Problematizing Marriage: Minding My Manners in My Husband's Community

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Introduction

As I edged myself towards my seat in the university auditorium, I recognized the Sudanese man sitting one seat over. ʿAdel and I had met more than a year ago during a social visit I made with my husband to celebrate the *ʿAid al-Adha* feast marking the end of *Ramadan*. We smiled as we greeted each other. The man immediately launched into a laundry list of my identifying characteristics – American doctoral student, right? In anthropology? At Boston University? Indeed, he remembered virtually everything about our meeting – except that I was married to a Sudanese businessman in Cairo. Working up to placing me by neighborhood and street, he announced that he had many friends nearby and that he would take my phone number, so that he could call me when he was in the neighborhood, and visit.

My understanding, prior to starting my research project on 'northern' Sudanese expatriate and exile networks in Cairo,[1] was that it was improper for a married woman in the Sudanese community to receive a male visitor without her husband present. I had discussed possible 'Sudanese' expectations about my behavior with my husband before starting fieldwork, naively assuming that there was an 'authentic' wifely role that I could try to play. I stared at the unfortunate man in disbelief: Doesn't he remember that I'm a married woman? I tried to communicate my disapproval of his 'transgression' through body language, turning away from him and giving his persistent questions curt,

one-word answers. Waves of embarrassment and anger rolled over me as I pondered the implications of his request. I abruptly excused myself and moved to another seat.

This incident emphasizes my ambiguous position as an anthropologist from the "Eurocenter" (Lavie/Swedenberg 1996) whose marriage to a member of her research community complicates the indigenization of knowledge debate. Compelled to understand a different set of subtleties about gender, ethnicity, and a host of other identity discourses as they are constructed through my home life as well as my fieldsite, as a married person I straddle a boundary that is much more blurred than the dichotomy 'native'/'non-native' connotes. Furthermore, my position as a 'Western' woman married into 'the Sudanese community' has been understood in different ways by various people from my fieldsite, my husband, and myself. These different readings of my position have shaped my own epistemological journey towards recognizing the importance of gender propriety – which I have glossed as 'manners' – as an identity discourse for displaced northern Sudanese communities in Cairo, a conclusion drawn from personal experience. Through the dual processes of negotiating my roles as 'spouse' and 'researcher', I learned much about the problems inherent in the use of labels and labeling, the epistemological process of 'making' gender (Ortner 1996), and the nature of 'authenticity' itself.

When I first embarked on my field research, I expected that I would have to deal with, and overcome, the various labels attached to my position in the global order, such as 'American', 'Westerner', and 'foreigner'. In this I thought I might be helped by the fact that I was the 'wife' of a 'Sudanese man', both labels that I assumed would enhance the process of socialization into my research community. My own assumptions about gender roles and relations in the Sudanese community, forged through a lengthy association with different segments of Egyptian, Sudanese, and other Arab and predominantly Muslim societies, were supported by my husband's understanding of gender ideals in his own community. By challenging my received knowledge, I learned a different, experiential set of norms that exposed the changing gender relations of Sudanese in Cairo.

Doing fieldwork in any research community necessarily muddles personal and professional identities. However, when the community under study penetrates the intimacy of marriage, the anthropologist

has less room for misunderstanding in the complex process of grasping community mores, values, and taboos, since both husband and community may view her as someone who should know better. The complex dialectic that I must negotiate as a married female anthropologist – between my position as a researcher, on the one hand, and as a woman married to an 'insider', on the other – structures community expectations in light of the labels I wear. At the same time, negotiations within marriage structure my understanding of community ideals and demonstrate the link between various levels of power relations.

Feminist theorists have contributed an awareness of the differentials of power in gender relations to social science, while postmodern theorists have concentrated on the inequality inherent in its practice. The indigenization of knowledge discourse, with its emphasis on the prerogative of social scientists from the periphery to develop fields of study afresh from the perspective of non-Western knowledge traditions (e.g. Islam) is another attempt to turn relations of power around. But marriage in the context of the 'traditional' fieldwork encounter, symbolizing the intersection of these three critiques, might be seen as a site of negotiation for the complex interaction of gender, colonialism, and individual temperaments.

