

*The Construction of Virility and Performance of Masculinities in the Language Practices of Young Men in Tripoli**

Abstract: This article analyzes the socio/linguistic construction of gender in Arabic in Tripoli, showing how young Libyan men make use virile and masculine speech practices as part of their performance of gender. Analyzing the interactions of a group of young men through participant observation and a resulting corpus of spontaneous recordings of speech, this article shows how, in their self-expression, certain young Libyan men perform their speech practices towards hegemonic, gendered goals, exalting virilizing values and foregrounding heterosexism by means of transgressive language practices. These language practices express domination, heterosexism, and homosociality, permitting them to distinguish themselves from women and others discursively and interactively constructed as inferiors, in order to validate their existence as dominant males.

Keywords: *Tripoli, Libyan Arabic, gender, masculinities, heterosexism, homosociality*

IF GENDER STUDIES HAS TURNED above all to history, sociology, and philosophy, linguistics has also renewed its own approaches in order to explore the ways in which gender is performed via situated interactions.¹ This article situates itself among these perspectives in

* The core of this article corresponds to the section concerning Libya in a co-authored article on the construction of masculinities in Morocco and Libya, to which I have added further examples and a more extensive introduction. The original text was translated from French for this publication by Adam Benkato, whom I warmly thank. For that original piece, see Moïse, Claudine, Christophe Pereira, Ángeles Vicente, and Karima Ziamari, “La construction socio-langagière du genre: jeunes hommes libyens, jeunes femmes marocaines et rapport à la masculinité,” in *Sociolinguistique des pratiques langagières de jeunes*, ed. C. Trimaille, C. Pereira, K. Ziamari, and M. Gasquet-Cyrus (Grenoble: UGA Éditions, 2020), 81–115.

order to examine the co-construction of the category “masculine” via situated language practices. It is based on the consideration of gender as a construction that is both social and relational as well as linguistic and situated, one that expressed relations of domination between men and women which are determined economically, ethnically, and socially. On the basis of interactions in Libyan Arabic, this article will analyze how certain young Libyan men perform their speech towards gendered, hegemonic aims in their self-expression.

From a methodological point of view, it is important to note my relationship to my interlocutors and the conditions in which I was able to collect the material which allowed me to write this article. In fact, I did not initially carry out fieldwork with the specific goal of collecting information pertaining to the performance of masculinities, but rather originally with the goal of gathering data which would permit me to write a grammatical description of the Arabic variety of Tripoli.² The particularity of my approach here results from the position which I adopted: that of a researcher who immerses and implicates themselves in their field of inquiry in order to accumulate empirical data which ultimately leads to a description of linguistic and social realities. In other words, I was a participant-observer.

This position, or posture, so to speak—which permitted me to become familiar with the Tripolitanian milieu and to gather the firsthand data which would later lead to my initial published works—could not have been maintained without the complicity, that is, both the consent and supporting actions, of local actors. During my first trip to Tripoli, I had the chance to get to know young men of the same age as myself, who would become my close friends and open unique perspectives up to me. Thanks to these friends, I was able to travel regularly to and around Tripoli and engage intimately with Libyan society while being immersed within their social group and sharing their lifestyles, all while observing their linguistic practices. I thus obtained from these young interlocutors, in a somewhat natural way, a

¹ See for example Deborah Cameron, “Gender, Language and Discourse: A Review Essay,” *Signs* 23 (1998), 945–973.

² Christophe Pereira, *Le parler arabe de Tripoli (Libye)* (Zaragoza: IEIOP, 2010).

corpus which could reflect contemporary linguistic practices in Tripoli. This type of fieldwork praxis, consisting of sharing the lifestyle of one's interlocutors in order to absorb their codes and of participating in their group activities in order to learn their social practices, allowed me to become one of their own. Because of living in an immersive situation with my interlocutors, according to the rhythms of their lives, I was able to become capable with spoken Arabic, gaining familiarity with my interlocutors' language at the same time that I gained familiarity with their city and their culture. These young men accorded me their confidence, appreciated my interest in their mother tongue, and allowed me to record even their most intimate conversations.

Born towards the end of the 1970s, these interlocutors represent in some ways the ideal generation for the examination of the formation and development of the Arabic variety of Tripoli, reflecting the impact of massive urbanization as well as the effects of political measures on language use in society. But they are also representative of young Libyan men on the path to adulthood, in a period of transition after the end of their studies and prior to marriage, and who are frustrated and in search of diversions in a social and urban context in which they often felt bored. It is precisely at this stage of their lives when I was present and could experience firsthand how they promoted "virilizing" values among themselves while foregrounding heterosexism through transgressive language practices. It is on the basis of these real-life conversations between young people, captured in a natural way and in an intimate setting, that I was able to comprehend this familiar and coarse vocabulary, one including sexually connotative expressions. It was thus my participant observation which allowed me to obtain data regarding sexuality, the performance of masculinities, and the expression of domination which I describe in this article. The goal of writing such a paper is thus to describe the language practices of young Tripolitanian men, at a particular moment in their lives, and indeed also in the life of the Tripoli dialect, and at a precise moment in their history—to describe linguistic facts in connection with social realities. It is this which led me to observe and describe the construction of masculinities: how are these masculinities performed? How are they reflected in interactions? And to what ends?

