

Gender, race and culture: Unpacking discourses of tradition and culture in UNHCR refugee policy

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Abstract

In this paper I want to consider the ways in which notions of culture and tradition have functioned within United Nation High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) policy documents dealing with gender. I argue that there is an ambivalent treatment of culture as both protective of women as well as the source of women's oppression in societies that are loosely identified as 'traditional'. Some significant implications of this are that there is a tension in the founding principles of universal humanism that underpins UN agencies when dealing with cultural specificity and that this tension is rooted in a conflation of tradition and culture with gender relations. In the context of UNHCR documents, the fact of being displaced is taken to necessarily result in a loss of tradition and identity because of the way that geographical and social communities are imagined to be synonymous. I argue that this reproduces a range of racial otherings that locates women's oppression and protection in a depoliticised notion of the traditional family.

Introduction

Within the domain of knowledge loosely called 'refugee studies' there has been a great deal of attention to questions of culture and tradition. Much of this attention to culture has been a concern over cultural difference – with a substantial part of this literature questioning whether the principles of psychology (as just one contributing discipline) are applicable across cultures. In this literature, questions of culture have come to the fore through a range of crises that have presented themselves when working across geographical and social contexts. It is perhaps not surprising that in many cases culture has been dealt with in the static and uncontested way by now so thoroughly critiqued within some varieties of feminist research (Mohanty, 1993; Spivak 1990). For example, even the more critical literature on trauma service provision across cultures tends to assume two cultures: that in which the idea of trauma and associated therapeutic techniques have emerged and that in which it is being applied (see, Eisenbruch, 1991; Andermann, 2002; Englund, 1998 for examples relating to trauma). There is little consideration in much of this literature of the complexities and varieties of cultures and how the boundaries of a culture are constructed and perpetuated through cross cultural psychosocial interventions. These cultures are often assumed to be ahistorical and essential in ways that close down reflections on how the invention of culture is a product of a particular moment in the social imagination (Hobsbawn and Ranger, 1983). These debates have been central to the varieties of critical psychology that have emerged over the past 20 years but take on a new significance and meaning when considering the more recent and constantly shifting constructions of nations and migrants.

In this paper I want to consider the contested discourses of culture and tradition as they operate in UNHCR policy on refugee women. I also want to offer an analysis of the ways in which tradition and culture have been conflated to reproduce a series of gendered consequences because of how tradition and culture slide into one another in these documents. I will consider the gendered and racialised character of tradition and culture and their ambivalent position within the notions of universal humanism that the United Nations (UN) is premised on.

That discourses of culture and tradition come into play so strongly when talking about refugees is not surprising. Work with and for refugees is necessarily cross-cultural (as is humanitarianism more generally) and, as such, it throws into light taken for granted notions of selfhood and otherness (with its associated judgements of normativity) and the extent to which this is considered to be rooted in symbolic constructions of place and nation. Equally, its cross-cultural nature functions as a reminder of how we construct culture in ways that conflate with constructions of nation as I will discuss further in this paper.

The documents that I will refer to are largely intended for use in refugee camps – by far the most common institutional arrangement in Africa for the spacial ordering of people of different nationalities. By implication camps operate as one of the least subtle technologies for the reproduction of and segregation of nations (Rose, 1990). Camps, in many ways, present particular manifestations and inventions of culture. Far from the integration debates circulating in some European contexts, the camp in Africa has become the “standardised, generalisable technology for the management of mass displacement” (Mallki, 195: 498). This has allowed for the emergence of a range of technologies of management and screening (such as health provision, trauma services etc) that create the illusion of the refugee as an objective, knowable entity and the study of refugees as a self delimiting and uncontested field with its associated experts.

Gendering culture and tradition

Notions of tradition have long been critiqued for their (often simplistic) conflation with race. Young (1995), for example, argues that culture has come to replace race in that it continues to function to produce the other. What this suggests is that notions of culture are constructed at the intersection of nation (place) and race and, more than this, are necessarily comparative in nature. As a result, the study of displacement offers an opportunity to expose and critique such a construction. Similarly, Mallki (1992) has argued, that nation and ‘culture’ are intricately connected through ascribing people with native or indigenous status. This raises a number of questions about who has culture, what norm culture is measured against and how reference to culture functions. In addition, however, discourses of culture that are conflated with race and nation depend on a cultural essentialism that, I will go on to argue, is a part of why the discourse on culture in UNHCR policy cannot adequately engage with gender politics. As Young states:

Culture never stands alone but always participates in a conflictual economy acting out the tension between sameness and difference, comparison and differentiation,

unity and diversity, cohesion and dispersion, containment and subversion (Young, 1995: 53).

