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**Alexandria 1860-1960 :
the cosmopolitan identity**



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A cosmopolitan Alexandria emerged around 1850 and virtually disappeared in the 1960s or soon thereafter. It was the product of significant immigration. A very large number of foreigners – by which I mean immigrants from Europe and from various parts of the Ottoman Empire – came and settled in Alexandria during the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Merchants, adventurers, men of religion and pilgrims on their way to, or from, Mecca had settled there even earlier. But the significant inflow began under Muhammad ‘Ali in the 1820s; it gained momentum under the Khedive Isma‘il (1863–79), and again in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

According to various censuses, the foreign population of Alexandria evolved as shown in Table 1, which employs two distinct categories of foreigners: foreign nationals, and non-Egyptian locals.¹ (The latter term refers to persons of Ottoman origin.)

The big increase in 1927 partly reflects population movements induced by the First World War, while the drop between 1927 and 1937 is due in part to the extension of Egyptian nationality, after independence in 1922, to those foreigners of Ottoman origin resident in the country who were willing to acquire it. The data clearly show that the foreign population of Alexandria was very large, particularly in the first three decades of this century; but, even at the peak of the foreign presence, the Egyptian population still

¹ Data for 1848 come from the records of an 1848 census held in the Egyptian National Archives (*Dar al-Watha‘iq al-Qawmiyya*) in Cairo (for an assessment of this census, see Reimer 1997: 197–200). The census records (*Al-ti‘dad al-‘am lil-sukkan*) for 1882 were published by the Ministry of the Interior, those for 1960 by the Statistics and Census Administration, and those for the intervening years by the Ministry of Finance.

References

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Table 1
Population of Alexandria from census statistics, 1848–1960

Year	Total Population	Foreign Nationals		Foreign Nationals plus Non-Egyptian locals	
		Numbers	Percentage	Numbers	Percentage
1848	104,128	11,666	11.2%	—	—
1882	231,396	49,693	21.5%	54,862	23.7%
1897	319,766	46,118	14.4%	60,424	18.9%
1907	332,246	63,366	19.1%	86,787	26.1%
1917	444,617	84,705	19.1%	113,617	25.6%
1927	573,063	99,605	17.4%	136,526	23.8%
1937	685,736	88,351	12.9%	120,979	17.6%
1947	919,024	63,534	6.9%	75,737	8.2%
1960	1,516,234	44,707	2.9%	—	—

constituted a significant majority, with a ratio of at least three Egyptians to one foreigner.

A large proportion of the foreign immigrants to Alexandria spent the rest of their lives in the city as did their descendants. Many families resided there for long periods extending over three or four generations. Yet, despite the long stays, many of these foreigners remained foreigners, proclaiming an identity defined by a negative characteristic – that of not being Egyptian. There were, of course, exceptions.

In Egypt, foreigners are constantly reminded of their different identity by the form of address: a non-Egyptian man is addressed as *ya khawaga*, and spoken of as *al-khawaga* so-and-so, as we say Sir, or Mister so-and-so. Egyptian men are addressed differently with terms such as *sayyid*, *hag*, *afandi*, *bey* or *basha*. I do not know of any other society where different words are used consistently to address foreigners and nationals, other than in situations where different languages are used ('Mister' to somebody who looks English or American instead of, say, *Senhor* or *Monsieur*).

Khawaga is a slightly corrupted form of a Turkish word, meaning 'sir'.² It expresses respect but is probably used to signal a distinction: you are a

² *Afandi*, *bey* and *basha* are also of Turkish origin. It used to be the custom to address an educated Egyptian as *afandi* (often written 'effendi', following the French usage). Nowadays this term is less commonly used. To ingratiate themselves with a

foreigner while I am an *ibn al-balad*, a 'son of the land'. This may well be the reason why, in Upper Egypt, Muslims address Copts of social standing as *khawaja* ('Khawaja Jirgis', 'Khawaja Bulos' and so on).³ The distinction, 'you are a Christian and I am a Muslim' is made, implicitly, from the outset, from the moment I address you, however respectfully. This distinction, signalled continually, reinforces the boundaries between communities, whether national or religious. The issue, really, is one of exclusion. In addressing somebody as a *khawaga*, I begin by distinguishing and end up by excluding, wittingly or unwittingly. Like all forms of address, *khawaga* can carry many different connotations depending on the intentions of the protagonist, the relationship with the particular *khawaga*, or the context of the discourse. It can express respect, admiration, irony, sometimes scorn. In all cases, however, it points to otherness.

