

Sexualities and Queer Studies

Interest in the various aspects of and possible common points between sexualities in the Islamic world through the ages has been a minor but continuous academic concern during the last three decades, boosted by the emergence of women's and gender studies, almost synchronously with gay/lesbian studies in the mid-1980s and then queer studies in the 1990s. Three groups of epistemological issues pertaining to gender and sexual identity in Islamic societies are addressed here: the constructionist vs. essentialist approach, the relevance of constructing "Islamic sexualities" as a field of research, and the interactions between Western and traditional constructions of sexual identity in modern Islamic societies. This article will deal mainly with sources in Arabic, which remained the language of the cultured elite of the Islamic world until the twelfth century. Sources for other regions will be mentioned in the bibliography.

The field of women's studies, which deals primarily with contemporary societies from a sociological, ethnographic, or political perspective, has provided us with raw information on gender structures; however, studies devoted exclusively to male identity and culture have appeared only recently. Writers dealing with same-sex behavior in Islam or in Arab societies, although informative, often seem unaware of the deeper issues associated with the vocabulary they use. "Homosexuality," "pederasty," "inversion," and "lesbianism" are used without questioning their meanings, while Arabic terms such as *liwāt* and *takhannuth* are immediately equated or linked with "homosexuality" and "effeminacy" without further investigation. Although G.-H. Bousquet discusses the actual importance of *zinā* (profligacy) in North Africa, despite its harsh condemnation in *fiqh*, he merely notes that "pederasty between children or young people does not cause great indignation . . . it is far from being unknown between adults. It is well known that a particular region of Tunisia is famous in this matter" (Bousquet 1953, 60). From a different perspective, al-Munajjid attempts to portray the sexual habits of the Umayyad and 'Abbāsid eras, including same-sex relations, through anecdotes quoted in *adab* works. The author seems to understand these anecdotes as factual reflections of reality, concerning the whole of medieval

society, without explaining that such words as *liwāt* do not bear the same meaning in classical and modern Arabic, whether because he assumes his readers' knowledge of the issue or, more likely, because he himself assumes that *liwāt* means homosexuality. The pervasiveness of sexual matters in *adab* causes him to call the 'Abbāsid age the "era of sex," which he attributes to an alleged "loss of religious feeling among the aristocracy" (al-Munajjid 1958, 45) and, above all, to the "Persian influence."

Whether hushed up, coyly alluded to, frowned upon, or rejected as products of foreign influence and past attitudes, same-sex relations have long been a blind spot in twentieth-century Arab sources. The subject is reluctantly addressed by Pellat in his 1983 *Encyclopedia of Islam* article, written from the perspective of normative discourses produced by Islamic societies concerning *liwāt*. With A. Bouhdiba's ground-breaking *La sexualité en islam*, however, sexuality in Islam was made into a specific, coherent object of study. More recent research has focused on the perceptions reflected in cultural production, essentially literature, whether classical or modern, but until recently there have been very few attempts at evaluating discursive praxis in the light of gender construction theory.

Scholarly debates catalyzed by queer studies, primarily concerned with the relevance of the concept of (sexual) identity, are highly useful in the study of non-European cultures, which in turn could certainly benefit from academic debate on the construction of sexuality in Islamic societies. Interaction with non-European civilizations during the colonial era, particularly the Islamic "East" as an epitomic cultural "Other" (R. Burton's "sotadic zone"), is closely related to the Western construction of a homosexual identity, with the help of what R. C. Bleys calls the ethnographic imagination's mapping of the "geography of perversion." In return, this deconstruction may now apply to Islamic cultures and enrich a discipline that has been hitherto primarily concerned with early Greek and Roman homosexualities. The possible links between pre-Islamic substratum conceptions of gender and same-sex relations, particularly Greek and Persian, and later Arabo-Islamic cultural features, have yet to be explored. The resemblances and differences between the classical Greek erastes/

eromenos relationship and the Islamic poet/*amrad* (beardless youth) relation need to be studied as well. It has often been noted that the pervasiveness of homoerotic poetry begins with the 'Abbāsīd caliphate period (750–1259), when the Persian heritage merged into Islamic culture. But the mere fact that the love of boys is connected with *shu'ū-biyya* (pro-Persian claims) in some belles-lettristic works does not allow the researcher to attribute the appearance of “homosexuality” in Islamic civilization to an outside influence.

Much research has been devoted to the extent to which Western definitions of homosexuality and, recently, the gay liberation movement, have influenced Islamic societies' perception of same-sex behaviors, as well as perceptions by “homosexuals” of themselves. An identity closely linked with heterosexuality probably first appeared in the nineteenth century during the age of encounters between colonial Europe and the Islamic world. The colonial era's influence on gender construction in Islamic countries often resulted in the imposition of a strict conception of heterosexuality, sometimes in a Victorian moral code that was eagerly and rapidly islamized. B. Dunnes's work on the normalization of sexuality in Egypt shows how the colonial power pressured reluctant local authorities to outlaw homosexual practices. A similar process occurred in India and is analyzed by S. Bhaskaran. The impact of nineteenth-century European morality on the construction of Islamic sexualities is also underlined by A. Najmabadi in her work on Qājār Iran.