In this way, otherness is constructed precisely through the conflict between the sameness of universal humanism and the difference of tradition and culture. Hooks (1992) points out the deep investments that we have in the myth of sameness and the outrage that noting difference evokes among those belonging to dominant racial groups. This investment in sameness is epitomised in the creation of ‘universal man’ in the post world war II European discourses of humanism as I will discuss, a bit more, later on.

Furthermore, for Mallki (1995) there is an implicit functionalism in the way that culture and tradition have been a central concern in the study of forced migration. She points to an “...assumption that to become uprooted and removed from a national community is automatically to lose one's identity, traditions and culture” (Mallki, 1995: 508). This is indicative of the slippage between culture, race and nation that requires further interrogation. Equally this implies that one's identity in one's ‘home’ country is unproblematic, taken for granted and never in question. A gender perspective provides a useful critique of this as I hope to indicate in the examples below.

If one accepts the inevitably comparative nature of discourses of culture, then culture and tradition only become visible – are only needed as constructs - at the moment when there is outside intervention or when the assumed homogeneity of culture becomes contested and challenged. This is perhaps most clearly illustrated in programmes for refugees where notions of nation and place come to define one's existence in a state and to structure one's dependence on, and entitlement to, aid. Humanitarian interventions, therefore, offer a case study of the conflictual position of culture and tradition within a humanist universalism that is the basis of humanitarian intervention across nations and races. Thus, humanitarian intervention is a process of creating culture, or of inventing it, because of the demand for intervention on the basis of universal rights.

That culture is, typically, conflated with and used interchangeably with race has been thoroughly argued and I don't want to restate these arguments here (see for example, Wright, 1998; Young, 1995). Rather, I want to move away from the singularities of gender and race and “think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (Bhabha, 1994: 1). A cursory glance over UNHCR policy documents (as well as other UN documents although these are beyond the scope of this paper) shows us that the moments where culture and tradition is evoked are frequently moments where gender relations and, in particular the treatment of women by men, are being questioned. Culture, as much as it is about raising notions of racial difference, is equally about contesting, supporting, or at least negotiating relationships between men and women. It functions to legitimate or undermine interventions into gender relations and shapes the possibilities for resistance and change. The accusations of racism levelled against humanitarian interventions that challenge gender relations in a culture other than one's own are an example of how the conflation of race and culture impacts on the legitimacy of interventions into gender relations. Of course, this requires a homogenised notion of insider/outsider that it is my purpose to unpack here.

However, before delving deeper into these debates, I want to consider how tradition and culture have functioned in UNHCR policies for women. This paper is a small part of a bigger project and so I will concentrate here on only two key documents although some of the arguments may well be made of other relevant documents.

Tradition as protective

Concerns for gender equity have been a part of debates about displacement at least since the creation of the 1951 convention on the rights and status of refugees. For example, during the drafting of the convention, it was suggested that one could also be persecuted on the basis of gender (the convention mentions race, religion, tribe, country of origin and membership of a social group) but this was rejected. The sense that violence against women is a form of violence different to the violence of war, and is rather embedded in culture, is one that I do not have the time to go into here, but is clearly relevant to how we construct culture in terms of gender relationships (see Palmary, 2005, 2006 for more).

Having said this, the UNHCR Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women (1991) identify tradition and culture as something that is, firstly, almost entirely conflated with the treatment of women within refugee societies and, secondly, as something entirely positive. The following is a (rather lengthy) excerpt from the Guidelines in a section entitled ‘beyond legal measures’:

13. Relief officials often point to cultural constraints in involving women in decision-making, particularly where women have had a limited role in the country of origin. Looking to women as decision-makers under these circumstances, they argue, amounts to tampering with the culture of the group.

14. These relief officials may, however, have only a superficial understanding of the socio-cultural roles of women. Their concerns may reflect the cultural biases of the officials and/or inadequate understanding of both the traditional cultures and the new circumstances in which refugee women find themselves. Prior to flight, women typically have opportunities to express their concerns and needs, sometimes through their husbands and other times through traditional support networks. In refugee camps, however, many women are unable to participate through such traditional mechanisms as these have broken down. Alternative arrangements must be made to ensure that their voices are heard and the perspectives that they have to offer are included in decision-making. It is essential, therefore, that organisations working with refugees recognize that special initiatives may be needed so that refugee women have the opportunity to contribute to the activities being planned.

