

# Malba Tahan, The Most Famous Arab Brazil Never Had

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Júlio César de Mello Souza (1895-1974), better known as Malba Tahan and author of *The Man Who Counted: A Collection of Mathematical Adventures*, was one of the great diffusers of Arab Culture in Brazil.

He wrote over 50 books under his pseudonym—later incorporated to his identity card under the authorization of former President Getúlio Vargas—and created an innovative technique for teaching mathematics using the involving narrative of oriental tales.

His most famous book, *O homem que calculava* (*The Man Who Counted*) initially published in 1938, is on its 63rd edition and still remains on the bestseller list in Brazil.

Since the first half of the 20th century, several generations of Brazilian youths have been introduced to Arab culture though the most Arab of the "cariocas," (natives of the city of Rio de Janeiro), math teacher Júlio César de Mello e Souza, better known as Malba Tahan.

*The Man Who Counted*, which brings adventures in typical Arab geographical scenarios together with charming solutions to algebra and arithmetic problems, is published by the Brazilian publishing house Record.

In all, Júlio César / Malba Tahan wrote 103 books, including fiction, textbooks and scientific books, and sold over 2.6 million copies.

Mathematician Júlio César de Mello e Souza fell in love with Arab culture as a child, reading "The Thousand and One Nights."

It was in 1919, at 23 years of age, however, that he delved into studies of Arab language and culture.

Between 1919 and 1925, he dedicated himself to reading the Talmud and the Koran, and to learning the history and geography of the Arab countries.

Such an enterprise becomes evident in the way he developed his characters, the sensitivity with which he weaved his dialogues filled with poetry and wisdom; in the verisimilitude of the scenery described.

Children and adults alike become completely involved in the way the author presents how sumptuous a hall is, or the seduction of a tent filled with turbans, jewels or luscious fabric.

A great storyteller, had he been born in Cairo or Constantinople in another time, Júlio César might have been considered a true cheik el-medah.

In the presentation of the Brazilian translation of "The Thousand and One Nights," by publishing house Ediouro, he states:

"Legend is the most delicate expression of popular literature. Man, on the attractive rout of tales and stories, tries to escape the daily vulgarity, embellishing life with a dreamed spirituality."

In a statement recorded at the Image and Sound Museum in Rio de Janeiro, professor Mello e Souza stated that he chose to write fables and legends as an Arab as no people has ever surpassed the Arabs in the art of telling stories and in the passion in hearing them.

## Newspaper Debut

Malba Tahan was presented to the public in Rio de Janeiro in 1925, in newspaper *A Noite*, where he wrote a fictitious biography supposedly translated by a fictitious translator, Breno Alencar Bianco.

Both the writer and the translator are fruit of the prodigious creativity of Júlio César, who gave them life and literary production in a column entitled "Tales of Malba Tahan".

Fictitious character Ali Lezid Izz Eduim Salim Hark Malba Tahan was born in 1885, in the city of Muzalit, close to Mecca, having become, at a young age, mayor of El Medina.

Rich, having inherited money from his father, Tahan travelled various countries including Russia, India, and Japan. In the "biography," it is also said that Tahan died in 1921, in the fight for liberation of a tribe in Central Arabia.

Almost all of the 50 books written under pseudonym Malba Tahan include sheikhs, Bedouins, and caliphs, and they take place in the desert, in hostels, and palaces in Damascus, Baghdad, or in Persian villages.

Their books narrate tasty adventures, full of magic—many of them are inspired on Arab legends and tales—and many references to typical terms and expressions, such as: Allahu Abkar! (Allah is the Greatest!) and on the traditional teachings of the Arab culture.

It is almost an incorrect statement to say that Malba Tahan is a pseudonym used by Júlio César de Mello e Souza.

First of all, because Júlio César called himself Malba Tahan, as did his students at school Pedro II and at the Institute for Education, and he even stamped his name in Arabic characters, showing that he had read papers by his students.

Secondly, because popularity of the name was so great that former Brazilian president Getúlio Vargas authorised Júlio César to add the name to his identity card.

Thirdly, because his literary publications and his ideas regarding education and science in general, and especially mathematics, are internationally referred to Malba Tahan.

All you have to do is quickly research the Internet to see the importance given to Malba Tahan and to his bestseller "The Man Who Counted," mentioned in various sites in various languages, including Greek, German, and Dutch.

## Admired by Famous Authors

*The Man Who Counted*, published for the first time in 1938, has already been translated to over 12 languages, including English, in both the United States and England, Spanish, Italian, French, and Catalan.

It received awards by the Brazilian Academy of Letters and brought him admiration from imaginative and popular authors including Brazilian Monteiro Lobato (very famous for children's books) and Argentine Jorge Luís Borges—the latter a lover of Arab tales.

The book tells the adventures of Beremiz Samir, a man with great ability with calculations. Beremiz solved problems and complicated situations of all styles with great talent, simplicity, and precision of any nature, with the use of mathematics. Júlio César was born on May 6, 1895, in the city of Rio de Janeiro, and died in the Northeastern state of Pernambuco on June 18, 1974, where he was giving one of his many and greatly requested talks.

He left important registration of his life and works: his book of memoirs called *Acordaram-me de Madrugada* (They Woke Me Up in the Wee Hours), and his recorded statement at the Image and Sound Museum (MIS), in Rio de Janeiro.

Before he died, he asked to be buried without much ado, flowers, or crowns, like a simple person from the Middle East. So as to justify his desire for no mourning in his honor, he cited verses by famous Brazilian composer Noel Rosa: "Black clothes are vanity / for those who dress fancily / my mourning is sorrow / and sorrow has no color."

Andréa Estevão

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