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“Come, we kill what is called ‘persecution life’”: Sudanese Refugee Youth Gangs in Cairo

Themba Lewis

“We never want to be persecuted at any time
Come, we kill what is called ‘persecution life’.”
(Out of Control, Outlaw rappers 2006)’

Introduction

A machete attack outside World Refugee Day celebrations at the American University in Cairo (AUC) in June 2007 left a 24-year-old Sudanese refugee dead, many more injured, and over 80 arrested. The incident was the first gang-related killing to enter the mainstream international press from Cairo’s Sudanese refugee community (BBC 2007). However, it was not the first such killing, and Cairo’s refugee youth violence has broadly affected not just the Sudanese community, but the greater refugee and refugee advocacy communities as well.

This paper examines the dynamics underlying the rise of refugee youth gangs¹ in Cairo and the functions that gang structures serve, contributing to the broader literature on urban refugees, gender studies, violence, and support systems in exile. It suggests that gang structures provide critical functions for displaced and disenfranchised youth frustrated by structural violence, protracted displacement, a distrust of refugee assistance and protection organisations, and an inability to envision feasible local opportunities. It explores breakdowns in inter-generational gendered relationships and transformations of authority as elements contributing to cultural reinvention and, sometimes, violence among youth drawn to the social solidarity function of gang life. Refugee youth gang structures challenge current conceptions of refugees, and, if ignored, may jeopardise effective state protection and assistance for refugee communities in Egypt and similar settings around the world. While the study of refugees acting in support of political agendas ‘back home’ has garnered some critical attention (Chimni 2000, Østergaard-Nielsen 2001, Rieff 2002, Milner 2000, Zolberg *et al.* 1986, 1989, Stedman and Tanner 2003), little scholarship has focused on refugees acting in the interest of their own livelihoods outside of prescribed structures of humanitarian assistance.

The paper begins by situating refugee youth gang development within the wider context of refugee life in Cairo, including the circumstances that gave rise to the 2005 Mustapha Mahmoud Sudanese refugee protest. It then investigates the effects of sustained structural violence, referencing social disorganisation theory to suggest that gang structures capitalise on the transformation of authority brought on by displacement, reinforce gender roles undermined by exile, reinterpret the refugee experience through the creative outlets of hip-hop and resistance, and provide refugee-originated social support and security systems. It concludes that gang structures represent proactive, albeit problematic, refugee-initiated efforts to realise

¹ The term ‘gang’ is used in this paper to denote a youth-created social organization. The term is widely stigmatized as implying criminality, however it is the word used by participating youth to describe their groups.

holistic protection in exile, and therefore provides a critical lens through which to view modern urban refugee life.

Background

Egypt has the world's earliest recorded refugee policy. A 1280BC agreement between the Pharaoh and the King of the Hittites represents the first complete intrastate treaty known; its focus: the extradition of political refugees. Over 3,000 years later, Egypt became the only African – indeed the only non-Western – drafting member of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Convention). It ratified the document alongside its 1967 Protocol in 1981, and was the first Arab country to host an office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Egypt also holds signatory status to the 1969 Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Convention on the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa.² Egypt is therefore bound to fulfil certain responsibilities regarding refugees and asylum seekers within its territory – notably the principle of *non-refoulement*, which ensures that asylum seekers and refugees in its territory may not, under any circumstances, be returned to a country in which their life or freedom would be endangered (Kagan 2002, Goodwin-Gill 1996).

However, Egypt conditioned its ratification of the 1951 Convention through a number of reservations that restrict refugee access to public education, employment, social security, rationing, personal status, and public relief.³ This has created substantial hardship for refugees and has drawn significant criticism (Al-Sharmani 2004; Azzam *et al.* 2006; Brown *et al.* 2003; EOHR 2002; Grabska 2005, 2006, 2006a; Moro 2004). Furthermore, Egypt has taken no formal steps to integrate the remaining provisions of the 1951 Convention into domestic legislation, citing Article 151 of the Egyptian Constitution, which ‘automatically’ incorporates Egypt's international treaty obligations into domestic law (Azzam *et al.* 2006, EOHR 2002). However, a condition placed upon Article 151 ‘has rendered the adoption of the international law useless’ in many circumstances (Ibrahim 2005: 2). Indeed, UNHCR believes that ‘if and when the government identifies a need’ to respond to the problems of refugees it will likely take the form of presidential decrees, rather than the implementation of legislation (UNHCR 2005: 2). This legal situation has left most of Egypt's refugees unable to effectively integrate or access the provisions of the 1951 Convention.

