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Restricting the Public: The Problem of the Private in Somali Bantu groups

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Abstract: For the Somali Bantu community settling at a public housing project in Columbus, Ohio, there is little evidence of privacy. Members of this group move in and out of each other's homes with few boundaries. This paper considers one instance where such boundaries were drawn in an effort to illustrate that the dichotomy between public and private is not absolute; rather, it illustrates social hierarchies based on gender and age.

On its face, the distinction between public and private seems to be straightforward and universal. However, in my research with a group of southern Somali refugees in Columbus, these mutually exclusive realms of human activity are not so readily distinguishable. My research focuses on a minority group of agriculturalists from southern Somalia, the Somali Bantu, who have a cultural background quite distinct from their ethnic Somali counterparts, and who have only recently begun to resettle in the United States after 10-15 years in refugee camps along the border in northern Kenya.

When Somali Bantu refugees began to arrive in Columbus as their primary resettlement site in 2004, the designated resettlement agency expected approximately 160 people, and were equipped to assist with their resettlement in the area until June 2005, when the grant for this relatively small population would be complete (Zissman 2005). Despite these limited resources, within the first year of resettlement, Columbus began to attract a number of Somali Bantu refugees away from their assigned resettlement sites and, by the fall of 2007, when I began my research there, the community numbered about 1000 people (Walker 2007), and had clustered in public housing projects around the southwestern boundary of the city.

This paper will consider the question of public and private at one of these housing projects, Wedgewood Village Apartments, just inside the city boundary. At Wedgewood, home to a number of Somali Bantu families who are related by pre-existing kinship and village ties in Somalia, the group has been able to replicate a number of elements of village life, including a characteristic blurring of distinction between the public and the private. To be sure, like any apartment complex, the individual units at Wedgewood serve to create boundaries around discrete nuclear families; however, despite these boundaries, members of the community move freely throughout each other's homes with little effort made to restrict access, or to enforce a standard of privacy. As in traditional village life, women share resources and services, such as food and babysitting, with extended family and neighbors. In fact, until the resettlement, polygamy was commonly practiced in this group, and one of its obvious consequences is that family life at Wedgewood is complex, and many members of that community are interrelated. In addition, despite ethnic distinctions within the group, many of the Somali Bantu living at Wedgewood were previously co-located with their current neighbors, both in their southern Somali villages, and later in refugee camps. Ultimately, the settling of this group into a vast but closely linked set of uniform housing units common to the American urban landscape has actually enabled the preservation of their traditional practices of common, rural living. As a result, there is little that is private within the Somali Bantu community at Wedgewood Village. However, rather than argue simply that the private does not exist within this community, this paper aims to explore a specific ethnographic instance in which some members

of the community are restricted from expressive culture by other members in order to explore the interplay of private and public in this context. I would argue that the dichotomy between public and private may be less helpful here than a closer examination of which groups within a community are included and excluded in practice, and how those practices are perpetuated among younger members of the community.

Restricting access: An ethnographic example

For my discussion today, I want to share with you some video footage I shot at Wedgewood during a visit there in July 2008. Let me begin by providing a bit of background on the happenings at the estate that day, then my intention is to let the video continue playing, and I will use it to point out issues of exclusion and inclusion in the filmed activities.

Let me start by admitting that, when I arrived at Wedgewood that day, I was carrying my video camera by accident. In an earlier visit, I had filmed a lot of activity surrounding the wedding of one of the Somali Bantu teenage girls at the project, and on this trip back, my plan had been to show the tape to some of her friends there because the viewing and circulation of wedding videos is very popular within the extended Somali Bantu community. Because I did not know if their VCR would work with my tape, I brought along my video camera with the intention of using it as a video player in this instance. I say all this by way of explanation for the poor quality of the video you are about to see. It was a rare opportunity for me to capture footage of the living spaces of the community in a spontaneous and unobtrusive way, so you will see digressions in that direction throughout this excerpt. Also, the footage was captured on Hi8 tape and then converted to a digital format, and some clarity was lost. Finally, I want to note that because my dissertation research focuses on the adolescent members of the Somali Bantu community, my IRB restrictions are fairly strict. All minors are a protected category, so I cannot allow the use of their names in a public forum. Ironically, I have to protect their privacy, whether they care about it or not. This makes spontaneous video a bit tricky to use because people name each other on tape. So that caveat has guided my editing decisions. Despite that, I wanted to offer a sense of the background music, and I believe everything relevant was left in the portions of tape you are about to see, although the transitions may be a bit choppy.

On this particular day, when I coincidentally had my video camera along, the Somali Bantu community was again celebrating a wedding. Not a wedding in Columbus, or even one being held that day. Rather, a young woman with relatives at the estate was planning to get married in Virginia later that month. Because her mother was in town, a number of community members held a celebration in an apartment across the hall from some friends of mine. So when I arrived at the home of my friend, a matriarch named Batula, her teenage daughter (the youngest girl from her second marriage) was presiding over a collection of Batula's grandchildren (an assortment of offspring of children from Batula's first marriage) while across the hall, music, dancing, and food were being shared in celebration of the impending wedding.

(Here's the videotape start.) Things to highlight:

- The gathering is seemingly exclusively women, in that sense, a private function. In fact, this is an ersatz wedding reception for those members of the community least likely to travel to Virginia to celebrate, ie women, who have caregiving responsibilities at home and who do not often know how to drive.
- They are engaged in activities that are routinely performed by women: cooking and dancing. In my experience of the Somali Bantu, both women and men dance at

weddings. However, one of the few ethnographers to work on this community prior to the collapse of the Somali state, Francesca Declich, has stressed the connections between dancing, pre-Islamic ritual practices, matrilineal kinship groups and the construction of authority while trying to de-emphasize the trend in Africanist scholarship to juxtapose African dancing against ideal Islamic practice (Declich 1995a). So, on the one hand, this event is obviously celebratory and uses African popular music, not ritualistic or even traditional musical forms; on the other hand, it is fair to say that there may be something important happening when a cohort of senior women gathers to dance in exclusive groups, particularly to celebrate a rite of passage, like a wedding.

