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Islam, Sexuality, and the Internet: A Historical Reflection of the Shifting Sexual Self in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

From the mid-1990s onward, the internet has stimulated the unprecedented development and growing tension between cultural values and identity. This is evidenced in the relationship between the dissemination of cultural values and the formation of identities on national and individual levels. The growing tension in this relationship is most particularly overt in societies that have a history of well-developed moral mechanisms of cultural protectionism.

This paper looks at the effects of internet culture on Turkish sexual identities, and its role in changing socially acceptable sexual codes and norms. It explores the developmental process of Turkish internet culture through a comparative analysis between two distinct framings of sexual identity: 1) as a product of historical and religious suppression and, 2) as a reflection of cultural rendering in electronic environments. When vectors of sexual behaviour, both explicit and implicit, are translated across cultural boundaries they begin to alter the conglomerate of religious values and socially experiential knowledge of participants. This is particularly apparent within the terrain of new media with its instant and widely available access, and its impact on the cognitive and emotional experiences it supports. This change in values manifests itself in dissonant sexual codes [1] which form a new system of sexual awareness. In most Western societies, expanding perspectives of human sexuality emerged in the 60's and 70's [2] evidencing a change in social values linked to the prosperity of modernity. In the case of the Muslim world, and in particular Turkey, this process was largely triggered with the appearance of the internet. The electronic environment provided an instant access to an open source of sexual perspectives which played upon stigmatized ethics and sexual taboos.

The focus of this paper is to examine this particular breaking of sexually related religious stereotypes after the appearance of new media in Turkey and the changes it caused that resulted in new sexual self-definitions.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.4 [SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES] K.4.0 [COMPUTERS AND SOCIETY] General: *internet and sexuality*

General Terms

Human Factors.

Keywords

Islam, Sexuality, Sex, Internet, Online Confessions, Republic of Turkey, Intimacy

1. INTRODUCTION

The theme of this paper is predicated on the observable shifting structure of sexuality in Muslim Turkey which is illustrated and analyzed from two central viewpoints. The first viewpoint is the complex interaction between the cross-products of the internet culture dominated primarily by Western cultural values. The second viewpoint, situated on the other side of the spectrum, is the historically inculcated ideologies of Islam underlying all forms of identity both on personal and social levels. The complexity of this process cannot be analyzed outside the context in which it is enacted - most prominently, the imbricate whole of 'religion - self - community' which constructs the socially acceptable norms of behaviour, typical for most, if not all Muslim cultures. Of equal importance are the particular individual drives which are often in dissonance with, and lie beneath what is socially condoned and therefore generally considered 'proper.' The war between social, personal, and interpersonal values that are experienced within the limits of analog communities has resulted in an outpouring of expressive venting in digital environments. This can be explained in part by the sense of security and anonymity provided by digital environments along with the wide accessibility of information resources.

This paper explores sexuality in particular, as a form of identity viewed through the prism of the interaction between analog and digital environments described above. Because of the multi-dimensionality of digital environments and the strictly non-quantitative nature of social and individual experience, much of the analysis provided is a result of cross-cultural hermeneutics. This investigation comes from the reflective analysis focused on the problem of the identification of the shifting sexuality from an ethnographic position based on 7 years spent living in Turkey. Explanatory evidence and propositions have been made on the basis of first person cultural observations and experiences, participant observation including conversations and debates with Turks related to the sensitive field of sexuality. The aesthesis of the transforming sexual self in Turkey is also derived from materials and data extracted from Turkish websites and blogs for sexual confessions. Interpretation by close reading also serves as an evidential compound and a way of directly presenting how

Turkish people report their individual experience and identity beneath the socially acceptable behavioural codes.

2. ISLAM AND SEXUALITY IN TURKEY – A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Although most of the Western world takes the separation of church and government power for granted, Islam still preserves its authority in Muslim societies, not only as an ethical guide, but as a source of jurisprudence. Yet, in this particular connection between church and state, Turkey's history differs from other Muslim countries. In the case of Turkey, the interlaced system of religious and secular, forming an authoritarian unity typical for the rest of the Muslim world is absent. The progress of secularization in Turkey (defined as the detachment of religion from the state) began in the early 1920s with the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, the adaption of a Western-style constitution, and a switch to a Civil Law-based legal system. This process led Turkish society to an unnatural state of hybridism (in comparison to other Muslim countries) observed in a dissonance and dualism between moral values dictated by religious beliefs, and norms established by the legal system. Not by coincidence however, the secularization process occurred in concert with a strong desire for modernization.

