Exploring Identity Changes of Sudanese Refugee Women in Cairo:
Liminality and the Frustrating Struggle between Stability and Change

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Introduction

Kunz (1973) argued that refugees are a distinct social type, whereas Coker (2004) referred to Victor Turner's (1967) influential work on liminality to highlight the inherent 'transitional' nature of a refugee's identity. It is an identity that is essentially liminal – a state characterized by ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy. Refugees are faced with the loss of patterns that sustained previously established identities and new factors that require effective adaptation and identity transformations. The interplay between these factors results in tremendous identity struggles. Not surprisingly, identity confusion is one of the most common stressors facing refugees (Baker, 1983; Stein, 1986).

This article explores identity changes experienced by Sudanese refugee women in Cairo, who, like all refugees, are a heterogeneous group (Baker, 1983; Harrell-Bond, 2002). The focus here is on shared experiences in this diverse group of women. Tens or even hundreds of thousands of Sudanese refugees have come to Egypt as a result of the decades of conflict in Sudan. The wars in Sudan have partly resulted from ethnic, religious, and inter-tribal tensions (Lesch, 1998; Johnson, 2003). Egypt is one of the primary destinations for Sudanese fleeing war. Many arrive in Egypt with the intention of applying to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for refugee status, in the hope of third-country resettlement (Coker, 2004). The Sudanese refugees in Cairo are heterogeneous, consisting of people from a variety of social classes, age groups, and ethnic backgrounds. Many have been refugees for years. They live in groups among the local population in Cairo's poor districts or urban slums. The majority of them are illegally employed and their living conditions are dire (Moro, 2004). They have very little protection and are often subjected to arbitrary detention and discrimination (Briant & Kennedy, 2004; Mahmoud, 2007). Like other refugee groups, the Sudanese refugees in Cairo vary with regards to the extent to which their migration was forced (Westermeyer, 1989). However, many arrive with stories of detention and harassment by Sudanese security forces. Most Sudanese refugees enter Egypt with visas that expire after one month and continue to stay illegally until their refugee status is determined by UNHCR (Briant & Kennedy, 2004).

An important issue facing many Sudanese refugees is the indefinite waiting period in Egypt. Living in a transitional state, without knowledge of the final destination, causes emotional distress. This constant state of waiting is made more difficult by the severe break with their previously established identity. In Sudan, people were part of a social order in which their identities were entrenched, practiced, and rendered meaningful. Coming to Egypt changes familiar patterns, practices, and groups, which, in turn, affects self-perception and the construction of identity.

As a point of departure, it is important to note that it is difficult to separate changes in gender-based identity from other identity changes experienced by this group of women. As described in the "Multiple Identities" framework (Gregg, 1998), the presence and constant interplay between multiple identities in an individual's life must be acknowledged. Therefore, besides being "Sudanese", "refugees", and "women", the Sudanese refugee women in Cairo also have religious, ethnic, and other identities that simultaneously and dynamically play significant roles in their lives. The gender identity transformations are experienced in the shadow of other identity changes. They occur in a transitional period and constitute part of the general identity transformation all refugees experience.

It will be argued that the identities of Sudanese refugee women in Cairo are essentially liminal, ambiguously trapped in the struggle between stability and change. As in any other culture, being female in Sudan is defined by sets of values, roles, and practices that constitute pillars on which identities are founded, supported, and rendered meaningful. Displacement shakes these pillars, challenging and constraining the sustainability of previous definitions of identity. While Sudanese refugee women strive to retain the values that previously formed the basis of their identities as women and persons, they are confronted with a new reality that imposes restrictions on and challenges to those identities. This results in the psychological distress of identity conflict and confusion. This article will detail how such identity issues are experienced, expressed, and reinforced in three overlapping domains: the domain of the body, the domain of productivity, and the domain of the social sphere.

