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Gender and Sexuality in early 19th-century Tunisia: a Decolonial Reading of Aḥmad b. al-Qāḍī al- Timbuktāwī's *naṣīḥa* on the sub- Saharan diaspora

Genre et sexualité en Tunisie au début du XIX^e siècle: une lecture décoloniale de la Recommandation d'Aḥmad b. al-Qāḍī al-Timbuktāwī's sur la diaspora subsaharienne

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Résumés

Français English

Cet article examine les stratégies de genre et les stratégies sexuelles dans la Tunisie du début du XIX^e siècle, en particulier les rituels de guérison pratiqués par les populations de la diaspora subsaharienne et les tentatives des érudits et religieux musulmans pour les discipliner. Il s'appuiera sur une analyse approfondie de la *naṣīḥa* de 1808 écrite par le clerc d'Afrique de l'Ouest Aḥmad b. al-Qāḍī al-Timbuktāwī, dans laquelle il est demandé aux gouvernants tunisiens de bannir les pratiques religieuses des populations sub-sahariennes – essentiellement des esclaves – jugées non islamiques. En plus d'analyser de près la *naṣīḥa*, je la contextualise et la compare avec d'autres textes, littéraires ou non, de manière à « dévoiler » non seulement le discours de al-Timbuktāwī, mais aussi l'histoire des populations sub-sahariennes asservies et, plus largement, l'histoire sociale, culturelle et politique de la Tunisie du début du XIX^e siècle. Je soutiens en effet que la demande de al-Timbuktāwī de bannir certains rituels était justifiée par des motifs religieux, mais qu'elle avait aussi pour but d'empêcher l'autorité et l'intimité sexuelle que ces rituels étaient censés favoriser, et je me demande dans quelle mesure ces pratiques liées au genre et au sexe étaient (ou n'étaient pas) perçues comme troublant l'ordre social et sexuel dans les familles tunisiennes.

This article examines the gender and sexuality politics in early nineteenth-century Tunisia, with particular reference to the healing rituals performed by the diasporic sub-Saharans and the attempts at disciplining them by Muslim religious scholars. It does so through an in-depth analysis of a 1808

naṣīḥa penned by the West African scholar Aḥmad b. al-Qāḍī al-Timbuktāwī, where the Tunisian rulers are urged to ban the religious practices of the sub-Saharan populations—mainly slaves—which are deemed un-Islamic. In addition to close-reading the *naṣīḥa*, I contextualise and compare it with other texts and literature to ‘unveil’ not only al-Timbuktāwī’s discourse but also the history of enslaved sub-Saharans and the larger social, cultural and political history of early nineteenth-century Tunisia. I argue that al-Timbuktāwī’s request to ban the rituals was religiously motivated, but it also aimed at preventing the leadership and sexual intimacy which the rituals allegedly promoted, and I investigate whether such gender and sexual practices were perceived as disrupting the domestic Tunisian social and sexual order (or not).

Entrées d’index

Mots-clés : esclavage, Tunisie, genre, sexualité, xix^e siècle, esclaves sub-sahariens

Keywords : slavery, Tunisia, gender, sexuality, 19th-century, sub-Saharan slaves

Notes de l’auteur

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Texte intégral

1 The history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Tunisia has been primarily studied within the framework of modernity, more specifically, in relation to European modernity.¹ Key elements which have been taken into consideration in the scholarship of modern Tunisia are the dissemination of new political theories about secularism and Islamic reform (especially the works of Tahar Haddad), of modern education (particularly the Ṣādiqī College founded in 1875 by Ḥayr al-Dīn Pāshā), the drafting of the 1861 constitution, the advent of the press and the evolution of the literary fields (through the contribution of prominent writers such as Abu al-Qasim al-Shabi), the birth of the nationalist movement and the discourse about women’s emancipation, whose main achievement is considered the reform of the Personal Status Law (1956). The early feminist discourses and writings were embedded in the changes that modernity entailed in the definition of the ideal union, family and kinship arrangements, and in understandings of sexual difference as well as sexuality, but there is still much to be grasped about how gender and sexuality operated in earlier historical periods.²

2 The epistemology of modernity and its linkage to Europe reveals as much as it conceals. In fact, if it is true that the proximity to southern Europe and the Mediterranean have shaped the cultural history of Tunisia, it is equally important not to neglect the fact that Tunisia is an integral part of the African continent and of a transcultural system that connects Africa to the Middle East in addition to Europe. This article adopts a transnational approach which furthers recent efforts to globalise the Ottoman Empire, on the one hand, and a decolonial perspective that looks at nineteenth-century Tunisian history neither necessarily nor exclusively in relation to France and Europe but rather to sub-Saharan Africa, on the other.³ More specifically, the following pages look at sub-Saharan—mainly enslaved—populations in early nineteenth-century Tunisia, and shed light on the larger history of trans-Saharan relations, the slave trade, and the black diaspora in the modern history of Tunisia.⁴ By so doing, this article both joins and expands the body of scholarship focusing on the subaltern subjects that the earlier elite-centred historiography has neglected.⁵ It also connects two scholarly fields, namely Middle Eastern and North African Studies, on the one hand, and African Studies—in which Africa is defined only as sub-Saharan Africa—on the other. At least since the 1960s, these have come to constitute two distinct, and disconnected, scholarly fields.⁶

3 To do so, it examines a 1808 missive penned by a West African scholar named Aḥmad b. al-Qāḍī al-Timbuktāwī, entitled *Hatk al-sitr ‘ammā ‘alayhi sūdānu Tūnis min al-kufr*

(*Unveiling the Infidel Religion of the Blacks of Tunis*).⁷ The missive addressed the ruler Hammuda Pacha and the *'ulamā'* of the Regency, whom al-Timbuktāwī aimed at persuading of the need to ban the religious practices of the sub-Saharan populations which he deemed un-Islamic. Al-Timbuktāwī's text belongs to the genre of advice literature (henceforth, *naṣīḥa*) which had developed in Islamicate cultures since medieval and early-modern times.⁸