In the first part of this article, I will briefly contextualize the corpus along with some elements which aid in the comprehension of the social context in which these young men were developing. Then

in the second part, I will attempt to describe precisely how these young men perform masculinities, via situated language practices, while reflecting their heterosexism: via a transgressive style and gendered insults (by way of terms of address or subjugation of others), claiming their heterosexuality through gendered self-presentation, in order to thus distinguish themselves from others discursively and interactionally constructed as inferior, and ultimately prove their existence as heterosexual, dominant males.

Contextualizing the Corpus

Although there exist stereotypes regarding masculinity, such as gender differences, heterosexism, domination, and homosociality,³ there is no universal masculine model valid for all times and all places. Since there is no such thing as a universal model of masculinity and since masculinity varies historically, socially, and between generations, it is more accurate to speak of masculinities in the plural.⁴ These cannot be envisaged without taking into account the social structures, cultural values, and systems of beliefs and practices in which they are constructed. Consequently, even if they are performed in interactions, the observation of masculinities through the language practices of young men cannot ignore their socio-cultural context.

The Interlocutors

The recordings on which this study is based were gathered in Tripoli between 2000 and 2011. The interlocutors were all born towards the end of the 1970s, were inhabitants of the Libyan capital, were Muslim by upbringing as well as practice, and at the time of fieldwork were all unmarried and still living with their parents. They had just finished their studies (all studied engineering) and possessed doubts about their future prospects: they would soon be finding themselves needing to

³ See Scott Kiesling, "Men, Masculinities and Language," *Blackwell Linguistics and Language Compass* 1/6 (2007), 657.

⁴ See Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

face the responsibilities of obtaining work and getting married—or to put it another way, needing to acquire the attributes of an adult male. Moreover, their comportment and their discourse also evoked their heterosexuality. This period in their lives corresponds to a moment on the path towards adulthood called “emerging adulthood” by Arnett.⁵ It is an ideal phase in which to examine the correlation between these young men’s linguistic habits and the elaboration of their masculinities as well as the expression of their virility.

Gathering the Data

During my fieldwork in Tripoli, I was able to cultivate a relationship of friendship and trust with this group of young men, where they allowed me to record them without limit while having access to their most intimate conversations, particularly those which dealt with taboo subjects, especially sexuality. These recordings were always made in private, away from those who were not part of the peer group. Outside of this group, discretion was the rule, owing especially to fear of being blamed for indiscretion by those external to it. On this subject, they would say:

l-lībi yaḥšām m-al-lībi

“The Libyan (man) shows shame in front of the
Libyan (man)”

Because of this, it was frequently in the car during casual drives that my interlocutors would feel comfortable enough to speak spontaneously about the things most intimate to them—the car was one of the rare spaces of escape and of freedom for young Libyan men, especially growing up in a closed society. Libya between 2000 and 2011 (again, the period of my fieldwork there) was a relatively conservative Muslim country, but also one in which severe social and political oppression governed the use of language and linguistic practice. The present essay deals therefore with social practices situated in a certain time and

⁵ Jeffrey Arnett, “Emerging Adulthood. A Theory of Development From the Late Teens Through the Twenties,” *American Psychologist* 55/5 (2000), 469–480.

place, and which recent and current upheavals may be in the process of reconfiguring.

42

From *ksād* and frustration...

In Libya at the time, activities through which one could relieve physical and emotional tension were rare, not to speak of the fact that alcohol was (and still is) officially prohibited and where the only way for young single men to have adventures was recourse to certain semi-legal sexual services.⁶ Numerous terms and expressions used in everyday language recall this context. The term *ksād* “boredom, stagnation, depression,” as well as the participle from the same root *mkāssād* “bored, stagnant, depressing,” terms with a great deal of semantic charge, designate this emptiness, this lassitude. In it, the everyday is monotonous, as one interlocutor describes in a humorous tone:

kull yōm nafs-əl-bərnāmāž...

“Every day the same program...”

Not to speak of Friday, the lone day off of the week, of which the same interlocutor says:

*hne šand-na yōm-əž-žumša ksād hālba,
tgūl tlāt ayyām lāšgāt fi bašd*

“For us Friday is extremely boring; you’d say
it’s like three days stuck to each other...”

Faced with the fatalism of events, these young men were nevertheless capable of humor and self-mockery. In a situation of constant submission (to one’s family and to the weight of tradition), of fear of political repression (the regime depriving them of basic freedoms), but also of social injustice (they live in a major exporter of oil and gas but

⁶ Christophe Pereira, “Les mots de la sexualité dans l’arabe de Tripoli (Libye): désémantisation, grammaticalisation et évolution linguistique,” in *L’Année du Maghreb. Numéro VI. Dossier: Sexualités au Maghreb: Essais d’ethnographies contemporaines*, ed. V. Beaumont, C. Cauvin Verner & F. Pouillon (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2010), 117–140.

must still ask why that the benefits of that massive revenue are not visible), a profound sentiment of rage is evident. Anxious about their destiny, they would say:

43

əl-qadər mnayyək ya ʕənn-dīn-kum!

“Fate is fucked up, curse your religion!”

