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[Ethar El-Katatney](#)

Identity Crisis 101

Posted in [Egypt Today](#) by Ethar El-Katatney on May 8, 2008

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Egypt Today

Cover Story

May 2008



Photo credit: Mosen Allam.

Available at: <http://www.egypttoday.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=7973>

Whether born Egyptian and raised abroad or raised in Egypt to bi-cultural parents, ‘halfies’ find themselves constantly afloat between two worlds.

By: Ethar El-Katatney

Identity Crisis 101 is the winner of the Press Category in the [Anna Lindh Media Journalism Award 2009](#), presented by Prince Albert III of Monaco.

As the world becomes increasingly globalized, with national boundaries no longer limiting where one can travel or live, it is inevitable that more and more people will end up straddling multiple cultures.

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based on religion, gender, social class or status, and even by profession or education.

But what about those who have a non-Egyptian parent, the so-called ‘halfies?’ Or ‘halfies at heart,’ who have Egyptian parents but have lived the majority of their lives abroad? How do halfies deal with the challenges facing them upon returning to Egypt and the hurdles they have to overcome in a Middle Eastern country? Is it possible for them to reconcile their dual cultures or does split heritage always mean split personality?

Meet the Halfies

There are countless types of halfies. From an American by birth who has lived all his life in Egypt, to native Egyptians who have spent the majority of their lifetime in Western or international schools, halfies know what balance is all about.

Nora El-Tahawy, 21, was born to Egyptian parents and raised in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Prior to moving to Egypt to attend university, El-Tahawy lived in what she calls an “expat bubble,” the niche in Saudi society of foreigners from all corners of the globe who attend international schools and live in predominantly foreign housing complexes. She now works as a program assistant at the Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement at the American University in Cairo (AUC). “I always tell people I’m ethnically Egyptian, born and raised in Saudi Arabia and I had a western style education,” she says.

Mohammad Kazaz, also 21, is a student of Mass Communication at the AUC and has co-founded a cultural multimedia enterprise to be launched this year. Born and raised in Ohio to Egyptian parents, he lived in Egypt from ages two to five, and returned to Egypt at age 15 when his father was denied a corporate working visa after the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. “My heart sank [when my father said we were going to live here]. I thought it was the worst thing that happened to me,” recalls Kazaz. Six years later, he defines himself “first and foremost as Muslim. Then Egyptian. Then Arab. Then American.”

Nermeen Mouftah, 26, was born and raised in Kingston, a small town in Ontario, Canada, to Egyptian parents and went to the University of Toronto in a very diverse and multicultural city. She moved to Egypt in late 2006 on a seven-month contract with the Canadian International Development Agency while pursuing a master’s degree in Islamic studies. Her experience was so positive she extended her stay. But even though she loves Egypt, Mouftah says, “I feel more Canadian in my mode of thinking. I’m culturally overwhelmingly Canadian.”

Sherif El-Gebeily, also 26, was born to Egyptian parents and grew up in London. After graduating with a degree in French and English from the University of Warwick, he worked as a police officer in London and an English teacher in Paris before coming to Egypt to pursue a master’s degree in International Human Rights Law and Forced Migration Studies. He currently works as a television and new presenter for Channel 2 and Nile TV. El-Gebeily says that while he grew up with all the Egyptian usul and taqaleed (fundamentals and customs), he considers London his home.

Darah Rateb, 24, was born in Saudi Arabia to a Moroccan-Egyptian mother and a Turkish-Egyptian father, both of whom shared very few ties with their non-Egyptian heritage. Calling herself a Canadian-Egyptian, Rateb lived in Montreal, Canada, until she was 18, when, she says, “I ventured off to Cairo to discover my roots, [...] learn Arabic, and further my Islamic erudition.”

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Fitting In

For the halfies who come to Egypt after a life abroad, be it in the West or the East, their ‘homeland’ comes as quite a shock. And not always a pleasant one.

After growing up abroad, some find aspects of local culture hard to grasp. From “watching the streets run red” during Eid, as El-Gebeily says, to the persistent sexual harassment, it takes a while to adjust.

“Things got really rough,” El-Tahawy recalls. “I wasn’t used to the crowds and filth [compared to Saudi Arabia]. I realized Egypt was a very polarized country. There are the fundamentalists and the liberals, with a very clear demarcation.”