15. In many cases, the government, personnel of other organisations and/or community leaders will need to agree formally or informally to the plans for ensuring protection of refugee women if they are to be effective. They may have objections based on traditional concepts about the role of women in the cultures of

the country of origin or the country of asylum. In these situations it is essential that they understand:

- The responsibilities of UNHCR regarding the protection of refugee women; and
- The requirement that UNHCR uphold international instruments that guarantee equity between men and women as well as the non-discriminatory use/distribution of UNHCR assistance.

There are several main points that I want to make in respect of this extract. Firstly, tradition and culture slide into one another at the moment where ‘culture’ becomes ‘traditional culture’. This hints at the notion of culture that is being evoked here: one that is timeless, transhistorical and, by implication, beyond critique or transformation. Linked to this, the notion of what culture is, what counts as culture, and what does not is left unstated as it is through the entire document. However, that it is raised in relation to the beliefs of (UN) officials and in relation to the participation (or lack thereof) of women in camp decision-making highlights its gendered and racialised connotations. Thus, the conflation of culture with the treatment of women within a national / racial group is left uncontested. Furthermore, through this conflation, culture is fixed and essentialised in ways that ignore the complexities of local resistances and support a range of unequal practices. Far from being just a simplification of gender relations these notions of culture shape how food aid is delivered, how camp management is established and the expectations and entitlements that men and women have. This notion of culture as fixed and authentic functions to close down opportunities for women’s political mobilisation that cannot easily be defined as ‘traditional networks’.

In addition, we see a tension between the assumption within UN founding theory of the universal subject and the need to accommodate difference. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights created the race and gender blind subject of ‘Universal Man’. As a reaction to the Darwinism that had dominated until then, and had driven the racisms of World War II, this notion of universal man aimed to transcend difference. However, difference continues to haunt UNHCR interventions with refugees, at least in part because being a refugee is dependent on classifications of race and nation that are not given space within universal humanist discourse. The difficulty in accommodating difference, and doing so only in terms of ‘culture’, raises another central problem. If we accept the arguments mentioned earlier that notions of culture necessarily evoke comparison then there is equally a norm that is implicitly established in the above extracts. This is the aid worker whose culture is assumed to be free of such sexism. As the final clause of the extract suggests, the UNs participation in the global discursive practices of humanism are emphasised over culture and tradition in the final instance. The extent to which the ‘universal man’ is shot through with sexist, racist and heterosexist assumptions is eclipsed.

What is equally clear in the above extract is that culture, aside from being rendered stable and authentic, is taken as an unquestioned good. By romanticising a simplified representation of ‘traditional culture’ and imagining that it is the fact of displacement that creates these tensions around the treatment of women – rather than them being ongoing

contestations - tradition is seen as the solution to the tension between difference and sameness that is at the heart of UN theory. Thus, the solutions set up in the UNHCR guidelines are largely about replicating 'traditional structures' in camp settings.

There is equally an implicit engagement with the argument that 'outsiders' should not tamper with the culture of another. The assumption in this statement is firstly that culture is unproblematically accepted within the displaced group and that the fact of their being geographically displaced means an inevitable loss of identity and tradition. In this way the nation, as a relatively recent construction that took on the concerns of the postcolonial era is conflated with a community with a natural shared culture. A shared geographic area is conflated with a shared culture and the anxiety over tampering with culture speaks to the concern that to do so might risk accusations of racism. However, this anxiety has reproduced a range of racisms about the extent to which women in African cultures are entirely blind to their cultural practices and its sexism.

The conflation of culture and tradition with the position of women in a depoliticised and essentialised way leads to a great deal of emphasis on the family in the UNHCR documents that deal with refugee women. The notion that traditional practices have no gender discrimination allows for the belief (restated many times in the guidelines) that it is 'unaccompanied women' who are most at risk. For example, in trying to understand the circumstances of those displaced the Guidelines (1991) recommend asking: "Are single women incorporated into family units or other groups during flight?" In the part of the document title 'protection needs and responses' it states: "when women and girls are separated from male family members in the chaos of flight or they are widowed during war, they are especially susceptible to physical abuse and rape". That women without family protection are considered to be particularly at risk is also a function of a depoliticised notion of the family as a 'traditional' structure of protection for women.

Similarly, under sexual exploitation and prostitution the Guidelines (1991) state that:

"In some situations, sexual exploitation of single women who are housed with other families has been reported, particularly where the refugee women are expected to take on conjugal roles in their new households. In other countries, some refugee women have been forced into prostitution for lack of assistance. Prostitution involves primarily single refugee women and girls who are unaccompanied, as well as female heads of household."

