

Summary Session 13:

13. Gazelles In the Garden of Allah Homosexuality in the World of Islam

When Muhammad died in 632 AD, Islam split into the two major sects we know today, the Sunni and the Shia. Of these, the Sunni are the larger (about 800 million world-wide) and usually more liberal sect. The Shi'ites (about 100 million) are concentrated in Iran, Palestine and Iraq and are usually the more militant and orthodox. The Sunnis elect a Caliph while Shia believe in infallible Imams who are the only proper source of religious instruction. There have been 12 Imams, of whom the last disappeared in 940. In his absence, "Ayatollahs" serve as caretakers of the faithful. Islam has many sects within the two broad divisions. Of these the Wahabi are of interest to us because Al Qaeda is its present-day manifestation; the other are the Sufi who seek mystical love and oneness with God and to this end employ music, dance and above all, poetry as the way to bliss. Sufis have also been the major transmitters of Islam around the world.

Homosexuality and the Qur'an: Like the Bible, the Qur'an contains many references which have been interpreted as referring to homosexual acts. Some, such as Sura 4:20-21 refer to adultery; others to sections re-telling the Lut (Lot) story of Sodom and Gomorrah. However, it is in Hadith that the most direct pronouncements are made: e.g.

"When a man mounts another man, the throne of God shakes."

"Kill the one that is doing it and also kill the one that it is being done to."

Some countries take these admonitions literally and apply the death penalty (in some, by stoning). These include Iran, Mauritania, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Yemen and perhaps the United Arab Emirates. Even so, homosexuality is wide-spread but goes on in a culture of denial: it is never talked about even if, as some argue, it would be rare for a boy of 16 or so in several Arab countries not to have had experience of anal sex with another male while adult men "cruise" quite openly in public places in countries such as Jordan..

Indonesia: Indonesia is today the world's largest Moslem nation, Islam reaching Java (probably through the port of Surabaya) in the late 13th century where its mystical Sufi version appealed to the also mystical Hindu/Animist locals. Traditionally, a liberal and tolerant form of Islam has been practiced there except among the so-called "Santri" and these days, among the growing number of fundamentalists. A striking example of institutionalized homosexuality in Indonesia is that of the *bunci*. These are men who service other men by providing oral sex. They dress and make-up as women while working but are usually married family men. From their point of view, they practice an honorable profession which they believe evolved during the Dutch colonial rule although probably this is a much more ancient indigenous custom sanctioned by Hindu if not Moslem lore.

In traditional societies and in historic times, just about every variation imaginable on the homosexual theme has been widely and fairly openly practiced in the Middle East. For example, in **Central Asia** along what was once the Silk Route, adolescent boys and even men who have retained a youthful appearance have traditionally also worked as dancing boys or *bacchá*. Journalists and coalition soldiers posted to Afghanistan not only affirm the age-old homosexual culture still exists there, many too exclaim how often they themselves are propositioned. A common explanation is that this was the route followed by Alexander the Great!

Alexander the Great also visited the **Oasis of Siwa**, much further west, where “boy marriage” was openly practiced until well into the 20th century. Here, in this remarkably isolated and limited settlement which probably needed to limit population growth, men did not marry until they were 40 years old.

Pederasty in Central Asia: Forms of committed relationships between youths and adult men were common-place in Central Asia. The most famous example was the love between Mahmoud of Ghazni and his slave, Ayaz.. Miranda Kennedy says that “*Among the Pashtun majority, having a young, attractive boyfriend is a symbol of prestige and wealth for affluent middle-aged men. Indeed, Pashtun men often keep a young boy in their hujra, the male room of the house that the wife rarely enters.*” She also says that sex is commonplace in Pakistan’s gender-segregated *madrassas*, or religious schools. However, one of the problems of Western journalists’ reports of boy-marriage in this part of the world is that they often conflate this ancient custom with pedophilia and reduce what was often a love-match to a temporary commercial arrangement.

Persia in its Glory Days

In Iran — when it was still Persia — from ancient times, homosexuality was tolerated in all kinds of places, including taverns, bathhouses, coffee houses, military barracks, monasteries and seminaries, especially during the Safavid era, 1501-1723 AD. One of the most popular ways of commemorating male-male relationships and perhaps the greatest form of poetry in Persia and later, in Moslem India, was the *ghazal*. The Iranian historian Ehsan Yar-Shater says that

*“As a rule, the beloved is not a woman, but a young man. In the early centuries of Islam, the raids into Central Asia produced many young slaves. Slaves were also bought or received as gifts. They were made to serve as pages at court or in the households of the affluent, or as soldiers and body-guards. Young men, slaves or not, also, served wine at banquets and receptions, and the more gifted among them could play music and maintain a cultivated conversation. These beautiful youths were often compared with – or even called – “gazelles” However, in poems about longing for the beloved, there was often another meaning, a *double entendre*, which expressed the longing of the poet for oneness with Allah.*

Among the greatest of the writers of *ghazal* was **Hafiz i-Shirazi** (1326-1390). A collection of his *ghazal* “*The Divan of Hafiz*” is so highly respected it is often said to be second only to the Qur’an. But the most shocking, irreligious and boastful of his sexual conquests — and, as many claim, the greatest of all the Persian poets — was the *enfant terrible* of Baghdad of his day, the libertine poet **Abu Nuwas** (750?–813?). He wrote witty, erotic songs celebrating male love, especially the love of an older man for a beautiful youth. As he wrote:



*For young boys, the girls I’ve left behind
And for old wine set clear water out of mind.
Far from the straight road, I took without conceit
The winding way of sin, because [this horse]
Has cut the reins without remorse,
And carried away the bridle and the bit.*

Abu Nawas might even have been the first Persian poet to write about masturbation which he considered inferior to the love of boys — but better than marriage!