

PHILOSOPHICAL ORIGINS OF THE ARAB BA'TH PARTY: THE WORK OF ZAKIAL-ARSUZI

Author(s): Saleh Omar

Source: *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Spring 1996, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Spring 1996), pp. 23-37

Published by: Pluto Journals

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/41858164>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Pluto Journals is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Arab Studies Quarterly*

JSTOR

PHILOSOPHICAL ORIGINS OF THE ARAB BA'TH PARTY: THE WORK OF ZAKI AL-ARSUZI

Saleh Omar

MUCH OF THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE BA'TH, both as a political party and an ideology, remains shrouded in mystery.¹ Among the more mysterious of the figures of this era is that of Zaki al-Arsuzi. While he is acknowledged to have been one of the Ba'th Party's founders and one of its major thinkers, there is very little scholarship, especially in the West, on his thought or its relationship with Ba'thist ideology. Michele Aflaq is usually considered to be the founder of the Ba'th Party, as well as the founder of Ba'thist thought. While Aflaq's writings have been studied by numerous authors, the work of Arsuzi has so far been ignored by Middle East scholars.²

This article is not intended as a comparison of Aflaq and Arsuzi. Rather, it is intended as a preliminary introduction to the thought of Arsuzi and his contribution to Ba'th ideology. This contribution lies in his development of a philosophical foundation for Arab regeneration. Arsuzi's philosophy of Arab regeneration is highly metaphysical. However, he is also a systemic thinker, with considerable creative powers.

Since this is not a biography of Arsuzi, very little will be said about his life. Nevertheless, a brief description will help shed light on his thought by placing it in some historical context. Zaki al-Arsuzi was born in the province of Alexandretta, which is now a part of Turkey. Alexandretta, in spite of the fact that it had a large Arab population, perhaps a majority, was annexed by Turkey in 1938. Since Arsuzi was one of the leaders of the Arab community in Alexandretta who struggled to keep it as a part of Arab Syria, after annexation he became one of the refugees who moved south to Syria, embittered for the rest of his life by the loss of his homeland.

Saleh Omar is a lecturer at Oakton Community College, Des Plaines, Illinois

ASQ Volume 18 Number 2 Spring 1996 23

Arsuzi was educated in the 1920s at the Sorbonne, where he studied philosophy, particularly the philosophy of Henri Bergson. His philosophy of Arabism shows a heavy Bergsonian influence. He returned from France to a Syria under French occupation. He taught philosophy at several Syrian high schools from which he was transferred frequently because he was an outspoken critic of the French occupation regime. His writings exercised great influence over the formation of the Ba'th Party, although he himself was too individualistic to play a Party role. He preferred lecturing and writing. He lived to see the Ba'th come to power in Syria and the union of Egypt and Syria in 1958.³

Arsuzi's starting-point was the idea of a national genius or spirit, an idea which was almost an axiom of 19th Century nationalism. There were various versions of this idea, but it may be summarized as follows: During its primordial genesis, a nation is endowed, by God or some metaphysical force, with a certain quality which defines its uniqueness and molds its values, morals, and in general its *weltanschauung*, or its "world view." During this early phase the nation is pure, united, and vital, and is impelled to accomplish its mission. This vitality drives it to achieve great things in literature, thought, military conquests, etc. This is the nation's Golden Age, when a people form their authentic self, their cultural identity. With the passage of time, and as this culture is penetrated by the influence of cultures of other peoples with whom it comes in contact, the nation's original culture is compromised and eroded, and it begins to decline. Ultimately, the nation's original spirit is smothered by other people's cultures (values, language, etc.) to the extent that it loses its own identity.

Nationalist philosophers, from Herder and Fichte in Germany to Mazzini in Italy to lesser known figures in Russia and eastern Europe, sought to revive their nation by discovering what they thought was their own nation's old spirit. Arsuzi, we must emphasize, was influenced heavily by this school of thought of nationalist revival.⁴ After completing his education at the Sorbonne, Arsuzi returned to Syria obsessed with the idea of national revival.