Following Michel Foucault, particularly the English translation of the first volume of his *Histoire de la sexualité*, researchers began to look at how sexuality is historically constructed in discourse, and how culture normalizes sexual acts so as to define genders and limits. Historians have sought to analyze the construction of homosexuality, while literary scholars explore the various bonds that define male identity, and demonstrate how each culture at different periods has conceived of sexuality. These works show how, during a long period of maturation beginning in fifteenth-century Europe and gaining speed from the eighteenth century on, “homosexuality was historically invented as a specific category and opposed to a norm that mainly defines itself by what it excludes” (Eribon 1998, 15), the assumption being that heterosexuality is not so much a natural or universal concept and way of living one's sexuality as a constructed definition of gender, excluding same-sex attraction and intercourse. Historians regarded as essentialists, on the other hand, have considered same-sex attraction to

be a universal minoritarian paradigm, regardless of its crystallization as an independent concept in history, that can rightfully be subsumed as “homosexuality” or “gayness”; they have subsequently endeavored to examine its developments at various periods and locations. Since the 1990s, queer theory can be seen as a later development of the constructionist approach, aimed at severing gay and lesbian studies from a minoritarian and identitarian approach.

Although such epistemological issues have seldom been addressed per se in studies pertaining to the Islamic domain, most authors have noticed that both normative texts (Qur'ān, *hadīth*, *fiqh*) and perceptions of sexuality (as reflected in literature or in interviews during fieldwork) deal primarily with acts linked to penetration (anal or vaginal) or behaviors seen as substitutes for penetration: intercrural intercourse (*tafkhīdh*), masturbation (*nikāh al-yad*, *dalak* or *jald 'umayra*), and inter-vaginal intercourse (*sahq*, literally “pounding,” an analogy being made with the crushing of saffron leaves), with a puzzling lack of mention of oral-genital acts. All these forms of behavior are considered through the prism of licitness by doctors of the law, or through the prism of social and literary acceptability by *littérateurs*, but classical authorities never derive from them the definition of a minority identity.

The first convincing attempt from a constructivist perspective to study the medieval understanding of sexual irregularities was made by E. K. Rowson, who highlighted a number of essential points concerning medieval perception of genders and sexual behaviors in his work on medieval Arabic vice lists. Modern prioritization of sexual object choice over sexual activity does not fit this perception, which sees the adult male as penetrator and the female as penetrated. Within this framework, the preference of an other-sex or same-sex partner for the male is a matter of choice (both options are illicit outside the frame of *nikāh*) whereas the preference for the passive position in anal intercourse (called *hulāq* until the ninth century, then *ubna* or *bighā*) is always perceived as an illness, and is widely discussed in *adab* literature, often in amusing fashion. Female refusal to accept male penetration is equally culpable. Parallels are drawn between active anal intercourse (*liwāt*) and fornication (*zinā*): they are both illicit but expectable attempts by the male to satisfy his instincts as penetrator whereas a beardless youth's acceptance of the role of passive partner for money, provided he derives no pleasure from it, is socially acceptable, though formally outlawed by religion.

It should be stressed, however, that such analysis should not be seen as a key to understanding contemporary attitudes toward same-sex relationships, nor as a definitive refutation of essentialist views. The concept of bisexuality, only recently discussed in academic works, could also be used to describe some same-sex behaviors. More recently, the AIDS epidemic has focused the attention of researchers on sex workers and their customers. Some articles in the Aggleton collection on male prostitution and AIDS, such as S. Khan's investigation of the South Asian zone or Boushaba's study of Morocco, suggest the idea of bisexuality might help build a slightly more balanced idea of same-sex relations in modern Islamic societies.

Particularly interesting is the case of *kbināth* or *takhannuth*, which can be translated variously as effeminacy, transvestism, transsexualism, or hermaphroditism – a puzzling inconsistency that is solved when one considers that the term refers to various failings to achieve masculinity in its behavioral features. In his essay on the “effeminates” of early Medina, Rowson argues that it was not until the ninth century that *kbināth* was associated with homosexual intercourse. Although interesting studies on gender-crossing are included in Murray and Roscoe, there have been no monographs until now on the different realizations of *kbināth* in Islamic societies. U. Wikan discusses at large the Omani *khanīth*s she observed during fieldwork in the 1970s. The term is almost unattested in classical Arabic, ignored by Ibn Manẓūr in the *Lisān al-ʿArab*, and barely appears as an adjective in a verse by the fourteenth-century poet al-Aʿraj al-Ṣāfi, quoted by al-Ṣafadī in *al-Wāfi bi-al-wafayāt*, in which the beloved is called “Zaby *khanīth* al-dalāl” (a kid with *khanīth* coyness).