Without consistent and institutionalised protection from the Egyptian government, UNHCR is the entity primarily serving the country's refugee population. However, UNHCR Cairo faces significant handicaps: numerous uncertainties, conflicting loyalties, and a massive constituency spread over great distances of urban density and desert (Fanjoy *et al.* 2005). In 2001, Cairo was UNHCR's largest refugee status determination (RSD) operation and Sudanese comprised the majority of asylum

² Adopted at the OAU Assembly of Heads of State and Government, Addis Ababa, 10 September 1969 and ratified by Egypt on 12 June 1980.

³ These reservations apply to article 12 (1), articles 20 and 22 (1), and articles 23 and 24. UNHCR (2006) Declarations and Reservations to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees as of 1 March 2006.

seekers and refugees it served (Kagan 2002: 5).⁴ Yet in undertaking its gargantuan task, UNHCR Cairo has disenfranchised applicants,⁵ denied access to services,⁶ and overlooked concerns raised by refugees.⁷

Egypt is seen by many (including its Government, segments of the local population, and until recently, UNHCR) as a transit country (Grabska 2005: 80). Between 1994 and 2005, more than fifty percent of Sudanese refugees recognised in Egypt were resettled elsewhere, making UNHCR Cairo one of the 'largest resettlement operations in the world' (Azzam *et al.* 2006: 8). Cairo was increasingly seen as an 'airport to the West' by refugees who 'came to view resettlement almost as a right' (Azzam *et al.* 2006: 8). However, resettlement is now heavily restricted and the great majority of Cairo's current asylum seekers 'remain in Egypt, severely disappointed and surviving ... under difficult circumstances' (Azzam *et al.* 2006: 8).

The Egyptian government 'opposes any suggestion of integrating refugees' (Shafie 2005: 9), rejecting outright the policy of local integration as a durable solution. Egypt does not fulfil UNHCR's local integration requirements (Grabska 2005: 72) and its 1951 Convention reservations effectively cripple refugees' ability to create livelihoods within the boundaries of domestic law. This drives them into informal sectors of the economy, where they endure exploitative, illegal, and often dangerous work while under constant threat of disciplinary action. Others engage in hazardous onward migration.

The Egyptian–Sudanese relationship – swinging 'like a pendulum' (Ronen 2003) between enmity and affinity – negatively affects displaced Sudanese in Egypt by prompting the creation of policies which 'often conflict with or confuse the information regarding services and rights available to Sudanese asylum seekers and refugees' (Azzam *et al.* 2006: 9). Displaced Sudanese are often unaware of opportunities and restrictions, uninformed about status requirements, in constant fear of unclear deportation policies, and confused by circular and contradictory information. For its part, UNHCR, the only effective mediating body, has maintained a tenuous relationship with both the Egyptian government and the displaced population.

Subject to extended exile and without prospects for durable solutions, refugees in Cairo find themselves trapped in an untenable state - unwilling to repatriate, unable

⁴ The Palestinian population in Cairo is larger than that of Sudanese refugees; however, Palestinians in Egypt are not supported by UNRWA and rarely appeal to UNHCR for recognition.

⁵ According to a 2002 assessment of UNHCR refugee status determination procedures made by Kagan (2002: 3), UNHCR 'has not implemented many of its own standards of procedural fairness, nor some well-established principles of law at its office in Cairo,' leading to particular risk of disenfranchisement for less educated and more vulnerable refugees.

⁶ For example, when a ceasefire was declared in Sudan in 2004, UNHCR RO-Cairo suspended Refugee Status Determination (RSD) interviews for *all* Sudanese asylum seekers, regardless of origin or reasons for flight (Azzam *et al.* 2006: 10). In place of an interview date, UNHCR provided asylum seekers with 'yellow cards' signifying asylum seeker status and protection from *refoulement*, but indefinitely delaying all access to refugee services. Hardship created by the suspension of RSD was considerable, and the act was premature, as interviews were suspended *before* the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed in 2005. The move additionally disenfranchised Sudanese refugees for whom agreement meant little in terms of their asylum claim.

