



the Hollings Center
for international dialogue

Small Grantee Feature

Bridging the Gap between Oral History and Documentary Filmmaking in the Middle East

Sawt, meaning “voice” in Arabic, is an oral narrative and animation documentary project highlighting the experiences of female activists in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution and their role in the nation’s dramatic transition to democracy. **Rhana Natour** and **Tamara Shogaolu**, documentary filmmakers and researchers living in New York and Los Angeles respectively are co-directing the project. Anticipating the difficulties of convincing Egyptian women to appear on camera, they decided to use a simple recorder and collect women’s stories in their own voices as the revolution was taking place in Egypt in early 2011. For the visual dimension of their documentary, they worked with animation artists to create unique storyboards with animated characters.

Natour and Shogaolu took part in Hollings Center’s dialogue [Oral History in the Middle East and Central Asia](#) in February 2012, and were inspired to explore further the ties and tensions between oral history and documentary filmmaking. They won a small grant to go back to the field and returned to Egypt in June 2012 to conduct follow-up interviews in the wake of the presidential election. Their project also included hosting a two-day workshop that brought together oral historians, filmmakers, activists and scholars to exchange ideas on important issues in the documentary film and oral history disciplines. With a specific focus on the Middle East, a select group of filmmakers, activists and scholars shared experiences, discussed innovative uses of digital technology, best practices in oral history, creative distribution methods and the challenges of archiving new media and digital content.



Rhana Natour, Tamara Shogaolu (producers) and Nada El-Kouny (production coordinator). Photo by Iluminda Armas.

Sanem Güner talked to **Natour** and **Shogaolu** to learn more about their experience in organizing an oral history workshop and interviewing women at a historical moment in Egypt's history.



Egyptian historians and filmmakers talk about similarities and differences between documentaries and oral history. Photo by Iluminda Armas.

Güner: Could you give us some impressions from the workshop? What were you able to take away on bridging the gap between documentary filmmaking and oral history?

Shogaolu: The workshop allowed participants to see how they can truly be a resource to one another. Oral histories are not only for research purposes. Filmmakers and artists can also incorporate oral histories into their creative work. Documentaries can help oral historians to take their research beyond the archives. It was also interesting to observe the

differences between the Istanbul dialogue on Oral History in the Middle East and Central Asia and our workshop. In Istanbul there was a lot of emphasis on academia in oral history and academic methodology, whereas at our workshop participants were more interested in how to use multimedia in oral history and their respective film projects.

Natour: We were very happy with the workshop because it gave filmmakers an opportunity to meet archivists and historians, and we saw that at the end of the workshop, these filmmakers had realized the importance of archives. For instance, the University on the Square project archives footage from the Revolution, which is an immense resource for documentarians. Oral historians and filmmakers are both interested in storytelling and preservation. Of course the medium and execution vary but by focusing on this shared foundation the workshop was able to draw out areas of potential collaboration and share best practices and technological tools in each field that we hope will ultimately enrich participants' work and bridge the gap.

Güner: Why is oral history important in the Arab Spring context?

Shogaolu: In countries that are dictatorships with lots of media control, what is on the record may not reflect a complete picture, let alone an accurate account of what transpired. The voices of the people should color in and present an alternative to official history. We learn history through documents in archives, but there is no way for official, written history to incorporate people's stories in these documents. Oral history is thus important because it gives voice to the actors of a certain historical event or period.

Natour: The events of the past year in the Arab world are incredible. Yet we must think ahead and take steps to preserve these experiences for future generations. Oral narratives will help us remember how things were seen at the time much more accurately than official records. These are important times, but in the digital age things move so fast that we need to start this process now as this information may be forgotten, taken down or irretrievable. This is a narrow window of opportunity to collect people's narratives and oral history is an important part of this historical record.



Shogaolu discusses the role of oral history in the construction of identity. Photo by Iluminda Armas.

Güner: Your project focuses on women's experiences. What women stories were you able to collect?

Shogaolu: Unfortunately what we heard were mostly depressing stories. There is a sharp rise in harassment of women, especially in public places. We interviewed a veiled woman who participated in an anti-harassment protest, and was almost raped, got beaten up and got her clothes stripped off of her. There is equal harassment to everyone regardless of what they wear. It strikes me that stories of foreign women getting assaulted get the highlight in international press. There is no clear understanding that Egyptian women have to deal with this every day.

Natour: The rule of law has broken down since the revolution and this makes things more difficult for women disproportionately. From what many people told us in the interviews, there is harassment in or around Tahrir Square and the attacks follow an eerily similar pattern, regardless of the women's profile.

The woman may be very conservatively dressed, or in more Western style, may be a local or foreigner. It always happens in the same way - a mob of men crowds around the woman, cuts contact with the people around her in a coordinated way and attacks and often brings other women into this circle.

Shogaolu: I believe this is a tactic to push women out of the political sphere. In Zamalek, a more liberal and higher-end neighborhood in Cairo, we sensed that the energy changed the day after Morsi got elected. There were cases of verbal assault at several points, targeting women who were dressed in short-sleeve shirts. People thought, “now we have Morsi as president” and they felt enabled to act in ways they weren’t able to before. This is not a religiously conservative reflex; it’s actually a class reflex. Poor people claim extreme conservatism; they feel like they are going against the bourgeoisie by reacting to certain lifestyles and reacting to women’s presence in public spaces.

Natour: We interviewed a few voters at a voting station in Zamalek, a Shafik stronghold. A female voter I spoke with, who was a devout Muslim, voted for Shafik because she saw the Brotherhood as a threat to her personal religious freedom. Other voters saw a Shafik victory as a foregone conclusion.

Güner: Finally, could you tell the readers about the atmosphere in Cairo in the wake of the presidential election and afterwards?

Shogaolu: When we were interviewing in Cairo last year a few months after the revolution, we felt that the city had a hopeful energy. People had a sense of being finally free. This summer we felt like people wanted to get back to their normal lives. Even after the Constitutional Court ruling to dissolve the Parliament on June 14, people were more disillusioned than angry. The atmosphere of despair was easily noticeable.



Natour: There were happy moments too though. We were in Egypt a few weeks before the election and everyone thought that Ahmed Shafik was going to win. People were jubilant that Mohammed Morsi got elected despite the interests and desires of the military and the old power structure. We must remember that he represents a political movement that had been oppressed and banned for many decades under multiple rulers. In that respect it is a huge victory for him and the Muslim Brotherhood, but it really is the victory of the people’s will. That is why you saw people from all walks of life celebrating in Tahrir with their families after the results were announced.

Shogaolu: We have to thank the Hollings Center for allowing us to have a once in a lifetime experience! We are still processing everything that we experienced such as seeing posters change on the streets overnight, the rumors about Mubarak’s health, and little things like these.

Natour: The nuances of experiencing the election visually and emotionally will help us incorporate a more realistic atmosphere into our film, *Sawt*.