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Between Field and Text: Emerging Voices in Egyptian Social Science

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ETHICAL DILEMMAS OF RESEARCH AMONG SUDANESE IN EGYPT: PRODUCING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE PUBLIC AND THE PRIVATE

ANITA HÄUSERMANN FÁBOS

This paper is an attempt to grapple with the ethical issues that have framed my ethnographic research among northern Muslim Sudanese communities in Cairo¹. Any social science project necessarily gives rise to a set of ethical questions regarding the public climate for research as well as the researcher's personal and political relationship with his or her research community. Social scientists, and anthropologists in particular, have long contended with methodological and epistemological dilemmas stemming from power relations. Colonialism and gender, for example, have been increasingly recognized as systems within which the researcher played a role, launching critical challenges to old-school claims of objectivity by such scholars as Talal Asad (1973) and Peggy Golde (1986). Researcher statuses such as "insider/outsider" or "halfie" became important points of entry into the debates over how knowledge is produced by social scientists².

As an anthropologist, I have followed professional code of ethics developed by the American Anthropological Association (AAA 1971) in the relationships I have formed with northern Sudanese living in Egypt. According to this statement of principles, anthropological ethics entails

¹ My fieldwork was generously funded by the Population Council through its MEAwards Program in Population and the Social Sciences and by a Social Science Research Council dissertation fellowship. This article originated at a workshop sponsored by the MEAwards program to evaluate its 19 years of support to researchers. I am grateful to Seteney Shami, Moushira el-Geziri, and Barbara Ibrahim for their advice and support over my years of research in Cairo. I especially thank Seteney Shami, Khalid Medani, Elizabeth Bishop, and Alison McGandy for their insightful comments on previous drafts.

² See Narayan (1993) and Altorki and El-Solh (1988) for useful discussions of fieldwork for cultural "insiders." The term "halfie" was coined by Kirin Narayan and popularized by Lila Abu-Lughod to describe researchers who have one parent with connections to their fieldwork community.

accepting that my primary responsibility is to those I study, putting them first in any conflict of interest and protecting their "physical, social, and psychological welfare and...[honoring their] dignity and privacy." Additionally, anthropologists are exhorted to maintain a commitment to "candor and to truth in the dissemination of research results," recognize their "responsibility for the good reputation of the discipline [of anthropology] and its practitioners," and finally, to accept their responsibility to students, sponsors, and to their own and host governments.

At the time I was conducting my research (1995-1997), however, I began to recognize that in addition to the methodological issues related to fulfilling my professional responsibilities, my research was shaped epistemologically by specific ethical considerations related to my choice of research topic. The sensitive research climate in Egypt as it pertained to Sudan and Sudanese during the 1990s, a period of tremendous instability for Sudanese-Egyptian relations, gave rise to ethical issues regarding the protection of my informants, concern over my ability to speak and write freely, and the politics of representation. My own position as the wife of a member of the Sudanese community in Egypt added another dimension to pursuing my research. The question: Where does 'the field' begin and end? resonated strongly as my gendered experiences in research and marriage led me to a new understanding not just of my own fluid identity, but that of Sudanese making sense of the Cairo "borderzone" (Lavie and Swedenburg 1996). These considerations have framed my research project in ways that have led me toward a deeper understanding of how and why Sudanese ethnicity in the context of displacement in Egypt is enacted within the ambiguous discourse of gender propriety.

Northern Sudanese in Egypt

Much of my research regarding 'northern' Sudanese identity in Cairo was geared towards understanding the complex social and historical context for Sudanese ambivalence towards Egypt as a site of displacement. I chose to study the numerically larger community of Sudanese from the northern central riverain region of Sudan rather than southern or western Sudanese because of their historical ties to the Egyptian state and economic and kinship ties to Egyptian society, and because expressions of nationalism by

this dominant political class are perceived to be synonymous with 'northern' Sudanese identity³.