To the question "What is a nation?", Arsuzi presents two alternative definitions:

1. Is it a concept which the mind constructs on the basis of shared experience (a common civilization and cultural experience), the experience of the ancestors passed on to their progeny?
2. Is it an idea whose origins are in heaven, an idea which is realized by placing its manifestations in space, and their collection in time?⁵

The first definition of a nation is what is usually called the historical definition, that is to say, a people's common experience over time leads to the development of institutions, customs, a common language and literature, etc. A people who inherits this collection of memories from its ancestors, and who also

shares the desire to collectively aspire to the future, are a nation. This definition of a nation, articulated first by the French historian Ernst Renan, is rejected by Arsuzi in so far as it applies to Arab nation. The Arab nation

. . . has chosen its truth in the metaphysical realm (God taught Adam the names, and, the names came down from heaven); that is to say, it has equipped its form with its constituents (instincts in the body and duties in consciousness). These constituents appear as a plan (a predetermined design), which is betrayed by its [outer] appearances, both public and private. Whatever the ancestors constructed realized whatever is in the inner depth of the descendants selves.⁶

Arsuzi's literary, metaphorical style, while providing flashes of insight on occasion, is very difficult to follow. This is one of the reasons he has remained obscure. Therefore, it would be helpful, before we begin an explication of his theory, to summarize the background of philosophers and ideas which undoubtedly influenced him. Since he was influenced by the Platonic philosophy, particularly the theory of innate ideas, we shall begin with this theory.

Plato held that there exists an ultimate reality beyond the physical world; that is to say, the world which we perceive with our senses. According to Plato's cosmology, God, the Creator originally created this perfect, higher world and then crafted the lower world in its image. The spatial location where this higher world exists was generally thought to be the heavens, in which the sun occupied a prominent place. The human soul originates in the higher world. When the soul arrives to this, the lower world, it carries with it knowledge of innate ideas in potential form. Once in the world, the human soul is awakened to knowledge of these ideas through education and experience. However, since this world consists of mere images of true reality, it is not real knowledge. Knowledge of the ideas of the upper world is not acquired through sense perception. True knowledge is already within the mind, in the form of the innate ideas we were born with. Evidence of the senses only illustrates these ideas, as part of the pedagogy which helps learn them, but is neither the source nor the proof of their existence. Through the dialectic, to be found in philosophical dialogues which Plato left us, is found the method used to help people awaken truth within themselves.⁷

From Plato, and more so from Plotinus, Arsuzi took the idea of a higher reality: the idea of a predetermined, absolute and metaphysical determinant of events in this world. To understand Arsuzi, one must understand that he begins with this assumption: There is a world other than the physical world, an upper world which contains and predetermines man's truth and fate.

The view of a supernatural world which is higher than the natural world did not originate in modern times. The adaptation of this view for nationalist purposes, that is, the idea that God endows specific nations to carry out His will,

is a modern idea. Typically, as we have seen, the nationalist philosopher held that his own nation was the instrument through which supernatural reality (God) transmitted a higher truth. But, while he held his nation to be God's exclusive instrument, the truth or message brought forth through this instrument held universal validity and relevance to all mankind. The better nationalist philosophers contributed not only to the revival of their own nation, but also developed ideas and methods which have universal value. Fichte's works are classics in world philosophy, and Mazzini's works inspired nationalist philosophers throughout the world.

Arsuzi too begins with a philosophical problem which is not Arab-specific, but has to do with the problem of human knowledge. The problem was no doubt inspired by the philosophy of Henri Bergson, who was a towering figure at the Sorbonne in the 1920s, when Arsuzi was a student there. Bergson made a distinction between knowledge which is "relative" and knowledge which is "absolute." Relative knowledge of an object in motion may be illustrated as follows: If we observe an object in motion, we may be said to have superficial knowledge of it. We might say the object moves, if it is in one place at an instant and in another place at another instant. We can say that the moving object has a certain velocity, that it moves with a certain force, and that it is met with resistance by the atmosphere, and so forth. In this kind of knowing, Bergson maintains, we are "outside" the object. We observe it from different points of view, and we adopt different descriptions accordingly. We use abstractions (time, place, velocity) to describe this motion. In other words, we must employ language or symbols in this description.

This kind of knowledge may be called symbolic or mediate, since in Bergson's view symbols or concepts are instruments which mediate between the knowing mind and the object known. Bergson contrasts to this abstract, symbolical knowledge a kind of knowledge which he considers "absolute," which is immediate, direct, and non-symbolical. Bergson called this knowledge *intuition*. The human knowledge, by an act of imagination, sympathetically penetrates the object and knows it from within.

