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CHAPTER 6

Between *Ghurba* and *Umma*: Mapping Sudanese Muslim Moralities Across National and Islamic Space*

Anita H. Fábos

Introduction: “She Was Always Nagging Me”

“Muhammad¹” is a thoughtful and dedicated youth worker for the local council of a small coastal town in the United Kingdom, where he has been an especially important role model for young refugees from the Horn of Africa, including Sudan and Somalia. Muhammad, a member of Sudan’s dominant Muslim Arab professional class, claimed asylum in the United Kingdom in 1993 along with many other Sudanese.² After establishing himself professionally, Muhammad applied to the UK Home Office for his wife and four children back in Sudan to join him in the United Kingdom in the late 1990s. Over the next few years, Muhammad experienced a rise in family tension and a deterioration in his marital relationship. “*W’Allabi* (by God), she was always nagging me,” Muhammad said of his wife—talking back to him, instructing him on his responsibilities, and taking decisions without his approval. In particular, Muhammad mentioned his anger at his wife’s unilateral act of sending money to her own uncle in Sudan without Muhammad’s permission. “This is too much,” he complained. “It is not her right to do this!” Adding to Muhammad’s woes, his tween and teen children were not behaving “properly.” The three girls preferred to wear clothes that were popular with British youth but that did not necessarily meet the ideal of modest dress promoted by many first-generation Muslim Sudanese. The

boy braided his hair in the style of his Afro-Caribbean classmates. All four children had begun to disrespect the authority of their parents. Things had gotten so bad at home that Muhammad's wife, with the help of local social services and the national Child Benefits office, had moved into a separate flat with her children. There was talk of divorce. Muhammad fretted that his family was losing their Sudanese family values as a result of his choice to seek asylum in Europe.

This is one of a number of similar anecdotes about family tension over moral propriety that I have heard over 20 years of talking with Sudanese Arab Muslim forced migrants in the diaspora. So far, this is a fairly typical story of the stress produced by social and geographic change on migrant expectations about "proper" gender and family roles and concerns about maintaining cultural identity far from home. From Cohen's influential study of Hausa migrants in Yoruba Towns (1969) to more recent studies of migrant parents sending children back home (e.g., Bledsoe and Sow, 2011; Dreby, 2006), a common thread in migrant narratives is the breakdown of expectations regarding the authority of men as husbands, and both women and men as parents, and the inability to produce proper behavior in family members who have previously measured their conduct according to the ideal cultural and moral values of another society. Although anthropologists have explored the many contradictions in how social groups promote, maintain, and enforce social norms on one hand, and how individuals subvert, play with, and defy norms of propriety, the discourse of a "culture clash" between refugee and immigrant parents and their children is so familiar that, for refugees resettling in the United States, cultural orientation staff sometimes refer to it as the "Call 911" syndrome³ (Chang-Muy and Congress, 2009).

What happened next in Muhammad's story may be less familiar to students of immigrant family tensions and renegotiations of roles and cultural values. It situates Sudanese Muslim Arabs—as well as other Muslims—within a broader moral geography and demonstrates the relevance of the Islamic *umma* (global community of Muslims) to Sudanese in the diaspora. Muhammad's attempt to impose Sudanese moral values in his UK space of exile—both in its assertion of masculine authority and cultural norms—was not, for this family, enough to reestablish a sense of Sudanese belonging and identity. Therefore—presumably with the agreement of his wife—Muhammad arranged for his four children and their mother to move—not "back home" to Sudan, but to the Egyptian city of Cairo. Although still *persona non grata* in Sudan, not only would Muhammad be able to visit his family in Egypt but they would also have access to a large community of immigrant and exiled Sudanese living in this Muslim majority country. Muhammad's children could hear Arabic spoken on the street and the Muslim call to prayer