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The *Efendi* and the *Shaykh*:
Spiritual Easternism in Fin-de-siècle Egypt

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Abstract

This article shows how an Egyptian *shaykh* (religious scholar) from the peasantry class, with a traditional religious education, and a young man belonging to the class of modern-educated Egyptians (*efendiya*) are entangled in the narrative of esotericism in fin-de-siècle Egypt. The *efendi*, ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Islambūlī (1905–1964), was the editor of the Easternist periodical *Al-Maʿrifa*. The *shaykh*, Ṭanṭāwī Jawharī (1862–1940), seen as the father of Egyptian Spiritualism, played a role as al-Islambūlī's mentor. Shedding light on the interaction between the two re-examines the preconceived notions surrounding the ideological positions taken by both — the class of religious scholars and the modern-educated *efendiya* — who in the narrative of the Egyptian renaissance (*nahḍa*) of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been painted on opposing sides. The relationship between Jawharī and al-Islambūlī illustrates the complexity of positions in Egyptian society, the interaction between classes through the medium of print, and how they came to understand the re-enchantment of the world through the different lenses their class upbringing situated them in. Through the reconstruction of both individuals' biographies and intellectual production in printed periodicals and texts, I show how they carved a space to highlight the political affinity and connection between lands in the East, and continuities with Islamicate medieval traditions.

Keywords: Esotericism; Arabic Periodical Studies; Pan-Easternism; Intellectual History

The Efendi and the Shaykh: Spiritual Easternism in Fin-de-siècle Egypt

The intricacies of creation confounded a young schoolboy who arrived in the Egyptian capital, Cairo, from the countryside in 1877. This *fellaḥ* [peasant] would later be known as the father of Egyptian Spiritualism.[1] In this article, I turn to the intellectual contribution of Ṭanṭawī Jawharī,[2] a philosopher, exegete, and spiritualist, who played a remarkable role in instigating the Egyptian public's interest in naturalism, religious reform, and esotericism. I look at his influence on 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Islāmbūlī (1905–1964), the young periodical editor of the short-lived project *Al-Ma'rifa* (Knowledge or Gnosis, ca. 1931–1934). Al-Islāmbūlī was a self-enculturated *efendi* [modern-educated Egyptian],[3] hailing from the countryside, who found himself embroiled in the discussions on esotericism, eastern solidarity, Perennialism, and theosophy taking place within Cairo. Jawharī, I argue, represented al-Islāmbūlī's take on *bātinīyah* and Easternism, which he developed and circulated in his periodical. The concept of Eastern connectedness gained considerable popularity in the Interwar period

1. All references to Spiritualism are capitalized throughout, as it refers to the post-1848 movement that was spurred by the Fox sisters of Hydesville, New York who claimed to have communicated with spirits haunting their home. This phenomenon inspired scientists, scholars, and intellectuals to begin a scientific examination of whether communication with the spirits in the afterlife was possible. It was a movement that sought to make sense of religion and science. In addition, when discussing the Egyptian context in this article, capitalization of Spiritualism is maintained to signal these indigenous figures' participation in, and contribution to, this scientific and social movement of the long nineteenth century, rather than their being treated solely as expressions of a spiritual tradition in the Islamicate world. In the Islamicate world, individuals such as 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Islāmbūlī, Tantawi Jawhari, and many of their contemporaries writing in the journal Al-Ma'rifa, were in conversation with Spiritualists in Europe and their scholarly production is an attempt at them reconciling Western Spiritualism, Eastern spirituality, and Islamic mysticism with the many scientific innovations taking place at the turn of the century.

2. Some work has been done on Jawharī as an exegete and his scientific theology; see Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860–1950*, 314; Elshakry, "The Exegesis of Science in Twentieth-Century Arabic Interpretations of the Qur'an"; Daneshgar, *Ṭanṭawī Jawharī and the Qur'an*; 'Attiyya, "Al-Dars al-falsafi 'ind Ṭanṭawī Jawharī," https://almuslimalmuaser.org/1998/11/11/الدرس-الفلسفي-عند-طنطاوي-جوهري/أبحاث ; Jādū, *Al-Shaykh Ṭanṭawī Jawharī: Dirasa wa-nusus*.

3. Ryzova, *The Age of the Efendiyya*.

in Egypt; it set out to create a sense of connectedness and a defense against the penetrative and colonial force of the West.[4]

The examples of Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī demonstrate the diversity of positions in Egyptian society concerning socio-political belonging. Moreover, it highlights the way classes interacted with print media, and how they came to articulate the defense and necessity of Spiritualism through the different lenses of their class upbringing. By shedding light on the interaction between the two, I examine the complex intellectual formation of the two individuals and the varied influences that shaped their attitudes towards esotericism.[5]

The article begins with a discussion on esotericism, or *bātinīyyah* as Liana Saif proposes, which functions as an umbrella term for occultic, spiritual, and mystical discourses.[6] I do so to contextualize Jawharī's and al-Islāmbūlī's interest in esoteric discussions of the time. I then dedicate sections to reconstructing their biographies and highlighting their unearthing of the spiritual heritage of the East as a project of anti-colonialism. Their contributions to the Western/Orientalist discourse show that the spirit and collectivity of the East is not to unearth a universal religion, rather it is to highlight the political affinity and connection between lands in the East.

Conceptual Framework: Egyptian Esotericism and Magical Mentality

I set out to understand Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī's bridging together of esotericism and Easternism, not as Wouter Hanegraaff's European model of diffusion, but

4. Jankowski, "The Eastern Idea and the Eastern Union in Interwar Egypt," 643. Such a concept depended on dividing the civilized world into two civilizational zones that are mutually exclusive and with their own unique operative principles. Early modernist Arab thinkers, prior to World War I, already divided the world into East (which included most of the Asian-African area) and West (which included Europe and America).

5. In doing so I follow the scholarly contributions of Thomas Bauer and Oliver Scharbrodt on the culture of ambiguity in Islam, forsaking a search for "intellectual coherence and biographical consistency" when studying the figures of the Egyptian renaissance [*nahḍa*] in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. See Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity*; Scharbrodt, *Muhammad Abduh*.

6. Saif, "What Is Islamic Esotericism?"

rather as a complex of "multilateral exchanges that are best grasped from a global perspective."[7] Recent works by Matthew Melvin-Koushki, Liana Saif, and Noah Gardiner, among others, have been changing the way we view the occultic, the magical, and the esoteric in Islam.[8] In this more recent sense, esotericism began to function as a new, scholarly umbrella term that comprises diverse phenomena such as occultism, magic, witchcraft, and alchemy, among others. Within the field of Islamic Studies, the use of "esotericism/esoteric" as a helpful category has been largely dismissed. Though the scholarship on Sufism is abundant, I do not set out to equate esotericism with Sufism.[9]

Liana Saif proposes a new approach to the study of Islam and esotericism, one that acknowledges the skewed power relations inherent in centering the story of esotericism around the West. She finds that although scholars of Western esotericism have begun to reflexively address their field of study, some conduct a sort of global history of Western esotericism arguing that "the globalization of esotericism is evident in the nineteenth century, when 'magic' and 'occult' were reclaimed" as positive human endeavors that are superior to rationality, and could be seen to have offshoots all across the globe.[10] However, Saif argues that when we turn to the plain of reality, bearing in mind the political, social, and economic conditions of "all across the globe" and the contexts within

7. Asprem and Strube, eds., *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*.

8. See Melvin-Koushki, "Introduction: De-Orienting the Study of Islamicate Occultism"; Sedgwick, "Is There Such a Thing as Islamic Esotericism?"; Liana Saif et. al., eds, *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*; Gardiner, "Esotericist Reading Communities and the Early Circulation of the Sufi Occultist Aḥmad Al-Būnī's Works"; also see Raphael Cormack's recently published general history of performative esotericism. *Holy Men of the Electromagnetic Age*.

9. This reduction of "esoteric Islam" to Sufism, has largely resulted from René Guénon (1886–1951), the French Traditionalist and interlocutor of al-Islāmbūlī, coining of the term "*l'ésotérisme islamique*" with its Perennialist focus on Sufism. Guénon believed that there is a vast rift between the "primordial tradition of the Orient and the spiritually bereft Occident." However, this understanding of Sufism was not without restrictions. Guénon and the Traditionalists were critical of popular Sufi practices—as many of the Islamic Reformists of the Islamicate world were— and instead tended to circulate their support for a more "sober" understanding of Sufism that is based on a textual imagination.

10. Saif, "What Is Islamic Esotericism?" 6.

which they exist, this turn to the esoteric was being weaponized as a means of othering those who were spiritual or occultic as pagan and superstitious. Hence, this global reclamation of the esoteric does not identify the uneven power relations of race, religion, and geographic location, namely, that if you did not subscribe to Protestant ideology and European rationality you were deemed a superstitious pagan. Thus, her approach proposes to assess Islamic esoteric currents according to "two epistemological paradigms, namely, intellectual or revelatory approaches to hidden phenomena," and "social orientations perceived in personal and/or communal pieties."[11]

Saif traces two periods in which *bāṭiniyyah* was catalyzed. The first is between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, a period that witnessed a paradigm shift due to the development and institutionalization of Sufism, which challenged intellectual and philosophical investigations of hidden realities, instead touting revelation as the only true way. The second is the early to mid-twentieth century when the term *ésotérisme islamique* emerged in the Traditionalist milieu. I delve deeper into the second period she examines, firstly looking at whether we can tell varied narratives of how esotericism was catalyzed in sync with anti-colonial eastern solidarity movements as a global phenomenon.[12] Secondly, I sketch out how we can trace Egyptian esotericism through the Annales school's history of mentalities, providing an insight into contributions to the study of esotericism from Arab scholars and intellectuals.

