

**Queer Islamic Masculinities: Social and Individual Identity in Queer Moroccan Muslim
Men**

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Introduction

On 20 March 2018, Dino Suhonic, Director of Maruf, a Dutch organisation by and for queer Muslims that represents the interest of queer Muslims both in the Netherlands and abroad, gave a lecture at Leiden University on the topic “How to Reconcile LGBTQ Rights with Islamic Faith”.¹ He came from Bosnia 15 years ago to study in the Netherlands and has lived here since. After introducing himself, he talked about how he initially met informally with other queer Muslims, in his living room, to discuss issues as “*how do we feel about ourselves being and Muslim and queer*”². Through discussion of the issues they face as a result of being both Muslim and queer, Suhonic explained they were able to transform his small living room into a space “*where we don’t need to explain ourselves to others... where we don’t need to explain our Muslimness and our queerness*.”³ From these initial meetings, Maruf has grown into the organisation it is today, providing a safe space for queer Muslims, and working for social acceptance. With the audience now aware of this history, Suhonic turned his attention to the question itself: “*So the question of this lecture, this gathering, is “How to Reconcile LGBTQ Rights with Islamic Faith”. So before we go there... when I saw that question, I was like, oh my god, I so don’t like this question*”.⁴ After all, as he noted, what is Islamic faith? What do we see as Muslimness? How does that change depending on place, such as being in a Muslim-majority country such as Bosnia or being in a Muslim-minority such as the Netherlands? Similarly, what are LGBTQ rights? Do they fall under the framework of human rights, or does the focus lie more on increasing social acceptance? Is it the decriminalisation of identity, or the freedom to marry whomever you want; but what is that freedom worth if your parents consequently disown you? After problematising the different aspects of the lecture title, and noting that we should be very careful with assumptions that LGBTQI rights were always part of a Western discourse of love and sexual freedom, he summarised his issues with the lecture topic concisely:

And when you bring these two in relationship, what are you talking about, how these two are completely excluding each other, or romanticising it too much and saying how these two are perfectly matching each other, you always have to consider the fact that even when you say Islam *and* homosexuality, or homosexuality *in* Islam, even when asking how to reconcile LGBTQI rights within Islamic faith, with Islamic faith, you assume that these two are not coming together.⁵

¹ At the end of the lecture, I approached Mr. Suhonic and, upon explaining the topic of my thesis, obtained his permission to use his presentation and my voice recording of it for this project.

² Dino Suhonic, “How to Reconcile LGBTQ Rights with Islamic Faith” Lecture, Leiden University Pride and Amnesty International Student Group Leiden, Leiden, 20 March 2018.

³ Suhonic, “How to Reconcile LGBTQ Rights with Islamic Faith”

⁴ Suhonic, “How to Reconcile LGBTQ Rights with Islamic Faith”

⁵ Suhonic, “How to Reconcile LGBTQ Rights with Islamic Faith”

This perceived dichotomy, or irreconcilability, between LGBTQ rights and Islamic faith - however we choose to define either - is a primary motivator for this project. Whilst Suhoni proceeded to discuss current anti-homosexuality laws in Islamic countries and the influence of identity politics - topics I will certainly touch on - I instead choose to situate my study within the framework of gender, and to problematise the category of masculinity.

In discussions on gender and Islam emerging in the past couple of decades, the focus has traditionally been on women and femininity. Much research has been done to analyze the question and effects of the veil, the specific effects of patriarchy, and an emergent Islamic feminism. Following on Edward Said's groundbreaking work in *Orientalism*, where he dissects power structures and clearly lays out power relations between West and East, works such as Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam* and Lila Abu Lughod's ethnographic research on gender politics in the Arab world have served to nuance Said's narrative and give voice to Muslim women themselves. Consequently, the analytical category of gender within Islam has predominantly focused on women. Notwithstanding the incredible importance and significant societal effect this research has had in shifting the discourse on Muslim women, and in amplifying their voices in fields that have long considered Muslim women as an Other that cannot speak for herself, I instead choose to focus Muslim men, and on Islamic masculinities. In 2003, Ouzgane noted that "there are very few studies that render Muslim men visible as gendered subjects."⁶ The field of Islamic masculinities, particularly in an Arab context, is far more recent and underdeveloped. There was, and indeed remains, a need make Muslim men more visible, to turn masculinity into an analytical category or lens through which to examine Muslim men, thus deconstructing the sacrosanctity of Islamic masculinity. By considering Islamic masculinity as both a topic of study and an analytical category through which to view gender relations, sexuality, and their individual and social consequences, we gain a deeper understanding of power structures and of the influences exerted upon individuals in their everyday lives. This process of turning Islamic masculinity into an analytical category has started to occur in the works of Ouzgane himself, but also in Ghousoub's collection of essays in *Islamic Masculinities* and De Sony's more recent contribution to this field with *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities* amongst others.

Nevertheless, this is still very much an emerging field, made still more complex by how non-straight sexualities interact with masculinity. Boelstorff notes that, although queer sexualities (or non-heterosexual orientations) and behaviours have long been surrounded by public silence, the existence of queer communities has been more or less tolerated in a don't-

⁶ Lahoucine Ouzgane, "Islamic Masculinities: Introduction", *Men and Masculinities*, (5:3), 2003, 231.

ask-don't-tell manner.⁷ Whilst Boelstorff's work focuses specifically about Indonesia, this is applicable to a larger Muslim context. Whitaker, and other scholars such as Momin Rahman and Muhsin Hendricks, further argue that Arab society in particular is more concerned with sexual acts rather than sexual orientations or identities.⁸ Therefore, as long as one performs the expected ideal of Islamic masculinity, sexual orientation almost loses social or communal relevance. As Farha Ghannam notes in her discussion of gender identity in urban Egypt, "men's heterosexuality and desire to be married is taken for granted,"⁹ further attempting to exclude queer sexualities from Islamic masculinities.

Indeed, research on queer sexualities and queer masculinities stems from a different theoretical framework. Queer theory as a radical way of rethinking sexuality stems from a particular social and historical process largely occurring in the West, such as the AIDS crisis or the work of Michel Foucault.¹⁰ As such, queer theory historically developed in a particular, localised context, consequently not incorporating Muslim identities. This is certainly beginning to change, however, with, for example, the most recent work Sofian Merabet's *Queer Beirut* and Afsanah Najmbadai's work on the trans community in Iran. Moreover, De Sony contributes to this discussion by showing how Muslim societies used to be more accepting of non-heterosexuality. He singles out 19th-century Mughal India, where men having relationships with other men whilst maintaining their marital relationships was, whilst perhaps not completely accepted, certainly common enough. As he states, "alternative sexualities were in constant negotiation within Mughal society, and they were not necessarily considered intrinsic characteristics, as orientations are today in Western societies."¹¹ More recently, Momin Rahman's innovative critique of Joseph Massad's 'Gay International' and analysis of how homophobia and Islamophobia often work to mutually reinforce one another provides an excellent example of how increased globalisation and interconnectivity has allowed for queer theory and Islamic masculinity to meet on the local level, and opens several intriguing possibilities for how to conceptualise queerness within an Islamic framework.

Nonetheless, due to the small and relatively new nature of this field, caution is still required when applying concepts in queer theory to Arab Muslim identities and the construction

⁷ Tom Boelstorff, "Between Religion and Desire: Being Muslim and Gay in Indonesia" *American Anthropologist* (107:4), 2005. 575-576.

⁸ Brian Whitaker, *Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East*, (University of California Press), 2006, 10-11.

⁹ Farha Ghannam, *Live and Die Like a Man: Gender Dynamics in Urban Egypt*, (Stanford University Press: California), 2013, 72.

¹⁰ Tamsin Spargo, *Foucault and Queer Theory*, (Icon Books: Cambridge), 1999, 7 & 34.

¹¹ Amanullah de Sony, *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities* (Bloomsbury Academic; Reprint edition), 2015, 144.

of (queer) Islamic masculinities. A secondary reason for this caution is my own positionality. My academic background is in both Middle Eastern and Islamic studies and, to a lesser degree, queer theory. I grew up in the Middle East, having lived in Dubai for 12 years, and have come back to the region on many occasions, most recently visiting Morocco as a result of this project. Nonetheless, I am still a gay white male undertaking this project from a Western academic background, which has a rather unsavoury history with how it has written about the Middle East, particularly when it comes to minorities. Through my critical use of both secondary literature and interviews with queer Muslim men themselves, I aim to demonstrate an awareness of this position of privilege, and keep queer Muslim voices central in this study, thereby both avoiding the pitfall of speaking for or speaking over them, and also demonstrating how queer Muslim men exercise their agency in negotiating a space for themselves in society, rather than being passive recipients of oppression.

Research Question

Building on this research, my research is focused on the following question: *how does queerness problematize and interplay with Islamic masculinity in queer Moroccan Muslim men?* Several sub-questions to this main research focus will assist in answering my research question:

- To what degree do queerness, masculinity, and Muslimness interplay with one another in the construction of both a social and individual identity?
- Is this individual identity different from a social identity, and can that distinction even be made, when the very concept of homosexuality as an identity is a recent Western phenomenon?
- How do these identities change over time and space?
- Lastly, what do queer Muslims themselves say on sexuality, their being Muslim, and masculinity, and how they see these identities? Do they see them as identities at all?

To answer these questions, this project adopts the position that men are not born the way they are; rather, they are made. Their masculinity is constructed by both others and themselves in a specific social and historical context. Therefore, these particular masculinities “emerge as a set of distinctive practices defined by men’s positionings within a variety of religious and social structures.”¹² Additionally, whilst there may be some overlap with other religious or nationalistic

¹² Lahoucine Ouzgane, “Islamic Masculinities: An Introduction”, in *Islamic Masculinities*, (London: Zed Books), 2006, 2.

identities, I posit that the masculinities covered in this project are specifically “Islamic”. Though the experiences of masculinity discussed are certainly not generalizable to all Muslim men, and the usage of “Islam” as a distinct category is a questionable practice at best (and a lazy Orientalist construct at worst), the collection of books and essays analysed in this project attest to how gender, patriarchy, and a complex relationship to “the West” are all of fundamental importance to Arab and Muslim society, culture, thought, and politics, all of which seek to lay claim to some form of ‘Islam’. Therefore, this is how I understand the “Islamic” aspect of Islamic masculinities.

Structure

I outline my project as follows. Chapter 1 will discuss the theoretical framework of Islamic masculinity, looking specifically at what it means to be an Arab Muslim man, and how this changes with regards to various local contexts. I will outline how Islamic masculinity is an identity that is variable, nuanced, and in flux, constantly engaging with its surroundings, but with a fixed, assumed heterosexuality. In order to ‘queer’ Islamic masculinity, I will be critically drawing upon queer theory and placing it within the context of Islamic masculinity, demonstrating the possibility for some measure of compatibility between the two

In Chapter 2, I will focus on the lived realities of queer Muslim Moroccan men. Using my fieldwork in Marrakesh, interviews with queer Moroccan men discussing their homosexuality, and a magazine publication by a Moroccan LGBT group, I wish to illuminate some of the issues queer Moroccan men face, such as coming to terms with their sexuality both individually and on a broader social level. In telling their stories and keeping their voices central to this project, I hope to add a personal dimension to this discussion, demonstrating how social pressures and expectations have real-world and real-life consequences. I will also be analysing the culturally specific context of Morocco, and consider how applicable this study is to other Arab Muslim countries, or countries in the Moroccan diaspora.

In the final chapter, I will be turning my attention to how identities change over time and space. Utilising both interviews and secondary literature, I will assess how queer Moroccan men - both in Morocco and in the Moroccan diaspora in the Netherlands - talk about the difficulty for both social and self-acceptance in Morocco, as well as the differences in Morocco and the Netherlands with regards to social acceptance and opportunities. Yet it is not just physical space that matters; online forums and blogs also allow for greater possibilities to disseminate information, and for queer youth to connect with each other differently from before, often despite government censorship. Non-governmental organisations also play a role in creating and

maintaining these connections.

Lastly, the conclusion will provide a summary of the previous chapters, but also look at the future. Where to go from here? Is there hope for future generations, and what can this study contribute to our understanding of queer Muslim lives?

Chapter One: Queer Islamic Masculinities - A Theoretical Framework

What does it mean to be a queer Muslim man? As mentioned previously, the field of Islamic masculinities is a recent and somewhat underdeveloped one; indeed, the study of masculinity itself as a gendered concept and an analytical category is relatively new.¹³ As such we need to exercise caution in approaching this topic, as it is easy enough to fall into the trappings of stereotyping Muslim men, or even inadvertently perpetuating Orientalist ideas. A quick Google search of the stereotypes of Muslim men yields some rather depressing results; whilst many articles aim to separate myths from facts on topics such as Muslim support of terrorism, male oppression of women, and the backwardness of Islam, the very abundance and apparent necessity of these articles speaks to some of the negative perceptions that still seem to hold sway. Whilst Muslim women appear to be either addressed as being oppressed or as being heroic in challenging her oppression, there is rather little information on Muslim men as a specific category, let alone on queer Muslim men.

In laying out a detailed understanding of what it means to be a queer Muslim man, I present an overview of some - but by no means all - of the literature on the topic of queer Islamic masculinities in this chapter. By thoroughly and critically engaging with works on Islamic masculinity, it is possible to gain a better understanding of the social and structural pressures that shape this particular way of being a man. From this literature, I produce a theoretical framework that permits me to analyse my own research in Morocco, and determine how much the experiences of my interview subjects fit into this framework. After all, the literature in this review deals with countries from all over the Muslim world, and it is both incorrect and dangerous to assume that what applies to Muslim men in Egypt also applies to Palestine or Morocco. As such, this chapter does not seek to propose an essentialist idea of what it means to be a queer Muslim man, let alone a queer Muslim Moroccan man. The various experiences of masculinity in this overview are not generalizable to all (queer) Muslim men, but aim to give voice to, amongst other issues, the personal and societal effects of patriarchy and homophobia,, which subsequently inform my own research.

The works discussed below provide a useful introduction to the subject of Islamic masculinity, and look at both how masculinity has been conceived of historically, and the challenges it faces today. I supplement this research with queer theory, demonstrating what it means to be a queer man, and analysing the possibilities and limitations of this framework in an Islamic context, examining ways in which one can “queer” Islamic masculinities, as it were.

¹³ Alex Hobbs, “Masculinity Studies and Literature”, *Literature Compass*, (2013, 10:4), 383.

After, I discuss works that theorise the position of the queer Muslim individual, drawing heavily on Momin Rahman's work which places the queer Muslim man at the intersection of homophobia and Islamophobia. Lastly, utilising anthologies and ethnographic studies, I demonstrate how these theoretical conversations play out on an individual level, translating into the lived realities of queer Muslim men.

Islamic Masculinities: An Overview

Lahoucine Ouzgane's *Islamic Masculinities* and Ghousoub and Sinclair-Webb's *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East* are two of the earlier works on Islamic masculinity. Both consist of compilations of essays broadly touching upon the relationship between spirituality and masculinity, in quite a different setting from the prevailing Western norms. *Islamic Masculinities* in particular "portrays ways of being in the world that intertwine with non-Western conceptions of duty to the family, the state and the divine"¹⁴. Some of these ways of being are highlighted in essays on topics such as Palestinian male identity, masculinity and the power of popular media, and the role of men as protectors of family honour, and gender relations in Morocco. A detailed examination of these various topics reveals some common trends in how men throughout the Muslim world are "made".

Two essays dealing with Palestinian identity - "My Wife is from the Jinn": Palestinian men, diaspora and love" and "Stranger Masculinities: gender and politics in a Palestinian-Israeli 'third space'" - comment in more detail on the expected role of Palestinian men. Rothenberg, in her essay on the story entitled "My Wife is from the Jinn", initially highlights Massad's and Peteet's work on explicit discourses of Palestine masculinity. Massad demonstrates how Palestinian nationalism is conceived of in masculine terms; in the process of establishing an anti-colonial masculinity, the Palestinian National Charter considers it the duty of the Palestinian man to fight an armed struggle against the oppressors, sacrificing his money and his life if need be.¹⁵ As such, masculinity becomes aggressive, tied to being able to financially provide for oneself and one's family, but geared towards the ultimate goal of reclaiming Palestinian land from colonial oppressors. Peteet, similarly, analyses the Palestinian male body. The daily inscription of power on the unwilling bodies of Palestinians, through daily public torture and beating, is a physical representation of the power of the occupier, yet "the Palestinians made of

¹⁴ Ouzgane, *Islamic Masculinities*, ii

¹⁵ Joseph Massad, "Conceiving the Masculine: Gender and Palestinian Nationalism" *Middle East Journal*; Summer (1995, 49:3), 477-478.

[these] signs something radically different.”¹⁶ Instead of humiliation and pacification, Peteet argues these experiences are empowering rites of passage into manhood, and eventual initiation into underground political leadership. Evidently - and logically - Palestinian masculinity appears to be at least partially rooted in rejection of Israeli oppression and the daily lived experiences that come with this reality.

Before I detail Rothenberg’s argument in full, Monterescu delves deeper into this particular facet of Palestinian masculinity. He argues that masculinity, or *rujula*, can be seen as a central code of behaviour and a dominant category in Arab-Palestinian culture, from which one can examine “the politics and poetics of identity”¹⁷. In merging together postcolonial and masculinity studies, Monterescu traces Palestinian men’s strategies in negotiating identity; most pertinent is his discussion of Jaffa. This Israeli city suffers from severe social problems as a result of the state-initiated Judaization of the city, deeply affecting men in particular in their traditionally-conceived role of “guardians of the normative and ethical system.”¹⁸ In this clash, Monterescu sees three competing masculinities: an Islamic masculinity of covered women and pious men; a liberal-’secular’ masculinity, focused on community organising and less restricted gender roles; and a situational masculinity that seeks to dynamically shift between both. The last option, for Monterescu, is a possibility to choose between otherwise essentialist options. It constitutes a fundamental part of how identity and masculinity is negotiated in the Arab-Palestinian context, and demonstrates on a larger level how masculinities are in flux, and dependent upon local circumstances. Although the specificities of Palestinian masculinity do not apply more globally, the competition between what Monterescu terms Islamic masculinity and liberal-’secular’ masculinity is certainly visible in my research in Morocco, and in the specific identities that gay Moroccan men choose to occupy in a contextually-dependent manner.

