



# Life History Report

A MODERN DAY EGYPTIAN MAN

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Ancient Egypt and the Great Pyramids of Giza, as well as the long history of such a geographically interesting region have always fascinated me. Situated in the northeastern corner of the African continent, Egypt's north coastline is the south side of the Mediterranean Sea while Egypt's east coastline is the Red Sea with the Suez Canal connecting both major bodies of water. The Egyptian culture has thrived for over 2,000 years, rich in religion, language, traditions, Mediterranean-style food and the mixing together of peoples as they migrate into and out of the country. To me, the Egyptian culture is so vastly different from my own that my curiosity runs as deep as the Nile River is long. The uprising of political activism in the north of Africa, known well around the world as the 'Arab Spring' has only added to my wanting to understand what it is like to be a modern day Egyptian.

This semester, serendipity stepped into my life in the form of a fellow classmate here at Salt Lake Community College. Mohammed Elsayed is an articulate, funny, open-minded, and easy-going Egyptian of the Muslim faith. He left his hometown, Fayoum, about 100 km southwest of Cairo and near one of the oldest salt lakes in the world, Lake Qarun, to come to Salt Lake City to study Aviation. Based on his familial class and overall lack of privilege, he would never have had the opportunity to pursue his chosen career path back home, in Fayoum. Mohammed and I have been corresponding over email the last couple of weeks, checking in to see how we are both getting on with our classes this semester.

Mohammed, who also goes by the nickname "Moe," came to the United States from Egypt in 2010 just prior to the beginning of the Egyptian revolution. From what

one sees in the media about young Muslim men, Mohammed struck me as quite different. He appeared to be very open, honest, liberal and free with his thoughts. I am actually very excited to have the opportunity to get to know him better through my interview and perhaps build a friendship. That said, Mohammed was not my first choice because I assumed that another classmate had already snagged an interview with him. I first met a man named Godo at my place of work who is a Peruvian-American with his full naturalization. Upon speaking with him briefly, he appeared to have more opportunities than the average American and so I decided that I should not interview him for this report. My second option for an interviewee was a young man from Kuwait who is taking ESL classes from my neighbor at the University of Utah. However, when I mentioned him to Mohammed, I learned that Kuwait is *such* an “oil rich” country that they very regularly send their young men to university abroad on the government’s dime. When I pre-interviewed Ahman, he confirmed that he was from a very prominent tribe in Kuwait, and that when (if ever) he needed something, he was able to get it through connections. For this reason, I felt that he was not the right choice either. Alas, Mohammed became the subject of this life history report, and we spent about 90 minutes in a face-to-face interview followed by some texts and emails to gain further clarification and understanding. The interview itself was fun, mostly comfortable, free of awkwardness and political correctness (per a request by Mohammed), and quite an eye-opening experience since I have never done an interview like this before. As I stated previously, I felt mostly comfortable except for a couple of times where I felt fairly ignorant and found myself trying to identify with him and his experiences which later I realized was unfair.

I think because I knew very little about modern day Egypt and Mohammed going into this interview, I was able to keep myself free of most assumptions and stereotypes. I learned that in Fayoum (and Egypt in general) they are not a racist society---meaning that they do not see different shades of skin color, but rather privilege and the intentional lack of privilege instead, which is exhibited in a class system. In Fayoum, there is no middle class. There is only the wealthy upper class and the poor lower class, but some people cling to the idea, mostly those that have government jobs, that they are the middle class, even though they are not. The line drawn between the two classes is thick, and it is extremely hard, if possible at all, to get out of the lower class.

Quite different from the social norm in Egypt, I discovered that although they are not divorced, Mohammed's parents live in separate homes. His father has his own farm and owns his own house (which makes him rich), while contributing zero financial support to his wife and children. Mohammed, his sister and mother lived with their maternal grandmother, and both siblings were primarily raised by her as well. It is pretty normal for children to be reared by their grandmothers while their moms go to work, since day care is nonexistent in Egypt. Even though his grandmother was musical and had played a drum, the Doumbek or dorbouka, Mohammed's father did not want him wasting his time on music or the arts. Ironically, considering Mohammed's political views, his mom has always worked for the law enforcement branch of government, performing clerical duties. The only time that he lived with his father, was also by far one of the most fascinating parts of Mohammed's early childhood. His father moved them to their neighboring country, Libya, where they still speak Arabic, but in different dialects. Not only was he a young boy in a foreign country, but they also moved around a lot in

Libya and so he attended a new primary school every year for the first five years of his education. Mohammed was a minority as the only Egyptian in his classes; he had a different passport, lack of privileges even more so than back home, and in his words, was a “complete alien.” It was a culmination of his life experiences that helped him find his way, even though they were at times adventurous and scary.

