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Constructions, contradictions and reconfigurations of 'Manhood' among youth in Palestinian camps in Lebanon

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A B S T R A C T

This paper examines how Palestinian male identities are constructed in refugee camps in Lebanon. It argues that dominant Palestinian masculinities, which are produced in and through educational processes, familial practices and political discourse in Palestinian society, are not in line with men's lived experiences as refugees in camps in Lebanon. Therefore, Palestinian males have been exercising agency and working to construct new masculinities through adherence to Islam and participation in international labour migration. While these processes have opened up new ways for Palestinian young men to perform 'manhood', they have also provided limited gender scripts from which they can construct their identities and imagine their futures.

Palestinians have been living in Lebanon as refugees for more than 60 years. As 'non-citizens' of Lebanon, Palestinians lack even the most basic civil, political, social and economic rights in the country and are excluded from active participation in Lebanese public life. This raises important questions about how Palestinian young men come to construct their identities in the contexts of exile and statelessness and in the midst of their dependence on the Lebanese government and UNRWA[1] for their daily provisions.

Through empirical data gleaned from an ethnographic case study among Palestinian refugee youth in south Lebanon, this paper will examine the ways in which dominant Palestinian masculinities are constructed in the camps in Lebanon through educational processes, familial practices and political discourse. It will be argued that the narratives of 'appropriate' Palestinian masculinity that are produced in and through these discursive sites contradict Palestinian men's lived experience in the camps in Lebanon. This is because historical events of the past 60 years have left Palestinian men in Lebanon with an inability to protect and provide for their families, and they have become dependent on the 'charity' of the Lebanese government and UNRWA. In this way, Palestinian men have become symbolically 'emasculated' in the eyes of their wives and children. Therefore, in order to become appropriately gendered as 'masculine', Palestinian males have exercised agency and worked to construct new Palestinian masculinities through adherence to Islam and participation in international labour migration. On the one hand, these acts of resistance have opened up new ways for Palestinian young men to perform 'manhood'. However, the essentialism through which masculinities have been constructed through these processes has also provided Palestinian males with limited gender scripts from which to construct their identities and imagine their futures. Moreover, it has largely relegated Palestinians females into the private sphere.

1. Context

Palestinian residence in Lebanon dates back over sixty years to the creation of the State of Israel and the subsequent refugee problem in neighbouring states. In 1947, the UN proposed the partitioning of Palestine into two independent states, one Palestinian Arab and the other Jewish, with Jerusalem to be internationalized (UNISPAL, 2007a). According to the partition plan, the Jewish state was to comprise 56.4% of the territory, even though Palestinian Arabs owned 93% of the total land area and comprised 66% of the population (Chatty and Lewando Hunt, 2005: 14). The day after the partition plan was announced, armed conflict spread throughout Palestine. However, being militarily superior, the Zionist paramilitary organizations were victorious, and the Jewish state envisaged in the partition plan proclaimed its independence in 1948 as 'Israel'. By contrast, the second state, 'Palestine', never came into being (UNISPAL, 2007b). In this way, '1948 marked two contrasting historical experiences: for the Zionists, it was the culmination of the dream of creating a state for world Jewry, as a means to put an end to European anti-Semitism; for Palestinians it was the time of expulsion and destruction of their land and society' (Chatty and Lewando Hunt, 2005: 15).

[1] United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East.

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As a result of the conflict, an estimated 750,000 of the 900,000 indigenous Palestinian population fled or were expelled by Jewish armed militias to neighbouring countries, including Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt (UNRWA, 2003). To the north, Lebanon received 110,000 of these refugees, primarily from the Galilee region (Chatty and Lewando Hunt, 2005: 11). On 16 June 1948, the Israeli cabinet adopted a plan preventing the return of Palestinian Arab refugees to their homes, which were now located in the newly created State of Israel. This is because such a large number of non-Jewish residents would shift the demographic balance and challenge the carefully constructed notion of Israel as a 'Jewish' state. At the same time, Arab governments refused to formally integrate Palestinian refugees, believing that this would threaten their right of return to their homes in Palestine (Khalidi, 2001). Today, Lebanese politicians across the political and religious spectra are in agreement that permanent Palestinian settlement in Lebanon would devastate the Lebanese nation. This is because the naturalization of such a large number of Sunni Muslims[2] would upset the delicate sectarian balance carefully reconstructed in Lebanon following the end of the Lebanese civil war (Suleiman, 2006).

Today, 427,057 Palestinians live as stateless refugees in Lebanon,[3] lacking even the most basic civil, political, social and economic rights (UNRWA, 2003). Palestinian refugees have no access to public social services, and the Lebanese government has placed severe restrictions on them in all areas of public life, including employment, property ownership and travel. Consequently, the refugee workforce is substantially under employed as seasonal or casual labourers who work for low wages with no social and welfare benefits. Therefore, Palestinians in Lebanon must rely almost entirely on UNRWA as the sole provider of social services and education (UNRWA, 2003).