⁷ See, for example: Azzam *et al.* 2006.

to integrate locally, and without the option of moving on. A significant portion of Sudanese refugees in Egypt exceed the ‘admittedly arbitrary’ five-year timeframe for a durable solution after which the United Nations qualifies a situation as protracted (Crisp 2003: 1). The phrase ‘in limbo’, which Crisp (2003) uses to characterise life in protracted refugee situations, is frequently applied to the displaced in Egypt (Ghazaleh 2002; Azzam *et al.* 2006; Coker 2004; Thomas 2006).

In 1999, UNHCR, aware of diminishing resettlement opportunities and its own limitations, adopted specific policy objectives to encourage self-reliance and discourage ‘irregular movement’ by ‘limiting the assistance made available’ to urban refugees (Sperl 2001: 3). The organisation sharply reduced funding for its Cairo operation in 1999 despite growing refugee numbers, prompting a crisis for refugees and asylum seekers (Sperl 2001: 3). This gave rise to numerous protection challenges for refugees and their advocates.⁸

As a result of this sustained hardship, in 2005, a segment of the Sudanese refugee community staged the most significant refugee protest in recent history (Harrell-Bond 2007; Azzam *et al.* 2006, Danielson 2008). The protest coincided with the rise of refugee youth gangs and is credited with promoting their development because it challenged existing social hierarchies and increased Sudanese distrust of refugee protection structures. Moreover, the protest illuminated many of the social and cultural points of discontent that gang membership would come to alleviate (Rothing *et al.* 2006). It is therefore important to highlight key features of the event to understand why gang structures developed the way they did.

The Mustapha Mahmoud protest and the emergence of youth gangs

The Mustapha Mahmoud protest in 2005 presented a radical change in survival strategy by Sudanese refugees in Cairo. It publicly challenged the isolation, insecurity, and protection difficulties of the preceding decade (Azzam *et al.* 2006, Lewis 2007). For three months, several thousand⁹ Sudanese refugees camped out at Mustapha Mahmoud Park opposite UNHCR Cairo, surrounded by banners calling upon the media, UNHCR, and the international community to pay attention to their problems. Protest leaders entered into a series of negotiations with UNHCR over a list of requests, but participants ultimately rejected any sort of agreement between UNHCR and the protest leadership. As a result, on the protest’s ninety-second consecutive day, state police dispersed the protesters with force. Many refugees were killed, others were separated from their families, and one committed suicide in police custody. The sit-in garnered negative attention from the Egyptian press and created discernable fissures in Cairo’s Sudanese refugee community. The protesters, though representing a fraction of the larger Sudanese refugee community in Cairo,¹⁰

⁸ Considering the resource demands placed upon UNHCR Cairo by status determination procedures, the organisation has lacked the capacity to effectively lobby the Government for the removal of Egypt’s reservations to the 1951 Convention, the ability to provide substantive legal assistance in individual cases, and, in some cases, the power to prevent *refoulement*.

⁹ The number of participants varied throughout the protest (Azzam *et al.* 2006).

¹⁰ Substantively determining the total number of Sudanese refugees in Egypt is an extremely challenging process complicated by varying levels of visibility and conflicting conceptions of ‘refugee’ (see Zetter 1991). While the concept of counting refugees has itself been problematised (Crisp 1999,

challenged not only their treatment by the government and UNHCR, but also a number of cultural values and social structures - including hierarchies of authority, methods of mediation, and gender relationships (Rowe 2007).

The psychological and cultural effects of the violence at the protest's end led to a reconfiguration of survival strategies and a re-conceptualisation of social structures. As Rothing *et al.* contend:

the violent outcome of this particular event has had a direct impact on the collective psychosocial state of the southern Sudanese refugee population, and helps to explain the rise of gang activity in 2006 including 'irrational' violent behavior among disenfranchised youth (2006: 5).

While the organisation of the protest itself challenged traditional Sudanese conceptions of authority and defied Sudanese patterns of masculinity (Rowe 2006), the development of youth gangs as support mechanisms in the aftermath demonstrates secondary effects in terms of social reconfiguration (Rothing *et al.* 2006: 5). Youth gangs present a new manifestation of resistance among displaced Sudanese in Cairo, offering alternative structures of support after the failure of previous strategies. I am not suggesting that gangs inform a larger political agenda of displaced Sudanese hoping to affect greater change, nor that they have developed specifically as resistance movements. Rather, youth gangs demonstrate a re-conceptualisation of collective representation, *de facto* reconstruction of support systems, and alternative, refugee-generated means of ensuring a perception of immediate protection and assistance for those no longer willing to rely on UNHCR or the Egyptian government.

