

# MOHAMED SALAH

## OR THE AESTHETICS OF ORDINARY MIDDLE EAST MASCULINITIES

---

On October 6 2020 The Sun reported an event where Mohamed Salah, the celebrated soccer player of the Liverpool FC and the Egyptian national team, had protected David Craig, a 50-year-old homeless man, from people harassing him at a petrol station. According to Mr. Craig, Salah first scolded the attackers and then gave him £100. Craig later declared: “Mo is a real-life hero in my eyes and I want to thank him,” hence the article’s title: “Have-a-Mo Hero.”

---

*Danilo Marino*

---



Egypt's football hero Mohamed Salah painted on a wall in Cairo

**T**he very next day, the same news appears in the blog of Amr Khaled, a popular moderate Egyptian preacher, in an article titled “The *murū’a* of Muhammad Salah” and signed by ‘Asim Isma‘il. As a researcher in Medieval Arabic literature and culture, I was intrigued by how the Egyptian writer reframed the event and I wondered why he resorted to the ancient and complex ethical concept of *murū’a* instead of opting for the more straightforward and unambiguous *batal*, the common Arab equivalent for the English “hero.”

The question is more than a philological exercise. I argue that this specific word adds multiple layers of meaning and interpretation about how Mohamed Salah’s public persona is perceived both in the West and in the Arabic and Islamic worlds.

### The “Murū’a” of Mohamed Salah and the model of masculine morality

Before attempting to answer the question above, we need to step back and briefly summarize some aspects related to this concept. The term *murū’a* appears in classical Arabic poetry as well as in Medieval ethical and historical writings. Its definition has no equivalent in English and in Arabic its meaning was neither clear nor univocal. While it had certainly to do with concepts such as the respect of collective morality, politeness, sense of shame, honor and dignity, generosity was and still is at the very center of *murū’a*.

The richer a person was the higher were the expectations regarding his/her expenditures and his/her moral stance was evaluated accordingly. Therefore, rather than translating ideas of “Arab heroism,” *murū’a* is meant here to read the event that occurred in Liverpool through the lens of a specific set of Arab ethical values of the kind exemplified by the Prophet himself, whose *murū’a* is described in an article published on the same Egyptian blog.

Thus, if ‘Asim Isma‘il’s essay clearly aligns with the widespread perception of Salah’s high moral behavior, it is also a way of saying to the Arab reader: our own set of values and moral principles of the kind epitomized by the term *murū’a* are essentially good and the West is finally acknowledging it thanks to the outstanding behavior of Salah.

There is no doubt that Mohamed Salah defies the general idea of what a football star looks like. Both his aspect and lifestyle are at odds with all the extravagance and excessive mediatization of players of the same caliber. Furthermore, as an Arab and a Muslim man, he also challenges the orientalist image of Middle East masculinity where men are often portrayed as hegemonic, patriarchal, uncaring, hyper-virile and fanatical.

Anthropologist Marcia Inhorn has noted that these representations of oriental masculinities are not only widespread in the Western imaginary, but they have also been gradually assimilated by Middle Eastern societies resulting in what she refers to as “residual indigenous Orientalism.” In other words, Arab men are often caught between the way they see themselves enacting masculinity and those global representations. As a result, most Middle Eastern men simply do not conform with these images and often reject them altogether.

Mohamed Salah’s perceived morality, which combined with his exceptional talent as player has led Arab media to nickname him “the pride of the Arabs” (*fakhr al-‘Arab*), provides then an excellent model for what recent studies have termed “emergent masculinity.” Marcia Inhorn argued that men in the MENA region are able to rethink their masculinity and adapt to the changing social context both globally and locally. “Emergent” refers to the ability of men from this part of the world to engage in new forms of manhood which also include reconsidering the gender relations and the way they look at their own body. Salah seems to embody exactly this model of emergent masculinity in which the “good man” is not the exception but the rule.

Moreover, Salah has always publicly shown his religious faith, to such an extent that the British newspapers have given particular emphasis on the so-called “Salah effect” in which the player’s popularity has triggered a more positive image of Islam across the UK. According to a study, anti-Muslim hate crimes in the Liverpool area have indeed declined and islamophobic tweets have even decreased by half.

This is the reason why influential Muslim authorities present the football player as a source of imitation and inspiration. The Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Ahmad al-Tayyib, for example, was phoned by Mohamed Salah on the eve of the opening match between Egypt and Zimbabwe of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Africa Cup of Nations hosted by Egypt between June 21<sup>st</sup> and July 19<sup>th</sup>, 2019. While some suggested that the call

was about the construction of an Islamic center in Salah's hometown Naghrigh, the shaykh also praised the player's good manners (*ibn al-khaluq*) and him being an excellent model for young people and recommended to keep his humble attitude (*tawādu'*) and "doing good (*khayr*), loving the poor and helping the weak." Finally, he also stressed how Salah is an example of piety for all the Muslims living abroad. Thus, Salah is not only a good and morally irreproachable man, but also a "good Muslim" and piety, according to an old proverb, "is not achieved without *murū'a*" (*lā dīna illā bi-l-murū'a*).

