



Profile

Mr. Mohamed Abdel Monem EL SAWY

Sakia Abdel-Moneim El Sawy
"Culture Wheel"

<http://www.culturewheel.com>



Presenter Interview

プレゼンターインタビュー
Egypt's first private sector arts and culture facility,
Cairo's El Sawy Culture Center

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エジプト初の民間文化施設
カイロのエッサーウィ文化センター

Opened in 2003, the Sakia Abdel-Moneim El Sawy (commonly called "the Sakia" or the El Sawy Culture Center) is a full-scale comprehensive arts and culture that is 100% private-sector financed and operated. Rare for Egypt, this facility is involved a wide variety of activities aimed at helping to solve the issues confronting Egyptian society through the dissemination of arts, culture and knowledge. The center's director, Mohamed El Sawy spoke passionately about these activities during his visit to Japan in September, 2006.

(Interviewer: Al Moamen Abdalla, Instructor of International Relations, Daito Bunka University)

Isn't it an extremely rare case for a private sector cultural center to be established in Egypt? Can you tell us briefly what it involves?

Sakia Abdel-Moneim El Sawy (El Sawy Culture Wheel), was opened in 2003. The section of central Cairo there is the bridge section where the El Sawy Culture Wheel facility is presently located used to be a gathering place for the homeless and petty criminal types and it had the bad smell of a garbage dump. I don't think anyone would have dreamed that such a disreputable place would be transformed in this way to a place that generates culture and knowledge.

The Egyptian name for the center, Sakia Abdel-Moneim El Sawy, means "the water wheel of Abdel-Moneim El Sawy." Just like we need water to live, I believe that knowledge and culture are important in peoples' lives. The name expresses our wish that the waterwheel of El Sawy will bring knowledge and culture to people just like a waterwheel raises water from the river to nourish the fields. And, in addition to introducing culture and the arts, we will also work actively to try to make the waterwheel of El Sawy a balm to heal the wounds of society, a source education for the public, a hand that reaches out to the community and a place where people can pursue self-education. I hope with all my heart that people will come to the water wheel of El Sawy seeking the waters of knowledge and learning.

With the concept of "encounters with culture and knowledge," the El Sawy Culture Wheel provides a wide variety of programs, from presentations of the arts and literature, including poetry readings and novel contests, to sports and educational programs such as seminars teaching skills necessary for seeking employment, cooking classes for women and Arabic calligraphy classes.

In the area of the arts, the center presents concerts of young musicians and singers, performing arts productions of theater and other genre, exhibitions of photography and painting and showings of film works. Every year the center holds a theater contest and a film festival for short films and documentaries. We are especially devoted to promoting and stimulating especially important "intangible cultural assets" of Arabian culture such as Arabian music. For example, we actively present recitals and workshops for performers of the traditional *qanun*, a stringed

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instrument [zither] similar to the Japanese *koto*. We are also working to revive a unique type of Egyptian folk song known as *mauwa-l*. At a recent performance we were encourage to see young people and office workers among the audience that we didn't expect.

In the literature field, we hold a novel contest every year. We get many applicants from other Arabian countries for this contest besides Egypt. The winning work in this year's contest was written by a man from Morocco. When we speak of Egyptian literature, poetry has traditionally been the mainstream, but in recent years young people are less interested in poetry. In an effort to revive interest in the traditional culture of poetry, we are holding events that cross the former boundaries of artistic genre by coupling poetry readings with performing arts. For events like these we seek to build interest and expand our audience by making the performances free to the public.

I personally believe that sports are a form of culture as well. This is because sports can provide an opportunity for exchange between our people in an atmosphere of mutual respect, without regard to who wins or loses. We also offer classes for children in the military arts and archery that have taken root in Islamic and Arabian culture. Recently, we are also promoting a type of military art called *tahati-b* that is similar to Japanese *kendo* with its bamboo sword.

What types of people use your facilities?

Since many of our programs are organized jointly with private schools and universities, we have a lot of students coming to the center, and we also have users from all the different age groups. We also rent out our theater space to local theater groups, producers and artists, which means that there are a great variety of events being offered. Many of our events are free and in order to make it easy for anyone to enjoy our offerings, we try to set the ticket prices as low as possible.

