



# Treasure Amidst Trash: Preserving Community in the World's Largest Garbage City

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*This city has three social classes, the upper class, the middle class, and then there is the nothing class. That's us – the Zabaleen.*

*– Adham, Garbage Dreams*

The smell of burning plastic chokes me; I stop breathing and waver side to side for a few moments before continuing to stumble my way forward. Is it rude to cover my nose at someone's work and livelihood? *Garbage Dreams*,<sup>1</sup> the documentary I had seen countless times before, is now three-dimensional; a full reality. Egypt's boiling hot sun beats down on my head while the putrid smell of animal feces, rotting garbage, and burning plastic seeps into my taste buds. The sight of bustling people, goats and donkeys, and unfinished towering brick buildings makes me dizzy. I am smack in the center of Garbage City: Manshiett Nasser, in Cairo. Home to the world's largest community of informal garbage collectors: the Zabaleen.

The Zabaleen, Arabic for "Garbage People," are a Coptic Christian community, constituting six informal settlements on Cairo's periphery. The largest of these settlements, Manshiett Nasser, consists of more than 45,000 people.<sup>2</sup>

Garbage collection is a familiar concept in both the first and the third world. Living on the bottom floor of a dorm my sophomore year of college, I daily heard the collection and compression of waste. But the distinction between the licensed garbage collectors who made a ruckus outside my window on the Brandeis campus each morning and informal garbage collectors such as the Zabaleen is how the collectors perceive the waste they collect. According to the scholar Daniel T. Sicular, who studied waste management in West Java, Indonesia, there are two types of garbage collectors: those who "treat waste as *waste* and are employed to perform the service of removing and disposing it, and those who treat waste essentially as an *ore*: a source from which valuable

materials can be extracted."<sup>3</sup> The Zabaleen, according to Sicular, are the latter. They are scavengers, who pay for the right to collect waste in order to reuse and redistribute it.

The Zabaleen are the largest group of informal garbage collectors in the world. But such scavenger communities exist in many other megacities, including the Muslim minority in Kolkata, India; the Roma gypsies in Romania; and the Bangladeshis and members of the Muslim minority in Delhi.<sup>4</sup> Besides seeing waste as a resource, these scavenger communities share other distinct commonalities. Most notably, the occupation at once necessitates and bestows low status.<sup>5</sup> The Zabaleen scavengers are a marginalized and low status community in Egypt for two distinct but undeniably interconnected reasons: their livelihood and their religion. I learned about both of these factors firsthand.

3. Daniel T. Sicular, *Scavengers, Recyclers, and Solutions for Solid Waste Management in Indonesia*, (Berkeley: International and Area Studies, 1992), 17-18.

4. Anne Scheinberg and Justine Anschutz, "Slim pickin's: Supporting waste pickers in the ecological modernization of urban waste management," *International Journal of Technology Management and Sustainable Development*, Volume 5 Number 3, 2006. P263.

5. Sicular 23.

1. I spent the summer of 2009 working for the director of *Garbage Dreams*, a documentary film that follows the lives of three boys from the Manshiett Nasser settlement of the Zabaleen.

2. There are 120,000 Zabaleen dispersed throughout these six settlements. The Manshiett Nasser Settlement has doubled in size over the past 20 years.

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In the summer of 2010, I worked at the Spirit of Youth Association, a small NGO that tries to reconcile this marginalization and empower the Zabaleen community through youth education and social aid. While working for the Spirit of Youth Association, I helped launch a Bill and Melinda Gates grant-funded project, *Improving the Livelihoods of Garbage Collectors in Cairo through Organizing, Institutionalizing and Upgrading the Traditional Waste Sector*, which sought to preserve the community's livelihood as it becomes threatened by the implementation of foreign waste management companies in Cairo.

Why is the Zabaleen's livelihood and community worth saving? What is so important about preserving this community? Walking down Naim Guindy Street in Manshiet Nasser,<sup>6</sup> I observe that everyone seems to know each other. There is a sense of deep connection, of mutual responsibility. How can this be? What binds this community together? A host of factors explain the dynamics of the Zabaleen community. Here, I explore two: the role of the Coptic Church and the function of development programs in the Manshiet Nasser settlement. Both the church and the development programs provide a necessary linkage within the community in relation to the tension that exists with the majority Muslim population and the government that is trying to "clean up" and modernize the city. I will show how religious and economic discrimination simultaneously marginalize and reinforce the community dynamic. The social role of the Zabaleen is both a source of prejudice and of strength. It is within this duality that new development projects are paving the way for the Zabaleen's next generation.