One of the significant problems that modernization has introduced to Turkey is the inability of Islam and its ethical indicators to become harmonized with the invasion of Western cultured values [3:35]. The divergent behavioural codes of the West and the Islamic East have not found a comfortable match, at least not on the visible social surface. What has transpired in its place, is the appearance of a strange symbiosis – an unusual and yet so natural co-existence of the latter resembling a dressed body – the desired truth, the sinful Western concepts of the world, the guilt inducing paradigms that are there, but kept invisible – in the form of a naked *body*; and the socially acceptable, but not so attractive Islamic norms that are used like a *dress* to cover the sinful truth.

The growing process of modernization has supported a reaction toward the traditional Islamic denunciation of the verity which has further resulted in expansion and positive reconstruction of the conservative Islamic values. Yet, this outward conservatism has appeared to be insufficient in its ability to broaden the scope of core sexual codes as an ultimate generator of physical and emotional fulfilment. Before the appearance of the internet culture, Western ideologies were primarily copied from the sensual side: mostly the visibly pleasing aspects, excluding the underlying characteristic concepts of the Western lifestyle were imitated.

The liberal graphic elements of Western sexuality as perceived from the surface appeared to be too weak to modify core historical portrait of sex-related Islamic norms. As a consequence, the separation of sexual roles with the hyper dominance of men [4], virginity as highest honour a woman can possibly possess, absolute heterosexuality, and at a deeper level, complete denial of sexual intercourse other than coition were preserved.

3. THE TURBULENT INFLUENCE OF NEW MEDIA TOWARDS A LIBERAL SEXUAL IDENTITY

The tension between generally acceptable sexuality and the controversial dynamics of the sexual drives of the individuals has defined a symptomatic discrepancy of sexual ideologies on social and personal levels. What stands out is the refusal of the libidinal desires to obey social norms and the impulse for finding a permissive environment which can serve as a mediator between the limits of the community and the private sexual needs of its members. The necessity of a workable solution for this situation was carried by large numbers of single individuals and reached a dimension where the problem of suppressed sexuality had been multiplied and distributed so it extended far beyond the scope of the personal. In line with this development, the appearance of a widely accessible internet in the territory of the Republic of Turkey in the late 1990's has provided the ideal medium for a "separate domain of human experience"[5:112]. The electronic environments served as a nexus between the sexual identity shaped by the matrix of religious and social values and the private impulses of the individuals, establishing a two-way linear modus: 1) the internet presented a rich field of sexually related views along with visual materials which urged the need for interpretation beyond the framework of Islamic ideology; and 2) this stimulated a refractive process of reassessment of the sexual self in which the recognition of cross-cultural explicit sexual expression and communication initiated the necessity of a supporting community that could exist beyond the restrictions of the analog society.

As Janet Murray formulates it "structuring participation with a mask"[6:112], digital environments utilize and assemble the very different characteristic circumstances of the social and private – providing publicity with discretion and social interaction with anonymity. This feature is of particular importance in Islamic societies where the internet is considered the only medium of freedom. The need for work in this area was communicated to some in Ogan and Cagiltay's article outlining a profile model of the average internet user in Turkey[7]. For this purpose, they have analyzed the importance of a Turkish site for general confessions as a part of the Turkish pop culture, proposing reasons why Turks felt a necessity for such a permissive form of semi-social interaction. They have concluded that the relative anonymity of the confessors served as an "incentive"[ibid].