- But is this private? Is it public? You can see that I am not the only video camera at the party. The room itself is staged in such a way as to create boundaries: the covered walls and window, although you cannot tell it from this part of the video, the door was generally shut and access to the room was restricted.
- But then there are those troublesome young men clustered almost voyeuristically at one end of the room, capturing the dancing for an even wider audience and watching intently. Two young men join in briefly at the start, but quickly move to the periphery. The dancing remains the domain of women, and—if it is not apparent—particularly women who are already married. The type of male who is included is also fairly limited: young, unmarried men can watch if they are part of a necessary function—like recording the celebration, but that’s all they can do. They are not fed, and they are not really welcome to dance.

Now the video moves back across the hall. In this second part, we also have dancing females. As you can see, the younger women are conducting an impromptu dance workshop in a separate apartment across the hall. Most of the dancers here are unmarried women, although a few recently married women join in toward the end.

Things to highlight with the second group:

- The question again is, is this public? Is it private?
- I kept in the conversation with the 17 year old because she illustrates the problem I want to highlight. Everybody dances, she insists. So this is a public act. But you will note that what happens in the tape complicates that considerably.
- A similar pattern of gender exclusiveness in the new room: there are males in the room, but they are younger (and that means junior to) the women who dance.
- In this case, I am the only person videotaping, and you can see there is considerable effort to show off for me.
- Note the two “tween” girls that are essentially being taught how to dance here and their reactions tell us as much as the 17 year old’s explanations.
- The two married women join in only after a third party departs.
- Other members of the peer group enter freely. In fact, I cut out a lot at the end to save time, so I should note that as this went on throughout the afternoon, a number of young people (including boys) from the housing estate flocked to the house to be videotaped, and became disruptive enough that I had to put the camera away.
- The arrival of Ahmed the patriarch, and the assertion of the private.

(After the arrival of the Baba, the video ends.)

Implications for our theme

As the afternoon went on, these patterns continued. The best way I can think to put it, in the terms of our theme, is that among this community, women dance in front of restricted publics or in selective privacy. If this ethnographic example is an accurate reflection of the communally held social rules, and I believe it is, then women's dancing is both public and private in the same instance. It is public activity shared among social equals and inferiors: other women of the same peer group or younger, or men of a younger peer group. It is private in that it is not conducted in front of social superiors: men of one's peer group or older. So what does this all mean in terms of these two domains of activity? I am struck, not only in this example, but also as I searched for folkloristic analysis on the issue of public and private, how often the private is raised in the context of gendered performance of expressive culture. In fact, one trend in scholarship has been to trace the process by which women's expressive culture becomes relegated to private performance across a spectrum of culture groups (Askew 1999; Borovsky 1999; Caughran 1999). However, as we saw in the video, access was not entirely based on gender, but on a mix of gender and status within the lifecycle. What I found more helpful was Beverly Gordon's discussion of a women's bathroom on the University of Wisconsin at Madison campus as a backstage women's space, working from Goffman's use of the theater as a metaphor in presenting the self (Goffman 1959). Yet, in my example, while it may be arguable that what was happening among the unmarried girls was a backstage activity, I would argue that the older women were engaged in a public performance despite the restrictions on access to it. Even more problematic is the presence of recording equipment. The dancing is being recorded; therefore, unrestricted audiences both within the community and at large could ultimately view this dance event. In fact, the sharing of wedding videos has become hugely popular within the Somali Bantu community in exile. So these young girls who dove for seats in order to avoid dancing in the presence of their grandfather are also aware that grandfathers in Atlanta, Salt Lake City, and any of the other relocation sites could eventually watch their dancing without restriction once my tape starts to circulate within the Somali Bantu world, despite the backstage nature of their performance. Felicia McMahon notes a similar phenomenon among DiDinga refugees in her book, *Not Just Child's Play*, and argues that collectively performed dance is central to preserving a non-Western identity, connecting them to their ancestral past as well as the larger diaspora of DiDinga. At the same time, the use of videotape to circulate the dance performances allows them to be preservers of their own culture, and pushes the performance of expressive culture into new forms (McMahon 2007:177-178). Greg Gow describes video use among diasporic Oromo (an Ethiopian minority group), and he describes these recordings as "video libraries" that allow illiterate migrants/refugees to keep records of their personal and collective histories, as well as narrate the arts and events playing onscreen, thereby moving themselves from margins to the center of events (Gow 2002:87, 89). The circulation of videos within the Somali Bantu community operates in the exact same manner. Now that resettlement has allowed them access to video cameras and video players, celebrations are routinely recorded and circulated. Families gather in mixed gender and age groups to watch other Somali Bantus, many of whom are not personally known to them, dance at weddings and birthday parties to both traditional and popular music. The video offers the larger diaspora a chance to participate in expressive culture in multiple locations, and circulation has become so important that cameras are hired even for this rather insignificant and distant celebration of a lifecycle event. At the same time, in the face-to-face context of performance, the community maintains the separation of traditional social hierarchies based on both gender and age group.

Ultimately, in this ethnographic project, I think that the categories of public and private are helpful only in that they illustrate the complexity of folkloristic practice in the midst of dislocation and resettlement, where the private and public co-exist in the same instance. Like my 17 year old informant said before she restricted access to her mother's home, "It is for everybody!"

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