In his major work, *Creative Evolution*, Bergson develops a metaphysics of life. The origin of life and its continuous evolution, according to this metaphysics, assumes a vital force (*élan vital*), which constantly pushes life toward higher forms. Man, as the highest form of life, is not only an observer of nature, but is also part of this mysterious process. As a part of it, he can know if from within, by developing his faculty of intuition. There is one problem with intuition, however: it is *inexpressible in words*. According to Bergson, language expresses abstractions, and therefore cannot express the cosmic message which an intuitor perceives in the world. It is as if nature were attempting to speak, but was mute.⁸

This, at any rate, is how Arsuzi understood Bergson. And he set out to show that there is a language whose words are not symbols, but direct sounds of nature itself. Arsuzi's first book, *The Genius of Arabism Is In Its Language*, contains his theory of Arabic linguistics and the metaphysics of Arabism which

is based on this theory. All of his later works were either repetitions of, or explication on, the main ideas in this first work. In the beginning of Chapter 1 of his *Complete Works*, Arsuzi states: "The Arabic language has a derivational structure. All of its words originate in audio-visual forms, which are directly copied from nature."⁹

Some of these words, such as *tarra* (the sound of falling water), *faqqa* (the sound of boiling water), *khashasha* (the sound of dry grass), and *zamma*, are derived from the sounds of external nature. We will illustrate what Arsuzi means by summarizing his analysis of one of these words, *tarra*.¹⁰ *Tarra*, according to Arsuzi, is a sound form which is the resonance of the sound of the intermittent falling of water: "tar. . . tar. . . tar. . . tar." In the Arabic language, this sound form and the image of falling water becomes the basis for a host of other words, which are modified to express a variety of meanings, but which are penetrated by the original visual-sound form of falling water. Here are some of these derivations:

tarra al-athm = "the bone was cut off and fell"

tarata = "he released his body and speech"

taraka, tirkah = describes the egg shell, left behind after the chick leaves.

Many other similar verbs are mentioned

A whole class of other words are derived from *tarra*, by replacing the consonant "t" with a sister dental consonant "d", "th", "t", etc., or by replacing "r" with "l." A variety of meanings are expressed in this way, while the original image is maintained. Here are some of these:

darra = "to flow profusely," as in *darra al-halib*,

"the milk flowed profusely"

darida = "his teeth fell out of his mouth"

Or, by replacing "t" with "th"

thartharra = "he talked too much"

The above will suffice to illustrate Arsuzi's point, although he gives many more examples of derivation of *tarra* and other verbs. Those among the readers who have studied Arabic will understand Arsuzi very well. Arsuzi provides an explanation of *ishtiqaq*, the ability of Arabic to derive its lexicon from a number of basic roots which are highly evocative of concrete, natural sounds and images.

We will not repeat all the verbs which Arsuzi lists. One, however, is particularly poignant. "Faqq" is the sound made when, during the boiling of water, air bubbles burst. As happens so often in Arabic, according to Arsuzi, this basic natural sound and its associated image underlie the meanings of words

as diverse as *faqasa* (hatching of the chick), *faqira* (to become poor), or the abstract *faqiha* (to fathom the inner meaning of something).

In addition to external natural sounds and images, another source of words in Arabic is the natural sounds of the body's emotions and its rhythmic movements. According to Arsuzi, sounds such as "ann", "an", etc., are natural expressions of human emotions, such as pain and loathing. Words such as *anna* (I), *anta* (you), *ahl* (family), *hanna* (to weep), and *hana* (contentment), betray their origins in these echoes in consciousness or rhythmic, natural bodily movements to form the roots of many Arabic words. Thus:

In addition to the basic modes making original words and their derivatives, the Arab consciousness discovered the original processes which underlies these modes. These processes can help us discover the nature of those methods. Certain sounds accompany the movement of the mouth muscles, and indicate the actions performed by this movement. These are expressed with words that have a rhythmic structure, like *qadda*, *batta*, etc.¹¹

By prefixing or suffixing to this root letters which are appropriate to the meaning yearning to become clear, a variety of Arabic words are born, such as *daba* (to cut), *qadda* (to pierce), *qaddara* (to divide, distribute), etc.

The natural expressiveness of Arabic applies not only to the vocabulary of Arabic, but also to its grammar.¹² The grammatical function of the vowels coheres with the physical motion of the body which accompanies the utterance of the vowels. The vowel "u" is suffixed at the end of the present tense verb and the subject, as in *yashrabu* (he drinks; he is drinking). When the Arabic speaker utters the present tense, the lips are rounded and air is pressured outward, indicating continuous action. When the past tense is suffixed at the end with the vowel "a", as in *shariba* (he drank), the tongue rests on the lower palate, indicating a completed, static state of affairs.