### Prejudice and Strength in "Garbage City"

*The authorities perceive the Zabaleen as "old fashioned." But they didn't come tell us "You need to modernize your ways." It was all done behind our backs. So what now? This work is all we know.*

– Laila, community social worker, *Garbage Dreams*

The Zabaleen community began its migration from the Assuit Governorate in Upper Egypt<sup>7</sup> to Cairo throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While in Assuit, the Coptic community worked as farm hands and pig breeders. To find more lucrative work, they migrated to Cairo, bringing their practice of pig breeding with them. Their religion and practice in agriculture in the Assuit Governorate made them the perfect group to adopt the practice of garbage collection in Cairo: their pigs could consume the organic waste collected. The use of pigs to consume organic waste was extremely effective. When

6. Main street in the Manshiet Nasser Zabaleen settlement

7. "Upper Egypt" is actually south because the Nile River flows from south to north – northern Egypt is considered "Lower Egypt" because it is the end of the Nile and vice versa

feeding the organic waste to their pigs, the Zabaleen were able to recycle up to 80 percent of what they collected.

But in the spring of 2009 the Egyptian government decided to kill all of the country's 300,000 pigs as a precaution for the impending swine flu epidemic. The *New York Times* reported that, "International agencies quickly criticized the authorities, saying that pigs were not spreading the illness." But the Egyptian government proceeded to round up and massacre the pigs, disposing of them in mass garbage dumps outside the city. The government eventually conceded that the massacre of the pigs was not solely a response to a possible swine flu outbreak, but more an effort to "clean up" the Zabaleen, "to finally get them to live in sanitary conditions."<sup>8</sup>

The actions taken by the government resulted in a loss of livelihood for the Zabaleen community as well as a loss of identity. In a majority Muslim state where eating pork is *haram* (forbidden) the Zabaleen's pigs set them apart as non-Muslim, a defining element they take pride in. Although the community fears what the government will do next, that fear keeps the Zabaleen close together in mutual aid when threatened by the government.

The extreme marginalization of the Coptic community is a relatively recent phenomenon. Egypt is more than 90 percent Muslim and less than 10 percent Coptic Christian.<sup>9</sup> Coptic Christianity existed in Egypt centuries before the spread of Islam. Only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has the Coptic Christian community been severely marginalized, as Islamic law and practice have taken hold.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, "Islamist influence was on the increase," and violence and propaganda against the Copts increased dramatically. Ironically, this was not helped by the Arab Nationalism of Abdul Nasser, who in 1961 further alienated non-Arab Copts by indirectly causing the loss of 75 percent of their work and property.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Nasser's redistribution of the Coptic communities' agrarian land was one of the factors that forced more Upper Egyptian Copts into cities and into the practice of garbage collection in Cairo.

As more and more Coptic Egyptians migrated from Upper Egypt to Cairo in search of a better livelihood in trash collection, Zabaleen settlements were frequently and forcefully relocated and split into new areas of Cairo as the city expanded and developed throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

8. Michael Slackman, "Cleaning Up Cairo, but Taking a Livelihood," *The New York Times*, May 24, 2009.

9. Imad Boles, "The Disappearing Christians of the Middle East." *The Middle East Quarterly* Winter 2001 Volume VIII: Number 1, pp23-29 <<http://www.meforum.org/23/egypt-persecution>> Estimates about 6 million out 64 million Egyptians to be Coptic Christian.

10. Up until the 20th century, Copts lived with *dhimmi* status under Islamic law where they lived in coexistence but paid a tax.

11. Imad Boles.

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Today, the Zabaleen communities are separated into six different settlements, each focusing on the collection of waste in a certain area of Cairo.

Manshiett Nasser, the largest settlement, is framed by the Mokattam Hills. Carved into these stone hills are the seven chapels of the Saint Samaan Monastery, built in 1986. Unlike the other Zabaleen settlements, this religious site attracts a variety of tourists and Christian groups from Europe and the United States, while also providing the location of daily prayer each evening for the Zabaleen community.

Exposure provided by the Saint Samaan Monastery is one of the main reasons that most development projects and media coverage about the Zabaleen are focused on the Manshiett Nasser settlement. In fact, I first learned of the Zabaleen and the Spirit of Youth Association from *Garbage Dreams*, a documentary film that features three boys who attend the Recycling School, a project of the Spirit of Youth Association in Manshiett Nasser.