By the end of the twenties, a call for Eastern relatedness rose. Scholarship posits that this is due to the erasure of any delusions over Egypt's democratic or "liberal" age.[13] Many scholars marked the visits of Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), among others, as the initial

11. Saif, "What Is Islamic Esotericism?" 2.

12. On esotericism, religion, and global history see Strube, "(Anti-)Colonialism, Religion and Science in Bengal from the Perspective of Global Religious History"; Maltese and Strube, "Global Religious History."

13. In the summer of 1930, the appointment of Ismā'īl Sidqī (1875–1950) as prime minister signaled the end of the so-called "liberal age," as what followed was an erasure of the disenchantment that Egypt had any political freedom. King Fū'ad, in trying to limit the Wafd party and Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥas's growing popularity, relied on Sidqī as an ally. Khan, "Gandhi."

stirrings of hope in a new form of alliance.[14] This tendency was articulated in al-Islāmbūlī's debut editorial:

> Of our most important motivations: firstly, binding Eastern countries together, and then secondly binding the East with the West: that is, by spreading/circulating the knowledge of the former to the latter. For the East remains mab'ath of wisdom and light, and the resting place of *wahi* and inspiration, a father of science and knowledge . . . We also seek to extract the benefits from Western science.[15]

The turn to being re-enchanted with the esoteric was an existential matter within a world-wide trend in the post-Great War moment. The disenchantment with materialism, democracy, and violence pushed individuals to re-think their position in the world, not only in Europe, but also in the Global South. I set out to do what Jason Ananda Josephson Storm has done in *The Myth of Disenchantment*,[16] namely, looking for the history of enchantment. In challenging conventional notions of what particularly defined a reformer, an *efendi*, a journalist, or a Sufi, I suggest that individuals of all backgrounds interacted with esotericism in different forms. Hence, the discourse that Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī propagated in their writings was what Charles Hirschkind called "Historical Therapeutics," whereby "one recounts not who [they] are but why [they] are other than what [they] have been told."[17] Considering Orientalist and colonial "othering" of Islamic cultures and its mobilization of their esoteric exoticization, while imputing "irrationality" to their practices and beliefs, the historical therapeutics of esoteric expressions of Easternism is mobilized by indigenous scholars to critically re-signify the contents of discourse, and articulate their identities and

14. This pan-eastern identity focused on a new alliance, alternative to the nationalist ones constructed by the Wafd and Constitutionalist Liberal party, who were, at the time, boycotting all elections, and nor were the Easternists supportive of the Egyptian monarchy's revival of the Islamic caliphate, which seemed bent on expanding the executive powers of Fū'ad as a religious caliph, and not concerned with British presence.

15. Al-Islāmbūlī, "Editorial," 4.

16. Josephson Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*.

17. Hirschkind, *The Feeling of History*, 6.

history within a turning point. Spiritual Easternism, as I interpret it through the discursive space of Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī, is a modern tradition *and* continuity from the past, of critical reflection on the state of politics, religion, European colonialism, and Orientalism. The task of Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī in the Egyptian press is a reorientation of cultural and political subjectivity, through the excavation of a buried past. I contextualize historical therapeutics as part of the various attempts by Egyptians to construct a holistic identity for them to situate themselves within global and local contexts. At the turn of the twentieth century, an existential crisis among intellectuals arose.[18] They sought to carve out a space of belonging. Some chose to revive an inherent spirit of Pharaonic or Mediterranean-basin orientation.

Individuals such as Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal (1888–1956), the editor of *Al-Siyāsa al-Isbū'iyya* [The Weekly Politics] newspaper, had been a fervent adherent of the Pharaonism that arose in the 1920s.[19] Haykal, among others, set out to construct the Egyptian identity according to a nostalgic embrace of the Pharaonic past as a means of self-determination, nationhood construction, and intellectual renewal.[20] His newspaper became the platform to present European values of modernity, the exoticization of the Pharaonic past, and assaults on the place of Islam in Egypt.

Another framework of identity formation was that of the Mediterranean spirit. One of the most important proponents of this Mediterranean identity imagination was Taha Husayn (1889–1973), the renowned Egyptian intellectual, who articulated the synthesis of this imagination in a later publication titled *Mustaqbal al-thaqafa fi-Misr* [The Future of Culture in Egypt], and put forward the vision of the Mediterranean as identity construction.[21]

18. Smith, *Islam and the Search for Social Order in Modern Egypt*, 2.

19. Smith, *Islam and the Search for Social Order in Modern Egypt*, 2. As a young man who had recently arrived in Cairo and become involved in the print culture of the time, al-Islāmbūlī initially worked as a journalist in the newspaper. However, he quickly became disaffected by the newspaper's Pharaonic ethos.

20. Al-Bayoumi, *al-Nahḍa al-Islamiyya fi siyar a'lamiha al-mu'asiryyin*, 194.

21. By the mid-1930s, however, Haykal and many of the old *Nahdawis* began to shift their orientation toward a more Muslim-Arab framework of identity to incorporate Islam in Egyptian history; see Gershoni and Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs*, 90.

Al-Islāmbūlī found in the Eastern spirit a more interesting calling. *Al-Ma'rifa* was his redressing of the dismissal of Eastern intellectual production.[22] Hence, he saw in it a readiness and potential to lead the counter-intellectual phase that Egypt and the Eastern world needed.[23] In the debut editorial, al-Islāmbūlī highlights the impetus behind the periodical as due to Manṣūr Fahmī, Muḥammad Farīd Wajdī, Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Rāziq, Muḥammad al-Taftāzānī, Shaykh al-ʿUrūba Aḥmad Zakī Pasha, and Ṭanṭāwī Jawharī.[24] In other entries, he thanks Madame Valentine de Saint-Point and Shaykh ʿAbd al-Wahid Yaḥya (René Guénon's Muslim name). All mentioned were then recurrent contributors to the periodical (see figures below). This "council" of al- Islāmbūlī not only encouraged him to establish the periodical, but they also informed his approach to an alternative identity formation.

The portraits were added at the top of their articles in *Al-Ma'rifa*. Al-Islāmbūlī and his council of mentors sought to reform the "erroneous pitfalls Orientalists fall into . . . when [overplaying] the West and its sciences."[25] This encompasses his general ethos of Easternism. But how was this ethos cultivated? Any attempt to answer such questions requires a turn to Ṭanṭawī Jawharī.

The modern "disenchantment" with the world order after the Great War had repercussions in the Islamic context as well as the Western, leading to a trend of re-enchantment via esoteric discourse. I take this re-enchantment

22. Al-Islāmbūlī, "Editorial," 4. *Al-Ma'rifa*'s ethos and establishment is the subject of my dissertation project and forthcoming article in *Oriente Moderno* titled, "The Multi-Modal *Taqriẓ*: Commendations in Cairo's *Al-Ma'rifa* Periodical."

23. *Al-Ma'rifa*, according to al-Islāmbūlī, was distinguished by the fact that it appeared before *Al-Risala* (1933–1953). Although *Al-Ma'rifa* went bankrupt in 1934 and *Al-Risala* continued until 1958, it is still worth noting the importance of the former, even with a short print run. Its brief and personal output allows us to carefully study with detail its development from the moment of its inception until its closure. The moment of *Al-Ma'rifa* is an articulation of a particular strain of intellectual thought, and in the pages of the periodical this ethos was reflected from start to finish thanks to its short print run, unlike other periodicals which have had time for editors to change and for their political and intellectual stances to evolve across decades.

24. Al-Islāmbūlī, "Editorial."

25. Al-Islāmbūlī, "Editorial," 4.



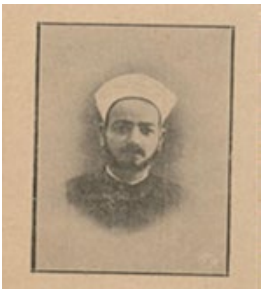


Figure 1, top left. Mansur Fahmi
Figure 2, top middle left, Madame de Saint-Point
Figure 3, top middle right, Muhammad al-Taftazani
Figure 4, top right, Muhammad Farid Wajdi




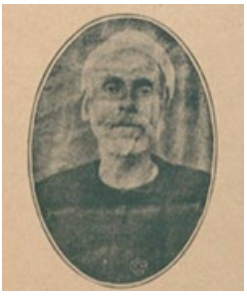

Figure 5, top left, Mustapha ʻAbd al-Raziq
Figure 6, top middle left, Rene Guenon
Figure 7, top middle right, ʻAbd al-ʻAziz al-Thaʻallabi
Figure 8, top right, Shaykh Tantawi Jawharī

as a "historically situated problem," which allows us to create a conceptual tool to undertake a historiography of esotericism in the Arab world. I set out to complicate esotericism as a Western conception, where "the entire Islamic world has been treated as a 'carrier civilization' of mostly Greek (and hence, one assumes, 'properly Western') material that would only become Western

esotericism when discovered by Latin scholars in the fifteenth century."[26] Looking at the history of re-enchantment in Egypt invites us to challenge the assumption that modernity and the enculturation of the *efendi* in colonial Egypt, led to a break with esoteric discourse.