Thus, through this form of address, the non-Egyptian was constantly reminded of his foreign identity. Not that this necessarily displeased the foreigners. In the vast majority of cases, it did not. On the contrary.

In the period we are concerned with, the foreigners, even those who were poor or illiterate, as many were, and even those who came from the Levant and were Arabophones, considered themselves to belong to a superior breed. This was partly the result of the political balance of power. Egypt had been ruled by foreigners since long before the British intervention of 1882, which resulted in a *de facto* protectorate. Muhammad 'Ali and his descendants were, after all, non-Egyptians, as were the rulers who preceded them. The Egyptian was the subject; the masters were foreigners. Not all foreigners were equally acceptable to the masters; but the dichotomy foreign/Egyptian coincided, at least in the image that one group had of the other, with the dichotomy ruler/ruled. And the feeling of somehow belonging to the side that holds political power contributes to arrogance.

I do not think that Egyptians, for their part, perceived the foreigners – save in some particular instances – as superior beings. And where there was

middle-class person people will address him as *ya bey* (or by a professional title such as *doctor*, *ustadh* or *bashmuhandis*) or even better, *ya basha*. In the hierarchy of titles, *basha* is superior to *bey*, and *bey* to the nondescript *afandi*. Curiously, verbal inflation has not yet reached the level of *amir* ('prince') which seems to be reserved for addressing children or expressing admiration for a person's generous or noble character. A *basha* is a man of substance; an *amir* is a person of high moral standing. It is interesting to note that *amir*, unlike most of these other forms of address, is an Arabic, not a Turkish word.

³ In Upper Egypt, as in much of the Arab world, the Arabic letter *jim* is pronounced like English 'j' (hence here *khawaja*), whereas in Lower Egypt it is a hard 'g'. Thus in Upper Egypt *hag* (see above) would be pronounced as the more familiar *hajj*.

admiration (some foreigners were undoubtedly admired for their personal qualities), the sentiment was probably tinged with resentment. That the Egyptians felt oppressed and that they deeply disliked these intruders – arrogant, spiteful and, above all, insistent on expressing their difference – is evidenced by the violence against foreigners which marked the history of Alexandria beginning with the 1882 riots (though, to be sure, there had been some earlier incidents) and continuing at irregular intervals until the late 1940s.

Let us look now, more closely, at the non-Egyptians who populated Alexandria. I shall use an analytical criterion to distinguish different groups: the extent of their willingness and their eligibility to integrate into Egyptian society. On this basis I distinguish four groups of non-Egyptian residents in Egypt.

The first group consists of foreigners – few in number – who managed to integrate very early on and became accepted as Egyptians. They were mainly Muslim Arabs who came from North Africa and the Levant (well before the nineteenth century in some cases). Several old Alexandrian families carry names which reveal an initial relationship with North Africa (such as the Gaza'irli, Salawi, Tlimsani) or with Crete (Al-Gritli) or even with Andalusia (Al-Mursi, which means 'from Murcia'). These old Muslim families from Morocco, Algeria, Tunis, Syria, Crete, and a few from Turkey and Cyprus, formed a large part of the very small population that was Alexandria at the time of the French expedition (1798). They all lived on the small peninsula between the two ports. These families have considered themselves Egyptian for many generations. They recall, of course, a very distant non-Egyptian origin, which is often betrayed by their family name; but they do not, and nobody else does, question their 'Egyptianity'. Some Christian Arabs and a few Armenians also managed to integrate at an early date into Egyptian society.