Returning to Rothenberg, she chooses to focus on the role of popular culture and media in facilitating conversation about social changes and expectations. One of these popular stories is about a man, Hassan, and his adventures with marrying a jinn. The beginning of the story is a familiar one for the intended audience: upon returning home to Palestine from studying abroad, he is immediately imprisoned by Israeli forces. He is eventually allowed to leave, but struggles to adjust to life in his birth village. Whilst the rest of the story details his entry into the world of the jinn, and marriage to a jinn named Ghada, the starting point of this tale reflects the reality

¹⁶ Julie Peteet, “Male Gender and Rituals of Resistance in the Palestinian *Intifada*: A Cultural Politics of Violence” *American Ethnologist*, (1994, 21:1), 32.

¹⁷ Daniel Monterescu, “Stranger Masculinities: gender and politics in a Palestinian-Israeli ‘third space’”, in *Islamic Masculinities*, 123.

¹⁸ Monterescu, *Stranger Masculinities*, 126

of returning from the diaspora, and allow for difficult conversations such as the hardship of readjusting to village life after being abroad, which, Rothenberg mentions, villagers prefer to not discuss outright.¹⁹ The subject of this story is actually in contrast to other Palestinian literature, particularly intifada legends, which tend to represent Palestinian men as heroes who challenge and engage the enemy in deadly battles, contrasted by Palestinian women being depicted as pillars of the family - glorifying the type of masculinity Massad and Peteet describe.²⁰ Rothenberg also notes that popular culture, media, and shows such *The Bold and the Beautiful* allow for the facilitation of conversations about what it means to be a good husband - perhaps in contrast to the intifada legends - and other questions of how to provide for one's family, whether having alone time is acceptable, and what it means to be a responsible man.²¹

The power of popular media is also seen in two other works dealing with the Turkish pop star Tarkan and Egyptian actor Farid Shawqi respectively. Tarkan, a singer, was increasingly promoted as an androgynous performer embodying a form of light-hearted hedonism in the early 2000s, prompting speculation in Turkish media about his sexuality, fuelled further by his years-long avoidance of the military draft. In his final performance in Istanbul before finally entering military duty, he disappeared from stage to return in a soldier's outfit and continue the performance. Whilst Sinclair-Webb argues this may reflect "a certain conformity to dominant cultural codes around military service and duty to the Turkish nation", and also affirms his heterosexuality, his previous androgynous public persona demonstrates the possibility for artists and performers to, to a degree, flout social codes and expectations.²² Similarly, Armbrust delves into the career of Farid Shawqi, showing how the famous actor was an exemplary figure in the development of new images and ideals of masculinity, demonstrating the effect popular culture can have on societal expectations.²³ This picture is nuanced somewhat when considering Lebanese group Mashrou Leila, whose lead singer is openly gay, and the controversy surrounding the aftermath of their performance in Cairo: seven Egyptians were arrested on

¹⁹ Celia Rothenberg, 'My Wife is from the Jinn': Palestinian men, diaspora and love, in *Islamic Masculinities*, 90-93.

²⁰ Sharif Kanaana, 'The Role of Women in Intifada Legends,' in A. Moors et al. (eds), *Discourse and Palestine: Power, Text and Context*. (Massachusetts: Martinus Nijhoff International), 1995, 154-158.

²¹ Rothenberg, 'My Wife is from the Jinn', 96-98.

²² Emma Sinclair-Webb, "'Our Bülent Is Now A Commando': Military Service and Manhood in Turkey", in Mai Ghoussoub and Emma Sinclair-Webb (eds). *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East*, (London: Saqi Books), 2000, 84-85.

²³ Walter Armbrust, 'Farid Shawqi: Tough Guy, Family Man, Cinema Star' in *Islamic Masculinities* 199-201.

account of promoting homosexuality.²⁴ Music and film, then, whilst allowing a measure of freedom in what it means to be masculine, do not necessarily provide an easy escape from social pressures, although the example of Mithli magazine and Hicham Nazzal, discussed in Chapter 2, nuances the role of popular media and the entertainment industry somewhat.

Similarly to how entertainers allow for a degree of flexibility in presenting masculinity, Nefissa Naguib, in *Nurturing Masculinities*, discusses dynamic relationships between Egyptian men and food. Following Inhorn's argument that men must be studied as "lived masculinities on the local level"²⁵ - similarly to how Ouzgane notes that men are not born, but rather are made the way they are - Naguib sees food as means of making connections and creating memories. Being able to provide food for the family is seen as a hallmark of proper male behaviour and morality, particularly so during festivals and other special occasions. Many men she interviewed referred to the concepts of *ibn al-balad* - literally "a son of the country", but also connoting someone committed to Egyptian values, someone flexible but who takes responsibility for his family²⁶ - and being a proper *ragel* - a congenial man, someone who has gallantry, clearness, conservatism, joviality, humour, manliness, and being a man who has the capacity to create a light-hearted, warm environment, with food needing to be eaten "with pleasure and health".²⁷ Consequently, with men facing social pressure to become this idealized version of an Egyptian man, masculinity becomes a social process, to do with the recognition of others, and can be viewed through connections, fluidity, and transformations, family obligation.²⁸ De Sony, similarly, notes that

while there may be no centralized effort in Islam or in other societies made to shape men in the form of some ideal masculinity, masculating processes occur in quotidian, repetitive social interactions... this dominant mode is associated with heterosexuality, toughness, power, and authority, competitiveness and the subordination of gay men.²⁹

Returning to Naguib, she furthers her analysis of the importance of food (and bread in particular) she furthers her analysis of the importance of food (and bread in particular) in Egypt by examining the Muslim Brotherhood and their food-based justice system in the *ibn al-balad* way, adding another dimension to masculinity. She shows that this has always been a

²⁴ Declan Walsh, "Egyptian Concertgoers Wave a Flag, and Land in Jail", New York Times, 26 September 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/26/world/middleeast/egypt-mashrou-leila-gays-concert.html>

²⁵ Marcia Inhorn, *The New Arab Man: Emergent Masculinities, Technologies, and Islam in the Middle East*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 4.

²⁶ Nefissa Naguib, *Nurturing Masculinities: Men, Food, and Family in Contemporary Egypt* (University of Texas: Austin Press), 2005, 20-24

²⁷ Naguib, *Nurturing Masculinities*. 95.

²⁸ Naguib, *Nurturing Masculinities*. 30-33.

²⁹ De Sony, *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities*, 9.

successful strategy, as food concerns are a very contemporary issue, demonstrating how the Brotherhood responds to very immediate concerns, which masculinities do in quite a similar way. Lastly, she notes that in her interactions with Egyptian men, a common theme is their fond remembrance of their mother's cooking. Food allows for moments of sentimentality amongst men and amongst family, and how the memory of certain foods is deeply entrenched. This fondness for past foods is revealing of how it used to be (or it is perceived to have been) easier to buy ingredients and make dishes and provide for the family. How food in the past is remembered, therefore, is reflective of how the past in general is remembered as a time for men, and where being a man was easier. Furthermore, the fondness for food, mother's cooking, and family time displays the possibility for a softer, more caring form of masculinity, where toughness and authority are no longer as important. If, to use de Soudy's words, some of these traits of a dominant, idealised masculinity can be diminished in certain settings, it may be possible for the other ideals of heterosexuality and the subordination of gay men to be less fixed - an argument certainly put forward by some queer Moroccan individuals.

Lagrange is also concerned with what it means to be a man in the past, though he focuses on homosexuality in Arabic literature. He notes that classical literature included the acknowledgement of male beauty and possible desire, where sex between males was talked about as an exercise of power, or a desire for submission.³⁰ Love between men never enters the equation - a recurring theme I will come back to in the second chapter. Turning to more recent works, Lagrange argues that more contemporary literature considers the Arab male's identity today to be in a rather tortured state, as "the Arab male's certainty of being at the centre of the universe has vanished".³¹ Due to political, economic, and cultural changes, the Arab man can no longer exert his power and virility in the same manner, and thus, in the few instances that homosexuality is mentioned in literary works, it is never happy or entertaining. Conway-Long reinforces the argument of the Arab man facing significant challenges. He argues that, in the early 1990s in Morocco, men were aware of the changes happening in family, society, and the economy, and interviewed men to find out how they were responding to these shifts. Typically misogynistic answers of men having physical and intellectual power with women having sexual power, or men losing power and therefore losing their ability to perform as the head of the family, belied a deeper, more profound truth; men feel as though they are experiencing oppression, and women should be punished as they are to blame. If the power of women is growing over time, the key implication is that the power of men is simultaneously

³⁰ Frédéric Lagrange, "Homosexuality in Arabic Literature", in *Islamic Masculinities*, 173.

³¹ Lagrange, *Homosexuality in Arabic Literature*, 174.

diminishing.³² However valid or not this perceived oppression may be, it still exists in the minds of men, and can therefore help explain gender relations in a wider context and highlights a way in which masculinity is perceived to be under threat.

In *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities*, Amanullah de Sonty further analyses the effects of these social changes, and looks for ways in which alternative forms of masculinity and femininity (i.e. lesbian *mohajabba* or transgender/transsexual Muslims going to the mosque) can be encompassed by Islamic traditions. He argues that, based on Qur'anic forms of masculinity and Mughal Indian history, there is room to play with the ideal of Islamic masculinity, especially in South Asia.³³ In setting the context, De Sonty analyses the impact of the famous Syed Abūl A'īlā Mawdūdī and the dialectic opposites in his work between, for example, men vs. women, Dar al-Islam vs. Dar al-Harb, Islamic modernism vs. Islamic conservatism, and many more, which, for de Sonty, is fundamental for understanding the modern Pakistani state. Adherence to strict gender roles and marriage became part of the solution to this dialectic in Mawdūdī's overall vision for an Islamic society. For de Sonty, "[Mawdudi's] plan for Islam responds to serious, important anxieties that perdure to this day" - much like how Islam can be seen to have the answers regarding perceived societal ills today.³⁴ Subsequently, de Sonty examines Muslim feminist discourse, which (perhaps logically) assumes a heterosexual male context, yet the discourse feminists use surrounding issues of family and the Qur'anic interpretation of certain verses could perhaps be (and may already have been) appropriated and modified to fit a queer context. More relevant is his discussion of masculinity in the Qur'an. De Sonty discusses the story of the various prophets or important religious figures - Adam, Joseph, Muhammad and Jesus - and concludes that they all portray masculinity significantly differently, particularly regarding the nuclear family. Current Islamic masculinity seems premised on this ideal of husband, wife, and children, with strong family ties; yet Jesus doesn't have a wife, Joseph is made to abstain from sex, and Muhammad has multiple marriages, all so that they can submit to God.³⁵ Adam fails to do this, which is why he is punished and sent to Earth. As such, de Sonty feels that these stories demonstrate the flexibility of masculinity over time and place, meaning the current emphasis on the nuclear family in Islam today is, to a degree, ahistorical, not following religious scripture, and is thus open for some degree of change.

Lastly, de Sonty turns to 19th century Mughal India. Whilst the necessity of marriage to secure one's masculinity is reiterated, as is friendship and the expectation of being a social

³² Don Conway-Long, "Gender, Power, and Social Change in Morocco" in *Islamic Masculinities*, 147-149.

³³ De Sonty, *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities*, 3-5.

³⁴ De Sonty, *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities*, 50.

³⁵ De Sonty, *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities*, 115.

individual, he also states “alternative sexualities were in constant negotiation within Mughal society, and they were not necessarily considered intrinsic characteristics, as orientations are today in Western societies”. These extramarital relationships “were not declared homosexual but were an additional relationship that they pursued at the same time that they upheld their marital relationships”.³⁶ Thus, as long as a man fulfilled his marital obligations, he had some room to pursue other men, though we will see that this is not really seen as a satisfactory option by many queer Moroccans today.

Queer Theory: An Alternate Perspective

Evidently, Islamic masculinity has historically not entertained the possibility of queerness. Even with the shifting nature of Islamic masculinity today, heterosexuality is still taken as the fixed default. Thus, in order to analyse how authors such as Momin Rahman and Muhsin Hendricks seek to tackle this problem, it is necessary to delve deeper into the queer side of things. How can queer theory help us bridge this gap, and to what extent is it actually applicable to queer Muslim men?

To answer this, we must first ascertain what queer theory is, and how it is relevant in this particular situation. Nikki Sullivan claims that queer theory, much like queer activism, commits to ‘queering’ - or challenging and undermining - heteronormative structures and ideas, although this is sometimes expanded to any challenge of the dominant paradigm.³⁷ Queer theory, at its core, is driven by a belief that identities are not fixed, not determinate, and advocates for a more fluid understanding of sexuality and identity that refrains from essentialism and binary systems. Queer theory has its roots in poststructuralist and postcolonialist thought, and, for Jagose, describes “those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire.”³⁸ As such, queer theory is concerned with explaining and illuminating the existing binary of heterosexuality/homosexuality in various contexts, and how this system shapes power and knowledge structures. I use ‘queer’ in a similar sense throughout this essay, as a loose yet inclusive umbrella term applicable to those not conforming to dominant sex and gender ideals.

Queer theory developed in a specific set of circumstances. In *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, Sullivan first provides an overview of general societal disposition towards

³⁶ De Sony, *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities*, 144-145.

³⁷ Nikki Sullivan, “Queer”, *Encyclopedia of Political Theory*, Volume One (London: Sage Publications), 2010, 1131.

³⁸ Annemarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: NYU Press), 1996, 3.

homosexuality over the years, thereby putting gay and lesbian sexuality and politics in a historical context. Subsequently, in discussing how and why queer theory emerged in the West in the late twentieth century, she draws heavily on the revolutionary works of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault. Sullivan notes the desire for liberationists in particular to experience homosexuality as something positive, as part of a larger fight to reduce the guilt and isolation of homosexuality, centred around an emphasis of the sameness of people all sexual orientations.³⁹ This queer liberation, centred around a discourse of ‘coming out’ and ‘pride’, emerged in this specific Western context, kick-started by the Stonewall riots and the emergence of “political lesbians.”⁴⁰ Yet notwithstanding Butler and Foucault’s groundbreaking work, and the near-impossible-to-overstate influence they have had on queer theory, feminist theory, and many other fields, they are nevertheless writing from an American perspective against conventional notions of gender, and Foucault in particular writes about a relationship between power and knowledge deeply influenced by the Western structures he was a part of.

Sharon Marcus, building similarly on Butler and Foucault, puts forth a similar argument. She begins by making the valid point that, thanks to earlier works of queer theory, we now “have the tools to pry off the labels that segregate homosexuality from the family, queer studies from feminism, and lesbians from women”, allowing for more accurate deconstruction of how social systems oppress certain identities.⁴¹ She spends the majority of her article discussing the history of queer theory, noting the contribution of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* in particular. Butler analyzes definitions of gender that stem from what she terms a “heterosexual matrix”, or dominant heterosexual ideal, that defines femininity as a desire for men, and, consequently, masculinity as the desire for women.⁴² Building on this relation between gender and sexuality, Sedgwick more completely demonstrates how homosexuality and heterosexuality mutually define each other throughout *Between Men*, arguing that the homosexual sphere has been heavily policed in a contest for power in Western culture. As Marcus states, “For much of the twentieth century, Western Europe and the United States did indeed define queerness in opposition to the holy trinity of heterosexuality, biological reproduction, and the nuclear family”, although this trinity is certainly not foreign to most Muslim-majority societies.⁴³ It is only recently

³⁹ Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: NYU Press), 2003, 23-28.

⁴⁰ Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, 33.

⁴¹ Sharon Marcus, “Queer Theory for Everyone: A Review Essay”, *Signs*, (31:1, 2005), 193.

⁴² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 37-38.

⁴³ Marcus, *Queer Theory for Everyone*, 205-206.

that this is beginning to change; the relative and often precarious acceptance, or tolerance, of queer people is quite a recent phenomenon.

David Ross Fryer provides a somewhat different take on queer theory, arguing for us to think 'queerly': "to think queerly is to recognize that most of us occupy identities in bad faith and to consciously choose not to do so ourselves. Queer thinking is critical thinking through and through".⁴⁴ Though the manner in which he builds his argument is of little relevance here, his concluding remarks are notable. He implores us to take the lived experiences of other individuals as the starting and ending point of our thinking, letting us be able to expose assumptions in gender, understand our own experiences better, and enact new ways of experiencing/performing gender not based on normative expectations.⁴⁵ The focus on lived experiences is one I have aimed to emulate in my own research. Applying Fryer's queer thinking to the works of Marcus, Foucault, Butler, and other queer theorists, it becomes clear that, whilst queer theory and thinking certainly provide a unique perspective from which to view Islamic masculinity, its foundation is still within a Western context.

Arondekar makes note of this issue, in exploring the possibility of translating the analytical paradigm of 'race' outside of its formations in the United States, particularly considering the increase in queer transnational work. She argues that the "conjoining of the categories of queer and race within discourses of globalization needs to be rethought and rearticulated".⁴⁶ Kosnick attempts to do this in her essay on how different cultural minority positions (i.e. queer vs. Muslim) are mobilized against each other in conflicts over 'queer' public leisure spaces in Berlin. Much like Marcus, Kosnick delves into queer urban history, but this time in Berlin. She shows how initial convergence of queer, Muslim, and other oppressed groups eventually shifts when queer acceptance into mainstream politics becomes a goal. Queer neighbourhoods subsequently become gentrified, pushing out the queer unwanted, reproducing social systems in which the white male is still on top, still desired, thereby demonstrating the double marginalisation of queer Muslims within this particular context, though this process is certainly alluded to by queer Moroccans in the Dutch diaspora.⁴⁷

Lastly, Muhsin Hendricks, the openly gay imam of the People's Mosque in Cape Town, takes a different approach. He claims, perhaps rightly so, that queer theory means little to most

⁴⁴ David Ross Fryer, *Thinking Queerly: Race, Sex, Gender, and the Ethics of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 20.