The sound which every letter in Arabic makes is given a literal, natural meaning by Arsuzi. For example, the letter "gh," which is a deep guttural sound (similar to the one made when one gargles), is used in words whose core meaning is the image of "sinking inwards": *ghaba* (he was absent), *ghasa* (he became submerged), *ghamid* (obscure), etc..

The above detailed exegesis is necessary if we are to understand the basis of Arsuzi's metaphysics. This is not an exegesis of the entire text. Arsuzi analyses a good portion of Arabic grammar in addition to what was presented above: the "Arabic word in its family," "singular and plural," "verb forms and their significance," etc.. However, since this illustrates the same principle and takes us too deep into Arabic linguistics, we will not dwell on it.

ARSUZI'S METAPHYSICAL INTERPRETATION OF ARABIC LINGUISTICS

Arsuzi gives more examples which illustrate the harmony between the sounds of Arabic words and the natural movements and sounds of the body. Then he writes:

It is evident from the above examples that the Arabic word consists of a form. This form comprises a becoming (its own transformations into sound sensations), and a creation, which is the basis of the harmony between these sensations. This form is the stamp of meaning, as it is projected unto space, thereby making it (the meaning) transparent through its parts and compositions. And it (the form) assists, through the directions of its growth, the meaning to actualize itself and to flourish. The Arabic word thereby becomes a word with a tendency (functional and dynamic). It is similar to the biological cell. The cell contains life and expresses, through the inclinations of its growth, the living being's point of view in these inclinations in such a way that they invite the sap of life to flow in them. Similarly, the compositions of the Arabic language, which results from the inseparability and harmony between vocabulary, syntax, and phoneme, are sloping surfaces upon which the idea of the nation (*al-umma*) manifests itself.¹³

As with any metaphysical thinker, and Arsuzi was endowed with a strong mystical streak, one can only go so far in explaining his vision and extricating those elements in it which make it at least plausible. Arabic, according to Arsuzi, is not symbolic, but a resonance of natural sounds and images, which cause the Arabic speaker to be an instrument of nature.

Here Arsuzi synthesizes the Platonic idea with an idea he borrows from Bergson. Living matter, according to Bergson, is endowed with a certain force (*élan vital*), which moves it in the direction of hierarchical development in man and human consciousness. As was described before, man according to Bergson can have knowledge of inner workings of this life force. However, this knowledge is acquitted through *intuition*, and is inexpressible through language.

Arabic, because it resonates with the sounds and images of nature and flows with the rhythms of the body, can express these intuitions. Were we to stop here, however, we would omit what is, from the point of view of the development of Arab nationalism, the most important aspect of Arsuzi's thought.

This aspect consists of how he uses the results of his analysis of Arabic linguistics to support a cosmic, metaphysical vision of the Arab nation. According to this vision, Arabic words are intuitions which reveal glimpses of the divine design and the meaning of life to Arab consciousness. One cannot

really understand Arsuzi or the Ba'th without assuming some kind of metaphysical or supernatural force which works its way in the Arabs' mind, individually and collectively, impelling it to strive for an ideal, to achieve a great purpose. The fact that Arabic words are not symbols, but determinants of their own meaning, signifies a divine plan which created the Arabic language and its speakers for a predestined purpose:

The inclined surfaces of Arabic thus spare future generations the efforts of the ancestors who created them, and spares them (i.e. future generations) fruitless efforts. Thus, the individual can resume the building of his personality by relying on this heritage, adding his own innovations, and ascending to his goal. This trait, the trait of eternity (i.e. emanation and growth, the emanation of appearances from the principle of life, and conjointness and harmony of these appearances), is a trait of the Arab mentality and a trait of the institutions which crystallize this mentality. The Arab self then sparkles and glows when its underlying inclinations and the institution which express them agree. . . . Thus the Arab self is endowed with an effluence which fulfills the goal of life: "heroism."¹⁴

According to Arsuzi, these original, primordial impulses led to the appearance upon the historical stage of the Arab nation during a period known as *Jahilliyya*, the pre-Islamic Period. The *Jahilliyya* Age was not, as described by the subsequent Islamic period, an age of ignorance. Rather, as the term indicates, it was a period of spontaneous expressions of the primordial characteristic inherent in the idea of the Arab nation. This is the period when Arab culture formed naturally and spontaneously, a continuation of the underlying primordial, mystical-organic life force.

