SCRIPT: Have a Seat - The Life of a Chair
Amira Mahmoud
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Lead In:
This documentary is the result of almost two months of work to track down the manufacturing process of the wooden Egyptian ahwa chair, and the analytic reflections on this unique process. The purpose of this documentary is to realize that we take almost everything for granted, and therefore try to notice things and simply be grateful.

Let’s start off with a bit of a riddle …When it has four legs, it must be a masterpiece. When it has six legs, it must be invisible. It is something that we increasingly use, yet, ironically, increasingly take for granted.

00:01 MUSIC: FADE IN: Rak El Habib – Umm Kalthoum (0-31secs from the start of the song – UP AND UNDER)

Any thoughts?

00:12 MUSIC CROSS FADE: Zekriaty – AlQasabgy (28 seconds, then FADE OUT)

Aly Shams: Spider (:0.6)
Moustafa Nasha’t: Butterfly (:01)
Farah Tawfeek: Fridge (laughter) (:01)

Well, not quite. It is not a spider, not a butterfly, and definitely not a fridge!
This, ladies and gentlemen, is the story of a chair.

It all starts somewhere in the world, when a seed grows until it eventually becomes a tree. We’ve all heard about photosynthesis in primary school. How does a plant grow?

MUSIC: The Photosynthesis Song (FADE IN AT 0:08 [How a plant grows, it takes water, air and sunlight, and makes cellulose. Every plant can do this fundamental process, and we can call this photosynthesis], then 0:11 - 0:25, FADE OUT at 0:26 [last word heard is photosynthesis]) (:17)

And because we are so kind to this planet, we chop down millions of trees every year.

MUSIC: CROSS FADE: Zekriaty – AlQasabgy (52 seconds, then FADE OUT)

The question now becomes, what happens to tree cells when their water supply is cut? Biology student Lila Bazina at the American University in Cairo (AUC) helps clarify this.

LILA BAZINA "There’s no water anymore so the water leaks out of the cell that’s already inside to go to the outer membrane, so that means that the cell shrinks. If you cut it off from the water, of course it will completely die. Completely shrink." (:15)
So basically, billions of cells are starved to death, and entire forests relive the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Wait, it gets better – or worse. I spoke with Sameh Helmy, a carpenter who works at AUC.

SAMEH HELMY UP AND UNDER (:14)

*MUSIC: FADE IN Zekriaty – AlQasabgy (40 seconds, then FADE OUT)*

Helmy explains that wood from around the world is exported to Egypt. Since it is over 90% desert, no trees are actually grown in Egypt for manufacturing purposes. There used to be a chair factory, well, there actually still is a chair factory in the region of Imbaba, but it has been closed down for five years now.

SAMEH HELMY UNDER (:15)

So, back to Helmy, who has been a carpenter since primary school. He explains that the most expensive wood comes from the U.S. A one meter cube block can cost up to 12,000 L.E. That’s about 1,700 USD.

*MUSIC: CROSS FADE Rak El Habib (:29)*

The imported wood reaches heads directly to this place called Al Menasra. Being the main furniture manufacturing area in Cairo, it was actually named Menasra after the Caliph Mansour – in the 10th century! It has existed since the year 921 to be exact.

At least dozens of workshops are scattered around this place. I talked to Shehab, one of the many workers in this area. His workshop lies right around the corner, and is overwhelmingly crowded with scary tools.

*NAT SOUND: FADE IN Band Saw at ‘scary tools’*

Near the entrance there’s a 2 meter high band saw that cuts vertically through wood. And on the right there’s the miter saw with a blade the size of a pizza. To the left, there is a huge sanding machine. It whirls so fast that it can actually make you dizzy.

*NAT SOUND: CROSS FADE Miter saw at ‘miter saw’
NAT SOUND: CROSS FADE Sanding machine at ‘whirls’ then FADE OUT after ‘dizzy’ (:25)*

*SHEHAB FADE IN – UNDER (Arabic) (:23)*

He explains that the wood could be turned into almost any object.

*MUSIC: FADE IN Rak El Habib UNDER (:67)*

For the purposes of this documentary, the production of the wooden chair is our area of interest. It is found in almost every working class coffee shop, also called ahwa, in Egypt. The handmade wooden chair is also referred to as the shisha chair, because it is associated
with the shisha that people smoke in ahwas.

AUC philosophy Professor Graham Harman has been in Egypt for almost 20 years, and he has been in a lot of ahwas.

Graham Harman "I used to smoke shisha a lot. I like the taste of the shisha here and I also like the Ahwa experience, being part of the local culture and the way they just welcome me and let me come in and sit." (:10)

Ramy Aly, an anthropology professor at AUC, spent his early years in London. Just out of curiosity, how does the shisha cafe differ between Cairo and London?

