Power and Sexuality in the Middle East

Bruce Dunne

Cairo Movie House

Sexual relations in Middle Eastern societies have historically articulated social hierarchies, that is, dominant and subordinate social positions: adult men on top; women, boys and slaves below. The distinction made by modern Western "sexuality" between sexual and gender identity, that is, between *kinds* of sexual predilections [and] *degrees* of masculinity and femininity, has, until recently, had little resonance in the Middle East. Both dominant/subordinate and heterosexual/homosexual categorizations are structures of power. They position social actors as powerful or powerless, "normal" or "deviant." The contemporary concept of "queerness" resists all such categorizing in favor of recognizing more complex realities of multiple and shifting positions of sexuality, identity and power.

In early 1993, news of President Clinton's proposal to end the US military's ban on service by homosexuals prompted a young Egyptian man in Cairo, eager to practice his English, to ask me why the president wanted "to ruin the American army" by admitting "those who are not men or women." When asked if "those" would include a married man who also liked to have sex with adolescent boys, he unhesitatingly answered "no." For this Egyptian, a Western "homosexual" was not readily comprehensible as a man or a woman, while a man who had sex with both women and boys was simply doing what men do. It is not the existence of same-sex sexual relations that is new but their association with essentialist sexual identities rather than hierarchies of age, class or status.

A recent study of family and urban politics in Cairo suggests that social taboos and silences relating to sexual behavior provide a space of negotiability.[1] They accommodate discreet incidents of otherwise publicly condemned illicit sexual behavior—adultery, homosexuality, premarital sex—provided that paramount values of family maintenance and reproduction and supporting social networks are not threatened. Such silences, however, leave normative constructions of licit and illicit sexual behavior unchallenged, sustain patriarchal family values, and legitimize patterns of sexual violence such as honor crimes, female circumcision and gay bashing.[2]

Also in 1993, an Egyptian physician affiliated with Cairo's Qasr al-'Aini Hospital informed me that AIDS and venereal diseases were not problems in Egypt because neither prostitution nor homosexuality exist in an Islamic country. While this statement may express conventions deemed appropriate for conversations with foreigners, it is profoundly ahistorical. Over the centuries, Islamic societies have accorded prostitution much the same levels of intermittent toleration, regulation and repression as their Christian counterparts and, until recently, have been more tolerant of same-sex

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sexual practices.[3] Denying the existence of transgressive sexual practices helps obscure the ideological nature of "transgression," making it difficult, for example, to see prostitutes as workers who support themselves or their families by performing services for which there is a social demand. Such denials also legitimize failures to respond effectively to public health concerns such as AIDS.[4]

Representations of Power and Sexuality

Western notions of sexual identity offer little insight into our contemporary young Egyptian's apparent understanding that sexual behavior conforms to a particular concept of gender. His view, informed by a sexual ethos with antecedents in Greek and late Roman antiquity, is characterized by the "general importance of male dominance, the centrality of penetration to conceptions of sex [and] the radical disjunction of active and passive roles in male homosexuality."[5] Everett Rowson has found this sexual ethos "broadly representative of Middle Eastern societies from the 9th century to the present." This is not to suggest that there has been an unchanging or homogeneous historical experience for the Arabo-Muslim world but rather to acknowledge both the remarkable continuity reflected in the sources and the need for research that would further map historical variations.[6]

Islam recognizes both men and women as having sexual drives and rights to sexual fulfillment and affirms heterosexual relations within marriage and lawful concubinage. All other sexual behavior is illicit. Whether the 7th century message of the Qur'an undermined or improved the position of women is much debated. There is more agreement that in subsequent centuries Muslim male elites, adopting the cultural practices of conquered Byzantine and Sasanian lands, construed that message to promote the segregation and seclusion of women and to reserve public and political life for men. Social segregation was legitimized in part by constructing "male" and "female" as opposites: men as rational and capable of self-control; women as emotional and lacking self-control, particularly of sexual drives. Female sexuality, if unsatisfied or uncontrolled, could result in social chaos (*fitna*) and social order thus required male control of women's bodies.[7] The domain of licit sexuality was placed in service to the patriarchal order. The patriarchal family served as paramount social institution and the proper locus of sex, thus ensuring legitimate filiation. Its honor required supervision of women by male family members, while marital alliances among families of equal rank maintained social hierarchies.