⁴⁵ Fryer, *Thinking Queerly*, 150-156.

⁴⁶ Anjali Arondekar, "Border/Line Sex: Queer Postcolonialities, or How Race Matters Outside the United States", *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* (2006, 7:2), 240.

⁴⁷ Kira Kosnick, "A Clash of Subcultures? Questioning Queer-Muslim Antagonisms in the Neoliberal City", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (2015, 39:4), 692-693.

Muslims, and instead argues for acceptance through basic theology. In an attempt to fill in the void on homosexuality within Islam with basic theology, he explores alternative interpretations of divine texts. By focusing on the Qur'anic emphasis on life, equality, and justice, and the Prophet's penchant for protecting the vulnerable and discriminated, he argues that, had homosexuality been a marginalised sexual orientation and identity at the time, the Prophet would have spoken for the rights of homosexuals.⁴⁸ He turns to alternate interpretations of the Qur'anic story of the people of Lut, claiming their sin was not homosexuality, but rather temple prostitution and failing to heed the warnings of Prophet Lot. As such, "it is a mistake and contrary to the core principles of the Quran to perceive [homosexual and transgender] people as detrimental to social institutions such as marriage, the family and even society as a whole".⁴⁹

These are only some examples of how some theorists have begun to more explicitly write about the relationship between queerness and Muslimness, and how the apparent opposition between the two can be reconciled, either on a theoretical level or a more personal one. Understanding this theoretical background is crucial in determining the theoretical space queer Muslims occupy, and, as a result, analysing how queerness interplays with Islamic masculinity. What and where exactly this theoretical space is, is expounded upon by Momin Rahman.

Queer Muslims: A Theoretical Anomaly

Rahman, a queer Muslim, describes himself as "an educationally and materially privileged British-born Bengali male... I am not simply a gay man, but a gay British Bengali, irreducibly racialized in my queerness and thus occupying an intersectional location in terms of gender, race, class and sexuality."⁵⁰ Being so open about his own positionality lends a personal touch to what may otherwise seem a very theoretical discussion, and makes clear the real-life consequences of occupying the intersectional location of being a queer Muslim. Similar to Arondekar's call for reconceptualising how we think about race and sexuality, Rahman proposes a rigorously applied intersectional perspective in trying to reconcile and make sense of queer Muslims' lived experiences. The premise of *Queer as Intersectionality* is that "gay Muslims occupy an intersectional social location between political and social cultures, and that they

⁴⁸ Muhsin Hendricks, "Islamic Texts: A Source for Acceptance of Queer Individuals into Mainstream Muslim Society", *The Equal Rights Review*, (Vol. 5, 2010), 38-39.

⁴⁹ Hendricks, *Islamic Texts*, 42.

⁵⁰ Momin Rahman, *Homosexualities, Muslim Cultures and Modernity* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 10.

suffer oppression through this position”.⁵¹ Rahman looks particularly at queer Muslims, and wishes to theorize this intersectionality through a “queer focus on unstable ontologies”, suggesting “a more rigorous application of intersectionality than has been apparent, focusing on both its demand to appreciate difference within oppressed identity categories, and its sociological demand to think across realms of the social in how identities are constituted”.⁵² As such, queer theory needs to be reconceptualized in a way that fits queer Muslims and can make sense of their lives and their lived experiences at the intersections of identity.

He expands upon these ideas in *Homosexualities, Muslim Cultures, and Modernity*. He states that the Muslim experience of sexual diversity politics is bound to be significantly different from the Western one: “This reality undermines any assumption that the processes of Muslim modernization will inevitably lead to the same outcomes around sexuality as those experienced in the West”.⁵³ In navigating the complex web of relations between Islam, homosexuality, and modernity, he successfully lays out how contemporary political discourses ultimately frame the opposition of homosexuality and Muslim cultures, demonstrating how Western countries can trumpet their acceptance and apparent promulgation of queer rights and use this as a yardstick by which to measure a level of “progress” which Muslim societies have not yet achieved. This is hypocritical on behalf of Western countries, as “absence is the most common condition of LGBTIQ issues in the West”, and the acceptance of queer rights is only a very recent phenomenon. In short, “the argument seems to be that, like gender equality, the conditions for homosexual public acceptance and rights are possible only in the liberal democratic conditions of governance”.⁵⁴ Yet both its absence from these models historically, and the relatively recent appearance of pushes for LGBTQ and gender equality, suggest that either democratic principles are not inherently favorable to such issues, or that other political and social structures are much more important in how sexual issues change within modernity.⁵⁵ As such, the historical development of queer rights in the West cannot merely be replicated in Muslim societies, due to the two significantly different historical contexts and vastly different experiences of modernity, but also not least because these development patterns *have already happened* in the West and have continuing influence within Muslim societies.

⁵¹ Momin Rahman, “Queer as Intersectionality: Theorizing Gay Muslim Identities” *British Sociological Association*, (2010, 44:5), 946

⁵² Rahman, *Queer as Intersectionality*, 949.

⁵³ Rahman, *Homosexualities, Muslim Cultures and Modernity*, 4.

⁵⁴ Rahman, *Homosexualities, Muslim Cultures and Modernity*, 28-30.

⁵⁵ Rahman, *Homosexualities, Muslim Cultures and Modernity*, 47.

One of the ways this influence is seen is in Joseph Massad's 'Gay International'. The notion of the 'Gay International' comes from Massad's belief that the social forces and historical events that produce homosexual identity have spread throughout the world, helping create a queer rights discourse focused on the universality of gay identity. In other words, the products of queer theory and queer thought are exported to the rest of the world, yet remain based in their original locality.⁵⁶ Effectively, this has stabilized same-sex desires into Western identities, and has consequently created heteronormative responses from Arab states. Whilst this argument is useful in partially explaining the idea that homosexuality is a 'Western phenomenon', Rahman claims it is also somewhat of a paralysing argument. Massad is stating that when Western ontological frameworks enter broader discourse, they are seen as "universal" with little to no possibility of adapting the framework to a local context. Not only does this not allow us to deconstruct the discourse and discuss the relation between homophobia and Islamophobia, but it is also not entirely correct, given how queer Muslims are appropriating queer theory and adapting it to their local contexts, also speaking against the uniformity of the queer Muslim experience. In presenting an overview of research done on queer Muslims, both in Muslim societies and in the West, Rahman concludes that Western conceptualizations of both politics and identities are an important resource for local and national developments of queer identities, but are not necessarily a blueprint for how sexual diversity will develop in non-Western cultures. Whilst a globalised gay identity can be useful in some respects, thus, it is always adapted locally, speaking strongly against Massad's 'Gay International' and demonstrating the agency available to queer Muslims despite their being rendered as 'impossible' or 'unviable' subjects due to their being both queer and Muslim.⁵⁷

The Meem organization in Lebanon demonstrates a form of this appropriation and local adaptation. This group was created by lesbian and bisexual women as a support community for non-heterosexual and transgender individuals in August 2007.⁵⁸ Their publication "aims to map out the strategies used by Meem in resisting... diverse religious fundamentalism(s)" as "many queer people are excluded from most religious discourses and histories and, therefore, find themselves having to abandon either their faith or their sexual identity."⁵⁹ Particularly in the case of Lebanon, and its legally recognised 18 distinct religious-ethnic communities, these religious

⁵⁶ Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2008, 161-163.

⁵⁷ Rahman, *Homosexualities, Muslim Cultures and Modernity*, 103-111.

⁵⁸ Nadine M. "Arab Queer Women and Transgenders Confronting Diverse Religious Fundamentalisms: The Case of Meem in Lebanon" *Feminists on the Frontline: Case Studies of Resisting and Challenging Fundamentalisms* (AWID, 2010), 7.

⁵⁹ M., *The Case of Meem in Lebanon*, 2.

fundamentalisms are multiple. Nadine M. argues that the very existence of Meem “as a diverse yet united community—one of the rare few in Lebanon—is in itself a challenge to the sectarianism endemic in Lebanese society and politics.”⁶⁰ The organisation takes advantage of existing political tensions and patriarchal ideas that women are not threatening or capable of producing real change, to ally itself with priests, sheikhs, and other women/human rights organisations to spread its message and establish a place in society for queer women. These alliances are important “because we are convinced that single-issue politics is not effective politics. Queer women are women first; many are working-class women, women from different ethno-religious communities, from different nationalities living in Lebanon.”⁶¹ M. also makes a hugely important point when discussing the difficulties in allying itself with Western pro-queer organisations, or using English terminology to frame identities:

While the West lures us with its trends, its individual liberties, its parades, its lesbian shows, its queer singers and its gay movies, we understand the power structures that made these trends possible...queer people in Lebanon are more likely to frame their identities in English or French (even when speaking Arabic), because that’s where these words exist more freely and are less laden with judgments or prejudices, and because these are the languages in which we find books and websites about sexuality. So the struggle to define oneself as lesbian and Arab is an incredibly difficult one. But is is crucial.⁶²

It is clear that Meem understands the nuances of being a queer Arab organisation and the local and global pressures upon it, and its strategies of allying itself, on its own terms, with important religious figures, organisations, and even popular blogs, demonstrate an intelligence and understanding of how to carve out a space in society for queer Arab women, and which strategies to pursue to strengthen its position in Lebanese society.

The trans community in Iran highlights another way in which queer Muslims appropriate and adapt to local circumstances. Afsaneh Najmabadi provides a compelling insight into the relationship between the categories of transsexual and homosexual in Iran, where the former is legal but the latter is not. Whilst she is mainly focused on mapping “contemporary discourses and practices of transsexuality in a longer historical trajectory and intersecting discursive sites, including medicine, religious doctrine, psychology, criminology, the family, trans activism, and practices of everyday life”, the dichotomy of the acceptable trans vis-a-vis the deviant homosexual is a running theme throughout.⁶³ Najmabadi devotes many pages to understanding

⁶⁰ M., *The Case of Meem in Lebanon*, 3

⁶¹ M., *The Case of Meem in Lebanon*, 15

⁶² M., *The Case of Meem in Lebanon*, 17.

⁶³ Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran*, (London: Duke University Press), 2014, 3.

the historical processes that led to this intriguing categorisation, noting the ‘marriage imperative’ - i.e the extreme social pressure to marry and start a family - as one particular reason for this. After all, “getting married was, and continues to be, a life-cycle social expectation, without which one does not become an adult in others’ and possibly in one’s own perception.”⁶⁴ In some same-sex couples, one may even feel forced to undergo gender transition to salvage the relationship and fulfil this imperative. She notes that distinctions between sex, gender, and sexuality do not apply particularly well in Iran; transsexuality and transgenderism in Iran is not historically shaped by queer theory/activism, but has rather been lumped together with non-straight sexualities as a result of the 1980s policies post-Islamic Revolution. Moreover, with no distinction between sexuality and gender emerging, as the word *jins* encompasses all; this very nondistinction actually forges the possibility of living in this ambiguous space. As Najmabadi puts it, “the closed question of the forbidden-ness of same-sex practices has become open to ambiguous possibilities... Is s/he *ts*? Is s/he *homosexual*? An unequivocal answer to the question of identification can be deferred.”⁶⁵ Both this example and the existence of Meem demonstrates two very different methods used by queer Muslims in negotiating social and legal stigma, speaking to the unique challenges faced by queer Iranians as opposed to queer Lebanese or queer Moroccans.

Lastly, Brian Whitaker touches upon similar issues of the marriage imperative and Rahman’s homosexual vs. Muslim framework, but focusing largely on Egypt. He similarly mentions homosexuality not being conceived of as a political identity today - perhaps due to historically relatively tolerant attitudes towards homosexuality - and also puts forth the same argument that Rahman makes, namely that homosexuality is often thought of as a Western phenomenon which threatens local traditions and virtues.⁶⁶ Whitaker then turns to a perceived generational divide. Internet access has made it easier for Egyptian youth to become well-informed about their sexuality - and speak to each other about it anonymously on certain blogs or websites - whereas their parents are still ill-informed and may send them to psychologists to cure their illness. Access to the internet does not change the social imperative of marriage, however, leaving many to either accept it or leave the Middle East, be it by travel or, in some cases, suicide.⁶⁷ Yet there is also significant online information that is harmful to queer youth; groups such as IslamOnline, where scholars can be asked about questions on given topics, state homosexuality is a choice, and encourage psychological treatment to defeat the illness.

⁶⁴ Najmabadi, *Professing Selves*, 123.

⁶⁵ Najmabadi, *Professing Selves*, 274.

⁶⁶ Whitaker, *Unspeakable Love*, 11-14.

⁶⁷ Whitaker, *Unspeakable Love*, 20-27.

IslamOnline ironically turns to fundamentalist Christian groups for support “in the absence of grateful testimonials on the effectiveness of [psychological treatment]”, as Whitaker acidly remarks.⁶⁸

In short, both Rahman and Najmabadi emphatically argue against Massad’s notion of the Gay International, and demonstrate how queer Muslims are able to adapt the ontologically Western framework of LGBTQ rights to their own society in facing their unique challenges, and lay claim to these rights but from a Muslim perspective. As the Meem organization so aptly demonstrates, queer Muslims are evidently aware of the very real challenges and dangers they face, but, as Whitaker also underscores, they are simultaneously able to work creatively within an often oppressive system to enhance their own lives, and constantly struggle to improve the situation for future generations.

Lived Realities

We have so far analyzed the specific circumstances in which queer theory came about and how and when the queer liberation movement in the West occurred. After this, we turned to Rahman’s detailed explanation of why the same blueprint cannot be blindly followed in a Muslim context, and have shown how both the trans community in Iran and the Meem organization in Lebanon reflect how queer Muslim groups are appropriating the goals of queer liberation and adapting them to their local contexts. We can now turn to the final stage of our review: queer Muslims’ own descriptions of their lived realities.

One of the ways in which queer Muslims are able to convey their stories is through anthologies. *Hijab: Unveiling Queer Muslim Lives* is a publication by the Inner Circle, an organisation of queer Muslims founded by Muhsin Hendricks, the gay imam of the Cape Town mosque mentioned previously. The organisation works to reconcile homosexuality and transsexualism with Islam, and compiled this anthology from stories related to the Inner Circle staff by queer South African Muslims over the course of many years.⁶⁹ The very first story of *Hijab* is a painful read: “I am always doing the wrong thing. I always need punishment. I must always be alone. Because I am useless.” After a horrific punishment by his father, the interviewee ends the story with “It took me years to realise that it is okay to be gay.”⁷⁰ Themes

⁶⁸ Whitaker, *Unspeakable Love*, 62.

⁶⁹ Pepe Hendricks (ed). *Hijab: Unveiling Queer Muslim Lives*, (Cape Town: The Inner Circle, 2009), vii-ix.

⁷⁰ Inner Circle, *Hijab*, 4-5.

appearing throughout often involved bargaining with God, believing homosexual feelings to be a test and promising God to not give in to homosexual desires and feelings.

Stories of punishment by male peers (in the case of gay/bisexual men), or generic family abuse, appear in almost all stories. Without detracting from the uniqueness of every story, and the idiosyncrasies of the each individual's lived reality, reading these multiple anthologies reveals a general trend that arguably does not differ too much from non-religious coming out stories. Many of the stories start with a lack of self-understanding, not knowing why you are bullied, or why you prefer the same sex, which one queer man describes as such:

Worry because I couldn't understand why I fantasised about boys not girls. Anxiety because I didn't know what the future would hold if I had to marry a girl. Confusion because I didn't know what to think about what was going on inside me. And sad because I didn't have anyone to help me to make sense of what I was feeling.⁷¹

Particularly the more effeminate boys were bullied, violently beaten, or worse. The previous passage, however, touches upon a very important theme: the lack of visibility. The 11-year old boy had nobody to talk to about these feelings. Due to a lack of role models growing up, and a general aversion to discussing any form of sexuality, this made it both very difficult for queer Muslims to accept themselves, but also increased hostility from family, as visibility and an understanding of queer sexuality is largely nonexistent apart from in derogatory terms. Two stories in particular discuss this; in one of these, a gay man flees his family due to them not accepting his sexuality, and they spread the word around the entire community to ensure he would leave Cape Town. He eventually ends up with some family who did not know about his sexual orientation, until they found out and threw him out because he was "filthy" and 'needed to be cleansed of [his] sins.'⁷² One lesbian woman also notes that, once she came out to her parents, "her 'pious' mother spat and swore at her as she left: 'Do not bother to come back until you have made *taubah* and changed your evil ways'." Despite being respected in the community as a good Muslim and kind individual, after coming out her family disowned her because "Being a lesbian was the only side of her that they saw".⁷³

Most stories - certainly not all - continue with an eventual self-reconciliation of being Muslim and being queer, though reconciliation with family happens infrequently. There are frequent questions of why everything became so complicated, of whether the Qur'an or society is at fault, of whether the Cape Town ulama and their blind following of hadith of questionable reliability should be challenged, yet many individuals retain their personal belief in God, and end

⁷¹ Inner Circle, *Hijab*, 140.

⁷² Inner Circle, *Hijab*, 29.

