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Resisting “Blackness”

Muslim Arab Sudanese in the Diaspora

ANITA FABOS

“*Ya wahsha, ya suuda*” (You ugly, black girl!), Aliya playfully remarked to Nur, her brown-skinned maternal cousin. Aliya, a young Cairo teenager whose mother was a Muslim Arab Sudanese immigrant but who identified herself culturally and racially after her Egyptian father, then turned to me and said in English, “I call her ugly because she is from Sudan.” This explicit banter between the cousins of this family, with its (black) Sudanese and (white) Egyptian members, reflects a broader racial hierarchy stemming from centuries of asymmetrical power relations along the Nile Valley. In combination with historical migration and recent forced migration from Sudan, the increased mobility of Muslim Arab Sudanese into Western cultural spaces such as London, Toronto, Houston, and Sydney brings them into contact with new and less familiar racial frameworks. Sudanese, in their increasingly transnational circumstances, must now negotiate racial categories in different countries, most of which regard them as “black.”

The term “Muslim Arab Sudanese” here refers to Sudanese nationals from the dominant ethnic group in northern Sudan, representatives of which have been in power since Sudan’s independence. Following the Islamist military coup in 1989 and ensuing political and economic turmoil, many Muslim Arab Sudanese left or fled Sudan, joining millions of southern and western Sudanese forcibly displaced by decades of civil war. In countries like Egypt and the UK with large communities of minority Sudanese, Muslim Arab Sudanese resist being designated as “black,” a category that in Sudan is pejorative and generally not employed by the Muslim Arab ruling class to refer to themselves. Muslim Arab Sudanese identity in the UK and Egypt is increasingly shaped by negative experiences of “blackness” in both of these two receiving societies. Different historical, cultural, and socio-legal contexts in each country, however, give rise to two distinct approaches to building a familiar and recognizable communal identity in the diaspora.

Race and whiteness

The new field of “whiteness studies” is helpful in thinking about how, in many societies where people of European origins are the majority, being “white” is often considered natural—the norm—while being a minority implies having a racial identity. The comparative study of race has demonstrated that racial categories are quite different from one society to the next, and that these categories are learned and acted out in ways that help to maintain the privileges of the dominant group. “Whiteness,” like “blackness,” can be similarly thought of as a learned cultural category even though it characterizes the racial

Muslim Arab Sudanese consider light-coloured skin attractive and upper class, but in Egypt and the UK Sudanese refugees and migrants are considered “black”; in each country Sudanese Arab Muslims have developed different strategies to cope with this situation. While Egyptian racial categories demand association with the dominant, light skinned majority, in the UK the Sudanese aspire to neither the white majority nor black identity.

majority. While I would argue that the particular racial hierarchy in Sudan predates the “black and white” European colonial categories, it is useful to think of Muslim Arab Sudanese as the standard norm in Sudan against which other minority “black” Sudanese are measured.

Sudanese recognize a wide spectrum of skin colours, describing *abyad* (white), *ahmar* (red), *asfar* (yellow),

akhdar (green), *azraq* (blue), and *iswid* (black). These designations resonate historically with the classification scheme used by slave traders in the markets in Cairo, where slaves classified as *asfar* and *abyad* were sold for larger sums of money than those who were labelled *azraq* or *iswid*.¹ Despite the fact that physical characteristics in Sudan are by no means clear-cut markers of ethnic identity, the social stigma towards “blackness” as an indication of African or slave origins contrasts white skin with attractiveness, wealth, and leisure. One of the ways that wealthy and powerful classes of Muslim Arab Sudanese have maintained and perpetuated their dominance over time is through promoting their own (lighter) skin colour as a sign of class and beauty. Various traditions of body decoration have developed that draw attention to lighter skin. Lip-darkening previously done through tattooing but replaced by make-up in contemporary times is thought to heighten the contrast between lips and skin, thus enhancing the appearance of light skin. Henna patterns are also thought to contrast with—and thus enhance—lighter skin.