Marriage, as an institution and a process that interacts with the fieldwork experience, deserves to be problematized for the way it produces knowledge about self and other. The topic of spouses in the field has attracted interest particularly as it relates to anthropologist couples or the balancing of professional aspirations in an age of dual career families (Fluehr-Lobban/Lobban 1987). But just as the concept of the family as a universal social institution has been extensively rethought, particularly regarding alternatives to the mainstream 'family values' focus of certain dominant ideologies (Kennedy/Davis 1993; Lewin 1993; Stack 1983), marriage too needs to be theorized as a historically constituted institution with a multiplicity of forms (Borneman 1996). Once marriage is conceptualized as a process, rather than a status, we can move away from rigid categorizations of 'us' and 'them', perhaps creating a more fluid notion of authenticity.

Reflexivity, Boundaries, and the Insider/Outsider Debate

The boundaries between a researcher's private life and public work may be more or less ambiguous depending on her position, while perceptions of self and other, shaped by power relations and their ensuing stereotypes, may create new labels through which to construct identities. In my case, I was never quite sure whether to attribute being included in Sudanese community activities and categories to my position as a married woman or not. For example, a friend in Cairo asked for my participation in a protest against the editorial policy of the locally-published Sudanese newspaper on the grounds that I was a 'Sudanese woman'. This was an intensely flattering invitation, though ultimately I decided not to call the newspaper to complain about the way it portrayed women, concluding that the person on the other end of the line would have a different perception of my 'Sudaneseness'. Nevertheless, the suggestion that I was part of the Sudanese community spurred me to think about the meaning of my relationship with my husband and with my Sudanese colleagues from the perspective of the production of knowledge.

The recognition that anthropological knowledge is largely predicated upon the ethnographer's subjective understanding of issues brought up through interaction with their research community is not new. It has, however, been "rediscovered" by postmodern theorists (Marcus/Fisher 1986) grappling with the unequal power relations that characterize these interactions. The fact that theorizing on these power relations have largely ignored those between men and women has not gone unnoticed by feminist scholars, who have responded in part by highlighting the distinguished tradition of reflexive ethnographic writing produced almost solely by women (Behar/Gordon 1995). The fairly recent reflexive turn in mainstream anthropology, we are reminded, is predated by women writing about their personal triumphs and tragedies in the field in a way that blurred the boundary between their academic and emotional lives (Tedlock 1995; Bell et al. 1992).

Yet while the acceptance of ethnography as a joint project between an anthropologist and a research community has been widely recognized, there is still a reluctance to admit that crossing the line between 'us' and 'them' may lead to interactions on a more intimate level (Kulick/Willson 1995). Anthropologists are still averse to writing

about their sexuality, let alone sexual relations with members of their field communities. The difficulties in simply bringing articles on sexuality and fieldwork together in a publication attest to the sensitivity of any sexual relations which may link anthropologists with their field sites (Kulick/Willson 1995).

Having a spouse from one's research community – a relationship overlooked, incidentally, in the section of an American Anthropological Association fieldwork report dealing with families in the field (Howell 1990) – also represents a different level of intimacy. Married anthropologists who study their own societies may also have to face the intrusions of research into personal life, but in the case where the researcher's spouse simultaneously embodies emotional marital closeness and cultural distance, the boundaries of intimacy become ambiguous. Inasmuch as marriage often legitimizes sexuality, such a relationship may be more acceptable to both colleagues in the country of origin and the community of the field than the erotic relationships so often entered into by anthropologists abroad. Nevertheless, the reactions to a marriage between an anthropologist and a person representing his or her field site may be met, in contrast, by muted hostility (Gearing 1995) on the part of friends and colleagues in the home country. Contradictory reactions from colleagues 'at home' to married intimacy in the field may reflect unspoken assumptions regarding the loss of the capacity for objectivity. But if other anthropologists have found that it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate the researcher and the researched into two neat categories (Karim 1992), could marriage signify the inevitability of interaction across the border?

