point also led

an armed struggle against Portuguese colonialism in Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. Agostinho Neto who led the Popular Movement for Liberation of Angola (MPLA) in the war of independence (1961-1974) and later became the first President of Angola (1975-1979) also theorized about the nexus between culture and liberation.

Sharawy dealt with coloniality as a phase of intertwined phenomena and not just an absolute negative phase. He articulated how coloniality shaped both national liberation movements as well as African thought. In line with this Nigerian thinker Peter Ekeh had developed what was called "Africa of two publics"- common people and new class people. A new class that emerged according to Ekeh served a purpose of furthering the interests of colonialism by accepting nominal independence. Militant nationalist movements and Islamic jihadist movements in West Africa tended to be assimilated by colonial powers leading to the acceptance of nominal independence and 'enlightenment'. Nevertheless, a chasm remained between the two groups of people in a post-colonial state. Within the framework of the centralization of the power under the contemporary globalization phase, together with its dominant cultural, media and military instruments, the new classes represented a form of dependent classes. The common people found only the Salafist formula of political Islam to represent a form

of liberation, and then the jihadist movements turned to globalization and rejected the idea of the national state.

### **Globalization: African and Arab reality**

Sharawy's scholarship used Cabral's thoughts to explain the African and Arab reality. Specifically, he focused on the notion of culture as a dialectical link between society and history, which he believed was worthy of invocation in understanding North Africa and the Arab world. For him, history had a great role in this region and a failure to understand it had led to domination of "Salafism". Here, the concept of the nation (Islamic Nation) always takes precedence over history, society and culture, so Salafism becomes its identity, and cultural interpretation becomes its methodology.

Society in this instance denies itself from history, as history stops at one moment or another while the religious stance entrenched in the cultural transcends the social. This is what the jihadist movements throughout the Islamic world have come to, from Wahhabism to Senussi and Fodia, all of which are attributed to the Islamic awakening.

The African and Arab reality neglected the positive interaction between the cultural and political dichotomy, as well as the analysis of social and cultural diversity within the framework of the cultural totality as Cabral had expressed. This led to two results

that greatly affected the national liberation movement, as Sharawy asserted. The first was represented in the fall of the national identity in the net of the qualitative identities of a global level (woman - tribal - ethnic ...), and the second was the fall of the national identity in the net of the Salafi's past, the religious and the ideal civilizational .

At the African level in general, the concepts of the Pan Africanism disappeared in the political culture together with the Pan Arabism movement in the North of the continent. This occurred because both were subject to conditions, which did not recognize the importance of local political and cultural dualism. The words of "union" and "unity" are no longer associated with the Pan-African movement and the same applies to the joint Arab action in the Arab-North African region. Hence, the concept of Arab-African conflict has been dominant together with expressions of 'Islamic terrorism'.

Sharawy affirmed that those preoccupied with ethnic, tribal, and sometimes religious conflicts do not present a cultural or social totality. Moreover, that the Arab and African mind must move with awareness of the dimensions of national identity and national culture, and understand the goals of the globalization process that feeds their camps with weapons through the media and local agents.

### **Egypt and Africa: A Road Map**



Sharawy's contact with Africa started by interacting with young people from various African countries, as well as supervising the East African House in Cairo, which included dozens of African children and teenagers who were studying in Egypt. It is therefore unsurprising that he always turned to young Egyptian and Arab researchers for support and advice. He always stressed the need to read African thought and its various projects in order to understand and engage with the African continent.

Sharawy believed that there is no building of real political relations between Egypt and Africa without the presence of a supportive social formation. With Egypt heading to the North in the 1970s and the decline of its role in Southern Africa, Egypt lost strong relations that previously existed with countries such as Senegal, South Africa, Ethiopia and Kenya. The political system and bureaucracy in Egypt during President Mubarak's rule ignored relations with Africa.

