

## **Homosexuality and Islamic History with a Focus on Modern Day Afghanistan**

Over the last ten years, I have had the pleasure of working and living in various Muslim countries throughout central and southern Asia. During these trips, I have found myself witness to frequent occurrences of same sex attractions and strange femininity among males that would be characterized by many in the West as homosexual or pedophile. In parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan, I've attended numerous oddly effeminate male-only parties where males perform dances for other males. During my early twenties while working as a civilian in Pashtun border areas, I was told by a local interpreter to let my beard grow out because of my young looks. This was apparently in effort to avoid being referred to as a "cheskai" or "bacha bazi,"; these are two derogatory sexual terms for young handsome men. Near an area on the Pakistani border, I was forced to repair a gap in security concertina-wire through which Afghan soldiers were sneaking preteen boys into the base during the middle of the night "to make tea and play games". In other areas of central and south Asia, there were repeated themes of pederasty that absolutely confounded me. Most were very hidden, but the small peeks into central and south Asian Islamic sexuality were quite shocking. Ironically, these secret attitudes and behaviors were prevalent in the most fundamentalist Islamic areas. While these actions are admitted by local populations to be sinful and abhorred by the Islamic god "Allah", the regularity of behavior does not seem to match that which is publicly stated. This begs the question: if this secret acceptance is not a new phenomenon, what parts of Islamic cultural and theological history can explain the level of occurrence? Examining the cultural, legal, and religious perspectives that evolved in the Islamic empires during the period of 700-1200 C.E. may help explain the practices of pederasty and same sex activities that currently exist alongside Islam's strict moral codes.

It is important to recognize that the modern use of the word "homosexual" and the perceptions that go with it are a predominately western creation and do not apply in the same way when referencing

the medieval Islamic world. The 'gay' of the 21st century as seen in the fashion of the "Will and Grace" television sitcom would be an entirely foreign concept. Homosexuality was not viewed an identity as it is today. In medieval times (and in certain countries today) a different perception existed. There was a style of homosexuality that allowed a man to practice various same sex activities with men and boys while still being considered masculine and or heterosexual.

### **The Koran and Islamic Law Concerning Same Sex Relations**

The Koran is undoubtedly against homosexual relations. It does not, however, make itself clear on what defines the activity or what the punishments should be. As with many other Islamic laws, the religious schools that emerged during the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century C.E. would be required to clarify and create specific Islamic laws to give the Muslims clearer moral guideposts. Looking expressly at the Koran, there are seven mentions concerning homosexuality and the actions of the people of Lut. The Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions all tell the story of Lut (Lot). Even today, the three religions use the story to demonstrate how God's wrath was used against a city of sexually immoral people and the one man that God spared for his purity and faithfulness. The Bible and the Torah commonly refer to it as the story of 'Sodom and Gomorrah'. It was a city of orgies, alcohol, adultery, and homosexuality.

Two examples of the story of Lut in the Koran are:

We also (sent) Lut: He said to his people: "Do ye commit lewdness such as no people in creation (ever) committed before you? For ye practice your lusts on men in preference to women : ye are indeed a people transgressing beyond bounds." and "And to Lut, too, We gave Judgment and Knowledge, and We saved him from the town which practiced abominations: truly they were a people given to Evil, a rebellious people."<sup>1</sup>

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Yousef Ali, *Holy Qur'an*, Suras 7:80-81, 21:74

The Koran holds only one Sura that gives a legal recourse in reference to homosexuality. “If two men among you are guilty of lewdness, punish them both. If they repent and amend, leave them alone, for Allah is Oft-returning, Most Merciful”.<sup>2</sup> The term ‘lewdness’ allows for much for interpretation and its punishment is almost nonexistent. Ironically, the prescription for fornication between a man and a woman is more strict and specific. As stated in the Koran:

The woman and the man guilty of adultery or fornication, flog each of them with a hundred stripes: let not compassion move you in their case, in a matter prescribed by Allah, if ye believe in Allah and the Last Day: and let a party of the Believers witness their punishment.<sup>3</sup>

While these verses do not condone anything, the difference in attitude towards punishment seems to imply that same sex relations were not on the same level as relations between the opposite sexes.

Combine this vagueness with the advent of Shariah law in the century after the death of the Prophet and there lies a difficulty in the simple prosecution of the act of sodomy. The Shariah legal requirements state that four males have to testify that they witnessed the intercourse for prosecution to occur. Even if four males did witness the act, this would be something incredibly shameful for them to publicly testify to, thereby further dropping the odds of prosecution. Among the four Sunni Islamic legal schools, three prescribe severe punishment for male anal intercourse (*liwat*). The fourth and oldest legal school of thought in Islam, the Sunni Hanafi school, “left punishment to the discretion of the courts based on the reasoning that it is not synonymous with adultery.”<sup>4</sup> Many of the legal discussions seem to be concerned with whether *liwat* is considered a form of adultery (*zina*) and or whether the act requires penetration to qualify.