The tendency of laypersons to use the labels 'north' and 'south' to refer to the major political divisions in Sudan mask the cultural and political complexity of both regions. Like the 'south,' the 'north' is a historically constructed term, and describes the region from which Sudan's politically and economically dominant ethnic groups emerged in the 16th century (Funj Kingdom), bound together to a large degree by their shared adherence to Islam. These groups describe themselves as *qaba'il* (tribes) with 'Nubian' or 'Arab' identities, though some scholars refer to Arabs as "Arabized Nubians" (Holt and Daly 1988; Spaulding and Kapteijns 1991). They include the Nubian-identified Mahas, Danagla, and Kenuz and the Arab-identified Shaigiya, Ja'aliya, and Ja'afra⁴. Despite these ethnic divisions, however, Sudan's dominant elite incorporates all of these diversities, and a cultural identity drawing from both Nubian and Arab Sudanese ethnicities has emerged, resonating most loudly in Sudan's capital and center of power, Khartoum. It is particularly telling that southern Sudanese refer to all members of this dominant elite as Arabs, despite the Nubian roots and cultural attributes of the northern region as a whole. In Cairo, 'northern' Sudanese often refer to themselves as 'Sudanese' while labeling anyone from an ethnic group from the south a 'southerner.' For the purposes of this paper, I use 'northern' Sudanese to refer to members of Sudan's dominant elite.

I focused on two northern Sudanese communities in Cairo, one settled since the 1940s and one recently displaced, to explore expressions of the ethnic identity of a complex and fluid population. The settled Sudanese community in which I conducted fieldwork, located in the neighborhood of Ain Shams, dates back to when, prior to the 1952 Egyptian revolution, many Sudanese found work at British Army camps in the Suez Canal region

³ Since the 1989 coup in Sudan several thousand Sudanese from marginalized areas, most commonly provinces in southern and western Sudan, have fled to Egypt where they joined a handful of their fellows who had been studying at Egyptian universities. Their ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences with their Egyptian hosts render their identity more classically 'ethnic' than Sudanese from the north.

⁴For more on the tribal history of northern Sudan, see Holt and Daly (1988).

or with the Suez Canal Corporation itself. The Ain Shams neighborhood was actually established by a group of these Sudanese workers who stayed to raise families in Egypt, maintaining their Sudanese identity and nationality even today. Older members of this community look back nostalgically to a time when the borders between Egypt and Sudan were more blurred. Second- and third-generation members identify strongly as Sudanese⁵ although they also concede that they have absorbed some of the cultural characteristics of their Egyptian hosts. Dialect and clothing are two examples. Through education, the media, and personal relationships.

Many of my newly arrived northern Sudanese informants were also familiar with Egypt from their childhood holidays or university studies and expressed a certain pride in its past glories. The head of the Sudanese Communist party, Al-Tijani Al-Tayib, now in exile in Cairo, remembers demonstrating against the British with his Egyptian colleagues when a university student at Cairo University. For several decades, Sudanese nationals enjoyed residence, education, and business privileges, partly due to Egypt's commitment to Arab Unity and partly as a symbol of the special political relationship between Egypt and Sudan. Though the last of these entitlements, permanent residency for any Sudanese entering Egypt, was removed in 1995 (following the attempted assassination of the Egyptian president allegedly by Sudanese militants), Sudanese living in Egypt prior to that date are covered by a clause acknowledging their residency and do not require visas. Additionally, a continual flow of official assurances that Sudanese are welcome in Egypt are published in Egyptian newspapers and broadcast on TV, a sentiment echoed by the Egyptians with whom Sudanese come into daily contact. Several of my recently arrived informants told me that despite the problems they faced as displaced persons, Egypt was the one country in the Sudanese diaspora where they felt comfortable. Yet the circumstances of displacement have led Sudanese, consciously and unconsciously, to rethink basic tenets of their identity.

⁵Since citizenship is conferred patrilineally in both Egypt and Sudan, Sudanese in Egypt--whose marriage practices tend strongly towards endogamy--have maintained their nationality through the generations.

Gender, Propriety, and Ethnicity

In my dissertation I argue that northern Sudanese use the cultural concept of propriety, a concept shared by their Egyptian hosts, to negotiate a fluid and ambiguous 'ethnic' boundary as an alternative to demarcating a clearly ethnic identity based on 'difference.' In addition to propriety norms, northern Sudanese and Egyptians also share language, religion, and kinship ties. Meta-narratives, including Arab nationalism and the historical struggle against British colonialism, further blur the boundaries between the two. Propriety, for Sudanese, is manifested most notably in gender relations, since it is Sudanese perceptions of themselves as men and women that form the basis of their communal identity. My ethnographic research demonstrates that northern Sudanese immigrant groups in Cairo express their differences from Egyptians in terms of gendered behavior and beliefs at the household, community, civil society, and national levels.

However, Egyptians recognize the same gendered behavioral characteristics as being fundamental to their own national/cultural identity. Confusing the boundary further is the Egyptian historical discourse, long proclaimed by political parties and government officials and echoed in popular opinion, which claims that Egypt and Sudan are "one cultural, historical, and racial entity⁶." For northern Sudanese in Cairo, the propriety discourse has provided an ethnic vocabulary for resisting Egyptian hegemony while acknowledging their vested interests in Egypt.