Palestinians have also been affected by the Lebanese socio-political context, which around the time of the study included violence in and around the camps. For example, as a result of the 2006 Hezbollah–Israeli war, more than 16,000 Palestinian refugees were forced to flee from the camps in southern Lebanon and Beirut to escape the fighting. In total, 181 Palestinian refugee shelters were destroyed or damaged in the attacks in south Lebanon, and refugees living in Beirut's southern suburbs had homes damaged or destroyed (UNRWA, 2006). Moreover, in mid-2007 around 27,000 Palestine refugees were displaced from Nahr el Bared camp in northern Lebanon as a result of the conflict between the Lebanese armed forces and the extremist group Fatah Al-Islam, which had established itself in the camp. During this military incursion, an estimated 95% of all buildings and infrastructure in Nahr el Bared camp were either destroyed or damaged beyond repair, forcing residents to flee to nearby camps (UNRWA, 2013).

It is within this context of marginalization, chronic poverty, conflict and uncertainty that Palestinian young men in Lebanon have had to construct their identities.

2. Methodology

This paper draws on broader research into the construction of Palestinian youth identities in south Lebanon. Specific research questions for this study included: (1) How do Palestinian youth (male and female) understand and perform their identities in relation to nationality, gender and religion in camps in south Lebanon? (2) How are the discursive resources of Palestinian identity appropriated and articulated in everyday life within the camps? and (3) How have Palestinian identities in Lebanon shifted across exilic generations?

Fieldwork for this project was carried out in three official UNRWA refugee camps close to the Lebanese port city of Tyre (Rashidieh, Burj AShemali, and El Bas)[4] between June 2007 and December 2008. I chose to conduct research in these specific communities because of their proximity to one another, their shared history and questions of access, that is the presence of 'gatekeepers' known to me and the potential for 'snowball' sampling.

The study adopted an interpretivist theoretical perspective, and ethnographic case study methodology was chosen to allow me to conduct an in-depth study of the Palestinian community in south Lebanon, and to capture and reconstruct the complexity and richness of this unique environment in the text. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) approaches, such as taxonomies, sorting and ranking techniques, Venn diagrams, art and role-play (Chambers, 1997). This was to allow local, individual and marginalized viewpoints to emerge as well as to recognize the existence of multiple perspectives in Palestinian society.

Interviews and observations took place in UNRWA schools, homes, community centres, local NGO offices and the regional UNRWA office. Semi-structured interviews with individuals lasted for a couple of hours each. On the other hand, focus group interviews and PLA activities with groups of between 6 and 10 youth, segregated by gender, extended over several days. To facilitate communication and promote cultural respect, interviews were conducted in both English and Arabic (the youth having some facility in English, and I having some facility in Arabic). Youth translators were used when communication became difficult. In total, fifty Palestinian youth were interviewed: twenty one in Rashidieh camp, ten in Burj AShemali camp and nineteen in El Bas camp. Of these young people, twenty three were young men and twenty seven were young women, aged between fifteen and twenty four.[5] Twenty six adults (including 9 teachers) were also interviewed, of which seventeen were men and nine were women, aged thirty plus, to provide a more contextualized picture of Palestinian youth identity and to provide reference points for how Palestinian identity has changed over generations. Out of the total seventy six respondents, fifty one were Sunni, eleven Shi'ite and ten Christian.

My researcher identities were highly significant in this study as they regulated my access to participants, the quality of data that I was able to collect, how I interpreted the data and how I constructed 'knowledge' from it. As a Canadian, non-Arab and non-Muslim, I was clearly an 'outsider' to the Palestinian community I was living in. However, being married to a Palestinian from south

[2] Although Palestinians constitute a religiously diverse population, camp residents in Lebanon are largely Sunni Muslim.

[3] The number of Palestinian refugees currently registered with UNRWA is 4,820,229: 2,004,795 in Jordan; 477,700 in Syria; 427,057 in Lebanon; 788,108 in the West Bank and 1,122,569 in Gaza. Among these, Lebanon has the highest percentage of refugees living in camps at 53.1%. By comparison, only 17.3% of Palestinians in Jordan live in camps (UNRWA, 2010).

[4] Rashidieh camp is located on the Mediterranean seashore 5 km from Tyre and contains more than 27,500 registered refugees (UNRWA, 2003). The older part of the camp was built by the French Government in 1936 to accommodate Armenian refugees. The newer camp was built by UNRWA in 1963 to house Palestinian refugees evacuated from villages in northern Palestine. Burj AShemali camp is located 3 km east of Tyre and contains more than 19,500 registered refugees. The camp was established after the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict to provide tented shelter for Palestine refugees from northern Palestine. UNRWA started providing services in the camp in 1955. El Bas camp is located 1.5 km south of Tyre and contains more than 9,500 registered refugees. The camp was originally built by the French Government in 1939 to accommodate refugees from Armenia. In 1948, Palestinian refugees arrived from the Galilee region.

[5] In the Middle East, marriage and family formation is a major passage for the transition of young people into adulthood. In the region today, nearly 50% of men between the ages of 25 and 29 years are unmarried because they are unable to bear the financial costs associated with marriage (Middle East Youth Initiative 2013).