One gang existed pre-protest, but in 2006 gangs grew in both membership and organisation; six months after the protest there were 'hundreds of gang affiliates in Cairo, representing a substantial number of southern Sudanese youth' (Rothing *et al.* 2006: 7– 8). Two primary groups developed, 'Lost Boys' and 'Outlaws', to which subsidiary groups often became affiliated.

While the 'gang' stereotype evokes a negative connotation, components of gang structure can have positive effects. Gangs may represent 'associations for youth solidarity', capitalising on the resilience and strength of social networks to transform collective potential (Strocka 2005). In contrast with previous gang scholarship's 'almost exclusive' focus on 'violence and delinquency', Strocka suggests a focus on social identity as a framework for understanding gang culture (2005: 12). It is important to understand the gang phenomenon holistically – as a network of relationships and structures which act in support of its members – rather than simply through its most negative consequence: the potential for violence. Interviews with gang members in Cairo indicated that gangs emerged to serve social purposes, establishing networks of youth who, in cooperation with one another, could afford to throw parties and plan social events (Rothing *et al.* 2006; Forcier 2008: 28).

Harrell-Bond *et al.* 1992), UNHCR Cairo counts some tens of thousands of Sudanese to be refugees under its status determination procedure.

I turn now to discuss how the abandonment of traditional cultural values by Sudanese gang youth in favour of the reinvention of social support structures might be examined through social disorganisation theory, which describes ‘the relationship between neighbourhood structure, social control, and crime’ (Kubrin and Weitzer 2003: 374).

Structural violence and social disorganisation

Social disorganisation theory aims to understand conditions that may give rise to gang activity (Bankston III 1998; Bursik 1988; Hagedorn 2005; Jensen 2003; Kubrin and Weitzer 2003). The theory roots gang activity in the ‘inability of a community to realise common goals and solve chronic problems’ (Kubrin and Weitzer 2003: 374). It suggests that when social institutions fail to contain the effects of rapid social changes (like those brought on by migration) and existing structures collapse, new and alternative forms of organisation emerge (Hagedorn 2005: 157, Bankston III 1998: 37). Youth may deviate from pre-existing systems of authority when those systems are ineffective and lose legitimacy. In situations of displacement and acculturative stress, the retreat of the state from social welfare policies, disintegration of the extended family, and social breakdown create a void in which gang structure may find fertile ground to generate a new social order (Hagedorn 2005: 157, Rothing *et al.* 2006: 13). Social disorganisation theory helps to develop a holistic approach to conceptualise group dynamics in light of social breakdown, highlighting the social functions of gang activity and the conditions that give rise to them (Bursik 1988: 521).

I suggest that the realignment of social structures through gang development represents cultural *reorganisation*— a process in which new, alternative systems emerge that abandon elements perceived as no longer useful and include elements that address specific challenges. This development allows for deviance from and re-interpretation of existing hierarchies and power structures, and can lead to their delegitimisation (SSRC 1954: 986). Traditional figures of authority, such as elders, may remain symbolically significant, but may no longer hold substantive influence because of their inability to navigate new challenges. Instead, newly-created social structures form in express opposition to inept or antiquated systems, directly challenging perceived failures and weaknesses of those systems.

Through rejection of traditional ‘elder’ authority structures, gang-affiliated Sudanese youth refuse to accept established Sudanese social rules in exile (Rothing *et al.* 2006; Forcier 2008). Simultaneously, by disassociating themselves from conservative Egyptian culture, the youth create associations that defy notions of cultural integration and societal expectations of the Sudanese ‘guest’ while developing networks of support, community, collective security, and shared experience. These creative processes represent radically new approaches to life in exile, demonstrating refugee capacity for change and development which directly challenge concepts of refugee stagnation in protracted ‘limbo’.

Gang structures enable youth to negotiate rejection, loss, and isolation while reinforcing collective and individual notions of potency through opposition. This is true both in relation to the host community – in terms of social acceptance, opportunity, and cultural understanding – and to the stress of unrealisable expectations of Sudanese cultural rules, milestones, and rituals derailed by exile.

Gender norms present an example of those expectations disrupted by displacement, as social progression is often rooted in gendered milestones.