The Hadith contains more specific legal verses against sodomy. Abu Dawud states that "If a

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<sup>2</sup> Yousef Ali, *Holy Qur'an*, Sura 4:16

<sup>3</sup> Yousef Ali, *Holy Qur'an*, Sura 24:2

<sup>4</sup> Samar Habib, *Islam and Homosexuality Volume 2*, Ed. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 312.

man who is not married is seized committing sodomy, he will be stoned to death.”<sup>5</sup> This oddly implies that a married man may be authorized to sodomize his wife, but if unmarried, he is not authorized sodomy at all. Similar to the Koran, another Hadith verse quotes the Prophet as saying that “If you find anyone doing as Lot's people did, kill the one who does it, and the one to whom it is done.”<sup>6</sup> Much like in the Koran, the specifics of the sexual activity of the people of Lut are not clearly revealed; only that people are not to do them or they will be killed.

In contradiction with traditional Islamic thought, the point could be made that the Koran actually promotes the pleasures of same sex activity in its description of paradise. Three suras speak of being served by “immortal youths” in paradise and “if thou seest them, thou wouldest think them scattered pearls”.<sup>7</sup> These immortal youths, commonly interpreted to be boys, are problematic for the Muslim community and often used to attack the Muslim's version of paradise. In Islam, humans are rewarded in the afterlife with the many things they abstained from while living (i.e.: alcohol, unrestricted sex, materialism). Here, men seem to be given beautiful boys as rewards for their abstinence. This could be indicative of the desires of men at the time the Koran was compiled. The discrepancy in punishments, vague descriptions of liwat and the odd descriptions of paradise could lead one to believe that a sexual culture similar to Afghanistan's may have been allowed to silently flourish.

## **Jurist Perspectives**

Man and boy relationships were quite common throughout Islamic history; so much so that specific orders concerning the practice of pederasty had to be stated. Famous medieval Jurist and 11<sup>th</sup> century theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazali ordered that “It is shameful to look at the face of a beardless boy when it may result in evil.”<sup>8</sup> Jurist, Ibn Hajar al-Haytami of the 16<sup>th</sup> century seemed to have a

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5 Abu Dawud, Book 38, 4448

6 Abu Dawud, Book 38, 4477

7 Yusef Ali, *Holy Qur'an*, 52:24, 56:17, 76:19

8 Abu Hamid Ghazzali, *Marriage and Sexuality in Islam*. Translated by Madeline Farah. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1984) 38.

personal understanding of the dangers of these beautiful boys as well. “There are beardless boys that surpass women in beauty and so are more tempting....and so more deserving of prohibition.”<sup>9</sup> Murray and Roscoe state that in a number of Hadiths even the Prophet Mohammad warns against gazing at beardless youth with “their eyes more tempting than the houris.”<sup>10</sup> The houris are the transparent skinned, youthful, voluptuous perfectly created female beauties of paradise. Clearly this was not some small issue relating to small group of sexually unique Muslims. If Sunni jurists and even the Prophet can publicly admit that youthful clean shaven boys are a temptation and risk to Muslim men and some even surpass the beauty of women, then this issue is much larger than popular history presents.

### **Homoerotic Themes found in Literature**

The themes of homosexuality and pederasty also make themselves evident in poetry and literature. When the Abbasid caliphate rose in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, new and more liberal attitudes towards same sex relations edged their way into Islamic culture. From the start of the Abbasid revolution, female deprivation caused soldiers to seek out other ways to release their sexual energy. According to Rowsen in the Encyclopedia Iranica:

[T]roops sent by Abu Moslem from Khorasan to the Islamic heartlands in 749 A.D. to achieve the Abbasid Revolution were forbidden to take their wives with them, and in their deprivation took sexual refuge in their male pages, thus instantiating what was to become an enduring fashion.<sup>11</sup>

Poets such as the famous Persian Rumi of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the Muslim mystics that rose from Abbasid Baghdad wrote vividly sexual and romantic poems about men and boys. Poet from 8<sup>th</sup> century Baghdad, Abu Nawas, was known for writing explicit poems about the joys of drinking, pederasty, and

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<sup>9</sup> Khalid El-Rouayheb, *Before homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic world, 1500-1800*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 112.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Murray and Will Roscoe. *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature* (New York, NYU Press, 1997), 90.