It can be noted that modern East Arabian dialects use the term *khanīth* as a derogatory insult for the passive partner in homosexual intercourse, but the transvestite/transsexual figure described is highly reminiscent of the early Islamic *mukhannath*, with the exception of homosexual prostitution, a feature of the modern *khanīth* unmentioned in discourse concerning the *mukhannath*. Wikan's conclusion that “it is the sexual act, not the sexual organs, which is fundamentally constitutive of gender” allows us to understand why “the man who enters in a homosexual relationship in the active role in no way endangers his male identity” (Wikan 1982, 175).

The high value placed on female purity renders seeking the company of a *khanīth* socially ambiguous: both a greater individual shame than seeking forbidden intercourse with a woman, through

female prostitution or, worse, through intercourse with a married woman, and a lesser social shame given that it does not require the female to break sexual interdicts. The Omani institution of *khanīth* therefore sheds light not only on Islamic societies alone, but on the statute of same-sex relations in any society that puts strong emphasis on female virginity and chastity. For the same reason, *khawals*, male dancers in nineteenth-century Egypt who performed dressed as women, eventually replaced female dancers entirely after Muḥammad ʿAlī Pasha ordered a ban on female prostitutes and dancers in 1836.

Research on the variations and permanencies of the terminology of same-sex relations in various languages used in Islamic countries is needed. In the case of Arabic, it is probable that neologisms such as *shudhūdḥ jinsī*, sexual deviationism (early twentieth century?), and *mithliyya jinsiyya*, homosexuality (late 1990s), were coined to translate the European concepts of homosexuality. English words such as “gay” (and to a lesser extent “queer”) have now become part of the usual vocabulary in the main urban centers of the Islamic world. But why and how did they partly replace traditional terms? In the Arabic-speaking world, when were the former meanings of *lūṭī* (enamoured of young men seeking the active role in anal intercourse), *muʿājir* (male prostitute), *maʿbūn* (grown man seeking the passive role in anal intercourse), *musāḥiqa* (woman flaunting penis-hate and practicing tribadism), and so forth, lost and replaced either by new meanings (*lūṭī* understood as a synonym of male homosexual, *siḥāq* identified with lesbianism) or by borrowed terms? To what extent do these neologisms cover the precise domain of homosexuality in mainstream Western culture? Do modern and ancient dialects (and urban slang or underworld languages) retain in their terminology the remembrance of premodern gender constructions, and are these consistent with elite *adab* conceptions?

Language partly allows a tempering of the constructionist idea of a dividing line between sexual acts rather than sexual preferences in classical Islamic societies: the repetition of homosexual acts, even by the active partner, might turn a mere amusement or ersatz into an illness, or something that could remotely evoke an identity; moreover, when a man often sleeps with other men, one cannot be sure of what really takes place between them, and as al-Tawḥīdī mischievously said of the tenth-century Persian vizier Ibn ʿAbbād, “*kam ḥarbatin fī al-qawmi šārat jāʿbatan*” (many a spear has become a quiver).

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All information concerning the early period is to be sought in eighth-century and later sources, and commands caution in terms of its historical value. Keyword searches (*liwāt*, *sihāq*, *ubna*, *bulāq*, etc.) can be conducted on the www.alwaraq.com site, which offers more than a million pages of classical Arabic works online. Although awkward to use, A. Schmitt's *Bio-bibliography on male-male sexuality and eroticism in Muslim societies* (Berlin 1995) is useful. Same-sex relations are widely mentioned in tenth-century *adab* works such as al-*Iṣfahānī*, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, al-Rāghib al-Aṣbahānī, *Muḥādarāt al-udabā'*, al-Qāḍī al-Jurjānī, *al-Muntakhab min kināyāt al-udabā'*, pseudo-Tawḥīdī, *al-Risāla al-Baḡhdādīyya*, etc. *Sukhf* (ribaldry) related literature at later periods offers many examples of same-sex erotica, the most famous of which is the thirteenth-century al-Tifāshī, *Nuḡhat al-albāb*. See also shadow plays by Ibn Dāniyāl, fourteenth-century al-Nawāji, or even eighteenth-century al-Shirbīnī, *Hazz al-qubūf*.

PRIMARY SOURCES – INTERNET

"Gay Islamic" websites calling for a reinterpretation of Qur'ānic verses condemning the People of Loth include www.al-fatiha.net, www.queerjihad.org, and www.angelfire.com/ca2/queermuslims. Many gay and lesbian groups of Islamic cultural heritage in the United States and Europe have sites. See, for instance, the sites of the Gay and Lesbian Arab Society (<http://www.glas.org/>), Gays and Lesbians in African Studies (http://www.sas.upenn.edu/African_Studies/ASA/glas.html), Kelma (<http://www.kelma.org/kelma.html>), Gay Maroc (<http://gay.ma.tripod.com/fr/>), Homan (www.ho-man-iran.org), and Sangat for South-Asian gays (<http://members.aol.com/youngal/sangat.html>). Similar groups have appeared in a more timid manner in Muslim countries and countries with important Muslim communities such as Malaysia. See, for example, the site of Lambda Magazine, www.qrd.org/www/world/europe/turkey/dergi/index.html, and that of Out, www.outinmalaysia.com/index1.html. Further study of the impact of the internet on gay attitudes in Islamic countries (through personal computers or internet cafés) is much needed.

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