

## NEW MANHOOD AND NEW ORDER: GANDHI AND BIN LADEN AGAINST THE GREAT POWERS

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### [Ø. Introduction]

In this paper I explore the similarities, which are as striking as they are surprising, between the personal lives of Mohandas K. Gandhi and Osama bin Laden. On a day to day level, I argue, both men fought unfathomably vast global powers through a way of life fashioned at a very local scale. This life, drawn in both cases from religious grammars, consists in an austerity of existential urgency and the image of recovered manhood.

I claim to be an expert on neither, nor on the traditions they draw upon. As sources, I have worked from journalistic reports, published recollections of those who knew them, later analyses, and their own words. My approach is indebted to the psychobiographies of Erik Erikson, which sought to unravel the origins of "great men" by treating them as mere men, as well as Pierre Bourdieu's localizing *Logic of Practice* (1990). By contrasting local and global evaluations of these men, I mean to raise questions about the ways in which a local manhood becomes imposed in the service of a reinvented politics.

### [I. Great Men: Global and Political]

In my upbringing and education, there have been hardly two men more opposite than the those I discuss here. When I was little, my mother would buy me videos about the life of Gandhi, celebrating his nonviolent victory over the British. I remember vividly the first time (of many) that I saw the Ben Kingsley film, absorbing its praise for the man from the floor of my grandparents' living room. The guru my parents took me to see in the course of their own searching, Eknath Easwaran, saw Gandhi as the key to bringing Indian spirituality into the contemporary age. In litany after litany, Gandhi joins the canon of modern saints.

My encounters with Osama bin Laden, of course, have been quite different. I had just turned seventeen when his associates crashed a plane into the Pentagon, located in my hometown of Arlington, Virginia, as well as New York's towers and the Pennsylvania countryside. It was just the time when I was beginning to wonder at the place my generation would take in the world and what role I would play in it. Instantly he became the first natural enemy of my adulthood. Nine days after the attacks, President Bush told us:

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Osama bin Laden is an evil man. His heart has been so corrupted that he's willing to take innocent life. And we are fighting evil, and we will continue to fight evil, and we will not stop until we defeat evil. (Bush 2001)

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That said, the news also makes us painfully aware that for some bin Laden is a hero. His picture is carried by crowds of youths alongside burning American flags in the infamous rallies of the "Arab street," which have become the new scourge of our modern newsreels.

When we encounter bin Laden and Gandhi, almost exclusively, they are moral figures, cast onto a global scale. And in my singular experience, the balance sheets are clear: Gandhi has been celebrated and bin Laden reviled. This great gulf between these men, though, began to dissolve for me when, rather by accident, I found myself reading detailed accounts of their lives at around the same time (Wright 2006; Erikson 1969). On a closer level, the lines between their political theories, Gandhi's militant nonviolence and bin Laden's terrorist violence, became less stark than they had always appeared.

### [II. Mere Men: Local and Biological]

Let me clarify what I mean by speaking of the local as opposed to the global. It is the territory of Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus*, the system of a subject's dispositions "which is constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions" (1980: 52). In this way, the pedagogy of everyday life is what makes us who we are through the people and pressures we continually encounter, rather than the totalizing stories of world history that may lay claim to us. Recognizing this, Erik Erikson's biographies of Gandhi and Martin Luther isolate these men as psychological creatures whose world-historical importance is plainly derivative of their very local personal development.

Locality is inscribed in our very bodies, which are limited by space and time, as well as by biological equipment. Anthropologist Robin Dunbar, based on comparative studies with primates, suggests that *Homo sapiens* are best equipped to operate in societies of around 150 (Dunbar 1992, 1993). As it turns out, military units, address books, and tribal societies tend to hover around this number by their own accord. When groups get larger, it becomes more difficult to maintain trust and prevent freeloading. In order to deal with unwieldy populations, we brashly lump them into imaginary abstractions like nations or cliques, which work in our minds as single agentive units.

Thus small, local networks take on a certain primacy, circumscribing the people and abstractions that we feel most responsible to. The global, then, is composed of a set of abstractions received and interpreted on a local scale. It becomes a play of shadows cast upon particular localities.

It is on these terms that I point to parallels in the lives of Gandhi and bin Laden. Both lived, quite intentionally, in small, communal settings while orchestrating conflict against a vast, unfathomable opponent. Their lives were different in many ways of course, but what similarities do exist represent a challenge to the way I have usually encountered them.

\* Father-consciousness

Both men understood themselves in a special way in terms of their fathers. Gandhi's father was a powerful local politician who, according to custom, had Mohandas married to a young girl when he was only 13 years old. This, Gandhi resentfully attributed to a father who "to a certain extent ... might have been given to carnal pleasures" (Gandhi 1983: 1). The worst came at his father's death, which occurred while Gandhi was having sex with his wife. "If animal passion had not blinded me," he later wrote, "I should have been spared the torture of separation from my father during his last moments" (26). The vow of chastity that would help to define Gandhi's adult life doubtlessly reacts to this painful association between "carnal pleasures" and his own father.