<sup>11</sup> E.K. Rowsen, *Encyclopedia Iranica ii. Homosexuality ii In Islamic Law*, 2004 ed. [http://www.iranica.com/articles/homosexuality-](http://www.iranica.com/articles/homosexuality-ii)

romantic love.

Below is a sample poem from Abu Nawas' collection:

*A gentle fawn passed around the cup*

*Delicate of waist and slim of flank,*

*“Will you be on your way, come morn?” he chirped.*

*“How can we bear to leave?” came the reply.*

*He glided among us and made us drunk,*

*And we slept, but as the cock was about to crow*

*I made for him, my garments trailing, my ram ready for butting.*

*When I plunged my spear into him*

*He awoke as a wounded man awakes from his wounds.*

*“You were an easy kill,” said I, “so let’s have no reproaches.”*

*“You win, so take what you will, but give me fair reward.”*

*So after I had placed my saddle bag upon him he burst into song,*

*“Are you not the most generous rider ever, of all Allah’s  
creatures?”<sup>12</sup>*

Rumi's poems often linked the male figure of God to the beauty of the young boy. This is in accordance with Sufi traditions from the 8th and 9th century that viewed gazing on a young boy's beauty as a way to connect with the beauty in the male personage that is God. Murray and Roscoe state that “with the rise of the Abbasid Caliphate, Muslim mystics generally adopted the vocabulary of boy love to signify love for God.”<sup>13</sup> It's interesting how Persian literature and poetry held a sharp contrast with Islamic law concerning homosexual activity, yet the writings were authorized. Persian *ghazels* were love sonnets that were written from the perspective of a male and often had a young boy as the

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<sup>12</sup> Phillip Kennedy, *The Wine Song in Classical Arabic Poetry: Abū Nuwās and the literary tradition* (Gloucestershire: Clarendon Press, 1997),

262.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Murray and Will Roscoe. *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature* (New York, NYU Press, 1997), 309

object of romantic interest. From the early Abbasid period, using Turkish slaves as soldiers was commonplace and these handsome young warriors drew the affections of poets and mystics. In fact, much of the romantic Persian poetry of the period around 1000 C.E. was directed at these pages and soldiers as described here:

*Put down your weapons boy! Bring me kisses!*

*All this trouble and strife serves no purpose at all!*

and

*O beautifully clad child, silver-bodied and ruby-lipped, / the substance of charm and gaiety,  
envious houries in pain from you.* <sup>14</sup>

Many of these types of poems are clear in their aims of pedophile relationship. In much of this style of Persian poetry the subject of love, is called a *kudak*: a child, a young lad, or a minor. To act as if these could be misinterpreted or quoted to stain Islamic history would be dishonest. These poems were not secret, nor were the intentions of the writers.

### **Caliphates and Boy Harems**

Homosexual and pedophile relations also made their way into some of the caliphates. Abu Nawas's friend, caliph al-Amin ruled in Baghdad from 809-813 C.E. and also shared a love for young boys. Al-Amin was credited as being the first to organize dancing shows using eunuchs that dress and sing like girls.<sup>15</sup> He died with no children and was succeeded by his brother, Al-Mamun despite attempts by his mother find Al-Amin a traditional female partner. Iraq was not the only place where such activity became accepted in the higher ranks. The Iberian Peninsula was home to Caliph Abd ar-Rahman III, who ruled Cordoba in 929-961CE. He was famous for being “attracted to a young

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<sup>14</sup> *Encyclopedia Iranica iii. In Persian Literature*, 2004 ed. <http://www.iranica.com/articles/homosexuality-iii>

<sup>15</sup> Joseph A. Massad, *Desiring Arabs*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 59.

Christian [boy] hostage,” who rejected him, and therefore, Rahman “had him barbarously executed”.<sup>16</sup> The story served Christians well as anti-Islamic propaganda when the boy was deemed a martyr by the Catholic Church and named Saint Pelagious of Cordoba. Some reports say that he was killed for merely refusing to convert to Islam and that the homosexual twist was a Christian fabrication to denigrate Islam. Rahman's extreme love for the boy is, however, in the realm of plausibility. The Encyclopedia of Medieval Iberia states that “homosexual pleasures were much indulged by the intellectual and political elite” and that rulers such as Abd ar-Rahman III, al-Hakem II, Hisham II, and al-Mutamid openly kept male harems.<sup>17</sup>

Following in the footsteps of his father (both in succession and sexual preference) came the second caliph of Cordoba, Al Hakem II. He ruled from 961-976 C.E. and while he likely did not identify himself as 'homosexual' in the western sense, he seemed to have absolutely no attraction to women. This became problematic when he was forty-six years old and did not have an heir. The solution was to find a female partner, dress her up in boy's clothing and name her “Jafar”.<sup>18</sup> The odd regularity of the same sex behaviors mentioned above did not simply disappear with onset of the Mongols or with the later 16<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman empire. The heart of Islam moved to Turkey and the Ottoman Empire became the last encompassing Islamic empire. With it, the traditions of pederasty followed. From the young beardless dancing boys assigned to Turkish palaces (koceks), to the bathhouses stocked with handsome wash and massage boys (tellaks), history up to modern day continues to display large sections Islamic culture silently obsessed with handsome, beardless, adolescent boys.

