

Panning the camera lens over what had been a nonspace before the summer war

'Collecting Dahiyeh' begins to screen films of the suburbs at Umam D&R

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BEIRUT: One of the ramifications of Israel's 34-day bombing campaign against Lebanon last summer is a sudden awareness of Beirut's southern suburbs, Dahiyeh. Since Lebanon's southern neighbor and sometimes-occupier spent so much energy trying to flatten Dahiyeh, particularly the quarter of Haret Hreik, and as television news deigned to turn its cameras toward it for the better part of a month, artists and audiences have grown interested in what the area was before it was attacked.

At once part of Beirut and apart from it, Dahiyeh is not unlike the unregulated "bidon-villes" that have grown up adjacent cities for as long as historians have bothered to notice them and stamp them with various labels. A locus for informal, and so cheaper, settlement of migrants during the 1975-1990 Civil War, Dahiyeh has been received in the public imagination as poor (therefore unpleasant), Shiite (alien) and a stronghold of the militant Islamist party Hizbullah (thus dangerous).

Though the ruin of the old city center in the 1970s and 1980s has kept Beirut relatively decentralized in its shopping and other public life, elite culture tends to be concentrated in the northern end of the city. If popular quarters further south like Cola and Furn al-Shubbak maintain a strong local flavor, the quarters of Dahiyeh – officially beyond the pale of Beirut's municipality – has virtually been a nonspace, at least as an object of (and platform for) the sort of high culture patronized by resident foreigners.

The exception that proves this rule is the Haret Hreik-based Umam Documentation and Research (UmamD&R), co-directed by Lokman Slim and Monika Borgmann. Based in the Slim family villa and pursuing an avowedly secular agenda, Umam embodies a desire to open up Dahiyeh. In this regard, Friday night saw the commencement of a three-night screening program devoted to films on Dahiyeh.

The films are being projected as part of "Collecting Dahiyeh," an exhibition of posters, maps and recorded oral testimonies sampled from Umam's ongoing project to assemble the history of Dahiyeh. All history is narrated from a chosen standpoint, commonly called "bias," and this one unabashedly focuses on the history of the region before the immigrants arrived in the 1970s.

The Umam project will be of interest to some, then, because it subverts the prevailing narrative that Dahiyeh is synonymous with Hizbullah. The value of the project extends well beyond this point of contention, though. Not only does "Collecting Dahiyeh" take a step in the direction of filling the vacuum in Lebanon's written history, it also serves to undermine biases of extant accounts, which tend to be told from a north-Beirut and Mount Lebanon perspective.

The screenings began with a pair of films from Pamela Ghanimeh. The first of these, "A Matter of Distance (The Bicycle)" (26 minutes, 2003) is a fiction film telling the story of a moth-



Philosopher-gardener Joseph Ghanimeh (left, below), from Pamela Ghanimeh's "Lemon Flowers," discusses how he transported soil to his new property from Haret Hreik to plant a garden ... and grow the very same pomegranates as he used to in the village. Zorro, Hassan and Zombie (bottom), the three villains of Rami Kodeih's "A Shahrzade Tale," a comic tragedy set in Hay al-Sellom.

er, Nada, and her young son Omar. She's returned to their family house in Haret Hreik for one last visit before handing the papers over to a friend who still lives in the quarter. Omar has his own mission, to retrieve and rehabilitate the yellow bicycle he was forced to leave behind when his family left.

Redolent with Nada's memories of past happiness and the loss of migration, and accompanied by the music of Farid al-Atrash, the film is possessed of the nostalgia found in so much post-Civil War Lebanese cinema. The sectarian aspect of the family's move is kept low key – the mother's secular attire, Omar's name, the Christian calendar hanging on the wall – but the codes are there for the Lebanese audience to read.

Four years later, in the wake of Israel's attacks on Haret Hreik, Ghanimeh picked up these themes again in her documentary "Lemon Flowers" (35 minutes). As her text explains, at the beginning of the film, before the start of the Civil War in 1975, Haret Hreik was still a village. Now apparently living somewhere north of Beirut, her family recall what a rural idyll Haret Hreik once was. Ghanimeh's mother and aunts are captured while watching an old Farid al-Atrash movie. Her philosophically minded uncle Joseph is filmed fishing and working in his garden, which he says was planted in soil from Haret Hreik.

Gradually the subject turns to the Palestinian revolution, as the left termed the early stage of the Civil War. Though Joseph was at first sympathetic to the movement, the family was later intimidated into leaving the quarter by young gun-wielding thugs whose bad behavior cannot be mended with an apology. Joseph remarks upon the surprising phenomenon of Hizbullah, its

ability to command its supporters like no political party before it, but when his niece calls these supporters "sheep" he disagrees. "No," he says. "It's commitment. Religious commitment is stronger than ethics."

Umam subverts the belief that Dahiyeh is synonymous with Hizbullah

The Umam screenings will conclude on June 15 with "Dahiyehscope," a selection of short films shot during the 2006 summer war. On June 8, Umam will project the fiction film "A Shahrzade Tale" (22 minutes,

2006) by Rami Kodeih. This student film is a first-person narrative of a climactic day in the life of Ziad, a university student from the southern suburb of Hay al-Sellom.

Unconnected to the summer war, the piece is doubly interesting. It's a remarkably accomplished first film that makes intelligent use of commercial film convention to tell a tale at once comic and tragic. It's also a story embedded in a quarter – albeit one that, as the narrator tells us, could take place anywhere in the world – a quarter that is sometimes spoken for but rarely speaks for itself.

Collecting Dahiyeh continues at the Umam D&R Hangar, in Haret



Hreik, until June 16. For more information call + 961 1 55 36 02.