The main reason that we try to reach out to as broad an audience as possible is that we want to bring culture closer to the people. Although we do have a membership plan, we want to keep our ears open to the ideas of as many people as possible, regardless of whether they are members or from the general viewing public. There have been actual cases where ideas from the public have led to new programs and we always take the people's opinions into consideration when putting together our programming. One day a person came in and asked us to hold a stamp-collector contest. I said to him, "Yes. Let's do it." But I added the condition that he take on the responsibility of being involved in the contest planning and organizing. I told him that the center would give him full backing if he participated in the project.

As this case shows, I believe that the systems and rules should be things that people create themselves according to the needs they perceive as relevant in each individual case. The programs should be things that people create freely by themselves, not things that are forced upon them. The important thing is to constantly strive for the goal of encouraging people to have the will to improve things for the better, to give people the means to better themselves and to heighten consciousness and understanding of the issues confronting society.

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Are there any unique aspects of your management policies?

The El Sawy Culture Wheel is a 100% private sector organization that receives no support or financing from the government whatsoever. Conversely, we are in a position where we pay the government a monthly rental fee on the land our facilities occupy. Almost all of our financing of our facility operation and programs comes from private-sector sponsors. We solicit both year-round sponsors and one-time sponsors for specific events and when there is a deficit in funding it is covered by the Ad and PR company Alamia owned by myself and my brother.

We also work with the embassies of the world's countries here in Egypt to jointly organize presentations of a variety of arts program, and we consider these to be an indirect type of support funding from them. Although we do not receive funds directly from these countries, their embassies pay for the air fare and accommodations for the invited artists while we provide the performance space stage production costs and PR, etc., and the ticket sales become revenue for our center. In these joint programs with the foreign embassies we adopt a cooperative working relationship with a clear division of roles. We plan to hold our first joint program with the Japanese Foundation this December (*). This type of cultural exchange with the embassies and organizations of the various countries has enabled us to present a wide variety of arts programs to our audience.

What is the nature of your theater contest?

In recent years, the theater world on Egypt is in what you could call a state of crisis. It is something like an unprincipled night club. We wanted to try to do something to stimulate the theater scene by starting the El Sakia Drama Contest three years ago, which is held now every year in July and August. Since one aspect of the contest is to discover new talent and nurture young artists, we solicit applications from a wide range of performing artists and groups for which to choose our winners. At the first stage of the judging process we look at the script, the staging and the technical aspects, then in the second stage we have the artists actually perform in front of our judging committee, The contestant artists or groups that pass this stage are then invited to perform at our theater festival. In the two weeks of the festival there are performances of over 50 works. The performance time for each work is up to one hour and the winner is announced at the end of the festival, with the closing ceremony also serving as the award ceremony. There are prizes not only for the best work but also for best director, best actor and best stage art. At this point we haven't had any contestants from outside the Arabic world but for the future we want to find sponsors and solve the funding problems so that we will be able to solicit contestants from outside the Arabic world as well.

We understand that at your center you are dealing with social issues in Egyptian society.

In Egypt, before you talk about culture and the arts you have to deal with the social problems like beggars and the living standard and habits of the people and the problem of education. There are an endless number of people who pretend to be poor so they can beg in front of tourists. Still, I don't think that just making laws to try to repress such action will really be very successful. It is a simple thing but I believe that in order to improve this situation you have to raise people's consciousness so that they can change themselves and correct bad habits, and I believe that it is important for people to have the strength of will to tackle and solve even difficult problems in a short time. At the El Sawy Culture Wheel we are working to help heal

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the wounds of society and solve its difficult problems by doing what we can to enlighten the public and educate people.

One of the ways we do this is through a campaign to get more people to be aware of the spirit of charity that is fundamental to the Islamic faith. We have also begun a project called "The Year of Arabic" which aims to help people learn classical standard Arabic (fusha). Due to people's progressing separation from the written language, Arabic is deteriorating today as a language. Even among adults today the number of people who can use classic standard Arabic properly is decreasing. There are many people who say they have read the entire Koran several times, but I wonder if they really understand what they are reading. Reading is not as important as really understanding what one reads, and the decreasing understanding of classical Arabic can't help but weaken people's identity as Arabs. We are conducting Arabic course to help people use Arabic more beautifully and with greater understanding and thus contribute to the people's level of literacy.

Can you tell us about the culture policy in Egypt?

Egypt's Ministry of Culture is responsible for promoting activities in the area of culture and the arts. The Ministry of Culture operates several funds for the purpose of supporting all kinds of activities in culture and the arts. There are also organizations under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture such as the regional culture facilities known as "Arts Palaces."