### Salah and the aesthetics of ordinariness

The Egyptian sociologist Amro Ali has argued that Salah has given back to both Arabs and Egyptians that sense of "somebodyness," that is a feeling of worth, self-esteem and self-acceptance, which the authoritarian systems have constantly crushed. Each of Salah's own achievements is indeed instantly felt as a success for all Egyptians. Slogans such as "Salah is one of us. He looks like us" perfectly articulate a process of collective identification.

As most of the young Egyptians, Salah was not given the means to cultivate his talent. Born in a small village of the Delta from a modest family, his former trainer at the Arab Contractors' youth team once declared that Salah was just a "third choice left-back" because he was "getting consumed physically and mentally" by the long hours he had to spend traveling from his hometown to Cairo five times a week. It is only after joining the Basel FC that Salah got the proper conditions to develop and thrive. This is probably one of the reasons of Salah's success among young Egyptians because they see in him a mirror image of their own trajectory: scant opportunity to achieve self-fulfillment in their own country given the poor starting conditions and the dream of redemption abroad.

In the wake of this collective identification, during the presidential elections in Egypt of March 2018, Salah was the third most voted candidate despite not being on the ballot. At the same time, the telecom giant Vodafone released a fascinating advertisement in Egypt, which was almost unnoticed by scholars, but that is an important document in support of our dis-

cussion about the representation of Mohamed Salah as the model of "Arab" masculine morality.

The ad plays on the contrast between Salah's apparent ordinary life in Liverpool and his great popularity in Egypt. Sequences of the lonely and seemingly anonymous Egyptian in a gloomy British city alternate with his image reproduced endlessly on portraits, T-shirts and posters brandished in the sunny streets of Cairo and in the Egyptian countryside as well as with videos of his performances played again and again on the phones of his young fans both boys and girls.

All this is accompanied by a powerful narrative in Egyptian Arabic which not only describes him as an unconventional football star, but also emphasizes this rhetoric of collective identification we referred to earlier through expressions like: "Kullenā sheyfin nefsenā fih" ("We all see ourselves in him") and "Kulluhum Salah" ("They are all Mohamed Salah"). Interestingly, while the first sentence is inserted into the middle of the video clip, the second is given the most prominent position of the final slogan, and this looks more like a political statement. Because Salah gives a good moral example, he has the power to mobilize the masses, and this is also why he has been politicized.

### Politics, albeit unwittingly (or not)

It is not too difficult to recognize in the latter sentence the same wording of one of the most popular slogans of the 2011 Egyptian uprising: "Kullenā Khaled Sa'id" ("We are all Khaled Sa'id"). It is true that both aim at creating an emotional connection but unlike the revolutionary reference to the "first martyr" or the French hashtag "Je suis Charlie" launched after the January 7th 2015 shooting of twelve people at the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, the Vodafone advertisement does not seem to support a cause, or promote solidarity. However, "Kulluhum Salah" is too similar to the one of 2011 that, considering the Egyptian State's attempts at erasing all traces of the revolution, this slogan must be more than just a successful marketing strategy.

Salah thus finds himself unintentionally involved in politics. We could argue that the soccer player replaces the "symbol" of the aborted revolution and therefore embodies all the aspirations of change that were crushed by the 2013 military coup. It remains unclear, for now, whether Salah thinks of himself as a

political actor, especially because he has never publicly expressed his opinion on this matter. However, in 2017 he donated a large sum of money to Tahya Masr (Long Live Egypt), a fund created by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to promote development programs in Egypt. The move, which has raised some eyebrows among his fans, can also be read as the regime's attempt at appropriating Salah for governmental propaganda and eventually whitewash the State's image both inside the country and abroad.

On another occasion, a dispute erupted between the player's agent and the Egyptian Football Association: the latter had placed Salah's image outside of the airplane bringing the Egyptian team to Russia for the 2018 Football World Cup. The problem was that the plane was sponsored by WE, the State-owned telecommunication firm and rival of Vodafone. The contention came from the fact that Vodafone owns the rights to exploit Salah's image. The situation escalated to the point that the player threatened to leave the National team in what he felt to be an abuse. Soon the hashtag: "Support Mohamed Salah" was launched and the State's effort to gain popularity by coopting the player as testimonial ended disastrously.

### Salah: a "new" masculine model?

Furthermore, particularly interesting to me is the model of masculinity emerging from the commercial use of Salah's image. In the Vodafone advert, as well as in other instances, the representation of Mohamed Salah's body, for example, not only contrasts with the chiseled and often tattooed figures of other international football stars, but it also defies Egyptian standards, which associate masculine identities with strength and muscles.