Egypt's return to support its relationship with Africa must begin by interacting with important university and research institutions in Africa since she is no longer aware of the important transformations that took place in the universities of Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Sudan and Ghana. There is no real cooperation between these influential institutions. Likewise, relations

with Africa should not be limited to the level of visits and conferences, but rather focus must be extended to cultural and educational relations. Currently there is lack of interest in understanding the true image of Africa in Egyptian and there is no real interaction between African tributaries on the cultural level. Hence, Egyptians are not involved in important African research and cultural institutions.

Also, the orientation towards Africa must go beyond the idea of state or leader moves (which has ended historically) in favor of the industrial roles and movements of Egyptian capitalism, which must be independent from the global market in a way that allows it to access to African markets in the fields of industry, agriculture, health services and pharmaceutical industries. Sharawy believed that for this to happen there should be joint work with African blocs, mainly the Nile Basin countries, to achieve mutual benefits through a real coordinating body that seeks to achieve this.

Sharawy did not hide his bitterness when Egypt's relationship with African people stagnated but he remained positive and hopeful. His qualities of as expert researcher with rich scientific knowledge as well as being a gentle-mannered person will be missed by his students and loved ones in various parts of Africa. His contributions and experiences which are written in books will forever remain with us.

## Mwalimu Sharawy: A Griot who kept African heritage in Egypt

Khalid Mikawy, Khalil Mannon and Abeer Abazeed.

Africanist Group<sup>1\*</sup>

### Prof. Sharawy: Our Mwalimu

As the Africanist we take this opportunity to write a tribute on the late Prof. Helmi Sharawy because he symbolized the meaning of African wisdom. Prof. Sharawy was a pure ‘Griot’ and ‘Mwalimu’. The Griot, derives its meaning from the Portuguese word ‘criado’, later turned to the French ‘guiriot’. In African languages mostly in West Africa, a Griot is referred to as a ‘Jelly’ in northern Mande areas, and “Jali” in southern Mande, “Arokin” in Yoruba and “Diari”/ Gesere in Soninke of West Africa. This widespread expression refers to West African ethnic groups who are responsible for keeping the knowledge of individual tribes and families alive. Essentially, Griots are historians, advisors, storytellers and living libraries among us. It is in recognition of his vast knowledge and contributions to the continent that we regard the late Prof. Sharawy as a “Griot”.

The Africanists Group was founded by Mwalimu Sharawy as a research group in the Arab and African Research Centre (AARC) in Cairo- and within the group we used to fondly refer to him as ‘Mwalimu’. In East Africa,

‘Mwalimu’ is a Swahili word that refers to an educator who transfers knowledge to the broader society and also mentors students and fellows with embedded values of caring and solidarity. The term also unites Arabic and domestic dialects of the African Great Lakes region and East Africa in one language and is spoken by millions of Africans. Prof. Sharawy was a political, social, cultural, and Afro-Arab activist whose project was aimed at uniting African people from all over the continent. For him Africa was one entity and thus he saw no reason why Arab- Africans should be separated from the rest of the continent. His intellectual and political project was flexible enough to analyse the African continent to provide a basis of uniting people against the notion of two Africa’s (North and South).

**Mwalimu Sharawy: A Pan-Africanist dedicated to the decolonization of the continent.**

In his early career, Mwalimu Sharawy was one of the people who embraced the Pan-African spirit at the height of African liberation movements. Not only was he focused on bringing independence to continent, but he

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<sup>1\*</sup> Africanist Group is a sub-research group in the Arab and African Research Centre (AARC) in Cairo. It was founded by Mwalimu Sharawy between 2011-2012. This piece is written by members in the Group: Khalid Mikawy, Khalil Mannon and Abeer Abazeed.

also saw the necessity of nation building in post-independent states as he worked as a cultural secretary in the African Association in Cairo, and a researcher in the Egyptian President Office of African Affairs under the leadership of Mohamed Fayek (1960-1975). During his affiliation to the President Office of African Affairs, it was a critical phase in uniting divergent African visions and to shift into political and economic integration. However, his role during this period was not that influential at policy level as he still young and involved mainly in translation, administration and coordination tasks. Nevertheless, he closely followed African political dynamics while also shaping his own ideas. Moreover, his responsibilities enabled him to build closer relations with leaders of African liberation movements.

