

Conference Report:
Sexual Knowledge in the Islamic World:
Historical Perspectives
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The history of sexuality often surprises modern readers, who may presume that premodern people were more restrained in their talk about, and practices of, sex. In the wake of the War on Terror, Muslims have been portrayed as uniquely conservative and patriarchal. Anglophone media regularly produces articles about the surprising “sex positivity” of the medieval Islamic world—wondering what went wrong. Modern writers have drawn a range of conclusions about premodern sexuality from bawdy literary writings or legal strictures. But to understand the relationship between surviving texts about sexuality and people’s behavior in the premodern world is a difficult question of methodology that scholars have long been refining.¹

On the quiet campus of the Swedish Institute, just off of the bustling İstiklal street in Istanbul, a group of scholars gathered to continue this discussion on sexual knowledge in the Islamic world. Having traveled from universities in Europe, Asia, and the US, or simply taken a ferry across the Golden Horn, we spent three days listening to presentations and sharing meals. Our host, Pernilla Myrne (University of Gothenburg), also arranged for us to take a tour around Fatih on our final day, underlining the value of hosting this conference in Istanbul. From the conference’s title, one might assume our focus was on “sexological” texts, a genre called *‘ilm al-bāh*, the science of intercourse. However, presentations focused on literary, medical, encyclopedic, legal, mystical, and magical texts, as well as the paratextual

1. For example, see Adam Talib’s report on the 2016 conference “The Words of Desire” where Myrne and I first met: “What Words Want,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 13, no. 1 (2017): 128–31.

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elements of manuscripts and documents, across a range of geographies. Everett Rowson's (New York University) keynote speech demonstrated how much has been gained by reading across these genres in Arabic literature and putting them in critical dialogue. Had scholars of material and visual culture been present, let alone anthropologists and activists working on contemporary issues, our methodological discussions may have been further broadened.

Myrne's own paper made a point that readers unfamiliar with this topic may find helpful: that high numbers of surviving "Arabic erotic manuscripts are part of an extremely rich tradition" beginning in the tenth century "with the aim to entertain, titillate, and educate." Myrne showed us examples from her study of over two hundred erotic manuscripts. Though these books were written by pious Muslim men largely for other men's pleasure, Myrne's study shows that readers adding their own material in the margins included more notes on women's health and pleasure. Myrne showed us an image of a fatwa on the permissibility of kissing the vulva, added to an eighteenth-century manuscript of a twelfth-century Arabic text, *al-Īḍāḥ fī asrār al-nikāḥ*. Sonia Wigh (University of Exeter) also presented on this rich erotological manuscript tradition as it spread across the Indian subcontinent, becoming "the site of encounter" for sexual knowledge in Sanskrit, Persian, Braj, and nascent Urdu. In Wigh's presentation, "*Īlm-i bāh* to *Īlm-i Kokā*: Translating Early Modern South Asian Knowledge," she showed how her patient work with the many recensions of erotological texts helped her untangle the extended influence of the sixteenth-century Braj text, *Kokaśāstra*. Older Arabic and Persian material circulated in the subcontinent from the medieval period, but remained in constant dialogue with local knowledge, including material from "courtly poetry, didactic texts, and medical treatises."

The conference was organized to prevent a conflation of the Islamic world with the Middle East. While more than half of the conference's papers were about Arabic texts, scholars of Persian and Ottoman Turkish literature were also present, along with scholars of Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Central Asia working in Persian, Urdu, Braj, Malay, and Chagatai. The conference's transregional purview greatly expanded the discussion. Maznah Mohamad (University of Singapore) ended our conference with a bang during her presentation on "Sexuality, Intimacy, and Islamic Spirituality in Early Writings from the Malay World." After a helpful introduction to the Malay world, Mohamed explained the transformation of sexual knowledge from seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Jawi manuscripts to twentieth-century printed texts written by reformist scholars. The earlier texts were usually written in verse, and simultaneously celebrated the life and progeny of the Prophet Muhammad as well as the body as a site of spiritual aspiration through sexual pleasure. The room filled with expressions of amazement when she showed us a few examples from manuscripts held in the National Library of Malaysia, including instructions for clitoral stimulation in which the hood was referred to as Ali's canopy and diagrams of vaginas in which each part was associated with a different member of the Prophet's family and companions. Mohamed then showed us two twentieth-century Malay texts, a set of incantations written by a woman named Khadija Terong and a reformist text by a male scholar who, in contrast to the earlier tradition, forbade a man from gazing at a woman's body during sex. Because this material was novel to the other participants, I wonder how this presentation might have shaped our discussions if we had heard it at the beginning of our three days together.