They were nostalgic for the period in which they were students, during which their responsibilities and obligations were deferred:

R) (laughs) *hādi l-xədma əlli təbbi dīn-umm-ha*

“(laughs) This is the work which needs its mother’s religion.”

A) *wuḷḷāhi..*

“Really.”

N) *mā-nəbbī-hā-š āne wuḷḷāhi mā-nəbbī-ha* (laughs)

“I don’t want it, I don’t. Seriously, I do not want it (laughs).”

A) *wuḷḷāhi l-gaḥba kāna iṛəddū-na*

“I swear, bitch, if we could just get taken back.”

R) *b-əs-sēf wuḷḷāhi b-əs-sēf. bāh, šən bə-tḏīr?*

“By force, seriously, by force. Alright, what would you do?”

A) *kāna iṛəddū-na ʕaḷaḷa?*

“If we could just get taken back (to when we were students)?”

N) *kāna kāna ya gaḥbət lə-ghāb kāna...*

“If only, if only, oh whore of whores, if only...”

These young men’s conversations were frequently punctuated by mocking laughs. They accuse their jobs of being responsible for their ills (*hādi l-xədma əlli təbbi dīn-umm-ha*) all while knowing they

would have no alternative, hence the use of the adverbial expression *b-əs-sēf* “by force, inevitably.” Despite their refusal to accept this new situation (*mā-nəbbī-hā-š āne wuḷḷāhi mā-nəbbī-ha*) and their regret at being unable to go back in time to when they were students (*wuḷḷāhi l-gaḥba kāna iṛəddū-na [...] kāna iṛəddū-na ʔaḷaḥa*) they were quickly captured by their fate: *b-əs-sēf wuḷḷāhi b-əs-sēf. bāh, šən bə-tdīr?* The final sentence of the text, the saying *kāna kāna ya gaḥbət lə-ghāb kāna* (a vulgar equivalent to “if wishes were horses, beggars would ride”), brings an end to their pipe dream. It is notably humor which allows the diffusing of personal tensions: a loophole intensified by recourse to a crude but playful language specific to young men.

...to attempts at escape

Faced with malaise, these young men desired change in their lives, effervescence and stimulating perspectives; a recurrent theme in their conversations was hence the possibility of traveling.

- A) *āne tawwa nəbbi ndīr bərnāməž, nəbbi ndəss gəṛšən, nəmši lə-fṛansa...*
 “Me, right now I want to make a plan, I want to save some money and go to France...”
- R) *šən bə-tdīr?*
 “What do you intend to do?”
- A) *nəmši l-fṛansa kāna xdēt əl-kurs āhuwa w əl-kurs əž-žāy fṛansāwi, nəbbi nəmši l-fṛansa...*
 “I’ll go to France, if I took this course and the next course, French, I want to go to France...”
- R) *təmši ʔale ḥsāb-ak?*
 “You’ll go with your own money?”
- A) *nəmši nnīk sbūfən tlāta gādi nḥaṛṛək bī-hum lsān-i f-əl-fṛansāwi lākən baʔd-ma nnīk daʔəm...fa mumkən nəmši nnīk mtāʔ tlāt āsābīʔ hekke ʔand hūwa šwēya ʔand hūwa šwēya ʔand hūwa šwēya bārīs hekke nšūf bārīs lākən nəbbi gəṛšən ndəss-hum fhəmt-ni?*

“I’ll go, fuck around for two or three weeks over there, get my tongue moving in French, but after (having got) some fucking (financial) support...So maybe I’ll go fuck around for around three weeks, something like that, a little here, a little there, a little here, Paris is like that, I’ll see Paris but I want to save money, you know what I mean?”

R) *tābbi l-ha ēh hādi tābbi gāršēn ēh tābbi mablāg u bārīs gālya !-aḏ-ḏoḃḃ !*

“It needs it, yea, this needs some money, yea, it needs a (large) amount and Paris is damn expensive!”

Alleging some excuse (*nəmši nnīk sbūfēn tlāta gādi nḥarḗḗk bī-hum lsān-if-əl-franšāwi*) this short-term plan was entirely feasible before the obligations of adult life, on condition of having built up some savings, such as is largely recalled in the preceding dialog: *nābbi ndāss gāršēn; lākān nābbi gāršēn ndāss-hum; ēh hādi tābbi gāršēn ēh tābbi mablāg u bārīs gālya !-aḏ-ḏoḃḃ*, where *gāršēn* literally means “two piasters” and *mablāg* means “sum of money”. Beyond linguistic concerns, one can see in these last examples that getaway trip in a foreign country would have given them access to activities they would not normally have in Libya, notably to quench their thirst and staunch their hunger, so to speak. As mentioned before, Libya was (and still is) a country where alcohol was officially prohibited and where the only way for young single men to have liaisons was recourse to certain semi-legal sexual services.⁷ While they waited to have saved enough money to travel, prostitution appears as a more affordable and local way to appease the unsatisfied spirits of these young men who would have liked a more available sexuality:

N) *fi franša gādi ya matyās ā-hu ngūl l-ək ʕlāš dʕif anta...antu fi franša tnīku dīma (laughs) ḥne n-nēk nāšbḥu fī-h marḗa fi sana*

“Over there in France, you fags [=goats], here I’ll tell you why you’re skinny. You in France, you

⁷ See again Pereira, “Les mots de la sexualité.”

fuck all the time (laughs), we, we get a fuck once a year...”