It is clear from the above why Arsuzi held this period to be of importance in the formation of the Arab nationalist character. For, the Arab culture and race was at its purest during this period. Thus, for a cultural purist like Arsuzi, the *Jahilliyya* period constituted the ideal environment for Arabs to develop individually and socially, unencumbered by external, cultural influences. Certainly during the *Jahilliyya* stage the Arabs were homogeneous and insular. They roamed mainly within the Arabian Peninsula, and had not yet made significant contact with the peoples and cultures outside it. Because of this cohesiveness and purity, the Arabs were able to develop their national character. One cannot emphasize enough the fact that, for Arsuzi, historical reality is a manifestation of a deeper, underlying reality. This deeper reality consists of metaphysical-biological forces which manifest themselves among homogeneous Arabs. This manifestation led to the *Jahilliyya* being the Golden Age of Arabic poetry, and later, to prophecy. The message revealed to the Arabs through their language drove the message of Islam to humanity. This subsequently led to

Islamic conquests and the establishment of Arab-Islamic civilizations in many parts of the globe.

The very spread of the Arabs and their mixture with other cultures led to their decline. The Arabs conquered many peoples of diverse races, languages, and cultures (Persians, Greeks, Copts, etc.). These are the peoples Arsuzi calls "the others", or *al-aghyar*. With time these peoples embraced Islam, and assimilated to Arab society. However, they brought into it also their own cultural, linguistic, and racial influences. These influences eroded Arab racial homogeneity and linguistic purity, which in Arsuzi's view are necessary for the originality and continued vitality of Arab culture. As a consequence, medieval Arab civilization declined, as the foreign element dominated politics and life in the cities, and the Arabs were marginalized and withdrew to the countryside.

Of critical importance, from the point of view of later problems in the political development of the Ba'th, is Arsuzi's conception of social institutions. Like everything else with Arsuzi, these institutions are evinced by Arabic words. Crucial among these institutions is the institution of leadership, that is to say, what determines who leads society and how is legitimacy conferred by society on its leadership? Again, for Arsuzi, language is the source. The word *nabi* is made up of the sound "nnn," a deep, highly subjective sound, and by "bi," a sound made when the lips part. The word *nabi* means "prophet." The same with the word *nabigha*, which means "prodigy." This word has the added sound of "gh," the guttural sound evoking the obscure and the unknown. The prophet or the prodigy has the charismatic quality necessary for leadership, because he has fluency with the language. Moreover, he has this fluency not by virtue of learning or individual skills only. Rather, he is inspired by supernatural forces, chosen, if you will, to reveal the Arab idea to his people. That is to say, he is messenger. It is easy to see how this concept of leadership establishes mystical and ambiguous criteria for choosing and legitimizing leadership. When the Ba'th became a political party, it inherited this concept of the divinely inspired leader.

EVALUATION AND CRITIQUE

When I first discovered the writing of Arsuzi, I was amazed that this figure, important in several ways for an understanding of modern Arab nationalism, was largely unknown. In Arsuzi, we find an original, philosophical view which inspired the Ba'th (Arab Regeneration), the most important and genuine modern Arab nationalist movement. As we show above, for Arsuzi, Arabism is essentially a metaphysical view of the world, a view which he supports and illuminates by an analysis of Arabic linguistics. This view laid the foundation of Arab nationalism and determined the course it took for the last fifty years. While this sense of uniqueness of mission is a universal phenomena of modern nationalism in its early stage, it is clear that unless this nationalism transcends this particularistic stage, it does not develop into mature nationalist thought. That is to say, unless it is integrated into the universal constituents of

the modern nation, it becomes a sterile, restrictive ideology whose only use is the justification of repressive and dictatorial regimes.

Arsuzi's theory of Arabic and how it colors the Arab national consciousness is original and interesting. The onomatopoeic quality of the Arabic roots lends Arabic a concrete texture and rhythm, which enables it to be highly expressive, qualities which justify the uniqueness of Arabic and the distinct cultural identity of its speakers. However, these facts about Arabic do not justify Arsuzi's metaphysics. The essence of this metaphysics seems to be that the roots and structure of Arabic are primordial units of predetermined meaning, which reveal this meaning in the same way that the biological cell contains the design of the living being dormant within it. This genetic pool of original meaning came down, presumably all at once through divine intervention, and embedded itself in the roots of Arabic culture, with all that it entails of values and outlooks and institutions, determined by this original pool of meaning. It was this primordial revelation which gave the Arabs the creative outburst of energy during the *Jahilliyya* and the Islamic Period, impelling them to carry their mission to the world and create Arab, medieval civilization. As long as they remained true to their linguistic inheritance, and since this was also biologically determined, to their genetic inheritance, they continued to flourish. As we mentioned above, however, their integration with other peoples and languages cut them off from their source of creativity. The Arabic language, too, degenerated, as speech became dictated by tradition and foreign vocabulary penetrated it, thereby creating the colloquial dialects.

