Performance and Representation:
Masculinity and Leadership at the Cairo Refugee Demonstration

Presented by

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Sudanese Refugee Protest in Cairo:
Community Dynamics and Broader Implications

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Abstract

In the autumn of 2005, Sudanese refugees staged a protest of UNHCR in Cairo. Demonstration organizers were young, single men who confronted tasks of maintaining control and discipline and negotiating with an international agency. Their attainment of community authority would have been improbable in Sudan. Why did people listen to them, and why were they allowed to represent so many others? This paper evaluates the demonstration leadership in terms of preservation of masculine identity and status attainment. Their roles in the demonstration can be viewed as masculine "performance." These considerations are developed through an examination of how leaders exercised authority, presented themselves to UNHCR, media representatives, and the public. In this event, identities were being transformed. Not only were gender identities being forged, but refugee identity was simultaneously affirmed and "de-stigmatized." Traditional Sudanese tribal distinctions and cultural identities were also subsumed in collective identifications as refugees and protestors. The demonstration became a self-governed community for refugees and challenges us to reconsider the possibilities for refugees to regain a measure of agency in their lives. The connections made in this paper should not be taken as causative but as an exploration of the possible impact of gender performance and identity transformation upon events.

Introduction

As we all know, before any other labels apply, refugees are human beings. Given the opportunity, human beings will seek their own best interests or the interests of those closest to them. Only coercion, manipulation or softer forms of persuasion steer us otherwise. One of the softest forms of persuasion derives from others believing one has their best interests at heart. Every politician knows it, and every leader is a politician. The question becomes what sort of politics are operating.

In approaching forced migration as a field of research and advocacy, we should keep the role of human agency foremost in our minds. The individuals and groups we study have experienced loss of control over their own lives and the denial of personal agency in determining what happens to them. What attracted my attention to last year's refugee protest in Cairo was the attempt to reclaim a modicum of agency through various roles adopted by individuals at the site. The protest was dominated by leaders with an agenda who were able to become political actors representing their own interests and those of approximately two thousand others. They delegated authority, presented grievances, portrayed a specific public image, and negotiated with UNHCR.

What I hope to reveal is how gendered performance and transformed identities affected the dynamics of protest. My project does not intend to reduce events to

questions of identity or performances of gender; rather, I believe we need to examine how these factors manifested at the protest and influenced its eventual outcome.

Identity Construction and Masculinity

What concerns me as a social researcher is the experience of becoming, accepting, rejecting, and presenting oneself (or not) as a refugee. Proponents of the "anthropology of experience" stress the individual "capacity to remember" and its consequent influence on one's present experience as the milieu within which a conception of the future takes shape (Abrahams 1986: 59). Zygmunt Bauman claims modernism changed identity from a matter of social "ascription" to one of "achievement, thus making it an individual task and… responsibility" (1997: 49). Identity construction aims not at immutability but durability and reliability in forging a future for oneself. We may be more or less conscious of the forces impinging on us: readily complicit or defiantly constructing our own unique personhood. Refugees are no different except for the inherent vulnerability in the formation of refugee identity through a convergence of external forces, namely international law, humanitarian agencies, host governments and society, and the refugee's own culture and experiences.

These forces "reduce the totality of the individual to the single facet… [of] refugee status" (Waldron 1987: 2-3). This reduction essentializes refugee identity and serves as a partial negation of personhood. The term "refugee" operates as a portable definition of identity, a label for people who exist somewhere "between displacement and resettlement" or repatriation (Hadjiyanni 2002: 3). Racial or other stigma often compounds the refugee label, as is particularly true for sub-Saharan refugees in Cairo. Furthermore, as strangers in a host society, refugees may not be "perceived as individuals, but as strangers of *a certain type*" (Simmel 1971: 148, emphasis added). Personal history can be reduced to the conflict that produced the need for asylum.