MUSIC: FADE IN THE LIONS OF CAIRO – UP AND UNDER (:78)

Ramy Aly "The interesting thing is that although you have all the paraphernalia of the shisha cafe; you have the shisha, and the various, uhm, mabsam and all the other things that come with the shisha, you don't necessarily have the wooden chairs that you have here. So, in a sense, what I am trying to say is that the shisha made it over to London, but the wooden chair that we associate with shisha didn't make it over to London. Both of those things are part of the material culture of the - of Egypt, let's say or of urban Egypt, uhm, and other Arab capitals as well." (:36)

I've never really thought about it before this project, but what is the importance of a chair?

RA "The chair itself is a way of elevating the person. It's almost like there's a status difference between sitting on the chair and sitting on the floor." (:11)

And more specifically, what is the significance of the very unique order in which the table and chairs are placed in ahwas.

RA "The chair is, you know, in a shisha cafe, is placed around the small metal table on the outside of the shisha cafe up against the wall so that the person who is sitting on the chair views the street, right? And so, in a sense, what we're saying is that, the chair in this sense is a vantage point upon which people perceive or gaze upon, you know, what's going on around them, or arrange themselves socially." (:29)

MUSIC: FADE IN Rak El Habib UNDER (:42)

As these anthropological perspectives sink in, let's go back to the physical manufacturing process of the chair.
I have talked to a lot of people involved in the manufacturing process.

Helmy: FADE IN (:08)
Shehab: CROSS FADE (:07)
Mohamed: CROSS FADE then FADE OUT (:06)

They have provided me with great insights.

MUSIC: FADE IN Zekriaty – AlQasabgy (71 seconds, then FADE OUT)
Now I can comfortably tell you that once the wooden logs are cut in respect to the proportions of the chair, the wood is then glued together using either nails or actual glue - in this case both. After that, the wood is perfectly sanded.

We know that chairs have four legs, but they have backs and seats too and the seat of an awha chair has it’s own character.

RA “What I find most interesting about them are the things that are stamped into them, to be honest with you, that’s what I find interesting, that people stamp into them not only designs, but all kind, you know, their names, you know, there are all kinds of ways of embellishing, you know, or personalizing these chairs that takes place.” (:20)

This is why I talked to Mohamed, a painter who has been in this workshop for longer than he can remember!

Mohamed UP AND UNDER (Arabic) (:09) then FADE OUT

He told me that the secret to perfecting chairs is in a cigarette, a cup of tea, and the soothing voice of Umm Kalthoum.

Rak El Habib 38 sec FADE IN, UP at [an’am aleh belwesa] FADE OUT at audience clap

Now, the wood has been completely transformed into a chair. Its wooden legs are beautifully cylindrical. Its seat has most of the decorative elements, while the back is made of a large piece of wood bowing out, as if embracing the person sitting on the chair.

There are thousands of working class ahwas scattered all over Cairo, let alone Egypt. And it’s honestly almost ridiculous to keep count of them. In a population of over 90 million people,

MUSIC: FADE IN Zekriaty – AlQasabgy (19 seconds, then FADE OUT)

how many people sit on these chairs and actually reflect on them? I think the more logical question would be how many people take these chairs for granted?

Graham Harman discusses this issue from a philosophical perspective.

GH “The philosopher Heidegger, who is possibly the most important philosopher in the 20th century, his whole philosophy is based on this idea, that we take things for granted. Phenomenology before him, but Heidegger said no, usually we take things for granted. The amount of stuff we pay conscious attention to is very small compared to the things we take for granted. That’s what he noticed. And he claimed that we only notice things that break or fail.” (:29)

Regarding the future of these chairs, I leave you with the words of Ramy Aly.

RA “You never know, it may be the case that in a generation or two, or in some years, the idea of the quintessential shisha cafe with wooden chairs and small metal tables
makes a comeback amongst middle classes, and suddenly, there’s a huge thirst for those kinds of things in the same way that we go to antique shops today to buy records from the past that we will never play, for example.” (:34)

Next time someone offers you a seat, think about how many trees and metal blades, how many cells, and how many Umm Kalthoum songs were involved in the process. We use almost everything more, yet, ironically, take everything even more for granted. Perhaps we can realize that we have the ability to notice things before they break or fail.

MUSIC: FADE IN Zekriaty – AlQasabgy, UP AND UNDER (32 seconds, then FADE OUT)

This documentary was produced by Amira Mahmoud for JRMC 4460 Audio Production in Fall 2014. Special thanks to AUC professors Ramy Aly and Graham Harman, biology student Lila Bazina, as well the manufacturers and carpenters for their interviews. Music used included “Zekriaty” by Mohamed El Qasabgy, “Rak El Habib” by Umm Kalthoum, and “The Photosynthesis Song.” Music was borrowed from Soundcloud, Jamendo, and the Lions of Cairo performance at AUC. Nat sounds were collected by me.

Interviewees:

Graham Harman –Professor, Philosophy Department
Ramy Aly – Assistant Professor, Postdoctoral Fellow, Anthropology Department
Lila Bazina - Biology major
Shehab Attia - Carpenter
Mohamed Ahmed - Painter
Mohamed El Boq - Ahwa owner

Music:

Soundcloud: by Mohamed El Qasabgy
Jamendo: From Rajasthan to Andalusia by German Shepherd
Live performance: The Lions of Cairo