Arab Americans:

Between Conflicting Definitions of Belonging

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As a proud-to-be Arab American woman who has resided in Lebanon for the past few years, my interest was immediately peaked when I heard that an issue of *Al-Raida* was to be dedicated to "Arab diaspora women". I could not help but wonder who exactly would be represented in the issue because, as I have learned, what the category "Arab Women" refers to and how exactly they are defined for many among Arab diasporic communities often differs with the more commonly accepted definitions in the Arab region. Of course, nothing is clear-cut when it comes to identity. Individuals of diverse ethnic, religious or cultural backgrounds often identify in numerous ways. There are, however, general patterns that can be discerned in how communities are defined or categorized amongst Arab American populations and those in the Arab Middle East; and it is the differences in these definitions that conflict with one another in rather fundamental ways. I have personally learned just exactly how different these ways of defining who is who are as an American of Arab descent whose mother is Lebanese but father is not (nor is he of any Arab heritage for that matter) and who has been living in Lebanon for the past three years. I made the naïve mistake when I first arrived of thinking that it would be perfectly fine for me to be just as proud to identify with my maternal affiliation as with my father's. I have been chided, berated, scolded, and corrected for this assertion more times than I can count.

From my own experience living here, I have watched other children of Arab heritage welcomed, including those who have only one parent of Arab heritage like myself but who were fortunate enough to have had that parent be their father. I have watched them welcomed even if they, like me, did not grow up here, were not born here, and do not speak Arabic as a first language or even at all for that matter. None of these factors seemed to prevent them from "being" Lebanese, or Palestinian or Syrian as it were; although, these same factors were often cited to me as the reasons why it was that I could not be. I ended up spending much of my time as a graduate student searching out answers to questions this experience raised. The experience of being accepted as an Arab among the diaspora in America (and often in other "Western" countries where I had spent time) while having been more or less excluded from consideration, either as Lebanese or Arab, while in Lebanon. The entire process of learning who I was and was not according to different people was both tiring and frustrating.

In my attempt to answer certain questions, others have arisen. I have often wondered if, with such different definitions of inclusion, it is possible to be an Arab woman or an Arab for that matter if certain members within the greater community reject her as such? Who exactly constitutes the Arab diaspora? Can one possibly presume to study Arab diaspora women's experiences when we cannot answer the most basic of questions as to who these women are?

For most persons reading this article, it is well known that it is male lines of descent, or patrilineality, which rein supreme in the Arab world. Based on gendered inequalities then, who is defined as belonging to specific Arab peoples and cultures, such as Palestinian, Omani, Lebanese, Egyptian, etc.? Moreover, who belongs to the larger over arching ethno-cultural category of the Arab people? Who results from this specific form of descent? As such, this mode of defining communities according to paternal affiliation affects the entire diasporic community: how it is defined, who is included, and who is excluded.

The issue of who is considered a member of any one of the many Arab peoples and/or part of the larger, more general ethnic category designated Arab is often confused with the issue of acquiring legal nationality to specific Arab states. Of course, the overlap and confusion is to be expected since the nationality laws in most Arab states are, in fact, the legal expression of the practice of patrilineality with regard to defining who the citizens of individual states are. These laws that exclude women in most Arab states from passing on their nationality to their husbands and children were originally based on European legal codes, specifically French and British, which privileged men over women and favored patrilineal descent.[1] However, the problem of defining who an Arab is cannot simply be reduced to or confused with the question of who may have access to passports in Arab countries and who cannot; nevertheless, the definitions of belonging and how it is that people are grouped into different communities whether ethnic or religious, according to paternal ties, has existed in the region long before contemporary nation-states and their nationality laws ever did.

The unequal access to nationality between men and women in Arab states creates a very specific set of hardships for Arab women nationals married to foreign men and their families, especially those who live in the women's country of origin, as it prevents these women in almost all Arab states from passing on their nationality to their children and husbands. This inequality limits their education, career and economic opportunities, while also restricting their civic duties, rights, and privileges. Emotional distress, too, takes its toll, as it is often deeply hurtful to many of these women and their children to have to watch the foreign wives of their male compatriots receive the citizenship, along with their children, and with it the privileges, rights, and responsibilities associated while they themselves are excluded.

