SCRIPT: “Life, Bread and Gold: The Story of an Egyptian Street Food Vendor”
Sarah El Safty
May 17, 2015

LEAD IN

By just taking a stroll around the streets of Cairo, you’ll find both tales of hardship and joy in every corner. This documentary unveils a true gem buried in the heart of Cairo. It tells the story of a woman who has abandoned her unstable corporate job to start her own business: a street food cart. We’ll get to know about the food, the struggle, the dream and the life of the street.

Yacoub (Y): I come here a lot. I would say every week since... more than ten years. [6s]

This is Yacoub. A non-Egyptian who’s been eating from his local street food vendor “Um Dahab” all these years.

Y: It’s a great place. Great Food and Dahab is...uh... fantastic. It’s like home. [6s]

Dahab is the owner of “Um Dahab” and she’s a bit of a celebrity in her street. Her food is great but people always come for something more.

Y: She’s fun. Always Joking. Knows everybody. It’s a live place. It’s not like a restaurant where you only come to eat and you know...this...uh... No, it’s something more. It’s...uh... It’s a part of real life Cairo. [15s]

MUSIC: Tarabband- Baghdad Choby [RT: 00:00:42-00:01:26] fade in under narration and sound bites.

How can I explain real life Cairo to someone who’s never been there? It breaks through and reinvents everyone’s identity and food isn’t excluded. The story of street food is one of poverty, struggle and enterprise. But most importantly...

Clara: You can feel that here food is made with love and that what make really the difference. [5s]

NATSOUND: sound of customer ordering food from a street vendor [RT: 00:01:05-00:01:11] fade in and out.

Matteo: I can eat Molokhiya, Bamia, Fasolya and Sabanakh. [6s]
Tahrir Square. Situated in the heart of Cairo and it is where the world witnessed one of the greatest revolutions in human history.

But if you walk around the square, take one of the side streets and then take your first right. You’ll find an extremely narrow alleyway. And at the end of the alleyway, you’ll find a single food cart.

You’ll find another revolution. A personal one. A revolution fought against dire circumstances. Against social and economic constraints. Against a sense of unimportance. This was revolution that produced one of Egypt’s finest resources. Gold.

Dahab (D): My name is Dahab. [1s]

In Arabic it means gold.

D: Actually Manal Mostafa Mahmoud Ghareeb... is my real name but Dahab is my street name. [7s]

She graduated from the foreign trade department at Helwan University and worked in public relations for two years. But she found that her lack of connections made her job highly unstable and she needed a secure source of income to make ends meet. So she started her own business,
which she always refers to as her “small project”, in order to take care of her responsibilities, including an ageing mother.

D: *I refused that my mother work in any any place. This is my principle.* [6s]

She decided to open a street food cart selling homemade Egyptian food.

D: *In Egypt, people don’t stop eating or drinking.* [4s]

But the job did not come naturally to her.

D: *I can’t to catch...I can’t to catch knife.* [4s]

She couldn’t even use a knife.

D: *I can’t catch... to cook rice, to cook chicken.* [6s]

But she eventually figured it out.

D: *I cook rice; I cook vegetable; I cook Macaroni; I cook chicken...uh... and I cook Mahshy.* [9s]

*Mahshy* is one of the most popular dishes in Egypt and it’s basically vegetables stuffed with rice.

Dahab also makes other traditional dishes like *Molokhiya*, a type of green soup, and *Sakalans* which is a sandwich of a mixture of honey, whipped cream and jam.

D: *I want to say that I make a lot of all the work alone, without any person... to help me.* [7s]

Despite her popularity, Dahab doesn’t see herself working in the street forever.

D: *I don’t want to make this business bigger because... it’s...it’s not my dream. I only started this so I can buy for things and I am patient with this work so I could continue and follow my dreams of working in the media.* [21s]

But that does not mean there is no good out of her job.

D: *I am sure my God stand with me; put me in the street to learn me how to deal with people. Different people. This matter help me in the future.* [18s]

But now, after 14 years in the job. Dahab has become much more than a mere food seller.
D: They love the character. They love the feeling. They love the dealing. They consider me…they consider me that I part of family. [12s]

Her feisty personality adds to the warmth of the place. She playfully snaps back at her customers just the way your mother would if you complain that the food is late.

*MUSIC: Ben Howard- Conrad cross fade out with next natsound.*

*NATSOUND: sound of Dahab jokingly arguing with customer [RT: 00:04:42-00:04:51] cross fade in with end of music and cross fade out with next natsound.*

*NATSOUND: ambience from Dahab’s street food cart [RT: 00:04:50-00:05:59] cross fade in with previous natsound.*

Of course, working in the streets of Egypt as a woman is no easy task. This is a country where the streets are male dominated and most women stay at home dependent on them. You would expect her to have experienced sexual harassment but in her case it was rare. She says that the street now has become like home to her.

D: Because I deal the person who come for my small project as my friend as my father as my sister as my grandmother. [9s]

But I also wonder why in a society so dependent on men, she didn’t take the easy way out and just get married.