More recently, “whiteness” has become a public issue for Sudanese in Sudan and in the diaspora, where the trend of using cosmetic skin whiteners that contain bleach is noted and discussed in the Sudanese media and in online sites. Beauty salons, pharmacies, billboards, and television advertisements promote cosmetic products which purport to lighten women’s complexions. Beswick summarizes the current Sudanese preoccupation with race and visual appearance thus: “Looking like an ‘African’ is bad; looking lighter is good, and the visual markers of skin colour and hair texture define who is an ‘Arab’ (good) and who is not (bad).”²

The attention that skin-bleaching in Sudan has recently received is noteworthy. A beautician interviewed in Khartoum is quoted as saying, “One hundred percent of women who come here have it done,” she said. “People think it’s prettier to look white.”³ A young woman quoted in a recent ethnography of middle class women in Khartoum states, “*Alhamdulillah*, my hair is okay and I have got all the right features from my mother, but I am dark, thanks be to my father [sarcastically]. Who would want to marry one with such a colour? Every man wants ‘*saфра*’. I myself use all these creams to find a man with a light skin colour. If I stayed dark do you think a light man would want his children to be ‘dirtied’?”⁴ Light skin also symbolizes wealth, as illustrated by a woman quoted in a newspaper article posted on SudaneseOnline: “People judge you here by your colour...If they see me and someone else with lighter skin wearing the same clothes, they would say she is living a comfortable life and I’m a poor woman.”⁵

The same article excited the following comment from a Sudanese man: “Thanks for this interesting issue. It’s so important to discuss such realities of Sudanese life. Such phenomenon can be interpreted in terms of the influence of Arabic culture in the country. In school



curriculum, white colour, and particularly a white woman, is associated with perfection in all aspects of life. A woman is praised if she's white, sometimes regardless of whether or not she's beautiful. Even in Holy Quran white color is always positive with black color being negative. Sudanese people were, and still, brought up with the understanding that they are Arabs, and part of this identity is to acquire an Arab [Arab] feature: color."⁶



Racial hierarchies along the Nile

Like Sudan, Egypt has played a historical role in slave-trading and slavery along the Nile Valley. Egyptians whose ancestors were slaves—from present-day Sudan, Ethiopia, Albania, and elsewhere—are today part of Egypt's ethnic mix. While subordinate groups in Egypt are not necessarily distinguished by skin colour, mainstream Egyptians use the term *qamhi*—wheat-coloured—to designate the "typical" Egyptian skin tone. As in Sudan, people who look "African" receive negative attention, and Africans who have become refugees in Egypt are maltreated and regularly harassed by Egyptian security. In Cairo, this differential treatment translates into the reluctance of Muslim Arab Sudanese migrants and exiles to consider themselves "African-looking" in comparison to Egyptians. Unlike private, cultural attributes such as food and music, physical characteristics like skin colour are publicly recognizable, if culturally constructed, markers of difference. Muslim Arab Sudanese in Egypt, however, do not tend to emphasize their comparatively darker skin tone.

Muslim Arab Sudanese resist being classified by Egyptians into socially disadvantaged categories like "African," and they actively pursue practices and stress their belonging to a (white) "Arab" ethnicity and the Muslim religion. One of the ways this is accomplished is through espousing a morality discourse that ties Sudanese firmly to Arab and Muslim concepts of proper behaviour, which I have described elsewhere as *adab*—propriety.⁷ Egyptians were largely portrayed as being less proper, and in comparison Sudanese felt that their own behaviour was more "Arab" and "Muslim" than their Egyptian hosts. Through this strategy, Sudanese were also resisting blackness by distancing themselves from their African compatriots while outperforming their "white" hosts through proper behaviour. In this way, Muslim Arab Sudanese in Egypt were able to avoid taking on a racial minority status yet maintain a separate community identity.