What distinguishes the refugee as a social type is the individual's vested interest in preserving whatever shreds of identity he or she can. Refugee identity constitutes only one option for individuals who find themselves in circumstances where identities are denied, shifting or being transformed in radical ways. Individuals will perform this facet of their identity when advantageous, but they will avoid refugee identity when perceived as disadvantageous. "Refugee" needs to be treated as one facet of a person's identity (Hadjiyanni 2002: 9) not the totality of individual identity. Investigating "refugee" as one facet of personal identity permits exploration of the social arenas and interactions in which refugee identity is deployed or hidden. It opens avenues for

studying refugees as more than quantifiable units or a distinct social type, but as human beings who also happen to be refugees.

Many of the world's refugees are heirs to the residual effects of colonialism. The colonial encounter failed to maintain "a neat bifurcation" between colliding cultures; cultural hybridity was the result (Papastergiadis 1997: 264). Conceptualized in these terms, refugees fleeing post-colonial regimes embody a type of cultural hybridity before ever encountering the host culture. When arriving in large numbers, refugees easily erect barriers to the cultural accretions of the host society and enact strategies to maintain cultural "purity" (Werbner 1997: 12). We will consider the intersection of identity maintenance, cross-cultural interaction and resistance as the discussion unfolds.

The unique needs and experiences of young refugee males (as were most of the protest leaders) have been sorely neglected in forced migration studies. Some studies incorporate issues concerning men such as family stability or social marginalization, but there is little effort to probe matters of identity maintenance and the psychological emasculation of persecution, flight, and refugee status. Although male refugees may have escaped inhuman fates of torture, exploitation and forced participation in atrocities, becoming a refugee further strips them of a portion of masculine identity. Feelings of guilt over abandoning home and loved ones or self-perceived cowardice arising from choosing to flee rather than staying to fight can compound this condition. Lack of success in gender also has social consequences. Social pressure emerges and may end in "ostracism" (McSpadden and Moussa 1993: 204). In highly patriarchal societies, one's community ascribes respect and ties this respect to self-esteem, but traditional means of attaining status depend on an original social context which asylum debunks. Acquisition of employment or active educational pursuits can remedy these identity crises, but these opportunities often prove difficult to find (McSpadden and Moussa 1993: 215-221).

Because of its deeply embedded cultural moorings, gender functions as one of the most powerful yet subconscious facets of identity. In gender discourse, multiple "masculinities" are recognized. In most cases, honor or status attaches to a particular type of masculinity which then dominates at the expense of other "marginalized" masculinities (Connell 2000: 10; Connell 2005: 80-81). The term "hegemonic masculinity" describes "the configuration of gender practice" in a society functioning to "legitimize patriarchy" and ensure "the dominant position of men and the

subordination of women" (Connell 2005: 77). Non-conformist actions such as protest can serve as "resource[s] in the construction of hegemonic and marginalized masculinities" (Connell 2000: 31), but a single paradigm of hegemonic masculinity may not be immediately apparent in various social contexts (Miescher and Lindsay 2003: 6). For example, it was often unclear to outsiders and protestors alike who were protest leaders. I contend these leaders exemplify a marginalized masculinity fighting for respect while undermining hegemonic masculinities (both Egyptian and longstanding Sudanese community leadership). Most importantly, the tension in this dynamic may have directly precipitated the protest's tragic end.

Before moving on, we need a basic frame for approaching identity and masculine performance. Manuel Castells outlines three types of identity: "legitimizing identity" endorsed by prevailing power structures and typically manifested in nationalism; "resistance identity" expressed by those in "positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized" by the dominant social structure; and "project identity" premised on the construction of "a new identity that redefines their position in society and… seek[s] the transformation of the overall social structure (1997: 8). As we look at the protest leadership, let us proceed with an "ideal type" in mind: we are examining men who have lost their legitimizing identity and adopted a resistance identity opposed to the surrounding culture. Most importantly, they cultivated a project identity through participation in an event enabling them to perform new identities and to radically transform their social contexts.