46

- R) *hne šādi əl-lībīyīn dīma nēk...*
 “We Libyans (would be) fine to fuck all the time...”
- A) *ṭabṣan mā-šand-hum-š muškila...*
 “Of course, they wouldn’t have a problem...”
- N) *hne l-lībīyīn māda bī-na dīma nēk māda bī-na...*
 “We Libyans, we would like to fuck all the time, we’d like that...”

As their main way of escaping the grip of reality, these young men have, of course, their fantasies and their imagination—but it is in reality that they must seek escape in order to confront their daily life: moments of relaxation and diversion among friends. Spirits calm among members of a peer group, in a male social space. This is an important space of socialization and of rare freedoms and it is valued for this very reason. It is far enough away from the observation of their families, from peers outside of their immediate group, and from the secret services, that these young men could unwind, disengage, and find relief. There, through their linguistic practices in particular, they affirm their virility and perform their masculinities.⁸

Virility, masculinities, and linguistic practices

In a society of asymmetric and hierarchic power relations, appearing virile constitutes an imperative.⁹ The gaze of peers assumes a

⁸ They often felt observed. This may explain why young Libyan men preferred to leave the country and divert themselves elsewhere, among peers exterior to their immediate peer group, see Pereira, “Les mots de la sexualité,” 125.

⁹ In the *Dictionnaire critique du féminisme*, Pascal Molinier & Daniel Welzer-Lang indicate that “la virilité ... est apprise et imposée aux garçons par le groupe des hommes au cours de leur socialisation pour qu’ils se distinguent hiérarchiquement des femmes. La virilité est l’expression collective et individ-

considerable importance, all the more so within a “viriarcal” society.¹⁰ Being a virile man is inscribed in a quest of recognizing peers, and young men therefore attempt to adhere to models of virility, displaying external signs in order to forge, while exalting virile values, a reputation under the approving eye of the other members of the peer group. Virility is thus elaborated in a selfsame context, in a “virilizing confinement,”¹¹ put in place, at least partially, through language.

Effectively, it is the use of a certain transgressive language which allows the display of the extremely marked gender stereotypes which have the function of socializing and integrating the peer group norms. Their linguistic practices thus maintain and perpetuate masculine stereotypes and, importantly, power relations such as heteronormative masculine hegemony¹²—not only those between men and women, or masculine and feminine, but also within groups of men.

ualisée de la domination masculine,” see Pascale Molinier and Daniel Welzer-Lang, “Féminité, Masculinité, Virilité,” in *Le dictionnaire du féminisme* (Paris: PUF, 2000), 71–76. Welzer-Lang states more specifically that “[l]a virilité constitue ... l’attribut principal des hommes, des garçons, dans leurs rapports au monde, aux femmes et aux hommes, à travers les rapports sociaux de sexe. Les rapports sociaux de sexe organisent les représentations et les pratiques des hommes et des femmes en les constituant comme hommes et comme femmes dans des relations de pouvoir asymétriques et hiérarchisées, ce que Bourdieu appelle la violence symbolique,” see Daniel Welzer-Lang, “Virilité et virilisme dans les quartiers populaires en France,” *VEI-Enjeux* 128 (2002), 10.

¹⁰ So-called “viriarcal” societies are societies dominated by maleness. The term “viriarcale” (French viriarcat) was proposed by Nicole-Claude Mathieu, who defines it as the power of men, whether they are fathers or not, to impose patrilineality on society, be it patrilocal or not, see Nicole-Claude Mathieu, “Quand céder n’est pas consentir. Des déterminants matériels et psychiques de la conscience dominée des femmes, et de quelques-unes de leurs interprétations en ethnologie,” in *L’Arraînement des Femmes. Essais en anthropologie des sexes* (Paris: EHESS, 1985), 169–245.

¹¹ The term comes from Guénif-Souilamas’ work on young Arab men, Nacira Guénif-Souilamas, “L’enfermement viriliste: des garçons arabe plus vrais que nature,” *Cosmopolitiques: Cette violence qui nous tient* 2 (2002), 47–59.

¹² See for example Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990), and Connell, *Masculinities*.

The transgressive register

48 The usual linguistic style of these young men, often called “youth speech”, is characterized principally by the use of obscenities and sexual taboos, as well as religious taboos¹³ often perceived as shocking and offensive in Muslim societies in general. Recourse to a transgressive register is characterized mainly by the omnipresence of sexual vocabulary, as can be seen in the following dialog, where numerous replies bear an exaggeratedness constructed principally by terms linked to sexuality.