“The way everything in Egypt functions, from the traffic, to getting ripped off in a store, to the bribery [...]. Add to that the constant sexual harassment on the streets of Cairo,” Rateb says. “There were some points where I would’ve liked nothing better than to pack up and leave. I didn’t speak the language, I didn’t get the sense of humor. Things like ‘are you fasting this year [for Ramadan] or is it like every other year’ were very, very, very insulting to me.”

Kazaz, perhaps the most optimistic, says his first reaction was that “Egypt is a wonderful country with a lot of horrible things that are more pronounced and embedded in the daily system.”

It is an intense experience that is compounded by a sense of isolation. El-Tahawy says that when she moved here, “I didn’t fit in with anyone. In Saudi [the fact that I was Egyptian] wasn’t an issue because everyone there was bicultural. No one questioned their identity. But I moved here and suddenly it was the big issue in my life.”

“When I first came here I was called American this, American that,” says Kazaz. “Part of it was the way I spoke, and although I was learning to adapt quickly, there were whole voids — cultural things you had to understand. Like the way you talk. Like getting a certain joke and not another one. When not to say something that might be hurtful to somebody. All things [...] that you have to be sensitive to in a very intimate culture.” As a result of the way the ‘full-bred’ Egyptians treated him, Kazaz, like many in his situation, gravitated towards other halfies.

For El-Gebeily, coming from London, friendships weren’t the only hurdle; his relationships with extended family were also challenging. While his cousins grew up together, got into trouble together and shared good times together, El-Gebeily was “kind of this outside person who every once in a while wandered in and wandered out. It was a bit daunting.”

Rateb found that she had to learn and adapt to new set of cultural and social norms very different from those of Montreal. “I had no idea that a sleeveless top was a form of non-conformity. Even a sleeveless top or a knee high skirt were grounds for me to get insulted, harassed, or even just stared at — I found that very demeaning.” Rateb now wears the hijab.

“[I had to] strike the balance between how much do I care what my bawab thinks about me and how much do I not care?” Mouftah says. “So at work [...] I was very conscious of what I wore and how I made myself appear. Very little makeup, always long skirts, no bright colors. My hair was always in a ponytail or bun.”

The adjustments went beyond the attire; conversations were also a potential minefield. El-Tahawy

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On the other hand, the Western-raised halfies found their own taboo topics were open for discussion. Mouftah says she found the “intrusiveness” of Egyptians extremely difficult: “I was asked to recite Al-Fatiha (the opening of the Qur’an) [to prove I was a Muslim]. I was so offended by that. In my [Canadian] culture your religion is personal. Here it’s too much.”

Who am I Now?

There are cultural and socialization theories that say that by the time you are six, you have absorbed 90% of your values and attitudes, and by the time you are 15, it is almost impossible for you to change them. In the world where kids are raised astride two or more cultures, it isn’t quite so simple.

Identity, says Dr. Patrice Brodeur, is tricky. Brodeur is a French-Canadian associate professor in the Faculty of Theology and the Science of Religions at the University of Montreal, the Canada Research chair on Islam, Pluralism, and Globalization, holds a master’s and he holds a PhD in Islamic Studies. He was in Cairo in December on a world tour presenting his workshop *Inter-Worldview Dialogue: Acknowledging Multiple Identities and Power Dynamics*.

Brodeur explains that identity is subjective, context-dependent and changeable, as Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf details in his book *On Identity*, but it is also far more complex and intricate. No definition completely captures the nuances of how different people understand identity or how they use it to classify themselves.

Drawing on his own experience as an example, Brodeur defines his main identity traits as being a human being, a person with a spiritual outlook and a scholar/ teacher / researcher, with his nationalities coming after. Depending on where you are, your boundaries of reference change and so does the way you define yourself. “It’s like Russian dolls,” he explains, referring to the dolls that nest layered one inside the other. “In Japan I feel like a Westerner. In Europe I feel like a North American. In the US I feel like a Canadian.”

The strength of each identity trait one feels depends on a variety of things. According to Brodeur, the strongest identity trait one feels is that which makes you part of a minority, and more powerless. Thus for uprooted halfies returning ‘home,’ being a minority is felt far more acutely than when they were part of a majority.

The Hidden Immigrant

In his book, *Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing Up Among Worlds*, David Pollock discusses the concept of “the hidden immigrant,” in which a child raised abroad moves back to his native country looking just like the locals. Consequently, society judges these people more harshly than they do ethnically foreign people, although both were raised in the same place.

El-Tahawy nods emphatically at this notion, saying that when she speaks English all the time, “people get very confused and tend to think that I’m just a *fafy* [snobby] AUCian and I want to show off. [...] When you look like the people around you they expect you to act like them, but when you act differently there’s a much bigger shock than if someone who looked different acted differently.”