In the summer of 2009, I interned for the filmmaker of *Garbage Dreams*, Mai Iskander, as she began circulation of the film in film festivals throughout the United States and Europe. The film follows the three boys as they try to reconcile the difficulties the Zabaleen community face as the Egyptian government shifts the waste management system from the Zabaleen to European waste management companies. In the film a group of young Zabaleen men and women discuss how to deal with the loss of their livelihood. They decide to try to implement source separation, which involves convincing the people from whom they collect garbage to start separating their waste at the source to make it easier and more efficient for the Zabaleen to recycle.

Since *Garbage Dreams* was filmed between 2004 and 2008, source separation has become an even greater necessity – particularly following the pig culling in spring 2009. As a result of this draconian government measure, the Zabaleen lost half their income, and lost the ability to efficiently dispose of organic waste.<sup>12</sup>

The Bill and Melinda Gates grant seeks to solve the major waste collection issue in Cairo, while preserving and developing the Zabaleen community.<sup>13</sup> Arriving a month

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12. Michael Slackman, “Cleaning Up Cairo, but Taking a Livelihood,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 2009.<sup>13</sup>

The five objectives of the Gates project are as follows:

Integrate the Zabaleen into Cairo’s formal waste collection system  
Strengthen the capacity of the Zabaleen communities to represent their own interests

Increase the capacities of the Zabaleen community to engage in successful recycling business activities, particularly through SMEs and NGOs  
Achieving a city wide implementation of household waste source separation into two streams (organic and non-organic)  
Relocate Zabaleen recycling businesses to new industrial zones

after the project was launched, I observed and aided in its development. I accompanied and worked with 30 young people between the ages of 20 and 30 from the Manshiett Nasser Zabaleen settlement as they made presentations on source separation. We traveled around Cairo to clubs, stores, schools, and cultural centers to make these presentations. In addition to accompanying the source separation team to presentations, I helped coordinate *Garbage Dreams* screenings in Cairo, using the film as a tool to convey what the Gates grant is trying to accomplish.

I was particularly fortunate to work with the source separation team. Being close in age to those in the team, I was able to relate to them on a social and personal level. I was able to compare my life as a young American woman to theirs as young Egyptians. Through these interactions I got a sense of not just how they interact with me but how they interact with each other and how they perceive their identities within the Zabaleen community and Cairo as a whole.

## A “Baladi” Identity

*We’re like one big family. Everyone here knows everyone. We watch out for one another. I live here. I belong here. I’m exactly like a fish that can’t live without my sea.*

– Laila, *Garbage Dreams*

“Say Ba’ara Egypt, Ba’ara Egypt,” Ashraf insists as we sit down for our lunch break of *foul* and *ayeesh*.<sup>14</sup> I repeat in accordance with what he asks. The table of young men and women giggle as they dip their bread into the small metal bowls filled with *foul*. “We are from *Ubber* [Upper] Egypt,” Ashraf says, gesturing to the people sitting around the table. “You just said *Cow* Egypt.” The giggles continue. This is a typical joke they play on me while I work at the Spirit of Youth Association with the source separation team: needling me for my pronunciation of Arabic words. But this time I find it curious that they are mocking the name of the place where they are from.

Ashraf and the other young men and women at the table are part of the source separation team. These small jokes and other subtle signifiers are commonplace for the Zabaleen, who take subtle but active roles in defining themselves as different from the rest of the city of Cairo and its majority Muslim population. Many of the defining elements of their Upper Egyptian culture are preserved within this community. Upper Egyptians have deeper accents than Cairenes (people of Cairo). For example, when asking “What

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14. *Foul* is made from Egyptian fava beans and flat bread, similar to pita. Fava beans are filled with protein and sit like a brick in your stomach for most of the day. They fill a hungry Egyptian belly cheaply and for a long time.