The esoteric turn this article focuses on can be seen as an overlooked response to modernity. According to Josephson Storm, "modernization is often equated with the rise of instrumental reason, the gradual alienation of humanity from nature, and the production of a bureaucratic and technological life world stripped of mystery and wonder."[27] For colonial Egypt, this modernization was entangled with the increased sculpting of a particular subjectivity by colonial rule, as well as calls for reform and modernization that battled traditional paths of life.[28] Identifying the usefulness of modern Spiritualism, and situating it within the intellectual milieu of Eastern heritage, allows scholars to respond to the Orientalist intellectual production and the sculpting of the Egyptian subject by both colonialists and/or "Oriental Orientalists."[29]

Spiritual Easternism, for Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī, "re-orients the Orient" within the discussions on the advent of modernity and constructions of belonging.[30] In my study of the concurrent development of discourse on Spiritualism and modernity, I show that being a modern subject is not equated with forsaking the spiritual in the realm of reality, but rather shows the culture of ambiguity that surrounded the budding of such discussions. Hence, I read Egyptian spiritualists' entanglement of ancient religions and pre-modern texts, with the modern moment, as "consisting purely of residual ideas, concepts, and energies [which] possessed contemporaneous purpose and vitality," in addition, rather

26. Asprem and Strube, *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, 3.
27. Josephson Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 4.
28. Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt*.
29. Ryad, "'An Oriental Orientalist.'"
30. I thank Liana Saif for suggesting this expression.

than viewing supernatural beliefs and magical practices as "residual remnants, [I] argue for their ongoing applicability as valuable cultural inheritances."[31]

This article thus gives attention and agency to the "local minds and bodies in which [esoteric] ideas existed, or the intentions and agendas through which they were adopted, adapted, and eventually disseminated further."[32] Hence, I focus on what others have gradually erased from Jawharī's repertoire. Jawharī's more lauded exegetical works are irrevocably linked with his interests in modern Spiritualism, theosophy, and ancient Eastern mysteries.

These encounters with Western modernity, the reforms of the Arab *nahḍa*, and spiritual textual heritage have informed the development of the interests of Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī. This resulted in what I term a contemplative mentality, a borrowing from the French *Annales* school. It is through this concept that scholars such as Karl Bell and Richard Noakes were able to trace and study the development of how individuals thought and wrote about supernatural phenomena. In a similar manner, I work on the eclipsed study of the magical mentalities of Cairo's urban dwelling classes, the migrant farmers-turned-scholars/*effendis*, and the rural inhabitants of the countryside.

In sketching out their contemplative mentality, I rely on the advocacy of Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloc for the history of mentalities.[33] In this manner, I undertake

31. Bell, *The Magical Imagination*, 2. It is with this context that one can understand how Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, would, during his tenure as editor of the periodical *Al-Manār,* nevertheless issue a *fatwa* [religious legal opinion] finding it permissible to engage in séances to speak to the dead. It is also in this context that one can observe the secular proponents, represented in the periodical *Al-Muqtaṭaf*, who would also theorize who would also theorize about the potential input of the spiritual world for scientific progress. Therefore, this article focuses on mainstream figures in Cairene intellectual circles, not marginal and countercultural characters. Jawharī and Islāmbūlī circulated their insights on how to construct the world following the Great War, while navigating colonial realities, class mobility, and contemporary political reformulations of identity.

32. Asprem and Strube, *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, 4.

33. Febvre and Bloch argued for a mentalities approach that was often contrasted with the traditional methodologies of history that concentrate on great men and great texts. The school of mentalities picked up during the 80s and 90s, pushing for an approach to examine "collective traditions and structures of thought to draw from them the values and modes of perceptions of the groups who enshrined them."

a history of Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī's sentiments, ideas, mental structures, as well as class structures. However, I do not assume the universality or eternalness of their mental habits and categories of thought, but rather I situate them within the socio-political culture they are embedded in.[34] They must be understood within the context of the language, myths, religious-social ties, and other structures that informed their world. Alfred Andrea traces the pioneering literature that relies on the history of mentalities approach, such as Jacques Le Goff, Georges Duby, and Carlo Ginzberg, showing how the mentalities approach "reveals the areas of common perception and sensibility shared by elites and nonelites alike."[35]

My attempt at bridging the mentalities approach with the study of esotericism is germinal within Islamic studies, but it follows a space Western secondary scholarship initially broached, such as in the works of Geoffery Ernest Richard Lloyd, Bell, and Noakes.[36] Lloyd focuses on problem areas that seem "most amenable to the hypothesis of mentalities" such as science, myth, magic.[37] He looks at the applicability of the mentalities approach when trying to understand the paradoxical beliefs of science and magic, and how the transition developed from the latter to the former. This transition is not focused on a revolutionary change in mental habits but rather a change in the self-definition of a style of inquiry. In Jawharī's case, I am not arguing that moving from the circles of Al-Azhar (perceived to be tradition) to Dār al-ʿUlūm (perceived to be modernity) created a rupture in Jawharī's mentality; I am not interested in reproducing rigid boundaries and binaries. Rather, I am arguing that the epistemological spaces of al-Azhar and Dār al-ʿUlūm provided a moment for Jawharī to change his style of inquiry; i.e., to observe and contemplate the scientific and natural world to understand the spiritual world and practice religion and socio-political advocacy.

In a more recent study, Bell shifts his interest to looking at the perceptions that

34. Andrea, "Mentalities in History," 607.
35. Andrea, "Mentalities in History," 607–8.
36. Noakes, *Physics and Psychics*.
37. Lloyd, *Demystifying Mentalities,* 7.

come hand in hand with the shifting mentalities of urban dwellers in Victorian England and the functions in which their beliefs were employed.[38] Bell's work focuses on the "magical mentalities of the plebeian magical imagination."[39] Bell turns to imagination "as a means of exploring and understanding the dynamics of modernization."[40] Similarly, I look at the mentality of Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī as reflective of an appreciation of the antinomies of modernity and the desire for the esoteric. I utilize the expression "mentality," rather than "ideology," when explaining the conceptualization of their approaches because "it makes a useful distinction from ideology."[41] In such a case, mentalities, rather than ideologies, "have a less precise, fuzzier definition indicating more innate, and unarticulated mental processes. Such mental aspects are also less obviously shaped along lines or language of social and political divide such as 'popular' and 'elite'."[42] Further possible divides that are worth noting are rational/logical and irrational/illogical; however, in this article, the *modus operandi* of Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī suggests the co-existence of a plurality of a rational and esoteric, a material and spiritual bend, which reiterates the "antinomial position in which people were capable of maintaining seemingly contradictory but concurrent modes of thought."[43]

Jawharī: Years in the Fields

To trace the movement of the young would-be *shaykh* from the countryside to the Egyptian capital I rely on narratives written by Jawharī himself that were interspersed in his writings, as well as the one comprehensive biography written by one of his disciples, 'Abd al-'Azz Jādū's *Al-Shaykh Ṭantawī Jawharī: Dirasa wa-nuṣuṣ* (1980).[44] Such

38. Bell, *The Magical Imagination*, 2.
39. Bell, *The Magical Imagination*, 3.
40. Bell, *The Magical Imagination*, 5.
41. Bell, *The Magical Imagination*, 4.
42. Bell, *The Magical Imagination*, 4.
43. Bell, *The Magical Imagination*, 4–5.
44. Jādū, *Al-Shaykh Ṭanṭawī Jawharī: Dirasa wa-nuṣuṣ*. See also: Hartmann, "Schaich Ṭanṭāwī Dschauhari, Ein Modaerner Egyptischer Theolog und Naturfreund" (1916); Jomier, "Le Cheikh

sources particularly highlight Jawharī's engagement with spiritualist discourses.

Jawharī attempted to resuscitate classical arguments about the soul, life, and death, while adopting empirical claims of his contemporaries. The concern with God's manifestations was at the center of his worldview. He writes in the opening lines of his *Al-Jawahir fi tafsir al-Qur'an* how he "was created in love with the wonders of the universe, enamored with its natural marvels, eager for the beauty in the sky, and for what is perfect on earth."[45] This sort of romanticism in the imagination is echoed in other instances when engaging with spiritualist discourse.[46]

Similarly, I argue that Jawharī's "contemplative mentality" was informed by texts such as *Tahdhib al-akhlaq* by Ibn Miskawayh (d.1030), *Rasa'il Ikhwan al-Safa* [Epistles of the Brotherhood of Purity], *Kimya' al-sa'ada* [Alchemy of Happiness] by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d.1111), English translations of texts on Rāja Yoga, the *Vedas*, and the writings of Hermes Trismegistus, as well as contemporary texts such as John Lubbock's (1834–1913) *The Pleasures of Life* (1887).[47] It is unclear whether Jawharī had read the texts in the original English, or a translation.[48]

Tantawi Jawhari (1862–1940) et son commentaire du Coran" (1958).