The second group consists of non-Egyptians who opted for Egyptian nationality in the 1920s. When Egypt became independent in 1922, the question of citizenship arose, and the definitive answers to this difficult issue were codified in the nationality law of 1926. Egyptians of Egyptian descent – the sons and daughters of the Nile Valley (including Nubia) and bedouins from the neighbouring deserts – were by definition citizens of the newly independent state. The government went further and offered to all residents of Ottoman origin (*min asl 'uthmani*) the right to opt for citizenship. This enabled a large number of Syrians, Lebanese, Palestinians, Jews from Asia Minor, Ottoman Greeks, Armenians and Turks to obtain Egyptian nationality. Those who took up this option genuinely considered themselves to be Egyptians. They made sure that their sons learnt Arabic (daughters did not need to bother – French was the appropriate language for them). They

put pressure on foreign missionary schools to introduce a stream leading to the Egyptian baccalaureate (*al-tawjihiyya*). When compulsory military service was introduced after the Second World War, their sons found themselves plunged very deeply into Egyptian realities. It is worth noting that religion was neither a condition for, nor an impediment to, opting for Egyptian nationality in the 1920s. Muslims, Christians and Jews were all eligible, provided they could establish Ottoman origin.

The third group consists of *khawagas* of Ottoman origin who had managed to obtain protection, or a passport, from a European power. These included Jewish families who had come to Egypt from all over the Mediterranean and from Morocco and the Yemen, at various times, beginning in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, but mainly between 1860 and 1920; there were also a number of Christian Syro-Lebanese (*shawam*) families, particularly merchants and brokers.⁴

Among the *shawam*, the Karams were Greek; the Catzefflis managed to collect a portfolio of nationalities including Russian, Austro-Hungarian, Greek and French; the Debbané were Brazilian; and so on.

Many Jewish families obtained Italian nationality on the grounds that ancestors (not necessarily direct ones) had migrated from Livorno to the Eastern Mediterranean in centuries past. Others, such as the Rolos and the Hararis became British; the Mosseris, Austro-Hungarian. Table 2 shows the non-Egyptian nationalities of Jews in Egypt in 1917 and 1927, as recorded in the population censuses of these years.

Table 2
Jews in Egypt with foreign nationality

Nationality	1917	1927
French	776	5,764
Italian	668	4,949
British	343	2,130
TOTAL	1,787	12,843

We see from this table that, between 1917 and 1927, the number of Jews with French, Italian or British nationality increased by 11,056, from 1,787 to

⁴ The term *shawam* referred to people who had migrated from those Ottoman provinces which, after the First World War, had become (roughly speaking) Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. Originally it had no religious connotation, but since the majority of migrants to Egypt from these areas were Christians, it came to acquire religious implications in certain contexts.

12,843. The Jewish population of Egypt meanwhile had increased by only 3,969 persons. Clearly, between 1917 and 1927, several thousand Jews had managed to obtain the coveted nationality of one or other of these three major European powers.⁵

The fourth and final group consists of foreigners to whom integration into Egypt did not seem meaningful or attractive. They were Italians, French, Maltese and Cypriots with British passports, European Greeks, British from the British Isles, Austrians, Germans and so on.

Non-Ottoman foreigners and Ottomans who had become European nationals or protégés enjoyed the benefits of the Capitulations⁶ – the peculiar regime which granted them extra-territorial rights: they were exempt from certain taxes; and Egyptian courts had no jurisdiction over them. Only their own consuls, and later the Mixed Tribunals, exercised judicial power in cases involving foreigners, or in disputes between foreigners and Egyptians. More fundamentally, these privileged categories enjoyed the political protection of the European powers which, after 1882, was effectively provided by the British administration, backed by the British forces of occupation. That Britain took its role as the protector of foreigners in Egypt seriously is evidenced by the conditions it insisted on in all negotiations with Egypt over independence and the evacuation of British troops. One of the four or five conditions which bedevilled these negotiations was that Britain should retain the responsibility for safeguarding the interests and security of foreigners in Egypt.

