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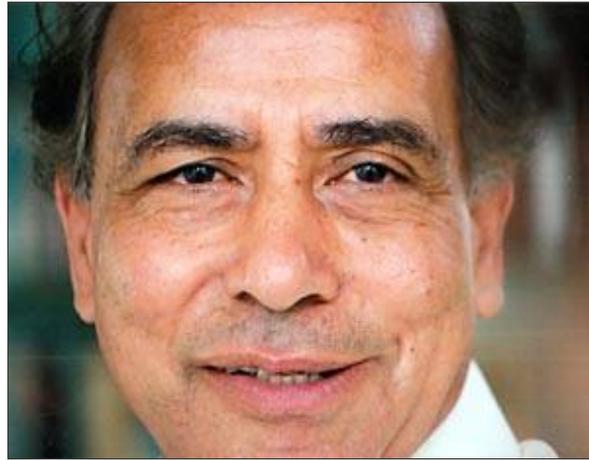
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Ibrahim Abouleish

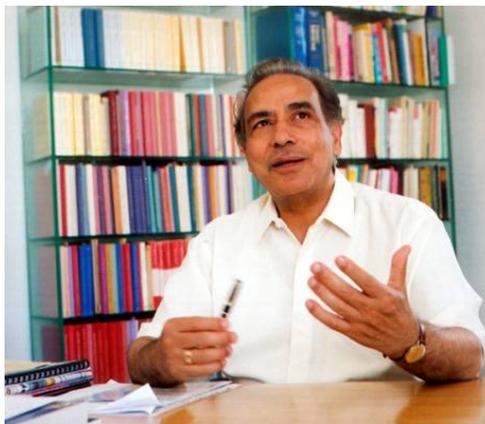
Vision of vitality

Engineering a social renaissance

By [Yasmine El-Rashidi](#)*photo: Sherif Sonbol*

The face behind Egypt's foremost organic foods provider is elusive. The first Egyptian-grown organic produce sprouted on the market some 15-odd years ago; the sporadic supermarket appearances of packaged carrots and tomatoes labelled "Isis organic foods" provoking, back then, few heads to turn.

The blossoming came in more recent years, as the health and fitness rage washed in from Western shores and the vision of well being took root and in time became the norm. Yet as the trade names of SEKEM, ISIS and the wooden-front stores of "Nature's Best" seeped into public consciousness, etching for themselves a place as household names, the face behind Egypt's organic foods revolution remained elusive, the multi-faceted nature of the SEKEM initiative undisclosed, not fully comprehended.

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Two hours outside of Cairo, at a point on an unremitting, winding desert road, in an area where one might not have known desert existed, a white textured wall framed at its base with grass indicates arrival at the 70-acre expanse comprising the SEKEM community. It is here, at the furthest corner of the plantation, within an expanse of mandarin trees and jasmine bushes, that one can find Ibrahim Abouleish -- winner of the 2003 "Right Livelihood Award" (also known as the "Alternative Nobel Prize") and creator of the initiative which borrows its name from the Pharaonic hieroglyph meaning "vitality from the sun".

We arrive at one of several angular white buildings with vast windows, at the centre of the plantation. It is just before 9am. After that, we were forewarned several days before, "will be too late".

Too late for what? We are not quite sure and never find out.

"You will first receive a tour of SEKEM, then you will meet Dr Abouleish," a vibrant, tanned, very busy Wedad informs us quickly, introducing us to our "guide", Ashraf, and then quickly rushing off

The tour is long, the air is dry, and the heat of the morning sun has already settled on the soil, radiating up.

Beyond the buildings, the multi-levelled landscape leads us through sand pits, contained jungles of fruit trees and open fields of grass, plants and shrubs. Within it all and along the way, kindergarten children clamour around us, tanned, glowing and squealing with naïve delight at the sight of our camera. Nearby, older children take a break from the school day to eat lunch. Others engage their hands and minds to mould clay or carve wood.

The nearby vegetable fields give way to the streamlined, low-rise blocks housing ATOS pharmaceuticals. It is there that natural extracts from organically grown herbs and plants are engineered and integrated to form a line of phytopharmaceuticals, including "safamood", a natural antidepressant commonly known abroad as "St John's Wort". Besides herbs, teabags are being stuffed and jars sealed: from SEKEM's network of biodynamic agricultural farms around the country, raw materials are processed and packaged to produce foodstuffs including cereal, fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables, noodles, honey, jams, spices, teas, oils and herbs.

We pass the building of the vocational training centre. Ashraf explains the centre's three-year programmes (accredited by the Mubarak-Kohl initiative and recognised by the Ministry of Education) offering training in areas including biodynamic agriculture, metalwork, electrical installation and office administration.

"And this is the work of a student that passed away a few years ago," he says of a glass encased collection of clay sculptures. "He was mentally retarded -- one of the students in the special education programme."