In their adoption of such an ambiguous idiom through which to express difference, the Sudanese case illuminates the actual mechanics of constructing a fluid identity in a specific context. As one of my colleagues pointed out, the northern Sudanese that she knew in Sudan did not focus on propriety as a marker of identity like those displaced in Cairo. The experiences of Sudanese in Egypt and the particular trajectory of Sudanese-Egyptian relations have converged at this historical moment to form a Sudanese ethnicity that allows both Egyptians and Sudanese a margin of

⁶ This characterization of Egypt and Sudan appeared first in the 1942 platform of the Wafd party, and has been trotted out regularly over the last fifty-odd years in newspaper articles, official speeches, and pamphlets dealing with the Nile Valley.

flexibility in their dealings with each other. Each group uses a different 'dialect' to talk about the Sudanese presence in Egypt depending on their audience. Northern Sudanese in Cairo are both constrained by circumstances and persuaded by available choices to enact their ethnic identity differently than if they were in another locale.

Public and Private Frameworks for Knowledge

Most anthropologists recognize that their understanding of their research topic is revealed through different levels of knowledge production. For my study on Sudanese ethnicity in Cairo, I identified two: the legal/political aspects of my topic, and the personal considerations in deciding on gender as a sub-theme. I came to Cairo in 1994 to begin my dissertation research on ethnicity as negotiated by northern Sudanese communities in Egypt. I was aware early on in planning my project that obtaining the necessary research clearances from the Egyptian government might be a challenge. Non-sanctioned research on certain topical areas, such as Islamism, labor relations, religious minorities, or Sudanese-Egyptian relations often undermines state doctrine regarding what is best for the stability of Egyptian society and politics. Difficulties facing scholars wishing to focus on Sudan or Sudanese result from a combination of factors. These include, most recently, Egypt's politically strained relationship with the National Islamic Front (NIF) regime in Khartoum, its support of the Sudanese opposition movement in Cairo, and the growing number of displaced Sudanese in Egypt, as well as internal debates regarding non-citizens (Wassef 1997) and religious minorities (Ibrahim 1995). The matter of large populations of Sudanese residing in Egypt takes on a highly politicized profile and any research related to Sudan carried out in Egypt is deemed 'sensitive.' In fact, the director of an American grant-making program told me before I applied that, likelier than not, my grant was bound to be rejected "just for having the word 'Sudan' in the title."

This was the official, written reason given by the Ministry of Education when they refused my first attempt to obtain research clearance⁷. Certainly,

⁷In a letter informing me of this decision, Terry Walz, executive director of the American Research Center in Egypt, wrote: "The reasons given by the Ministry for this denial were that it was due to the 'sensitivity' of the subject matter and

several concerns of the Egyptian government were represented in this decision, including worries about cooperation between the Sudanese regime and anti-government Islamist groups in Egypt and the agendas of foreign researchers. However, it became clear over the course of my project, which I conducted carefully so as to meet Egyptian research requirements⁸, that Egypt's relationship with Sudan was more than just a sensitive research topic, but a fundamental socio-political issue contributing to Egypt's national identity. I came to realize that my research posed questions about the very nature of Sudanese-Egyptian differences that Egyptian officialdom might want to regulate, given the extreme historical importance of Sudan to Egypt, and that the 'concept' of Sudan might play an important role in the construction of Egyptian nationalism and national identity. I further understood, over the course of my research, that the interaction of Sudanese with Egyptian state and society on these terms was the basis for the ambiguous Sudanese ethnicity that my research revealed.

Naturally, I expected that the various audiences of my research would have different reactions to these conclusions, particularly since my main concern was to give priority to the Sudanese voices in Egypt that had been under-represented in Egyptian public discourse. Yet Egypt is my adopted home, the Egyptian government my host, and members of Egyptian society are my friends, relatives, and colleagues. Hence I was faced with the ethical dilemma of privileging one audience with over another; my northern Sudanese informants, with their conflicted attitudes towards their life in Cairo, had a very different stake in my research than Egyptian officials and intellectuals with their sensitivities as to how they were being represented internationally. Thus, the ethics of conducting this research without the explicit blessing of Egyptian officials became a trope for understanding the ambiguous nature of Sudanese identity and my own position at the junction of public and private knowledge.

'to avoid raising problems or conflicts with the Egyptian/Sudanese relations at the present time.'"