Mohamed's paper was not alone in reminding us that the historical body, a site of great cosmological significance, extended beyond the physical plane. Nerina Rustomji (St. John's University) presented some "Reflections on Sex in Paradise," a realm where earthly pleasures were "amplified and experienced without the earthly taint of bodily functions and emotional ill-will." Paradise held the sexual promise of perfected bodies, companionship, and physical connection—sex without bodily fluids, wine without intoxication. Through an analysis of the Quran, as well as ninth-century *ḥadīth* and *adab* texts, she showed how narratives of paradise "often presume a male believer and depict relations with wives, houris, *wildān*, and *ghilmān*." These relationships of "labor, companionship, and ownership" were not always straightforward; some male writers considered Muslim wives to be elevated above houris in paradise. Rustomji ended her presentation by tracing the word *houri* from Arabic into European literature, where it continued to represent an ethereal ideal of femininity. Irvin Cemil Schick (independent) presented on "Sex and Oneiromancy: Mining Islamic Dream Manuals," showing how this textual tradition represents the "horizons of sexual thinking." These manuals interpreted dreams about taboo sexual acts from necrophilia and zoophilia to sex with one's own parents. Beginning with Ḥunayn b. Isḥāq's ninth-century translation of Artemidorus' ancient dream interpretation manual, Schick took us through several manuals to show examples of how non-sexual motifs were given sexual meaning and vice versa. However, Schick also pointed out that certain acts were not included at all, like sadomasochism, which he argued was representative of the limits and horizons of historical sexual imaginations. Anuj Kaushal (University of Texas) took us east with his presentation, "Immanentistic Sensuality: Genderscaping through Imagination and Free Will in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Islamicate Sexology of North India." Kaushal read across the voluminous writings of Muslim scholar and reformer, Shāh Walī Allāh (d. 1762 CE), to locate his thoughts on sexuality. Shāh Walī Allāh's philosophically-oriented writings on sexuality reflected "the human realm's mundane existence and deep connections with the spiritual worlds," including the intertwining of "the rational faculty of an individual's soul with their mind's ability to alter the cosmos." Participants seemed surprised by the way Walī Allāh placed responsibility for society's sexual prudence on men rather than on women's dress and behavior. As Kaushal noted, "principles of immanence or divine interplay continued to undergird North Indian philosophies of human sensuality even during the colonial scientific hegemony of the nineteenth century." While many presenters engaged with scholarship on medieval and early modern Europe, Kaushal reminded us that this knowledge continues to be relevant, putting us briefly in conversation with the global history of sexology.²

Physicians have had a large role in shaping views on sex historically, even before medicine had the totalizing state power it does today. However, as presentations in this conference highlighted, many authors of practical and popular medical texts were not physicians. Ignacio Sánchez (University of Warwick) presented on sexuality in the *Luqāṭ al-Manāfiʿ*, an understudied but highly popular text by the Ḥanbalī polymath and jurist Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201). Sánchez explained that, while many have categorized this text to be