When a sensitive issue such as sexuality motivates the need of endorsement, the 'mask' feature inevitably plays an intense role in medium selection. This can explain why the transformed and cross-culturally fertilized sexual identities of Turks can be revealed and easily identified on the terrain of new media. Instances of this shift are most overtly found in Turkish blogs for sexual confessions. What comes into view as a result of the focus on the materials posted in these blogs is the varying sexual identities, particularly when compared to those observed in analog situations. The distinctive context of the blogs- sex and sexuality- reflects a systemic process where incoming influences and desires are processed and result in cultural behaviour and individual identity creation: The input includes both the imposition of external sexual values; the processing is illustrated by their interpretation and adoption, and the resulting output can be seen in their verbal formulation in the form of online confessions.

4. EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS OF EXPANDING SEXUAL NARRATIVES

The transforming definitions of the sexual self celebrate their indigenous adaptations and initiate new directions of self consciousness. These transforming definitions cross the barriers of what is allowed or convert and extend what is forbidden in Islam. In the innovative spirit of sexual susceptibilities, some key points contradicting the sexual principles of Islam find expression through digital environments. This is evidenced in the open effusion of homosexual desires both for males and females and the decline in male sexual authority. The implications of these shifts in sexual expression include the realization of the importance of female sexuality and sexual satisfaction, and a decrease in the value of virginity; the reconsideration of the role of men as related to sexual activity; the expanded interest in forms of sexual intercourses other than coition; and female polygamy.

Intimate bodily activities, attitudes, and sexual codes conflicting with those of the religious ground of analog society have found acceptance and expression in the semi-materialized environment of new media. For the sake of clarity and a clear systematic approach, the most overt points of heterotopous sexuality are organized into themes derived from the sex narratives of online blogs. It is important to emphasize that these categories are not self exclusive and that the core content of the materials is overlapping and interconnected.

4.1 A New Culture of Homosexuality

Homosexuality in Islamic societies is accursed both on religious-ideological and social levels. It is treated as a sinful aspect of sexuality and is associated with behaviour originating and expressed in Western societies. In extremist Islam countries, homosexual behaviour can be penalized with execution, as in the case of Iran. In Turkey, homosexuality is not a phenomenon that is dealt with legally; however, it is an issue that triggers a high volume of social devaluation and sarcasm. In Turkey, this social exclusion transforms it to amorphic sexuality where it is used as a way of excommunicating and insulting (primarily) male individuals. On a private level, homosexual individuals usually struggle within their personal and familial social environments and are often rejected by their family members, primarily the father. Consequently, it is not surprising that homosexuality is a phenomenon that is not confessed even in the cases where it exists and can be recognized in more overt ways.

From this aspect, new media has provided a platform which separates the dualism of social sexual taboos from individual drives, resulting in a safe space where homosexuality is no longer imprisoned within its taboo status:

"I am not a lesbian and I don't have it in my sexual drive, but I have always wanted to have lived through that sexual experience." [sex: female, age: 49] (Obtained from a Turkish on-line sexual confession site. All materials are translated from Turkish by the authors. Because of the sensitive nature of the matter discussed, user names are not included.)[8]

Although the blogs are densely occupied by female homosexuality which may be considered an indicator of a more rapid development of emancipative female sexuality, male homosexuality despite its complete social rejection finds its expression in digital environments too.

"Because of the rejection to be involved in anal intercourses and the coldness of my wife, at the end I found a solution to that problem with a homosexual [man]. The result: in one word, it was incredible. None of my girlfriends has ever been able to make me experience such a great sex." [sex: male, age: 36][9]

Both the confessions of men and women related to homosexual activities indicate an awareness of the need for reinvention of sexuality which for some people extends to a level of including completely new visions and approaches beyond socially and morally forbidden sexual taboos such as homosexual expression.

4.2 Diminution of the Dominant Role of Men

The manifesting demolition of male hyper-dominant sexuality cannot be extracted from the online sex narratives in the form of stable entities; it can be derived from the implicit notion of reconsidered sexual codes of the sexual confessions. A meaning within this thematic category can be constructed through the opposition of gender related sexual roles within and outside virtual communities. In this context, the intertextuality of this matter requires a detailed exploration of what stands behind the static content of the narratives.