Mouftah, the self-described Canadian through and through, looks at it slightly differently. “Emily, my American roommate, is treated better in a restaurant,” Mouftah admits, “but she has a harder time with a cabdriver. Things are tradeoffs.”

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open secret — Egyptians are second class citizens, foreigners are always treated with much more respect. People meet you on time, they treat you better. It's a sad, bitter truth.”

Strangers in Both Lands

Challenges as a halfie are not limited to Egypt; they face another set of difficulties in their overseas 'home.' “Even really superficial things [like] being called a nigger as a kid,” says Mouftah. “Obviously I'm not black but in really white towns if you have any sort of pigmentation you are black.” Even when she moved to Toronto — a multicultural city where she says, “I'm considered white,” — she lived in a dormitory which she laughingly calls a “little nest of whiteness.” During Mouftah's first year at the University of Toronto, the second intifada (Palestinian uprising) began, and in her second year came 9/11, forcing her, she says, to have to constantly defend Islam and her roots.

Rateb also lived the entirety of her youth in Canada, but she says she always felt like an 'other.' “I didn't drink, date, or do drugs,” she says, “and unlike in America, there aren't social pressures to do so, but you do feel awkward. It's even worse when you work [because] the immediate after-work activity is to go to a bar / pub. When you don't go, you miss out on the social aspect of work, become isolated. They sometimes discuss work in the pub, so you may miss out on something important that's been cooking.”

After being in Egypt only six months, El-Gebeily, observes, “To a certain extent I feel [in London] like I do here. I belong but I don't fully belong. That I spoke Arabic set me apart from everyone at my school. Here I feel I'm Egyptian. Over there I feel like I'm an Egyptian-Brit in the UK. But, [the difference is] London is a patchwork of society so you can be something else and British but here it's one or the other — you're Egyptian or foreign. You can speak, look, eat and write like an Egyptian but they will still say you're a foreigner. [London and Cairo are] both my home. There I'm isolated from my background, my culture, and Egypt. Here I'm isolated from people I know, the places I'm used to going, the memories. They're both isolation, but different types of isolation.”

Though El-Gohary says that she is balanced in her love of both countries, she adds that there are certain aspects of Egyptian culture that are not hers and that she will never feel 100 percent Egyptian. “The relationship between a man and a woman is the best example,” she says. However, “when I used to go [to Russia] in the summer and see drunken parties I hated it and couldn't imagine myself existing in that type of society.”

So where is home to halfies? The concept of home to them, unlike natives, is not connected to a location, but to the people that they love.

“I am a Canadian-Egyptian,” says Rateb. “I don't feel more of one side. I can laugh at an Egyptian joke about Goha the same way I'll laugh at a joke about Newfies [people from Newfoundland]. In Egypt I can feel homesick, and in Canada I can feel homesick. It's more about finding the right community of like-minded people [...]. Home, really, is where the heart is, where I share my fondest memories, whether it is drinking bubble tea on Bloor Street, or drinking Turkish coffee in Zamalek; it's about the company.”

El-Tahawy says that the concept of home is difficult to get her mind around, since in Saudi Arabia it was “always drilled into us that this was temporary, [and] I resisted calling it my home for so long because I hate a lot of the country's policies.” Even though she loves Egypt “in my own twisted

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Moving back and forth can also result in reverse culture shock. When they are in one country they try hard to fit in, then when they go back to their other home they also have to try hard to fit in. “You become a bit of a schizo!” says Rateb with a laugh.

“The price of being exposed to so much is that you will sit down at points of utter confusion, total numbness, trying to understand what it is that you are,” Kazaz says. “Not just [in terms of] identity, but everything right down to your core. If you do not have your core figured out, if you’re not decisive about what your discourse is that you live in life, you’ll live a confused life with no roots.”

For the most part, the halfies say that they are able to balance between their multiple identities. Others may not be able to do so, and these people, Brodeur believes, are susceptible to trouble. “The greater the number of perceived excluded identities and the greater the access to networks of discontent,” he says, “the greater the chances of alienation, humiliation, radicalization, and violence.”

Without balance, some become so torn that they throw themselves from one extreme to the next — assimilating completely into the culture they live in or rejecting it completely. A classic example is a person in the minority abroad who, feeling excluded in the local culture, turns to fundamentalism in his religious, cultural or national identity.