The indigenization of knowledge debate (Morsy et al. 1991) with its roots in the call for decolonization of the social sciences in the 1970s, has suggested that blurring boundaries or crossing borders in anthropological fieldwork is more easily or legitimately done by the indigenous or 'halfie' (Abu-Lughod 1991) anthropologist. In this debate over what constitutes 'authentic' knowledge, the anthropologist who is linked to his or her research community by virtue of nationality, ethnicity, or even race, is seen as being able to tap a more 'authentic' vein of information about the society under study through perceived personal commitment to the community, and the community's acceptance of the anthropologist as 'one of them'. But while the 'nativeness' of the 'native' has been strongly challenged as a sign of eligibility for

knowledge, his/her indigenous status still positions him/her methodologically, and epistemologically (Narayan 1993).

The anthropologists writing in *Arab Women in the Field* (Altorki/El-Solh 1988) examine the epistemological implications of being Arab or Arab-American women connected with their field sites in different ways. It becomes clear that whatever expectations were thrown up by being glossed as insiders, their personal relations with members of the community were equally powerful in mediating these expectations. In her response to a critique of her recent ethnography on Nubian gender relations (Shirazi 1996), Jennings writes that her expectations of being accepted by a Nubian community on the basis of her appearance as an African-American woman and her kinship bonds with them never fully occurred (Jennings 1996). I suspect that her feeling that her 'racial heritage' gave her quicker and more complete access to the community than she would have had were she an anthropologist with a different phenotype was predicated upon my similar hope and misconception that I held as a married woman expecting 'instant roots' in my husband's community. But to what extent does an anthropologist's position(ing) influence her personal relationship with people in the field? I propose that, through my position as an anthropologist blurring the boundaries of 'insider/outsider' status through marriage, I bear some of the same expectations that an indigenous anthropologist sustains despite being an outsider in terms of cultural knowledge.

Marriage As Position and Process

The fact of my marriage and the ongoing process of negotiation associated with it accords me an ambivalent position in the Sudanese community in Cairo. Other ethnographers have described their married status in the field as providing them a certain level of access and/or saddling them with constraints (but cf. Altorki/El-Solh 1988: 4-7), and most recognize its epistemological implications. Sayigh describes her life history research in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon as greatly aided by the fact that she was the wife of a Palestinian and the mother of Palestinian children; her married status gave her credibility, while as a non-Palestinian she was not seen as partisan. Finally, as a woman she was less likely to face arrest than she would have as a male researcher (Sayigh 1994: 8). Fluehr-Lobban, writing on

her fieldwork in Sudan, echoes the aphorism that women – and married women in particular – are more able than men to cross gender boundaries in segregated societies (Fluehr-Lobban 1984: 225), though she chose to emphasize her solidarity with Sudanese women. Freedman comes closer to the idea of marriage as a process in her narration of her fieldwork experience before and after her husband's death (Freedman 1986). The three 'roles' she played vis-à-vis her research community ("wife, widow, woman") and the three sets of relationships she developed according to her different positions were predicated upon change over time.

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 my behavior. 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 wife[2] contributed dramatically to the specific character taken by my research on gender and ethnicity, and my decision to study Sudanese norms of propriety within their immigrant identity discourse in turn sensitized me to the nuances of power in my marriage.

Marriage, Self, and Community

Marriage as a social category has long been represented by anthropologists as "the definitive ritual and universally translatable regulative ideal of human societies" (Borneman 1996: 215). But the rich body of scholarly work on marriage and the family encompassing kinship, gender, power, and political economy, among other units of analysis, has been criticized recently for its ahistorical view of marriage as a "privileged form that invariably produced gender as its effect" (Borneman 1996: 230). It is not the aim of this essay to contribute to the project of rethinking marriage as producing gender in terms of the inclusivity/exclusivity debate outlined by Borneman, but rather to demonstrate that marriage, in addition to endowing a person with a socially recognized status, is also a process shaped by discourses about gender and the specific circumstances of the relationship.