Past the glass cabinet -- which holds a framed picture of the smiling, sculpting student -- we enter the back of a building and climb a lengthy flight of steps.

"As you can feel, when you come in the buildings, it's extremely cool," he says as the temperature fall enwraps us. "The buildings are designed in a certain way so we really don't need air-conditioning. And as you can see from the furniture and colours, everything is chosen with purpose."

The mastermind behind it all, of course, being the elusive Abouleish.

The walls are shades of lime, green and violet. The furniture is wooden, the curtains vibrant in their colours and woven from organically grown cotton threads manufactured on site. The kindergarten toys are all natural also -- wooden cars, rocking horses, animals and spinning tops. The dolls are organic too. No plastic, no rubber and no synthetic concoctions.

At the top of the stairs, a large, glass-enclosed room houses 50-some people. Some of them sit at looms weaving together threads into cloth. The rest snip, sew and embroider. The final products make up the line of goods promoted under the brand names of Conytex, Cotton People, Nature Tex, Under the Nile, and Alana -- organic garments, home textiles and dolls.

We leave the building from an alternate staircase, and begin the trek, at last, to the private quarters of Abouleish.

The greeting into his study comes about 15 minutes later -- the opening door leading into a space designed by Abouleish himself and conceptualised to induce peace of mind and calm: little in the way of furniture, few colours, lots of light and space.

"What is it exactly you want to know about me?" he asks, smiling in seeming bemusement. "How I came up with this idea that many people do not quite understand?" he laughs.

Abouleish is clearly well aware of the whispers that once circled steadily around Cairo -- of a hippie community that spends its day planting and singing and chanting about life and love and peace.

Tanned, slender, and not the elderly face I had anticipated, Abouleish laughs vibrantly out loud. His health is deceiving of his age.

"And no," he offers in good humour, "I have never done yoga in my life. That is an unfortunate misconception."

The term "organic" has come to be associated with the "new age" spiritualism practiced by the stars of today (especially in California): they eat organic, wear organic, think organic; practice yoga and meditation and are on a new-found mission to seek inner peace and liberation from the consumer-driven material world.

"It's rather amusing," Abouleish says, pausing before shedding light on a starkly contrasting reality. "This initiative," speaking of SEKEM, "started many years ago when I travelled to Europe, to Austria, in 1955. I went initially to study chemistry, then medicine, then worked in research, and I got married and had two children and enjoyed life tremendously there. I loved the music, the philosophy and the culture, but I was also very rooted in my culture here -- as a Muslim and as an Egyptian," he explains.

Was it distance, then, and the curiosity that it instilled, that provided fertile ground for the seed of SEKEM to grow?

"I think that through living in Europe, it helped me discover my roots, my faith and religion," he says. "It's something you see often in people that travel abroad. Personally it allowed me to perceive my own roots, as well as Islam, from an entirely different perspective."

The difference between Abouleish and others has resided in this vision.

"Through my years in Europe I was constantly absorbing my environment," he reflects of his 21 years overseas. "From the culture, to how people lived, to their environments. And in the 1970s," he continues, "After the war, when President Sadat asked Egyptians to come back and invest in their country, I thought 'why not?'"

Step one was a 1975 visit home with his family.

"I wanted to give them a taste of Egypt -- show them the beauty of it and explore the possibilities," he recalls. "I took what I saw, went back to Europe, and started diagnosing the state of the country and looking into why it reached the state which it had."

While the perspective of others was that war was the culprit, Abouleish believed firmly that the national state of despondency was rooted much deeper.

"Living at the top of the Alps you gather a lot more information than you would in a city," he says. "You are in a different environment, cleaner, less distractions and detractions."

The analysis of the country's own self-inflicted limitations was coupled with the conceptualisation of a vision for the future -- as he, that is, would like it to be

"It took three years," he says. "Over those years I put together all the information I had gathered and wrote sort-of a book. It was about my vision of how I could see Egypt being developed; how you can form a sort-of Renaissance. On the one hand, there was the endeavour to find ways to heal the earth, and on the other, seeking ways to initiate progressive steps towards the development of the people."

Abouleish shared his plan with all the businessmen, doctors and intellectuals whose paths crossed with his, even in any minor way. "They were all very interested in listening," he laughs. "But nobody was ready to do it."

Abouleish pauses, laughs and humours himself

"And so one fine Sunday when the heavens were open," he picks up with more laughter, "I asked my family what they thought, if they were open to this new social model of development."

The family, he claims, were eager, and so together they returned to develop this society and environment, which in tandem was envisioned to develop individual human capability and capacity.

"You can't do this unless you build a community," he says. "That was my wish -- for this initiative to embody itself as a community; a community in which people from all walks of life, from all nations and cultures, from all vocations and age groups, could work together, learning from one another and helping each other, sounding as one in a symphony of harmony and peace."