While the first group became fully integrated into Egypt, and the third and fourth groups – the true *khawagas*, with foreign nationality – never attempted to merge, a tragedy was to beset the second group, the Christians and Jews of Ottoman origin who opted for Egyptian nationality in the 1920s, for they discovered, in the 1940s and 1950s, that they were not fully recognised as Egyptians. They were *mutamassirin* ('Egyptianized'), at best partly disguised *khawagas*. Their attempted integration was undone: first by the rise of nationalist demands for jobs, economic positions, improved standards of living in Egyptian society – a phenomenon which was very perceptible in the 1940s; secondly by the Arab-Israeli conflict; and thirdly by the Arab socialist laws and the nationalization of economic assets enacted by President Nasser in the early 1960s. I will enlarge on each of these three factors in turn.

The demographic forces which produced significant increases in the size of the Egyptian population and migration from rural areas to the towns (particularly Cairo and Alexandria) gave a marked impetus to the Egyptians' claims on economic, social and urban space. Attempts to satisfy these claims

⁵ See Krämer 1989.

⁶ From the Latin *capitula*, referring to the 'articles' of a treaty.

in a stagnant economy inevitably involved a move towards the exclusion of other claimants. The foreigners were a natural target. And there was more space to be gained by treating the 'Egyptianized' as foreigners, pushing them back into the status they gave up in the 1920s. Just address them more emphatically as *khawagas*, treat them more explicitly as *khawagas*, and you may find very quickly the old *khawaga* identity reappearing under the thin Egyptianizing veneer.

The Arab-Israeli wars of 1948, 1956 and 1967 led to the expulsion of some Jews and to the 'encouraged' departure of most others – irrespective of whether they were Egyptian or foreign citizens. But in fact it was – surprisingly – the Suez War of 1956 rather than the war of 1948 (in which the Arab aim was to prevent the establishment of Israel) that made it abundantly clear to all Jews that there was no future for them in Egypt.

Of those who had taken Egyptian nationality, the *shawam*, the Armenians, and the Greeks were particularly affected by Nasser's socialist legislation, and many of them left Egypt in the 1960s.⁷ They left because their businesses and assets were sequestered; or because they felt that their Egyptianized children had no future in a nationalist Egypt; or because they found themselves responding to a herd instinct, the instinct that says 'let us leave since everybody else is leaving'.

Before proceeding to attempt a statistical analysis, let us briefly summarize the four main groups of non-Egyptian residents of Alexandria in the period 1860–1960:

1. Muslim Arabs and Turks who were never considered to be *khawagas* and happily merged into Egyptian society.
2. *Khawagas* who opted to become legally Egyptians and were ultimately rejected, or felt rejected, by a narrow-minded nationalist Egypt.
3. Christian Arabs and Ottoman and Egyptian Jews who could have opted to become legally Egyptians but took advantage of the Capitulations to join the ranks of the true *khawagas*.
4. *Khawagas* who were happy to remain *khawagas*, and probably had no other option.

To these might be added a very small fifth group of would-be *khawagas*: that is, full-blooded Egyptians who had been immersed in French or English culture, or who had married foreigners, and felt somewhat distanced from their own Egyptian identity.

Is it possible to gain some idea of the size of each of these groups? The results of any attempt to do so will be very rough, for the only data available are derived from population censuses which are specific to a given day of a

⁷ They followed an exodus of Greeks of Greek (or other non-Egyptian) nationality, Italians and Maltese which had begun in the late 1930s.

given year. They do, however, provide valuable information, not only on the nationality of the respondents, but also on their national origin, though the accuracy of such information is difficult to assess, because of problems of definition and subjective perception. Earlier censuses use the concept of 'sujet local' which in some censuses includes Egyptians and in others excludes them. In the latter instance, 'sujet local' and 'stateless' may overlap. Finally, the question of who was Egyptian before the 1920s is not absolutely clear, as there was no legal definition of nationality. For all this, the attempt at quantification may still be worthwhile, though the results are to be understood as indicating no more than orders of magnitude.