⁸ I designed my methodology specifically to avoid surveys, questionnaires, focus groups, and other techniques which require explicit review and permission from the Central Authority for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), concentrating in the main on visits to families, analysis of cultural products, and interaction with Sudanese in public arenas.

A subtheme that illuminated the gender framework of my research was my marriage, prior to the start of my project, to a Sudanese businessman living in Cairo. As has been the case for scholars conducting research in their own society (Altorki and El-Solh 1988), I was faced with the dilemma of figuring out the boundaries of my 'field'.⁹ I had carefully thought through the methodological pros and cons of working in a spouse's community, such as the advantage of easy access and acceptance as the wife of a community member, or the drawback of restricted movement as a person whose behavior reflected on her spouse as well as herself. Furthermore, I was prepared for the complexities that being labeled as an 'American' or 'foreigner' might hold for me, in terms of the variety of ways those labels could be read by people in the field. However, I was not prepared for the degree to which my personal position framed my research project and influenced my grasp of Sudanese gender ideology. Ethically, my research was very much shaped by the tension between my need to maintain a private, defined space, my 'home,' and my own ambiguous position in the field. Eventually, I understood that my responsibilities as a 'proper' wife were not so much in conflict with my researcher role as an extension of it; negotiating multiple positions in my daily life forced me to confront my own fluid identity and in the process, that of my Sudanese informants.

At the outset of my research, I intended to explore the Sudanese community discourse over the proper behaviors of men and women serving as boundary markers for Sudanese ethnicity in Egypt. Over the course of fieldwork, I learned that the content of these behaviors was often contested. I felt my professional responsibility to entail representing the different voices in these debates as fairly and accurately as I could. The fact that I became, through marriage, a member of the moral community I was studying served to heighten my perception of internal disputes over what was properly 'Sudanese' behavior. But my marriage, even as it represented an interface between male and female, 'East' and 'West,' and researcher and researched (among other polarities), would not have been able to accommodate all the different versions of gender propriety contained in the Sudanese community discourse.

⁹ These complexities are explored more fully in my article: "Problematizing Marriage: Minding My Manners in my Husband's Community" (forthcoming).

During my long-term relationships with the Sudanese community in Cairo and with my husband, I have experienced how the fact of my marriage has changed my understanding of cultural expectations regarding propriety and gender norms. While conducting field research, I was also a participant in the life of a Sudanese family, that of my husband, and I was responsible for comporting myself in a way that had implications far beyond my study. The process of learning to be a proper wife¹⁰ contributed dramatically to the specific character taken by my research on gender and ethnicity. Through 'minding my manners' as a gendered researcher and spouse, I began to recognize the discourse of propriety as a subtle ethnic boundary marker for the Sudanese communities in which I worked.

Multiple Discourses, Multiple Audiences

The ethnic dynamic that I explore in my research involves many strands of dialogue between the northern Sudanese communities of my study, their Egyptian hosts, and myself as an anthropologist. The many voices that have influenced my own impression of Sudanese ethnicity in Egypt speak to various audiences, just as my writings on the subject have several readerships. Both the public and private frameworks of inquiry within which I conducted research gave rise to concerns about my relationships with these different audiences. Since there is usually more than one audience for a piece of research, the sensitivities of one group might very well represent the self-affirmation of another. In the case of Sudanese in Cairo, my research project was and continues to be well-received by my Sudanese informants, colleagues, and friends, whose interest, insightful critiques and guidance have been invaluable to my research. The effects of exile on Sudanese identity is one of the central topics of conversation for Sudanese, both in private and in public¹¹, and as such looms large in the ethnography of the Sudanese

¹⁰ I note my debt to Lila Abu-Lughod's concept of the "dutiful daughter" in Altorki and El-Solh (1988).

¹¹ I subscribe to two Internet discussion groups run by and for Sudanese abroad, and the topic of identity comes up time and time again. The anthropologist Sondra Hale has begun work on a study of artists of the Sudanese diaspora and the effect of exile on expressions of identity.

diaspora. Yet, as meaningful as publicly exploring Sudanese identity in Egypt is for the Sudanese community, it is equally threatening for Egyptians to have their public stance on Sudanese challenged by an alternative point of view.