For Arabs, the road to regeneration is, therefore, to return to the source: the Arabic language as it originally was. Modern Arabs should purify their language by going back to the language of their ancestors. They should drop foreign influence from its vocabulary, educate their children to speak it as per the original grammar, and conduct "etymological study" of its vocabulary. Such etymological study, according to Arsuzi, will lead to the roots of Arabic words, and how they are connected together, thereby revealing the intuitions of Arab culture. These intuitions would become the basis and the guide for Arab regeneration in the Modern Age.

One needs to be at least familiar with the structure of Arabic in order to truly appreciate Arsuzi's analysis here. The following example will suffice. We analyze the intuition embedded in the word *sa'adah* ("happiness"). According to Arsuzi, the root of *sa'adah* is the verb *sa'a* ("to go after a goal"). *Sa'a* is uttered beginning with and sustaining the "sss" sound, a sound generated by an outward flow beginning with the tip of the tongue pushing air outwards through the teeth. The Arabic speaker then utters an intensified "ayn", a deep guttural sound indicating inner want, followed by the long vowel "aaa." The implication is that happiness is attained through the individual's striving to achieve something. However, another verb *sa'ada* ("to help or assist"), is derivatively related to *sa'adah*, the implication being that happiness is not totally an individual effort, but also depends on helping, or being helped by other members of the community.¹⁵ In a similar vein the words for "pleasure", "pain",

“joy”, and “sadness” can be analyzed. Such etymological derivation of words can provide insights of a general nature for Arabs, both as individuals and as a society, in their quest to form their modern society. Arsuzi, however, did not seem to realize the limitations of this method for generating ideas which can encompass the imperatives of the modern world’s culture.

It is not hard to see that this view, pushed to its metaphysical limit, can lead to what may be called linguistic determinism. That is to say, the view that language, words which have been formed in form and content at some point in the past, determine how a people think and act, how they develop concepts and institutions and their values. However, neither in this article nor in any of his other writings does Arsuzi’s “etymological analysis” succeed in yielding specific concepts or specific institutions that can form the basis for a regenerated Arab society. All he could achieve, following this method, were a few vague insights.

One should not be surprised that this was the case. Arsuzi’s contempt for history caused him to labor under two false assumptions: that the Arabic language was unchanging, and that language creates reality, rather than reflecting and expressing it. His very achievement, which was to found modern Arab nationalism on the basis of distinct identity and uniqueness of origin, becomes, when carried to extreme, a confining cocoon of an immutable core stored in the Arabic language. This core was unaffected by historical events prior to its genesis, nor by succeeding periods of history since this genesis. He further shrinks this cocoon by insisting on the total autonomy of Arab culture in relation to other cultures, even in modern times.

Arsuzi’s claim that Arabic is a pure essence which has survived untainted by history is a myth. Like all languages, Arabic has changed, and so did the culture which it purportedly determined. The history of these changes is no less than the history of the people who spoke and still speak it. Arabic did not remain an immutable abstraction, but changed with the demands and needs of every age which Arab society passed through. The *Jahilliyya* Age was an age of poets and warriors, and Arabic reflected this spirit. Then came the austere and otherworldly Islam, and Arabic expressed this new world view. Then came the period of assimilation, during which the Arabs adopted the Greek philosophical and scientific heritage and Arabized it. During this period, Arabic became a language of translation, sometimes even transliteration, of foreign ideas, concepts, and theories. To express this scientific and philosophical corpus, Arabic had to invent specialized and technical terms. The point I am making, which is rather obvious, is that in Arabic, or any other language, words do not have a predetermined literal meaning. In addition to this residual core of the word, meaning is determined by the need to express something new, by the translator’s imagination, and by the context of its text.

During the modern period, which is usually referred to as the Arab *Nahda* (“Renaissance”), the same process of assimilation took place. Arsuzi admits that Arab society fell behind the West, and admits that in the area of science and technology the Arabs need to learn from the West, in order to catch up with its level of material civilization. However, he makes an absolute

distinction between culture and civilization. Arab culture, which includes values and social and political institutions, must remain pure, and must not borrow from other cultures. The idea that a society can become scientific and industrial without changing its cultural values is highly questionable. It is equally questionable whether there is any society in the modern world that can maintain a pure culture. Let us take a few examples from contemporary Arab culture, such as the word *hurriyya* ("freedom"). According to Arsuzi, the word derives from the root *harara*, which denotes purity of constitution (as in "pure metal," like gold or silver), on the one hand, and the meaning of "heat" (free men are said to be "hot-headed" when they are coerced or insulted) on the other.