The Westernized view of increasing and negotiating gender equality, along with its historical trajectory of democratizing human rights has led to a greater homologizing of gender roles and has been reflected on a sexual level, including derivative narratives of fantasy and power exchange. The interchangeability of gender roles is particularly obvious in explicit video materials containing homosexuality and female dominance so widely promoted and accessible on the net. The character of digital media to "directly motivate behaviour"[5:32] along with the nature of explicit sexual content to arouse desires have played upon the stigmas relating to male authority in Turkey, forcing individuals to find coherent expressive sexuality outside the domain of the traditional sexual roles. From that perspective, the ability of new media to communicate its messages by distributing divergent perspectives across cultural boundaries has resulted in a process of remapping the sexual self in an otherwise conservative society.

In fact, an explicit source of information in evidence of the demolishing dominant role of male sexual potency is detected in some confessions made by men which illustrate that even male individuals have accepted an interchangeable sexual role with their female partners, often expressed through sexual fantasy scenarios:

"I want to be raped by a female with a strap-on [...]"[sex: male, age: 46][10]

"I am not homosexual for sure, but I have this fantasy of being dominated by a female with a strap- on and it drives me crazy." [sex: male, age: 29][10]

Another layer of emphasis of the hyper dominant role of men is the subject of virginity. At a level of male-female sexual hierarchy, there is one meaning of the practice of virginity that can be employed: it serves as a customary guarantee that the female has been under the sexual authority of only one man – her husband. Conventionally speaking, virginity implies commitment to ignoring sexual desire and possession of the self, and cultivating the female sexual identity around the axis of the idea of an external ownership and power expressed through one lifelong partner.

From that perspective, what becomes clearly visible within online sexual narratives is the difficulty (if not impossibility) of mapping the contours of virginity as a value. It is interesting to notice that virginity is no longer a trademark of young females. In particular, the confessions of females around the age of 18 sharing their multi-partner sexual experiences imply that sex outside the frame of a marriage is a common practice and virginity has a decreased value in the culture of the maturing female generation:

"Before my current boyfriend, I have been with one more person with whom I had my first sexual intercourse. I recently understood that my current boyfriend can't stand my ex one and that he [current one] thought I was still a virgin [...]"[sex: female, age: 19][8]

Keeping in mind that the legal age for marriage in Turkey is 18 and the selected probe of confessors who share multi-partner sexual experience is within the age range of 19 – 20, it can be concluded that the sexual encounters have appeared outside the boundaries of a marriage.

Despite the fact that the main narrative thread is not dominated by the subject of virginity itself, the online episodic plots provide a nuanced insight into the attitude of young females towards the practice of virginity. Indeed, the disregard of the subject of virginity in the sexual narratives reveals the manifestation of the personal sexuality over the cultural one:

"Yesterday night, I went to a bar with three friends of mine to get drunk.[...] [There] I got acquainted with a very handsome one [male] and he invited me to his place.[...] I was so excited by the fact, that I am going to be with a person I hardly know just for the sake of sex.[...]" [sex: female, age: 20][11]

The online confessions provide evidence to the social narratives of young females who do not envision virginity as a credible form of sexuality. This trend reveals the rejection of the cultural sexual regulation regarding the existence of women under the authority of a single partner.

4.3 Restructuring the Islamic Notion of Sexual Intercourse

Islam attributes a universal character to sex by limiting the options for sexual intercourse to coition (meaning penile-vaginal intercourse) [4] with the purpose of reproduction. From a social perspective, this religious dogma with regard to the procedures of sex has evolved to such an extent that the condemnation of intercourses outside the frames of coition has been codified even at linguistic level. For example, 'anal penetration' is literally referred to as 'wrong connection' (in Turkish 'ters ilişki') when directly translated into English.

In this thematic category, it is important to draw a clear distinction between 'ideologically forbidden' and reality. From the aspect of historical practice, it is an unspoken fact that anal intercourse has been used as a method of sexual activity which does not harm the state of virginity. However, its ideological demonization has reflected sexuality on social level, meaning that discourse regarding this issue is considered an absolute taboo.