His warm relations with the rest of the continent were nurtured when he supervised coordinated activities at the offices of African liberation movements. . It was as a result of this role that for example, in 2020, the anti-apartheid leader Sam Nujoma, the first President of a post-independent Namibia requested to visit Mwalimu Sharawy at his home during his official visit to Egypt. Such an informal visit reflected a sense of solidarity and long built relations developed during his role as coordinator at the Offices of African Liberation Movements. His significance as a

griot was also reflected by his participation in the mediation process of the Ethiopian-Eritrean crisis in the early 1990s.

He also actively engaged in academic institutions, Prof. Sharawy chaired the African Association for Political Science and also co-founded and led the Arab and African Research Centre (AARC) which cooperated with CODESRIA in organizing events and translating some of its publications into Arabic. Mwalimu Sharawy taught African political thought at Juba University in the 1980s. He wrote, translated and reviewed many books and articles that cover African languages, cultures, thoughts and political affairs.

The cultural approach had a great significance in his intellectual project and was largely informed by his belief that the interaction between different cultures was critical towards the attainment of African unity. In attaining this goal, he partnered with researchers from Egypt to establish the periodical scientific international conference called the ‘African Cultural Forum’ with support from the Egyptian Ministry of Culture. To date, about four editions have been held since 2012 serving as a platform for Egyptian researchers to meet their peers from other African countries and to discuss obstacles facing the continent using a multi-disciplinary approach.



## **Developing a younger generation of scholars.**

There is no doubt that Mwalimu Sharawy strongly believed in the development of a younger generation of social science researchers in Egypt with a focus on Africa's development. At the Arab and African Research Centre he mentored young researchers and he always had time to discuss with them their research ideas and provide them feedback. He also provided students and researchers with books and papers from his library to aid their intellectual development. Within our group he encouraged us to read and discuss the writings of Pan-Africanist scholars and we would present these readings at public seminars which he organized.

His commitment to developing Pan-African scholars and researchers was not only done through monthly meetings of the Africanist Group in the Center but he also established the 'Helmi Sharawy's Award for African Studies' in 2010. Through his personal resources and contributions from other Egyptian scholars. The objective of this award is to support young researchers to convert their MA or PhD theses into a book accessible to a wider public. Since 2010, the recipients cover diverse topics which include anthropology (i.e. Dinka people in Cairo and Khartoum);

economics (i.e. the impact of the global economic crisis on African economies, economic integration of ECOWAS); political thought (i.e. Fanon and Algerian revolution, Africa in the Zionist thought) as well as comparative politics (i.e. democratization challenges in Djibouti; political discourse of youth during Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions; challenges of local governments in Ethiopia and Nigeria). Worth noting is that the awarded topics transcend the colonial division of Africa between the North and Sub-Saharan and also that the award also extended to other researchers from other African countries whose dissertations are in Arabic. The award has seen beneficiaries being drawn from Djibouti and Senegal.

Mwalimu Sharawy's mission was to consolidate African integration through incorporating Egyptian affairs and the Arabic language in African scholarship. All of that was done in a harmonious way like a professional musician playing Kora, with zeal and optimistic insight. He was a man who cared to teach and pass his knowledge down to many generations after him, therefore his intellectual heritage will be concerned by African and human thought for a long time. Mwalimu Sharaawy was a continent walking among us, he left but his echo will still be forever... as a griot's custom.

## **Prof. Helmy Sharawy: An End of an Era**

Kribsoo Diallo

The late Prof. Helmi Sharawy was an Egyptian socialist writer and pan-Africanist thinker who cared about African affairs as well as Egyptian-African relations from his early youth. He was a supporter of the policy of President Gamal Abdel Nasser and held several positions before being appointed head of the Center for Arab and African Research. Added to his widely publicized roles in the liberation of the continent he also toured many African countries to learn about the conditions of the people and participated in independence celebrations of some countries such as Kenya and Tanzania. His greatest intellectual interest involved the critical analysis of relations between the Egyptian and the rest of Africa's politics, economics and cultures. Above all, he was a Pan-Africanist at heart and in actions as shown by his heavy involvement in the affairs of the Organization of African Unity (OAU).