It must be understood, though, that these nationality codes, which preclude women in every Arab country from full and equal access to the nationality rights their male compatriots enjoy, is but one manifestation of the highly pervasive cultural practice that privileges male lines of descent in transmitting identity. As such, it is also employed in defining other aspects of an individual's identity or, at least, their perceived identity: It is often the practice in many Arab states that one's official religious identity, village of origin, and even political allegiances at times, are defined in the same manner. Obviously, each of these issues raise their own separate set of concerns: one's legal religious status, taken from one's father's religion (or one's father's father for that matter), affects which laws of personal status — marriage, divorce, inheritance and custody — they will be subject to in most Arab states, regardless of what individuals may personally believe in or practice. Legally delineating citizens' villages of origin this way can translate into issues of electoral representation.

Therefore, it is from this general practice of passing on identity through the paternal line that defining who belongs to the ethno-cultural category of the Arab people extends. An Arab child then, whether in the region or in the diaspora, is one of an Arab father, regardless of the mother, according to the logic of patrilineality. Children of Arab women whose father is not Arab are thus excluded from being considered Arab and as such are further excluded from constituting part of the Arab diaspora. In the words of a long-time and well-established Arab feminist who once told me in conversation, "it is both unscientific and illogical."

Within the United States of America, however, the prominence of bilateral patterns of descent have often meant that children of Arab mothers can just as readily define themselves in terms of their mothers' ethnicity as their fathers', thus situating themselves firmly within the Arab American community. Obviously, this is in stark contrast to the Arab practice of patrilineality. This is not to say that the practice of employing bilateral modes of descent within the United States emerged because of any commitment to gender equality. On the contrary, it most likely had little to do with it. It is more likely that the profound racism of European American society towards African slaves in the then-colonies and their descendants in present-day America contributed to the predominance of individuals defining their ethnic or "racial" identity according to either parent without gender-based distinction. One need only be reminded of the infamous "one-drop of blood" rule to know how deeply rooted racism was and is in America. This so-called "rule" was based on such profound fears of the "contamination" of "white blood" with that of the slaves that only "one-drop" of African blood was sufficient to categorize a person as Black.

American history is replete with examples of the deep-seeded racism that characterizes American society. Undoubtedly, this has contributed to American definitions of belonging and means of exclusion as the proliferation of anti-miscegenation laws in America during the 18th and 19th centuries testifies to, and which, it should be added, were not fully repealed from all states until as late as 2000. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 suspended all Chinese immigration to America until 1943, and serves as another example, while the internment of Americans of Japanese ancestry, whose loyalty was deemed suspect and so interned because of their "enemy alien ancestry", is yet another. Obviously, this historically racist method of privileging certain Americans because of their European ancestry and excluding others also affects the Arab communities of the United States, especially in a post-9/11 America.

With the rise of the civil rights movement in America in the early 1960s, activists publicly touted the ideal that America consists equally of all of its diverse ethnic and racial communities who were just as human and as American as their fellow citizens of European descent, and as such deserved nothing less than full and equal rights. Even in a nation with such profound historic racism, Americans with diverse heritages now assert their racial and ethnical origins with pride, with dignity, and with the awareness that their communities' contributions to the United States and their histories are just as valid as those of their compatriots of European ancestries.

The problem the differences in definitions of who an Arab is among the Arab American community and among Arabs within the Middle East is further complicated by the different ways in which an American is defined. Generally speaking, Arab patrilineality operates in a way that cannot easily comprehend dual identities. Apparently, it seems to preclude the possibility of belonging to other ethnicities, or at least takes precedence over them. This is where concepts of race intersect with patrilineality: The term American, or what is often referred to as "purely" American, "America-American" or "real" American, as I have heard used over and over within the Middle East, is most commonly understood by many in the Arab region to mean those Americans of European descent or, more crudely put, "White".