4 We do not know much about al-Timbuktāwī, but his introductory *nisba* (filiations) signals he was the son of a judge (*ibn qāḍī*), which is indicative of the scholarly milieu in which he was brought up. His *nisba* also indicates his life and scholarly trajectory as he moved northward: he was born in Dawjaqa, which historians Fatima Harrak and Mohamed El Mansour suggest is probably the town of Diaguku in the region of Fuuta Jalon, in present-day Guinea.⁹ Our scholar then studied in Jenné, which was a remarkable scholarly centre in the second half of the eighteenth century, and later settled in Timbuktu, where he projected himself—he identified as “*al-Timbuktāwī ufuqan*,” that is, where his horizons were set. Most likely, our author belonged to the Fulfulde-speaking Muslim elites in Fuuta Jalon who developed reputations as scholars, Sufi leaders, and authors of *'ajamī* literature in the Fulfulde language.¹⁰

5 I combine close-reading of al-Timbuktāwī's *naṣīḥa* and the contextualisation of it, and I draw synchronic and diachronic comparisons with other texts and literature from different world geographies. The attempts at banning healing rituals such as the ones al-Timbuktāwī referred to are common in Islamicate history, as is the persistent link of the rituals with women and the patriarchal nature of arguments that refuted their legitimacy to lead or engage in these. I thus frame the *naṣīḥa* within the genealogy of these discourses, and at the same time I see it as indicative of the political situation at the turn of the century in both sub-Saharan Africa and the eastern Maghrib. In fact, the 1808 missive was a reaction against the Tunisian tolerance to sub-Saharans' possession and healing cults which *jihād* leaders in West and Central Africa were endeavoring to ban in the aftermath of the Fulani war and the establishment of the Sokoto caliphate (1804-8). The normative character of the *naṣīḥa* is particularly strong in what is related to gender and sexuality issues. I read the gender normative tone of the missive against the grain and in comparison with other local and transnational texts in order to investigate not only al-Timbuktāwī's view on the black diasporic community, but also that of the Husaynid rulers and the larger Tunisian society. Ultimately, by means of examining the *naṣīḥa* together with other comparable writings, we can gain insights into the politics of gender and sexuality in early nineteenth-century Tunis.

6 Several scholars have engaged with the economic, social, political, and cultural insights in al-Timbuktāwī's text, but have paid little attention to the gender and sexuality-related content therein. Abdeljelil Temimi's introduction to the transcribed *naṣīḥa* does not address the gender and sexuality-related issues at all. For their part, Harrak and El Mansour assert that these are arguments which our author “develops [...] to show the extent of the damage ‘the slaves’ can cause in the host societies.”¹¹ In asserting this, they suggest that al-Timbuktāwī *used* gender and sexuality-related arguments *in order to* be more persuasive in his enquiry to ban the religious practices. Instead, here I aim at complicating the notion whereby his assertions were merely, or at least predominantly, strategic. I argue that al-Timbuktāwī's demand to ban the rituals was not only religiously motivated but informed by the gender and sexual dynamics that the rituals allegedly foregrounded. The gatherings were said to facilitate sub-Saharan women's leadership and intimacy, thus the gender normative tone of the *naṣīḥa* aimed at persuading the Tunisian leaders of the need to discipline not only the sub-Saharan “infidels” but also the Tunisian Muslim female *and* male subjects.

The early nineteenth-century Ottoman Maghrib seen by a West African scholar

- 7 Ḥammūda Pāshā (ruled 1782-1814) followed the steps of his father 'Ali Bey II and built his reign on three foundations: prosperity through agriculture and trade, the support of the religious leaders, and a disciplined army.¹² Ḥammūda Pāshā ruled in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars (1792-1802), which fostered the rivalry for the control of the Mediterranean, especially between France and Britain, and importantly allowed Tunisian corsair expeditions to flourish again. The Mediterranean corsairing and the trade in enslaved Europeans of earlier centuries thus regained prominence by the end of the eighteenth century. In addition to regaining power in the Mediterranean, Ḥammūda Pāshā revitalised the trans-Saharan trade and the links with the most powerful Sudanic kingdom of the time, the Saifawa Dynasty, which ruled the central African state of Bornu. As soon as Ḥammūda Pāshā ascended to the throne in 1782, he launched an ambitious programme to reorganise Saharan commerce, particularly the Ghadames caravan trade.¹³
- 8 The Mediterranean corsairing and the trans-Saharan slave trade were historically shifting routes—like the larger cultural, commercial, military and religious mobilities which have historically connected North and sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁴ The trans-Saharan trade had long been dominated by Berbers until the Hilalian invasion in the eleventh century disrupted it, and the Almoravids and Almohads had shifted the trade westward, until the Ottoman administration gained full control of the hinterland circa 1600.¹⁵ While the enslavement of Europeans was banned in 1816 in the three Ottoman Maghribi regencies, the institution of slavery as such was not abolished in Tunisia until 1846, and a decade later in the rest of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁶
- 9 The sub-Saharan slaves al-Timbuktāwī referred to as “the blacks of Tunis (*sūdānu Tūnis*)” were slaves brought to the Regency in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, that is, as a result of the revitalisation of the trans-Saharan (slave) trade by Hammuda Pacha and his father 'Ali Bey II. Among these sub-Saharan slaves there was a predominance of central African Hausa people. Al-Timbuktāwī also referred to other categories of black people, probably Tunisian-born blacks or freed slaves—as we shall see.
- 10 “When I came back to Tunis from the *ḥajj* [...] I found sedition (*fitna*),” declares al-Timbuktāwī at the beginning of his missive.¹⁷ The dissent, he continues, was provoked not by the Jews or the Christians but by “the infidels of our own Lands of Sudan (*kufār bilādina al-sūdāniyya*).” Al-Timbuktāwī employs the historical Arabic term *bilād al-sūdān*, literally the Lands of the Blacks, meaning the territories of the African Saharan belt, or the Sudan. Al-Timbuktāwī considers the people of “[his] own Lands of Sudan” to be “infidels” because their rituals involve polytheistic elements, such as the veneration of totems (*aṣnām*), and the use of carpets and incenses, that imply the violation of the principle of *tawḥīd* or the unicity of God, and to which he refers with the word “shirk” (literally “association”).¹⁸ In other words, the main motivation of the scholar's complaint is that the rituals entail unbelief (*kufṛ*), which in turn constitutes the grounds on which their enslavable condition is justified—not skin colour, or ‘race.’¹⁹
- 11 The scholar, in fact, devotes the first two chapters of his *naṣiḥa* to arguing that indifference before unbelief equals unbelief. He does so by recurrently citing both the *Qur'ān* and *aḥādīth* (sayings and deeds of the prophet Muḥammad), the two most prestigious sources of Islamic legitimacy. He addresses not only Hammuda Pacha but also the ‘*ulamā*’ of the country, “including Susa, Sfax, Qayrawan and others,” and requests them to ban such practices. Once and again, al-Timbuktāwī denounces the general attitude of indifference before practices which he deems forms of indictable polytheism. He claims that the rituals are known to everyone: “men and women, free and enslaved, old and young.” Some even tried to dissuade him from denouncing the practices he condemns, by telling him that it was an “old sedition (*fitna*).”²⁰ Al-Timbuktāwī particularly accuses “the people of virtue, righteousness and knowledge (*ahl al-faḍl wa al-ṣalāḥ wa al-‘ilm*)” of