Gender and transformation of authority

While current debates around gender in forced migration largely focus on women, the Cairo Sudanese gang phenomenon highlights compelling dynamics related to men, masculinity, and displacement. In exile, traditional male roles can erode to the point of inverting gender relationships, leading to considerable stress between both genders (Eruesto 2002; Rowe 2007; Lejukole 2000). Within a particular gender, displacement may upset 'rites of passage' such as circumcision, education, gainful employment, ritual, or marriage, and problematise roles of authority, leadership, and adulthood (Eruesto 2002; Rowe 2006). In protracted situations, younger generations may mature without clear concepts of gender roles and intergenerational relationships, while organisations such as UNHCR assume a 'provider' role, undermining pre-established head-of-household authority (Rowe 2007: 69; Crisp 2003: 12; Turner 1999). As Crisp explains:

[S]uch circumstances have a particular impact on adolescent refugee males ... who are unable to assume traditional male roles after puberty, and who have little prospect of establishing a sustainable livelihood. A common finding of recent studies is that males in this age-group are particularly prone to engage in negative coping mechanisms, including various forms of delinquent or anti-social behaviour (2003: 16-17).

The development of predominantly male youth gangs in Cairo demonstrates a struggle to redefine concepts of masculine agency undermined by flight, exile, and the removal of previous support systems. Navigating personal identity under such circumstances can become an avenue for the realisation of personal, social, and cultural power, and new visions of masculinity (Rowe 2006).¹¹

The literature on masculinity in forced migration is lacking. Indra (1999) and Lammers (1999), both significant contributors to the gender discussion, have only focused on masculinity in passing. As Rowe (2006: 2–3) points out, Indra's text contains one chapter on the subject while Lammers' 241–entry annotated bibliography contains only one item exclusively focused on masculinity. Furthermore, a December 2002 issue of *Forced Migration Review* explicitly devoted to gender and displacement contained only 'two articles (out of eight) on masculinity', suggesting a larger research gap (Rowe 2006: 3). I therefore draw heavily on the work of Rowe (2006), who researched the changing gender dynamics and notions of masculinity during and after the 2005 protest.

Young male leaders of the protest challenged existing conceptions of masculine authority within the Sudanese community. Rowe suggests that the leaders experienced 'marginalised masculinity within their own culture' due to extended displacement and the inability to progress through traditional rites of passage (2006:

¹¹ Rowe elaborates that labels such as 'refugee' can themselves operate as tools of presentation. The utilisation of these tools occurs when performing particular 'identities' is advantageous (2006).

21); they asserted power through resistance to and rejection of the 'hegemonic' masculinity represented by established authority figures (2006: 16). Having lost the opportunities to legitimise their social and cultural identity as they might have in Sudan, they harnessed protest leadership as a new way to re-affirm their own vitality.

Similarly, by reinterpreting social order and rejecting unattainable markers of masculine development, gangs provide an alternative avenue to realise strength and authority. Gangs afford distinct and conspicuous markers of masculinity for youth, identifying loyalties and peer relationships, as well as postures of strength, agency, confidence, and resistance. These developments are achieved through a rejection of cultural expectations and social pressures to integrate, and are manifested through the creation of a distinct culture – Sudanese identity infused with dominant characteristics of Western 'Gangsta'¹² dress and the rebellious, self-aggrandising confidence of hip-hop music.

Hip-hop & cultural reinvention

For gang members, hip-hop and in particular rap music, an element of the broader hip-hop culture that includes fashion and ideology, is another component of cultural reinvention in exile. Hip-hop serves as a tool of expression through narrative, music, fashion, and community identification in opposition to the host and greater Sudanese communities. It also serves as a means to gain social capital. Understanding the value of hip-hop among gang-affiliated refugees is critical to reconceptualise the urban refugee experience, refugee youth, and identities of resistance.

Mainstream American Gangsta rappers provide gang-affiliated Sudanese refugee youth in Cairo an example of seemingly successful resistance to racism, harassment, disrespect, hopelessness, social marginalisation, poverty, and a lack of opportunities. Experiencing many of these ills,¹³ it is not surprising that gang members have joined the global phenomenon of youth identification with Western Gangsta culture, despite vastly varied circumstances (Hagedorn 2005: 158).