Such models are not only dominant in the Egyptian show-business, they are also used as political propaganda. In a recent "viral" video, for example, 1,500 Egyptian police cadets are seen parading topless before Abdel Fattah el-Sisi during a graduation ceremony in Cairo showing off their shaved and well-muscled upper bodies while practicing all sorts of stunts. In contrast, Salah is obviously an athlete, but his body is "normal" and his "normality" challenges and reverses the hegemonic message of physical aggressiveness, trivial virility and hyper-masculinity

that we have grown so accustomed to in Egypt, the Arab world, as well as in the rest of the globe.

Moreover, Salah's apparent minimal interest in his physical appearance, in particular his hairstyling and beard which has never simply been a matter of fashion in the Middle East as well as in the football stardom, reinforces his non-narcissistic stance and modesty. Indeed, Salah's image is of a serious and fully devoted athlete because "he is not a star; the stars are far away from him" as the voice-over of the Vodafone advert says.

This perceived "ordinariness" is a persistent feature of Salah's representation and is constantly stressed by his fans. The Vodafone advert repeatedly emphasizes this point by showing images of the player wearing normal clothes, buying fish and chips, jogging in the park or playing with his daughter Makka, as if he was unaware and even surprised of his own success.

On the narrative side, a series of words are also used to condense different aspects of Salah's "normal" masculinity. The expression "Abū Makka," for example, a patronymic designation (*kunya*) literally meaning "the father of Makka" and used in both Arab and Muslim contexts to honor a person by alluding to "his" or "her" – the feminine *umm X*, "the mother of X" is also very common and demonstrates that this naming system does not indicate virility – alludes to Salah's fatherhood in a way that reconnects the worldly acclaimed football player to his cultural background, where manliness is inherently connected to being a father and a husband.

Interestingly, in a very popular song by the young Egyptian singer Moaaz Eissa, the *rugula* or masculinity of Mohamed Salah is again linked to his fatherhood like in the refrain: "Father of the little sweet Makka, a first-class professional. Father of the little sweet Makka, what an example of masculinity, what an example of masculinity (*Abu Makka al-'assula, ihtiraf min daraga al-ula. Abu Makka al-'assula, rugula rugula!*)"

The Vodafone advertisement also refers to Salah as *ibn al-balad*. The expression literally means "the son of the country" and is used in the video to show how the football player despite living in a foreign country is still adhering to behaviors and attitudes considered part of the Egyptian identity. Moreover, as Sawsan el-Messiri showed in her 1978 study, the expression *ibn al-balad* is also connected to a specific set of supposed "masculine" moral obligations, such as generosity, gallantry, respect of the customs and of the religion, protection of the family, etc. This is encompassed



in the concept of *murū'a* discussed above and it is perceived as a genuinely Egyptian ideal, and thus opposed to “foreign” models of masculinity. *Ibn al-balad* is a phrase still commonly used by middle-class and lower-middle-class Egyptian men to define themselves and using it for Salah means re-Egyptianizing the global celebrity while also bringing him closer to an idealized image of normality.

Finally, the Vodafone video states that Salah is *rajul* and *walad*, two generic Arabic terms meaning “a man” and “a son” or “a boy” respectively. The use of these terms in their indefinite forms and without adjectives qualifying them alludes to the fact that Salah’s non-toxic, caring and virtuous masculinity is not an exception, but rather the ordinary way of being a man, a boy and a son, meaning “a good man,” “a good boy,” and “a good son.” In other words, positive models of masculinities, “good men” and “good Muslims” or simply men of *murū'a*, are the greatest majority and Salah is the mirror in which they are reflected and eventually vindicated.

---

#### BIO

---

*Danilo Marino is an Italian researcher currently based in Oman who has studied Mediterranean Studies and Comparative Literatures at the University of Naples “L’Orientale” and learned Arabic in Naples, Paris, Damascus and Cairo. In 2015, he got his PhD from the University of Naples and INALCO in Paris with a thesis on the literary representations of intoxicants in the Arabic literature from the Mamluk period (1250-1517). In 2018 and 2019, he was a post-doctoral fellow at the Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies where he worked on the Arabic notion of murū'a and the representation of masculinity in pre-modern Arabic historiography. He is currently an independent researcher collaborating with the Encyclopaedia of Islam and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs where he teaches introductory as well as specialised classes on different topics such as history, religion, language, culture, politics and gender of the Arab and Islamic worlds.*

#### FURTHER READING

- Ayubi Zahra, *Gendered Morality. Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family and Society*, Columbia University Press (New York 2019).
- Farès Bishr, “MURŪ’A or MURUWWA”, in: Clifford Edmund Bosworth, Emeri Johannes van Donzel, Wolfhart P. Heinrichs and Charles Pellat, et alii, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second edition, 13 Vols, Brill (Leiden 1986-2000), Vol. 7, 1991, pp. 636-638.
- Ghannam Farha, *Live and Die Like a Man. Gender Dynamics In Urban Egypt*, Stanford University Press (Stanford 2013).
- Inhorn Marcia C. and Kostantina Isidoros (eds.), “Arab Masculinities: Anthropological Reconceptions”, special issue of *Men and Masculinities* (2018).