2. Durba Mitra, "Review Essay: Sexual Science as Global History," *Gender & History* 31, no. 2 (2019): 500–510.

prophetic medicine (*ṭibb nabawī*), it is actually a text of regimen or preservation of health (*tadbīr al-ṣiḥḥa*). Ibn al-Jawzī's antagonism towards extreme asceticism and his knowledge of Galenic medicine shaped his writing on sex and sexuality, which was distributed across chapters such as creation (conception and gestation), embellishments and cosmetics, coitus, and accidents of the soul. While highlighting some of Ibn al-Jawzī's more egalitarian notions, for example that infertility could be the responsibility of either partner, Sánchez clarified that this material was inevitably "women's health without women." László Károly and Patrick Hällzon (University of Uppsala) highlighted the variegated sexual content in manuscripts from Turkestan in their presentation, "Chagatai Medical Sources as a Way to Understand Conceptions about Love, Sexuality, and Procreation among Turkic Societies of Central Asia." First, they introduced us to Turkestan, the "land of sedentary Turks at the frontier of the nomadic" and Persian-speaking world now divided across many national borders, as well as the holdings of manuscript libraries there. While Arabic and Persian were used as the language of science and medicine from the eleventh century onward in this region, Turkic began to be used from the seventeenth. Károly and Hällzon described the earliest Chagatai medical texts, like the *Hulāṣat al-ḥukamā'*, written by the ruler of Bukhara, Sayyid Subḥān Qulī (r. 1680-1702 CE). Alongside medical topics like virility, impotency, pregnancy, birth, and children's illnesses, they addressed a variety of social situations, including love, jealousy, and fear of infidelity. Like many other presenters, Károly and Hällzon reminded us how their sources gave due importance to women's pleasure. My own presentation, "Translating Gender and Medicine in Medieval Gujarat," also explored an environment with multiple languages and traditions of medical knowledge. Authors of Persian medical texts in India often grappled with Ayurvedic knowledge, either by including select concepts and remedies in their texts of Galenic medicine or translating entire Ayurvedic texts. Both the translator of the Persian *Ṭibb-i Maḥmūd Shāhī* (1473 CE) and the author of the Sanskrit text it was based on were comfortable ignoring non-male bodies except when it came to reproductive health. While "cross-cultural" translation across scientific traditions is celebrated in the history of science, hierarchies and exclusions are still active across these contexts. Here, the patriarchal attitudes across multiple medical traditions were commensurable.

From all of these texts written by men, what can we actually know about women's sexual lives? Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo tackled this question in her presentation on "Eroticism and Sexual life of the Nasrid Women of Granada (13th–15th Centuries)," bringing together court cases in collections of fatwas, literary texts, letters, and medicine. She highlighted the extensive use of reproductive metaphors by Ibn al-Khaṭīb, who justified the importance of having sex by describing the uterus as the "farmland of the first existence." Sara Verskin (Rhode Island College) offered us a riveting close reading of two court cases about the "sleeping fetus" (*rāqīd*) from a fatwa collection by al-Wansharīsī (d. 914/1508) and other legal writings from North Africa. In her presentation, "Testing and Trusting Women: Offensive and Defensive Gynaecology," she showed how the testimony of women, midwives, and other community members were informed by "desired legal outcomes." Through these legal texts, Verskin presented a novel way of understanding virginity assessments by thinking about them alongside pregnancy assessments, which were often identical in

practice. Verskin provided us with the origin of the sleeping fetus in early Islam, a concept through which a pregnancy could be understood to last for years. She argued that this concept could be used to protect women's social standing. Colonial legal reforms later used modern science to deny the possibility of the *rāqīd*, thereby elevating the rights of men.

Several presentations showed the value of literary studies in their fresh analyses of “obscene” literature. İpek Hünner Cora (Boğaziçi University), in her presentation “Whose Desire? Narration of Desire in Ottoman Fiction,” traced the older “wiles of women” genre through the Ottoman period. This genre features stories of how disloyal women cunningly satiated their sexual appetites while their husbands were absent. After explaining how scholarship has read this genre as either misogynistic, sex-positive, or in between, Cora argued that these stories are ultimately about masculinity—written by men for other men. Domenico Ingenito (University of California, Los Angeles) recited from his lively translations of medieval Persian pornography in his presentation, “Obscene Poetry as Counter-Text to Courtly and Mystical Lyric in Medieval Persian Literature.” Only by reading obscene poetry and courtly lyrics (amatory *qaṣīdas*, *ghazals*, etc.) counter-textually, he argued, can we reconsider “the power of obscene literature to explore the human body from perspectives that bridge the gap between courtly ideals of beauty and physical experiences of desire” beyond the gender binary. Though “Persian *ghazals* tend to ungender the body of their idealized objects of desire,” he provided us with examples of how “pornographic counter-texts dwell extensively on gender-specific intimate body parts and clothing,” complicating the fluidity of desire in Persian literature. Matthew Keegan (Barnard College) reframed the category of *mujūn*, a genre of Arabic literature “associated with playful obscenity, rough language, libertinage, and deliberate upending of social norms,” as part of the Islamic ethical tradition. In his presentation, “Of Law, Islamic *Mujūn*, and al-Tifāshī's *Nuzhat al-Albāb*,” he took seriously the pious introductions of *mujūn* texts and their implications. If presented in the right manner and context, Keegan argued, silliness and obscenity were not only licit but were valorized as “Islamic entertainment.” In these stories, cleverness could get wrongdoers out of sticky legal situations, and the reader who could appreciate such cleverness was refined. However, Keegan clarified, texts of *mujūn* like the one by twelfth-century jurist al-Tifāshī still delineated between proper and improper comportment, especially between chaste and unchaste homosexual desire in his chapter on “sodomy” (*liwāṭ*). Tales of illicit sex could be sophisticated and entertaining without being models of comportment.