⁷³ Inner Circle, *Hijab*, 42.

up with a stronger sense of self. One woman in particular scoffs that “A burnt-out old man rooted in a patriarchal society will not be able to guide the life of a lesbian Muslim.”⁷⁴

Siraj, on the other hand, interviewed gay Muslim males living in London, exploring how some men combine (or choose not to combine) their identities of homosexual, male, and Muslim, and how they reformulate their self-understanding in reconciling these identities. With the larger goal of making the topic of homosexuality in Islam more visible, she recruited several gay Muslims from various London organizations. Two of her seven interviewees noted how Islamic values are central to their lives; Omar, for instance, states that by understanding and justifying his sexuality through his religion, his religious attachment to his sexuality deepened, and the two identities are almost meshed together.⁷⁵ Others, however, chose to renounce their Islamic beliefs due to the Qur’an’s view on homosexuality. Both Jamal and Adil choose to keep the two identities as separate as possible, being able to neither suppress his gay feelings, nor willing to recant his Muslimness. After all, the Qur’an is relatively clear on homosexuality being wrong.⁷⁶ Similarly to the stories of queer South African Muslims, attraction to men caused a significant deal of guilt and inner conflict, causing an “intense and prolonged period of self-harassment,” exacerbated by largely negative responses to coming out - if this step was even undertaken.⁷⁷

Merabet chooses to forego the interview method, and instead writes an urban ethnography of Beirut, demonstrating the gritty details of how themes of honour, queer visibility, and legal and social rights of queer individuals play out on a country and city shaped by previous civil wars. One of the various facets of queer Beirut life he focuses on is in internet usage, specifically chat room usage in Internet cafes. He provides a transcription of a very explicit conversation between two men, who are very direct when it comes to asking what the other likes and what they are looking for. However, Merabet notes that, due to the difficulty in being able to find a place to actually hook up, “the chat platform becomes a site of projections and dreams that, for the most part, are impossible to realize.”⁷⁸ Gay Beirut life seems to be rather centred on projections and dreams, stolen glances and unfulfilled desires. Throughout his ethnography, it becomes clear that, whilst there are a few spaces that are known hangout spots

⁷⁴ Inner Circle, *Hijab*, 152.

⁷⁵ Asifa Siraj, “On being homosexual and Muslim: conflicts and challenges”, in Ouzgane’s *Islamic Masculinities*, 204-205.

⁷⁶ It is pertinent to note that this article was written in 2003, and much of the other works discussed here reflect that strides have certainly been made in developing a different, more gay-friendly theology and interpretation of certain Qur’anic passages.

⁷⁷ Siraj, *On being homosexual and Muslim*, 205-210.

⁷⁸ Sofian Merabet, *Queer Beirut*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 60.

for *khassun* (those concerned with being gay) or *faytin bil-jaw* (part of the gay atmosphere), most of these spots vary over time, due to the changing nature of who is able to appropriate these places, the potential dangers in becoming too visible and facing normative societal homophobia, and the changing nature of social and cultural capital. One of these hangout spots that remained relatively consistent, however, is Dunkin Donuts.

Whitaker briefly mentions Dunkin Donuts as well, wondering bemusedly “exactly why gay men found it so attractive is a bit of a mystery, since most of those who preen themselves at its tables would not dream of eating a doughnut for fear of the damage it might do to their waistline.”⁷⁹ Merabet is able to answer this puzzle, as he remarks that its location made it a prime place to see and be seen: another enormously important part of gay Beirut social life. Being able to show off the latest watch, put your new phone on the table next to large car keys of a (potentially “borrowed”) BMW or Mercedes, is all part of making an impression and gaining prestige, all of which appear to be a large part of gay life in Beirut in the absence of actually being able to fulfil one’s desires.⁸⁰ Whilst Merabet sometimes appears to have gotten a little too friendly with his interlocutors, this close relationship allows him to frequent many areas where gay cruising happens, and to gain access to the gritty details of gay Beirut life.

Perhaps the most important of these details is the recurring theme of disavowment when their sexuality is questioned: *ana mesh heyk*. I am not like that. “That” is a *luti*, a *tobji*, or a *shadh*; a fairy, a faggot, or something of the like. “That” is associated with being feminine, with being weak and submissive, with wanting to be dominated sexually and deserving to be dominated socially and treated with contempt because “that” is an Other that needs to be repudiated. “That” is associated with not being *dakkar* (virile and masculine), with not being the penetrator, and with not having enough social, cultural, and economic capital to be of relevance.⁸¹ With this “homosexual homophobia” - as Merabet terms it - normative, it is perhaps a logical outcome that no shared sense of identity has emerged which could potentially be channelled into a political movement. It is intriguing that Merabet reaches this conclusion, which stands in contrast to the existence of Meem as a solidary group for queer women and transgender people in the very same city. Whilst a definitive reason for this contrast cannot be given, it certainly appears as though homosexual homophobia, or the desire to adhere to a prescribed ideal of Lebanese masculinity, is still vital for many gay Lebanese men, whereas

⁷⁹ Whitaker, *Unspeakable Love*, 46.

⁸⁰ Merabet, *Queer Beirut*, 21-23

⁸¹ Merabet, *Queer Beirut*, 143-146.

queer women can almost use Lebanese social expectations of women being submissive and incapable to their advantage.

Evidently, the lives of queer Muslims vary all over the world, and although the reality of being a queer Muslim can often come with significant tensions, disadvantages, and dangers, I have also shown how queer Muslims negotiate and fight for their place in society in many different ways. There is certainly no defining queer Muslim experience; even within Beirut, Merabet and M. demonstrate the widely different social pressures and possibilities for queer Muslims to assimilate. The studies on queer Muslims in South Africa and in London further reflect this, providing many different avenues in which queer individuals choose to live their lives and maintain their relationship between their queerness and Muslimness. In the following chapter, I explore how this relationship is negotiated by queer Moroccan men in particular, analysing the interplay of these various identities, and drawing upon my own experiences in Morocco.

Chapter Two - Moroccan Lived Realities

In this section, I wish to focus on the realities of queer Moroccan Muslim men. In the previous section, I established the various manners in which queer Muslim men across the world choose to engage with their various identities, and how they seek to make a life for themselves notwithstanding at times intense social pressures and dangers. In understanding how the framework of queer Islamic masculinities fits specifically into a Moroccan context, I will analyse how some queer Moroccan men choose to navigate these difficulties. First, I will provide a brief overview of the legal framework under which queer Moroccan men live, and how this is reflected in social attitudes. Subsequently, the majority of this chapter will focus on the fieldwork I engaged in during a three-week journey to Morocco near the end of 2017, relaying both the positive aspects of spending time in Marrakech in particular, and the unfortunate setbacks I experienced in researching NGOs and hoping to come into contact with queer Moroccans in Marrakesh. As a result, I was forced to shift my focus and my initial fieldwork ideas, ultimately using media productions rather than personal interviews. The consequences of this amendment will be discussed in both this chapter and the next.

Legal and Social Framework

Article 489 of the Moroccan penal code criminalises "lewd or unnatural acts with an individual of the same sex" with punishments ranging from 6 months to 3 years imprisonment, and a potential fine between 120 to 1200 dirham (roughly between 10 to 100 Euro).⁸² Though the illegal status of homosexuality does not, naturally, translate to its non-existence, it does force homosexual activity to be more circumspect, particularly when Article 489 is actually enforced with some frequency. For instance, Al Arabiya reports that two men were imprisoned for four months on grounds of homosexuality, though the two men claim they were just sitting in their car together.⁸³ More recently, in Fkih Ben Saleh, six men were convicted of homosexuality and faced up to three years in prison.⁸⁴ In 2015, two more men were arrested for homosexuality and convicted after a dubious trial occurring only 5 days after the arrest with no witnesses being

⁸² Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, *Morocco: The treatment of homosexuals, including protection offered by the state and the attitude of the population*, 5 March 2007. <http://www.refworld.org/docid/469cd6af0.html>

⁸³ AFP, "Lawyer: Two Moroccans jailed for homosexuality", Al Arabiya English, 21 May 2013, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/05/21/Lawyer-Two-Moroccans-jailed-for-homosexuality-.html>

⁸⁴ Massoud Hayoun, "Morocco convicts six men for homosexuality", AlJazeera America, 15 May 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/5/15/morocco-convicts6menforhomosexualityamidnationaldialogueongays.html>

called.⁸⁵ Yet perhaps the most interesting - and telling - example on both legal and social attitudes to homosexuality are seen in the town of Ksar el Kebir in 2008. Rumours of a “gay wedding” occurring in a house in town owned by Fouad Fretter, for which the only evidence was of a man dancing suggestively in women’s clothes. Whilst it is difficult to ascertain what exactly happened, it is clear that word of the ‘wedding’ spread sufficiently that a sizeable crowd showed up and marched on the local mosque. The crowd then “attacked the car of a jeweler accused of funding the party, ransacked Fretter’s wine store and pelted his house with stones and bottles as his family hid within.”⁸⁶ Eventually, the house was destroyed and four of the people involved in the “wedding” were imprisoned. With these examples being the only ones that make the news, it is not entirely surprising that Harit claims that thousands of men have been jailed for being gay since Morocco gained its independence in 1956, though this claim is unsubstantiated.⁸⁷ By no means do these examples speak for all Moroccans, but they do serve to highlight the homophobic nature of Moroccan society and the legal and social threat of even appearing to have anything to do with homosexuality.

This viewpoint is shared by Grotti and Daïf, who argue that “Homosexuality in Morocco has two other H’s to contend with: *Hchouma* (shame) and *Haram* (sin).”⁸⁸ As such, ‘coming out’ is not really an option in the current climate. Short-term goals for LGBTQ activists in MENA⁸⁹ countries are thus more focused on cessation of government persecution and repealing anti-homosexual laws, rather than, for instance, marriage and adoption rights, though these may be long-term goals and shared with Western LGBTQ organisations. Hence, Grotti concludes that, if you want to live in Morocco as a homosexual, there is only one way: absolute discretion. Jamal, one of the men Grotti interviews, mentions that there are no reference points, no visibility, nothing to help a confused and lonely 15-year old when he realises he is attracted to other boys - “You try to kid yourself that maybe you’re bisexual or it’s just a passing phase.”⁹⁰ Hassan, by contrast, decided to come out to his mother, with the almost expected consequence of having to break up with his boyfriend and renounce that part of his life simply to avoid getting disowned by

⁸⁵ Scott Roberts, “Morocco jails 2 men for committing a ‘deviant sexual act’”, PinkNews, 5 March 2015, <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2015/03/05/morocco-jails-2-men-for-committing-a-deviant-sexual-act/>

⁸⁶ Tom Pfeiffer and Zakia Abdennebi, “Liberals and Islamists clash over Morocco “gay wedding””, 13 March 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-rights-morocco/liberals-and-islamists-clash-over-morocco-gay-wedding-idUSL0581448520080313>

⁸⁷ Fouâd Harit, “Maroc: une cyber-campagne contre l’homophobie” 17 May 2013, <http://www.afrik.com/maroc-une-cyber-campagne-contre-l-homophobie>. Original in French, translation by author.

⁸⁸ Laetitia Grotti and Maria Daïf, “Gay in Morocco: A Mini-Dossier Compiled for the Moroccan Weekly *Telquel*” *Index on Censorship*, (2005, 34:3), 154.

⁸⁹ Middle East and North African

⁹⁰ Grotti and Daïf, *Gay in Morocco*, 156.

his mother.⁹¹ In short, Moroccan society is for the most part homophobic, and with society, religion, and the law all presenting homosexuality as perverse and deviant, it is little surprise that discretion is of the utmost importance.

Yet there appears to be a greater deal of leniency when it comes to gay tourists visiting Morocco. Ibtissame “Betty” Lachgar, co-founder of pro-gay and abortion rights organization Alternative Movement for Individual Liberties, argues that Moroccan authorities promote a double standard in which gay foreigners are largely allowed to do what they want.⁹² Figueredo supports this interpretation, arguing that the Moroccan king Mohammed VI has a vested interest in not applying these laws to foreigners, under the guise of promoting his country as a beautiful tourist destination whilst being mindful of growing international anti-homophobic sentiment.⁹³ Indeed, various travel blogs appear make a similar argument. Whilst they may not be the most academic of sources for information, they nevertheless provide valuable insight into what gay tourists should expect, and the kind of information tourists are looking for. Logically, all caution against public displays of affection in general, but it is interesting that they share many tips for places to go, such as particular areas and bars and Marrakech⁹⁴ or the differences in gay life in Agadir, Marrakech, and Tangier.⁹⁵ Hoare takes note of Marrakech as well, but discusses it in the context of Ray Cole, a British tourist to Morocco who was arrested in Marrakech in 2014 for homosexuality after he was spotted together with his young Moroccan (boy)friend. He claims, presumably rightly so in the context of these other stories, that this would never have occurred had a local Moroccan not been involved in the situation, and that, we would never have known about this situation if a foreigner had not been involved.⁹⁶ As such, Harit’s claim that thousands of men have been jailed for being gay since Morocco gained independence does not seem so infeasible.

Initial Fieldwork

As a result of the aforementioned sources, I chose to focus my studies on Morocco, and conducting fieldwork on this topic in Morocco seemed to be a feasible option. My initial fieldwork

⁹¹ Ibid 156-157

⁹² Hayoun, *Morocco convicts six men for homosexuality*

⁹³ Michael Figueredo “An Examination of Factors that Catalyze LGBTQ Movements in Middle Eastern and North African Authoritarian Regimes” (2015), Graduate Thesis, 25-26, accessed at https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3483&context=open_access_etds

⁹⁴ “Gay-friendly: Marrakech for homosexuals”, Travelguide Marrakech, accessed 20 October 2017 at <https://travelguide-marrakech.com/gay-friendly-marrakesh-for-homosexuals/>

⁹⁵ David Brown, “Gay Travel in Morocco: An Overview”, Journey Beyond Travel, accessed 21 October 2017 at <https://www.journeybeyondtravel.com/blog/gay-travel-morocco.html>

⁹⁶ Patrick Strudwick, “Ray Cole interview: ‘I would go back to Moroccan prison hell for Jamal’”, The Guardian, 16 October 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/16/ray-cole-interview-jailed-morocco-homosexual>

plan was to get in touch with queer Moroccan men and conduct interviews with them. Additionally, I intended to email several human rights organisations such as Aswat, review Mithli, an LGBT magazine produced in Morocco, and come into contact with and eventually interview members of Kif-Kif, an NGO and LGBTQ rights organization for queer Moroccans. In light of the background literature, I initially felt as though my fieldwork ideas needed minimal revising, and I was knowledgeable and confident in my ability to perform this fieldwork successfully. However, as the weeks progressed, I realised I had perhaps been a bit naive in how I intended to come into contact with queer Moroccan men. I had a few contacts who promised to put me in communication with other individuals both in- and outside Morocco, who would then be able to introduce me to other individuals I could potentially interview, starting a process of snowball sampling. This would have allowed me to interview at least a couple of gay men regarding how they reconcile being a gay Muslim man, both on an individual level and on a societal level regarding family relationships, marriage, and reputation. Yet none of my initial contacts panned out, and I found it to be incredibly difficult to find an 'in' to the gay world in Marrakesh - if such a world even exists anymore. As previously mentioned, multiple travel guides and articles make Marrakesh out to be relatively accepting of homosexuality, largely due to its status as a tourist destination. However, the legal status of homosexuality and the enforcement of this law made this a more difficult area to study than I had hoped. Furthermore, my own status as a white male may have impeded by ability to find an 'in' into the gay world of Marrakesh. It proved for me to be impossible to find an initial contact who could introduce me to the rest of the gay scene in Marrakesh; although there were two individuals whom I initially believed could have helped, one of them was likely a male prostitute (which two travel⁹⁷ guides⁹⁸ note is a distinct possibility), and the other, an individual working at a local cafe who gave me his number as I was enjoying my meal there, turned out, perhaps not unsurprisingly, to be more interested in my money. This was likely another case where the reputation of Marrakesh as a tourist destination caused me, a white male, to be seen as a financial opportunity (along with the many other white tourists wandering around the touristic heart of Marrakesh), leaving me to wonder how being in Marrakesh, as a researcher, was affecting the very thing I was attempting to research.

Furthermore, during my travels to Marrakesh, I spent some time walking around *jamaa' al-fanâ'*, the main square, market place, and, according to Hoare, the city's primary gay cruising

⁹⁷ Liam Hoare, "What's It Like to Be Gay in... Morocco?", Slate, 22 July 2015, http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2015/07/22/gay_in_morocco_the_experience_is_very_different_for_moroccans_and_foreigners.html

⁹⁸ Travelguide Marrakech, *Gay-Friendly: Marrakech for Homosexuals*

spot after dusk.⁹⁹ The square is beautiful, filled during the day with the rich smells of Moroccan spices, vendors shouting at every passerby to buy their fresh fruit juices, men attempting to sell sunglasses, and tourists leisurely strolling around whilst the sun beats down.



(picture taken from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jemaa_el-Fnaa)

Come nighttime, once the temperature has become slightly more agreeable, the square becomes even more lively, with some vendors being replaced by food stalls, story tellers, and men bringing along their own sound systems and performing dances, much to the delight of some tourists. Though Hoare claims it is a gay cruising spot - and I imagine the location, with several small streets leading off the main square and to the narrow streets of the souk on the one end, and the opportunity to go to bars and clubs on other end, at Avenue Mohamed V, would be perfect for this - I did not notice any activity of the sort. It is perhaps possible that *jamaa' al-fanâ'* is no longer the cruising spot of choice - as the articles referencing this location as a cruising spot are nearly three years old at best - but this may also be due to the active police presence, as there were uniformed soldiers with machine guns patrolling the square. Whilst my visit to Marrakech was certainly fruitful in terms of understanding the layout of the city, observing how men interact with each other in public spaces and other male-dominated spaces such as local cafes, and perhaps play the role of family provider in their attempts to sell their wares to tourists, it unfortunately did not result in interviews with queer Muslim men themselves.