being unconcerned. To be sure, our author constructs his own scholarly persona as religiously committed vis-à-vis both the Tunisian political and religious authorities.

12 The detraction from practices deemed un-Islamic has a long history in Islamicate writing, and women's participation in them has often been used to link the practices to immorality and apocalyptic consequences.²¹ Sub-Saharan—or rather creolized—healing rituals performed by a majority of, or only, women and often linked to witchcraft have historically been the target of petitions for them to be banned.²² Detractors have tended to brand these rituals as *bid'a* or illicit innovation, and portrayed women as syncretising agents.²³ Colonial powers also promoted the kind of religious conservatism which condemned healing rituals, as was the case of the British in early twentieth-century Sudan, which reinforced the idea whereby women and their rituals were 'superstitious' and un-Islamic.²⁴ Al-Timbuktāwī's admonition is to be understood within the genealogy of these initiatives, and at the same time as revealing of the political situation at the turn of the century in both sub-Saharan and North Africa.

13 But al-Timbuktāwī's *naṣiḥa* was also a reaction against the Tunisian tolerance to sub-Saharan cults which *jihād* leaders in West and Central Africa were endeavoring to ban in the aftermath of the Fulani war and the establishment of the Sokoto caliphate (1804-8).²⁵ In Hausaland, a region where many of the sub-Saharan slaves brought into Tunisia originated from, *jihād* leaders considered *bori* rituals polytheistic, just as al-Timbuktāwī did. As was the case with the above-cited arguments, the detractors of the *bori* healing rituals in the Sudan also used heavily gendered discourses to condemn such practices. Yet *bori* was also a way to deal with the increasingly patriarchal dynamics that the Islamic revivalist movements foregrounded. As Ismail H. Abdalla has stated, in the aftermath of the establishment of the Sokoto caliphate, Hausa "[w]omen found themselves the economic and jural minors of their male relatives [...] [and] *bori* possession, a socially sanctioned therapeutic practice, became an important avenue for women to deal with a male-dominated, male-oriented world."²⁶

14 Importantly, then, al-Timbuktāwī's militant missive reveals that the black diaspora in Tunisia could preserve different cultural and identity-related aspects relatively freely—or, at least, that the sub-Saharan there could perform rituals which were increasingly persecuted in their regions of origin in the aftermath of the *jihādī* revolutions. This 'tolerance' is to be understood within the Tunisian mode of governance, based on a redistributive system which assured the ruling family's monopoly of authority sanctioned by the politico-religious and military elites as well as of the larger population, of which the sub-Saharan slaves were a part. The Husaynid ruling family supported—and depended on—a range of philanthropic activities, financial remunerations and cash gifts to both secure political alliances and assist the impoverished.²⁷ The male and female members of the Tunisian ruling family cultivated ties with different sectors of the population by means of supporting endowments and charities, which included the patronage of local saints. This was a key means of demonstrating commitment to the population, and indeed it was a way to reinforce the political identity of the Husaynids. Such support was not only financial nor was it solely provided from a distance. Ḥammūda Pāshā's mother and sister, for example, regularly visited the *zāwiya* (shrine) of one of the most popular saints in Tunisia: Sayyida Manūbiyya (1190-1266), a refuge for women, especially those who were poor and those seeking to solve marital and fertility problems.²⁸ The patronage of local saints by the Tunisian state also included black saints such as Sīdī Sa'ad, also known as 'the saint of the slaves' (*Sīdī 'abīd*).²⁹ As a matter of fact, both the Husaynid and the Karamanli ruling family of Libya appear to have been involved in the patronage of *bori*, the healing cults of the enslaved Hausa populations which were observed in many cities in the Maghrib and other places throughout the Ottoman Empire.³⁰