This last quote highlights the moments in which an essentialised and romanticised notion of traditional families begins to unravel – even if it is only acknowledged to exist when women are housed with 'other' families. If one accepts that in traditional societies women have access to decision-making and it is only when they lose their family support structures through displacement that they are rendered vulnerable to abuse, it is not surprising then that family reunification or the accommodation of women within families other than their own, is considered one of the primary solutions to the problems facing women. However, the hint at the levels of abuse within families reminds us of how it is precisely the kinds of heteronormative family models with women under the 'protection' of a male head of household that is the source of most of the violence against women.

Equally, the focus of analysis is narrowed here to their culture where the extent to which culture becomes contentious only through displacement and the place that defines it.

Tradition as an obstacle

As much as traditional culture may be celebrated as protective of refugee women, the above extracts begin to hint at an ambivalence to culture, perhaps precisely because of its conflation with the subordinate position of women in the context of a discourse of universal rights. Indeed, many of the interventions aimed at refugee women are intended to assist them to overcome this same, equally unspecified, tradition. In other words, in spite of the above romanticisation of an authentic tradition and culture, within UNHCR practice, tradition and culture have equally been seen as so much of an obstacle to refugee women that war has even been celebrated for its ability to disrupt traditional cultural practice. If we return to the previous extract, in spite of claiming that it is the fact of displacement rather than culture that excludes women from decision making in camps, the extract nevertheless returns to the founding universal humanist claims to which the UNHCR is bound as a response to instances where culture really does exclude women. In the final instance, universal humanism takes precedence over cultural specificity. Even more strongly, the 2001 *standing committee meeting document on mainstreaming: a gender equality perspective* states:

16. While displacement creates obstacles to empowerment for refugee women, it also creates opportunities. Every day, displaced women and returnee women, overcome traditional roles that inhibit their participation in economic and political life, challenging customs and traditions out of sheer necessity, in order to continue to provide for themselves and their families. Such efforts deserve support and encouragement.

Later, when discussing the importance of male involvement the same document states:

28. The survey in Guatemala also made it clear that awareness raising of women's rights, both in asylum and return must target men as well as women in order to ensure sustainability, particularly of gains made during conflict and asylum are not to be lost on return, when many men insist that women return to traditional roles.

The idea that war and displacement create opportunities for women, otherwise not available to them because of 'traditional culture', figures frequently in these documents. Regardless of how good or bad culture is meant to be for refugee women it remains centrally about the social position of women within a racial or national other. However, the statement that women change roles out of "sheer necessity" (and because of their commitment to their families) rather than, say, hard won struggles for greater equity within their communities, again suggests that it is the fact of displacement that is the source of challenges to tradition and culture. Once more the notion that at 'home' tradition is uncontested and unproblematic for all within a geographically defined cultural community persists. The traditional position is set out as one where women take no role in political and economic life (in contrast to the extracts from the gender guidelines) and the assumption is that men will demand a return to this once they return home. This provides a

very striking example of Mallki's (1992) claim that culture is conflated with a geographic area and without a change in geography would remain unchanged. Once more tradition is conflated with men's treatment of women.

Some conclusions

I have offered some ideas about the problems raised by the current conceptualisation of culture and tradition within UNHCR humanitarian discourse and the racialised and gendered politics thereof. Culture is never defined but implicitly relates to the social position that women are supposed to occupy within groups that are defined as different. As such it functions to reproduce the notion that the nation represents the boundaries of culture. As Bhabha (1994) notes, the "shadow of the nation falls on the condition of exile" (p. 154). More than this, however, this construction of culture as stable and authentic shapes and constrains women's contestations of the reinvention of 'their' culture through humanitarian aid interventions. In addition, the ambivalence to culture in UNHCR policy as both positive and negative on the one hand and as recognition of difference in the context of a demand for universal humanism on the other reproduces an artificially rigid notion of gender relations and women's social positions. As such the source of women's oppression is located in her culture and her men rather than in a global system of inequality perpetuated through universal humanisms (see Mohanty, 1993). This operates through the naturalisation of the nation and the function of UNHCR in an era of universal humanism to contain

"wandering peoples who will not be contained within the *Heim* of national culture and its unisonant discourse, but are themselves marks of a shifting boundary that alienates the frontiers of the modern nation...[T]hey articulate the death-in-life of the idea of the 'imagined community' of the nation" (Bhabha, 1994: 164, emphasis original)

I have tried to illustrate just one example of the gendered consequences of this; of how, in the context of humanitarian interventions for and with refugees, concerns for culture are predictably concerned with the treatment of women where their ill treatment is deemed to be part of 'traditional culture'. This conflation locates culture as homogenous and defined by the boundaries of the nation, and in this move eclipses any progressive moves to transforming and contesting relationships between men and women in any society.

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