This meaning of *hurriyya* falls far short of conveying its full meaning as it is used in modern Arabic. During the anti-colonial struggle which ended in the 1950s, it signified independence from foreign rule. Since most Arab states achieved independence, however, the Arab people's experience with nationalist governments has been dismal. It was, and still is, an experience of repressed political life under the rule of dictators and juntas. Freedom, or *hurriyya*, now therefore denotes the right of the individual human being to self-expression for protection of self and opinion, and to have a choice in those who govern. This definition of freedom is not Arab, but universal, a meaning which crystallized from the experiences of many cultures in the modern world (i.e. the *Magna Carta*, the *Declaration of the Universal Rights of Man* during the French Revolution, the *American Bill of Rights*, etc.). Only a vague residue of meaning from the original root remains in *hurriyya*. The full meaning is determined by the Arab people's aspirations, by the context of the times, etc.

Another word, which is probably the most commonly occurring word in Arab political discussion nowadays, is "democracy." This frequent usage of the term in contemporary Arab society underlies the feeling shared by many Arabs that they need to democratize this political system. Clearly the word *dimuqratiyah* has no Arabic root. But, because of a need for the concept and the process described by this term, Arab society borrowed this concept and the term which names it. This is because Arab society's need for democracy is great, regardless of where the idea of democracy and the term originated. In this case, the language reflects reality, and the opposite is not true.

CONCLUSION

The above critique notwithstanding, Arsuzi's philosophical contribution to the early history of the Ba'th movement is important, and its neglect until now has robbed Middle Eastern scholarships of knowledge from a dimension that illuminates the origins of the Ba'th movement. This added dimension which Arsuzi contributes is best described by the word "depth." Arsuzi does not accept as axiomatic that the Arabic language defines the Arab spirit and therefore the Arab nation. Rather, he attempts to discover why this is so. To answer this question he sets out to explain the derivational structure of the Arabic language,

commonly known as *ishtiqaq*, the fact that most words in the Arabic lexicon derive from roots that have concrete meaning.

Unlike other derived languages, Arabic for Arsuzi is an original language. Unlike the derived language, where words are mere symbols, words in the original language carry intrinsic meaning. The roots of Arabic, he believed, correspond to the images and sounds of nature, and the movements and primordial emotions of the human body. Arabic grammatical structure and the rules which govern derived Arabic words, according to Arsuzi, seem to be also in congruence with the natural order.

One need not accept Arsuzi's metaphysical theory of the origins of Arabic in order for one to see the value of his achievement. His theory provides an insightful epistemological explanation for the capability of Arabic to grow and change while remaining the same. Arabic in this sense was already in the advanced stages of a process of regeneration when Arsuzi wrote his work. Yaroslav Stetkyvetch, in his important work *The Modern Arabic Literary Language*, shows how modern Arabic evolved out of classical Arabic by relying mostly on its own derivational power.¹⁶ Arsuzi is the first philosopher in modern times to attempt an epistemological analysis of this unique generative quality of Arabic.

As I stated in the beginning of this article, this work is intended only as an introduction to the work of Zaki al-Arsuzi. I have attempted, in this short article, to present and explain his main line of thought, and why it is important. This exposure will hopefully stimulate further study in the West, not only of the actual works of Arsuzi, which remain largely neglected, but also of the myriad questions raised by his seminal thought. Further study of Arsuzi's work may be guided by a general outline based on our preliminary conclusion from this. As I indicated before, this essay is not meant to compare Arsuzi to Aflaq. Nevertheless, compared to the vague generalities of Aflaq's ideas on the origin of the Ba'th, Arsuzi's philosophical theory is more specific and methodical. According to the editors of his collected works, Arsuzi summarized to them his philosophy in this way:

The Arabs have a comprehensive philosophy inside their language, a philosophy not expressed until now by any other thinker in a complete fashion; the reason for this is that none of them realized that the way leading to an Arab philosophy must be based on understanding the system of the Arabic language. Because of its unique power of expression, Arabic can form for every one of the universal, existential truths, a form which renders it faithfully. He considers that the establishing of this philosophy has two important results: one is to provide correct foundations for the idea of the Ba'th, and secondly, such philosophy would enable the Arabs to participate seriously and decisively in forming the heritage of humanity. For, while the Western, Greek mind tends toward

discovering the system of nature, the Arab, Semitic mind is inclined toward ideal, spiritual truth. These two minds must complement each other.¹⁷