Bin Laden's father Mohammed was also an important man, the go-to construction contractor for the Saudi kingdom. He was a prolific husband, marrying twenty-two women, though never with more than four wives at a time, in deference to Islamic law. When his father divorced Osama's mother, she was married to a clerk in his company, and as a boy Osama was teased that this second marriage was not legitimate (Randal 2004: 57). Growing up, he idolized his father and ultimately quit school to work on the company's road projects (Randal 2004: 63-64; LT: 83). At age 19, he and his friend Jamal Khalifa vowed to practice Islamic polygamy more honorably than their fathers, treating their wives with respect (Wright 2006 81). For most of the time since, Osama has kept the Qur'anic limit of four wives, most of whom have been older and highly educated (Bergen 2006: 123). Mohammed, meanwhile, was killed in 1967 in an airplane crash on the way to take a new young wife.

\* Sickly constitution, strong yet humble spirit

In the shadow of strongman fathers, each performed a recovered masculine strength built on received feminine humility. Throughout bin Laden's adult career, he has been plagued by debilitating health problems. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the Egyptian doctor and fellow al Qaeda boss, has reportedly supplied bin Laden with regular intravenous glucose treatments to keep him from fainting (Wright 2006: 139). Meanwhile the international terrorist has been repeatedly described by those who encounter him as an "extraordinarily humble person" who "presented himself as a soft-spoken cleric, rather than as the fire breathing leader" (Bergen 2006: 118, xxix). Despite the harsh discipline imposed on al Qaeda trainees (265), he is known for moments of humor, eager listening, and kindness. "He's not really that hard," one of his daughters once said. "He just acts like that in front of the men" (Wright 2006: 253).

Erikson's analysis is attentive to the motherliness of Gandhi with his close followers, which he learned from his own mother, who favored him among her children as she cared for his "sickly constitution" (Kakar 1990: 86). He reports in the autobiography, "My eye always followed the girls [who lived at the ashram] as a mother's eye would follow a daughter" (Erikson 1969: 238-239). Fasting, Gandhi's military tactic of choice, was the specialty of Hindu women, and was practiced fervently by his mother. Revathi Krishnaswami (2002: 295) has pointed out that Ghandian nationalism's "revived, reformed, and elaborated androgyny," drawing from roots in Indian culture, performed an alternative masculinity to the clean-cut, manly militarism that the British maintained in the country. But both Gandhi and bin Laden, as they mean to invert the logic of the colonial system, also invert the logic of fatherhood they found in their own fathers, one of relatively inattentive, unresponsive power.

\* Self-sacrifice

The tactics of militant nonviolence and theatrical terrorism, while appearing so different to the global audience, incur quite similar risk on the part of their practitioners and masterminds. Both lived in constant threat of being

destroyed at the whim of their distant opponent, and each made a mythology out of self-sacrifice. Bin Laden, whose organization prepares men to carry out suicide attacks, had to overcome a Qur'anic injunction against suicide by drawing on the currency of martyrdom. One early al Qaeda recruit said of him, "I think he desires only one thing and that is martyrdom ... I believe this is what he wants" (Bergen 2006: 118).

Gandhi also believed deeply in the efficacy of self-sacrifice, and when his courage faltered he continually sought "more self-purification and sacrifice" to prepare himself for challenges to come (Gandhi 1983: 208). Perhaps maniacally in our view, he perceived depriving himself of food, sex, and comfort as a means to secure strength not only for himself but for the nation that was to be his figurative offspring. The two leaders, in this way, appear to be spiritually dissolving the reality of local life while supplanting it more and more with global proxies.

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\* Local Utopia

For Gandhi, the global conflict against British occupation was enacted as much on the territory of his own palate as that of the Subcontinent. This likely began when his mother bound him to vows of chastity and vegetarianism when he departed to study law in England as a youth. There, in the Imperial capital, much of his moral effort and, eventually, social life revolved around eating habits (Gandhi 1983: 50-52; Erikson 1969: 151-2). Later in life, much of his Experiments with Truth would still be devoted to experiments with health and eating, geared in turn at facilitating chaste existence. He (and therefore his wife also) took the vow of chastity - of brahmacharya - in 1906 while living in South Africa and arguably kept it for life (Gandhi 1983: 182). The communities he organized around himself, the Tolstoy Farm in Africa and Satyagraha Ashram in India, became laboratories for these experiments which were to become the basis of a new Indian nation. The strategies he used with the British became his strategies with the local children, even to the point of fasting in order to show his disappointment or to compel his wife to follow his dietary suggestions (Erikson 1969: 237-238, 242-243; Gandhi 1983: 291-292).

Bin Laden's local community, with its own mix of brutal discipline and motherly compassion, in the words of one who experienced it, "went hungry together and [was] filled together" (Bergen 2006: 267). What Gandhi drew from the Indian tradition of the spiritual ashram, bin Laden found in the mythology of the cave and the exodus associated with Mohammed Wright 2006: 233). Afghanistan and Sudan, where he and his followers found refuge over the last few decades, became a modern day hijra, Mohammed's historic flight from Mecca to Medina to gather support in hiding, which marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar.  
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\* Voluntary Ascetics

Neither was forced into the poverty that he performed. Bin Laden was an heir to millions, and Gandhi held a law degree from London. Only by having so much could they renounce it locally without sacrificing the global influence inaccessible to the truly poor. Renunciation took constant effort to maintain. "Throughout his life," writes one biographer, bin Laden "would hunger for austerity like a vice" (Wright 2006: 77). He slept on the ground (Bergen 2006: 133) and instructed his wives not to iron his clothes (Randal 2004: 29). These were choices made of anything but necessity for a man of his wealth and position.