According to the census of 1927, the total population of Alexandria was at that date 573,063 persons, comprising 473,458 Egyptians and 99,605 foreigners. The foreign population was thus 17.4 per cent of the total, but almost half of these Alexandrian foreigners (46 per cent) had been born in Egypt (45,025 persons). The Egyptian population of 473,458 comprised 432,327 persons classified as 'of Egyptian origin' plus 894 Nubians (who must also be considered, in this context, to be 'of Egyptian origin'), and 40,237 Egyptians of 'foreign origin' (8.5 per cent of the population of the city). The composition of this last group is shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Egyptian nationals of foreign origin in 1927

Turks	2,338
Armenians	4,964
Jews (some of them genuinely of Egyptian origin)	8,921
Syrians and Palestinians	9,998
Other Arabs	2,669
Greeks	4,799
Sudanese	3,316
Other national origin (not specified)	3,232
TOTAL	40,237

The total in Table 3 gives us an idea of the possible combined size of Group 1 (assimilated Muslim non-Egyptians) and Group 2 (naturalized Egyptians of foreign origin) in 1927.

The breakdown by origin of Group 3 (persons eligible for Egyptian nationality, who apparently chose not to adopt it) is shown in Table 4.

Those listed as ‘Turks’ (people who had come to Egypt from Turkey) included 1,800 Armenians, 558 Jews, 60 Syrians and 702 Greeks.

Table 4
Nationality by origin of those eligible for Egyptian nationality who had not adopted it in 1927

Syrians	1,779
Palestinians	516
Arabs	94
Turks	4,322
Albanians	244
TOTAL	6,955

We can also estimate numbers of *shawam*, other non-Egyptian Arabs, and Jews, who opted for foreign nationality or protection. The 1927 census recorded the origin of persons carrying the nationality of Italy, Turkey, the UK, France and Spain. The relevant data are shown in Table 5.

Table 5
Origins of foreign nationals in Alexandria in 1927

Country of Nationality	Total	Jews	<i>Shawam</i>	Other non-Egyptian Arabs	Egyptians
Italy	2,654	1,842	177	214	421
Turkey	658	558	60	14	26
UK	1,289	882	185	31	191
France	4,511	2,661	690	18	1,142
Spain	651	651	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
TOTALS	9,763	6,594	1,112	277	1,780

The grand total of 9,763 may involve both an underestimate on one count and an overestimate in one of its components. The underestimate is due to the absence of a breakdown ‘by origin’ for foreign nationals of countries which are not listed in Table 5. This underestimate, however, is likely to be small, because the data cover the European countries which had the largest

number of passport holders resident in Alexandria. The overestimate is in the number of Jews shown. Not all Jews with foreign nationality were Egyptians or Ottomans who had sought the protection of a foreign power: many of them had originally come from the countries shown in Table 5, and most notably from Italy.

Finally, we can estimate how many true *khawagas* there were in Alexandria in 1927 (those, that is, who belonged to Groups 3 and 4 in our classification), and how they were divided by origin. Table 6 shows the numbers of those stating various European countries of origin, and, in the case of Greece, Italy, Britain and France, gives for comparison the numbers of those holding the nationality of those countries.

Table 6
Nationality by citizenship and origin

Nationality	By origin	By citizenship
Greek	48,755	37,106
Italian	17,354	24,280
British	3,872	14,394
French	2,494	9,429
Maltese	4,732	none
Other European	6,155	unknown
TOTAL	83,362	—

This redefining of national groups by origin instead of citizenship reveals that the Greeks dominated the foreign component in the population of Alexandria to an even greater extent than was commonly thought. Their case differs from that of all other national groups, since the number of people claiming Greek (or Cypriot) origin (48,755) was far in excess of the number holding Greek citizenship (37,106), whereas the numbers of Italians from Italy, French from France and Britons from the British Isles (including Ireland) were less than, and (except in the case of the Italians) only a small fraction of, the numbers holding passports from those countries. Table 7 shows the breakdown by nationality of those claiming Greek or Cypriot origin.