Kifkif

A second issue I ran into was attempting to research the organisation Kifkif. Kifkif, meaning 'same' in Moroccan Arabic, is an NGO and LGBTQ rights organization for queer Moroccans. Although my original intention was to contact them through their website, which was operational at the beginning of my preparation for this project, their website was subsequently

⁹⁹ Hoare, *What's It Like to Be Gay in... Morocco?*

taken down, presumably by the Moroccan government. After around two months, the website resurfaced, largely in Spanish; the organization has been licensed and checked in Spain since 2008 due to it being illegal in Morocco, and works for LGBTQ acceptance in both countries.¹⁰⁰ This url has also since been taken down - though, fearing this would occur again, I managed to copy down the information before the website was taken offline - and been replaced by yet another url with slightly different information, which also lasted a few weeks. Their email and other contact information also continuously changed, and I was unable to initially reach the NGO. It is unclear how many times this process has repeated itself. Any Facebook groups and Twitter handles that are linked to Kifkif, or that are intended as a support group for queer Moroccans, have also been shut down or their most recent activity stems from over five years ago.¹⁰¹ At the time of writing - May 2018 - Kifkif's website is operational once more under the url <https://kifkif.info>, though it contains significantly different information from earlier iterations. The current version of the website only refers to staff working in Spain, focusing particularly on social inclusion of all individuals and LGBTQ migrants, but not referring to any activities or organisation in Morocco. Indeed, Professor Abdessamad Dialmy, a researcher who has published over 40 academic books and articles within the field of gender, sexuality and Islam in Morocco in 30 years of study, believes that Kifkif is no longer active in Morocco.¹⁰² In May 2018, I was finally able to contact Kifkif through the most recent iteration of their website; Javier Navarro López, one of the social workers, informed me that the organisation still has ties to Morocco, but predominantly in the legal area, where it advocates for the rights of LGBTQ individuals and victims of hate crimes. However, Kifkif has no offices in Morocco "for obvious reasons", which limits their scope of action.¹⁰³ Some of the information provided on previous iterations of the website, however, still exists in my research notes, and as a Google site owned by Kifkif Project, both of which contain Kifkif's mission statement:

The fundamental aim of Kifkif is the annulment of Article 489 of the Moroccan penal code. This law is used above all to target the members of the LGBT community, violating the intimacy of its members and denying them basic human rights. The abolition of this law will assist in reducing social persecution and pave the way to achieving equality for the LGBT community in Morocco. Kifkif's other main objective is fighting against the

¹⁰⁰ John R. Bradley, *Behind the Veil of Vice: The Business and Culture of Sex in the Middle East*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 250.

¹⁰¹ Similarly, Menna w Fena (for us and by us) is an internal group within Kifkif, specifically for lesbian, bisexual, and trans women, launched in 2010, but its website was shut down soon after.

¹⁰² Ministry of Immigration and Integration: The Danish Immigration Service, "Morocco: *Situation of LGBT Persons*", Copenhagen, March 2017, 13. https://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/90FC4C64-BAB6-403B-8CC4-DAE8F94A5B70/0/Marokko_LGBT_FFMrapport06032017.pdf

¹⁰³ See Appendix A. Original in Spanish, translation by author.

AIDS epidemic and other sexually transmitted diseases whilst advocating for the rights of patients.¹⁰⁴

Unfortunately, Kifkif is indeed no longer directly, or publicly, operating in Morocco, the “obvious reasons” most likely referring to the constant attacks on their internet domains, and the legal and social framework in which they have had to operate. Yet even despite their non-activity, their mission statement is still relevant for understanding the framework in which they conducted their activities. Their fundamental target of repealing Article 489 relates back to what Dino Suhonic, the Bosnian Muslim in the Netherlands whose lecture was mentioned in the introduction, touched upon; how the initial focus needs to be on decriminalising homosexuality, before other issues such as social awareness and acceptance can be discussed. Nevertheless, this still represented a significant setback in my fieldwork, as I had hoped to interview some members of the organisation, an alternative research avenue yielded more success.

Mithli magazine

Kifkif is also the producer of the magazine *Mithli* (a non-pejorative word for homosexual, meaning ‘like me’ in Arabic). It was launched in April 2010 and was the first LGBT magazine in the Arab world. The organisation did not bother applying for a formal application for the magazine because, as one staff member puts it, “we knew it would be rejected.”¹⁰⁵ 200 copies of the first edition were published clandestinely in Rabat and spread amongst interested people and advocates for Kifkif’s cause, as article 489 not only punishes homosexuality, but also prohibits the publication of homosexual material. The publications were also uploaded online to their websites, which, as mentioned, have since been taken down. As I was unable to establish any proper contacts in Marrakesh or elsewhere in Morocco, I was not able to obtain any print versions of the magazine, but a single issue still exists online. The 14th issue of the magazine, from June 2012 is entitled مغاربة يقولون: لا لرهاب المثلية or Moroccans Say: No To Homophobia. It is dedicated to IDAHO (International Day Against Homophobia), with coverage of IDAHO events inside Morocco. This issue further contains a statement from the Algerian LGBTQ group Abu Nawas, an article on Islamic Fatwas on homosexuality, a piece on the Arabic terminology on

¹⁰⁴ Kifkif Project, “Kifkif: Collective Marocain des lesbiennes, Gays, Bisexuels et Transsexuels”, 2007. <https://sites.google.com/site/gaymarruecos/about>. Original in Spanish, translation by author.

¹⁰⁵ Richard Ammon, “Courageous Gay Magazine ‘Mithly’ Debuts in Morocco”, *Global Gayz*, 27 May 2010, <https://www.globalgayz.com/courageous-gay-magazine-mithly-debuts-in-morocco/>

homosexuality, and other articles.¹⁰⁶ Though only numbering 22 pages, the magazine provides an excellent indication of the kind of content queer Moroccans are looking for, and demonstrates, much as Najmabadi and M. showed in their works on the trans community in Iran and the Meem organisation in Lebanon, how Moroccans are engaging with their society and are exerting agency to negotiate with dominant ideas in order to begin a discourse around homosexuality on their terms.

In the first article in the magazine, an opinion piece entitled *حين يكرس القانون الكذب على الذات* (When the Law is Dedicated to Lying to Itself), Sana' al-'Aaji ruminates upon the legal and social hypocrisy in the country. She feels as though Moroccans are unable to see society how it actually is, rather than how they want it to be, and the current legal framework reflects this obstinacy. A majority of the article is spent detailing the manners in which Moroccan Muslims still drink, finding a way to circumvent the laws in place, and how this is largely considered a personal choice. Breaking these "Islamic" laws is somehow seen as less offensive than homosexuality, and al-'Aaji is disappointed in the hypocrisy. She argues that both homosexuality and sex before marriage (between people of any gender) are now a fact of Moroccan society and are reflective of a changing world, and she ends the article with calling on both legal and social changes in attitudes towards both of these issues.¹⁰⁷ The next article is shorter, reporting the events Kifkif either organised, or assisted in organising, as a part of IDAHO. Intriguingly, this article begins by situating these events in a larger context: "في ال17 من ماي من عام 1990 أعلنت منظمة الصحة العالمية حذف المثلية الجنسية من قائمة الأمراض النفسية" (Translation: On 17 May 1990 the World Health Organization eliminated homosexuality from its list of psychological diseases). This seems to be a deliberate attempt at inclusion, placing Morocco in the global struggle for queer rights and fostering a larger sense of community. Nevertheless, the article points out that "يظل هذا اليوم غير معروف أو متجاهل في المغرب والعديد من الدول التي تجرم المثلية" - this day remains unknown or ignored in Morocco or other countries that criminalise homosexuality. Whilst many dream of being able to express their existence freely, and to not be forced to deny their sexual identity, the reality is that this is simply not possible. This sentiment is echoed in a different article by Abu Nawas, an Algerian LGBTQ group named after an 8th-century poet partially known for his homoerotic poetry. They similarly begin their article situating themselves in the grander tradition of IDAHO, then state that they strive to make visible their existence on the path

¹⁰⁶ OutRight Action International, "Magazines from LGBT Groups in North Africa Available Online", 22 May 2012. <https://www.outrightinternational.org/content/magazines-lgbt-groups-north-africa-available-online>. This issue of the magazine can be downloaded from this website

¹⁰⁷ Mithli, *Moroccans Say: No To Homophobia*, 3.

to fighting persecution and marginalisation experienced by gay¹⁰⁸ people today. Newspapers, court cases, and daily insults all attest to this maltreatment, and the organisation calls for acceptance of differences in sexual orientation, working together to achieve this.¹⁰⁹ Evidently, both Kifkif and Abu Nawas actively choose to actively place themselves in the larger, international LGBTQ community as a way of gaining both visibility and acceptance.

Returning to the previous article on the IDAHO events organised by Kifkif, it mentions the launch of a book project, meetings, and presentations of photos as a part of IDAHO; some of these photos are shown here:



(All pictures taken from IDAHO article, pages 4-6)

Evidently, it is unsafe and unwise for the individuals in this picture to have their faces shown, further reflecting previous remarks on social attitudes towards homosexuality and the near impossibility of being able to exist freely. It is curious, therefore, that the subsequent article briefly covers the coming-out of Hicham Nazzal, a French actor and tv-producer of Moroccan descent. Yet this appears to have been made possible by the fact that he is a public figure, and thus has somewhat more room for not conforming to societal expectations, but probably even

¹⁰⁸ The Arabic word used for gay is مثلي - this terminology will be discussed later.

¹⁰⁹ Mithli, *Moroccans Say: No To Homophobia*, 8.

more so because he is also French, and lives in France. Nonetheless, his coming-out was still warmly received by the Moroccan gay community.¹¹⁰

Lastly, the final article of relevance is a slightly longer piece on Arabic terminology. The author, Nasreen Mazawi, discusses her issues with the term *mithli*:

"ان كانت الكلمات "مثلي" و"مثلية" هي فعلا إنجاز لغوي ثقافي يحتفي به المثليين والمثليات في المجتمعات العربية لماذا يتم التنازل عن هذا الإنجاز الغض لصالح إستيراد مصطلحات لغوية خارجة عن السياق التاريخي السياسي والثقافي المحلي للمكان؟!"¹¹¹

Mazawi is angry at the terms *mithli* and *mithliyya* being celebrated as some sort of cultural and linguistic achievement, when she feels as though these terms are being used in favour of others that actually have their historical and political context grounded in Morocco or the Arab world in general, rather than blithely importing foreign terms and 'Arabizing' them. Uncritically celebrating the terms *mithli* and *mithliyya*, she argues, does injustice to the work done by, amongst others, Palestinian lesbians and Lebanese organisations to promote the gay Arab movement. Her viewpoint established, Mazawi then turns to a discussion of the context in which various English words are used, actually using the English terms 'homosexual', 'lesbian', 'bisexual', 'trans-gender', 'trans-sexual', 'queer', and 'pinkwashing'. The discussion of 'queer' - or كوير - is particularly intriguing, as Mazawi notes its origins as a slur and its transformation into an academic and political theory with a strong agenda. Similarly to the section on queer theory in Chapter 1, Mazawi discusses the fundamentals of queer theory and queer thought - also mentioning Foucault and Butler - and claims that, whilst it has been brought into an Arab context over the past few years, it is, much like *mithli* and *mithliyya*, still a relatively foreign concept that, while useful, is still a bit of an odd word without much meaning in Arabic.

Mazawi also notes the difficulty of translating the various English terms she mentions, devoting a section specifically to 'pinkwashing', and the necessity to import this term due to its particular nuances and historical context. This term is used to describe a strategy used by i.e. a company or a state that uses its open and welcoming attitude towards homosexuality to cover up other, more negative aspects; Mazawi uses the example of the Israeli state's open policy towards homosexuals whilst simultaneously committing crimes against humanity against Palestinians.¹¹² She also explains the 'pink' is in 'pinkwashing', noting that gay men were forced to wear an inverted pink triangle patch in Nazi concentration camps; the colour was later reclaimed and used as a gay symbol. Lastly, having established the difficulties in translating

¹¹⁰ Ibid 7

¹¹¹ Ibid 9

¹¹² Whilst the Israeli's state alleged pinkwashing is certainly an interesting point of contention and one worth exploring, it is not relevant to this project

these contextually loaded terms, Nazawi reasserts her viewpoint that neither ‘queer nor ‘mithli’ is the word that should be used, instead arguing:

لماذا لا تستخدم كلمة شواذ¹¹³ _ إن كان ولا بد التعبير عن هوية ثورية جذرية (راديكالية) كالهوية الكويرية

The word شواذ, she concludes, is a better word to use as it engages with a homosexual tradition in the Islamic world that has existed for centuries, and stems from a far more localised context. It represents a beginning for queer Arab individuals to embrace their own language, rather than fleeing from it.¹¹⁴

This article in particular illuminates once more how the magazine attempts to situate the queer movement in Morocco within the global movement for LGBTQ rights. The brief overview Mazawi provides of queer theory and queer history, as well as the particular nuances of the various terms within this history, denotes not only an awareness of the larger, globalised discourse on queer terminology and the politics of translation, but also signifies a willingness and desire to appropriate these ideas into a local context and adapting to local circumstances. As a result, it becomes more possible for queer Muslims to argue that their identity is not a foreign import, and it is possible to be queer and to be Muslim, and that these identities are not in contrast to one another. The magazine overall, whilst not directly discussing masculinity, still provides an excellent example of the issues queer Moroccans deem important, and highlights the various manners in which queer Muslims are actively exerting themselves in attempting to tackle deep-rooted societal and legal homophobia.

Nevertheless, the lack of interviews was a significant issue. As my initial approach had failed, I decided to shift my focus. Instead of conducting my own interviews, I searched for interviews online with queer Moroccans; one of the interviews I found is with the creator of Mithli magazine himself, known by the pseudonym Walid al-Amrawi. He remains anonymous as, in his own words, “I have a job and a social life I have to protect. If someone stumbled on my name in the news it would be a disaster. It's social suicide to come out here.”¹¹⁵ Social and legal discrimination against homosexuality means anonymity is the only option for survival. Al-Amrawi also discusses the usage of the word *mithli*, coming from the root *mithl*, meaning alike or similar, instead of other words with more pejorative connotations (such as *shaath*, meaning pervert or *luti* from Qur’anic story of Lot). In the same vein as Mazawi’s article, al-Amrawi states it is important to use an Arab word in order to emphasise how gay men are a part of Arab society, but he does not appear to follow Mazawi’s argument regarding the potentially problematic or

¹¹³ Emphasis on last words is my own

¹¹⁴ Mithli, *Moroccans Say: No To Homophobia*, 10.

¹¹⁵ PRI’s The World, “A magazine for gay men in the Arab world”, 27 October 2010, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2010-10-27/magazine-gay-men-arab-world>

insufficient usage of this word. They do agree, however, on the necessity of creating or using words for homosexuality that are not derogatory and humiliating. The interviewer also mentions that the launch of the magazine caused a furor in Morocco in April 2010, having received 6 million visits by October of the same year. The most recent publication of the magazine at the time included an open letter written by a gay man to his mother, an article entitled “A normal day in a normal life of a normal transsexual”, and an editorial piece railing against a Moroccan rap group’s music video in which homosexuality is listed as one of the country’s biggest issues, describing a homosexual as ‘not a normal man’.¹¹⁶ The purpose of the magazine, thus, is to give gay men a chance to speak for themselves and to support each other, as has indeed been shown in the *Mithli* articles analysed.

Although neither Kifkif nor its production *Mithli* explicitly discuss the relationship between being queer and being a Muslim male, the presumed incompatibility of the two is frequently alluded to. This is evidenced by the necessity for an Arabic word for homosexual that is not derogatory; words such as *shaath*, *luti*, or *tobji* (mentioned by Merabet in Chapter 1) are all humiliating and considered to be deviant from what is expected of a man. The understanding, therefore, is that a gay Muslim man is not masculine, not virile, and, by extension, unable to acquire social and economic capital, thereby being both unable to provide for his family, and even bringing shame down upon them. Whilst Kifkif and *Mithli* have clearly undertaken preliminary steps to argue against these associations of homosexuality with weakness, the extremely clandestine way in which Kifkif has had to operate makes it very difficult to assess any impact the magazine may have had. If only 200 copies of the first edition were covertly distributed, the total readership is likely not to greatly exceed that number, and most of the individuals reading the magazine in the first place are likely the ones who are already convinced of the necessity for change in attitudes to homosexuality. Moreover, although Lindsey mentions that the website received 6 million visits by October 2010, it is unclear how many or few of those visiting the website were in agreement with its content, rather than trying to get the website taken down or even sending death threats.¹¹⁷ Thus, Dialmy’s assertion that Kifkif has recently ceased its activities in Morocco speaks strongly to the dangerous climate described above in which the organisation operates/operated, and whilst it may nevertheless have managed to begin a conversation on homosexuality and homophobia in a limited sphere, there is evidently still a long way to go.

¹¹⁶ Walid Al-Amrawi, interview by Ursula Lindsay, 27 October 2010, 2:34-2:59. Interview available at <https://www.pri.org/stories/2010-10-27/magazine-gay-men-arab-world>

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*

Value of Online Sources

As previously mentioned, my inability to access and interview queer Moroccan men directly was disappointing. Lee and Renzetti, in their work on 'sensitive' topics, provided some solace, noting the difficulty in performing studies impinging upon vested personal or societal interests, where those studied are likely to fear being identified or incriminated in any way.¹¹⁸ Even though these individuals may have an interest in the research being undertaken, the fear of potential repercussions is too great. Yet even when only a limited sample can be obtained, as shown by Martin and Dean's work on AIDS and sexual behaviour patterns, and it is unclear how representative the sample is, it is still possible for the study to be fairly accurate, and conclusions can be drawn despite imperfect circumstances.¹¹⁹ These limitations have also encouraged methodological innovation, particularly with regards to media sources. Ginsburg argued for the importance of media sources twenty-five years ago: "it is crucial that we understand media not only intertextually but also in the context of broader social relations that are constituted and reimagined in film and video works explicitly engaged in representing culture."¹²⁰ Media productions do not stand apart from the complex contexts of production and interpretation that shape its construction. Nine years later, she contends that media productions have become embedded in people's daily lives (and this process has continued ever since), in a world where the Internet has opened up spaces that cross cultural and geopolitical borders, and has facilitated new social configurations through online access determined by class distinctions or diasporic connections.¹²¹ Subaltern groups have gladly made use of these possibilities, resisting structures of power in a manner of "cultural activism", as Ginsburg terms it, to pursue social change through a politics of identity and representation.¹²² Mitra and McLelland present two studies of how the Internet has given voice to marginalised groups, both noting how new technology has allowed for the formation of relationships and connections between otherwise

¹¹⁸ Raymond Lee and Claire Renzetti, "The Problems of Researching Sensitive Topics", *American Behavioral Scientist*, (1990: 33:5), 512-513.