45. Jawharī, *Al-Jawahir fi tafsir al-Qur'an al-karim*, Vol. 1, 3.

46. For example, Bell in *The Magical Imagination* argues that the imagination, or mentality, of English individuals in Victorian England was informed by, and a response to, the intellectual, social, and geographic terrain in which they were located (9).

47. The texts were mentioned in various publications by Jawharī: his qur'anic exegesis, *Al-Arwah*, and *Kitab al-taj al-murassa'*. These texts were either interspersed in Jawharī's writings as sources of references or ones he directly mentions as influential in his worldview construction. He came across these texts either as recommendations from his teachers, or from his own perusing of periodicals. See Jawharī, *Kitab al-taj al-murassa'*, 28–29.

48. In his diaries, Muhammad Lutfi Jum'a writes that he had been Jawharī's student in the Khidawiyya school, and he was close to Jawharī, enough that he helped his master learn the English language and gifted him English books to borrow for personal reading. See Muhammad Farid Wajdi, *Shahid 'ala al-'asr*. I would like to thank the second anonymous reviewer for alerting me to the fact that Jawharī translated Kant's *Über Pädagogik* based on its English version at the turn of the 20th century. In addition, Jawharī's exposure to Lubbock's thought was first through the latter's seminal text *The Pleasures of Life*. Lubbock had his texts widely translated in the Arab world, and his texts were printed and edited by the Arabic-language publishing houses in Cairo and Beirut. Lubbock had been translated by Wadi' al-Bustani (1888–1954). His texts, such as *Mahasin al-tabi'a wa-'aja'ib al-kawn* was published in 1913 by Matba'at al-Ma'arif in Cairo, which was

Unearthing these texts is important for better understanding Cairene book culture during the turn of the century. In his study on the influence of Rene Guénon, Mark Sedgwick notes that Guénon had a negligible influence on Egypt, finding that "this is so perhaps because in Egypt there was no real equivalent to Guénon's audience in France."[49] He finds that Egyptians had very little appetite for books other than the "modern and ancient titles about Islam,"[50] yet we find Jawharī among the initial Egyptians who had been interested in discussing such topics. Jawharī's interests and writings expanded to unearthing different forms of sciences and intellectual production that were originally developed within the East. However, this article focuses particularly on his work on Spiritualism. In the case of Jawharī's "religious bookshelf" it highlights the bookish tastes of the time, and in turn their intellectual and philosophical utilization. In addition, it provides a more nuanced understanding of how such texts on religion, Spiritualism, and the occult were produced, translated, and printed for an Egyptian audience through publishing houses and periodicals.

Born in the Delta region of lower Egypt in 1862, Jawharī grew up in the village of Kafr ʻAwadāllah Hijāzī. His maternal grandfather, Shaykh ʻAwadāllah Hijāzī was the head of the village. The young Jawharī grew up around his maternal grandparents' family; with ties to Al-Azhar in Cairo.[51] Young Jawharī's interest in history was also sparked by living alongside the ancient Pharaonic ruins of Bubastis; the center of worship of the ancient Egyptian goddess Bastet.[52] Unlike the *Nahḍawis*'s take on the Pharaonic heritage as constitutive of an Egyptian national identity, Jawharī saw the writings and philosophies of Ancient Egypt as part of the

owned by Najib Mitri—who sponsored the publications of al-Bustani's particular translations of Lubbock. Lubbock, dubbed as "filasuf al-hayah al-yawmiyya" [The Philosopher of Daily Life], was circulated in many of the Cairene bookshops, among which are Maktabat Mujahid (owned and run by al-Islambuli's close friend, Zaki Mujahid), and Maktabat al-Arab.

49. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 78.

50. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 78.

51. Jādū, *Al-Shaykh Ṭanṭawī Jawharī*, 10.

52. Jādū, *Al-Shaykh Ṭanṭawī Jawharī*, 11.

Eastern heritage of wisdom and spirituality. He dedicates a large part of his *tafsīr* to detailing the contributions of ancient Egyptians, and the Perennial commonality in how they approached religious ceremonies and esoteric worldviews.[53]

While his maternal family was composed of the religiously educated class and village heads, Jawharī's paternal side was part of the peasantry class of Kafr 'Awadāllah. Jawharī's father, a farmer, was proud of his son who excelled at the village's *kuttab* [informal Qur'anic learning schools]; Jawharī remembers his father repeating, "I had not been lucky enough to be educated, and so I ensured that my son pursued it."[54] And so, in 1877, fifteen-year-old Jawharī arrived in Cairo to continue his traditional religious education.[55]

Following six years of residence at Al-Azhar University, Jawharī falls ill and returns to the countryside to recuperate in 1883. His father also falls ill, and Jawharī finds his sick leave extended indefinitely to help his family with the farmland.[56] Whilst he worked the fields, watered the crops, and labored under the sun of the countryside, a shift began to occur in Jawharī's worldview. The countryside was a space suitable for the development of Jawharī's epistemological approaches as it was where he bridged together the aforementioned books he encountered in the Cairene context, and the observation of the natural world around him.

Within this epistemological space of observation and contemplation, Jawharī

53. The context within which Jawharī grew up is important. In his writings he stressed how observing his surroundings and soaking in everything with his senses informed the way he came to understand the universe and God. The religious temple's ruins are important to highlight, and the transcultural nature of the Bubastis area is also important. During his stay in the countryside, the ancient Egyptian ruins were excavated by the newly established Egypt Exploration Fund. This excavation was finished in 1887, a year after Jawharī had returned to Al-Azhar; it is then important to contextualize Jawharī's outlook on life as constituted during a moment of interaction between the village locals and the foreign delegation and archeologists. The excavation was headed by the Swiss archaeologist and Biblical scholar Édouard Naville (1844–1926), who published a report detailing the excavation process and results, along with some reproduction images of the community of Egyptians involved in the dig.

54. Jādū, *Al-Shaykh Ṭanṭawī Jawharī*, 12.

55. Jādū, *Al-Shaykh Ṭanṭawī Jawharī*, 13.

56. Jādū, *Al-Shaykh Ṭanṭawī Jawharī*, 13.

began to think about *mas'alit al-rūḥ* [the question of the spirit].[57] At first, he says that his curiosity for the hidden world and esoteric in life was nonexistent, and that he swayed from absolute doubt [*shakk muṭlaq*] to denial [*inqār*], until he had an episode in the fields. He writes:

> One day while working in our family's fields in Kafr ʿAwadāllah, I began to feel dizzy because of my poor health, and so I rested on the ground and suddenly roused myself after having passed out. This [episode] spurred me to think of the matter of the soul and so I said "If I am still alive and I passed out and lost all sense and feeling, then what must it be like if I die and separate [my soul] from my body? Does my mind or knowledge remain?"[58]

He began to reconsider questions of life and death, the intricacies of God's creations through what he observed of the sky, the earth, and his surroundings. ʿAbd al-Azīz Jādū, an Egyptian intellectual and close follower of Jawharī, writes that while farming the land Jawharī acquired a tendency to seek out the presence of God and his wonders through what nature presented; he "looked to the trees, and the flowers, and the fields for all it did to heal him and his father from their illnesses."[59] Once he recuperated, Jawharī returned to the capital.

Jawharī found it difficult to readapt in Al-Azhar because of constraints with the way education functioned. In his book, *Nahḍat al-umma wa-ḥayātuha* [The Renaissance of the Community and Its Life], regarding Dār al-ʿulūm,[60] Jawharī writes:

> One of the teachers of Dār al-ʿUlūm visited Al-Azhar and met with a *shaykh* there where the latter laments "my son, who are these people who frown upon Al-Azhar's way of teaching! and why do they want to introduce subjects such as *ʿilm al-tabīʿa* [the natural sciences]?"
>
> The son of Dār al-ʿUlūm replies: "I find reforming the education system necessary. Did we not hear you, our *shaykhs*, lamenting and criticizing the way we rely on commentaries?"
>
> The *shaykh*: "we did, yes."

57. Jawharī, *Kitab al-arwah*, 215.
58. Jawharī, *Kitab al-arwah*, 215.
59. Jādū, *Al-Shaykh Ṭanṭawī Jawharī*, 13.
60. Dār al-ʿulūm was established in the late nineteenth century to work in tandem with the traditional education in Al-Azhar; it functioned as representative of modern schooling.