As a U.S.-born and -educated anthropologist, my scholarly inquiries grow out of my training in the American academy. Although I have made concerted efforts to share the fruits of my research with laypersons, such as giving public lectures in Arabic and English and participating in panel discussions on behalf of Sudanese NGOs, I write in a language with roots in Western intellectual discourse. As participants in this discourse--albeit in the position of the subaltern--Egyptian intellectuals, like intellectuals from other countries of the South, serve as interlocutors between their local constituencies and the hegemonic West. The long history of 'orientalist' and racist bias symbolized by Western scholarship has left intellectuals, nationalists, and their associates in the government with a legacy of mistrust of researchers and other representatives of European and American standpoints. The need to combat 'misrepresentation' is fought on two fronts: asserting Egypt's historical role as a leader both in the Arab unity and non-aligned movements, and challenging non-Egyptians on their biases.

The issue of Egypt's relationship with Sudan presents a special conundrum for the researcher sensitive to the dynamics of post-colonial power relations between the North and the South. Throughout the course of my research, I was compelled to defend my choice of ethnic community to Egyptian friends and colleagues because of the perception that northern Sudanese were not different enough from their hosts, and therefore not truly ethnic. Indeed, the ties that bind Egyptians and Sudanese, including marriage, trade, administrative integration, the shared anti-colonial struggle, and Arab Unity have produced a feeling of kinship between Egyptians and the ethnic groups from Sudan's northern Nile Valley who reside in Egypt. Egyptian colleagues attending lectures on the subject of Sudanese in Egypt have been vocal in their condemnation of the political circumstances that have affected the lives of Sudanese, and are quick to insist that the problems between the two states do not affect the relations of the two peoples. A stock response to my research question was: "Well, Egypt and Sudan were one country, after all."

Egypt's Sudan Policy: Framework for Ambiguous Relations

Links between Egypt and Sudan date back to Pharaonic times, and over the centuries merchants and traders, clerics, scholars, and adventurers have forged relationships along the Nile river, extending along caravan routes and creating political alliances (Manger 1984; Walz 1985). Islam filtered into Bilad as-Sudan¹², as the territory south of Egypt was known to medieval Muslim scholars, from the Arabian peninsula and the Maghreb as well as along Nile Valley. The modern era of Sudanese-Egyptian relationships begins with the Egyptian conquest of Sudan. Between 1820 and 1826, Viceroy Muhammad Ali, the ambitious governor of the Ottoman Empire's province of Egypt, expanded his territory southward, eventually incorporating most of present-day Sudan under Turko-Egyptian rule. This period lasted until the 'Turkiya' was brought to an end by the Sudanese uprising led by Muhammad Ahmed Al-Mahdi in 1885, though 'Egypt' later regained its foothold with British help during the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (1898-1956).

The innocent declaration that "Egypt and Sudan were once one country," learned by Egyptian schoolchildren, is repeated by adults who do not realize that most Sudanese perceive Muhammad Ali's long administration of Sudan as a colonial conquest. Although certainly not all Egyptians share this view, the state discourse on Sudan, as transmitted through scholarly, popular, and official channels, has a powerful influence on the way Sudanese are regarded and the policies that regulate their lives. Warburg's (1992) analysis of Egyptian, Sudanese, and European scholarship on 19th and 20th century Sudan demonstrates that Egyptian historians have portrayed the Ottoman Egyptian administration of Sudan (1821-1885) as positive and collaborative. "Almost all of them," writes Warburg, "agree that there cannot be an 'objective' interpretation of the Nile Valley's history which does not accept its unity as axiomatic and as stemming from natural geographical, cultural and historical roots" (Warburg 1992: 59).

The Unity of the Nile Valley discourse has been carried through to the present century and can be seen most clearly in the legal policies regulating the Sudanese presence in Egypt. For more than a decade prior to the 1989

¹² Arabic for 'land of the blacks.'

coup overthrowing Sudan's democratically elected government, Sudanese enjoyed a special status in Egypt (similar to that granted to Palestinians until the 1976 Camp David Accords, and Syrians during the short-lived United Arab Republic (1958-1961)) which granted all Sudanese passport holders entry without visas, permanent residency in Egypt, the right to government-subsidized education and medical care, and favorable business and property ownership rights. Even third-generation citizens of other Arab League countries were not granted the same residency rights as Sudanese during those golden years. In short, Sudanese had virtually all the rights of Egyptian citizens, with the exception of the explicit right to employment which was, nevertheless, often overlooked by Egyptian employers.