15 Indeed, in early nineteenth-century Tunisia, the *sūdānu Tūnis* whom al-Timbuktāwī decried formed separate communities and established corporate organisations according to their ethnic and geographical places of origin.³¹ They assembled in communal households (Ar. *dīyār*, sing. *dār*), where they performed their *bori* spirit possession and

healing rituals—known as *zār* or *ṭumbura* in the Nile Valley, and as *holey* among the Songhay. The *dīyār*, moreover, served as the community support systems which have been described in other Atlantic and Ottoman black diasporas, and which were key to the maintenance of the black diasporic consciousness associated with the “psychological crisis brought about by enslavement, and transplantation into an alien environment.”³² Tunisian rulers seem to have encouraged the formation of such support systems since at least the eighteenth century. One of the oldest households which was still active when al-Timbuktāwī was in Tunis in 1808, Dar Kufa, probably dates back to the reign of ‘Ali Bey I (1740-1756), the grand-father of Ḥammūda Pāshā. ‘Ali Bey I created his own regiment of sub-Saharan slaves and assisted them in establishing their own *nawādī* (clubs), where they could practice their customs.³³

16 Women, particularly elderly women, played leading roles in such households and thus held important degrees of authority over the community. These elderly women—referred to as *godīya* (in Hausa) or *‘ajūz* (in Arabic)—were the chief priestesses of the rituals performed in the *dīyār* in Tunis, and in other Ottoman cities.³⁴ Beyond their liturgical duties, these women also played key roles in preserving indigenous sub-Saharan cultural values among the Tunisian diaspora.³⁵ It is true that the head of the sub-Saharan community in the city of Tunis was the Āghā, who was the chief eunuch belonging to the official machinery of the state—also called *ḥākīm al-qishra al-sawdā’* (in Arabic) or *sarkin bayi* (in Hausa). But the Āghā gradually lost his power with the abolition of slavery in Tunisia in 1846.³⁶ This means that the women-led rituals and households remained the strongest form of diasporic community bonding throughout the nineteenth century, both in the pre- and post-abolition era.

17 The centrality of women in the sub-Saharan diasporic community disturbed al-Timbuktāwī, as will become clear in what follows. In the *naṣīḥa* he explained:

“When I was back from the *ḥajj* a female servant (*khādīm*) approached me as I was sitting in a shop run by a man from Timbuktu, and she said to me: ‘Give me money! (*hāt al-filūs!*)’, so I told her: ‘tell me girl, what do you want the money for? (*yā ibnati mādhā tafālīna bi al-filūs?*)’, so she responded: ‘we want to perform at the elderly woman’s [communal household]’, by which she meant [worshiping] the totem. So I told her: ‘if you go to a mosque I will give you the money, as for the old woman I do not know her.’ She said: ‘you would have known her had you not disdained her, just as everyone arriving from the Sudan who does not join the worship of the gods they quarrel with them and disdain them.’”³⁷

18 This is quite an exceptional excerpt in the otherwise normative tone of the *naṣīḥa*, and it reveals several interesting issues. For the purposes of this article, I wish to focus on what this excerpt tells us about the sub-Saharan women and the subtext on power. First, the “female servant (*khādīm*)” whom our author interacted with is likely to have been a freed slave or a Tunisian native-born black woman.³⁸ This, in turn, suggests that the enslaved sub-Saharans were not the only ones attracting newly arrived slaves to the rituals, and that freed slaves or their descendants likewise played a role in such recruitment. Second, the wording chosen by al-Timbuktāwī to reproduce the dialogue in Arabic (although the oral interaction might have taken place in a West African language or some form of patois Arabic) depicts the woman as direct and even bossy, and the scholar as paternalistic. She shows no respect for al-Timbuktāwī, who is likely to have been older than her and whose garments and attitude probably indicated his scholarly and prestigious origin, in addition to his newly attained status of *Ḥajj*. Third, her statements show the constraint put on newly arrived sub-Saharan slaves to participate in the rituals and pay for them, and the hostile reaction that they faced if they refused to do so. This excerpt thus shows that the priestesses and their assistants were not necessarily benevolent women, and that we should not romanticise their leadership of the households which were central to the cultural and psychological survival of the enslaved sub-Saharans. One can easily imagine newly arrived enslaved individuals finding both the necessary support as well as control from within the community and its female leaders.³⁹

Gendered and sexual 'sedition' in Al-Timbuktāwī's *naṣīḥa* and early nineteenth-century Tunis

19 Throughout the *naṣīḥa* al-Timbuktāwī focuses on sub-Saharan populations, mainly recently enslaved ones, but in his final exhortations he deals with Muslim Tunisian women and men, in relation to the danger involved in the mingling of the latter with the sub-Saharan "infidels." Unsurprisingly, the discussion of the peril of such inter-religious mingling comes with his tackling gender and sexuality-related issues. It is worth quoting him extensively before proceeding to scrutinise his remarks.

"Do you not see that many Muslim women enter with [sub-Saharan] into this reprehensible business and their husbands cannot restrain them, for it is no secret that the men of this age are under the thumbs of their womenfolk and this is one of the greatest scourges of seditions? Have these men not heard the *ḥadīth*: 'A people who are governed by women shall never prosper?' Do you not see, O my lord, that the weak men have also entered this abomination? Also do you not see, O my lord, that the behavior of these slaves leads them astray and causes others to be led astray and that they will perish [spiritually] and cause others to perish and they devour the wealth of your land unjustly and falsely? Do you not see that they take uncountable sums of money at the hands of women for the worship of the *jīnn* and for lesbian conduct (*al-musāḥaqa*)? Muslim women have begun to steal money from their husbands to pay for the worship of idols and [the practice of] lesbianism (*al-musāḥaqa*)."⁴⁰

20 On the one hand, the mingling that the rituals promote is for our author a spiritual "calamity (*balwā*)."⁴¹ Tunisian Muslims' exposure to "the behavior of these slaves [...] causes [them] to be led astray [...] [and] to perish [spiritually]." In order to prevent the spiritual perish of Muslims induced by sub-Saharan, al-Timbuktāwī suggests that "every *qāḍī* (judge) and *muftī* [should] ban those [male] slaves from marrying Muslim women and Muslim [men] from marrying [slave] women."⁴¹