Overt identification with Western rap culture is evidenced through the names of the gangs themselves, which refer to mainstream rappers (Rothing *et al.* 2006: 18). Additionally, gangs in Cairo adopt fashion trends, dance moves, and gestures such as hand signs to conspicuously identify with the successful, strong, minority youth who embody (and rap about) experiences of poverty, disrespect, and solidarity as well as resistance to forces devised to divide, oppress, and subjugate them. For example, at World Refugee Day celebrations in Cairo, youth rejected traditional Sudanese henna

¹² The term 'gangsta' is derived from a particular sub-genre of rap music that emerged in the late 1990s and celebrated gang rivalries. Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls (Notorious B.I.G.) were both considered gangsta rappers. The gangsta aesthetic often displays overt signs of opulence, such as diamonds, expensive cars, and designer clothing.

¹³ Experiences of racism, harassment, and social exclusion are well documented among Sudanese in Cairo, and were a central concern during the Mustapha Mahmoud protest (Azzam *et al.* 2006; Fábos 2001)

designs in favour of wearing gang affiliations, slogans, and tributes to the American rapper Tupac Shakur.¹⁴

Displaying gang markers is a highly visible oppositional response to identities such as 'refugee', imposed by UNHCR (Rowe 2006; Waldron 1987), and 'Samara', a racial slur imposed by elements of the local population. Such aesthetic forms of deviance also indicate a rejection of the cultural systems with which displaced Sudanese youth are expected to identify. As such, Sudanese gang youth create an amalgamation of worlds that is uniquely theirs. By intercepting, interpreting, and deflecting negative local circumstances, through the signifiers of global social and cultural networks, youth emancipate themselves from continued social degradation.

Drawing clear lines between gang members and those who do not support them reinforces mutual support, agency through opposition, and 'familial' solidarity. Therefore, greater social rejection of gangs may strengthen solidarity within them, and the internal necessity of their structures. A UNHCR-recognised refugee in Cairo explains, 'I do not trust the UNHCR because they will not help me. They do not like we Sudanese [sic] and they do nothing. I live now with my friends and together we are support' (Participant Interview, 2006). Similarly, identification with a larger 'posse' is a critical component of the attraction to gangsta and gang cultures. Quinn suggests that 'Gangsta Rap is a form of resistance...to economic and cultural marginalisation, empowering black youths by showing them other blacks who, as [rapper] Ice-T puts it, 'don't take no shit from nobody' (1996: 72). The rejection of structures of authority – found in international assistance organisations, the Egyptian state, and Sudanese community and familial hierarchies – gives rise to a social identity based in resistance, which acts as a unifying element of gang participation.

As refugees and asylum seekers endure protracted displacement, less faith is placed in external institutions to positively affect their circumstances. As efforts to change this – such as the protest – fail, disenfranchisement becomes intractable. Gang formation, Hagedorn suggests, is the result of '[t]he failure of modern institutions and the lack of faith in the certainty of a better future' among marginalised youth. This failure has 'strengthened ... identities formed in opposition to the dominant culture and the uncertainties of an unstable modernity' (2005: 158).

Young refugees' embrace of hip-hop culture is unsurprising. Hip-hop culture is grounded in resistance,¹⁵ and contrasts traditional Sudanese culture rendered ineffectual in exile. Moreover, in an environment of conservative values and restricted sexual interaction, the liberal and hyper-sexualised imagery and rejection of oppressive social structures of hip-hop music represents and engenders a celebratory and attractive defiance. Moreover, rap serves to further social separation, placing its subscribers into a category distinct from Egyptian cultural and sexual norms (Rothing *et al.* 2006: 20) as well as traditional Sudanese musical expression. While rap

¹⁴ Similar accounts appear in a study of Tanzanian rap and hip-hop culture, in which the spread of 'cultural identifiers' proliferated 'with at least as much fervor and speed as the music itself, if not more' and youth were using hip-hop to become 'more visible' (Remes 1999).

¹⁵ 'Hip-hop culture' is not musically restricted to rap specifically, but to a wider range of dance hall, reggae and raggaeon music. As Forcier (2008: 25) notes, the popularity of Bob Marley – a reggae singer whose repertoire leans heavily on themes of liberation and resistance – is widespread among youth. Mixes of Bob Marley lyrics into rap songs played by refugee youth are not uncommon.

may accentuate exclusion locally, it serves to create global connections to hip-hop fans around the world, thus providing a sense of belonging within a larger community, as the following section will discuss.