Methodology

This article is based on PhD fieldwork conducted between June 2006 and January 2007, piloted by an earlier study for an MPhil degree in 2004-2005. The research explores how Sudanese refugees in Cairo use culture to manage the identity and life changes they experience as a result of forced migration. The fieldwork was qualitative (consisting of focus groups, in-depth interviews, and ethnographic analysis) and included male and female Sudanese refugees in Cairo. During the research process, the refugees' lives in both Sudan and Egypt were extensively discussed.

The data used for the present article is based on ethnography and thirty-one in-depth interviews with Sudanese refugee women. The women's ages ranged between nineteen and fifty-three and the length of their stay in Egypt varied between one and eight years. They were diverse in terms of marital status, religion, ethnicity, tribe and region of origin, education, occupation, and official UNHCR refugee status. Their commonality was that, at the time when the interviews were conducted, they were all 'waiting'

indefinitely in Egypt for a decision to be made about their future.

The fact that this diverse group of women is treated as a single entity does not undermine the ethnic and cultural diversity within the group. The circumstances of these refugee women have resulted in the emergence of a new group identity – that of a 'Sudanese refugee'. This emergent identity is constantly reinforced in Egypt by social groups (e.g. by some Egyptians and certain aid agencies, etc) who treat them as a homogenous group (Sudanese refugees), rather than acknowledging the range of factors contributing to their identities (e.g. westerners, northerners, southerners, easterners, Muslims, Christians, Beja, Dinka, Arab, African, etc.). This, in turn, has impacted the way in which refugees have come to identify themselves, proving that "identity is as much about the process of being identified as it is about the process of identification" (Duveen, 2001, p. 259). This new identity is further reinforced by the common experiences Sudanese refugees share in Egypt.

The Domain of the Body

The body is one of the domains through which identity changes are caused or expressed. It has been argued that the body can be the locus of identity transformations (Coker, 2004), and, as will be shown, the body not only represents these transformations, but also expresses and reinforces them.

The invasion of the body through sexual violence is a traumatic event that affects the very core of a Sudanese girl or woman's identity. As in many cultures, in Sudan a woman's dignity and moral standing is based on her virginity before marriage.[1] Many Sudanese women experience sexual violence before coming to Egypt (Verney, 1995). In particular, rape is sometimes the primary reason why a woman or a girl decides to flee Sudan and becomes a refugee. The story of Hend, a 25 year old, single, Sudanese refugee girl, exemplifies the impact that rape can have on a girl's sense of femininity, dignity, and humanity. Hend's story illustrates how the body can become the locus of suffering, a symbol of the loss of femininity.

Hend is an intelligent, opinionated, and personable young lady. She came alone to Egypt a year and a half ago. Hend is a survivor. Her experience is full of admirable courage and resilience. When she began her studies at a university in Sudan, she became politically active. She was arrested and detained four times before she decided to flee. She was subjected to increased abuse and torture each time she was detained (from psychological to physical, culminating in sexual violence and rape). Following each detention, Hend would courageously return to her university and speak about her experience. However, her last detention, during which she was raped, was the final straw. This incident affected the core of her identity, damaging what she valued most as a Sudanese woman. As she explains:

> ... After what happened to me [i.e. the rape], I couldn't stay. If I had a fiancé in Sudan, he wouldn't understand what I went through. I couldn't go back to my house or university. There was nothing left for me there...

The rape was an invasion of the embodied value of chastity, resulting in what she believed to be a forced disconnect between her and her community. It marked the beginning of her journey outside Sudan, a story of suffering and dehumanization.

1. See Cloudsley, 1983; Boddy, 1989.

For Hend, her body continued to be the locus of identity transformation, as shown below:

> ... (I) started working [in Egypt] because I was on my own and needed money. This is a whole other story of suffering. After having been a top university student, I am working now as a housecleaner, which is humiliating... And [I] sleep on the floor... People treat [me] like [I am] not human. [I] and a piece of furniture are one and the same for them. I work six days a week and only come back home for one night. I spend the rest of the week constantly working ...