Table 7

Nationality by citizenship of those claiming Greek or Cypriot origin

Greeks with Greek Nationality	37,106
Cypriots (mostly Greek) with British nationality	3,533
Greeks with French nationality	129
Greeks with Italian nationality	2,486
Greeks with Turkish nationality	702
Greeks with Egyptian nationality	4,799
TOTAL	48,755

We can now see that the figure in Table 6 for those claiming European origin (83,362) is in excess of the total number of true *khawagas* (our Groups 3 and 4), and we must deduct from it the 4,799 Greeks (see Table 7), and a smaller number of people claiming other European countries of origin (see Table 3), who had obtained Egyptian nationality and thus belong to Group 2. These naturalized Egyptians would, in most cases, have obtained their Egyptian nationality on the basis of former Ottoman citizenship.

The fascinating question that I wish to address now is that of the identity of cosmopolitan Alexandria. It is important at this juncture to free ourselves, as far as possible, from the powerful images implanted in the Western world by Lawrence Durrell and others.⁸ Even Robert Ilbert who wrote brilliant pages on 'the spirit of the place' (meaning the identity of cosmopolitan Alexandria) in his monumental work, *Alexandria 1839-1930*, was strongly influenced by Durrell, whose name appears forty-one times in the text and footnotes of the relevant chapters. Ilbert has much to say about the ambivalence of a city which each group of its inhabitants perceived as belonging to somebody else. The Egyptians could see that its best parts were not theirs, and the foreigners (even those who were second- or third-generation immigrants) always felt, at least subconsciously, that they would not belong there for ever.

Ilbert defines 'la culture alexandrine' in terms of this mixture of values which, on the one hand, glorified the individual and emphasized personal success, usually commercial, and on the other imposed rigid social constraints on the same individual's behaviour and relationships with

⁸ For a critique of the Western literary images of cosmopolitan Alexandria see, in the present volume, Khaled Fahmy (ch. 14), and, on the contributions of Durrell and E.M. Forster in particular, David Roessel (ch. 17).

others.⁹ He also notes that Europe was everybody's dream (and 'everybody' means essentially the foreigners). The Europe of the dream, however, was not the real Europe, where modes of life, values, social behaviour, freedoms, politics, were so different from those of Alexandrian societies. In my view it is this half-imagined Europe which provided the label of a common identity. 'Nous les européens' my mother used to say. Born in Alexandria from unadulterated Syro-Lebanese stock, she did not visit Europe until she was fifty-five years old, and then only briefly. This 'common identity' was not the *lowest* but an almost *empty* common denominator.

The non-Egyptian Alexandrians recognised each other as having the common characteristic of 'not being Egyptian'. Such a negative determinant cannot give substance to a common identity. In fact it can be very destructive, as indeed it proved in the end to be. Of course, the negativity was the product of a relationship. The Egyptians excluded the *khawagas*, beginning with the way in which they addressed them. Those *khawagas* who did not want to integrate were happy to exclude themselves, and those who did attempt to integrate ended up by being excluded.