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time is it?” in Arabic, a Cairene would say “*Sah Kam*,” while an Upper Egyptian would pronounce it “*Saw Kom*.” I found it difficult at first to discern the difference between these pronunciations. But whenever “*Saw Kom*?” slipped out of my mouth, the members of the source separation team would hoot with laughter and proclaim, “*Madeleine is Upper Egyptian!*”

Something as simple as their accent is a means by which the Zabaleen maintain their distinct cultural identity despite working and living in circumstances that are incredibly different from their origins. The ethnographer Farha Ghannam addresses similar idea when she refers to the importance of maintaining the *baladi* (“authentic and traditional”) culture of the “original Egyptians.” Although her study focuses on a relocated Muslim community in Cairo, the Zabaleen can also fit her paradigm, one that is a “strong relationship between identity and place of residence.”<sup>15</sup> For the Zabaleen this identity is rooted in where they come from: Upper Egypt. As noted earlier, the Zabaleen are separated into six different settlements throughout Cairo, dividing their Upper Egyptian *baladi* identity throughout the city. But they manage to maintain their own identities within their own community, despite being separated from other Upper Egyptian Copts.

Particularly for the Manshiet Nasser settlement, the Saint Samaan Monastery has provided a distinct locus for the Zabaleen community to root themselves. Despite repeated threats from the government to relocate and “clean up” the Zabaleen as the city continues to expand and modernize, the Saint Samaan Monastery, built for the Zabaleen, allows them to pinpoint a religious location that is purely their own. In her ethnography Ghannam states, “When ‘all that is solid melts into air’ being rooted in a particular place gains more significance and becomes central to the representation of the self and the formation of identities.”<sup>16</sup> The Zabaleen, although they are no longer in Upper Egypt, have maintained their identity through preserving their culture.

### Samaan the Savior

*As an altar boy, I'll feel that I'm changing. I'll feel it because I'm wearing something worthy.*

– Osama, *Garbage Dreams*

“Are you Christian or Muslim?” Moussa asks as we dodge around hordes of people going to evening prayer at Saint

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15. Farha Ghannam, “Remaking the Modern,” (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 79-80.

16. Ghannam 45.

Samaan Monastery.<sup>17</sup> I follow Moussa up the winding and littered road after work. Tired from squeezing around trucks filled with plastic yogurt cups and piles of cardboard paper, the question catches me off guard. “I’m not religious,” I respond uncomfortably. He stares back at me blankly. “You mean you don’t believe in anything?”

His question gives me pause. I stop to think about how I should respond. If there is one thing I have learned in my time in Cairo, it is that religion is of central importance to identity and community.

Growing up in New York City, religion played a binary role in my life. Throughout my childhood I trekked down the street to my mother’s synagogue twice a week for Hebrew School. Meanwhile, I celebrated Christmas and Easter with my father’s family. In social settings in the United States I rarely have to identify myself with either religious tradition, nor do I choose to. In contrast, mixing religious beliefs is unheard of in Egyptian society. In Egypt, identifying with a particular religion shapes how people relate to you. Still, I haven’t figured out how to explain my own religious background. So I turn to Moussa and simply respond, “No, I don’t believe in anything.”

Moussa looks at me like there is some kind of misunderstanding. Here in Egypt, the lines of religion are clearly marked. There is no room for mixing of religious worlds. But sometimes, religious differences are too difficult to explain. No place for my mixed family background.

Ironically, in Cairo, as in my upbringing, I straddle two religious worlds. I live in downtown Cairo<sup>18</sup> where the *adan* – the call to prayer – reverberates throughout the city five times a day. Lines of men in *galabiyas*<sup>19</sup> crowd inside the mosques that are scattered in crevices and alleyways of the dilapidated city streets. In my first days in Cairo, the thing that struck me most was how publicly pious people are, that when I would step onto the overcrowded women’s train car I was often the only woman not wearing a *hijab*.<sup>20</sup>

17. Saint Samaan Monastery was built in 1986 and consists of seven chapels carved into natural caves in the Mokattam Hills. It is located directly above the Zabaleen neighborhood.

18. Downtown Cairo is one of the oldest areas of the city, and is featured in famous literature and films

19. A loose fitting dress mainly worn by older men

20. Islamic head scarf worn by women

▼ “Are you Christian or Muslim?”  
Moussa asks as we dodge around hordes of people going to evening prayer at Saint Samaan Monastery.

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But the religious atmosphere I experience while working with the Zabaleen has a different quality from where I live in downtown Cairo; lanterns inscribed with the imprints of Coptic saints sway precariously off half-built buildings, while men and women chat on the street with small crosses tattooed to their inner wrists. In Manshiett Nasser the *adan* is muffled by the sound of church bells. Women's hair, often lightened by henna, is tied back in a loose bun or long braid. Similar to my experience, when one of these Coptic women steps onto a train car in downtown, her identity as non-Muslim stands out like a sore thumb. But within the confines of the Coptic community they have created in Manshiett Nasser, everyone knows and understands each other and everyone practices the same religious teachings.