¹¹⁹ John Martin, "The Impact of AIDS on Gay Male Sexual Behavior Patterns in New York City", *American Journal of Public Health*, (1987, 77:5), 578-581.

¹²⁰ Faye Ginsburg, "Culture/Media: A (Mild) Polemic", *Anthropology Today*, (1994, 10:2) 6.

¹²¹ Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod and Brian Larkin (eds), *New Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*, (University of California Press: 2002), 1-2.

¹²² *Ibid* 8

dispossessed or diasporic individuals.¹²³ As such, I understand the online interviews I use as a form of cultural activism, situating my study within the larger context of subaltern groups and their media usage, and I will expand on this point in the following chapter.

Online Interviews

Due to the lack of other accessible interviews with queer Moroccans from within Morocco, I decided to turn to the Moroccan community within the Netherlands, where I found two more interviews with two gay Dutch men of Moroccan descent. Both of their parents have emigrated to Morocco, and both talk about growing up in a Moroccan household. By no means do I wish to conflate growing up in a Moroccan household in the Netherlands with growing up in Morocco, and I would like to emphasise that the experiences these two men discuss, whilst certainly influenced by being of Moroccan descent, still took place in the Netherlands, and would have been different had they taken place in Morocco. Yet the very fact that accessible source material on this 'sensitive' topic is in the form of two Moroccan Dutch gay Muslim men speaking openly about their experiences, and speaking about them in Dutch, testifies to the speaking capital of Dutch (and French, as seen in the article in *Mithli* dedicated to Hicham Nazzal's coming out) children of Moroccan migrants, raising the question of who has the capacity to speak for whom. Nevertheless, the interviews are still pertinent to the social expectations of Moroccan men, and reflect the social pressures of conforming to an ideal Islamic masculinity. The issue of diaspora populations and the Internet, will be touched upon as well, but will be more fully analysed in the coming chapter.

The first interview is a 10-minute radio fragment with Nassiri Belaraj, the founder of the Pink Marrakesh boat that took part in the Amsterdam Gay Pride Canal Parade in 2017. Belaraj spent 25 years in the closet, afraid to come out due to growing up in a Moroccan household, and felt very lonely throughout that time, as he had no role models and nobody to talk to about his feelings. He was told at home "don't you dare come out, don't you think about it", suggesting that there were suspicions of his being gay before he came out, and evidently his family, and mother in particular, made it abundantly clear this was unacceptable, which Belaraj believes is

¹²³ See, for example, Amanda Mitra's "Voices of the Marginalized on the Internet: Examples From a Website for Women of South Asia" and Mark McLelland's "Virtual Ethnography: Using the Internet to Study Gay Culture in Japan"

due to the Moroccan culture and Islamic background.¹²⁴ He mentions having to police his behaviour at home to avoid conflict, even almost being engaged once to a woman in order to ‘fit into the picture’, as a part of a larger struggle for self-acceptance, and once he did come out, his family cut off all contact.¹²⁵ He was never able to talk about his homosexuality with his mother as it was a taboo subject:

Interviewer: Did you ever reach the point where you wanted to tell your parents despite what they thought?

Belaraj: No. No... I was very close with my mother. We did so much together. We did everything together, and we had a really good relationship, but always in the back of my mind you think ‘what if’, what if she would find out, then the relationship wouldn’t be there anymore.

Interviewer: So how did the relationship end? You mentioned you don’t talk anymore.

Belaraj: Four years ago, we called every day... one night I called my mother, and I noticed very soon this conversation was going very differently from previous ones. My mother made up this story where she thought I stepped into someone’s car... and that was it... to the present day we don’t talk.¹²⁶

Currently, Belaraj aims to improve visibility of queer Moroccans living in the Netherlands, not just for younger generations, but also for the many other gay men he knows who are married to women but pursue extramarital relationships with men.¹²⁷ With the Pink Marrakesh boat, his aim is to promote and maintain visibility, ensuring there exists a conversation about sexuality in both Moroccan households and other religious and cultural spheres within the Netherlands where homosexuality is considered unacceptable.¹²⁸ He concludes optimistically, arguing that the topic of sexuality is becoming more and more approachable and acceptable to talk about due to the increased visibility of queer Moroccans and the pride with which they carry themselves, and the pride they have in their identities. Belaraj feels strongly that events such as the Pink Marrakesh boat taking part in Gay Pride Canal Parade actively help to create a community for queer Moroccans, demonstrating they are not alone and providing a support group for closeted Moroccans, whilst simultaneously normalising being both queer and Muslim for a more general Moroccan public.¹²⁹

Belaraj also mentions getting angry at a similar interview as the one he gives, but is referring to an encounter between Salaheddine and Tofik Dibi. The latter is a once up-and-

¹²⁴ FunX Radio, “Pink Marrakech zet zich in voor de multiculturele LHBT- gemeenschap”, 16 February 2017. interview available at <https://www.funx.nl/radio/fragmenten/261811-pink-marrakech-zet-zich-in-voor-de-multiculturele-lhbt-gemeenschap>. Original in Dutch, translation by author. 0:25-1:46.

¹²⁵ Ibid 1:20-1:23, 1:55-2:10

¹²⁶ Ibid 2:35-4:23, transcription edited for clarity

¹²⁷ Ibid 4:37-4:50

¹²⁸ Ibid 5:32-5:57

¹²⁹ Ibid 6:58-8:10

coming politician who left the political arena in 2012, and came out in 2015 in a book entitled *Djinn*. He subsequently gave many interviews in various media about his coming-out, and what it meant to him, yet I chose this interview in particular as Salaheddine - a journalist, writer, and TV-producer who focuses on the Moroccan community in the Netherlands, and has a popular YouTube channel on which the interview between the two can be seen - is also Dutch of Moroccan descent, and he emphasises this shared identity with Dibi throughout the interview. The two are seated at a table, drinking tea, when Salaheddine opens the conversation. He states that he only cares about “Tofik Dibi, the Moroccan. Holland doesn’t exist right now, it’s just about our community, we as two Moroccans talking to each other.”¹³⁰ Dibi grew up speaking Moroccan at home, interacted largely with other Moroccans, and believes he had a very traditional Moroccan upbringing for that particular time. He grew up Muslim at home, went to Qur’an school, and his family would often go to Morocco during summer holidays.¹³¹ His coming out story is slightly different, as he was a relatively famous individual, so was able to utilise newspapers and TV-shows to reach as wide an audience as possible:

Salaheddine: When you came out, you sought media attention.

Tofik Dibi: Yeah, I wrote a book... I felt it was important that the story I wrote in the book - because not everyone is going to buy the book, especially not Moroccan Muslims - that I was also able to bring that story out into the public via the media, so that I could reach as large an audience as possible, and especially Moroccans and Muslims. That was really the underlying idea behind doing interviews in various media.¹³²

Salaheddine notes that the timing of this book is a bit suspicious, as *Djinn* was only written when it became “commercially interesting” and Dibi was running out of money, which Dibi understands but denies, only for Salaheddine to act surprised that it was not simply a commercial endeavour, seemingly unconvinced by Dibi’s admission that the coming out process almost cost him his life, and that no Moroccan Muslim would do this for fame or fortune.¹³³

Furthermore, Salaheddine argues that what Dibi is doing is incredibly risky and is actually setting the wrong example, because there were many institutes that made coming out easy for him, whereas for younger Moroccan Muslims that is not the case.¹³⁴ Dibi agrees that it was made relatively easy for him, but does not believe he is setting the wrong example as he is clearly aware of the dangers of coming out, and recognises the credibility he has built up for his

¹³⁰ “Zeer openhartig gesprek tussen Salaheddine en Tofik Dibi”, YouTube video, published 15 February 2016. interview available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYCqtPI9MJQ>. Original in Dutch, translations by author. 0:26-0:34.

¹³¹ Ibid 1:03-1:27

¹³² Ibid 1:35-2:03

¹³³ Ibid 2:23-3:12

¹³⁴ Ibid 3:35-4:36

previous political achievements and advocating for refugees, Muslims, and Moroccans. As such, the larger Moroccan community knows he is “a good guy” and being gay can almost be ignored in favour of these things.¹³⁵ Salaheddine argues that this is exactly why Dibi should not have come out in the way he did, as all the Dutch people he did interviews with do not reflect “our norm of how our culture is” but Dibi is evidently aware of the privileges he was afforded and the dangers of queer Moroccan youth coming out in the same way he did but without the support network.¹³⁶ As Dibi states:

I don't want it to seem like I'm saying 'Moroccans in Holland, everyone who has these feelings, let's all come out of the closet and we'll all chill together because life is so beautiful and happy, because it isn't. It's also not easy for me, I also get verbally abused on the street sometimes, I also often need to justify to family members why I did it this way, why I had to appear on TV... even for me, in my privileged position... I don't want people to put themselves in danger doing exactly what I did, ignoring their own environment.'¹³⁷

After having established that heterosexuality is the norm in Islam, Salaheddine continues his skeptical line of questioning in asking whether Dibi shouldn't have just kept his sexuality between himself and God, in the interest of covering his sins.¹³⁸ This leads to a similar argument, as Salaheddine continues to push the idea that Dibi did not think his actions through and may come to regret them in the future, if he turns out to be straight in fifteen years time.¹³⁹ Dibi responds that he believes, from a personal and religious standpoint, that this was the right decision to make. When Salaheddine interjects, saying that all the Dutch would agree with Dibi and encourage this decision, Dibi responds “fuck the Dutch. I just know this was the right decision.”¹⁴⁰ He continues in the same vein until the interview comes to its climax. Salaheddine asks Dibi if Muslims who have same-sex desires, but trust in their *ʾīmān* and refrain from acting upon these desires, and go to the grave having never acted upon them, should be the benchmark and should be lauded for passing Allah's test, and should be considered better than other Muslims who are weak and 'give in' to these feelings.¹⁴¹ Dibi argues that he does not think this is what Allah asks from the people He created, and refuses to bow to Salaheddine's insistence that Dibi should praise those who never act on those desires, and that they are more

¹³⁵ Ibid 4:37-4:54

¹³⁶ Ibid 5:01-5:33

¹³⁷ Ibid 5:52-6:40

¹³⁸ Ibid 7:12-7:35

¹³⁹ Ibid 8:38-8:44

¹⁴⁰ Ibid 10:09-10:22

¹⁴¹ Ibid 11:58-12:45

worthy than others who do. Dibi ends with expressing his desire for Muslims to be happy whichever way they choose, and the community to respect that decision.¹⁴²

The Bigger Picture

These three interviews taken together highlight the myriad difficulties and obstacles in coming out within a Moroccan community. Both Belaraj and Dibi clearly demonstrate an awareness of the privileges afforded to them by living in the Netherlands, and being able to eventually function as a role model of sorts for other queer Moroccan youth in the Netherlands struggling with similar feelings. They both mention the extreme difficulties they nevertheless faced in coming out from their environment - Belaraj being rejected by his family completely, and Dibi's inner struggle nearly killing him, but with his family connections still intact largely because of the credibility built up during his time as a politician. Evidently, Al-Amrawi is completely unable to publicly come out, but his decision to give the anonymous interview and start *Mithli* can be seen in a similar vein of giving visibility to queer Moroccan men, and attempting to normalise homosexuality within Muslim men, resisting the perceived social incompatibility of the two. Consequently, the three men all appear to be able to reconcile their being gay, being Muslim, and being male on an individual level, and are using this self-acceptance to engage in cultural activism and begin a dialogue on a societal level. It is pertinent to note that all three speak of homosexuality as an identity, moving away from the historical Islamic focus on homosexual actions; this shift will be analysed in the context of the Internet and global LGBTQ movements in the following chapter. Overall, despite the significant differences in what it means to be a gay Moroccan male in the Netherlands - as opposed to a gay Moroccan male in Morocco - these three interviews, along with Kifkif's struggles and the edition of *Mithli* magazine, draw attention to the many nuances of what it means to be a queer Moroccan Muslim male in different parts of the world. They further reflect the needs and wants of the larger Moroccan queer community, and underline the many ways in which Moroccans both in Morocco and in the Moroccan diaspora are working to serve these needs despite the inherent social dangers.

¹⁴² Ibid 14:00-14:42, 15:51-16:09

Chapter Three - Morocco on the Global Scale

In situating the interviews and magazine articles from the previous chapter in a broader context, this chapter aims to analyse how the relationships between being queer, Muslim, and male change over time and space. As previously mentioned, the interviews of al-Amrawi, Belaraj, and Dibi, whilst only a very small sample, nonetheless demonstrate the various ways in which queer Moroccan Muslims are negotiating their identities on both a personal and on a broader, societal level. In this section, I wish to look at the bigger picture in which this negotiation, and attempts at setting up a larger network of queer Moroccan Muslims, takes place; namely, online. Though the previous section touched upon the value of online sources and the usefulness of understanding these interviews in the framework of cultural activism and the facilitation of new social configurations as a result of ever-increasing Internet accessibility, I will be examining how this applies to Morocco in particular, and the overall growing access to queer resources throughout the Muslim Arab world. First, I will consider how access to Internet resources has allowed queer Muslims in both Morocco and other Muslim Arab countries greater possibilities to meet like-minded people, and consider what this greater (online) visibility means. Subsequently, I will be turning to the topic of diaspora populations and internet usage, looking specifically at the Moroccan diaspora in the context of the interviews of Belaraj and Dibi, and the links they aim to form with the Moroccan population in both the Netherlands and Morocco. Lastly, I will consider the queer Moroccan movement in the context of the global push towards more LGBTQ rights, bringing in Joseph Massad's idea of the "Gay International" and its usefulness in assessing the motives of non-governmental organisations and the impact of their actions on the queer Moroccan community.

Internet Activism and Visibility

Returning briefly to the value of online sources and the possibilities they facilitate, we have established that media productions are, to a large degree, embedded in people's daily lives, and Internet access has allowed for the creation and widening of metaphysical spaces that can cross cultural and political borders. Subaltern or marginalised groups have been able to make use of this development to put forth their voices and take advantage of this online space to speak out about particular issues, and to be heard. This is distinctly different from previous opportunities. Bohman theorises the Internet as something that is not merely a variation of existing print or national public spheres, but rather as a decentralised public sphere in which all

communicators participate.¹⁴³ Whilst the Internet is still beholden to national interests and reflects the institutions in which it is embedded, it still possesses no small amount of power. The Internet is able to facilitate activities by individuals that may go against the wishes of national interests. In other words, though the possibilities for activism and speaking out against certain issues such as homophobia or other forms of inequality may be amplified, the Internet still develops within the social structures that caused these conditions in the first place, rendering speaking out a dangerous thing to do despite the measure of anonymity the Internet provides. Indeed, McLelland notes that, whilst the Internet is its own social space with its own social structures, “when individuals log on they do so as real people in actual locations for specific purposes: the meaning of the Internet is thus partly the product of social context.”¹⁴⁴ As such, it is pertinent to keep in mind that, whilst the Internet has indeed provided a new and effective manner of activism and disseminating information, the local contexts in which this activism is undertaken is still very much present and threatening.

Nevertheless, cyberspace has been instrumental for many different groups. Mitra’s analysis of what having a voice in cyberspace means for women in South Asia demonstrates how virtual forums can provide marginalised groups with an online presence that may otherwise be denied to them in the ‘real world’, allowing that group to specifically articulate its own narrative and discourse.¹⁴⁵ Online forums in particular allow for the promotion and development of alternatives to mainstream, institutionalised ideologies. Despite the uneven distribution of access, online voices reveal agency and reflect how people make sense of their lives; those who feel excluded from mainstream narratives can use these forums for alternative public spheres and oppositional subcultures.¹⁴⁶ Whitaker similarly mentions the advantages of the Internet, noting that “In contrast to their perplexed parents, gay youngsters from Egypt’s professional class are often well-informed about their sexuality... Sometimes their knowledge comes from older or more experienced gay friends, but mostly it comes from searching the Internet.”¹⁴⁷ Although this is certainly helpful in helping younger queer people accept their sexuality, one of Whitaker’s interlocutors note the information is still largely addressed to a

¹⁴³ James Bohman, “Expanding Dialogue: The Internet, the public sphere and prospects for transnational democracy”, *The Sociological Review*, (2004, 52:1), 140.

¹⁴⁴ Mark McLelland, “Virtual Ethnography: Using the Internet to Study Gay Culture in Japan”, *Sexualities*, (2002, 5:4), 388.

¹⁴⁵ Amanda Mitra, “Voices of the Marginalized on the Internet: Examples From a Website for Women of South Asia” *Journal of Communication*, (2004, 54:3), 492.

¹⁴⁶ Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner, “Oppositional Politics and the Internet: A Critical/Reconstructive Approach”, *Cultural Politics: An International Journal*. (2005, 1:1), 80.

¹⁴⁷ Whitaker, *Unspeakable Love* 22.