> The teacher says: "and still you teach through the commentaries, . . . as for the natural sciences, I truly believe that knowing these sciences is obligatory, for it is the spirit of belief and it is what the Qur'an requires of us."[61]

This recounting of the conversation reflected Jawharī's concerns over the state of education and how it constrained his contemplative mentality. We have here two institutions in conversation with one another. Not where one represents tradition and the other modernity; the two are extensions of one another according to Jawharī. He consciously reminds the reader that the Azhari alumni teach at Dār al-ʿUlūm, and the young professors of Dār al-ʿUlūm contribute to Al-Azhar's scholarly life. It seems the particular focus on the natural sciences in Dār al-ʿUlūm sparked Jawharī's curiosity. In 1889, three years after his return from the transformative period in the fields, Jawharī enrolls in Dār al-ʿUlūm. There he spends five years engrossed in expanding his studies.[62]

In 1893, Jawharī graduates from Dār al-ʿUlūm and embarks on a career of teaching at his secondary school alma mater, and the Egyptian University (now Cairo University). During this teaching period, as well as his retirement in 1922, Jawharī was part of several political and intellectual societies [*jamʿiyyāt*].[63] Of particular importance here is the Islamic Brotherhood Society which was catering for diasporic students hailing from various Eastern countries who had come to study in Egypt. In many of his writings, Jawharī usually referred to some of his diasporic students from Southeast Asia, Muslim Russia, China, etc. For Jawharī, integrating the Eastern Muslim students into Cairene society through knowledge production, education, and literary gatherings was at the forefront of his message.[64] His extracurricular activities also included being an essential

61. Jawharī, *Nahdit al-umma wa-hayatuha*, 70.

62. Jādū, *Al-Shaykh Ṭanṭawī Jawharī*, 88.

63. These included: such as Jamʿiyyat al-muʾassa al-Islamiyya (established in 1910), al-Jamʿiyya al-Jawharīyya (established in 1914), Jamaʿat al-Ikhwa al-Islamiyya (established in 192?), Jamʿiyyat al-Shuban al-Muslimin (established in 1927), and the Spiritualist society Daʾirat al-Qahira al-Rawhiyya (1937). See Jādū, *Al-Shaykh Ṭanṭawī Jawharī*, 14–36.

64. "Taʾlim al-Sharq al-Islami," 5.

member to *Da'irat al-Qahira al-Rūḥiyya* (Cairo's Spiritualist Club);[65] a society established by Aḥmad Fahmī Abū al-Khayr (d. 1960).[66] Abū al-Khayr points out the pioneering role Jawharī played in helping him establish Egypt's first Spiritualist society, finding him a staple presence in every seance and meeting.[67] Jawharī's involvement with modern Spiritualism was through attendance of seances and the establishment of societies catering to this in Cairo, as well as writerly pursuits with his authoring of *Al-arwāḥ* [The Spirits], *Ayn al-insān* [Where is Man?], and *Barā'at al-Abāssa* [The Innocence of Abassa].[68]

Furthermore, his interest in interacting with like-minded individuals also extended to interacting with foreign delegates in Cairo. Jawharī had spent nine years in close companionship with Olga Lebedeva (1852–193?)[69]—who arrived in Egypt in 1906—teaching the Russian Orientalist Arabic and reading *Al-Risala al-Qushayriyya* for her to translate it.[70] Of interest is that Lebedeva was said to be responsible for opening the Egyptian chapter of the Theosophical Society in Cairo.[71] Jawharī writes that Lebedeva was commissioned by a German scholar

65. According to Majid Daneshgar, Jawharī was inspired by the London Ghost Club in co-establishing Cairo's Spiritualist Circle. See Daneshgar, "Tantawi Jawhari," 161.

66. Ahmed Fahmi Abu al-Khayr was a pioneer of Spiritualism in Egypt. He was a teacher of natural sciences at Egypt's governmental schools. After having lost his son, he began to seek out spiritual mediums to reach out to his boy beyond the realm of his reality. He relied on print enterprises to vocalize his interest in Spiritualism and the benefits of spiritual healing through mediums and seances, by publishing the periodical *'Alam al-ruh* [The Spirit World], and by translating works by Western Spiritualists J. Arthur Findlay's *On the Edge of the Etheric* (1931); 'Ala hafat al-'alam al-Ithiri (1938). See Radi, *'Asharat asdiqa'* [Ten Friends], 3–7.

67. Abu al-Khayr, "Al-Shaykh Ṭanṭawī Jawharī," 10.

68. The story behind the inception of this book is part of a forthcoming article titled, "The Innocence of al-'Abassa: Historical Therapeutics and Justice in the Spirit World." Jawharī had been attending a seance when Harun al-Rachid reached out to him via a Spiritualist medium asking him to correct a historical mistake the print scholar and author Jurji Zaydan had committed against Harun's sister al-'Abbasa in one of his Islamic History Novels Series.

69. Olcay, "Olga Lebedeva (Madame Gülnar)," 40–71.

70. Jawharī, *Tafsir al-Jawahir*, 235; Jawharī, *Ayn al-insan*, 65.

71. Almost no scholarly work has been done to study the presence of the Theosophical Society in Egypt, the bulk of scholarship focuses on Asian contexts. However, the Theosophical Society was functioning in Egypt, where a chapter in Cairo was established by Russian Orientalist

named Max—he does not supply a surname—and was sponsored by the Egyptian government throughout her stay to translate al-Qushayri's work.[72] According to the Lebanese poet May Ziadeh, Lebedeva was responsible for establishing the Egyptian Charter for the Theosophical Society. It is likely that Jawharī's extended companionship with Lebedeva initially introduced him to the debates on modern Spiritualism, coupled with the increased publication on the topic in Arabic periodicals—hailed in Arabic scholarship as *'Asr al-bahth al-ilmi li-l-ruh* [The age of scientific search for the spirit].[73]

The contemplative mentality of Jawharī, to write the esoteric world, is a mode of cognitive or epistemological interpretation manifested through specific cultural practices, namely, Eastern ones.[74] Jawharī's fervent interest in the renaissance of the Eastern community was apparent in his writings. The renaissance would require a melding together of materialism and Spiritualism, where he writes:

Olga Sergeevna Lebedeva (1854–193?) around 1913. May Ziadeh, the Lebanese-Palestinian poet and essayist, wrote of the many literary salons that Lebedeva frequented in order to establish a dialogue between East and West, showing how the Theosophical Society was present in Egyptian intellectual society and circles. As the head of the Egyptian chapter of the Theosophical Society, Lebedeva made sure to engage with the Egyptian intellectuals of the time whereby she organized a recurrent literary salon for a mixed audience. Ziadeh lists the attendees that were present, such as 'Abd al-Khaliq Tharwat Pasha, Ahmad Zaki Pasha, Lutfi al-Sayyid, Ali Bahgat, Serge Vornoff, Dr. Comanos Pasha, Shibili Shamil, and Ziadeh herself. This Western-Eastern dialogue, sponsored by Lebedeva and the Theosophical Society, according to Ziadeh continued after the Great War, and during the 1930s more Western Orientalists and Theosophists attended these recurrent meetings in Groppi, the famous coffee shop in downtown Cairo. Among them was Madame de Saint-Point and Paul Vanderborght (1899–1971). De Saint-Point and her Theosophist associates established smaller Theosophist-inclined societies such as Nadi al-bi'a al-fikriyya and Jam'iyyat al-fanus al-'asam. See Ziadeh, *Kitabat mansiyya*, 96–100.

72. The Max scholar is an enigma in Jawharī's writing, he either referred to him as Max or Marx. It is worth speculating whether this Max is German philologist and orientalist Max Müller, who directed the publication of a 50-volume set of English translations titled the Sacred Books of the East. The translation project published some of the most seminal religious texts, according to German religious studies, spanning from Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, and Islam. To what extent can it be plausible to put forth that Qushayri could have been part of the religious bookshelf of the Sacred Books of the East?

73. Ra'uf Abayd, *Al-Insan ruh la-jasad*, 15.

74. Bell, *The Magical Imagination*, 4–5.

> You see inspiration and development in materialist communities, such as the people of Europe, comes because of their preoccupation with materialism, whereas communities that have only circumscribed themselves to spiritual pursuits excel in only one thing. As for the Muslim *'umma* it draws its inspiration from the material and the spiritual, they do not only stop at materialism . . . and they do not only stop at Spiritualism . . . rather they draw their inspiration to develop from both tendencies, benefiting then their spirit, body, meaning of life, and material conditions.[75]

Jawharī's attempt at embracing materialism and Spiritualism sought to understand the esoteric entanglements of the *umma* and encouraged it to seek its renaissance through both aspects. Jawharī's bridging attempts should be contextualized within the discourses taking place during this period. In her chapter on materialism, Marwa Elshakry highlights how materialism had been used by individuals such as Shumayyil to argue against "faith in Spiritualism or supernaturalism of any kind."[76] Jawharī's conceptual framework present in his writings sought to "demonstrate in exhaustive detail that science was in full harmony with scripture."[77] I do not set out to set up Jawharī as a remarkable figure of his time, his ideas of reconciling Spiritualism and materialism, as well as science and religion, were a matter of concern for many Egyptians at the turn of the century.[78] The German Arabist Martin Hartmann (1851–1918) after having read Jawharī's works found that the latter "contends that explanations about living beings, and even the way plants and minerals build chains that ascend from a lower to a higher order, were expressed by Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406), Ibn Miskawayh (d. 1030) , al-Rāzī (d. 1209), and others; therefore, Darwin's theory of evolution would not be anything new."[79]

This is part and parcel of al-Islāmbūlī's ethos as well. Embracing the duality of modernity/heritage, spirituality/materiality, Orientalist/indigenous discourses are part of the dual nature of *Al-Ma'rifa*'s position in Egyptian society in the 1930s,

75. Jawharī, *Tafsir al-Jawahir*, 13–14.
76. Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic*, 100.
77. Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic*, 180.
78. Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic*, 314.
79. Hartmann in Daneshgar, *Ṭanṭawī Jawharī and the Qur'an*, 33.