Moussa and I duck under the archway marking the end of the dirt road of the Zabaleen neighborhood and the beginning of the newly paved road up to Saint Samaan Monastery; the crowd of people thickens. Moussa greets other young men he knows with a handshake and the customary kiss on each cheek. Turning to me he proclaims "All these boys are like my brothers." Meanwhile, a group of young girls hold hands, weaving around us to run into girl's church school, where two nuns are welcoming the girls one by one.

Saint Samaan Monastery feels like a haven after a day working in Garbage City. Although the pungent smell of rotting waste lingers, Saint Samaan Monastery is surprisingly well kept compared to the rundown and unfinished buildings that make up the Zabaleen neighborhood. Oddly pristine and intricate carvings of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus decorate the outside dome of the main church.

It would be an ordinary sight were it not for the words inscribed around the holy figures in both Arabic and English. Framing a carving of Saint Samaan the Tanner is a biblical quote: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest..."<sup>21</sup> I had visited the monastery a number of times before, but amidst the traffic of evening prayer, the purpose of the monastery took on a new level of importance. The area around the church reminds me of the park across the street from my apartment building in New York City. Men and women chat in groups about the day's endeavors. Two young boys play pick-up soccer in the open parking lot. Within the Zabaleen neighborhood, men sit in cramped side streets puffing on *shisha* pipes and women bustle about doing their chores. But the monastery provides a space for people to socialize freely a step outside the chaos of Garbage City, and feel less like outsiders amongst a majority Muslim population.

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21. Matthew 11:28

Moussa and I finally arrive at the main church. Outside, an assemblage of people accumulates into a semicircle. As we make our way toward the expanding group, I catch a glimpse of a man in a black robe and skullcap with a long grey beard. He holds a walking stick, and a long silver chain with a cross rests just above his rounded belly. A man kneels in front of him, kissing his hand. Moussa turns to me with wide eyes and says, "That's Father Samaan." His excitement catches me off guard. Religious leaders have never played important roles in my life. But Moussa seems to almost idolize this individual. Why is Father Samaan so important? Why do all these people surround him in such a way?

Father Samaan arrived at Mokkatam Hills in 1978, 10 years after the first Zabaleen were relocated to Manshiett Nasser. In a short documentary titled *Father Samaan and Garbage City* that features his work in the Zabaleen community, Father Samaan describes how "no one cared [about the Zabaleen] because they were doing a filthy task...the people were in need of the grace of Christ."<sup>22</sup> Father Samaan took on the mission of bringing religion to the Zabaleen. In 1986 Saint Samaan Monastery, honoring the Coptic Saint Samaan al-Kharaz, was built as a result of the efforts of Father Samaan. Father Samaan remains in the city as a head priest and administers many of the community's major decisions.

After greeting the crowd and nodding politely, Father Samaan returns to the inside of the church. The semi-circle breaks down as a number of people follow behind to proceed with the evening prayer; Moussa and I continue to the top of the hill where I can watch the crowds of people surrounding the monastery. At that moment, I am reminded of how strange it must be for Moussa to hear that I am not religious. For his community, it seems that philanthropic efforts through religion have helped solidify and settle the Zabaleen for the first time in over a century.

## A Settled Community

*When I was young there were no schools here, I had to study from home on my own. We teach them new ways of thinking so they can be empowered unlike their parents.*

– Laila (referencing the Recycling School), *Garbage Dreams*

Ezzat sits reclined and fixed in his chair, cigarette dangling flimsily between his fingers. The round table separating us is covered with a range of Egyptian-style foods – flat bread, baked and fried chicken, tahini, pickled vegetables and *molokhia*.<sup>23</sup> Surrounding us sit members of his family: his wife and mother on the master bed, his daughter animatedly

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22. Film: *Fr. Samaan and Garbage City*. A 10-minute YouTube documentary about his endeavors in Garbage City.

23. A slimy soup-like dish prepared with jute leaves and chicken broth



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sitting in a chair to the left of me, and the son and daughter of his first cousins sitting snugly on the couch beside me. They smile widely as I attempt to politely stuff my belly with the remainder of boiled chicken that sits dully on the metal plate in front of me. As I nod in recognition at the surrounding relatives, Ezzat takes notice of the staring crowd and nonchalantly comments, “We like to live as relatives around each other; as a close community.”