Western audience, and is not necessarily suitable to people living in Arab societies - echoing Salaheddine's criticism of Dibi in the previous chapter. Yet as Hassan states:

Imagine a young boy, living in a small town or a village, finding out that he's gay. He can't tell anyone about it, he keeps it hidden away inside himself, thinks there's something wrong with him and that he's the only one in the world. There's where the Internet has brought about a revolution. For five dirhams, a boy like that can now log on, discuss things, make friends or even meet other boys... It's thanks to the internet that I met 90 per cent of the best friends I've got today.¹⁴⁸

Merabet approaches the proliferation of Internet access and gay-oriented websites in a different manner, instead focusing on Internet cafes in Beirut. These are mainly used for the purposes of arranging a time and place to meet, or for playing out sexual fantasies - and much less so to provide information to those struggling with their sexuality - yet this still highlights the myriad ways in which one can establish an online presence and meet other gay men. Lastly, Daïf notes that though there may not yet be a dating website exclusive to Moroccans, there are plenty of French or international sites open to everyone, allowing for a measure of anonymity at first, and the potential to meet other men despite the social and legal barriers.¹⁴⁹

On the other hand, Whitaker takes the time to discuss various incidents of how Internet access is used against queer individuals, providing a grim reminder of the national interests and institutions that Bohman mentions. In the wake of the Queen Boat case - where fifty-two men were arrested on a floating night club on the Nile that was popular with gay men - the Egyptian government cracked down on online websites and forced gay life even deeper underground.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, it signalled the start of Egyptian police going undercover as gay men to lure other gay men to parties or meetings where they are arrested, charged with debauchery, and imprisoned - a practice taken over by other countries in the region.¹⁵¹ The case of the "gay wedding" in Ksar el Kebir, mentioned in the beginning of chapter two, also speaks to the way in which the Internet facilitates the spreading of misinformation and the dire consequences this can have. Even so, engaging in some kind of cultural activism or community building is almost forced to take place online, as other options are limited. The works of Rachid O. and Abdellah Taïa, two writers concerned with masculinity and homosexuality in Morocco, aim to question the Moroccan established model of hegemonic masculinity and virility that "is of paramount

¹⁴⁸ Daïf. *Gay In Morocco*, 161.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid 162.

¹⁵⁰ Whitaker, *Unspeakable Love*, 49-51.

¹⁵¹ Ibid 62-64

importance in the Maghrebian cultural context.”¹⁵² The questioning of this model is done in the homosocial space (such as the *hammam*, or cafes) - the very space where masculinity is performed, affirmed, and reinforced - thereby suggesting there is room for a softer, and perhaps more intimate form of masculinity. Rachid O. particularly writes about the violence, ostracism, and constant degradation faced by queer individuals everywhere in Morocco. Though at first glance this work appeared to be of significant interest to my research, the impact of these works is limited at best. Both writers are aware that simply relying on their literature to incite social change is insufficient.¹⁵³ Consequently, they have sought to create a media presence, largely in France as well as in Morocco, further demonstrating the absolute necessity of online visibility, even when other means of activism or speaking out are possible.

Diaspora

Placing internet usage and activism in the context of the interviews of particularly Dibi and Belaraj - and al-Amrawi to a slightly lesser extent - I will now turn my attention to how this internet usage and the links it creates between communities works with regards to the Moroccan diaspora in the Netherlands. As has been noted previously, the Internet has opened up spaces that cross cultural, geographical, and political borders, thereby facilitating new social configurations through online access, less affected by class status or existing in a diaspora. The term diaspora is used here to denote a situation where a considerable percentage of a country's population lives outside of that country's territory, where the population is dispersed but still maintains intensive and crossborder contacts via social, economic and political networks.¹⁵⁴ Whilst this is one of many ways in which the term diaspora can be used or understood, I do not wish to enter this debate, but merely utilise the term to describe the Moroccan community in the Netherlands and the links it has with Morocco. The Moroccan diaspora in the Netherlands exists largely as a result of labour migration in the late 1960s, though these workers did not return home as was the original plan. Instead, many stayed in the Netherlands, and were eventually joined by their relatives in family reunification schemes. Throughout this process, the Moroccan government and other government-related institutions have encouraged Moroccan migrants to maintain relations with their home country. Initially, the level of institutionalisation of

¹⁵² Alessandro Badin, “Between Men: Homosocial Desire and the Dynamics of Masculinity in the Novels of Rachid O. and Abdellah Taïa”, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, (2005, 20:1), 119.

¹⁵³ Gibson Ncube, “Sexual/textual politics: rethinking gender and sexuality in gay Moroccan literature” *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, (2014, 32:4), 485.

¹⁵⁴ Steven Vertovec, “Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, (1999, 22:2), 449-451.

organisations for migrants was low, yet they proliferated as various Moroccan diaspora engagement policies granted the diaspora the status of an active social and economic actor, ensuring (indirect) Moroccan governmental control over the diaspora.¹⁵⁵ Evidently, the Moroccan government aims to maintain links with its citizens in the diaspora, both in the Netherlands and in countries such as Germany, France, and Spain.

Moroccan migrants to the Netherlands additionally face suspicion from the Dutch population, or the recent “Dutch backlash against multiculturalism.”¹⁵⁶ Forces of globalisation and migration have caused some Dutch people to feel threatened by the changes these forces bring with them. Prins argues this feeling stems from Dutchness being “an unmarked (but actually Western, Dutch, white, etc.) category... it does not differ from modern culture in general, it... coincide[s] with what is considered the norm or normal. Hence, everything non-Dutch gets marked as ‘other.’”¹⁵⁷ As such, Moroccan-Dutch individuals, and Moroccan-Dutch youth in particular, receive a lot of attention and are systematically stigmatised and framed as non-citizens, threatening to Dutch society.¹⁵⁸ Yet in contrast to the dominant views of the failure of integration by immigrants, and the rhetoric and political discourse on this topic, second-generation Moroccan-Dutch i.e. those born in the Netherlands to Moroccan parents, are actually rapidly advancing toward Dutch national averages in terms of education, language, employment, religion, marriage and birth figures.¹⁵⁹ Buitelaar demonstrates some of the workings of this complicated relationship between Moroccan migrants and Dutch society in her study on personal autonomy and women of Moroccan descent in the Netherlands. In growing up in between what is loosely termed as ‘Dutch individualistic society’ and the ‘collectivistic values’ characterising ‘Moroccan’ or ‘Islamic culture’ - with an understanding of the problematic nature of these generalisations - these women “have developed wishes for self-realization which are

¹⁵⁵ Gery Nijenhuis and Annelies Zoomer, “Transnational activities of immigrant organizations in the Netherlands: Do Ghanaian, Moroccan and Surinamese diaspora organizations enhance development?” *Paper prepared for the 2nd meeting of the Transnational Organizations Network, Princeton May 11 – May 12 2012*. Draft. <https://cmd.princeton.edu/sites/cmd/files/working-papers/2012TransnationalMeeting/2012-Netherlands.pdf>

¹⁵⁶ Baukje Prins and Sawitri Saharso, “From toleration to repression: the Dutch backlash against multiculturalism.” In S. Vertovec & S. Wessendorf (eds.), *The Multiculturalism Backlash: European Discourses, Policies and Practices*, (New York, NY: Routledge 2010), 78.

¹⁵⁷ Baukje Prins *The Standpoint in Question: Situated Knowledges and the Dutch Minorities Discourse*. PhD dissertation. Faculty of Humanities, Utrecht University, the Netherlands, 126.

¹⁵⁸ This depiction of Moroccan-Dutch individuals, and antipathy between them and white Dutch people, is constantly hinted at throughout the interview between Salaheddine and Dibi, and reaches its peak when Dibi exclaims “fuck the Dutch”

¹⁵⁹ Frans Verhagen, *Hoezo mislukt? De nuchtere feiten over de integratie in Nederland* [Failed in what way? The bare facts about integration in the Netherlands]. (Amsterdam: Nieuw Amsterdam, 2010), 10-11.

new in their families.”¹⁶⁰ They face a challenge between desired autonomy on the one hand, and the family connections and loyalties inherent in their parental milieu that simultaneously denies them the freedom, as women, that they desire.

I posit that this dilemma can be appropriated to fit the context of queer Moroccan men in the Netherlands. Although there is the obvious but still important difference that the traditionally hierarchical family structure benefits men more than women, and allows them a far greater degree of freedom and mobility, queer Moroccan men are still forced in the same challenge of balancing personal autonomy with family connections and responsibilities, and, for every choice made, a price must be paid. Belaraj discusses this in the radio interview, talking about how his staying with his family, and maintaining a relationship with them, was dependent upon his not being gay, and, having no contact with his mother at all having no contact with his mother at all; a steep price to pay indeed. Integration into the home country and culture is thereby seemingly encouraged to a certain level, but issues arise when new wishes for self-realisation are actualised. Similarly, Dibi demonstrates the negotiation between Dutch society and Moroccan home life, as he talks about growing up in a traditionally Moroccan household. Facets of this upbringing included speaking Moroccan at home, interacting with other Moroccan families, going to Qur’an school, and often visiting Morocco in the summer. Nevertheless, his coming out still placed similar strains on family relationships, and he hints at these strains not being worse due to the regard he is held in as a result of his political achievements. I also postulate that this growing up in two cultures is one of the key reasons for Belaraj and Dibi to discuss their homosexuality as an identity, rather than the historical understanding of being concerned with homosexual actions, due to the Netherlands’ relative acceptance of homosexuality both socially and legally. As such, these two men grew up in a physical space separated to a degree from, to use Badin’s words, the model of hegemonic masculinity and virility that “is of paramount importance in the Maghrebian cultural context.”¹⁶¹

Similarly, time also plays an important role. Especially since the early 1990s, exposure to Western culture throughout the Arab world has increased exponentially as a result of increased access to satellite televisions, other forms of media, greater tourism and travel between both localities, not to mention the Internet. Western sexual behaviour, debates on same-sex marriage, or scandals with gay celebrities such as George Michael’s arrest in a Los Angeles toilet are all events that are likely to have caused intrigue and influenced Arab ideas on

¹⁶⁰ Marjo Buitelaar, “Staying close by moving out: The contextual meanings of personal autonomy in the life stories of women of Moroccan descent in The Netherlands” *Contemporary Islam*, (2007, 1:1), 19.

¹⁶¹ Badin, *Between Men*, 119

sexuality, be it positively or negatively.¹⁶² As a result of this increased contact between the parts of the world, it is only logical that some Western ideas on sexuality are likely to have spread and taken hold in some segments of Arab society; the positing of homosexuality as an identity quite possibly being one of them.

Returning to Belaraj and Dibi, these two interviews can also be viewed in light of the idea of “alternative public spheres and oppositional subcultures” - similar to Ginsburg’s notion of cultural activism - as both Belaraj and Dibi are eminently aware of the effects of their online presence and voice. Dibi’s coming out in his book *Djinn* was succeeded by interviews in various newspapers and television programs, attempting to reach as large an audience as possible by combining both his offline and online presence - much like Rachid O. and Abdellah Taïa. Belaraj has seemingly done fewer interviews, but the Pink Marrakesh boat is part of a larger Pink Marrakesh organisation that Belaraj founded, which helps organise LGBTQ events largely for Moroccan-Dutch queer individuals, and remains highly active on Twitter and Facebook.¹⁶³ This level of public visibility and activism is evidently impossible for Walid al-Amrawi, yet his interview can certainly also be seen in light of cultural activism. He states that it is social suicide to come out in Morocco, needing to protect his job and his social life, yet even giving interviews anonymously and founding *Mithli* magazine are dangerous feats, considering the very real possibility the government uncovers his identity despite the precautions taken. The printing and clandestine distributing of copies of the magazine further underline both the activist nature of his work, and his attempts at creating or beginning an alternative public sphere or oppositional subculture both offline and online, despite the Moroccan government’s attempts at removing all copies of the magazine from the Internet.

The attempts of all three men to promote online visibility of queer Muslim men is also contrary to traditional understandings of masculinity. As we saw in the first chapter, what it means to be a Muslim male is naturally dependent on context, but always appears to include heterosexuality as the fixed default, often considered as the starting point for becoming a man. A gay Muslim man does not fulfil this basic criteria, and is therefore not masculine and unable to take start or take care of a family. Yet in these interviews, masculinity is never directly mentioned. Much like how Buitelaar argues Dutchness is an unmarked category in relation to Moroccan-Dutch individuals, is considered the norm, and only becomes visible when confronted with an other, heterosexuality is the assumed and unmarked identity and expectation of Muslim men. This expectation only becomes visible when it is rejected; in the case of Belaraj leading to

¹⁶² Whitaker, *Unspeakable Love*, 210

¹⁶³ See <https://www.facebook.com/PinkMarrakech/> and <https://twitter.com/pinkmarrakech>

a complete cessation of contact with his mother, in Dibi's case leading to significant family tensions and a terse interview overall with Salaheddine, and something that is simply not yet possible in the case of al-Amrawi due to it being 'social suicide'. Both Belaraj and Dibi at some point decided to no longer pretend to conform to assumed heterosexuality, or heteronormativity, and their coming to terms with being gay, Muslim, and male on a personal level shines through in their interviews, even if their families have largely been unwilling or unable to accept this. Yet both are using their self-acceptance to speak to not only other people in the Moroccan diaspora in the Netherlands, but also to speak to Moroccans in Morocco proper, utilising their online influence and diasporic connections to reach as many people as possible. Belaraj in particular notes that, as a result of this increased visibility, the topic of homosexuality is becoming less and less taboo. He also briefly mentions a foundation to support the LGBTQ community in Morocco that almost achieved legal status, though this status was not given at the very last minute.¹⁶⁴ Though the name of the organisation is not mentioned, nor are any further details given about its nature and the struggle it has undergone to be legally allowed in Morocco, it does bring us to another actor that plays a role in linking the Moroccan queer community to the global stage: non-governmental organisations.

Reciprocated Links

Non-governmental organisations and other affiliated institutions have long played a role in various Muslim and Arab countries, particularly when it comes to gay rights activists from abroad paying attention to Muslim countries. Returning briefly to the notion of the 'Gay International' as put forth by Joseph Massad - previously mentioned in the first chapter - he is skeptical of the usefulness of non-governmental organisations and actors when it comes to promoting gay rights in Arab and Muslim countries. Massad claims it is an imperialist, missionary project of sorts to impose the categories of homosexuality (and heterosexuality) upon Muslim Arab civilisation.¹⁶⁵ For Massad, the historical processes that have led to homosexuality becoming a (political) identity are now being exported to the rest of the world by the 'Gay International', through gay rights activists and organisations, yet without regard for the context in which these ideas are being placed, thereby creating both state and cultural resistance in Muslim cultures. Yet this is reductionist and allows for little room or agency on the

¹⁶⁴ FunX Radio, "Pink Marrakech zet zich in voor de multiculturele LHBT- gemeenschap" 7:09-7:16.

¹⁶⁵ Joseph Massad, "Reorienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World" *Public Culture*, (2002, 14:2), 361-362.

side of queer Muslims, who are able to exert their own agency and determine the potential usefulness of these exported ideas. There exists an underlying, mistaken assumption of “the direction and ‘ownership’ of modernity by reducing sexuality to a reflex of Western modernization.”¹⁶⁶ Whilst the potentially orientalist nature of NGOs is certainly something to be aware of, the overall picture Massad paints of Western gay activists as blindly exporting their queer theology and identity politics to a helpless Arab Muslim society is simply incorrect. Indeed, returning to the case of the Meem organisation in Lebanon (mentioned in the first chapter), M. mentioned how this organisation understands the power structures in the West that allowed for the creation of queer singers, shows, and individual liberties, and how queer people in Lebanon are more likely to frame their identities in English or French, even when speaking Arabic, as that is where these words exist more freely and are less laden with judgments or prejudices, and these are the languages in which books and online sources are written about sexuality.¹⁶⁷ Yet the focus of the organisation is still to utilise these existing resources and appropriate them “to define oneself as [both] lesbian and Arab”, further reflecting agency on the part of queer Muslims and an understanding of the benefits and limits of using Western gay theory in making themselves heard and seen.

Additionally, the notion of Western gay activists interfering in the affairs of queer Arab Muslims would be a more credible one if queer Arab Muslims were actually in a position to organise themselves within their own countries. Whilst this may certainly be beginning with the works of Dibi, Belaraj, al-Amrawi, and others, and with the case of Meem and the trans community in Iran, none of these organisations are entirely self-sufficient. As such, NGOs often work from abroad and with secret collaboration from anonymous people inside the country.¹⁶⁸ Yet apart from Kifkif, it appears as though there are very few organisations that, at least publicly, are working to improve the legal and social status of LGBTQ individuals. The Moroccan Association of Human Rights (AMDH) and Moroccan Organisation of Human Rights (OMDH) are two of the larger human rights NGOs in Morocco, yet little information about them is accessible online as their websites have been taken down - quite possibly by the Moroccan government. The National Human Rights Council (CNDH) - the successor to the Advisory Council on Human Rights (CCDH) - is one of the largest human rights organisations working in Morocco, but is actually a government organisation founded by the late King Hassan II, which helps explain why its website, whilst containing rather minimal information, is still active.

¹⁶⁶ Rahman, *Homosexualities, Muslim Cultures, and Modernity*, 89

¹⁶⁷ M., *The Case of Meem in Lebanon*, 17.

¹⁶⁸ Whitaker, *Unspeakable Love*, 212.

However, this organisation has come under significant criticism for its role in investigating human rights abuses started by King Mohammed V and continued on a larger scale by King Hassan II. In 1999, nine years after King Hassan II founded the CCDH, the organisation recommended the creation the Independent Arbitration Panel to investigate state abuse against the population, which was succeeded in 2003 by the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (IER). Whilst ostensibly representing a significant step in Morocco's willingness to investigate its past human rights violations, the IER's mission was not to reveal the identities or prosecute human rights offenders, much to the dismay of victims.¹⁶⁹ Furthermore, it was not allowed to mention King Hassan II, nor human rights violations since 1999 (when King Mohamed VI succeeded the late King Hassan II), nor is it allowed to criticise violations of freedom of speech.¹⁷⁰ Thus, notwithstanding some of the successes the ERC achieved in rehabilitating and compensating victims, it was evidently not a fully impartial organisation. It is therefore no surprise that scholars such as Slyomovics and Dennerlein criticise the role of the ERC, arguing that it does not constitute a general truth and reconciliation commission, and is instead more concerned with showcasing to an international audience that Morocco cares about human rights.¹⁷¹ Indeed, Figueredo noted that the Moroccan king has a vested interest in promoting a certain view of Morocco to the outside world; though he focused more on the king presenting Morocco as gay-friendly for tourists, presenting Morocco as a country concerned with its previous human rights abuses fits neatly into this strategy.