My fieldwork among northern Sudanese in Egypt centered around

the changing content of gender relations, and the intersection of gender ideology with ethnic identity. The discourse of displacement as presented by Sudanese women and men in exile in Egypt suggested to me that morality and manners as ideal behavior patterns are a crucial part of defining Sudanese identity at the time of my fieldwork. Marriage is an important element of Sudanese morality, tied to female chastity, fertility, and division of labor, among other things (Boddy 1989; Mohamed-Salih/Mohamed-Salih 1987; Williams/Sobieszczyk 1996). However, the circumstances of exile do not support adherence to the ideal code (as expressed in the current context) of gender propriety, and Sudanese women's and men's actual behavior in Cairo has drawn my attention to this contradiction.

The influence of this discourse, however, has been powerfully illustrated for me in the context of my position as a married woman, and what that might mean for community expectations concerning my role. The behavior of ʿAdel, the Sudanese man who proposed visiting me, could be interpreted in several ways taking into account the circumstances of diaspora and desperation. His intent to visit could well be representative of a "new morality" in the community which blurs formerly clear-cut codes channeling male/female interactions into public space. Alternatively, his attempts to get to know me better could have been related to his reading my 'Americanness' as putting me in a possible position to help him leave Egypt for a chance at a new life in the U.S. Finally, his query could have been a test of my understanding of an ideal Sudanese code of propriety and a statement of his illicit intentions.

Killick notes that little is written regarding local expectations towards researchers as non-native men or women (Killick 1995: 88). Early on in my fieldwork, I had assumed that my marital status would demonstrate sexual unavailability in the way that the ethnographer Helen Morton's pregnancy warded off unwanted attention (Morton 1995: 177), since my own inability to see gender as a fluid process gave me a two-dimensional view of propriety. It took persistent questioning of my female informants for me to understand that the variety of possible explanations for ʿAbdel's behaviour had to do with how he might have seen me. The ambiguity of this encounter illustrates that marriage is a matrix of power relations that brings together a complex mix of personal and community expectations.

Marriage as a Site of Power Relations

The process of gender production within the framework of marriage can be analyzed in terms of relations of power that draw the female ethnographer into the complexities of the community's gender relations, as well as negotiations with her spouse. For an ethnographer married to someone from his/her field site, marriage becomes a site of knowledge production where several interconnected sets of power relations, including gender and sexuality, the legacy of colonialism, and ethnicity and race, converge and mingle. Karim has called the power relations of fieldwork "diabolical" for the troublesome research dynamic that places the anthropologist as ascendant in relation to the world 'outside', while the 'native' reigns supreme in the world the anthropologist is trying to comprehend (Karim 1992: 248). But the position of female anthropologists vis-à-vis these "opposing worlds" is more ambiguous, since their relations of power on both sides of the equation are complicated by gender (Kulick/Willson 1995; Morton 1995; Bell et al. 1992; Altorki/El-Solh 1988; Morsy et al. 1991). Furthermore, in deconstructing their experiences as the 'Other' within their own societies (Bell et al. 1992) it has been suggested that women are more sensitive to issues of domination (Fluehr-Lobban 1986; Dubisch 1995).

Other ethnographers writing about spouses in the field have described the confusion they caused by not adhering to community-defined gender roles in their marriage. Freedman discusses the doubts of Romanian villagers about her husband's masculinity, since he could not consume the quantities of alcohol expected of him without getting violently ill, and frequently performed household tasks such as laundry and carrying water which were, in this village, solely performed by women (Freedman 1986). Fluehr-Lobban and Lobban note that their dedication to sharing household tasks in northern Sudan raised eyebrows (Fluehr-Lobban 1987), while on the other hand Schrijvers suggests that the women in her Sri Lankan research community admired her husband for his participation in childcare (Schrijvers 1992). It is worth noting that none of these anthropologists' spouses were from their field site; although communities judged these individuals according to their own gender norms, the ethnographers did

not note any ambivalence on the part of their spouses towards disregarding these norms.