The above excerpt describes her feelings of dehumanization which result from a significant identity transformation: from student to housecleaner. The lack of mental stimulus and the physical stress made her feel that she is no longer 'human' or able to enjoy the luxury of 'free time', but a machine that needs to be recharged to resume its task. When asked how she spends her free time, she responded:

> There is no free time. I only take a day off from work and I come back, sleep, and do the chores. When I'm done, I worry about the transportation back to work... There is no time for anything. I feel like a machine.

In this case, the body has become the locus of psychological distress and dehumanization, and the bearer of significant identity changes. The shift from 'citizen' to 'refugee', the impact of rape on her identity and on her perception of her own femininity, and the dehumanization she experienced at work reflect the severity of her experience and her marked sense of loss. As shown above, these experiences, in Hend's case, are felt and expressed through the body.

Another way in which the body acts as the locus for identity transformation for Sudanese refugee women in Cairo is through physical self-presentation. In parts of Sudan, womanhood and femininity are enforced by the performance of beautification rituals and clothing. In the cities, women typically wear the Sudanese robe (*tobe*), paint *henna* on their hands and feet, use particular scents, and perform the *dukhan* ritual (a sauna-like 'smoke' bath to cleanse and purify their skin). These processes are essential to a woman's sense of femininity and personal beauty. Participants proudly and nostalgically described the importance of these processes for Sudanese women; as Basma explained, "... We can't live without those things. Oh my God!... every woman should have those things."

Sudanese refugee women in Cairo strive to continue to practice these rituals but it is difficult. The unavailability of many items and the high cost of those items that are available make their acquisition difficult. In addition, Sudanese women have less time and energy in Egypt to perform such rituals because, in addition to house chores, many Sudanese refugee women work long hours. Housing conditions also impede women's ability to practice beautification rituals. In Sudan most of the houses are one storey, thus women can easily dig the holes in the ground used to perform the *dukhan* ritual. In Cairo, many of the refugee families live together in single rooms in apartment buildings. It is thus difficult to dig holes in the ground and to find the privacy needed for such a ritual.

The above factors have resulted in the decreased practice of these rituals in Egypt. Women that can perform the *dukhan* ritual face another difficulty:

> Hala: Do you do [the *dukhan*] everyday?
> Basma: No, it depends on when I'm going out. Because it's not good... the smell is so strong, and not all Sudanese women do it here... because this smell is not common here. If men smell it, it would be a disaster! [i.e. seductive].

Despite the various difficulties mentioned, the interviewees insist on the value of such rituals which are basic to the expression of their femininity as Sudanese women. One of the most common and easily retained aspects of self-presentation is the Sudanese robe and henna, which many Sudanese women continue to wear in Egypt. Doing so, however, has its own connotations; in addition to their skin color, wearing the Sudanese robe and *henna* makes them stand out as Sudanese. Arguably, these beautification practices are used to reconfirm personhood and womanhood for Sudanese refugee women in Egypt. For example, Becker (1997) notes:

> Clothes do more than simply cover and fit the body. They are an extension of the body, an extension that proclaims personhood, because people choose clothes that represent who they are. Without such reminders of identity, a major linkage with the known body is dissolved, and a guidepost of continuity is destroyed. (p. 138)

Once again, the body becomes the locus of identity changes and the medium through which identity is expressed and reinforced. The constraints experienced by women attempting to continue practicing beautification rituals, as used in Sudan, reflect the broader feelings of cultural estrangement. Yet, they continue to struggle to retain their femininity, as reinforced by traditional rituals and clothing, while simultaneously adjusting to new constraints.

The Domain of Productivity

For the purpose of this article, productivity is defined as the roles and values which shape a Sudanese girl or woman's identity as a productive citizen. This has a variety of forms in Sudan, including specific duties for students, housewives, and career women. Displacement has a severe impact on the refugee women's identities as productive persons, resulting in injury to their dignity and the redefinition of selfhood. The domain of productivity is the site of "degrading" and distressing identity transformations experienced within the family or through the body (as was seen in the case of Hend). Again, refugee women get trapped in the psychological struggle between stability and change.