- A) *āne nfax, ḥayāt-i mwallya l-aḏ-ḏoḥḥ, fhamt-ni?*
 “I’m sick of it, my life has become shit, you feel me?”
- R) *māfīš ḥadd mās nfax, ḥatta āne nfax l-aḏ-ḏoḥḥ lākən əəə šən bətdīr?*
 “Everyone’s sick of it, me too, fucking tired of it, but hey what can you do?”
- A) *āne fāhm-ək ʔlāš zmān lamma tzi tūgəf baḥdā-na hekke mṯarṯəm l-aḏ-ḏoḥḥ, marṯāt hekke, yənʕən dīn-zəkk-umm-lībya*
 “Me, I understand why you used to come chill with us like that, fucking sour-faced, it’s like that sometimes, curse Libya’s mother’s ass’s religion.”
- R) (laughing) *yənʕən dīn-zəkk-umm-lībya...*
 “(laughing) curse Libya’s mother’s ass’s religion...”
hīya, taʕraf šəni tamsaḥ-ha? tamsaḥ-ha safra.
 “You know what’ll clear that up? A trip’ll clear it up.”

¹³ The frequent use of taboo words is one of the main characteristics of “youth speech”, cf. Jannis Androutsopoulos, “Research on Youth-Language,” in *Sociolinguistics. An International Handbook of the Science of Language and Society*, ed. A. Ulrich, N. Dittmar, K. J. Mattheier, and P. Trudgill (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), 1499, and Anna-Brita Stenström, Gisle Andersen, and Ingrid Kristine Hasund, *Trends in Teenage Talk: Corpus Compilation, Analysis, and Findings* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2002), 64–66.

- A) *waḷḷāhi tamsaḥ-ha safra l-aḏ-ḏoḅḅ!*
“I swear, a fucking trip’ll clear it right up!”
- R) *waḷḷāhi, tamsaḥ-ha safra laḏḏoḅḅ, taḥraf, təmši*
tnīk safra u tzi talga rūḥ-ək mīya mīya.
“I swear, a fucking trip’ll clear it right up, you
know, just go on a fucking trip and you’ll come
back and find yourself totally fine.”

In other words, to speak in a masculine manner in Tripoli is to have recourse to a crude and obscene register of speech and to employ words related to sexuality in an exaggerated manner, which taken together reflect a certain rude and raucous comportment linked as well to the affirmation of heterosexism. This includes the recurrent usage of words referring to the male sexual organs (such as *ḏoḅḅ*, *ḏoḅḅr*, or *kātsu* “penis” and *dlāwəz* “testicles”), sexual acts (*nāk-ynīk* “to fuck,” *nēk* “fucking,” *mnəyyək* “fucked (up)”), and prostitution (*gaḥba*, plural *ghāb* “whore” and words derived from this such as *gəḥḥəb* “to be awesome” or *tgəḥḥəb* “to be pissed off”). Recourse to such taboo words allows one to perform indelicacy and rudeness. On the linguistic level, this expressiveness appears, notably, in innovative forms developed on the basis of terms of sexuality.¹⁴

To give an example, in the preceding dialog the term *nfax*, literally “swelling,” used as a metaphor for “to be fed up,” allows the expression of their discouragement and their disillusionment as they come to the conclusion that their life is pitiful: *ḥayāt-i mwallya l-aḏ-ḏoḅḅ* “my life has become total shit.” The term *ḏoḅḅ* “cock, penis” is present in this sentence in the form of an adverbial phrase *l-aḏ-ḏoḅḅ*, meaning literally “to the cock” which provides vulgar emphasis to a phrase and is most effectively translated with a range of idiomatic expressions depending on the context. Then, the verb *nāk-ynīk* “to fuck” is employed as a light verb (i.e. a verb with no semantic content but which combines with an object to form an idiomatic expression) such as in the expression *tnīk safra*, literally “to fuck a trip,” meaning simply “to go on a trip,” or perhaps, in a corresponding vulgar register “to go on a fucking trip”.

¹⁴ The formation of such terms is described in Pereira, “Les mots de la sexualité.”

As well, the expression *zəkk-umm* “mother’s ass” is inserted between the verb *yənʕən* “to curse” and its object, permitting the expression “to curse something’s ass” such as in the insult *yənʕən dīn-zəkk-umm-lībya* “curse Libya’s mother’s ass’s religion,” an expression about as taboo and vulgar as possible.

These syntactic innovations and taboo words have a transgressive function. They are used, among other things, in interaction to expressive ends: formed in the playful and humorous tone which characterizes the young men’s discourse in general, these words permit the intensification of the communication. It is then in this mode and this tone that heterosexism is expressed, as the young men act it out and as they exacerbate masculine stereotypes and ultimately dominate them.

Gendered Insults

A striking example of masculine solidarity which is established by means of language is that of insults which represent the transgression of a Muslim society’s particular taboos. From an axiological point of view, a pejorative or potentially degrading term is not performed as a personal insult but as a form of address.¹⁵

One can note two types of gendered insults: 1) certain lexical items employed as terms of address among members of a peer group which do not have the pragmatic value of an insult, and 2) insults towards social targets susceptible to being dominated, notably those whom a peer group excludes: the “puppets without virility.” One can see by means of the insult that the hegemonic model of masculinity enters into conflict with, for example, alternative masculinities or masculinities considered less virile.¹⁶

¹⁵ On pejoratives as forms of address, see Cyrille Trimaille and Océane Bois, “Adolescents et axiologie péjorative: présentation de soi et socialisation groupale,” in *Les insultes en français: de la recherche fondamentale à ses applications (linguistique, littérature, histoire, droit)*, ed. D. Lagorgette (Chambéry: Université de Savoie, 2009), 113–140.