Al-Islāmbūlī finds that engaging with modern Spiritualism and Theosophy as important for embedding oneself in a cross-cultural discussion, in order to bridge the gap between East and West. He argues that seeking the Perfect Man and spiritual heights, as the Theosophists and Western spiritualists are doing, is essential — but what is more important for him is to trace the origins of the discussion, arguing that it was based on Indian philosophy and Sufi thought. This creates the amalgamation of Eastern Spiritualism, one that found the road to self-actualization of Perfect Man is one that "strips away worldly desires, denies the human Self, and gets rid of the corporeal. Perfection is in stages, where each stage requires specifics to reach."[80]

Their discussions on the binary of material and spiritual are grounded in the discourses of modern spiritualists—as well as indigenous Arab scholarship of the time. The Arabic press witnessed an increased interest in the dichotomy between materialism and Spiritualism. Rene Guénon, for example, criticizes the West's decadence at the turn of the twentieth century, where in his book *East and West* he writes that:

> But most extraordinary of all is perhaps the claim to set up this abnormal civilization [the West] as the very type of all civilization, to regard it as "the civilization" par excellence, and even as the only one that deserves the name. Extraordinary too, and also complementary to this illusion is the belief in "progress," considered no less absolutely, and naturally identified, at heart, with this material development that absorbs the entire activity of the modern West.[81]

For Guénon, and many of the Egyptians who lauded his critical view of the West as decadent, such as ʻAbd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmud (1910–1978), the West's material development is not to be praised, rather it is the very essence of their corruption. Guénon finds that the modern world, which has been acted on too much by the West, "has reversed the natural relations between the different orders of things: once again, it is depreciation of the intellectual order (and even absence of intellectuality), and exaggeration of the material and the sentimental orders, which all go together to make the Western civilization of today an anomaly, not to say a monstrosity."[82]

80. Al-Islambulī, "Al-Itijāhāt al-haditha," 537.
81. Guénon, *East and West*, 4.
82. Guénon, *East and West*, 24.

He finds, "the only impression that, for example, mechanical inventions make on most Easterners is one of deep repulsion; certainly it all seems to them far more harmful than beneficial, and if they find themselves obliged to accept certain things which the present epoch has made necessary, they do so in the hope of future riddance; these things do not interest them, and they will never really interest them."[83] (This line of thinking, where the passive and ancient East is disinterested or apprehensive of "technology" is not echoed in Jawharī's writings. For Jawharī there resides a nuanced understanding in this debate, where materialism and technological advancement are complemented by an inward appreciation of the soul and the divine creations. Additionally, this materialism is not inherently a result of the social and cultural make-up of Western society, but as a result of years of contact with the East—the origin of both materialism and Spiritualism, according to Jawharī.

This line of thinking was also present in other Arabophone scholarship. ʻAbd al-Mun'im Khalaf, for example, writes: "One of the weapons that we should highlight that we are in possession of, is that we embrace the Materialist *madhab*, which both the Eastern and Western cultures are enamored with" – notice how he does not make a distinction – "as this [materialism] is the backbone of our religion, and the master of our minds/thinking, and the door through which we pass to know God, and our religious guide that the Quran places before us in our search for God and his secrets and his traits, and in our search for our relationship with Him, and with the materialist universe."[84] Badrī Ṭaha ʻAlam, in one of his contributions to *Al-Maʻrifa*, complicates this spiritual versus material divide even further, arguing that the self [*nafs*] is actually characterized by two natures that are in constant battle between one another; a materialistic self and a spiritual self, where one can be both, or one or the other, to different degrees at various moments in life.[85]

83. Guénon, *East and West*, 10.
84. Abd al-Mun'im Khallaf, "Al-Madiyya al-Islamiyya," 6.
85. Badri Taha Alam, "Al-Nafs al-māddiyya wa-l-nafs al-rūḥiyya," 689.

Muḥammad Farīd Wajdī, another equally important figure in the history of Egyptian Spiritualism,[86] also contributed quite frequently in *Al-Ma'rifa* on the topic. In his article on the "Animism *madhab*," he takes a stance against those who acknowledge a more spiritual approach to understanding and receiving knowledge, namely the proponents of Guenon's Perennialism, but have trouble accepting the presence of spirits and communicating with them. He challenges those who do not quite understand the distinctions between materialism and Spiritualism, and argues that the former, through technology and natural sciences, has been used to prove the presence of the spiritual in daily life; through science and technology one is able to sense and communicate with the spiritual world.[87]

The historical therapeutics of Eastern spirituality are anti-colonial in nature, whilst also being a process of re-reading the Eastern heritage in conversation with the Islamic and the Western. By introducing the discussions on the binaries of materialism and Spiritualism from the Arabophone scholars, I shed light on the attempts of Arab scholars to engage in the ongoing discussions of Western esotericists taking place both in the West and the Arab world. For al-Islāmbūlī, embracing the materialist and spiritualist allows the Easterner to find a brother in the Westerner—where a universal brotherhood is thus formed as a means of reforming the present. Al-Islāmbūlī constructed the building blocks of his universal brotherhood with like-minded individuals engaged in transcultural exchange such as Jawharī and others.

Al-Islāmbūlī: The Efendi's Periodical

Al-Islāmbūlī wore varied metaphorical hats when engaging with the Cairene and Pan-Eastern intellectual discussions of the interwar period. He met Jawharī through a common friend, the lawyer and intellectual Muḥammad Luṭfī Jum'a (1886–1953)—a former student of Jawharī.[88] This relationship then developed into a mentor-student

86. I deal with Jawharī and Muhammad Farid Wajdi more thoroughly in my current dissertation project.
87. Muhammad Farid Wagdi, "Al-Mabāḥith al-nafsiyya wa-l-falsafa al-māddiyya" 57–58.
88. The contribution of Jum'a to Egyptian intellectual life has been covered by Mattias Gori

one, where Jawharī encouraged al-Islāmbūlī to establish a periodical to work on his intellectual project of reviving *rūḥ al-sharq* [the spirit of the East].[89]

It seems probable that the rural-inhabitants-turned-urban-dwellers bonded over similar life trajectories, seeing as they both came from the Egyptian countryside. However, young al-Islāmbūlī was born in the village of Basyūn in the north of Egypt to a mercantile class family. He was educated at the village's *kuttab*, until he moved to Cairo in 1919 with his father to enroll in a formal government secondary school. This episode was short-lived with the eruption of the 1919 revolution.[90] When the family deemed it safe enough, al-Islāmbūlī returned to Cairo and was enrolled in the ʻAbdīn night school to finalize his secondary education. However, his father's untimely death further halted al-Islāmbūlī's educational track.[91]

Although he was forced to take on the breadwinning position for the family, al-Islāmbūlī still remained a fervent bibliophile. From al-Islāmbūlī's early development, we see what Lucie Ryzova terms "the narratives of 'becoming efendi' or efendification" of our young periodical editor.[92] While Ryzova looks into the "social practice of efendification, the process of making one's son an *efendi* through modern schooling,"[93] I show how al-Islāmbūlī's connections, private reading (*mutāla'a*),[94] and his foray into the world of print journalism resulted in his becoming part of the *efendiya* class, and how it connects to his engagement with

Olesen in his PhD dissertation. See Olesen, "The Future is Eastern."

89. Al-Islāmbūlī, "Editorial," 4.

90. The nationwide revolt and civil disobedience from November 1918 to July 1919 against the British colonial occupation of Egypt, which resulted in Egypt earning its independence in 1922 and the establishment of its constitution in 1923. See Heshmat, *Egypt 1919*; Hellyer and Springborg, eds, *The Egyptian Revolution of 1919*. Al-Islāmbūlī joined the demonstrations and aided in circulating anti-British pamphlets which later led to his arrest by the colonial authorities. The short-lived political arrest resulted in his suspension from the governmental school, and in his return to the village, for his family feared if he remained in Cairo he would be under the scrutiny of the authorities.

91. Al-Bayumi, *al-Nahḍa al-Islamiyya fi-siyar a'lamiha al-mu'asiryyin*, 194.

92. Ryzova, *The Age of the Efendiyya*, 89–90.

93. Ryzova, *The Age of the Efendiyya*, 89.

94. On private reading and its manifestations in premodern and modern settings see Yousef, *Composing Egypt*.

Spiritualism. This growing class of *efendiya* (sing. *efendi*) were "the first self-consciously modern generation in Egyptian history,"[95] where their consciousness and ways of belonging are constructed by their engagement with public life through new print technology and the resultant journalistic scene. The periodicals and journals of the time functioned as "venues" that allowed for the "articulation of efendiyya subjectivity," and as a site of performance through which "a national community of similarly minded men [and women] with a shared perspective on society and history, and their own roles in it" was practiced.[96]

He was known for expanding his connections with various members of the Egyptian and international literati circles, and even to the point of obscure mystics and European perennialists and Traditionalists. Jum'a writes of an evening where he was invited by al-Islāmbūlī to the latter's house. There he found "[The exiled Tunisian national leader] 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Tha'āllabī, Madame [Valentine] de Saint-Point,[97] and an Arabic-speaking, yet silent French man [René Guénon],[98] who had become popular

95. Ryzova, *The Age of the Efendiyya*, 4.

96. Ryzova, *The Age of the Efendiyya*, 21.

97. For more on de Saint-Point, see Contarini "Valentine de Saint-Point: A Futurist Woman?"; Sedgwick, *Against The Modern World*, 98–103.