The Upside of Being on the Outside

Being a halfie brings with it a multitude of benefits: They end up with many different sets of beliefs or evaluative standards and so are able to adapt faster to changes and be more tolerant and understanding of other cultures. They also keep a broader perspective on their experiences.

“There will always be a part of you missing [as a halfie],” says El-Gohary. “Accept that. There will always be a part of the Russian me missing living there and there will always be a part of the Egyptian me missing because I do not appreciate Omm Kolthoum, for example. There are certain things shared by Egyptian people that are missing in me but that’s OK. I don’t have to concentrate on the missing part. I have 80% of what it takes to be an ‘Egyptian.’ Why should I concentrate on the missing part? I gained another 50% of another culture, which is an asset.” Having dual nationalities, she believes, makes her a more open-minded person.

Brodeur agrees that halfies do not have to be one or the other. “When people force you to choose [between two ethnicities], it’s like why should I? We [shouldn’t] have to think about identity in the singular. We can just recognize that every person is multiple layers all at once. If I reduce myself to one identity I reduce the richness of who I am.”

El-Tahawy claims that being a halfie means she is able to enjoy ‘double consciousness,’ a term coined by African American writer William Du Bois. In a contemporary sense, the term describes the ability to see yourself as yourself and to be able to see how others perceive you. “I see myself from a Muslim context and from a Western context,” explains El-Tahawy. “There’s this divide where I’m able to see things from both points of view.”

Halfies can also serve as bridges between different cultures. Many have a huge wealth of knowledge in how cultures work, and just helping a society integrate with other societies that they have been directly exposed to means they can change society.

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Mouftah. “And beyond the cheesy closeness, you *honestly* understand. I honestly understand western Ways of thinking. But I have Islam which means I can also understand a way of thinking that involves Allah all the time.”

Changing Egypt or the world, however, is not necessarily a priority. Coming in with foreign degrees and experience from abroad, many are seeking to make a quick buck to improve the state of their own affairs. “It’s every man for himself,” says Mouftah. A lot of Egyptians raised here leave and make loads of money abroad, she says — they have demonstrated no loyalty to their country, so why should halfies feel obligated to stay?

According to El-Gohary, halfie status also doesn’t mean that you have an obligation to fix your country or be a mediator. “We are people who have the potential to be bridges between cultures but it doesn’t mean the potential will have to manifest itself,” she says. “If you do, good for you, if not then you haven’t failed; you’ve just lost an opportunity. The majority of people I know are comfortable as halfies. They see the positives and they see the negatives and they live here. But it’s their choice. Others simply don’t care and it’s their right. It doesn’t necessarily mean that [because] you’re a halfie that you have to foster both [cultures]. It’s an added value.”

Brodeur argues that simply by living in a culture, halfies add a lot to society by being a minority. “We need to listen to others that in some power dynamic are less powerful to be able to learn,” he explains, “and that means in a healthy interdependence we complement each other in human dynamics. And when there is that openness in dealing with others, knowing that any human being I encounter is bound to be able to teach me something in one way or another, then it really helps bring the relationship to a greater degree of equality.”

Halfies agree that their upbringing is the most critical factor in determining the closeness or distance they developed to both their native land and adoptive homes. The Lebanese writer Maalouf describes one’s upbringing as ‘vertical heritage’ and environmental surroundings as ‘horizontal heritage.’ Brodeur concurs with the author that one’s vertical heritage plays a larger role in influencing who one is. In the ‘nature versus nurture’ argument, nurture wins.

Faces of the Future

In 2007, Janan Delgado, an Ecuadorian woman who studied Arabic at Al-Azhar and AUC, presented her study *Religiosity and Political Attitudes: Research among Elite Students in Egypt* at the Illinois Conference for Students of Political Science. Delgado found that out of 153 randomly selected Egyptian students at AUC, only 50.3% were pure Egyptians; the rest were of mixed ethnicities. According to her study, these are the people who will, in 20 years, be in positions of power and influence around the country. They will become examples in society, whether it be Kazaz and his entrepreneurial skills, or El-Gohary refusing to be pushed into an early marriage as per Egyptian convention, or El-Gebeily claiming the freedom to dabble in whatever interests him rather than accepting a prestige profession such as a doctor or an engineer. They cannot help but affect the society around them.

Brodeur acknowledges that many argue that individuals with multiple nationalities will undermine national unity; if they cannot be 100% loyal to their country, integration and assimilation will slow down and the country will become fragmented. He disagrees with that assessment.