Gender and power relations in the context of marriage to the 'Other' resonates more with the experiences of indigenous female researchers, who have discussed the conflicts they face in their own communities, or in communities which have adopted them (see, for example, Lila Abu-Lughod's mutually defined role as a 'dutiful daughter' in the Awlad 'Ali community [1988]). The assumption by both an indigenous ethnographer and her community is that, since boundaries demarcating researcher and researched are blurred, gender values and behavior should be shared. The tension produced by such an assumption lies in the contradiction that though the researcher and fieldsite are both gendered, relations are made ambiguous due to the differentials in power inherent in the research process.

The debate as to whether social science research can free itself of its Eurocentric heritage represents another set of power relations that is equally important in problematizing marriage in the field. As Dubisch points out,

> [s]exual relations of women of the dominant cultures with men of the subordinate cultures … confuse dominance relations, for gender hierarchy in such a relationship [from the point of view of the dominant Western society] contradicts the hierarchy of the cultural relationship by making the dominant women 'available' to subordinate men.
>
> (Dubisch 1995: 34)

I do not believe that the dual status of a woman who is also a representative of her husband's colonial past suggests a neutral balance of power. Since marriage and fieldwork are both processes which call on the spouse/researcher to constantly renegotiate her relationship with both, it is through personal experience that 'authentic' knowledge based on the intersection of these sets of power relations is created.

Minding My Manners: Propriety, Marriage, and Knowledge Production

As a wife/researcher in the Sudanese community, my experiences have been transformed into certain types of knowledge through learning

a culturally-mediated role. I had previously recognized that my access to information about my husband's community would be enhanced – and I quickly learned that some of my activities would be curtailed – because of my position. I had not realized that, in my conceptualization of my research, my partiality would lead me to structure my knowledge about Sudanese gender behavior in such specific ways. The process of negotiating my marriage brought me face to face with a very personal understanding of how Sudanese in Egypt were coping with their increasing disenfranchisement, both in their own country, and within their host society.

The historical entanglement of northern Sudanese with the Egyptian state and society is reflected in both the ambiguous status of Sudanese in Egypt, and their ambivalence over their ethnic identity. While Sudanese recognize long-standing ties of trade and marriage, cultural similarities, and the shared struggle against British colonial rule in the region, many resent patronizing Egyptian attitudes and ignorance of the problems facing Sudanese displaced in Egypt. The official Egyptian position, reflected in popular social discourse, maintains that Egyptians and Sudanese are one people, based on Egypt's historical claim to a 'united' Nile Valley. Northern Sudanese, in response, have asserted their identity as Sudanese through a discourse predicated on gender ideology, since other ethnic boundary markers such as language, religion, and dress are negated by Egyptian proclamations of unity.

During the period of my field research, my perception that Sudanese were using the idiom of 'manners' as a marker of ethnic difference coincided with my attempt to learn 'proper' behavior. Sudanese discourse on their identity increasingly took the form of disparaging comments about perceived lack of manners on the part of Egyptians, and on their own adherence to propriety. These were largely expressed in terms of gender norms. For example, one of my Sudanese colleagues regularly admonished her son for swearing, a habit she felt he had developed through his association with Egyptian schoolchildren. She told him, "Remember! You are a polite, Sudanese man!" Other associates from the Sudanese community described Egyptians as behaving immodestly compared to Sudanese, citing such 'impolite' characteristics as flirting across gender lines, or the alleged lack of generosity and hospitality that Sudanese believe sustains their masculinity. In addi-

tion, my husband and I had many conversations, prior to starting fieldwork, as to what behavior was 'appropriate' for the wife of a Sudanese man, and what behavior I should expect in response.