The economic deterioration and ascension of the National Islamic Front in Sudan, a regime that the Egyptian government unequivocally opposes, challenged the special status of Sudanese in Egypt. Sudanese out-migration due to growing instability in Sudan surged in the mid-1980s, and most recent Sudanese arrivals in Egypt left Sudan under refugee-like conditions. Yet even after the virtual collapse of the relations between Egypt and Sudan in 1990, the Egyptian government rarely treated Sudanese citizens as refugees. Due to the fact that, until recently, residency for Sudanese citizens came without legal restrictions, the international refugee regime classified them as 'displaced persons' rather than refugees. In two and a half years of working with local and international refugee agencies in Egypt, I heard of only one case of international protection granted to a member of the Sudanese opposition who fled to Cairo pursued by Sudanese security forces. For southern and other marginalized Sudanese with few personal or cultural ties to Egypt, this only added to their feeling of isolation and persecution, while recently arrived northern Sudanese continued to perceive themselves as temporary guests.

However, on July 4, 1995, the Egyptian government issued a Presidential Decree requiring all Sudanese entering Egypt to apply for a visa following accusations that the Sudanese government was behind the June 29 assassination attempt on President Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa. This represented the essential abrogation of the Sudanese special status and allowed the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) to process Sudanese asylum cases for the first time. Yet the Egyptian government still did not allow the international refugee system to classify

Sudanese as refugees; instead they are considered to be people in a "refugee-like situation," a status that allows third countries to offer resettlement but does not qualify them for full United Nations support¹³.

Politically speaking, two justifications lie behind Egypt's treatment of its Sudanese immigrant and displaced population. Egypt's recognition of its position as the end-user of the water provided by the Nile river has spurred the country's strategic planners to treat Sudan an impediment to its unchallenged use of Nile water. To this effect, several Nile Water treaties have been negotiated with Sudan to the distinct advantage of Egypt, though Sudanese objections have become more assertive over the decades since its 1956 independence. The latest cause for Egypt's concern has been increasingly insistent calls for secession of southern Sudan by armed opposition groups in Sudan, which would fracture control of the White Nile headwaters. This worry has been mitigated only by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement leader John Garang's assurances that he seeks a unified Sudan. Egypt's support of the Sudanese National Democratic Alliance, an umbrella organization of all Sudanese opposition groups, and its large community of constituents in Cairo, is a bargaining chip for the future security of Egypt's water supply.

The second reason for Egyptian state tolerance for Sudanese residents is part of a larger strategy to undermine the Sudanese government. As long as Sudanese continue to flow across the border into Egypt, the NIF regime cannot claim that it maintains popular support in Sudan. The Egyptian government has a vested interest in exaggerating the number of Sudanese residing in Egypt. While it is impossible to know exactly how many Sudanese passport holders are in the country, the recent claim by President Mubarak that between 4 and 5 million Sudanese were resident in Egypt was clearly designed to embarrass the regime in Sudan¹⁴.

However, I believe that the unique position that Sudanese hold in Egypt's imagination is more than just a matter of political and economic realities. Powell examines a heated exchange between Sudanese and Egyptian

¹³ For example, Sudanese receive a fraction of the refugee maintenance allowance granted to full refugees.

¹⁴ Statement given by President Mubarak on August 15, 1997, at a question-and-answer session at Alexandria University, in response to the question, What is Egypt's current stance towards Sudan?

academics in the newspapers several years ago over the use of the term 'imperialism' to describe Egypt's annexation of the geographical area that would later comprise independent Sudan (Powell 1995: 11-13). She uses the term "colonized colonizers" to characterize Egypt's stance during the period of intense nationalist activity. Ironically, even as Egyptian intellectuals were fighting for a nation free of colonialist influence, they sought to deny Sudanese the same aspirations. Even now, officials cited in the media regularly describe Egypt and Sudan as one entity¹⁵, tacitly denying the difficulties suffered by Sudanese, aggravated by discriminatory Egyptian policies. To a large extent, this double standard still shapes Egypt's view of Sudan. I believe that it is responsible for the continued denial on the part of Egyptian officials and ordinary citizens alike that Sudanese have a separate voice. The ambiguous legal status of Sudanese--neither strictly foreigners nor full citizens--has mirrored their liminal ethnic identity.

Northern Sudanese Perceptions of Egypt and Egyptians

Sudanese both appreciate and resent the Egyptian government for its handling of the current political situation in Sudan. On the one hand, the state has provided a haven for Sudanese opponents of the NIF regime, offering political and sometimes financial support. On the other, the 'special relationship' so often touted in official statements is misleading when compared with the regular encounters of Sudanese with their 'otherness.' The crisis between Egypt and Sudan has had several effects on the daily lives of Sudanese in Egypt. In addition to deleterious changes in legal status, my informants perceive changes in Egyptian popular attitudes. According to my Sudanese friends and colleagues, Cairene taxi drivers demand more money from them than in the past, and service staff, such as those at airline ticket counters or money changers often treat them rudely. Additionally, Sudanese--even those born in Egypt--are regularly subjected to humiliating treatment at Egyptian border posts, or are even denied permission to enter. Such incidents are bewildering for Sudanese long used to friendly, even stereotypically

¹⁵ In his August 15, 1997 statement about Egyptian-Sudanese relations, President Mubarak said that Egypt and Sudan were joined together as: "One Nile, one people, and one religion."

deferential behavior from Egyptians, particularly during Sudan's boom years in the 1970s.