Performance of Masculinity

The Egyptian government and media depicted the park as a site of drunken debauchery, reeking of human waste and a breeding ground for disease—all unfounded accusations from what we witnessed. It is inconceivable that, had such an atmosphere existed, it would have been tolerated for even a day in front of a popular mosque during the month of Ramadan. In order to confront these depictions, protest organizers sought to present the best image possible through maintenance of order and control. The protest was dominated by males, and examples of masculine performance are manifold. We will look at organizational control, discipline, and public relations as established by the protest's masculine leadership.

Leadership and Organizational Control

At the protest site, leaders arranged themselves by function and appointed committees with specific duties. Some oversaw security and recruited men to control

access by posting them at entrances to question any outsiders who attempted to enter. These men selectively admitted journalists and students who were then directed toward the English proficient leaders to ask questions. In this way, organizers were able to dominate rhetoric at the site and influence dissemination of information. Even so, something of a democratic process existed. When decisions needed to be made or statements arrived from UNHCR, the entire community would be called together, informed of the issue and asked for approval or disapproval. Daily speeches encouraged demonstrators to keep a peaceful and non-confrontational demeanor. Speeches were made by younger male leaders and lent them a high profile among protestors. Other men took responsibility for collecting donations to buy rations and distribute necessities at the site.

With so many opportunities to be actively involved in what was happening, many otherwise marginalized young men were given a chance to feel needed and a part of something with larger meaning. Leaders have stressed this empowerment as one of the positive outcomes of the protest. On the other hand, assumption of authority by young, better-educated men and those they selected to carry out essential tasks led to rifts in the community. Some community leaders were offended they were not consulted about the wisdom of a demonstration. Others felt younger men had no right to take leadership roles over elders. Elements of dissent began to emerge, but we will return to this point later.

Discipline

As reflected in daily admonitions to avoid argument and conflict, discipline was a primary concern of protest leadership. On October 15th, several men arrived at the site in an automobile displaying Sudanese diplomatic tags. They allegedly then proceeded to distribute alcohol among protestors and attempted to instigate a confrontation. Protest security personnel detained the men and turned them over to Egyptian police. During the episode, the license plate was removed from the vehicle and photographed as proof of Sudanese embassy involvement. Thus a symbol of legitimizing identity was captured in the name of preserving resistance and project identities. For a moment, marginalized masculinity gained the upper hand against representatives of one type of hegemonic masculinity.

This incident may have helped produce a controversial form of discipline. A large tree stands in the middle of the park. When individuals were found to be intoxicated or otherwise behaving in a disorderly manner, makeshift security personnel

would bind them to this tree as punishment or to incapacitate them until sober. It seems this practice was conceived in the park and has no precedent among traditional Sudanese cultures. Before passing judgment on this type of justice, let me point out that in the instances I observed, being taken to the tree was more of a juvenile spectacle through which men vented energies and indulged a "horsing around" mode of humor. However, the practice caused problems when a Sudanese staff member from a local NGO was accused of causing a disruption and spent time tied to the tree.

Media and Public Relations

Over the course of three months, demonstrators transformed the park and a sense of community developed. Organizers maintained relatively well-enforced boundaries between sections where women and children interacted and areas where men, most of them young and single would congregate. Although men generally respected these boundaries, it did not prevent them from engaging with other women who visited the park. Foreign women who came to ask questions or observe often found themselves pursued as romantic interests by some men at the site. This observation is not surprising in regard to masculine behavior in any time or place. What I find significant is that by virtue of how interactions with outsiders were controlled, female students, researchers and journalists were directed to protest leaders or spokesmen who were then able to monopolize their attention. A similar pattern applied to interactions with media representatives.