The Alexandrian foreigners also perceived themselves to be different from one another by virtue of their nationality, ethnic origin or religion, and – no less importantly – the sect to which they belonged within a given religion. Each group had its own identity, which, as we shall see, was, in some instances, well-defined and free from fundamental ambiguities. In other cases, however, there was confusion and a lack of clarity in relation to the question, 'Who am I?' And it was such uncertainties which gave rise to that ambivalent cosmopolitan culture or character that so fascinated Durrell and many other European writers, journalists and artists who visited Alexandria fleetingly and were deeply impressed by their contacts with what was, in reality, a very small 'cosmopolitan minority'.¹⁰

How did the various Alexandrian communities see themselves? We must start with the largely forgotten fact that the Egyptian population of Alexandria constituted the majority at all times. This does not mean that Alexandria was not cosmopolitan, since the character of a city is often imparted by a minority: the image of Oxford, for example, is that of a University town, yet the University is very far from being the whole of Oxford. In 1927 there were some 430,000 Egyptians in Alexandria who had no problem of identity. They were Egyptian, they knew that they were Egyptian, and they behaved accordingly. The *mutakhawigin* ('foreignized'),

⁹ Ilbert 1996: 682.

¹⁰ Maurice Barrès, Roger Martin du Gard (who remarked that Alexandria was mostly populated by foreigners), Roland Dorgeles etc. Earlier, E.M. Forster had been impressed by the Greeks, and by nobody else. Examples might be multiplied indefinitely.

Egyptians who aspired to be European, were such a tiny minority they may be safely ignored.

As we have seen, there were some 50,000 Greeks and Cypriots secure in the cultural identity provided by their language and by belonging, almost all of them, to the Greek Orthodox Church. An important point is that their Church was exclusively theirs.¹¹ And the Greeks had their own schools which could accommodate all their children if they so wished. The French from France were French and the British from the British Isles were British, and that, for these two groups, was the end of the story. For the Italians things were less clear. They shared a common language, of course, but they did not enjoy the benefit of an exclusive association with a church. The Roman Catholics among them shared the parishes with French, Maltese, other Europeans from Spain, Austria and Germany, and sometimes with *shawam* who belonged to oriental churches united with Rome. The priest did not always preach in Italian. Furthermore, the Italians did not have enough schools of their own in Alexandria, and often sent their children to missionary schools which taught in French.

The groups which suffered (or perhaps enjoyed) the ambiguity of mixed identities were the Jews, the *shawam*, some Armenians, and some segments of the Italian and Maltese communities, as well as the small colonies of other Europeans (such as Yugoslavs, Austrians, and Russians). The Jews constituted a large community, numbering 25,000 in 1927, while the *shawam*, including the majority which had opted for Egyptian citizenship, numbered 13,250 in that year. These groups needed a lingua franca, other than Arabic, which only the *shawam* and the Jews of Egyptian origin knew, and the French schools, of which there were many in Alexandria, provided it. The *Frères* had a primary school in almost every district, as well as their famous secondary school, Sainte Catherine, and its successor, the Collège St Marc. Catholic nuns belonging to various orders ran several schools for girls. Then there was the Lycée Français and the Lycée de l'Union Juive. And thus it was that French became the lingua franca.

Whether they intended it or not, the French schools de-Egyptianized the *shawam* who received their education there. The early migrants from Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, those who arrived in Alexandria in the second half of the nineteenth century, spoke only Arabic, but their children and grandchildren became more fluent in French than in Arabic.

Taking 1927 as our point of reference, we can say there was a group of about 50,000 persons from which the so-called cosmopolitan society of

¹¹ The small group of *shawam* who were *rum urthudhuks* (i.e. Greek Orthodox), and who caused the Greeks some trouble on occasions, did not diminish the feeling that the Greek Orthodox Church was Greek, the *shawam* being confined to their own parishes.

Alexandria drew its members. By this I mean the society which claimed an Alexandrian culture – not Egyptian, not Greek, not even pure Italian or English – but something *sui generis*. French, which a few mastered very well,¹² and a majority managed with varying degrees of success, was the linguistic vehicle of this culture. One of its main characteristics was to insist on the specificity of this Alexandrianism which was never clearly defined. And this culture was to some extent that of an educated, though not always wealthy, middle class. There were attempts to relate the cosmopolitan Alexandria of the 1920s and 1930s to the glorious Greco-Roman past of the city. But these were never convincing because of the virtual absence of visible traces of this past – the main exceptions being Pompey's Pillar, the catacombs, a few cisterns, the contents of the museum, and the standing columns of one or two small temples – and because of a historical discontinuity of sixteen centuries. Cavafy, who focused so much on ancient Alexandria in his distinguished poetry, provided no bridge between past and present. His gift was not the creation of an identity but a poetical treasure which was discovered by the British, I am tempted to say, before anyone else.¹³