21 Apart from being spiritually dangerous, the rituals produce a situation of gender reversal. Al-Timbuktāwī affirms that Tunisian Muslim men cannot prevent their wives from entering "into th[at] reprehensible business" with sub-Saharan women because they are "under the thumbs of their womenfolk." Thus the West African scholar expresses anxiety over an alleged disenfranchisement of men through employing a commonplace gender reversal trope. This reversal, our author claims, is both the cause of women's "sedition (*fitna*)" and "the greatest scourges of seditions" itself. Al-Timbuktāwī uses the authoritative source of *ḥadīth* to argue against the dissent that the reversal in gendered power represents: "A people who are governed by women shall never prosper."⁴² By banning these practices, as al-Timbuktāwī advocates, the allegedly disenfranchised position of Tunisian Muslim men will be reversed.

22 Al-Timbuktāwī later proceeds to construct a divide among Muslim men, which nuances the catastrophic character of the gender reversal analysed above. There are "weak" or "weak-minded" men (*ḍu'afā' al-rijāl*) who participate in the "abomination (*munkar*)."⁴³ What this means is that it is not only women who are the cause of the gender sedition, as men—the "weak" ones, for that matter—"have *also* entered the abomination." Crucially, therefore, the gender dimension in al-Timbuktāwī's admonitions involves masculinity as much as femininity. Our scholar considers men to be promoting religious deviance, social danger, and sexual unruliness. Consequently, the banning of the rituals he is demanding the Tunisian rulers to implement is also a means of disciplining and controlling Muslim men.⁴³

23 Rather than using gender in order to legitimise his petition to ban the rituals, al-Timbuktāwī's request is in fact informed by gender anxieties and goals. Not only have Muslim women "begun to steal money from their husbands," which reinforces the idea

whereby men “are under the thumbs of their womenfolk,” but Muslim men’s “uncountable sums of money” are also destined to “the worship of the *jīnn* [...] [and] idols and [the practice of] lesbianism.” Thus the rituals foreground a double “calamity”: as Muslims they support un-Islamic practices, and as men they encourage intimacy between women.

- 24 As in virtually any patriarchal society, women’s intimacy is perceived to be threatening for male privilege and power. Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe have stated that “[m]ale suspicion of what women are up to among themselves, on the one hand, and women’s formation of emotionally intense relationships as shelters from men, on the other, are common patterns in West African cultures.”⁴⁴ As already mentioned, the detractors of healing rituals have historically used misogynistic arguments and depicted the women involved therein as threatening the (gender) order. For example, in the legal battle which the religious, administrative and commercial middle class of Aden undertook against Northeast African headwomen of *zār* in 1923, the petitioners argued that it “involved ‘women of ill-repute or whores’.”⁴⁵ Echoes of the danger posed by female homosociability are also found in Émile Dermenghem’s study on Algeria, in which he reports that

“Arab husbands look askance at their wives for spending their money and scheming with black women, who are very influential and aware of everything that is going on, given that they are often masseuses in the public baths.”⁴⁶

- 25 Dermenghem’s observation, penned around 1930, more than a century after al-Timbuktāwī, conveys Algerian men’s sense of threat in the face of black women’s power, female homosociability and more specifically the mingling of Arab and black women. In addition, anxiety also revolves around the notion that it is actually men who enable such mingling, thus their own curse, by paying the costs entailed in the service that brings women together—the baths in Dermenghem’s text, and the household rituals in al-Timbuktāwī’s. In the Maghrib, both the public baths and sanctuaries are spaces in which female homosociability occurs routinely. Inasmuch as it engenders a threat to male privilege, female homosociability can represent a window of empowerment for women. In fact, Fatima Mernissi defined sanctuaries as “antiestablishment arenas” where women’s networks and an alternative to male-defined femininity could emerge.⁴⁷

- 26 Al-Timbuktāwī’s use of the term “*al-musāḥaqa*” adds a sexual component to the wide notion of female homosociability, however. This Arabic term illuminates an Islamicate literary tradition discussing love and sex between women.⁴⁸ A wide range of medieval and early modern treatises, edicts and poetry in the Islamicate world both celebrated and condemned practices and desire among people perceived as belonging to the same gender. One of the most well-known erotic treatises is the fifteenth-century Tunisian *Al-rawḍ al-āṭir fī nuzha-t al-khāṭir*, most commonly known in English as *The Perfumed Garden*. Its author, Muḥammad al-Nafzāwī, condemned tribadism and inscribed sex in a merely heterosexual paradigm.⁴⁹ And yet, as Samar Habib has argued, what this text and the extensive literature to which it belongs reveal is “that there can be no doubt as to the existence of female homosexuality, *at least* as a category, in the premodern Arabian imagination.”⁵⁰

- 27 Ismael M. Montana has argued that al-Timbuktāwī “equat[ed] the prominent role of women in the cult and the importance of possession with sexual deviance.”⁵¹ Although our scholar was undoubtedly concerned about both women’s prominent role in the rituals and what he saw as sexual deviance, he did not exactly equate both phenomena. What is more, al-Timbuktāwī might have written yet another insightful sentence, which appears in ‘Abdeljelīl Temīmī’s transcription but is missing in the manuscript copy found in the Tunisian National Library: “Do you not see that [Muslim] women (*al-nisā*) have exchanged their men folk for black women (*al-khidm*)?”⁵² This sentence further qualifies the emasculating risk of female homosociability and *al-musāḥaqa*, which is none other than the threat that men are disposable, as women can actively choose to “exchange” them for other women.