Since Arab philosophy derives from the structure of the Arabic language, Arsuzi's theory should be studied from the point of view of Arabic linguistics, particularly theoretical linguistics. Arsuzi's theory, namely, that the structure of Arabic determines how the native speaker of Arabic thinks and that Arabic expresses our underlying world view, finds support in the controversial theories of Benjamin Whorf, who posited that the grammar of any given language determines how the native speaker of that language thinks about, perceives, and analyzes his environment.¹⁸ Arsuzi's theory of Arabic linguistics needs to undergo the scrutiny of scientific linguistics, in order to distinguish the true from the purely metaphysical in his Arabic linguistics.

The significance of Arsuzi's thought for the development of modern Arab culture and for Arab nationalism needs to be treated on a different plane. Arsuzi's theory of the regeneration of an original Arab identity based on language, indeed the whole idea of the *Ba'th*, must be placed in perspective. A definition of national identity based exclusively on an essence deriving from the Arabic language is a definition which will ultimately lead national development to an impasse. Equally troubling is Arsuzi's bifurcation of mankind into two main world views: one Greco-Western and one Semitic-Arab. This view is un-historical as well as incomplete, for it leaves out other cultures such as the Chinese or Indian. A philosophy of self-generation is necessary for national identity. However, Arsuzi's view of Arabic culture is too one-dimensional. Arabic does not have a monopoly on spiritual truths, nor do the Western languages have a monopoly on knowledge of the science of nature. Arab culture needs both in order to develop in the modern world. Arsuzi's view does not preclude this possibility. For the Arabs' linguistic heritage, according to him, need not become a straight jacket. Such heritage can be ". . . the inclined surfaces . . ." on which the modern Arab ". . . individual can resume the building of his personality by relying on this heritage, adding his own innovations, and ascending to his goal."¹⁹

NOTES

1. The idea of *ba'th* (regeneration), was a dominant idea in the Arab World of the 1950's and 1960s. The idea took political expression in *Hizb al-Ba'th al-Arabi al-Ishraqi*, the party which led the Arab nationalist movement during this period.

2. In his paper *Arab Nationalism: A Bibliographic Essay*, Elie Chalala devotes two sentences to Zaki al Arsuzi, calling him ". . . one of the lesser known

founders of the Ba'ath Party. . . ." See Tawfic E. Farah ed., *Pan-Arabism and Arab Nationalism: The Continuing Debate*. (Westview Press, 1987). On the other hand, the author gives considerable coverage to Aflaq in the same essay.

3. Al-Arsuzi, Zaki. *The Complete Works of Zaki Al-Arsuzi (al-Mu'alahafat al-Kamila)*, Damascus, 1978, vol. I. See the editor's introduction. Throughout this essay all translations from the Arabic were done by the author of this article.

4. For a thorough discussion of the history of this idea see Shafer, Boyd, *Faces of Nationalism*, (New York, 1972). For a study of the influence of German nationalist thinkers on Arab nationalist thought see Tibi, Bassam, *Arab Nationalism: A Critical Enquiry*, (New York, 1981), pp. 100-110.

5. Arsuzi, *Works*, vol. I p. 222.

6. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 222.

7. Plato's epistemology, generally known as the "theory of ideas," is elaborated in the *Republic*, *Parmenides*, and other dialogues. Throughout history, there have been two main schools of philosophy. One, which begins with Plato, holds that true knowledge is perceived by the inborn faculty of the mind. In the Seventeenth Century, this theory resurfaced in Descartes and Leibniz and has become known as "rationalism." Rationalism remains a strong philosophical school today. The school of empiricism, founded by Locke and Hume, takes an opposing view and holds that all ideas are constructed slowly by sense perceptions, or, in other words, all knowledge is learned.

8. Bergson, Henri. *Creative Evolution*, (New York, 1944).

9. Arsuzi, *Works*, vol. I, p. 71.

10. The following discussion is based on pages 71-72 in vol. I of *Works*.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 85-89.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

16. Stetkyvetch, Yaroslav. *The Modern Arabic Literary Language*. (Chicago, 1970).

17. Arsuzi, *Works*, vol. I, p. 32.

18. Carroll, John B., ed. *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. (New York, 1956).

19. See above, p. 10.