Where men rule, sexes are segregated, male and family honor is linked to premarital female virginity and sex is licit only within marriage or concubinage. Those denied access to licit sexuality for whatever reasons—youth, poverty, occupation (e.g. soldiers), demographic sexual imbalances—require other sexual outlets. Such contradictions between normative morality and social realities supported both male and female prostitution and same-sex practices in Middle Eastern societies from the medieval to the modern period. Ruling authorities saw prostitution as a socially useful alternative

to potential male sexual violence (e.g. against respectable women) and a welcome source of tax revenues, even as some religious scholars vigorously objected. According to Abdel-wahab Bouhdiba, "institutional prostitution forms part of the secret equilibrium of Arabo-Muslim societies," necessary to their social reproduction.[8]

In medieval Islamic societies, understood through their (male-authored) literature of morals, manners, medicine and dream interpretation, sexual relations were organized in conformity to principles of social and political hierarchy. "[S]exuality was defined according to the domination by or reception of the penis in the sex act; moreover, one's position in the social hierarchy also localized her or him in a predetermined sexual role."[9] Sex, that is, penetration, took place between dominant, free adult men and subordinate social inferiors: wives, concubines, boys, prostitutes (male and female) and slaves (male and female). What was at stake was not mutuality between partners but the adult male's achievement of pleasure through domination. Women were viewed as naturally submissive; male prostitutes were understood to submit to penetration for gain rather than pleasure; and boys, "being not yet men, could be penetrated without losing their potential manliness." That an adult male might take pleasure in a subordinate sexual role, in submitting to penetration, was deemed "inexplicable, and could only be attributed to pathology."[10]

Rowson explains the relation between gender roles and sexual roles in medieval Muslim societies by locating them in, respectively, distinct public and private realms. Adult men, who dominated their wives and slaves in private, controlled the public realm. Sex with boys or male prostitutes made men "sinners," but did not undermine their public position as men or threaten the important social values of female virginity or family honor. Women, who could not penetrate and were confined to the private realm, were largely irrelevant to conceptions of gender; female homoeroticism received little attention. Effeminate men who voluntarily and publicly behaved as women (*mukhannaths*) gave up their claims to membership in the dominant male order. They "lost their respectability [as men] but could be tolerated and even valued as entertainers"—poets, musicians, dancers, singers. Men who maintained a dominant public persona but were privately submissive threatened presumptions of male dominance and were vulnerable to challenge.[11]

The articulation of sexual relations in conformity to social hierarchies represents an ideological framework within which individuals negotiated varied lives under changing historical conditions. Adult male egalitarian homosexual relations may have been publicly unacceptable, but there is evidence that, in the medieval period, men of equal rank could negotiate such relations by alternating active and passive sexual roles.[12] In Mamluk Egypt, lower-class women could not afford to observe ideals of seclusion and secluded upper-class women found ways to participate in social and economic life and even used the threat of withholding sex to negotiate concessions from their husbands. Women in the Ottoman period went to court to assert their rights to sexual fulfillment (e.g., to divorce an absent or impotent husband).[13] State efforts to repress illicit sexual conduct or promote social-sexual norms (e.g., by closing brothels or ordering women indoors) were sporadic, short-lived and typically occasioned by political circumstances and the need to bolster regime legitimacy.[14]

Ideological Reproduction

Reproduction of ideological Islamic sexual roles in the modern period has accompanied dramatic transformations, including the rise of modern state systems, Western colonial intervention, and various reform and nationalist movements. These complex processes have not significantly challenged the patriarchal values that undergird the sexual order or impaired the capacity of states, elites and political groups to deploy both secular and Islamic discourses in their support. Colonial authorities left existing gender relations largely intact, as did middle-class reform and nationalist movements. While secular legal codes have been adopted in many countries, they have generally deferred to religious authority in matters of family or personal status laws. Both nationalist and Islamist discourses have invoked ideals of Islamic morality and cultural authenticity to control and channel change.[15]