The topic of anal sex that is revealed in online sexual narratives differs considerably and is inconsonant with the unspoken taboo and lack of discourse at social level. One aspect of this difference may be illustrated by the overt openness of both male and female

confessors towards anal intercourse and its removal from the state of a social anathema:

"This is not a real confession but... 10-15 years ago, finding a woman that wants anal sex was just impossible. With the passing of time, the new generations began to understand what they want much better. Anal sex has become something normal. You can see this even here [this website]... Many women say they have experienced it and that they really love it."[sex: male, age: 31][12]

The existence of analysis of reported sexual behaviours within this confession formulates the achievement of an overt and validated sexual cognition which has a social function of eliminating the dissonance between socially revealed and intimate sexuality. The linguistic terminology used in the narrative is used to label actions with their exact names; referring to anal sex as 'anal sex' instead of 'wrong connection' illustrates the ability to name, reflect, and own personal reality through the prism of a freed sexual self.

The reconstruction of attitudes towards sexual intercourse as varied and differentiated from coition moves sexual value and behaviour outside the framework of the normative dimensions of Islam. This also reveals the intercultural perspectives in the evaluation of the sexual definitions. The aspiration toward an innovating sexual noesis parallels the adaptation of more flexible Western sexual patterns explicitly displayed and easily accessible on the net:

"I had my first anal experience in my second year of university. We did it again and again. We were enjoying it a lot."[sex: female, age: 27][12]

"My spouse got addicted to anal sex, yeah :))" [sex: male, age: 34][12]

4.4 Female polygamy

Despite the fact that male polygamy is valued without question within the genesis of Islam, in the history of Islamic female sexuality, female polygamy is synonymous with death. In the case of Turkey, female plurality of partners does not have legal consequences; however, the Islamic notion of proper sexual behaviour has influenced the body of socially acceptable female sexuality. From that perspective, what becomes observable is the role of new media as an adequate and sole platform that implies a sexual nature ruled by the immutable desires of the female sexual self and serves as a mediator between the dual levels of the social and the personal. Female confessions regarding multi partnered experiences are an evidence of that case:

"I did it at the end. Although he was not perfect, he had a nice body. We were looking at each other at the edge of the pool and eventually we found ourselves in the bed of my room. I told my boyfriend that I was not feeling well and sent him shopping, so he [the boyfriend] was easy to deal with."[sex: female, age: 39][13]

"[...] While my husband and daughter were sleeping, I just silently went out and we [she and a lover] did it 3 times in the car[...]" [sex: female, age: 33][8]

The distinctive naturalness with which females are describing their multi partner experiences should not be dismissed. It is a result of a deeper social conflict resolved on the terrain of new media: the problem of the repressed sexuality and the social expectations of a lifelong partner, along with the evoked needs of

the new westernized sexual self that claims overt ownership of not just body, but self value and self evidence.

5. CONCLUSION

The reconstructed intimate codes that have been investigated here in this exploratory analysis of online narratives serve as partial evidence of the growing modified sociocultural sexual self in Turkey. Electronic and online environments have the ability to transmit cultural vectors beyond geographic boundaries. In Turkey, electronic new media has mediated negotiation of tensions and resolution of conflict between the binominal poles of social and private sexuality. This has resulted in reassessing definitions of sexuality.

In Turkey as well as many emerging nations, the internet has stimulated an unprecedented development and growing tension between cultural values and identity. We have seen this evidence in the relationship between the dissemination of cultural values and the formation of identities on national and individual levels. Turkey is an example of the growing overt due to a history of well-developed moral mechanisms of cultural protectionism. This comparative analysis of Turkish internet culture has provided two distinct framings of sexual identify: the first as a product of historical and religious suppression and, the second, as a reflection of cultural rendering in electronic environments. Evidence from online community spaces illustrates growing sexual identities in the arenas of 1) a new culture of homosexuality, 2) a reduction in the sexual dominance of the male, 3) restructuring of the Islamic notion of sexual intercourse, 4) and concepts of female polygamy. In addition, online new media communities include a growing form of social reflection evidenced through the existence of analysis of reported sexual behaviours within sexual confession sites. This is an example of a social formulation of an emerging overt and validated sexual cognition, a social form that moves to rebalance dissonance between socially revealed and intimate explored sexuality. We have examined this in light of the appearance of new media in Turkey and the shifts in emerging sexual self-definition.

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