The new Egyptian immigration policies stemming from Egypt's standoff with the NIF regime in Sudan have made it difficult for many Sudanese to imagine a future in Egypt, and this is reflected in the developing Sudanese discourse articulating their differences from their Egyptian hosts. However, in the face of the hegemonic doctrine of brotherhood, shared history, and Arab unity propagated by the Egyptian state with respect to Sudan, there are few characteristics available to Muslim, Arabic-speaking Sudanese with which to construct a separate ethnic identity. This ethnic boundary takes the form of a propriety discourse drawn from Sudanese interpretations of correct behavior espoused by the Arab and Islamic cultural traditions and shared, theoretically, by the Muslim, Arabic-speaking Egyptians who make up the majority of the population of Egypt. This discourse of difference portrays northern Sudanese as upholding norms of hospitality, generosity, modesty, and respectability in comparison to Egyptians, who are depicted as 'impolite' and 'distant from their own traditions.'

Naturally, my observations of Sudanese immigrants and exiles over a three year period have shown the reality to be more complex than this black-and-white snapshot suggests. Furthermore, there are differences in the way Sudanese individuals with various experiences and relationships in Egypt describe Egyptian society and their own identity. Settled Sudanese, for example, who have more at stake regarding changes to their status in Egypt, are more likely to stress the commonalities Sudanese have with Egyptians than Sudanese exiles who see themselves resettling abroad rather than in Egypt. But the resounding conclusion that many Sudanese overall draw from their experiences in Egypt is that Egyptians do not know them. Egyptians are seen as unfamiliar with Sudanese history and culture, ignorant of what it means to be Sudanese. Sudanese feel that Egyptians resist getting to knowing them as people with a unique identity, and instead continue to use the 'one people' metaphor left over from the days of colonialism. Although they acknowledge the good will shown to them by the Egyptian state and people, their invisibility has made it difficult for them to draw attention to their problems as a community. I was privy to some of this frustration during my earlier capacity as head of a development project looking into

educational opportunities for Sudanese in Cairo, when I was told over and over again by officials in the Egyptian government, the UNHCR, and other aid agencies, that Sudanese were "like Egyptians" and therefore required no assistance.

Brotherhood, as conceptualized and promulgated by the Egyptian state, still seems one-sided, according to accounts of northern Sudanese informants. Those who have attended Egyptian schools and universities remark on the nationalistic curriculum that overlooks important periods in Nile Valley history, such as the 26th Pharaonic dynasty, which emerged in what is today Sudan. Nubian and Sudanese characters in films and television emerge as buffoonish, much like the servile Black Sambo and Mammy characters in that sorry chapter of American cinema. In addition to these sorts of omissions and stereotypes, Egyptian cultural hegemony is expressed in popular discourse as well. For example, a group of Sudanese musicians at a goodbye party in a public park was met with curiosity--and an exhortation to sing something Egyptian--by a group of Egyptian youths. This request was met by glowers and another Sudanese song by the musicians. One Sudanese man suggested that the unfamiliarity of Egyptians with Sudanese cultural forms was the fault of Sudanese for not publicizing them to an Egyptian audience, but the result is the same--the widespread feeling on the part of northern Sudanese that they are considered brothers in the Nile Valley only on Egyptian terms.

My field notes abound with examples of Sudanese shock and dismay at what they perceive as Egyptian ignorance of their problems. According to a Sudanese professor now in exile in the U.S., the Egyptian contingent planning a joint conference in January 1989--four months after the NIF's military coup--between the universities of Cairo and Khartoum did not understand why the Sudanese contingent was having trouble getting exit visas from the new Sudanese government. A two-day symposium on Sudan and Democracy that I attended in 1995 at the Institute of African Studies, also at Cairo University, had virtually no Egyptian participants. Cairo University professors came to chair their panels but did not stay to hear Sudanese and European scholars discuss the concerns of ethnicity and nationalism in Sudan.