Black and Muslim in Britain

In the British context, Muslim Arab Sudanese women and men similarly seek to position themselves at an advantage in the national discourse on race. In contrast to a lack of rights in Egypt under Egyptian immigration policy, in Britain Sudanese are able to claim British citizenship. However, Britain's legacy of racial discrimination and the heightened social and political anxiety with immigration, especially of Muslims, places Sudanese—who, in the British paradigm, are both black and Muslim—in a vulnerable position. In comparison to the Egyptian context, Muslim Arab Sudanese are not able to reconstitute their identity as part of mainstream British culture, and feel somewhat alienated by "immoral practices" (such as premarital sexual relations) that are seen to be part of British society. At the same time, Sudanese seem unwilling to define themselves as part of Britain's black minority.

Nagel points out that, in Britain, Arabs and Arab migration have been "excluded from 'race relations' debates and discourses. They seldom are treated as a separate, identifiable cultural entity or as a 'problem' minority group" in mainstream discourse except in reference to terrorism, Middle East politics, and oil wealth.⁸ Nagel describes the strategy of her Arab research participants in the UK whereby Arabness is disassociated from recognized minority identities and from racialized groups like "Pakistanis" who use the term "black" to underline commonality with other visible minorities.

This disassociation from blackness debates in Britain is difficult for Sudanese Arabs to maintain. Anwara is a Muslim Arab Sudanese refugee interviewed by Nagel who has rejected colour-based identities, despite feeling that she is considered "black" in British society. In the context of her Sudanese middle class background, embedded in Sudanese racial hierarchies Anwara "is disturbed by the thought that she is now black." Rather than searching for commonality with other black groups, she has chosen instead to avoid association with them. Revealing her sense of black as a stigmatized category, she states, "We look at the underclasses here and we say, look at those people, how they behave, how loud they are. They are in a low position."⁹

For Sudanese women and men in the diaspora, the particularities of negotiating a Sudanese Arab Muslim belonging in Egypt and the UK are not only shaped by their social and legal status as immigrants and refugees, but also by negative experiences signified by blackness. As familiar aliens in Egypt and foreign citizens in Britain, Sudanese may hold on to their Muslim Arab identity in both places but it is given different social meaning in these contrasting contexts. The position of Sudanese in an Egyptian racial hierarchy wherein blackness is associated with slavery requires

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them—with their own legacy of enslaving Africans and participating in the development of racial categories in Sudan—to distance themselves from other darker skinned people and maximize their association with the dominant—and lighter skinned—Egyptian majority. In the UK, however, Sudanese, as Muslims, do not seek a position for themselves among the white Christian-identified majority yet neither do they aspire to a black identity, which would embroil them in the charged debate about racism in British society. "Whiteness" is as much of an aspiration for Sudanese in the UK but with the goal of inclusion into an Arab Muslim identity that sidesteps British racial categories.

Cosmetic skin lighteners emphasize whiteness as a beauty ideal.

Notes

1. Terence Walz, "Black Slavery in Egypt During the 19th Century as Reflected in the Mahkama Archives in Cairo," in *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa*, ed. John Ralph Willis (London: Franck Cass, 1985).
2. Stephanie Beswick, "How to Make Sudanese Islamic Fundamentalism Work for you," *H-Net Reviews in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, no. 2005, <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=11411138813867>.
3. Mohammed Abbas, "In Sudan, Pale Is Beautiful but Price Is High," *Reuters*, 2 August 2006.
4. Salma Ahmed Nageeb, *New Spaces and Old Frontiers: Women, Social Space, and Islamization in Sudan* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004).
5. Abbas, "In Sudan, Pale Is Beautiful but Price Is High."
6. Posted by Al-Sadig Yahya Abdalla, 1 May 2006, www.sudaneseonline.com. Spelling as in original.
7. Anita H. Fabos, *"Brothers" Or Others? Muslim Arab Sudanese in Egypt* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2007).
8. Caroline R. Nagel, "Constructing Difference and Sameness: The Politics of Assimilation in London's Arab Communities," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25, no. 2 (2002): 268.
9. Ibid., 275.

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