All of the aforementioned organisations state their activities are focused on the protection of human rights in general, women's rights, and advocate for greater democracy and economic and social possibilities, but none of them explicitly mention initiatives or activities aimed at improving the position of queer or LGBTQ individuals.¹⁷² Even Kifkif, which was evidently active within Morocco at the beginning of the decade, does not have any official presence in Morocco, although their email mentioned that they continue to have links to Morocco even if their focus is still on the legal aspect - possibly a reference to the original aim

¹⁶⁹ Human Rights Watch, "Morocco's Truth Commission: Honoring Past Victims during an Uncertain Present" (November 2005), Vol 17., No. 11(E), 22. <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/morocco1105wcover.pdf>

¹⁷⁰ Priscilla Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 42-44

¹⁷¹ See Bettina Dennerlein's "Remembering Violence, Negotiating Change: The Moroccan Equity and Reconciliation Commission and the Politics of Gender" and Susan Slyomovics' "A Truth Commission for Morocco"

¹⁷² See <https://euomedrights.org/members/association-marocaine-des-droits-de-lhomme-amdh/> and <https://euomedrights.org/members/organisation-marocaine-des-droits-humains-omdh/> and <http://www.cndh.ma/an/about-cndh/about-us>

on their website of repealing Article 489 of the Moroccan penal code. Nevertheless, the mention of continuing links with Morocco suggests that their support and activism is largely underground, and it is certainly possible that the other human rights organisations mentioned are clandestinely working towards improving the social and legal climate for LGBTQ people.

Yet these links do not simply flow from the outside world, or from NGOs and their affiliated institutions, into Morocco. The Moroccan queer community, with the aid of Kifkif, has demonstrably taken advantage of these existing links in order to place the struggle for better LGBTQ legal and social rights in a global framework. Kifkif's original mission statement does not hint at this more global focus, but it becomes apparent when considering *Mithli* magazine, particularly in light of the role of internet activism. Al-Amrawi states clearly how the magazine is intended to give gay men a chance to speak for themselves and support each other, combining both clandestine, offline methods with the physical production and distribution of the magazine, as well as it being uploaded online (despite government intervention) to spread and develop of alternatives to mainstream, institutionalised ideologies. The articles mentioned in the most recent issue of the magazine discussed in the Al-Amrawi interview does not appear to have a global outlook. The articles - an open letter written by a gay man to his mother; an article entitled "A normal day in a normal life of a normal transsexual"; and an editorial piece on a Moroccan rap group's music video described a homosexual as 'not a normal man' and homosexuality is listed as one of the country's biggest issues - instead appear to focus more closely on Moroccan society, and aims at increasing visibility of various queer identities and struggles with the aim of normalising homosexuality, and making it seem less like a deviant identity.

The magazine issue discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 2, whilst certainly still maintaining this focus, shifts its attention somewhat from Morocco and to the global community. Of particular interest was the focus on International Day Against Homophobia (IDAHO), encapsulated by the title: مغاربة يقولون: لا لرهاب المثلية or Moroccans Say: No To Homophobia. Due to the lack of access to other issues of the magazine, it is impossible to ascertain how common the more global outlook that is presented in the June 2012 edition truly is, or whether the theme of this edition was easily provided by the May 17 date of IDAHO, when other monthly issues are more similar to what is mentioned in the al-Amrawi interview. Yet, in a way, this does not matter. Both the al-Amrawi interview and other articles on *Mithli* provide a sufficient indication of the kind of content the magazine seeks to provide, and the issue dedicated to IDAHO simply follows this trend. As mentioned in Chapter 2, one of the articles is a review of the events occurring in Morocco as a part of IDAHO, largely made possible through Kifkif, which starts by noting the

elimination of homosexuality from the World Health Organisation's International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD) in 1990. This day, whilst celebrated worldwide but being particularly strong in Europe and South America,¹⁷³ is either unknown or ignored in Morocco and other countries criminalising homosexuality. Dedicating this particular issue of the magazine to this relatively unknown day suggests an attempt at worldwide inclusion, at an acknowledgement that there are worldwide celebrations for homosexuality and against homophobia, reiterating that queer sexualities are not criminalised or socially ostracised throughout the world, and thus encouraging potentially disillusioned queer Moroccans to keep fighting. The pictures taken of the IDAHO events that are used in the article can be interpreted as providing further support, in that the IDAHO events are not simply words on paper that make for a nice story, but are actually organised and supported by real-life individuals who are, like other queer Moroccans, forced to keep their identities hidden. The sense of community that this article attempts to foster is bolstered by the statement from Abu Nawas - the Algerian LGBTQ group - which also calls for an acceptance of different sexual orientations, an end to the persecution and marginalisation, and for a social change leaning towards normalisation of homosexuality. Evidently, one of Abu Nawas or Kifkif reached out to the other, showing there are not just links between the West and Morocco, but also that pro-LGBTQ organisations from within the MENA region are in contact with one another. Much as how Meem strategically allies itself with important religious figures and organisations on its own terms, Kifkif and the larger Moroccan queer community appears to be doing the same.

Lastly, Nasreen Mazawi's article on the usage of the terms *mithli* and *mithliyya* is revealing in terms of what the queer movement in Morocco is aiming to achieve. To refresh our memory, Mazawi writes about her anger at the terms *mithli* and *mithliyya* being celebrated a cultural and linguistic achievement, simply for not being a derogatory word, as these words have no grounding in Morocco or the Arab world. Instead of using either the English 'queer' or *mithli*, the word *shawadh* is better suited. Yet reactions to her article appear to be virtually non-existent, and al-Amrawi is happy with the term *mithli* for it being an Arab word, emphasising that gay Arab men are a part of Arab society. The other articles within the magazine also uncritically use the word *mithli*, and the very title of the magazine issue contains the same word: لا لرهاب المثلية. Ever since this issue of the magazine was published, the word *mithli* has been slowly growing in acceptance as, despite its lack of grounding in the Arabic language, it is a far more

¹⁷³ IDAHO Committee Team, "The International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia: Annual Report 2013", <https://dayagainsthomophobia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/IDAHO-2013-Annual-Report.pdf>

neutral term. While Mazawi may certainly be raising relevant issues in her article, it appears as though the majority of other queer Moroccans find this discussion to be either uninteresting, or currently not of relevance. I argue that this is likely due to what Dino Suhonic, the Bosnian Muslim mentioned in the introduction who gave the lecture on “How to Reconcile LGBTQ Rights with Islamic Faith”, touched upon, namely that the focus in Morocco is currently on the decriminalisation of identity. Indeed, as Figueredo states, “a short-term goal for LGBTQ activists in many MENA countries is the amelioration of governmental persecution.”¹⁷⁴ Discussions on what term should be used or reclaimed - similar to how ‘queer’ has been reclaimed by Western gay activists - are certainly necessary in future conversations, but are currently only of secondary importance. This primary focus is reflected in how (part of) the Moroccan queer community presents itself to the outside world, and maintains its links with Kifkif both during and after its legal operations in Morocco, consequently demonstrating to an even greater degree how the Moroccan queer community is organising and speaking for itself, with the help of outside organisations and actors, thereby effectively refuting Massad’s argument that NGOs simply speak for and speak over local actors.

A glance at the future

With the role of the Internet and NGOs established in how queer Moroccans both within Morocco proper and in the Moroccan diaspora situate themselves vis-à-vis both Moroccan society and the global movement for LGBTQ rights, we can turn our attention to what may happen next. As Rahman pointed out, the struggle to improve the legal and social situation of queer individuals in Muslim countries as a whole is bound to be different in these countries as opposed to the West, both because of the vastly different experiences of modernity, and the beginnings of queer liberation having already occurred in the West and directly influencing Arab Muslim countries, such as Morocco, through diaspora connections, NGOs, and greater Internet accessibility.¹⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the influence of these actors allows us to imagine how the demand for greater queer rights may unfold. Figueredo notes that, even with some measure of political liberalisation in Morocco in the wake of the Arab Spring, “gay rights activists were still unable to engage in more orthodox methods of activism (e.g. public demonstrations, lobbying politicians, activism via proxy groups such as human rights organizations, NGOs, unions, or

¹⁷⁴ Figueredo, *An Examination of Factors that Catalyze LGBTQ Movements in Middle Eastern and North African Authoritarian Regimes*, 7.

¹⁷⁵ Rahman, *Homosexualities, Muslim Cultures and Modernity*, 48.

Islamic associations) due to the nature of their causes.”¹⁷⁶ Though internet presence does allow these activists to promote their message to a certain degree, the ability to mobilize and obtain political support is highly limited. The Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, for example, has distanced itself publicly from gay rights (activists) for “religious and cultural reasons.”¹⁷⁷ It is entirely possible this move did not result from homophobia, but was rather a more strategic consideration to not tarnish its domestic legitimacy and impact its funding and standing with certain governments, ensuring it can still operate in Egypt. It is certainly plausible that NGOs operating in Morocco follow the same logic.

Contrarily, other advocacy groups existing solely online do not have to fear these potential repercussions, and thus have more options. Hashtag campaigns on Twitter are able to raise a significant deal of both domestic and international attention, such as the hashtag #SolidaritywithEgyptLGBT after Egyptian police started posing as LGBT on social media such as Grindr to entrap and arrest Egyptian users¹⁷⁸ - much as Whitaker warned about in the potential dangers of Internet usage. Afdhere Jama details other methods of raising awareness in his interviews with famous queer Muslims; his interviews with Muhsin Hendricks (the gay imam of a mosque in Cape Town mentioned earlier) and Scott Siraj Kugle (a well-respected openly gay Muslim academic), amongst others, indicate the determination of these queer Muslims to improve the legal and social standing of queer Muslims throughout the world.¹⁷⁹ Indeed, as the Belaraj and Dibi interviews show, some of these changes are already starting to occur. With the greater influx of online information accessible to queer youth in the Muslim world, the concepts of ‘gay’ or ‘queer’ or ‘sexual orientation’, whilst perhaps foreign imports, can serve the useful purpose of providing a framework for understanding on the part of Muslims who grow up attracted to their own sex, and for their families, who may have an alternative to regarding their children as sinful or mad.¹⁸⁰ It does, therefore, not need to be shameful for a man to be attracted to other men, and it does not need to be at odds with an Islamic masculinity. Though this process will likely take a significant amount of time, and the route will not be easy, the first steps of Internet visibility and growing domestic and international awareness have already been taken.

¹⁷⁶ Figueredo *An Examination of Factors that Catalyze LGBTQ Movements in Middle Eastern and North African Authoritarian Regimes*, 95.

¹⁷⁷ Aswat Masyira, “Egypt’s Homosexuals Struggle for Freedom”, *Egyptian Streets*, 8 April 2014, <https://egyptianstreets.com/2014/04/08/egypts-homosexuals-struggle-for-freedom/>

¹⁷⁸ Conor Sheils, “Egypt’s Gay Activists are Ready to Fight Back”, *Cairo Scene*, 28 September 2014, <http://www.cairoscene.com/LifeStyle/Egypt's-Gay-Activists-Are-Ready-To-Fightback>

¹⁷⁹ Afdhere Jama, *Queer Jihad: LGBT Muslims on Coming Out, Activism, and the Faith*, (Oracle Releasing: California), 2013.

¹⁸⁰ Whitaker, *Unspeakable Love*, 212.

Conclusion

The aim of this project was to determine how queerness, or being gay, problematizes and interplays with the ideals of Islamic masculinity in queer Moroccan Muslim men. In situating this study in the larger framework of gender studies and queer theory, I was able to draw upon works on Islamic masculinity, queer theory, and everything in between. In the first chapter, I looked at what it means to be a queer Muslim man. The concept of Islamic masculinity, though a fairly recent one, provided the foundation for my project, and for an understanding of how Muslim men are “made” throughout the world. Massad, Peteet, Monterescu, and Rothenberg all demonstrated the various facets of Palestinian masculinity and the manners in which it is informed and shaped by Israeli oppression. Naguib instead focuses on Egypt, indicating possibilities for a different kind of masculinity; one that is non-violent, but rather focuses on Egyptian men’s connection with food and the nurturing aspect of being able to provide food for family and friends. Conway-Long, Lagrange, and de Soudy all note that Islamic masculinity appears to be in a state of crisis due to social and economic changes, both locally and globally. Sullivan and Hendricks subsequently state that queer theory can perhaps provide a starting point for coming out of this crisis, though the applicability of queer theory to Morocco and the larger Muslim world is limited. Rahman then outlines the theoretical position of queer Muslim individuals, and demonstrates how Western conceptualizations of sexual, political identities are an important resource for local and national developments of queer identities, but are not necessarily a blueprint for how sexual diversity will develop in non-Western cultures; a notion strongly supported by the case of Meem in Lebanon and the trans community in Iran. Lastly, voices from queer Muslims themselves in various anthologies highlight how these theoretical discussions have real-life impacts, from South Africa to London to Beirut.

The second chapter focused on Morocco. After detailing the legal and social framework under which homosexuality falls, I described my own fieldwork and the struggles I encountered in Marrakech and with doing online research on Kifkif and Mithli magazine. Nonetheless, I was able to note down the information on one iteration of Kifkif’s website before it got taken down yet again, showing its focus on repealing Article 489. I was also able to locate one the magazine issues of Mithli, as well as an interview with the founder of the magazine, demonstrating the kind of content queer Moroccans are looking for, and showing how Moroccans are engaging with their society and are exerting agency to negotiate with dominant ideas in order to begin a discourse around homosexuality on their terms. Of particular interest was the international focus of this particular issue of the magazine - though this may have been coincidental due to the recent date of International Day Against Homophobia - and Mazawi’s article on terminology. The

interview with Walid al-Amrawi provided further insight into the purpose and aims of the magazine, and also highlighted the dangerous nature of al-Amrawi and Kikif's activities in Morocco. This interview was supplemented with interviews from Nassiri Belaraj and Tofik Dibi, two Moroccan-Dutch men in the Moroccan diaspora, both speaking about issues surrounding homosexuality in Morocco and growing up in a Moroccan household. Both demonstrated a clear awareness of the privileges afforded to them growing up in the Netherlands and able to publicly come out, despite the difficulties they faced in initially accepting themselves and with family members' (non-)acceptance.

These online interviews set up a discussion about the Moroccan diaspora and Internet usage in the final chapter. Greater Internet access has allowed for subaltern or marginalised groups to put forth their voices and take advantage of this newly-created online space to speak out about particular issues, and to be heard, affording these groups an online presence that would otherwise be denied to them in the 'real' or offline world. This type of activism and creation of oppositional subcultures has resulted in greater information about sexuality being accessible in countries such as Morocco where this otherwise would not be possible. Contrarily, the dangers of the government or police utilising the same social media to track down and arrest queer individuals are very real and substantiated. The Moroccan diaspora in the Netherlands also clearly makes use of these online possibilities, demonstrated by both Dibi and Belaraj's online presence and constant self-orienting towards being gay in Morocco and Moroccan society, possibly as a result of Dutch stigmatisation of Moroccan-Dutch individuals despite the incorrect picture of failed integration. Dibi, Belaraj, and al-Amrawi all aim to promote online visibility of queer Muslim men, contrary to traditional understandings of Islamic masculinity, using their self-acceptance to speak to not only other people in the Moroccan diaspora in the Netherlands, but also to speak to Moroccans in Morocco proper, utilising their online influence and diasporic connections to reach as many people as possible. It is unclear as to whether these links are furthered by NGOs, as, apart from Kikif - which no longer directly works in Morocco - they have appeared unwilling to explicitly and publicly state they are willing to improve the legal and social status of queer individuals in Morocco, although the online activism of this group and the existing international awareness of their subjugated position signifies the first steps to improving their situation have been made.

In the first chapter, it became clear that what it means to be a Muslim male is naturally dependent on context, but heterosexuality was always the fixed default, often considered as the starting point for becoming a man. Yet these discussions did not seem to be of particular relevance in the subsequent sections, with masculinity never being mentioned by al-Amrawi,

Dibi, or Belaraj. Heterosexuality is the assumed and unmarked identity and expectation of Muslim men. This expectation only becomes visible when it is rejected; in the case of Belaraj, this led to a complete cessation of contact with his mother; in Dibi's case, significant family tensions and a terse interview overall with Salaheddine; and in al-Amrawi's case, the open rejection of heterosexuality is not yet possible. Both Belaraj and Dibi seem to be able to reconcile their being gay with being a Muslim man, both on a personal level and in encouraging others to do the same, yet for al-Amrawi this is only currently possible on an individual level, and only in secret. In no case does queerness interplay with Islamic masculinity on a societal level in Morocco; this is only possible in small, oppositional subcultures such as those created by Kifkif and Mithli. This becomes slightly more possible in the Moroccan diaspora, but the possibility for family rejection certainly exists, and the expectation of Moroccan men getting married to a woman and starting a family is still hugely influential.

Whilst this study looked at the diaspora in the Netherlands, an avenue for further research would be whether this is possible in the diaspora in, for example, France, Germany, or Spain. Other possible options for further research would have to include interviews from queer Moroccan Muslims themselves, and hearing what they have to say about sexuality and Islamic masculinity. Nonetheless, I hope this project has been able to shed some light on the relationship between queerness and Islamic masculinity, and amplify the voices of queer Moroccan Muslim men in detailing their lived realities.

Appendix

Appendix A

 **Kifikif - Gerencia** May 15 ☆ ↩ ▾
to me ▾

Buenos días Vicent.

Gracias por ponerte en contacto con Kifikif. Nuestra organización continúa teniendo lazos con Marruecos, sobretodo en lo relativo a la incidencia política sobre la situación jurídico-legal del colectivo y los delitos de odio de los que son víctimas las personas LGBT.

Kifikif no tiene sedes en Marruecos, por motivos obvios, lo que limita bastante nuestro margen de acción.

Un saludo cordial,

Javier Navarro López
Gerente
Trabajador social



Kifikif, Migraciones y Refugio LGBTI+ | Entidad declarada de Utilidad Pública

= administracion@kifikif.info | www.kifikif.info

Response received from Kifikif after inquiring about their activities in Morocco:

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