Global belonging

Although, as Papachristos (2004) suggests, gang activity is 'hyper-local', gangs exist in all parts of the world. Gangs are also increasingly transnational and are affected by satellite or otherwise affiliated gangs internationally. Specifically referencing refugee participation in gangs, Loescher and Milner suggest that such groups 'take advantage of the transnational nature of refugee populations, of remittances from abroad and the marginal existence of urban refugees to further their goals' (2005: 160), suggesting that the experience of migration itself globalises gangs. Research from Cairo supports Loescher and Milner's theory, as the dispersal of members across the globe has created satellite memberships as far away as Australia and the United States. For example, the Lost Boys and Outlaws have membership in resettlement countries all over the world (Rothing *et al.* 2006: 33). By utilising lingo and signs as well as altering their appearance, Sudanese in Cairo may consider themselves as 'belonging' to both their local gangs and foreign networks (Rothing *et al.* 2006: 20). Gang affiliation thus solidifies a sense of belonging to a much larger transnational community.

The rise in social networking websites and internet cafés has facilitated the growth of virtual networks and affiliations with particular social groups (Koser *et al.* 2007; Rothing *et al.* 2006). Koser *et al.* describe the creation of a virtual community of Sudanese refugee youth as an act of deviance in itself, straying from 'traditional' notions of 'communal experience as bounded by physical space' (2007: 16). Members of gangs may counteract their perceived rejection from society with acceptance into a broader community with which they share common experiences. These experiences are shared through hip-hop, a discourse, movement, style and art form that prizes stories of struggle and defiance such as theirs.

Gangs provide a platform for refugee youth to creatively explore self-expression through rap music, a narrative art form that allows the direct conveyance of events and emotions to a specific audience. A number of Sudanese gang-affiliates write and perform rap at parties and other social events, echoing overarching themes in mainstream rap, including a focus on local experiences - in this case, survival in Cairo and the refugee experience. Sudanese youth have employed the genre to express solidarity with other displaced Sudanese 'around the world', connect with the West, describe imagined conceptions of a 'future' Sudan, and mobilise listeners to 'get their rights' (Outlaw Rap, 2006). Public performance leads to increased respect and recognition within the group, building social capital, reinforcing confidence, and applying value to experience in exile. While the individual psychosocial benefits of narrative have been discussed elsewhere (see: Miller and Rasco 2004), the greater communal benefit is that it can serve to create experiential solidarity. While the embrace of hip-hop culture offers social solidarity, other aspects of the Sudanese youth gangs in Cairo are less positive, as the following section will discuss.

The role of violence in establishing 'positive' group identity

Violence between youth groups in Cairo has thus far been a defining characteristic of gang life. Some members of rival gangs engage in violent conflict on semi-regular bases, employing knives to seriously injure, if not kill, opponents. According to Strocka, gang rivalry can represent a strategy to 'establish and affirm a positive group identity' (2005: 10). What role does violence play in establishing such an identity?

Violence does not occur in isolation. As Oliver-Smith (1991) points out, aggression on a group level often manifests in response to violence, for example, as a reaction to harsh structural and physical conditions applied to a group by external forces. In Cairo, 'retaliatory' violence against Egyptians would place refugee perpetrators in positions of extreme vulnerability at the hands of the state. In this context, it is in the interest of gang-affiliated refugee youth to re-direct violence back into the Sudanese community, for the sake of self and community preservation vis-à-vis refugee status and the Egyptian state. While violence perpetrated by gang youth is directed almost exclusively towards other gang youth, the notion that it arises out of greater structural violence cannot be casually dismissed.

Physical violence is an expression of potency. To engage in physical violence is to demonstrate a capacity for influence. Thus the act itself exhibits pro-active resistance to the powerlessness that permeates the lives of displaced Sudanese in Egypt. Violent conflict between gangs presents an avenue to subvert existing structures and create movement by undermining failed systems and allowing youth to demonstrate social influence through force and irreverence.

Not all gang members need to participate in violence for its impact to permeate the groups as a whole. Indeed, many gang members do not engage in violence and have never committed a crime. Thus, while the group benefits from a common concept of gang strength, the notion of collective criminality is misleading and should be avoided (Rothing *et al.* 2006: 7). The perpetration of violence by the few affects the wider gang population, which perhaps has never committed acts of aggression, affording them the benefits, as well as the drawbacks, of such demonstrations of force (Forcier 2008: 31). These acts serve to further ensconce a sense of community, solidarity and identity that leads to further benefits, as the following section describes.