The particular quality of Alexandrian life perhaps had something to do with the sea. It was on the beaches that 'cosmopolitan' Alexandrians felt themselves to be Alexandrians. As Ilbert puts it, 'thanks to the sea, the city seemed then to be nothing but a vast playground'.¹⁴ Exaggerated, but still to some extent true, this statement applied neither to everybody nor exclusively to foreigners. The only people who could devote their lives to 'play' were the rentiers, the students during school and university holidays, the *filis à papa*, and those middle-class women who did not work. Others had to labour for a living.

Alexandria was a fragmented society, and not only along the Egyptian/foreigner boundary. The foreigners did not form a homogeneous group. Those who had a clear national identity held to it: this was the hard core of their inner being. Those who generated the Alexandrian cosmopolitan identity mixed together in cultural events and could talk to each other about certain intellectual issues. But the *shawam* remained *shawam*, the Italians remained Italians, and the Jews remained Jews. Exogamy existed but was frowned upon. Conversions from one religion to another occurred but were rare.

¹² Some wrote nice poetry in French: for example, Hector Klat, Edouard Gergeour, Henri Thuile, René Tasso, and Louis Fleri.

¹³ On Cavafy, see, in the present volume, Khaled Fahmy (ch. 14) and David Ricks (ch. 18).

¹⁴ 'Par la grâce de la mer, la ville semblait alors n'être qu'un immense terrain de jeux' (Ilbert 1996: 687).

The area of social intercourse was business. Everybody dealt with everybody in commerce, finance, shipping, industry and the services. The areas that were taboo were religion and politics. Few would broach these subjects in conversation; and the small number of political activists involved, for example, in the communist movement always operated secretly.

The ambiguity of social life in cosmopolitan Alexandria lay in the co-existence of openness in economic life and closed boundaries elsewhere. Relationships could only develop in neutral areas between the many walls. Hence the need to tread cautiously and the impression that social life was a lazy, pleasant but very careful dance. The impression was created – and people came to believe – that ‘we are all happy together’. The pace of the dance was never accelerated, lest the feeling of superficial happiness should collapse through some *faux pas*. And the golden rule was never to talk seriously, if at all, about the things that mattered most: differences in values, or in religious or political perspective.

And the ambiguity of identity for those who belonged to the cosmopolitan culture lay in the co-existence of a hard core of strongly held beliefs and dearly cherished personal interests at the centre and an ill-defined fringe all around. It was the fringe that related the members of the cosmopolitan group to another. But within that fringe there was little of real substance – some illusions and dreams, some common negative elements of self-definition. The fringe had no clear boundaries. It was rather like the long coastline of Alexandria which opens it to the Mediterranean but is not a frontier with any particular country.

And it was the coast which reminded Alexandrians, when they turned their sights on the sea, that otherness was the source of their inner trouble. Otherness was just beyond a distant but neatly drawn blue horizon. But otherness could not be reached by dreaming of this beyond while lazing on the beaches. The sea which put them in touch with otherness, through intimation, brought them back, as on the returning wave, to Alexandria, and to the hard core of the self. The ambiguity of the Alexandrian identity resides perhaps in this feeling that otherness was its true nature but that true otherness was not attainable. Egyptians constantly reminded the foreigner that he or she was ‘another’. The Alexandrian foreigner, immersed for several generations in the city, might also have liked to be ‘another’, but in many cases had no choice, and none of these foreigners could really *be* the ‘other’ that they thought they were.

This was their drama, and not only while they lived in Alexandria, for many felt it even more acutely when, in the 1950s and ’60s or later, they emigrated to other shores.