98. For a full biographical study of Guénon see Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*. Mark Sedgwick demarcates his life into three phases that all built onto one another to encompass his Traditionalist thinking; he was initially interested in the occult scene in Paris, where he joined the Martinist group in 1906. The second phase marks the beginning of his disaffection with Western modernity and his turn to Traditionalism. This was later followed by the third and final phase of his life; i.e., his conversion to Islam and turn to Sufism as he resided in Cairo until his death. Guénon's initiation into Sufism and introduction to Islam were administered by the Sufi Ivan Agueli (1869–1917), a Swede who alternated between France and Egypt. Agueli, who was part of the Theosophical Society, was embroiled in anti-colonial politics in Egypt after his conversion; a sentiment that we see echoed in Guénon and de Saint-Point, who were anti-colonial and anti-western in their writing in Egypt, particularly through the latter's periodical *Le Phoenix*, which she used as a platform to criticize British colonial presence. In 1929, Guénon met Dina Shilito, a wealthy American who was heavily interested in the occult, and had recently converted to Islam; they initially developed a project together of working on a series of Traditionalist books, involving collecting books for Guénon to edit. Shillito suggested they embark on a journey to the East; they set sail for Egypt in 1930, but their partnership was curiously broken up after a few months, and Guénon remained in Egypt. Both de Saint-Point and Guénon had an invested interest in ancient Eastern mysteries, Perennialism, and Spiritualism.

in his own country, but then he Orientalized [*istashraq*] and remained in Egypt, and ended up marrying an Egyptian Muslim woman."[99] Jum'a paints for us the types of individuals in al-Islāmbūlī's close circle; narrating a night they spent discussing Sufism and the corpus of Ibn al-'Arabī (138). This motley group of guests is not a rare occurrence for al-Islāmbūlī. He was known among his contemporaries for finding merit in "anyone who defends his own *'aqīda* [belief] with honesty," even if it went against what he believed in (138). Jum'a finds al-Islāmbūlī to be a fervent admirer of atheists — this is perhaps Jum'a's inability to stomach Perennialism (138–39). In this manner, I read al-Islāmbūlī's various stances as pluralistic efforts to "reconcile conflicting worldviews without vindicating one at the expense of the other."[100]

Al-Islāmbūlī's council also included Western constituencies, namely, the traditionalist René Guénon and Valentine de Saint-Point. De Saint-Point was a French artist, performer and novelist who converted to Islam in 1918 during her time in Morocco, and took on the name of Rūḥiyya Nūr al-Dīn.[101] Once a "reformed" feminist and nudist model, de Saint-Point exhibited a more subdued and conservative feminist inclination and a pro-Eastern tendency, which led al-Islāmbūlī to have her contribute routinely to *Al-Ma'rifa*. In the debut issue of *Al-Ma'rifa*, al-Islāmbūlī adds an addendum to de Saint-Point's article as a biographical note. He introduces her as the editor of the periodical *Le Phoenix*, a French periodical published in Egypt — explaining that he solicited her to write an article "of her opinion on the Eastern woman . . . seeing as she is one of the people who have comprehensively studied Eastern life."[102] It is probable that she had been the point of contact between René Guénon and al-Islāmbūlī; for she had been among the European residents in Egypt who welcomed Guénon and stood by his side when he first arrived in Cairo in 1930.

99. Jum'a, *Shahid 'ala al-'asr: Mudhakirat*, 138. Jum'a is unimpressed with Guénon, seeing him as a look-alike to "Monsieur Massignon," but is not close to the latter's intellectual standing.
100. Oliver Scharbodt, *Muhammad 'Abduh*, 9.
101. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 66–78, 129–30.
102. De Saint-Point, "Huriyyat al-Mar'a fi al-Islam" (trans. al-Islāmbūlīāmbūlī), 89.

Guénon is an important contributor to al-Islāmbūlī's intellectual ethos. I do not aim to overstress Guénon's effect, nor suggest that he is the sole contributing factor to al-Islāmbūlī's interest in Sufism, Perennialism, and Eastern philosophy. Instead, I provide a more nuanced approach to situate Guénon as one among many other influences on al-Islāmbūlī. Guénon was named as one of the mentors who inspired al-Islāmbūlī to establish *Al-Ma'rifa*.[103] Guénon contributed to *Al-Ma'rifa* during its first year; however, his articles lessened over time, perhaps in response to al-Islāmbūlī's interest in modern Spiritualism—which Guénon, publishing under his Muslim name 'Abd al-Waḥid Yaḥyā, wrote a series of scathing articles against, titled "Modern Spiritualism and its Errors [*Al-Rūḥiyya al-ḥaditha wa-khatā'uha*]," and "Modern Spiritualism: A Response to a Response [*Al-Rūḥiyya al- ḥaditha: Rad 'ala rad*]." In these articles, Guenon challenges the proponents of modern Spiritualism, arguing that although modern Spiritualism was developed by individuals who sought to combat the twentieth century's overt materialism, it somehow becomes materialism of another nature. "It is even more damaging than materialism as it created false imaginations and myths in order to influence those who do not embrace the common materialist opinions of the time," argues Guénon.[104] While al-Islāmbūlī found in Guénon a mentor, their interests still diverged when it came to the topic of modern Spiritualism – instead, al-Islāmbūlī's ideas were more in line with Ṭanṭawī Jawharī's orientation.

The Efendi and the Shaykh: Historical Therapeutics of Spiritual Easternism

In an article titled "Modern Approaches to the Philosophy of Spiritualism," al-Islāmbūlī laments:

> Of the strangest manifestations of this age are European and American scholars' dedication to studying Spiritualism in all its forms. We find that this manifestation

103. Al-Bayoumi, *Al-Nahḍa al-Islamiyya fi siyar a'lamiha al-mu'asiryyin*, 139.
104. 'Abd al-Wahid Yahya, "Al-Ruhiyya al-haditha," 355. For a more thorough examination of these articles see Elashmawy, "Taming the Animal Within in Cairo," 45; forthcoming.

> is an indication of the types of crises the world has suffered, be it psychological or economic — one that has forced this new direction of inquiry.
>
> This . . . makes us extremely proud, for in addressing Spiritualism and philosophy, they will be heading towards the East — the emitter of wisdom and light. The East is where spirituality has always resided. . . . Although we are truly glad of this moment in history, we are nevertheless pained. We [as Easterners] have neglected to engage with this, seeing as we are the origins of where this discussion had first begun.[105]

Al-Islāmbūlī's observation indicates his favorable take on Spiritualism, indicating three things. First, that the preoccupation of Spiritualism is a political mediator between the West and East. Second, that the initial textual and intellectual conceptualization of Spiritualism occurred in the East. And third, that he observes a lack of initiative from Islamicate scholars and intellectuals in addressing Spiritualism in the same scientific manner. Rather than being an object of study, al-Islāmbūlī wishes scholars to engage with Western spiritualists and intellectuals, to be part of a "brotherly and equal dialogue" between East and West (539).

In his article in *Al-Ma'rifa* titled, "From the East to the West," Jawharī writes,

> humans are one type . . . They multiplied in number and spread into the earth, East and West. The East is the father, the West its son, and the father is compassionate towards his son. As for religions, they are all Eastern in origins, be it Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. From the West crawled the Greeks, the Ptolemies, and the Romans toward the East, forcing themselves . . . in the lower East as conquerors. Here the father turns to his son and says to him, "My dear boy, if you throw stones at me, I shall throw dates at you. Do not exit your father's realm until I have put you upon the right path."[106]

For Islāmbūlī, this represented an entry point into Orientalist discourse of the time regarding various topics, and not only Spiritualism and eternal knowledge. This was an opportunity to critically re-signify the contents of the Orientalist discourse and articulate identity and history. He writes that he is interested "in extrapolating what is rotten or wrong within the ranks of Theosophy and

105. Al-Islāmbūlī, "Al-Itijāhāt al-haditha," 537.
106. Jawharī, "Min al-sharq li-l-gharb," 453.

modern Spiritualism when it comes to how they came to write about the East and its heritage."[107] He finds merit in discussing the trends that occupy the esoteric imagination of Westerners, but on Easterners' own terms.

Jawharī writes of this first presence of the *Gharbyin* [Westerners] in the East during the age of antiquity. This was marked by warring by the Greeks and Romans against the reigning Eastern empire of the time: the Persians. "The end of this interaction was marked by the conversion of the polytheist Westerners to Christianity. Christianity spread into the West and the Eastern light of Christianity that had shone brightly began to dim as Charlemagne massacred the Saxons in 782 and continued to burn and pillage towns that he found to be heretical."[108] Jawharī finds that the Eastern light was finally extinguished in this pre-modern era particularly with the establishment of the Inquisition trials of 1182.[109]

Once again, the light of wisdom, progress, and Islam brought the Westerners to the East once more with the Crusades, argues Jawharī. During this time, the Westerners in the East began to be exposed to the treasure trove of texts that the Abbasids had translated and maintained. Jawharī then turns to his contemporary moment and says, "here they are, come again to the East for the third time; with no excuse except to take away the rights of Easterners and humiliate them . . . they accepted our Christianity fourteen centuries ago, in the first half they failed in following its teachings and were slaves [to their decadent desires]. In the second half, our light shone upon them and so they moved forward; with us being the parents and them, the children; with our sciences and religions they have developed. And so, is the father's lot in life only betrayal from his son? And an ignorant legacy? And greed, tyranny, and colonization? You have angered humanity, you Westerners."[110]

107. Al-Islambulī, "Editorial," 1–3.
108. Jawharī, "Min al-sharq li-l-gharb," 454.
109. Jawharī, "Min al-sharq li-l-gharb," 454.
110. Jawharī, "Min al-sharq li-l-gharb," 455.