Increased economic and educational opportunities for women and the rise of nuclear family residential patterns have eroded patriarchal family structures, with, for example, older forms of arranged marriages giving way to elements of romantic attachment. Nonetheless, as Walter Armbrust and Garay Menicucci suggest in their film discussions in this issue, the popular media constantly reaffirm that family interests and normative sexual behavior take precedence over individual romantic aspirations. Moreover, because regimes link their legitimacy to the defense of morality and the licit sexual order, opposition groups and ordinary people draw attention to the existence of sexually transgressive behavior to criticize a range of government policies.[16] Thus, premarital and homosexual relations among Moroccan youth, in the context of AIDS prevention debates discussed in this issue by Abdessamad Dialmy, are attributed to the government's failure to provide employment and, hence, access to marriage and licit sexual relations. Both official and oppositional discourses affirm sexual norms.

Sexual relations, whether heterosexual or homosexual, continue to be understood as relations of power linked to rigid gender roles. In Turkey, Egypt and the Maghrib, men who are "active" in sexual relations with other men are not considered homosexual; the sexual domination of other men may even confer a status of hyper-masculinity.[17] The anthropologist Malek Chebel, describing the Maghrib as marked by an "exaggerated machismo," claims that most men who engage in homosexual acts are functional bisexuals; they use other men as substitutes for women—and have great contempt for them. He adds that most Maghribis would consider far worse than participation in homosexual acts the presence of love, affection or equality among participants.[18] Equality in sexual relations, whether heterosexual or homo-

sexual, threatens the "hyper-masculine" order.

Gender norms are deeply internalized. A recent study of sexual attitudes among rural Egyptian women found that they viewed female circumcision as a form not of violence but of beautification, a means of enhancing their physical differentiation from men and thus female identity.[19] An informal study of men in Egypt found that aspirations to "hegemonic notions of masculinity" informed a continuous process of negotiating the nature of masculinity—the ability to provide for families or exercise control over women—in response to declining economic conditions.[20] The persistent notion that women lack sexual control affords broad scope and social sanction to aggressive male sexuality. Women alone bear the blame—and the often brutal consequences evidenced by honor crimes—for even the suggestion of their involvement in illicit sexual activities. Suzanne Ruggi notes in this issue that honor crimes may account for 70 percent of murder cases involving Palestinian women. Honor crimes are also common in Egypt, Jordan and Morocco.

Violence directed against male homosexuals appears to be on the rise. Effeminate male dancers known as *khawals* were popular public performers in 19th-century Egypt; today that term is an insult, equivalent to "faggot."[21] The 19th-century *khawals* may not have enjoyed respect as "men," but there is little evidence that they were subjected to violence. Hostility to homosexual practices has been part of the political and cultural legacy of European colonialism. Today, global culture's images of diverse sexualities and human sexual rights have encouraged the formation of small "gay" subcultures in large cosmopolitan cities such as Cairo, Beirut and Istanbul and a degree of political activism, particularly in Turkey. Although homosexuality is not a crime in Turkey, Turkish gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transvestites and transsexuals have been harassed and assaulted by police and sometimes "outed" to families and employers. Turkish gay activists have specifically been targeted. Effeminate male prostitutes in contemporary Morocco are described as a marginal group, ostracized and rejected by their families, living in fear of police and gay-bashers (*casseurs de pédés*). For some, as for Turkish transsexuals, prostitution serves as one of the few ways in which they can live their sexuality.[22] Many homosexuals in Middle Eastern countries have sought asylum in the West as refugees from official persecution.[23]

"Queering" the Middle East

In noting the threat posed to the dominant sexual order by egalitarian sexual relationships, Malek Chebel acknowledges the great silence that surrounds the fact that widespread active male homosexual relations in Middle Eastern societies presuppose the widespread availability of passive partners.[24] Demet Demir, a political activist and spokesperson for Turkish transsexuals, touches upon the same contradiction when she states, with reference to the popularity as prostitutes of Istanbul's transsexuals: "These people who curse us during the day give money to lie with us at night."[25] Is this the "functional"—and misogynist—"bisexuality" de-

scribed by Chebel above the mere substitution by men of other, available men for unavailable women? That view, which hardly explains the choice of a male or transsexual over a female prostitute, is entirely consistent with and sustains the ideology that positions public or visible or audible men as sexually dominant.