Protest leaders kept meticulous records. Not only were UNHCR statements carefully scrutinized, organizers also maintained a notebook of contacts: journalists, students, NGO representatives, government officials and others who visited the protest. Some men persistently requested we provide them with information regarding human rights, the political situation in Sudan, and media accounts in English and Arabic of what was happening in the park. Clearly the equation of knowledge with power was not lost on these men.

The demonstration gave protestors the chance to meet people who were willing to listen to them. I observed many instances of younger, angry men expressing grievances and speaking their minds to any outsider who would listen. Besides these encounters and public speeches, media interviews provided opportunities to indulge egos. Egyptian journalism undergrads sometimes stalked about the site wanting to interview leaders, and the BBC, Al-Jazeera, CNN and many Egyptian media outlets

also frequented the site. Watching organizers being interviewed, one could easily see the sense of accomplishment in finally having the attention of the international press.

In what was arguably the most attended seminar in its history, the Forced Migration and Refugee Studies program at the American University also provided a forum for leaders to meet the public. The atmosphere was charged. Vigorous exchanges took place as audience members (mostly Sudanese refugees and expatriates) confronted leaders or passionately proclaimed solidarity.

Among the Sudanese expatriate community in Cairo, the discourse of a "New Sudan" has persisted for many years (Fabos 2002). Not surprisingly, a complementary rhetoric of a "mini-Sudan" or microcosm of the nation represented by protestors living in the park emerged roughly a month into the protest. The image evolved into a "united Sudan" and became a prominent theme in discussions with organizers. This sentiment was even echoed and heralded by Sudanese notables who visited the site including Sadiq Al-Mahdi whose appearance unquestionably helped to legitimize the protest and its spokesmen. Such pronouncements beg the question as to what extent organizers viewed themselves as guardians and leaders of this mini-Sudan in exile. As they worked to preserve and redefine their Sudanese heritage, could they have made these statements without recourse to a broader, all-encompassing refugee identity? Here it seems the commonality of being refugees translated into acceptance of a unified Sudanese cultural identity. In reality, men at the protest arranged themselves by tribal affinity in small groups often composed of one or two older gentlemen with several young men, but this dynamic could easily be passed over in such a small space.

Negotiating with UNHCR

Returning to the point of the protest and the issue of dissent, we can now investigate negotiations with UNHCR. These proceedings can be classified as meetings between what Erving Goffman terms "normals" i.e. UNHCR staff, NGO representatives and observers and "stigmatized" i.e. refugee protestors. In these instances, "the causes and effects of stigma must be directly confronted by both sides" (1963: 13). Goffman also employs the concept of "discredited" and "discreditable" stigmatized persons (1963: 4). Discredited individuals bear an immediately apparent stigma. Discreditable stigma is not visible but may become apparent through speech, observation or other interaction. In most social situations, refugee stigma would be

only potentially discreditable, but in these negotiations, refugees came to the table bearing "discredited" status.

Protest leaders claim to have had no experience in formal negotiation. One leader remarked, "Negotiation doesn't need school… a cause makes negotiating natural… having the right to ask doesn't need defense." Minutes from negotiation meetings reflect a well-informed and persistent if not stubborn attitude from the protest representatives and an awareness of responsibility in representing others. They responded to UNHCR's concerns and arguments with well-articulated counter-claims. Following the sort of parliamentary procedure set by the agency, representatives also tried to debate as "one speaker to one topic" (UNHCR minutes; personal interviews). It should be noted that one woman was chosen as a representative in negotiations, but it remains unclear whether she was a full participant or served a symbolic function.

Perhaps the most elusive question remains, why were these men allowed to broker for so many others? We can only speculate as to what notions of masculinity they tried to perform. Transgressing socially sanctioned roles permitted in Sudanese society allowed them to dialogue with an institution valuing "Western" terms of engagement. Hopes of resettlement may also have prompted them to behave as they thought Europeans or North Americans might expect. Sadly, however, it seems "needs were conflated with rights" and the overall project proceeded from a premise of wanting to present grievances within a rights framework (Azzam 2006) lacking genuine awareness of the substance of those rights under international law. The keys to successful negotiation lay in performing and emphasizing an essentialized refugee identity to an agency whose sole purpose is to establish and legitimize that identity. Most importantly, their power in representation rested upon recourse to strength in the number of people assembled at the demonstration.