Smack in the center of the garbage collection settlement of Manshiet Nasser is the home of Mr. Ezzat Naim Guindy, the director and founder of the Spirit of Youth Association, where I sit one Sunday for lunch after work. As Ezzat and I chat about the founding and struggles of the organization, the floor vibrates from the buzz beneath us as boys shift chairs and chat in the Recycling School directly below us.

Ezzat, one of the first Zabaleen to receive a college degree, established the Recycling School in 2000, and the Spirit of Youth Association in March of 2004, mobilizing 35 young men and women of the garbage collectors community who wished to serve their community and families.<sup>24</sup> The Spirit of Youth Association has a mission to empower “the children and youths of the community to learn and earn and to improve their environment, as well as to strengthen their capacities to effectively advocate for their causes.”<sup>25</sup>

As we finish lunch that early evening, his family files in and out of the room, clearing the table of food. Between drags of a newly lit cigarette, Ezzat tells the story of how he began his own education. “My father wanted me to work as a garbage collector since an early age, to help collect and guard the donkey cart when we go to the city to collect garbage. But my mother insisted that I apply to governmental schools. My father was so mad that my mother applied for me to go to school. But by the end of the year I was studying so hard. By the time I was 14 years old I started to do his financial records – I was very clever in mathematics so I kept his financial situation working well. So that’s why he was so happy and let me continue my education.”<sup>26</sup>

Ezzat’s educational experience is very different from mine. My parents never fought over whether or not I could go to school. It was always expected that I would go to university. Despite the vast amount of money and support my parents have put into my education, I have yet to use the skills I have learned from my schooling to aid my parents’ livelihood – education has always been for my individual betterment. As

24. From the English translation of the Spirit of Youth Association website.  
25. “Arab Info Mall,” *The Arab Reform Forum*, <http://arabinformall.bibalex.org/En/OrgData.aspx?orgid=334&sectionid=3>

26. These conversations and interviews were conducted on both July 11<sup>th</sup>, when he invited me to dinner with his family before going to watch the World Cup Final at the Saint Samaan Monastery, and during a more formal session at his office on July 29<sup>th</sup>.

I finish my university education, I notice how increasingly different my parents interests and mine have become. In contrast, Ezzat’s mother’s persistence in a notoriously patriarchal society, and her foresight to facilitate and support the academic success of her son, have proven overwhelmingly beneficial for her family and the Zabaleen community as a whole.

It is safe to say that the Spirit of Youth Association represents a culmination of Ezzat’s academic and personal experiences as a child in the Garbage City. By having the opportunity to get a proper education, he was able to apply his work to help the family and community to which he felt devoted. Similarly, the Recycling School targets boys aged nine to 19 who have dropped out of government schools – or who never enrolled in schools at all – because their parents expect them to help with the collecting and sorting of waste.

The Recycling School is the only one of its kind in Egypt. Its intention is to empower the boys by teaching them skills that would contribute to the Zabaleen community as a whole.

The Recycling School curriculum is designed around empty brand name shampoo bottles recovered by the learners. The boys bring the plastic containers to the school and fill out a form showing how many bottles they have retrieved. Through this teaching style, the boys learn reading, writing, and numeracy, skills the boys need to help develop their family and community practices.<sup>27</sup>

This type of learning is called the Montessori Method of Education. Founded by Mariella Montessori in the early 1900’s, the method is described as an “aid to life” rather than a formal education. Presently, this type of education “prepares students to succeed in a world where technology is changing the way [they] live at a very rapid pace, and general life skills are far more valuable than mastery of an outdated academic curriculum.”<sup>28</sup>

27. From the English translation of the Spirit of Youth Association website.

28. “Montessori,” *The International Montessori Index*, <http://www.montessori.edu/homeschooling.html>

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Before I arrived in Egypt, my plan was to teach English at the Recycling School. While this is not a formal part of the Recycling School curriculum, English class has now become commonplace at the school. In the past few years the Zabaleen have received exposure to the outside world because of their status as a marginalized community that attracts both western Christian groups and environmental activists. It is not unusual to see tourists or church groups wandering around the neighborhood. Much like myself, many volunteers come to the Recycling School to try to “help out.” This often takes the form of teaching English. When I visited the school while working at the Spirit of Youth Association, it was common to see a young man or woman in loose fitting clothing sitting with a couple of young boys teaching art or English.