### **Prof. Helmy Sharawy's Birth and Upbringing.**

Muhammad Helmi Sharawy was born in Giza Governorate, Egypt, in 1935. At an early age, he showed interest in the African continent, so he went with one of his companions to a meeting of the African Association in the Zamalek neighborhood in

Cairo. Prof. Sharawy then moved to the African Guest House then also known as the "East African House". Later on he was to graduate from the Faculty of Arts at the Cairo University in Egypt with a BA in Sociology in 1958.

Ideologically, the late Prof. Sharawy was a grounded leftist and who was largely influenced by the politics of Gamal Abdel Nasser the former President of Egypt. He was an active political player during his youthful days and fraternized with the ruling party in Egypt. It was largely because of his political activism, intellect and proximity to President Nasser that he became an important link and bridge between the Nasserite government and the various African liberation movements that established offices in Cairo at that stage.

### **A Giant in African studies.**

One of his major interests that possibly drove him to be a Pan-Africanist was his interest in African studies from a very early age. During the 1950s to the 1960s, Egypt was grappled with obstacles of lack of academic freedom. As part of his studies towards the fulfilment of his Master's degree he submitted his proposal at the University of Cairo which was met with ridicule by faculty members

because of its focus on liberation movement in Nigeria. Despite this setback and driven by interest to know more about the continent he was able to engage in a study of modern African political and social thought through his active participation with the African Society.

His intellectual orientation was critical of racist colonial models which he used this to critique racism in the Egyptian society. Further, through ideas and actions he also fought against the idea of two-Africa's- one which saw North Africa as separate from sub-Saharan Africa. Not only was he a great intellectual with a total of 13 books among other publications to his credit, but he was also a practitioner, who put to test his ideas through participatory actions. Other revolutionary thinkers on the continent, from the Pan-Africanist tradition who put theory to practice were Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral and Eduardo Mondlane just to mention a few. What sets Prof. Sharawy from the rest is that his main conviction was grounded on uniting the Egypt, the Arab-Africa and the rest of the continent.

One of the most pertinent questions which pained him was why the Pan-Africanist discourse advocated for by the Egyptian state during the Bandung era fail to be embedded on Egyptian society. What worried him most was seeing some Egyptians failing to identify

themselves as non-Africans. With disappointment, he admitted *that*

Unfortunately, the Egyptian society did not display any real development at the level of its political and religious culture with respect to Africa during this period. We thus see how he was also shaped by the Bandung spirit.

### **Research and professional activity.**

His most important professional activity in the field of African studies started when he joined the Department of African Affairs during the reign of Nasser in 1959 as a researcher responsible for East African countries. Later on he was to be appointed General Coordinator of the African Editorial offices in Cairo, responsible for 23 offices.

His closeness to Muhammad Faiq, the then Director of the President's Office for African Affairs gave him an opportunity to travel around Africa between 1959 and 1975 which made it possible for him to be part of the delegation that attended celebrations of Tanganyika's independence (today's Tanzania) in 1961. He also had a stint as a researcher at the Folklore Center and African affairs until 1974. Due to divergent ideological orientations with President Anwar Sadat who succeeded President Nasser, he was dismissed from working in the Presidency of the Republic as well as the African Department whose focus

was Egyptian foreign policies. He then moved to the University of Juba in 1975 where he taught political science. Then, Juba was part of Sudan before it became the capital of South Sudan.

His last station was in the Presidency of the Center for Arab and African Research in Cairo, where he remained until his death in 2023. Between 1960 and 2023, Prof. Sharawy spent an entire career working on understanding and enhancing relations

between Egypt and the rest of the continent. His passing on robs Egypt and the entire continent of a pragmatic Pan-Africanist which gives meaning to the words “*end of an era*”. The challenge is for the younger generation and the current leaders on the African continent to pursue his ideals towards the realization of a united continent driven by Pan-African values, solidarity, the Bandung spirit and left politics. I send my deepest condolences to the family, friends, relatives and comrades of Helmi Sharawy. May his soul rest in eternal power.