¹⁶ David Le Breton, *Rites de virilité à l’adolescence*, (Brussels: Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles de Belgique, 2015), 11.

Terms of address and the construction of identity

Certain insults are employed as terms of address among members of a peer group, for example words designating “homosexual” such as *zāməl* (plural *zwāməl* or *mazməl*), as well as *tēs* (plural *matyəs*) also meaning “goat.” The expressivity may be found by means of the insult.

51

mazməl hne mxallyīn faraġ l-əl-kābāb hne zwāməl ēh!

“We are such fags for leaving some room for kebab, we’re fags, yeah!”

*fī fṛansa ġādi ya matyəs āhu ngūl l-ək ʕlāš dṣif anta...
antu fī fṛansa tniku dīma (laughs) hne n-nēk nāšbḥu fīh marṛa f-əs-sana...*

“Over there in France, you fags, look I’ll tell you why you’re skinny.
You in France you fuck all the time (laughs), we, we get a fuck once a
year...”

The young men also use potentially insulting terms among themselves in order to call or refer to each other, such as *šāyəʕ* “thug”, *frūx-əl-gaḥba* “son of a whore”, as well as *kəlb* (plural *klāb*) “dog”.

wēn tdūh ya šāyəʕ?

“Where are you hanging around, you thug?”

kāna hāda ya frūx-əl-gaḥba ġāʕad ndūr ġādīkāya!

“If it was like that, you son of a whore, I’d still be hanging around over there!”

wēn dāru zəkk-umm-ha, lə-klāb?

“Where have they fucking put it, the dogs?”

As they are employed here in a jesting tone used by peers to insult each other or for self-mockery, these terms of address enter into the construction of a social identity. For the one who employs them, they serve to exclude those to whom they are addressed from the world of “real” men, and thus to express domination and virility all while maintaining group cohesion. It is precisely because they are employed with a contrary sense, without the value of personal insult among friends, that these expressions which seem to threaten face are actually

elements which reinforce the links of the peer group.¹⁷

52

The subjugation of the other (heterosexism)

One also finds these terms employed, in a mocking or insulting tone, in relation to the subjugation of the other. In effect, other than power and authority, competitiveness and submission, as well as toughness, the dominant mode of being a “real,” heterosexual man is typically associated with subjugation, notably of homosexual men but also of women. The finding and constructing of targets who are susceptible to being discursively mocked or dominated imposes itself on the young man in order for him to prove himself as a dominant, virile male.

Therefore, all the previously mentioned words designating homosexuals are also employed as insults; to be added to these is also *mībūn* (plural *mwəbbna*) “faggot” and *bġəl* (plural *bġūla*) “mule.” In the peer group, these terms also designate those who lack worth in their eyes—the association here is thus between homosexuality and worthlessness or despicableness. Speaking of someone who is rejected, in a deprecatory tone, one can hear:¹⁸

hāda mībūn! or hāda bġəl!

“That guy’s a fag!”

In order to verbally provoke, certain rhyming phrases are also used by the members of the peer group. They allow a sort of humorous or playful type of insulting; these are ritualized insults, almost chanted, which allow teasing in an amplified and caricaturing manner:

ya zāməl ya tēs / nahši l-ək būbrēš

“You homo, you fag / I’ll stuff a gecko (in your ass)”

ya bġəl / nahši l-ək fi tīnt-ək təl

“You fag / I’ll stick a rod up your ass”

¹⁷ Trimaille & Bois, “Adolescents et axiologie péjorative.”

¹⁸ The terms *mībūn* and *bġəl* can also be used as terms of address among members of the peer group.

To be addressed as a passive homosexual is to be virulently excluded as weak from the world of “real men”. Insult, and above all homophobic (and misogynistic) insult, reinforces masculine domination and the cult of virility.¹⁹ Additionally, hegemonic models of masculinity enter into conflict with other masculinities considered to be less virile. On this topic, the below phrase, uttered by a young man in Tripoli annoyed after realizing that others were mocking him for being effeminate, shows that the criteria of virility are not always the same from person to person or group to group.

*tašbhū-ni hēkke təhsābū-ni mā-nnik-š? wallāhi nnik-kum wāḥəd
wāḥəd!*

“You see me like that? You think I don’t fuck? I swear,
I’ll fuck all of you one by one!”

This young man challenges here those who consider themselves “real men”: challenging them that he will prove his virility, and confirm physically his ability to be sexually dominant, by means of the erect and penetrating form which characterizes the virile masculine sexuality expressed by the verb *nnik* “I fuck.”²⁰ In the discourse of young men, the affirmation of virility and heterosexuality—linked to contempt of the other, especially homosexuals, effeminate men, those considered to be lacking worth and thus contemptible—has, in Libyan society, the monopoly on legitimate sexuality. Heterosexism thus appears as a sort of “gender policing” intended to remind one of the symbolic order and thus confirm masculine domination in relationships between the sexes.

Heterosexuality reclaimed

Sexuality allows the performance of virility. It is in effect by his sex and his sexual activity that the young man becomes aware of his identity and his virility; sexual activity which affirms his heterosexuality to other

¹⁹ Welzer-Lang, “Virilité et virilisme dans les quartiers populaires en France,” 19.