I was struck, on several occasions during public events organized by Sudanese NGOs in Cairo, not only by the tiny number of Egyptians in the

audience, but by even these individuals' reluctance to acknowledge the separate history and concerns of the Sudanese speaking about them. At a presentation of a new report on torture in Sudan, an Egyptian man exclaimed: "But we have torture here in Egypt!" At a panel discussion on women and displacement marking International Women's Day, an Egyptian woman pointed out that there was poverty in Egypt too; in fact, displaced Sudanese had more than enough help from foreign organizations. At a meeting in which I introduced a research project on female circumcision in the Sudanese community, an Egyptian doctor wondered why our team was not targeting female circumcision among Egyptians. I recognize that these individuals, and others bearing similar views with whom Sudanese regularly engage, may be part of a self-selected minority. Nevertheless, to the northern Sudanese of my study, the perception that Egyptians do not understand their problems and are not interested in knowing the causes is reinforced even in fora where sharing this knowledge is the point of the endeavor.

Ethics, Epistemology, and Ethnicity

It is this issue of knowledge that lies at the core of my dilemma regarding the representation of northern Sudanese identity in Cairo. My specific difficulties in negotiating the complex research environment in Egypt has led me on an epistemological odyssey towards a greater understanding of the factors that continue to shape this identity. In choosing to challenge Egyptian concerns in the way I portray the northern Sudanese community, I have ended up emphasizing one of the most important concerns of the Sudanese with whom I have worked--remaining unknown outside their community. At the same time, the voices of northern Sudanese are remarkably diverse, and give rise to a complex discourse that has confounded my attempts to describe an essential ethnicity. My apprehension of the unique, ambiguous quality of northern Sudanese ethnicity, a result of individual and communal interaction with a host society with its own complex set of discourses, has been nurtured by the circumstances of my research in Egypt.

As with any other minority or ethnic group, Sudanese identity in Egypt is framed by its history. In this case, the historical relationship between Egypt and Sudan--and its current manifestation--is at the heart of the specific

form that Sudanese ethnicity takes in Egypt. Ethnicity, far from being a primordial given, is developed through historical processes nurtured by inequality. Egyptian resistance to my research on Sudanese communities in Cairo has helped me understand not only that the topic is sensitive, but that Sudanese ethnicity itself is shaped by the larger historical forces that have spawned this resistance. By negotiating the shoals of what methods were permissible and what information was acceptable, I recognized not only that Sudanese ethnicity in Egypt was highly politicized but that its specificity derives from a dynamic process of interaction between Sudanese populations and Egyptian state and society. Contested research permission became the epistemological key to comprehending the ambiguous nature of Sudanese communal identity.

This ambiguous ethnicity, I discovered, was nurtured by complex set of circumstances, policies and discourses during the time of my fieldwork. My recognition that Sudanese were ambivalent about their role and status in Egyptian society has illuminated the fact that Sudanese in Egypt do not form one community. My personal experience as a researcher among Sudanese in Egypt has led me to a more nuanced understanding of ethnicity, where boundary markers designed to assert and preserve difference coincide with affirmations of brotherhood and belonging for both Sudanese and Egyptians.

The ethical dilemma for me is also related to the issue of representation, but not because I feel I might misrepresent Egypt's historical viewpoint or belittle its concerns regarding its minority populations. Egypt's role in the Nile Valley has been hegemonic, which implies the existence of subaltern discourses. Yet Egypt has also been colonized, and its intellectual elite, in its fear of misrepresentation, belies the scars of physical and psychological subjugation. Rather, my difficulty lies in representing the complexity of my field setting, its intertwined communities each with its own understanding of past and present events, which could be seen as a challenge to the official narrative. This narrative asserts that northern Sudanese in Egypt are not 'like' other minority communities in Egypt due to their unique relationship to state and society, rendering Sudanese claims of difference debatable.

When even public assertions of the unique circumstances, needs, and identity of northern Sudanese are met with Egyptian indifference, or denial of difference, the contradictions between their daily lives and the identity being

imposed upon them from above become clear. In asking permission from the individuals whose words I hoped to use to convey their problems, hopes, and opinions, I was often told that my research was important, that "people outside" needed to know about the difficulties of the community. The fact that I ended up privileging the Sudanese perspective of life for Sudanese in Cairo came about not despite Egyptian resistance, but because of it. The contradictions spawned by the Egyptian-Sudanese relationship have to do with intimacy and power. My task, as I see it, is to acknowledge Egypt's discourse and the changes in Egyptian policy towards Sudanese over time while representing the subaltern voices of Sudanese as part of a complex whole.

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