“Every day we have species that die out because of environmental problems. That depletes the

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We need diversity.

As for feeling torn between cultures? Rateb says, “In Egypt, not everyone shares the same views or traditions. It’s natural to be torn, whether you come from one culture or not. In Canada you can fit more into some circles if you are an environmentalist hippy. In Cairo, you fit into some circles more if you are wearing the latest Gucci bag. There are two sides to every coin, only our sides are across the Atlantic.”

“When it comes to questions of identity, I feel that a lot of people are boo-hoo and sad about it,” Mouftah says. “They think having multiple identities is a really bad thing, that it’s a challenge and hard and a difficult thing and I’m so against that. I think it’s such a wonderful thing. [...] I feel it’s a gift to have access to different worlds — really genuine access. And you are enriched.” et

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5 Responses

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1. **yosyosa** said, on June 13, 2008 at [11:49 pm](#)

Ethar, your story on halfies hit the bull’s eye for me.

So here I am at 20: a pure Egyptian, an Irish national (by passport) who first set foot on Egyptian soil at age 2.

I was born in Ireland, started school in Canada and studied for a further 4 years in Saudi Arabia in one of those absurdly isolated, pre-dominantly American and Westernised environments in which I stupidly ‘prized’ myself for not having to deal with any local Saudis (God forbid).

I was quick to learn that I had the luxury of choosing and picking what I want from a place and

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confidently say that I am Egyptian and proud to relate to most of the Egyptian culture but a small part of me still doesn't feel like I completely fit in.

Thank you for sharing the lives and views of other halfies and letting me know that I am not alone.

[Reply](#)

2. **Rajen** said, on November 11, 2009 at [8:57 am](#)

Hi Ethar

Your analysis is very pertinent. I've loved the way you've gone through it. And one of my favourite books is the one by Amin Maalouf. I believe that even we are not 'halfies' in the true sense of the word, we still are in one way or the other, as we are exposed to others and take their ways as our own... I read once somewhere that at the end, we are all 'des metis'. Take care and keep it up.

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3. [News & Events | SYLEFF Official Website](#) said, on November 19, 2009 at [3:22 am](#)

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[Reply](#)

4. **Sherif Elnegahy** said, on November 22, 2009 at [9:09 pm](#)

Amazing job Ethar, it is definitely an award material. Keep up the good work and please allow me to share my thoughts.

During my master's studies at the States, I have been asked to introduce my self several and every time I would reply by "a pure Egyptian". I simply felt special than all the Americans who uses words like "African American" or "Latin American" or even "New Yorker" when they introduce themselves. Coming from a single rich deeply rooted culture like the Egyptian culture gave me the sense of superiority and pride over the mixed cultured Americans.

One day I introduce my self to my professor as "a pure Egyptian". He asked me "are you sure?"..."defiantly,...both my parents and grandparents are Egyptians and I have been born and raised there" I replied.

"So you would never consider your self as an African, or meddle eastern, midetranium or even Arabian. Perhaps you wouldn't feel connecting to the Turkish traditions as well"

The professor asked with a kind smile and left me wondering.

His words draw my attention to undeniable fact, which is there is no such a thing called a pure nationality and every single one of us have been interacted or influenced by deferent cultures. Whether we like it or not we are all halfies to some extent.

Recognizing that and moving further I do believe that the core reason of the identity question is the contradiction between two essential needs. First as a social creature we have the need of connecting and belonging. This need is always have been challenged by our second need of differentiate our selves to feel special and unique (or you simply can call it Ego).

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5. **Marwan Elnakeeb** said, on May 20, 2010 at [9:41 am](#)

I enjoyed this article so much... kudos for you, yet another one of your brilliant award-winning articles :o)

On a related note, I couldn't help thinking about a group that is invisible for the most part, what I would call "Halfies by Choice". People who have been born and raised in Egypt their whole lives, but their education and culture are of western origin. As they grow older, they insist on adopting their 'borrowed' cultural mindset rather than mainstream schools of thoughts. They consider themselves 100% pure Egyptians (I liked that description) and are able to completely understand, interact, and empathize with western ideas, and ideals. Estranged at times with their thoughts and how they perceive certain social issues. It wouldn't be strange to see a woman wearing Hijab, and at the same time seeing one wearing a sleeveless top isn't an invitation to gawk. Many speak seamless English, French or German when the need arises, other than that it is mighty difficult to spot one. Such people would consider themselves open-minded, are often well educated and open to multiple cultural influences, and firmly attached to their cultural background.

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