28 But how is such an “exchange” and women’s disposing of men, which al-Timbuktāwī feared, to be understood historically? More importantly, can we draw some hypotheses about how the sexual “calamity” our author conveyed might have been perceived by Ḥammūda Pāshā and the religious authorities to whom the *naṣīḥa* was addressed? Building on that, can we draw more general conclusions about sexual politics in early nineteenth-century Tunisia? If al-Timbuktāwī’s *naṣīḥa* ‘unveils’ the tolerance that the Tunisian—and more generally eastern Maghribi—governors displayed toward diasporic sub-Saharans’ assemblies and religious practices, can we also think of *al-musāḥaqa* as a tolerated practice, too?

29 A few years after al-Timbuktāwī addressed the Tunisian authorities, Louis Frank, the Belgian physician of Ḥammūda Pāshā wrote an account of the geography, history, society and culture of Tunisia which he entitled *Description de Cette Régence*.⁵³ In it Frank described instances of homoerotic and homosexual relations among men and women. He referred to sodomy as a “shameful vice” practiced by men in Tunis, “a debauchery” that he thought contradicted “nature and morality at the same time.”⁵⁴ Abdelhamid Larguèche has stated that male homosexuality is frequent in nineteenth-century archival dossiers, and that although it is seen as a “perversion,” it is however “a generalized phenomenon” in “all realms,” including the Beylical court, military aristocracy and more modest as well as popular classes.⁵⁵ Frank and Larguèche’s insights thus suggest the relatively visible character and cross-class nature of male homosexual practices in early nineteenth-century Tunisia.

30 As the physician of the Bey, Frank could access different spaces within the Bardo palace and claimed to have had the exceptional “possibility of seeing many upper-class women in Tunis.”⁵⁶ Despite his daring claim, he was very intimidated by the interaction between the so-called “public female dancers” and the women in the palace household. Frank denounced the dancers’ movements, saying they “were made up of libidinous postures,” after which the entertainers and spectators “ended up holding each other tightly, interlaced, and allowing themselves the most revolting of libertine excesses.”⁵⁷ After the Orientalist and heterosexist flavour of this source is taken away, we can assume that Ḥammūda Pāshā must have been aware of the *soirées* held in the palace where he reigned. If that was the case, the accusation of *al-musāḥaqa* which al-Timbuktāwī voiced is likely not to have caused such outrage in the Bey. Besides, it seems improbable that such leisure was restricted to the palace household, as cultural norms among urban Tunisian upper-class families were very similar to those of the ruling family.⁵⁸ That being so, we can speculate about the regularity and naturalised nature of gatherings among the female members of—at least—the upper-class households in early nineteenth-century Tunisia and, consequently, about Ḥammūda Pāshā’s lack of perception of *al-musāḥaqa* as an exceptionally pressing issue to enforce the banning al-Timbuktāwī called for.

31 Frank added that those “public dancers” or “public singers” existed in other “Oriental countries”, where they worked as courtesans. One is reminded of the different categories of women who provided different leisure services and whom the French colonial system in Tunisia and Algeria homogenised under the name of ‘prostitutes.’⁵⁹ Thus the nature of the *soirées* described by Frank echoes the kind of leisure—including sexual—practices recorded among other Maghribi communities in the early modern period. Taking into account this and the insights outlined above, we can also conclude regarding wider issues related to sexuality in early nineteenth-century Tunisia. First, whereas male homosexuality seems to be visible in a wide range of historical archival sources, including Frank’s essay, *al-musāḥaqa* is less visible, at least in the urban realm, where it appears as restricted to the household⁶⁰. Second, the households where forms of *al-musāḥaqa* were located (the palace household *pace* Frank and the *ḍīyār* where sub-Saharans assembled *pace* al-Timbuktāwī), suggest its cross-class and cross-community dimension.

Conclusion

- 32 The growing awareness whereby privileging the colonial framework and the epistemology of Eurocentric modernity can lead to the unintended (re)production of colonial powers' influence has led to the so-called 'transnational turn,' bringing more careful attention to the connectedness of Middle Eastern and North African localities with world regions other than the colonial metropolises. The transnational approach is thus pushing us to extend our horizons to other lands that played a significant part in shaping the history and the societies of North Africa and the Middle East. This article has tried to contribute to this new trend, by focusing on a text written by a West African scholar, where he mainly discusses the religious practices of the sub-Saharan diaspora in early nineteenth-century Tunis. I have argued that the trans-Saharan axis bears much potential for shedding new light on the history of the Maghrib, including the fairly under researched politics and epistemologies of gender and sexuality, and their intersection with slave status, in early nineteenth-century Tunisia.
- 33 The main source scrutinised in the article, the *naṣīḥa* written by the West African scholar Aḥmad b. al-Qāḍī al-Timbuktāwī, belongs to a large body of Islamicate literature condemning women-led rituals as un-Islamic and requesting they be banned. At the same time, however, it speaks to the favourable Tunisian social, cultural, and political *milieu* in which the sub-Saharan diasporic communities and cultural practices developed. Al-Timbuktāwī constructed his scholarly persona as religiously committed vis-à-vis the Tunisian political and religious authorities whom he addressed; such a reaction is to be understood in the framework of both the *jihād* revolutions in the Sudan and the early-modern Tunisian mode of governance. While in West and Central Africa the *jihādī* leaders were banning rituals like *bori* for being un-Islamic, the Maghribi governors facilitated community gatherings among the enslaved sub-Saharans who fell under the patronage system on which their political legitimacy relied. As such, the *naṣīḥa* shows the pan-African reach of the *jihād* revolutions in the Sudan, as well as the important role that sub-Saharan slaves played in constructing the Husaynid political legitimacy in early nineteenth-century Tunisia.
- 34 The *naṣīḥa* also reveals insights related to the social and cultural history of sub-Saharan slaves in modern Tunisia. The sub-Saharan elderly women led several of the communal households which were spread throughout the cities of the Regency. As such, they were key to the maintenance of the black diasporic consciousness and the community bonds among the recently enslaved sub-Saharans whom al-Timbuktāwī termed "the blacks of Tunis (*sūdānu Tūnis*).” Al-Timbuktāwī was disturbed at these women's leadership role, and his misogynistic assessment thereof is clear in his use of gender reversal tropes. Notwithstanding, his concern confirms the leading role that these elderly women played in the households, the rituals performed therein, and the authority that they exerted upon the enslaved and freed black community, and perhaps also on the Tunisian Muslims who participated in the gatherings. Our scholar was concerned about the spiritual decay that the rituals might entail for Muslim Tunisians.
- 35 I have argued that his request to ban the rituals was however not only religiously motivated but was a means of disciplining Muslim as well as "infidel" women *and* men. In the eyes of the West African scholar, the gender sedition that the ritualistic mingling of Muslims and "infidels" entailed was also caused by a portion of Muslim men, who were said to be under the thumbs of women. Banning the rituals, then, could right the wrong power imbalance which allegedly existed between Tunisian Muslim men and women. It would also prevent the instances of *al-musāḥaqa* which the rituals allegedly facilitated. Yet, in light of the historical traces which suggest the relative visibility and frequency of a wide range of practices including (homo)sexual ones, I have suggested that Ḥammūda Pāshā is likely not to have perceived *al-musāḥaqa* as an exceptionally pressing issue that he would enforce the banning al-Timbuktāwī called for. To put it differently: the West African scholar was reacting to Tunisian rulers' permissive attitude toward the rituals