Little attention has been given to the nature of these expressions of male sexual desire which, as Deniz Kandiyoti has noted, seem to "combine a whole range of masculinities and femininities."[26] There are, she suggests, generational and institutional dimensions to the production of masculine identities. Thus, men who are expected to be "dominant" in one context may experience subordination, powerlessness and humiliation in others, for example in relation to their fathers and to superiors at school or during military service. How does "masculinity" change meaning in these different domains? The complexity of questions of sexuality, identity and power are explored in this issue by Yael Ben-zvi who finds herself, in Israel, simultaneously privileged as an Ashkenazi Jew and marginalized as a lesbian. The aim of "queerness," therefore, is to recognize identity as "permanently open as to its meaning and political use [and to] encourage the public surfacing of differences or a culture where multiple voices and interests are heard."[27]   ■

Endnotes

1 Diane Singerman, *Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics, and Networks in Urban Quarters of Cairo* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1997), pp. 92 and 100.

2 See Latefa Imane, "Un programme de sensibilisation et de soutien auprès de prostitués masculins," *Le Journal du SIDA* 92-93 (December 1996-January 1997), p. 55.

3 See As'ad AbuKhalil, "A Note on the Study of Homosexuality in the Arab/Islamic Civilization," *Arab Studies Journal* 1/2 (Fall, 1993), pp. 32-34.

4 See Malek Chebel, "La séparation des sexes engendre un masculin maghrébin," *Le Journal du SIDA* 92-93 (December 1996-January 1997), p. 27.

5 Everett K. Rowson, "The Categorization of Gender and Sexual Irregularity in Medieval Arabic Vice Lists," in Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub, eds., *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Ambiguity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), p. 73.

6 Ibid., pp. 72-73.

7 See Judith Tucker, *Gender and Islamic History* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 1993), pp. 3-13; Steven M. Oberhelman, "Hierarchies of Gender, Ideology, and Power in Ancient and Medieval Greek and Arabic Dream Literature," in J. W. Wright Jr. and Everett K. Rowson, eds. *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 66.

8 Hassanein Rabie, *The Financial System of Egypt: A.H. 564-641 / A.D. 1169-1341* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 119; André Raymond, *Artisans et commerçants au Caire au XVIIIe siècle* (Damascus, 1973), pp. 508-09 and 527; Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 193.

9 Oberhelman, op. cit., pp. 67-68.

10 Rowson, op. cit., pp. 66-67.

11 Ibid., pp. 66 and 72-73.

12 Ibid., p. 66.

13 Huda Lutfi, "Manners and Customs of Fourteenth-Century Cairene Women: Female Anarchy versus Male Shar'i Order in Muslim Prescriptive Treatises," in Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron, eds. *Women in Middle Eastern History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 101 and 109-18; Tucker, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

14 Rabie, op. cit., p. 119; Raymond, op. cit., pp. 604-09.

15 See Tucker, op. cit., pp. 19-33.

16 Singerman, op. cit., pp. 93-94 and 100.

14 Orna Osheri, "Nim'as Lanu Leha'amid Panim" ("We've had Enough of Pretending"), *Ma'ariv*, December 18, 1995.

15 Eden's column, "HaMo'omedet" ("The Candidate"), *HaZman HaVarod* 16 (January 1998), p. 3.

16 "Ha'Isha Shelanu Lamo'atsa" ("Our Woman to the City Board"), *Klaf Hazak* 20 (Fall-Winter 1997), pp. 23-27.

17 I equate "de-racialized" with Ashkenazi identity and, with Frankenberg's (op. cit.) definition of whiteness in mind, as a "cultural void" (122), but a "void" charged with power.

18 Eden's column, "HaMo'omedet" ("The Candidate"), *HaZaman HaVarod* 15 (December 1997), p. 13.

19 I conducted the interview, which was published in full as "Arviya, Amerika'it, Feministit, Streitit" ("Arab, American, Feminist, Straight"), *Klaf Hazak* 17 (Fall 1996), pp. 10-12.