What this means at the end of the day for Arab Americans is that all of them, from those who emigrated yesterday and are proud to be citizens to those whose roots go back over one hundred years, are really perceived only as Arabs who, as if often said in Arabic, "*byaishoo bi America*" (live in America). They may have the citizenship but according to this logic, they are never fully American. In the same vein, Mexican Americans, Chinese Americans, and other non-European Americans are often categorized solely according to their ethnic origins as opposed to also being considered "real Americans", as the expression goes. This definition of American is one that is rather offensive to the plethora of non-European ethnic and cultural communities of Americans in the United States today, even if the injury is not intentional. By employing this definition of American, the racially exclusive definitions of American historically employed within the United States are further strengthened. Furthermore, it only helps to reinforce those attitudes held by too many Americans today that articulate fear of and superiority over both Arabs and Muslims, including Arab and Muslim Americans, perceiving them as an untrustworthy population within American society. Such racially exclusive criteria for being American should also make us as Arabs, whether in the diaspora or within the Middle East, question our own community's racial prejudices towards others.

It has been my experience that among many Arab Americans, especially those second generation Americans and beyond, that the term American does not refer to any one ethnic group nor is it something that can be genetically transmitted. It is not something that comes from their fathers alone nor does it refer solely to those Americans of European heritage. It does not necessarily or automatically preclude any other form of cultural identification. Instead, Americans of Arab heritage are publicly asserting themselves as exactly that — Arab Americans. They are nurturing the growth of a political community that would help to strengthen their long-established cultural community that has been part of American society for over 130 years. They are doing this even in a post-9/11 America that only seems to demonize Arab and Muslim Americans more and more, often questioning their loyalties as American citizens and chipping away at their and all Americans' civil liberties.

Arab Americans attempt to nurture a burgeoning and growing political community that will acknowledge and address their history as part of greater American history. In doing so, they lobby for improved civil rights for Arab Americans, as well as other Middle Eastern and Muslim American populations from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and push for improved US relations with the Middle East, of which the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the war in Iraq are crucial components. However, such exclusive criteria can be detrimental and self-defeating.

Such exclusive definitions are also very hurtful: They are hurtful to those who are proud of their Arab culture(s) and history. They are hurtful to those who proudly identify, not necessarily as formal citizens per se, but socially, culturally, and even emotionally with their cultural heritage and ethnic origins and who do not see that influence weaker, less present, or less influential solely because it came to them from their mothers as opposed to their fathers. They are so very hurtful to all of those women, their spouses and children who are treated as second-class citizens in Arab states. It is a very painful experience for so many of those Arab women and their children whose fathers are not nationals of their mothers' countries to be so cruelly excluded either from legal, social, and political rights within Arab states/or from the cultural community of their heritage. Consequently, it is very hurtful for them to watch foreign wives of Arab men along with their children be so much more easily welcomed into the fold in a way, at least, in which their families may never be welcomed. As many Americans of Arab backgrounds attempt to strengthen and maintain connections with the Arab region, it is both hurtful and disheartening to so many of them to be so swiftly rejected by many members of what they consider their own communities.

As the field of Arab diaspora studies grows, a very important question to ask is just how the “Arab diaspora” will be defined. Will we choose to opt for a nationality requirement, by which only those who have or may have access to a passport to an Arab state will be included? If this were to be the case, would children of Arab heritage from their mother's line be excluded while women of non-Arab descent married to Arab men are included? Will there be a linguistic requirement imposed instead, effectively excluding all generations throughout the diaspora who do not speak Arabic? Will we use it to refer only to those first generation Arab men and women from the region who emigrated abroad? Will we include their children or only those of male emigrants and their descendants? We must ask ourselves if we will redress or maintain such gender-based criteria that excludes children of Arab women alone from being included as Arabs and part of the diaspora and, in so doing, render them, render us, our histories, and experiences invisible?

Endnotes

*Jehan Mullin obtained her MA from CAMES at the American University of Beirut. At present, she is working on an oral history project of the evacuation of Arab Americans from Lebanon during the 2006 summer war. She is also a member of the Arab American Institute, Association of Middle Eastern Women's Studies and active with the American Friends Service Committee.

1. It is also worth noting that so strong was the practice of patrilineality among the British historically that it was not until 1983 that British women could pass on their nationality to their children by the right of descent. Until then, only British men could pass on British nationality, to one generation only, granted that they were married.

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