which were severely repressed in West and Central Africa, not only because he considered them un-Islamic but because they facilitated women's leadership and intimacy. Ultimately, then, al-Timbuktāwī's *Unveiling the Infidel Religion of the Blacks of Tunis* serves to 'unveil' the fact that the politics of gender and sexuality in early nineteenth-century Tunis were also rather tolerant regarding sub-Saharan women's leadership and authority, and the instances of *al-musāḥaqa* that the communal households—and the royal palace household—allegedly included.

Notes

1 Hedi Saidi, *Histoire tunisienne: Modernité, élites et finance dans la Tunisie du XIX^e siècle - Le triple défi*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2014, for example. Privileging the epistemology of modernity has also shaped a problematic narrative of Tunisia as a regional exceptionality: Christopher Alexander, *Tunisia: Stability and Reform in the Modern Maghrib*, Hoboken, Taylor & Francis, 2010; Safwan M. Masri, *Tunisia: An Arab Anomaly*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2017.

2 Dalenda Bouzgarrou-Larguèche (éd.), *Histoire des femmes au Maghreb: culture matérielle et vie quotidienne*, Tunis, Centre de publication universitaire, 2000 ; Emna Ben Miled, *Les Tunisiennes ont-elles une histoire?*, Tunis, Simfact éditions, 1999; Ilhem Marzouki, *Le mouvement des femmes en Tunisie au XX^e siècle*, Tunis, Cérés Productions, 1993.

3 On the globalising aspect of the Ottoman Empire see Mostafa Minawī, *The Ottoman Scramble for Africa. Empire and Diplomacy in the Sahara and the Hijaz*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2016. Recently there has been an increase in the production of works in which the Mediterranean is understood as a transcultural space; one such great work is: Julia Ann Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans: North Africa, Europe, and the Ottoman Empire in an Age of Migration, c. 1800-1900*, Berkeley, Calif.; London, University of California Press, 2011. Yet a number of works focusing on the Mediterranean disregard or downplay Arabic, Tamazight and Judaic Maghribi sources, and overwhelmingly focus on the Francophone ones reproducing, *de facto*, a Eurocentric epistemology. For an enlightening criticism of Eurocentric conceptions of Mediterranean multiculturalism see Hala Halim, *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism: An Archive*, New York, University of Virginia Press, 2013.

4 For a systematic study of the entrenchment of the trans-Saharan slave trade in Tunisia and the abolition of slavery in the Regency, see Ismael Musha Montana, *The Abolition of Slavery in Ottoman Tunisia*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2013. One of the earliest studies of the enslavement of Christians and blacks in Tunisia is Lucette Valensi, "Esclaves chrétiens et esclaves noirs à Tunis au XVIII^e siècle", *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 22, n°6, 1967, p. 1267-1288. See also Abdeljelil Temimi, *Études d'Histoire Arabo-Africaine - Dirāsāt fī al-tārīkh al-'arabī al-ifriqī*, Zaghuan, Tunis, Centre d'Études et de Recherches Ottomanes, Morisques, de Documentation et d'Information, 1994; John L. Wright, *The Trans-Saharan Slave Trade*, London, Routledge, 2006.

5 See the work of Abdelhamid and Dalenda Larguèche on prostitutes, Jews, the impoverished, blacks and the 'marginalised' in Tunisia. Dalenda Larguèche and Abdelhamid Larguèche, *Marginales En Terre d'Islam*, Tunis, Cérés Productions, 1992; Abdelhamid Larguèche, *Les ombres de la ville : pauvres, marginaux et minoritaires à Tunis (XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles)*, Manouba, Centre de publication universitaire, Faculté des lettres de Manouba, 2002.

6 A group of political scientists has recently endeavoured to connect these regions and scholarly fields. See Hisham Aidi, Marc Lynch, and Zachariah Mampilly (eds), *Africa and the Middle East: Beyond the Divides*, POMEPS Studies 40, POMEPS and Columbia SIPA, 2020, <https://pomeps.org/pomeps-studies-40-africa-and-the-middle-east-beyond-the-divides>.