I believe that flexibility is an important attribute of organizations like the Ministry of Culture that promote the arts and culture, but government agencies have the problem of a bureaucratic system. So, from the standpoint of promoting the arts and culture, there is the important problem of relaxing regulations. Also, I believe that a transfer of power to subordinate organizations in a manner that will strengthen their operating capacities is necessary.

On the other hand, there are foreign arts and culture support organizations in Cairo like the France Culture Center and Germany's Goethe Institute, and these organizations not only introduce the arts and culture of their own countries but also provide support for Egyptian artists and contribute to the development of Egyptian arts and culture. As private sector supporters there is also the Ford Foundation actively provides funding for young Egyptian artists. Although they are few, there are also universities that also provide funding for students doing independent works. But on the whole, there is not enough support for the arts in Egypt, especially for the performing arts.

Are there times when there is difficulty getting approval from the censor authorities to in order to get permission to stage a play? Please tell us about censorship in Egypt.

To tell the truth, I don't know why but for some reason we have a very good relationship with the censors at the moment. I don't know if it is because the censor bureau has a strong trust in us, but they don't interfere with our activities at all. I think it may be that our ethical standard of respect for people and determination to uphold the peace and stability is more than censorship policies demand. Of course, our policy is to not accept contents that are injurious to people or contain radical or inflammatory expressions.

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In February or 2007 the El Sawy Culture Wheel will be entering its fourth year. In these four years have there been any changes in conditions in the culture and arts world of Egypt?

In Egypt we have a unique annual theater festival called Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre. Thank to the support from the government it seems that the quality of these festivals is getting higher in recent years. Many foreign artists are participating, including artists from Japan, and it has developed recently into an important venue where theater groups from around the Arab world are competing with each other in trying out new ideas and techniques.

Meanwhile, although our Culture Wheel has only just begun activities, we are attempting new challenges from our base here in Cairo. In September of 2006 we opened a new facility that will serve as a branch of the El Sawy Culture Wheel. It is a facility on the outskirts of Cairo with a theater that belongs to one of the universities, which asked us to take over management of the theater. It is probably hard to envision a university theater facility but in fact it is more like an independent theater building with complete theater facilities and equipment. This new project will bring us into closer contact with students and children from the local community and make it easier to bring arts and culture to them, which is a big advantage. We want to continue to actively expend our bases through tie-ups with outside organizations like this so that we can send out our El Sawy Culture Wheel message to all areas of the country in the future.

That is why we want to change our status in the future from our present corporation status to a non-profit organization status. In fact restrictions regarding non-profit organization in Egypt today are still quite strict, so it is easier to operate as a corporation. As we gather more sponsors in the future and get more support, I believe it will be necessary to gain NPO status in order to operate more effectively in collaborations and the like.

What kinds of changes do you hope to see in the Egyptian arts world in the future?

One of the things that impressed me on my tour of Japan this time was the large number of young people I saw at the Noh and Kabuki theater performances. That was a wonderful thing to see. I would like to see this same type of strong interest and involvement in the traditional arts by young people realized in Egypt as well. That is my wish.

My father, who was a former Minister of Culture, used to say that before you can have true internationalization you first have to achieve "intra-nationalization." In other words, in order to truly develop one's country in a meaningful way, you first have to deepen your understanding of your own country. To do that I believe that we have to return to the cultural roots that are the soil of our spirit and reestablish the traditional arts and at the same time heighten the knowledge and learning of the younger generation, and to do that I believe that we have to stimulate all areas of the arts. This type of revival of traditional arts is never easy but if we continue to make efforts, I believe that it is possible to build bridges between present and the past and between tradition and the young generation.

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Could you give us a message for the artists of Japan?

I strongly hope that the artists of Japan will visit Egypt once. And I hope that you will get a chance to experience all kinds of Egyptian and Arabic culture firsthand. Just as they say the soil where arts and culture flourish becomes enriched, just as they say that soil that arts and culture spring from is created by the environment, I hope you will have a chance to experience the arts born of the Egyptian environment in that same environment. Life in Egypt has been supported and enriched by our traditional instruments and folk songs, by clay sculptures, handmade rugs that are said to be works of art, by paintings on papyrus and many other kinds of art. Egypt's traditional arts are full of the sensitivities and the appeal of the people of Egypt. I am sure that you will find something in them that will touch your hearts.