Due to the legal restrictions on refugees in Egypt (Moro & Lamua, 1998), it is almost impossible for many to find decent jobs. Many have to struggle in the informal sector or sell merchandise on the street. It is particularly difficult for men to find jobs and the few available jobs are low-paying and physically demanding. Women have better chances to find employment in the informal sector. Many women work as housecleaners or wander the tourist streets of Cairo as *hannanas* (women who paint *henna*). Thus, women become the primary 'breadwinners', which results in a pronounced shift in gender roles and, consequently, shatters gender identities. The majority of women see this shift in gender roles as degrading. For example, Eman proudly recalls that in Sudan she was 'a housewife'. In Cairo, Eman has been

forced to work as a housecleaner to help her husband and family. She described her experience as follows:

> In Sudan, it was different because I was not working. But when I first came here... I had to work to support my husband. I looked for a job and... [the] only job that was available and paid better was cleaning houses. So, by God, I worked. By God, you know when I am working, my tears fall on the floor. I wipe the floor and I wipe my tears with it. I mean, this has really affected me, by God. [Gets very tearful]. I really suffered because of this...

This experience clearly represents a shift from Eman's previous identity as a 'dignified housewife'. However, she justifies her current condition by stressing that she is working to help her husband, thus framing the experience within the higher duty of being a supportive wife and mother. This identity shift is not only distressing because of its personal effect but also because it prevents her from carrying out other mothering activities. For example, Eman bitterly explains how her physically demanding job as a housecleaner has affected her health and undermined her role as a mother:

> I worked for two years... And I got sick, I wouldn't lie to you... I was bleeding, and I had back pain, and pain in the joints. So I lied down for a while. But I got treated, thank God, and I am better now. The doctor told me either to work less... or quit... Thank God, until now I've continued to work every other day. But by God, I am tired. Everyday I go to work, you know, when I come back home, my daughter tells me, "Mama, come kiss me". But I ask her to come because I am unable to move. My back hurts and I need to lie down immediately... The following day, thank God, I usually feel better. I cook for [the children] and I do anything they need...

This excerpt highlights the inherent liminality of Eman's identity as a refugee mother. She feels that she must help her husband and provide for her family. The only way she can fulfil this responsibility is to do what she thinks is a 'degrading' job. This job is also harming her health and making it impossible for her to meet the standard of the ideal mother and housewife that she set for herself. Like many other refugee women, she is trapped in the struggle between stability and change. This process involves identity challenges and role conflicts that leave her physically and emotionally distressed. Her description of physical illness, resulting from her demanding job, also illustrates how the body can act as the bearer of identity transformations, overlapping the domain of the body and the family.

Another way through which the family acts as the locus of identity transformations is through procreation. In many parts of Sudan, one of a woman's primary roles is to bear children.[2] Sudanese refugee women continue to embrace the value of procreation. While this reinforces their womanhood, as previously defined, it also puts tremendous stress on them and their entire family. Many parents worry about their children's safety on the street. Many complain about the lack of education for their children and worry about what the future will hold for uneducated persons. Many lament that their children are rapidly internalizing the Egyptian culture and losing their own. Still, parents continue to have children because procreation is a core value, sustaining their personhood in the face of inevitable change. Again, the women are caught in a struggle between stability and change. Having many children is an important value,

2. See Boddy (1989) on a northern Sudanese community and Deng (1972) on the Dinka of southern Sudan.

which secures their womanhood and personhood, but the circumstances in Egypt make fulfilling the related duties and obligations very challenging.

Domain of the Social Sphere

Social life is another domain through which identity transformations, caused by displacement, are lived and reinforced. Social life in Sudan is full of hospitality (Voll & Voll, 1985). Relationships in the extended family and tribal and social networks in Sudan were based on ideals of solidarity and mutual support. Part of a woman's life and identity in Sudan is expressed by her social role in the community. This entails her participation in social gatherings and networks. These social interactions not only provide entertainment but they also have important social functions. An example is the 'coffee ritual', nostalgically described by many women. This ritual typically took place at noon, after the women had finished their chores. One woman would host all of the women in her extended family and neighbourhood for coffee (this was regularly rotated). Each woman would bring an ingredient to make coffee and snacks. During the gathering, folkloric songs are sung and there are various forms of entertainment. However, in addition to its entertainment value, the coffee ritual provided community support for those in trouble or need. Problems were discussed and a *sundooq* (donation box) was passed around, in order to collect money to help those in need. In addition to the coffee ritual, missed by many in Egypt, a woman and man in Sudan are socially responsible for visiting their neighbours and family, hosting guests, and supporting others during events.