²⁰ The verb *nāk-ynik* “to fuck, have sex with (actively)” contrasts with the derived verb *tnāk-ḡtnāk* “to be fucked, to be the passive sexual partner.”

members of the peer group. It being the case that young Libyan women should be virgins when they marry, young heterosexual Libyan men who desire sexual relations have few options other than prostitutes (or perhaps non-Libyan women). There were in fact paid forms of sexual service which these young men could take advantage of, as discussed for example in the following dialog:

- A) *fi ghāb az-zaḥḥ fi ma nnīku z-zaḥḥ?*
 “Are there some fucking prostitutes? Is there something to fuck?”
- B) *āmta tawwa?*
 “When, now?”
- A) *ti ēh...*
 “Yea, of course...”
- B) *fi wāḥda swēla*
 “There’s a dark (woman)”
- A) *bāh! mlīḥa?*
 “Alright! Is she fine?”
- B) *tabbī-ha?*
 “Do you want her?”
- A) *ṣādi!*
 “Fine!”
- B) *b-əl-flūs lākən rā-h!*
 “But you have to pay, you know!”

In this dialog, one can see both how virility and domination are performed by means of a kind of sexuality. In this context, having recourse only to prostitution in order to fornicate, a symbol of virility. The young men’s representation of the sexual act (outside of marriage) almost approaches a pornographic practice.

From the first phrase of the dialog above, one sees that interlocutor

A asks for “prostitutes” (*ghāb*), a term through which a certain relationship of domination is expressed: the notion of domination appears in the context of prostitution in the figure of the one who has money and pays for the service. Then, without transition and in the same phrase, the interlocutor asks if there is “something to fuck” (*fi ma nnīku?*)—the relative pronoun *ma* is used for objects, not persons, in which case the expression would be “someone to fuck” (*fi man nnīku?*). One thus observes the devalorization and subsequent reification of the prostitute; representing her as a sexual object allows heterosexism, domination, and virility to be expressed in a context in which, obsessed by their virility, young men do not really consider their sexual organs as ones of pleasure but rather as tools: the instruments of performance.²¹ Then, as the dialog continues, their sexual compartment is presented as crude and also brutal: they speak of “shooting” a prostitute, using the English word “shoot,” in the phrase *tšūt-ha* “you shoot her.”

- A) *ēh, bāh! swēla, ſbēda, mlīha wlla nafəx?*
“Yeah, okay! Brown, black, is she pretty or is this a dumb plan?”
- B) *swēla! la, la mlīha*
“Brown! No, no, she’s pretty.”
- A) *şangta?*
“A bombshell?”
- B) *la, la, məş şangta, mlīha žisəm-ha bāhi lākən
tuğʕud fī-k şannət-əs-swēlāt əl-gaħba baʕd-ma
tšūt-ha* (laughs)
“No, no, not a bombshell (but) she’s pretty, has a nice body, but damn the smell of dark women stays with you after you’ve shot her (laughs).”
- A) *āh!*
“Ah!”

²¹ Elisabeth Badinter, *XY, de l’identité masculine* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1992), 204.

- B) *ʕraʕt-ha ʕannət-əs-swəlāt? lākən š-šʕaʕ š-šʕaʕ əl-məlwi...*
 “You know it, the smell of dark (women)? But the hair, the curly hair...”
- A) *hmmm...hmmm...!*
 “Hm, hm”
- B) *lə-ʕyūn mlowwnāt, ʕyūn-ha mlowwnāt xuḍur*
 “The eyes are colored, her eyes are green colored”
- A) *l-gaḥba!*
 “Damn!”
- B) *uqsum billāh u šwārəb ʕənd-ha mlāḥ l-aʕ-zaḥḥ...*
 “I swear to God, and she has damn nice lips...”

At no time are sensuality or eroticism expressed; sentiments and affection are, in these stereotypes, associated with women and would be interpreted as unvirile. These sexual practices are therefore disassociated from sentiments of affection. Nevertheless, interlocutor B converses in a less abstract manner, describing the prostitute’s physical attributes mostly positively: she has a “good body” (*ʕisəm-ha bāhi*), “curly hair” (*š-šʕaʕ əl-məlwi*), “green eyes” (*ʕyūn-ha mlowwnāt xuḍur*), and “damn nice lips” (*šwārəb ʕənd-ha mlāḥ l-aʕ-zaḥḥ*)—these details allow him to imply that he already knows her sexually, has perhaps already had relations with her, and that he is thus an active and accomplished heterosexual. This is reinforced by the insulting and racist comment that he adds, noting that after the sexual act he could still sense a “smell of dark women” (*ʕannət-əs-swəlāt*). Thus B expresses his virility while showing off, while also putting himself into the scene and bragging, boastfulness being as well a characteristic of young men employed in dominating and obtaining the recognition of peers.²²

Setting the scene of a gendered self

²² See Coates, *Men Talk*.