*NATSOUND: part of previous natsound where Egyptian singer Abdelhalim Hafez sings on the radio playing at her street food cart [RT: 00:05:24-00:05:26] amplify then de-amplify at the beginning of the next sound bite.*

D: I don’t.I don’t get married now because I have a lot of responsibility. My first responsibility is my mother. After that I think about for my marriage. Okay. But the problem I want the person who I married him, he…he understand my hard work and he has to appreciate me. [33s]

*NATSOUND: part of previous natsound where Dahab sing along with Abdelhalim Hafez song [RT: 00:05:59-00:06:02] amplify then fade out.*

But of course, she’ll naturally have guys flirting with her every now and then.
NATSOUND: sound of Dahab jokingly shouting at a man flirting with her. (Translation: Dahab: “Karim, I have a very important, amazing, fantastic interview with the media right now. There is no room for flirting. Please, get out of my life.” Karim: “I’m not coming here to flirt, I swear.”) [RT: 00:06:05-00:06:15] amplify between narrations then fade out.

And she’ll definitely give you a hard time for it.

MUSIC: Gustavo Santaolalla - Lago Frias [RT: 00:06:16-00:07:20] fade in under narration and sound bites.

There is no doubt that Dahab’s place is special. But not everyone in Egypt is as accepting of street food. She tells a story of a guy who loved her food so much that he had to bring his friends the second time around.

D: I saw one girl in this group say for him “Oh my God. Don’t think about we can eat here.” [14s]

MUSIC: Gustavo Santaolalla - Lago Frias [RT: 00:06:44-00:06:47] amplify and then de-amplify between sound bites.

D: In this moment, I leave all my work and focused... for... faced for this girl. I can’t to put my food on the table for this girl. Because this girl haven’t any respectation for me and for my small project. [27s]

MUSIC: Gustavo Santaolalla-Lago Frias [RT: 00:07:13-00:07:20] amplify and then fade out.

It’s true there is a certain stigma against street food in Egypt. I asked some of my colleagues whether they eat food from the street and this is what they had to say.

Menna Ayad (MA): No [0.6s]

Ahmed Abo El Magd (AA): No, I don’t. [1s]

Rana Younes (RY): No, No, usually not. [1s]

Nora Abdeen (NA): No. [4s]

And why not?

MA: Because I think its not clean. [2s]
AA: Because of the hygiene. I am not so sure about what’s in the food. Just out of being safe, I just don’t. [6s]

RY: I think it’s because…it’s you know… it’s contaminated. [4s]

NA: I think that it’s dirty. [2s]

This stigma comes from certain classes here in Egypt. Sociology professor Malak Roushdy explains.

Malak Roushdy (MR): When you talk about residential areas and upper-middle classes, they see them as something that pollutes the environment. I mean…of course when you have a food cart there is food around it people socialize and so on and it disturbs so usually residential areas don’t like to see street food vendors or for that matter any street vendor. [24s]

MUSIC: Angham- Ana Aysha Hala [RT: 00:08:08-00:09:24] fade in from under previous sound bite and amplify after end of previous sound bite until start of narration.

People like Dahab work tirelessly just to provide for their families. She has her own dreams of working in the media but she knows it won’t bring food to the table.

D: My mother is all my love, is all my life. [6s]

MUSIC: Angham- Ana Aysha Hala amplify [RT: 00:08:30-00:08:34] amplify between end of previous sound bite and start of narration.

And to give her that life she deserves. It is no coincidence that she found her answer in food.

Over the years, Egyptians have proven how much food means to their existence.

In 1977, the bread riots saw scores of people killed after the state ended its subsidies of basic foods.


Decades later, people took to the streets again in what is sometimes dubbed as the “Revolution of the Hungry.”

“Bread, freedom and social justice”. The slogan of the 2011 revolution saw people protesting against the fact that bread has been moving further out of reach.

[Pause 2 seconds]

And here’s a fact. If you go anywhere in the Middle East, bread is called Khobz. But in Egypt it’s called Aysh. It means life.

MUSIC: Angham-Ana Aysha Hala [RT: 00:09:16-00:09:23] amplify then slowly fade out.

This audio documentary was produced by Sarah El Safty for the audio production course at the American University in Cairo taught by Professor Kim Fox in Spring 2015. Special thanks to Manal Ghareeb, Malak Roushdy and Yacoub for their interviews. Music credits are Baghdad Choby by Tarabband, Conrad by Ben Howard and Ana Aysha Hala by Angham. Nat sounds were collected by me and from Youtube.com.
Interviews:

Manal Ghareeb (aka Dahab): An Egyptian street food vendor.
Malak Roushdy: Sociology Professor at the American University in Cairo (AUC).
Yacoub: A loyal customer of Dahab’s.
Matteo: Italian customer of Dahab’s.
Clara: Italian customer of Dahab’s.
Menna Ayad: Computer Science Junior at AUC.
Ahmed Abo El Magd: Integrated Marketing and Communications Senior at AUC.
Rana Younes: Multimedia Journalism Senior at AUC.
Nora Abdeen: Marketing Senior at AUC.

Music:

Baghdad Choby by Tarabband.
Conrad by Ben Howard.
Ana Aysha Hala (Instrumental) by Angham.

Nat Sounds:

All collected by me except: “Bread, Freedom, Social Justice” by Jamie Allinson from youtube.com