Progress in negotiations with UNHCR was accompanied by a marked shift to rhetoric of a "leaderless, self-organizing spontaneous event" among organizers who had previously openly acknowledged their leadership roles. The rationale behind this move is uncertain. It is possible they feared being singled out by Egyptian security, but I believe the more plausible reason was to mitigate dissent.

On December 17th, UNHCR issued a statement declaring its intention to respond to almost all protestor demands including the reopening of closed files. Resettlement was the only issue left unaddressed (UNHCR Statement). Two days later, UNHCR representatives spoke publicly to demonstrators. UNHCR claimed

international attention would ensure it honored its offers and acknowledged the protest's effectiveness stemmed from the sheer numbers of people it had attracted (UNHCR Transcript). I have hesitated to name leaders thus far, but it is imperative to introduce a pivotal character in the outcome of the protest. A man named Napoleon, who had not been involved in negotiations with UNHCR, responded to the speech. He spoke in English with UNHCR and translated for himself into Arabic to speak to protestors. He insisted on guarantees. He insisted on being allowed to remain in the park until every case had been reviewed. Following the accepted norms at the site, he then called on the crowd to voice their approval. Napoleon was also able to make an impression with media contacts. In BBC reports of the forced evacuation of the protest site, he is the only protestor named and quoted as an eyewitness (BBC 2005). Unlike the other leaders, Napoleon is in his mid-forties, married and the father of three children, one of whom was born at the protest. It appears that in the final hour when negotiations were thought to be settled, this man's dissenting voice resonated with a considerable number of demonstrators. One possible explanation for this phenomenon may lie in Napoleon's culturally more legitimate stature in terms of masculine authority. In the end, his voice won out. Demonstrators stayed in the park past the deadline set by UNHCR and Egyptian authorities. Negotiations broke down, and the site was forcibly evacuated resulting in at least 27 deaths and numerous injuries.

Future Concerns

One noted anthropologist has commented, "[W]hile 'experience' is usefully employed to discuss meaningful actions from the most ordinary to the extraordinary, we expect the more intense occasions to have a point, even to carry a message" (Abrahams 1986: 62). After the horror of deaths and beatings, what was the point of this protest? What message have participants and leaders discerned in these events?

In follow-up interviews with protest leaders, several notable perspectives have surfaced. First of all, some of the organizers were not even present at the site when protestors were removed. While not casting doubt on the legitimacy of their experiences, it should be noted that their stories are vignettes of intended heroism thwarted by circumstances. One was detained by police before he could reach the park and was eventually taken to a detention facility. Another tried to make his way back to the site but was not allowed to get close enough to join his fellow protestors. He wishes he could have been there with them, but in the end he was denied the chance to

share in their collective fate. Other leaders are recasting events in a positive light by focusing on new friendships made during the protest, greater awareness of rights, dissolution of tribal and political differences and the hopes expressed of wanting to start new lives. At the same time, their regrets are most telling. When asked to list mistakes, they mention underestimating group differences that led to problems in representation. In hindsight, they would have pursued the support and approval of older Sudanese community leaders. They also realize the consequences of not having a backup plan and believe protest may not have been the best approach to solving problems. Learning from mistakes is valuable, but learning at the expense of lives is regrettable. If there is a message, it would seem to be that desperation and motivation can accomplish a great deal. If there is a point, it should be that even the best intentions have unforeseeable consequences. To end on something of a bittersweet note, these same young protest leaders are still meeting with UNHCR and claim the agency intends to do what it can for protest survivors.

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