The staging of the self takes place above all in the narrations through which masculine identity and virility are performed. This is primarily via the choice of insults and taboo words as well as via the narrating of one's exploits—be they sexual, violent, or connected to alcohol consumption—wherein a virile comportment, considered to be masculine, is foregrounded.²³ This may be observed in the following extracts. In the first extract, interlocutor C recounts his plans to travel outside of Libya for a few days in order to drink and live without responsibilities. A trip such as that would give him an access to leisure activities he would not be able to achieve in Libya:

C) *b-nəmši wullāhi ngūl l-ək hāža m-əl-āxīr?*
b-nəmši nəskər u b-nasrah ʕale rūḥ-i hekke
sbūʕēn tlāta u bə-nrawwah...

“I intend to go, I swear, I’m talking to you seriously, huh? I’ll go and get drunk and just have fun, like that, two, three weeks, and then I’ll come back...”

D) *ēh!*
“Yeah!”

C) *sukrān hekke fāqəd tlāt sābīʕ u xlāš...*
“Drunk, just like that, three weeks wasted and that’s it...”

D) (laughs)

C) *m-əl-āxīr...*
“Seriously...”

This interlocutor fantasizes by means of an imaginary trip allowing him to stage himself: he transports himself outside of Libya, where he is able to lose control. Virility is expressed by means of the exploit which he will accomplish once there: getting drunk. A dialog such as this is in essence a playful exercise which permits, in a humorous tone, the centering of attention, boasting, and domination. This may also be seen in another dialog, below, where interlocutor E recounts an

²³ Ibid.

encounter which upset him. The exploits which are foregrounded are drunkenness and verbal violence directed towards another young man.

58

E) *taʕraf wāḥəd hāḍāka l-marra fi lēla sukrān əl-
mudda lli fātət u nāk ttaṣṣəl nnīk, ttaṣṣəl gult āne
ālō, sakkəṛ, nnīk nabʕat l-a māṣəž, ma-ʕi-hā-š
kaləmtēn mūfidāt f-žurrət baʕd-hum*

“You know, a guy, that one time, I was drunk one night, a while ago, and he fucking called me, dammit, he called and I said ‘hello’, he hung up. So I send him a fucking message without even two words that make sense in it...”

F) *w ənta sukrān?*

“And you were drunk?”

E) *mā-ʕi-hā-š kalma mā-ʕi-hā-š sabba!*

“There wasn’t a word that wasn’t a curse!”

F) *w ənta sukrān?*

“And you were drunk?”

E) *ēh u kull-a fak fak fak fak fak fak fak fak yu wen
yu kōl ḍə fakiṅ fakiṅ fakiṅ, yu dont hæŋ əp ḍə
fakiṅ fōn yu dont fakiṅ fakiṅ fakiṅ fakiṅ kōl, āy
kallamt-a ma-bā-š iṛudd fhamt-ni?*

“Yeah and it was all [English] ‘fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck you when you call the fucking fucking fucking you don’t hang up the fucking phone you don’t fucking fucking fucking fucking call’, yea, I called him and he wouldn’t respond, you got me?”

F) *ēh!*

“Yeah!”

E) *nnīk l-a māṣəž...*

“I send him a fucking message...”

F) *māṣəž kull-a fakiṅ*

“A message (where) it is all fucking”

Contrary to the preceding dialog, here interlocutor E has recourse only to a crude form of language, obscene and full of insults. He speaks aggressively. He sets himself in a kind of telephone brawl where he dominates the other via insults. Virility, domination, and boastfulness are all on display. Domination also appears via the monopoly of speech, as a way of prevailing in a peer group. Here it can be seen that E dominates F by blocking his interventions, interrupting him, and not listening to his words. These masculine performances are homosocial, and this *mise-en-scène* permits one to obtain the recognition of peers. The chosen themes allow one to choose how one presents and shows oneself, how one wants to appear, themes which play an important role in identity construction.²⁴

Conclusions

Through these unguarded, spontaneous oral conversations, gathered *in situ* directly within the peer group, one may begin to comprehend the ways in which the linguistic habit of young Tripolitanian men indeed performs traditional, stereotyped, and hegemonic masculinities through virile comportments, to use the terminology of Kiesling.²⁵ The exalting of virilist values and foregrounding of heterosexism through transgressive, very obscene, highly expressive, language practices, express an identity constrained by traditional society and a lack of a certain kind of sexual freedom. The reproduction of hegemonic models of masculinity allows young men to perform domination, toughness, and insensitivity in order to distinguish themselves from women while reaffirming each other. This virility materializes via the discursive affirmation of a measured, heterosexual sexuality outside of marriage, humor consisting of gendered insults and a strong homophobic tendency, and a self-presentation, all of which define an important part of homosocialness, whereas the expression of power appears constantly via sexist and homophobic utterances, where women and homosexuals are constructed as being “others” inferior to the members of the peer group. This construction of a social identity, exercised sometimes through self-ridicule, other times in order to subjugate the “other,” thus permits these young men to validate their existence as dominant males. While assigned a particular identity imposed by the

²⁴ See again Coates, *Men Talk*.

²⁵ Kiesling, “Men, Masculinities and Language,” 657.

social conditions which constrain them, it is interesting to note that their language practices aim to emancipate them from the constraints in which they live while they simultaneously reproduce the expected, dominant, imposed compartments. What is then lived as transgressive or even emancipatory serves stereotyped categories, which, far from participating in an intimate sexual identity, one both chosen and personal, encloses each person in preconceived frameworks.

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62

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