The absence of important support networks in Egypt causes refugee women great difficulties. Although support networks have been formed in Cairo, they exist on a much smaller scale and the extent of their funding is limited. Refugee women note that maintaining the coffee ritual in Cairo is difficult because of the lack of financial resources to cater for a gathering, the lack of physical space, and because in Cairo many women work whereas in Sudan they were housewives.

Another important and commonly mentioned obstacle is the difficulty of dealing with Sudanese from other backgrounds in Cairo. This creates identity confusion for women, reflected in their difficulty to relate to other Sudanese and results in the lack of social activities and gatherings. This has left many women confused and socially isolated. When asked what she misses in Sudan, one participant responded with the following:

> ... Here, there's no intermingling. I sometimes feel sad because of this. Even within the Sudanese community, there's no intermingling... I don't know much about my neighbour, and she doesn't know much about me. In Sudan, it is different... You see, I shut my door like this in isolation, because I'm the only person from Darfur in this place. They are all from the Nuba Mountains, and when I visit them, they speak their *Rotana* [tribal language].

As evidenced by the above example, the social sphere is another domain through which identity transformations are lived and reinforced. The aforementioned participant complained that there was no intermingling within the 'Sudanese community'. Yet, she acknowledged that her neighbours were women from a different background in Sudan. This illustrates the identity confusion which results from changes in ethnic identities taking place in Egypt. Specifically, the new group identity,

'Sudanese refugees', may have given refugee women expectations about their social lives in Egypt, such as a belief that they would be able to develop relationships and have smooth interaction with other Sudanese groups. However, in reality, they are perpetually faced with mixed messages: Are they 'Sudanese refugees' or are they members of their respective regions or tribes? Or both? What should their expectations be? And how can they avoid estrangement and disappointment?

Conclusion

This article attempted to examine how the 'liminal' or 'transitional' identity of a refugee is experienced by Sudanese refugee women in Cairo. These women are experiencing identity changes on many levels: from identifying themselves with particular Sudanese tribes or regions to adapting to the 'Sudanese refugee' identity; from productive citizens to refugees; and from students/house wives/career women to housecleaners. In all of the above examples, refugee women are caught between the need to establish control over their lives and maintain continuity with their past identities, and the need to respond to the changed circumstances they face in Egypt. Should they give up their previously established identities and adopt new ones? Should they use the little control they have in their present situation to maintain continuity with their past? Or should they do both? And what does their future hold?

Identity changes were explored through the overlapping domains of the body, the spheres of productivity, and the social sphere. Each of these domains has been explored as locations in which identity transformations are lived, manifested, and reinforced.

An important factor to briefly consider is the way in which identity struggles are managed by refugee women. How do refugee women cope with this frustrating liminality? The answer to this question deserves a study, in its own right. However, it is worth noting that liminal or transitional periods are typically addressed through processes of meaning-making and the recreation of control (Becker, 1997). Although this process can be idiosyncratic and dependent on personality, psychology, and other life circumstances, it is fair to say that many women are able to give meaning to their experiences by integrating identity conflicts into larger value systems. Many are motivated by the value of providing for their children and securing them a better life. Many take solace in the belief that this is part of God's 'plan', which helps them accept their situation. In all cases, giving greater meaning to their experiences by framing them within a larger value-structure makes it easier for women to cope with their situation.

The dynamics of identity changes discussed in this article emphasize the fact that identities are lived and felt. They have a real presence in everyday life and are experienced at the level of the body, the mind, and the social sphere. They are constantly in motion. Understanding them requires understanding the contexts through which they are manifested and experienced.

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