Neither a rural area nor a city, given the deeply established social forms and traditions in each, could serve as a locale. "It had to be built outside, on the border of the civil societies that already exist." In the surroundings of Belbeis, Abouleish began work in 1977, starting initially with just a two-man team.

"It started with just me and Mohamed," he smiles. "Mohamed was a villager in the area who came up to me when I was walking around, put his hand on my shoulder, and said 'I'm with you'."

"There was no infrastructure, no energy -- nothing. We began the reclamation and greening of the land, and people started coming. And they were forced to adapt to the new social forum, where they have to respect each other and keep the environment clean, and where they have to work and they have to learn." He pauses, calls for lemonade -- organic of course -- and answers a phone call. Hanging up, he stares out of one of the French windows that frame the room, and points with his chin, by way of indication. "It was clear by that time that the implementation of this ideal would become a life's task," he says. "I knew that it would require patience and most likely would take many generations to progress."

"Because the whole initiative is cultural one, you have to generate capital," he says of the multi-facet businesses of SEKEM. "It started with the extract of a medicinal plant which we exported to the United States. Then we moved on to all the other things you see today. To create the environment and microclimate that we have today, we had to plant 120,000 trees. That's why the production of organic produce in this way did not start immediately," Abouleish explains,

Since it started, Abouleish's vision has expanded in various directions and on numerous levels.

"Over time and from within the bounds of the community, the 'Council for the Future' was born. The goal of this council is to strengthen our direction and simultaneously renewing it according to contemporary needs," he says. "To achieve this we draw our source of inspiration from spiritual and natural science, religion and art -- and we gather together scientists and artists from all over the world. Over the past 26 years SEKEM founded various institutions based on the three-fold order of economic, social and cultural life, striving to inspire, aid and develop our natural and human resources," he continues. "Although all three areas are entities in their own right, they do constantly interact with one another."

The economic life of the initiative begins on a practical level to "heal" the soil through biodynamic farming methods, which puts at their disposal raw materials of the highest international standards

"In partnership with our close friends and colleagues in Europe, and our local partners in trade, we strive to market our products, employing what we call the 'economics of love'," he says, pausing briefly to take breath. "Cultural life within SEKEM is nurtured and cultivated by the 'Egyptian Society for Cultural Development'. It has the never-ending task of educating our children, youth and adults, consolidating both their cognitive and practical skills while enhancing their command of free will," he explains.

"The institution offers healthcare and therapeutic services, based on holistic medical care, including outreach programmes in neighbouring villages. Within the SEKEM Academy we initiate research, dealing with all aspects of life, searching for solutions to major questions. And to ensure that the

democratic rights and values for our co-workers are adequately implemented, we founded the 'Cooperative of SEKEM Employees', which addresses all questions concerning civil society in the workplace," Abouleish recounts.

"It is our objective here that all members of the SEKEM community will grow towards taking responsibility for society."

Part of that cooperative entails the gathering of the 2000-plus SEKEM employees in "circles" several times a day. In the morning those gathered share with their colleagues their achievements of the day before, and goals for the present day. And during the other scheduled "circles", they chant the community mantra, "Goodness of the heart, light of truth, love of the people." These circles are perhaps the root of rumours about this so-thought hippie community. But what are perceived as spiritual "far-out" chants, are in fact a means of helping people learn to express themselves, set goals and take responsibility.

"We all stand next to each other, from the manager to the man who cleans the floor. And for that one period of the day, we are all equals, and we are all as human beings given that dignity, to feel every job is important, part of the making of the community.

It was not, of course, initially welcomed with open arms

"People didn't come here and fall in love with it all straight away," he laughs. "It took time, but they got used to it. And now they feel a sense of belonging, of importance. They are being taken care of, they eat together, have the chance to learn. They watch their children learn and play. This is a model for society, and it is sustainable and it feeds itself. Of course there is lots of work to be done, and every time you reach out, you find another horizon," he says, shaking his head. "But," he quotes Goethe, "neither time nor any power destroys forms that developed in a living way.' We can develop the state of our homeland if we tackle things in the right way. This is my contribution," he smiles.

No, living in the middle of the desert far away from distractions perceived by the masses as "entertainment", Abouleish does not get bored.

"Look around you. Listen to the peace and natural sounds," his hand brushing over all that is around us. "We get so caught up in the fast pace of city life, we forget to absorb the sound, the smells, the colours," he reasons. "I have so much to do here, and we have an orchestra and books to read, and things to write," he says, waving his arm around him evoking the wealth to be absorbed -- both in the environment and on the shelves of his notable library.

Abouleish points his chin again, towards the far wall.

"And if I were to begin to get bored," he laughs, "I have him to work for, and I have all his qualities to work towards and better, and attempt humbly to emulate."

Behind him is a wall hanging on which are inscribed the 99 names of God.

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