20 Under her maiden name, Michal Levi Nahum, with her partner, Ira Rader (now Ira Eden), "Inyanim Mediniyim—Lo BeKlaf Hazak Bevakasha" ("No Political Matters in *Klaf Hazak*, Please"), *Klaf Hazak* 17 (Fall 1996), p. 12.

21 It is only recently, nine years after *Klaf Hazak* was founded, that a token Palestinian lesbian was finally published in its pages. See Mansiya (pseudonym), "Sipur Nishkah" ("A Forgotten Story"), *Klaf Hazak* 18-19 (Spring-Summer 1997), p. 14.

22 See *Klaf Hazak* 18-19 (Spring-Summer 1997), pp. 19-22.

23 Words by Yoav Ginai, music by Zvika Pik.

24 On *Umpatampa* (IMP Dance, 1994). Words by Dudu Barak, music by Dana International.

25 Michal Eden, "Lehitga'ot BeIsrael, Tartey Mashma," op. cit., p. 2.

26 "Ha'Isha Shelanu LaMo'atsa," *HaZman HaVarod* 16 (January 1998), p. 26.

27 Yair Kedar, "Thank You for the Music," *HaZman HaVarod* 12 (September 1997), pp. 5-7.

28 Words by Dana International and Ofer Nissim, music by Ofer Nissim. On *Ofer Nissim Featuring Dana International* (IMP Dance, 1993).

29 "Miz miz" is probably derived from the Hebrew slang "mizmooz," meaning physical flirting. In Egyptian slang, it means snacking.

30 Words by Yoav Ginai, music by Ofer Nissim. On *Umpatampa* (IMP Dance, 1994).

31 The song was banned for a time by Israeli radio lest it encourage young men to cross the border and die outside the conventional framework of heroic death—military service.

32 Words by Yoav Ginai, music by Zvika Pik. On *Umpatampa* (IMP Dance, 1994).

33 Words by Dana International, music by Ofer Nissim. On *Maganona* (Helicon 1996).

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17 Huseyin Tapinc, "Masculinity, Femininity, and Turkish Male Homosexuality," in Kenneth Plummer, ed., *Modern Homosexualities: Fragments of Lesbian and Gay Experiences* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 46; Singerman, op. cit., p. 99; Chebel, op. cit., p. 27.

18 Chebel, op. cit., p. 27.

19 Hind Khattab, *Women's Perceptions of Sexuality in Rural Giza* (Giza, Egypt: The Population Council: Monographs in Reproductive Health 1, 1996), p. 20.

20 Kamran Asdar Ali, "Notes on Rethinking Masculinities: An Egyptian Case," *Learning About Sexuality: A Practical Beginning* (The Population Council and the International Women's Health Coalition, 1995), pp. 106-07.

21 Singerman, op. cit., p. 100.

22 Imane, op. cit., p. 55; Turkish Daily News, August 22, 1997; Amnesty International, *Breaking the Silence: Human Rights Violations Based on Sexual Orientation* (London: Amnesty International UK, 1997), pp. 26-27, 52.

23 Information provided to MERIP courtesy of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission Asylum Project, San Francisco.

24 Chebel, op. cit., p. 27.

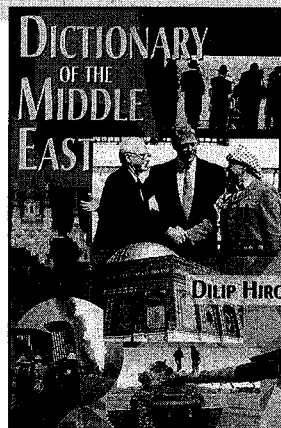25 *Turkish Daily News*, August 22, 1997.

26 Deniz Kandiyoti, "The Paradoxes of Masculinity," in Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne, eds., *Dislocating Masculinities: Comparative Ethnographies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 212.

27 Steven Seidman, "Introduction," in Steven Seidman, ed., *Queer Theory/Sociology*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996), p. 12.