Gandhi's character had a similar erotics of asceticism, to the point of nearly naming his Indian ashram the "abode of austerity" (Gandhi 1983: 254). It also took considerable effort; his practice of riding the train third-class caused headaches for his benefactors (Erikson 1969: 189-190; Gandhi 1983: 212-213), who would eventually go to expensive lengths to ensure his safety there. Both enact the figure of the anti-colonialist partisan shared by the likes of Che Guevara as well the majority of suicide bombers (Atran 2003: 1536-37). In these cases, the elite men of a disempowered society choose to adopt an ascetic moralism, legitimating their leadership by identifying with the downtrodden. This recovered manhood becomes a way for members of the political class to "man up" in contexts where their authority has been abdicated to a foreign power.

\* Global battles fought on local turf

In each case, this means fighting global battles on local turf. For a man of such public stature, bin Laden's global experience is limited. Unlike many of his cousins, he was never educated outside of Saudi Arabia, and he has probably never traveled to the West that he disapproves of so much. He prepares and implements his policies without interface with world leaders. His whole career and crusade has been built and imposed on the world out from the local utopia he surrounds himself with.

Educated abroad and associate of ordinary statesmen, Gandhi appears to have better political credentials. Still,

much of his own statesmanship rested on what one author calls "an anatomy of charisma to also be the simple arithmetic of demographic reform" (Alter 2000: 26). It is by now well known that during times of duress, he would bring female associates into bed with him in order to test his power not to become aroused and thereby to keep his vow of chastity. "If I can master this," he reportedly remarked, "I can still beat Jinnah" - the partition of India (Erikson 1969: 404). In these ways, local and global worlds appear to be confused.

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\* Rebellion and rejection of children

Both local worlds had their discontents. Each man had a son who rejected him and his cause. In time for the 50th anniversary of Indian independence, a major new movie is being released in India about Gandhi's estranged son, who denounced his father and eventually converted, for a time, to Islam. Though bin Laden has been described as a loving husband and father, his first and fourth wives had left him by the time of the 2001 attacks, along with several children, all tired of the self-imposed austerity of jihadi \* life. Both men, like so many men and despite their impact on the world stage, struggled to hold their local lives together.

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\* Different Evaluations

We are faced here with two men and two different scales for understanding them. On the one hand, there is the global and political, which I learned from my mother and from the President of the United States. Then there is the local, the biological, which I noticed only by looking more closely at biographies and imagining the worlds these men knew.

On a local level - with regard to family and close associates - it is clear that bin Laden and Gandhi employed homologous strategies in order to enact resistance against global-scale empires. Each fashioned a manhood recovered from religious sources, an ethic of self-sacrifice, poverty, and strength prophetically juxtaposed with vulnerability, all under the threat of death from above. Against an opponent whose power was so pervasive it extended into their homes and upbringings, a new political order began with imposing order on the home. Both fought against the resistance of their wives and children to this order, asserting it with comparable stubbornness.

Seen against local similarity, furthermore, the ostensibly vast differences between bin Laden and Gandhi seem to dissolve into circumstance. What if bin Laden had been raised by a mother devoted to a Jain monk, as Gandhi was, rather than taught by Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood exiles working in Saudi Arabian schools (Wright 2006: 78)? If we were alien ethnologists looking at the two men in their daily lives, would there be any great difference? It is precisely because I personally prefer the strategy of one vastly more than the other that the fragility of the difference between them feels all the more disconcerting.

[III. Values after Facts]

I would like to conclude by raising some of the questions, both analytical and ethical, that I am still struggling with after my attempt to imagine these great men in their merely local worlds.

Intuitively, cognitively, and experientially, people are local creatures. We interpret the global locally, making decisions that potentially affect the many based on our relationships with the few. Yet history reads like a sequence of the great shadows cast by the merely local. Which set of stories do we tell and read: How the global shadows happen to fall on us, in our locality? Or should we attempt to search out the original, local light from which they came?

Then also, ourselves: With which realm do we identify? Is it necessary to fight political battles on local turf, or can either be distinctly recognized, somehow, as such? In many traditional formulations, furthermore, female activity operates locally, while men lord over the shadows of politics. Does the blindness of one gender to its locality help to explain structures of domination?

Thomas Friedman, the *New York Times*'s myth-maker of globalization, suggests that "super-empowered individuals" like bin Laden will become ever more common as network technology provides a means for small actors to work quickly and effectively on the world stage. Clinton's use of cruise missiles against bin Laden in 1998, Friedman points out, "was the first battle in history between a superpower and a super-empowered angry man" (Friedman 2002: 5-6). If this is the case, it may be time for us to be more attentive to the possibility of confusing global good with one's own local preference.

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