Engaging with Moe and learning about his family’s religious traditions has been neat, especially since it is completely foreign to me. His family mostly celebrates the new year, *Ramadan*, and participates in the fasting between sunrise and sunset for thirty days. They also take part in a holiday called *Sham Neseem*, which is an ancient Egyptian Easter celebration that typically takes place outside. It sounds incredible to me because they eat all kinds of food, that for the most part I have never had a thing, such as salted fish with geese and raw green onions served in a picnic-like setting. While dance is a part of the Egyptian culture, it is not necessarily performed at all holiday celebrations, but rather mostly at weddings and baby showers---family oriented festivities.

Despite Mohammed having an atypical upbringing, he has really persevered in life through his unwillingness to give in to what the Egyptian society says he can do. More than once during our interview, he exclaimed that he did not want to be like everyone else and just follow the path laid out for him. He was and is not a sheep, so he opted not to join the military despite the fact that his cousin was a General. Due to male privilege, he was still permitted to “screw up,” but because of his decisions and “rebellious” nature his father and extended family treated him as though he was stupid during his formidable years. Ultimately, he received a two-year degree from the Open

Education University (where he also took both English and Russian language classes), which may sound great, but degrees from there rarely do much for moving one up out of the poorer class. Still, he got a job working in the tourism industry which did not pay very well, but he had fun and was allowed to dress in relaxed “safari” clothing every day. Mohammed is a survivor and a fighter, and because of that, he did not give up on his dreams of finding a way to go to a western school. Instead, he started the scholarship process for an extremely competitive international Fulbright grant while simultaneously waiting for a United States visa. Not only did he receive the grant, but he used as much of it as possible in the year that he had it, completing 55 credit hours in only three semesters! His initial migration to Utah was fairly straightforward and all he did was study and attend classes at SLCC while living with roommates set up through the college. He did end up moving back to Fayoum for a couple of years, which was not a part of his plan, but it was in that span of time where he reached a turning point in his own political views and became much more liberal minded. The other pivotal thing that happened in between then and now was that in receiving the Fulbright grant and studying so hard here, he was reaccepted by his family and deemed successful, so they are now being supportive of his education here in the U.S.

Now back in Utah and attending SLCC at a more conducive pace, he has made some friends through his mosque, one of which is his roommate (a white, former LDS, openly gay man) and another is his “bestie” whom I happen to work with, but living here has not come easily. He has been unable to find a job in the aircraft mechanic field, despite holding a degree, due to what he thinks are the prejudices that come with having the name “Mohammed” and he feels like Utah is more conservative, religiously, than

Egypt so he has moved his view even farther to the left. Dating women also comes with its own set of challenges because of the mostly Mormon population, and the message he has received time and time again is that he is “not good enough” to hang out with or date, unless he converts from Islam to Mormonism. I love his perspective on this subject because I, too, cannot imagine being single here and trying to date. I had a feeling that it was difficult, but not so mean and unkind, too, which really bothers me. He hopes to move out of Utah in about a year, though, and go onto formal flight school in either Arizona or California.

I am both happy and humbled that I had such a unique opportunity to meet and get to know someone like Mohammed who grew up in an entirely different set of traditions, religion, and circumstances than myself. Perhaps I have had conversations with Muslims before without knowing it, but it was refreshing to connect with a young, male Muslim and gain real perspective on his culture instead of the same old, recycled stereotypes in American media. As with any religious group, I am sure there are some faithful followers who are more conservative and others who are more liberal, but I feel more confident that we have far more in common than we have differences. However, I am disappointed in the way that he has been treated by other Americans while seeking out a career opportunity or looking for romance because Mohammed is fantastic! It just goes to show you that one should not judge a book by its cover because you truly miss out on the beauty of being different. This assignment has impacted the way I perceive immigrants and international students in that, I feel like I have gained insight and will reach out more than before in extending friendship, and that I will be less nervous about interacting with others who may have been raised entirely different than me. I have

considered myself liberal and progressive for quite some time, but I am not sure that I have always walked the walk so to speak. I know that there have been moments where I have passed judgement or perpetuated stereotypes, out of pure ignorance and hopefully between this class and my Human Geography class this semester, I will be overflowing with empathy and compassion. In the end, I have made a new friend whom I can share a meal with, enjoy stimulating, intellectual or light-hearted conversation, and continue to learn more about the evolving world and exceptional people around me.