Solidarity, social support, and security of resources

The social support structures offered by gangs (Strocka 2005; Rothing *et al.* 2006) emerge in two primary forms. As *social institutions*, gangs provide means to cope with acculturative stress, isolation, and disconnection with dominant cultural systems. As *communities*, gangs provide opportunities for direct livelihood support within immediate relationships.

As social institutions, Sudanese youth gangs facilitate secure opportunities for socialising, community gathering, and exchange through field trips and parties (Rothing *et al.* 2006: 14). Parties often occur on Nile boat trips, away from the scrutiny of authorities and outside the constraints of conservative cultural norms. Additionally, gang solidarity functions as a central support system. Norms of visiting injured or ill members demonstrate strict social obligations. Similarly, internal conflict resolution structures value gang-loyalty as a fundamental principle between

quarrelling parties, providing common ground through which to resolve differences while creating avenues for facilitation within the larger group. These mechanisms provide opportunities for collectivised problem identification, mutual support, and conflict resolution. Such opportunities might otherwise be non-existent as a result of the 'multiple and sequential movements' and 'disordered group values and crosscutting loyalties' which emerge through the process of displacement (Rothing *et al.* 2006: 4).

The pooling of resources for food and rent, fund-raising for medical care, and communal housing demonstrate livelihood supports facilitated by gang membership (Gamal 2004; Rothing *et al.* 2006). Additionally, as witnessed when UNHCR transferred some of its functions to a church located in the Abassia neighbourhood – under the territorial influence of the Lost Boys – gangs function to control access to assistance and refugee-related support services, privileging their membership. As Rothing *et al.* report, 'Lost Boys, who ... claimed control over this territory, started to exploit their privileged situation by imposing fees on outsiders entering the neighbourhood, a practice frequently mentioned as leading to increased gang violence' (2006: 25). While this practice can hardly be seen as a 'positive' support structure, it effectively increased access to resources for affiliates of the gang.

Conclusion

Coupled with rising levels of inter-gang violence, Sudanese youth gangs threaten the security of a much larger proportion of the refugee population than themselves. Gangs directly threaten refugee protection in significant ways, particularly as violence may lead to *refoulement* and host-community backlash, potentially undermining refugee policy. Assistance organisations, many of which serve as congregation points, may limit access out of fear that gangs may bring violence to their doorsteps. Perhaps more dangerous is the potential that organisations themselves may become territorial prizes as gangs aim to secure access to scarce resources under increasingly desperate local conditions. Additionally, marginalisation of certain segments of the refugee community can serve to further ensconce a 'state of exclusion' more generally (Grabska 2006a: 300). This marginalization, which may affect any number of minority elements, can occur both within greater host community structures, and within refugee communities themselves, and can lead to fragmentation that may undermine the cohesion necessary for effective integration.

The Sudanese refugee community in Cairo is diverse, and gang affiliated youth compose only one fragment of the whole and certainly do not represent all young Sudanese. The development of youth gangs comes at a time when disenfranchisement and frustration among much of the refugee population is so deeply entrenched that few see hope for or avenues towards a better future in Cairo. Without access to basic structures of personal and community development – such as employment, education, community networks, resources, opportunities, and respect – the formation and popularity of gangs can hardly be surprising.

This paper has shown that gang structures can serve critical functions in terms of solidarity and mutual support. Indeed their development reveals an active rejection of prescribed social, cultural, and legal roles by their members and demonstrates a reassertion of control under circumstances in which alternate avenues appear not to exist. Gangs act as families to those estranged through displacement, unable to reconcile with Egyptian culture and alienated from Sudanese culture-in-exile.

Membership provides a sense of belonging for those isolated, a network of information-sharing for those uninformed, and a feeling of potency under circumstances of powerlessness.

Furthermore, this paper has demonstrated that gangs challenge mainstream conceptions of the refugee experience. Understanding the dynamics of gang development – and the conditions that may facilitate it – is of critical importance to the success of policy and the actualisation of substantive protection and assistance. Knowledge of gang structures provides an opportunity for policy makers, advocates, and academics alike to update conceptions of refugee life; better understand the experience and potential consequences of protracted displacement; and recognise elements of that experience perhaps otherwise unseen.

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