He ends the article with a cautionary message to Western countries. He writes: "Beware, you Westerners … The time of reckoning has come, the East has awoken. It is like a plant that had been buried under a debris of snow, and the sun had spread its rays upon it and melted it; and so, the plant begins to grow. Beware of the anger of the Easterners. Japan, China, India, Turkey, Persia, the Arab lands, and Afghans alongside Russia; all are prepared. Can you not comprehend this?"[111]

This idea of the East as the emitter of light and a carrier of inherent spirituality and wisdom is part of Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī's discursive therapeutics. In the first volume of his exegesis, Jawharī writes about the recurrent theme of "*ex, Oriente lux,*"[112] saying:

> It was once said that the sun rises on the people of the East, travelling to the people of the West, moving forth across the Atlantic to the Americas, crossing round to the lands of the East once more—this is how we view science, wisdom, and civilization, moving within the same pathway as the sun, seeking the utmost of its capabilities to shine upon the Eastern people. The king of India was called the King of Wisdom, the Chinese King: the king of the people, the Turkish King: the king of lions, and the Persian King: the king of kings.[113]

In the next issue, al-Islāmbūlī builds upon his contemplative mentality. He argues that without religion, knowledge cannot be reached. The idea of religion as science, al-Islāmbūlī says, can be traced in all the ancient religions such as Taoism in China, as well as other manifestations such as in Persian and Hindu religious texts (*Vedas* and *Avesta*). For this religious science to be planted in the soul, it had to take physical shape in art and literature. This is done for man to externalize what is within his spirit. The "*ex, Oriente lux"* for al-Islāmbūlī, as for Jawharī, is

111. Jawharī, "Min al-sharq li-l-gharb," 456.

112. This conceptualization, given impetus by scholars such as Sir Edwin Arnold in his *Light of Asia* appeared in 1879, led to an extensive and serious academic endeavor to study the religions of the East, and to publish texts and translations. To what extent did Islāmbūlīand his contributors find currency in this idea and how did it serve their cultural/intellectual project? See Arnold, *The Light of Asia*. In the case of Japan in particular, Cemil Aydin argues that the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 was a global moment where Eastern countries began to reflect on their own positions within the Imperial world order. See Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia*, 71–72.

113. Jawharī, *Tafsir al-jawahir*, 143.

essential and a matter he comments upon time and again in his writing. In turn, al-Islāmbūlī is also interested in engaging in a historical therapeutics—one that unearths the Islamic heritage and finds commonality with the Hindu, Persian, Chinese, etc., discursive spaces. Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī found in Eastern cultures and religions an affinity for each other; one that is imbued with an ancient Eastern soul. This preoccupation with the esoteric is at the crux of *Al-Ma'rifa*'s ethos. And once the Western spiritualist scholars, through their studies of Spiritualism, arrive at the truth that this Eastern soul is the carrier of such knowledge, "the flag of peace will be hoisted, and love, fraternity, and equality will be achieved."[114]

Conclusion

In this article, I have provided an exploration of how Egyptian intellectuals Ṭanṭawī Jawharī and ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Islāmbūlī utilized esotericism as cultural tools and discursive platforms. Their stories underscore the multifaceted responses to colonial influence and highlight the formation of a distinct Egyptian intellectual ethos during the long nineteenth century. This contribution situated Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī's contributions within the larger socio-political, religious, and cultural frameworks that defined this transformative period in Egypt.

I set out to capture the nuanced ways in which they engaged with, adapted, and redefined esotericism within their context. They integrated esotericism with socio-political objectives to construct a narrative of Eastern unity and intellectual sovereignty. The article illustrates how both figures shared common ground in their rural roots, an admiration for Eastern traditions, and a desire to resist Western cultural dominance. Whilst one came from the peasant class and the other from the merchant class, their roads converged in fin-de-siècle Egypt through print media. With their writings and public influence, Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī presented a vision of spiritual Easternism that reoriented the discourse around modernity, presenting it as compatible with a spiritual, religious, and

114. Al-Islāmbūlī, "Al-Itijāhāt al-haditha" 539.

intellectual heritage grounded in the East. This vision not only bridged the divide between secular and religious thought but also unified various Eastern cultures under a shared identity.

Jawharī advocated for an intellectual synthesis between science and esotericism. His exposure to a range of texts, from Hermetic philosophies to Western esoteric and scientific works, enabled him to craft a unique epistemological stance that affirmed both the material and spiritual dimensions of human experience. This integration was crucial to revitalizing an Egyptian identity that was deeply aware of its spiritual roots and yet responsive to modern scientific inquiries. His approach to spiritual Easternism countered Western Orientalist portrayals that often dismissed Islamic esotericism as antiquated or irrational. By positing science and religion as mutually reinforcing, rather than oppositional, Jawharī established a model of intellectual synthesis that promoted a distinctly Egyptian form of modernity.

On the other hand, al-Islāmbūlī transformed the principles he learned from Jawharī into the core ethos of his periodical, *Al-Ma'rifa*. Through *Al-Ma'rifa*, he advocated for Eastern solidarity and intellectual exchange with the West. Unlike Jawharī, al-Islāmbūlī's connection with Western thought was filtered through a journalistic lens, leading him to cultivate a dialogue that not only embraced elements of modern Spiritualism but actively sought to reform Orientalist narratives. *Al-Ma'rifa* became a forum for discussing and critiquing Western esotericism and materialism, presenting the East not as an exoticized "other" but as a repository of wisdom and enlightenment. He openly challenged Western-centric notions of progress, situating Eastern Spiritualism as an antidote. Al-Islāmbūlī's contribution embodied the spirit of Eastern intellectual autonomy, offering a voice for Egypt's emerging modern class of *efendiyya* to engage with global discourses on their own terms.

Both men's intellectual endeavors are responses to the disruptions caused by colonialism, particularly the erasure of local governance and autonomy in Egypt. Their engagements with Spiritualism were thus not escapist, but were rather

rooted in a commitment to reclaim and reinterpret Egyptian identity in a time of crisis. Through their works, Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī bridged intellectual and social divides in Egyptian society, fostering a collective identity that transcended class boundaries. Their appeal to both the educated elite and self-enculturated migrant-turned-*efendi* suggests that spiritual Easternism resonated as a unifying force, fostering a shared sense of purpose and cultural pride among Egyptians—although it was a short-lived project in Egyptian history.

Of particular importance here is the attempt to re-evaluate the function and use of esotericism within Egyptian society beyond a Western-centric framework. I present an analysis that sets spiritual Easternism as more than a local adaptation of European occultism; instead, it was a reclamation of an indigenous esoteric heritage that sought to counterbalance Western hegemony. Figures like Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī were not simply passive recipients of Western thought; they critically engaged with it, transforming imported ideas into catalysts for cultural revival and socio-political resilience. This approach calls for a reexamination of the global history of esotericism, shifting the focus away from a unidirectional diffusion model and toward a multilateral exchange where non-Western intellectuals actively shaped and redefined spiritual discourse.

Furthermore, the article sheds light on the role of print media in disseminating these ideas. Periodicals like *Al-Ma'rifa* served as crucial venues for intellectual exchange and ideological formation, enabling figures like al-Islāmbūlī to reach a wide audience. Through these publications, Egyptian intellectuals were able to shape an imagined identity that was inclusive of spiritual and esoteric traditions, resisting both Western materialism and reductionist interpretations of Islam. The print culture of the period was not merely a tool for disseminating information; it was a space where new forms of subjectivity and collective consciousness were forged. Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī's engagement with Spiritualism through print media illustrates the transformative potential of intellectual exchange in redefining social identities and cultural narratives.

In conclusion, the article encapsulates the dynamic intellectual landscape of fin-de-siècle Egypt, where figures like Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī leveraged spiritual Easternism as a means to navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity. By embracing esotericism, they challenged the binaries of material/spiritual and East/West, proposing an identity that was both modern and deeply rooted in Eastern spiritual heritage. Their work exemplifies the resilience of indigenous cultures in the face of colonialism, as well as the transformative power of intellectual synthesis in creating new cultural paradigms.

Ultimately, the article invites readers to reconsider the ways in which esotericism can function as a political and cultural force. For Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī, spiritual Easternism was more than a philosophical stance; it was a form of historical therapeutics—a means of healing and reorienting Egyptian society amidst the cultural dislocation of colonialism. Their advocacy for a spiritual revival grounded in Eastern traditions continues to offer insights into the possibilities of cross-cultural dialogue and intellectual autonomy. Through their lives and legacies, I underscore the importance of acknowledging diverse pathways to modernity and the role of esotericism as a cornerstone in the construction of postcolonial identities.

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