Taking my cue from these and other ideals, I initially limited my interactions with Sudanese men, keeping conversation on a more 'formal' level, giving out my office phone number rather than my home number, and leaving mixed gatherings on the early side so as not to excite comment about late-night fraternizing. I also mentioned the fact of my marriage to a Sudanese man frequently, believing that this connection would alert Sudanese to my understanding of the need to behave like a 'proper' Sudanese woman and thus creating the expectation that I ought to be treated in a 'respectable' and 'authentic' way – that is, like a 'native' and not a 'foreigner.' I must stress, however, that I experienced the adherence to these norms quite differently as a married woman. Thoughts of my husband's reputation usually ran parallel with worries about whether I was attracting negative attention as a woman.

Thus I was not prepared for my feelings of humiliation and anger when, for example, Sudanese men called our home asking for me late at night. I had internalized, it seems, certain norms of propriety that made me feel like I was behaving 'authentically.' However, over the course of fieldwork, I routinely noted the many contradictions to the stated ideals of Sudanese propriety, which led me to question the content of the labels that people in my research community attached to themselves and others. Despite my understanding that late-night calls from Sudanese men were improper, quite a few of my Sudanese women friends complained about 'inappropriately timed' phone calls as well. I came to recognize that many Sudanese, for whom it is nearly impossible to find work, do not start their day until noon and stay up late visiting friends or watching television, so for a significant segment of the population telephoning someone after midnight is not considered late, and therefore not improper.

Displacement has also affected other norms of gender propriety, such as women's freedom of movement. My research suggested that many Sudanese women in Cairo did not feel that they had to restrict their visits or errands to daytime or early evening, as was the stated norm as I understood it. Indeed, my husband and I were concerned that people would consider me an improper wife if I stayed out late

during my field visits, only to realize that many married women were just starting their evening visits as I was getting ready to return home. Coping with the contradictions between ideal and real boundaries of propriety was stressful, since the constraints I had anticipated were still assumed by my husband to be part of Sudanese behavior, even as my research suggested otherwise.

Observing changing gender norms in the Sudanese community in Egypt through the lens of my marriage led me to a deeper understanding of the distress caused by displacement and the ways in which people cope. The fact that, through my marriage, I became a member of the moral community I was simultaneously studying served to heighten my perception of the gender subtext in the Sudanese discourse about identity. But my marriage, as a "processual encounter", conditioned my awareness of propriety as an idiom in a much more intimate way which involved both my husband and his community as participant-observers as well (Jenkins 1994: 452).

Conclusion

The full disclosure of the position of the researcher vis-à-vis the research community continues to be a vital tool of analysis for the anthropologist interested in how her own subjectivity influences the production of knowledge about the community. Different levels of insight are gained from doing rather than just watching, but comprehension of other societies can be enhanced by intimacy. Timothy Jenkins states that

> to understand is to acknowledge one's own participation, and therefore be changed since, in order to participate, one of the roles on offer has to be taken up and explored.

Becoming a partner in marriage within fieldwork is one such role. However, the concept of marriage is not a universal equivalent that translates across cultures, and it therefore produces different understandings of femininity and masculinity (Yanagisako / Collier 1996: 236). Rather than considering marriage as representing a role or a status, relations between husband and wife should be seen as producing knowledge specific to the confluence of power relations encompassed

by the relationship. Through the process of negotiating this particular encounter I, as a married anthropologist, have come face to face with the challenge of authenticity and the ethical implications of social research.

Notes

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1 Since the 1989 coup in Sudan several hundred thousand Sudanese nationals from northern central riverain Sudan have fled to Egypt where they joined a large settled community of 'northern' Sudanese. The label 'northern' refers to the handful of ethnic groups from the region who have dominated the political and economic stage of the Sudanese state, though this has been historically constructed and masks the cultural and political complexity of Sudan.
2 I note my debt to Lila Abu-Lughod's concept of the 'dutiful daughter' in her contribution to Altorki/El-Solh (1988).

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