As a westerner who had also been “inspired” to come to the Recycling School, it was strange to see others doing the same. I often wondered what kind of long-term impact this exposure would have on the boys at the Recycling School.

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Unlike those of Ezzat’s generation, through volunteers like me these boys have been subject to unprecedented exposure from the outside world.

While most of these boys don’t end up learning much from their sporadic English lessons, some catch on quite quickly, and become very attached to their temporary English teachers. These types of experiences will challenge the next generation of Zabaleen.

In January 2010 Ezzat, a representative of an earlier generation, was named one of 22 Synergos Arab World Social Innovators. His education and his initiative to support and develop his community have sent him around the world. He travels to Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States attending conferences and networking. But Ezzat speaks nonchalantly of his successes. I ask him what he thinks of his experiences abroad. The table now cleared of food, he stubs his cigarette in the ashtray. Sighing briefly he responds: “Y’know, I’m going to London this coming Wednesday to make a presentation. They asked me if I wanted to extend

my trip for a few days, but *yani*<sup>29</sup> I told them I wanted to make the round trip in one day. I’m one of those who’s happiest when I’m home.”

## Generational Transitions

*I can only hope that with time comes change. Something needs to happen. I can’t keep living like this.*

– Adham, *Garbage Dreams*

“I’m moving out of my parents’ home,” Ashraf proclaims one afternoon, in between slides during a practice for the English source separation presentation. “They don’t want me to work for the Association.<sup>30</sup> They just want me to work in collecting the garbage.” This is unheard for a 22-year-old in this community, unless he is getting married. But Ashraf’s decision to leave his parents’ home to work solely for the Spirit of Youth Association represents a beginning of a distinct transition in the Zabaleen settlement.

Although the Zabaleen community has been brought closer together by the church and by marginalization by the Egyptian government, these influences have also precipitated an unprecedented transition in the lifestyles of the next generation of the Zabaleen. Through outside exposure from the building of the Saint Samaan Monastery and development projects like the Spirit of Youth Association, the Zabaleen no longer live their lives as an insular Coptic Christian community of scavengers. Young individuals involved in NGOs are constantly exposed to the outside world, leaving them thirsty for more. Unlike Ezzat’s generation, which continues to find the most comfort within their own community, those of the next generation, such as Ashraf and Adham, will change the face and culture of the Manshiett Nasser settlement.

What I have learned of this community pertains primarily to the life of its young men. The Recycling School is an all-boys school. Although some Spirit of Youth Association projects are directed towards women, my relationships with these women were limited and insubstantial. Due to my own difficulties with the Arabic language I communicated mainly with young people who went to the Recycling School and who had the linguistic knowledge to interact freely with foreigners, and these were mostly men.

Various projects and NGOs support young women in the Manshiett Nasser settlement. Most prominently, the Association for the Protection of the Environment funds a young women’s income-generating craft school, where

29. A vocalized pause denoting “like,” very commonly used in colloquial Egyptian speech.

31. “The Association refers to the Spirit of Youth Association.”

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women “learn and earn” through making recycled paper and fabrics.<sup>31</sup> Their voices in relation to the next generation are essential to an understanding of how the Zabaleen community is developing and changing.

Since my return to the United States, the Bill and Melinda Gates grant has faced a number of obstacles from both inside and outside the community. Within the community, Father Samaan has taken a stance against the grant, proclaiming that the Spirit of Youth Association has stolen all the money from the community. On top of this, the government has discouraged and even threatened the Spirit of Youth Association from pursuing the project any further. Without support from the church, the Zabaleen will never support the changes proposed by the grant. Furthermore, without support from the government, the Zabaleen will never be completely integrated into the formal waste management system. The persistent resistance to change from both within and outside the community could lead to the eventual demise of the Zabaleen as a whole.

But perhaps hope lies in the next generation. Through effective development projects such as the Recycling School, young men and women from within the community are learning how to simultaneously maintain cultural identity and develop their community in a way that will, hopefully, withstand opposition.

My experience with the Zabaleen community was always full of adventure. Whether trooping around Cairo making presentations with the source separation team or sitting at countless dinners of boiled chicken, tahini and *molokhia*, I am forever grateful to the Zabaleen of the Spirit of Youth Association for accepting me, at least temporarily, as a member of their community.

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32. Wael Salah Fahmi and Keith Sutton, “Cairo’s Zabaleen Garbage Recyclers: Multi-Nationals Takeover and State Relocation Plans” (University of Helwan and University of Manchester, 2005).