## **Afghanistan**

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<sup>16</sup> Louis Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 166.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Gerli and Samuel Armistead, *Encyclopedia of Medieval Iberia*, ed., (New York:Routledge, 2003), 398.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Murray and Will Roscoe. *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature* (New York, NYU Press, 1997),151



Romantic man-boy relationships described in the pages above are common in parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Parties filled exclusively with men where music is played and a young man dances in the middle while the older men stare and clap is commonplace. In my experience they are usually beardless and dance in a very feminine fashion focusing on shaking the chest area, eye contact and flailing the arms. There is also a strange effeminate quality with those boys that that are hired to bring tea to local Afghan leaders, business men and or military commanders. There are longstanding joke in Afghanistan about "tea-boys" and their other duties. In Pashtun border areas, I have personally known *mullahs* (Islamic priests) that were known boy lovers by the local community but continued to hold their status as a religious leader. As an outsider, these things were rarely admitted to me except by those Afghans that were radically westernized or those in which I had built strong relationships.

Ghazali's commands long ago concerning the dangers of beardless youth seem to have held their prominence today. The PBS Frontline documentary, *The Dancing Boys of Afghanistan* examines the subject of child sexual abuse and the world of the *bacha bazi* (literally 'boy play') in the region.<sup>19</sup> The *bacha bazi* is reminiscent of the eunuchs of Al-amin's court and the male harems of the Abbasid period. Much like the centuries earlier warnings from Islamic jurists, recent Taliban codes repeat the decrees. Rule number nineteen states in the Taliban handbook states that "mujaheddin are not allowed to take young boys with no facial hair into their private quarters."<sup>20</sup> It seems quite ironic that one of the most hard-line Islamic fundamentalists groups finds it necessary to specifically make such an order. In Kandahar, the original heart of the Taliban, their famous saying is: "When a bird flies over Kandahar, he flies with one wing; one to fly and one to cover their behind." It appears that pedophile relationships continue to be a silently accepted part of the region's culture, regardless of how strict the Islamic religious codes are.

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<sup>19</sup> PBS Frontline. "The Dancing Boys of Afghanistan" 2010, Public Broadcasting Network, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/dancingboys/etc/synopsis.html> (accessed November 21<sup>st</sup> 2010)

<sup>20</sup> Euban, Roxanne, and Muhammad Qasim Zaman. *Princeton Readings in Islamic Thought: texts and contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden.*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2009), 416.

## Conclusion

There is a natural assumption made that when access to the opposite sex is mitigated, homosexual and pedophile tendencies increase. In the case of the Afghan soldiers sneaking young boys onto base, it may be true that if there were a larger access to women or a different code of religious beliefs concerning women that these soldiers may have taken to sneaking females onto base. While it makes sense, it does not apply well when considering the actions of those in high political and social positions who had access to numerous handpicked female slaves. Also, in contrast to most flavors of medieval Christianity, Islam does not demonize heterosexual sex within marriage or make it strictly for procreation. Actually, one of the important duties of the Muslim wife is to sexually please her husband. In the hadith of Sahih Muslim, the Prophet was credited with saying that Allah is only pleased with the wife if she pleases the husband in bed.<sup>21</sup>

Where does this love of beardless youth and clean shaven men come from and how has it existed beside Islam's strict moral codes? Many blame the Greeks and the Persians for their influence on pederasty, but that doesn't answer why it continued to flourish beyond the Abbasid period. In my opinion, Islam offers the perfect combination of recognizing the importance and need for sexual gratification while restricting the viewing of women yet still sexually objectifying them. The lower classes, who would normally marry one wife and have access to only one woman for their life, unconsciously took an outlet that appeased their necessary sexual needs while not crossing the bounds of adultery. The interpretations of Islamic law and codes for living from the Qur'an left just enough leeway to allow same sex practices to exist while avoiding prosecution. This secret practice was reverberated and secretly condoned throughout Islamic culture in poetry, Sufism, and even the high society of the caliphates. After researching same sex relations in Islamic culture, law and religion

throughout the periods of 700-1200 CE, the overbearing existence of pederasty and love of beardless youth alongside strict Islamic laws in Afghanistan and Pakistan seems logical.

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