While Keegan and others in this conference demonstrated the importance of understanding Islam beyond *fiqh* and *ḥadīth*, texts in this genre tend to form the bulk of debates on Islam and sexuality in the public sphere. Fortunately, the conference began with three excellent papers on these genres. Sara Omar's (Georgetown University) presentation on “The Lot Narrative and the Formation of a Qur'ānic Subtext” previewed some work from her forthcoming book. Omar elucidated the Abrahamic context of early Muslim communities by drawing on *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, *isrā'iliyyāt*, and the Haggadah, arguing that the narrative of the people of Lot in the Quran should be read in light of the “widespread code of hospitality” shared by Jews and Muslims in the Late Antique period. Omar showed that early Muslim exegetes and historians interpreted the action of the people of Lot (*'amal qawm Lūṭ*) as the first, gross violation of hospitality. Many of the early narratives

of the people of Lot contrast his hospitality towards strangers with the inhospitality of his people, emphasizing the latter's miserliness, dishonesty, and mistreatment of foreigners. Between the eighth and tenth centuries, exegetes and historians emphasized their assault of foreigners (*ghurabā'*) in Quranic verses about this (29:28–29), rather than using the story to villainize male homosexual sex. Omar Anchassi (King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies) presented on “The Churning in the Flogging of ‘Umayra: On the Ethics of Masturbation in Islamic Law,” now published in *Studi Mağrebini*.³ He traced a shift in attitude from recommending masturbation to ward off the desire for illicit sex to the outright prohibition of masturbation, drawing on “juristic debates on the ethics of masturbation from the formative period of Islamic law to the early nineteenth century.” Anchassi showed there was also a divergence of attitudes between the Sunni and Shi‘i *ḥadīth* corpora, revealing regional patterns in *ḥadīth* transmission. He argued that “masturbation did not occupy the foreground of the moral imagination of premodern jurists” compared to acts like bestiality or *liwāt*, perhaps both because of the assumptions they were making about their audiences’ social status as well as how they conceived of sexual categories. Finally, Jonathan Lawrence’s (University of Oxford) presentation, “Being-a-Lūṭī? Liwāt’s Moral-Psychological After-Effects,” took on the fascinating and urgent question: how does a man who commits *liwāt* (male same-sex intercourse) understand himself? Lawrence took us through the process of how someone who commits *liwāt* could become a *lūṭī*, as well as the graphic material on afterlife punishments for *lūṭīs*, drawing mainly on three fourteenth-century Mamluk works by al-Nuwayrī, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, and Ibn Abī Ḥajala. Noting that important scholarship has already established how rare legal ramifications were for an accusation of *liwāt* in the premodern period, Lawrence focused instead on “how these texts act upon the individual’s phenomenological experience of sexual desire, sexual intercourse, and self-conception as a sexual actor.” He showed how many of the *ḥadīth* on this topic focus on the physical and social ramifications for *lūṭīs* in the afterlife, including association with the Quranic “qawm Lūṭ,” and were meant both to inspire guilt in those who had acted and as a deterrence for those who hadn’t. In a world in which same-sex love was normal but sex disallowed, “no man was free from the specter of becoming a *lūṭī*.”

Today, I write this report in Chicago, as a Muslim American scholar of Gujarati origin. Because I am in community with queer and trans Muslims, I am often reminded how scholarship on the history of gender and sexuality in Islam is important to share with interested readers in and beyond the academy. This very summer, the community was rocked by an open letter published by some Muslim American leaders.⁴ I might have asked any participant the same, but I asked Lawrence whether he felt his work had implications for Muslims today. He responded in true queer studies fashion, saying it wasn’t his place to comment on modern Islam but “there are traces of the past in the present, and the present in the past.”

3. Omar Anchassi, “The Churning in the Flogging of ‘Umayra: Or, Towards a History of Masturbation in Premodern Islamic Law,” *Studi Mağrebini* 20, no. 2 (2022): 213–46.

4. This summer, Muslim American scholars published an anti-LGBTQ letter in a bald attempt to “re-align themselves with the American religious right,” which has been criticized and critiqued by scholars of Islam in America.