7 I have worked on the text in its manuscript form as well as its two available transcriptions: Aḥmad al-Timbuktāwī, 'Hatḳ al-sitr 'ammā 'alayhi sūdānu Tūnis min al-kufr' (Tunis, September 1808), A-MSS-09564(02), Tunisian National Library; Abdeljelil Temimi, 'Transcription of the manuscript Hatḳ al-sitr 'ammā 'alayhi sūdānu Tūnis min al-kufr by Aḥmad al-Timbuktāwī', in *Études d'Histoire Arabo-Africaine - Dirāsāt fī al-tārīkh al-'arabī al-ifriqī*, Zaghuan, Tunis, Centre d'Études et de Recherches Ottomanes, Morisques, de Documentation et d'Information, 1994, p. 74-86. My subsequent citations include page numbers of the manuscript and both Temimi's and El Mansour/Harrak's transcriptions.

8 Louise Marlow, "Advice and Advice Literature", *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, 1 June 2007. The Tunisian missive is not the only *naṣiḥa* al-Timbuktāwī penned. From Tunisia the scholar traveled to Morocco and spent time in Fez, to whose scholars he directed a missive with a similar scope. Both *naṣiḥa*-s have been edited by Moroccan historians Mohamed El Mansour and Fatima Harrak: Ahmad Ibn al-Qadi al-Timbukti (eds), *A Fulani Jihadist in the Maghrib: Admonition of Ahmad Ibn al-Qadi at-Timbukti to the Rulers of Tunisia and Morocco*, Rabat, Ma'had al-Dirasat al-Ifriqiyya, 2000. This article is only concerned with the Tunisian *naṣiḥa*.

- 9 Mohamed El Mansour and Fatima Harrak, "Introduction", in *A Fulani Jihadist in the Maghrib*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
- 10 On Fuuta Jalon, see John H. Hanson, "Fuuta Jalon", *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, *THREE*, 1 July 2017.
- 11 *A Fulani Jihadist in the Maghrib*, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
- 12 Jamil M Abun-Nasr, *A History of the Maghrib in the Islamic Period*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 180.
- 13 Montana, *The Abolition of Slavery in Ottoman Tunisia*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
- 14 Ralph A. Austen, *Trans-Saharan Africa in World History*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2010.
- 15 Montana, *The Abolition of Slavery in Ottoman Tunisia*, *op. cit.*, p. 13-19.
- 16 The abolition of corsairing did not entail the disappearance of Europeans in Tunisia, however. From the 1820s on, labor and other kinds of European migrants populated the Regency. Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans*, *op. cit.*
- 17 al-Timbuktāwī, 'Hatk al-sitr 'ammā 'alayhi sūdānu Tūnis min al-kufr', 63b–64a; Temimi, 'Transcription of the manuscript Hatk al-sitr 'ammā 'alayhi sūdānu Tūnis min al-kufr by Aḥmad al-Timbuktāwī', 74; al-Timbukti, *A Fulani Jihadist in the Maghrib*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
- 18 al-Timbuktāwī, 'Hatk al-sitr 'ammā 'alayhi sūdānu Tūnis min al-kufr', 64a and 64b; Temimi, 'Transcription of the manuscript Hatk al-sitr 'ammā 'alayhi sūdānu Tūnis min al-kufr by Aḥmad al-Timbuktāwī', 75, 77; al-Timbukti, *A Fulani Jihadist in the Maghrib*, *op. cit.*, p. 54, p. 57-59.
- 19 Ismael Musah Montana, "Enslavable Infidels: Sudan-Tunis as a Classificatory Categorization for New Wave of Enslaved Africans in the Regency of Tunis", *The Maghreb Review*, vol. 29, no. 1-4, 2004, p. 78-98. The Western idea of 'race' is not the same as that which operated in pre-colonial trans-Saharan relations. See Bruce S. Hall, "The Question of 'Race' in the Pre-Colonial Southern Sahara", *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 10, n°3 4, 1 September 2005, p. 339-367, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629380500336714>. See also Mohammed Ennaji, *Serving the Master: Slavery and Society in Nineteenth-Century Morocco*, Basingstoke-New York, Macmillan-St. Martin's Press, 1999; Rita Aouad, "Slavery and the Situation of Blacks in Morocco in the First Half of the Twentieth Century", in *Revisiting the Colonial Past in Morocco*, trans. Driss Maghraoui, New York, Routledge, 2013, p. 142-156.
- 20 al-Timbuktāwī, 'Hatk al-sitr 'ammā 'alayhi sūdānu Tūnis min al-kufr', 63b; Temimi, 'Transcription of the manuscript Hatk al-sitr 'ammā 'alayhi sūdānu Tūnis min al-kufr by Aḥmad al-Timbuktāwī', 75; al-Timbukti, *A Fulani Jihadist in the Maghrib*, *op. cit.*, p. 53.
- 21 Alexandra Cuffel, "From Practice to Polemic: Shared Saints and Festivals as 'Women's Religion' in the Medieval Mediterranean", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* vol. 68, n°3, 2005, p. 401-419.
- 22 For attempts at banning healing rituals in Sudan and Egypt, see: Ahmed al-Safi, Ioan Myrddin Lewis, and Sayyid Hurreiz, *Women's Medicine: The Zar-Bori Cult in Africa and Beyond*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press for the International African Institute, 1991, p. 87, p. 185.
- 23 Silvia Bruzzi and Meron Zeleke, "Contested Religious Authority: Sufi Women in Ethiopia and Eritrea", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 45, n°1, 2015, p. 37-67.
- 24 Janice Boddy, *Civilizing Women: British Crusades in Colonial Sudan*, Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007, p. 48.
- 25 Paul E. Lovejoy, *Jihād in West Africa during the Age of Revolutions*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2016; Montana, *The Abolition of Slavery in Ottoman Tunisia*, *op. cit.*, p. 173.
- 26 Ismail H. Abdalla, "Neither Friend nor Foe: The Malam Practitioner - Yan Bori Relationship in Hausaland", in al-Safi, Lewis, and Hurreiz (eds), *Women's Medicine: The Zar-Bori Cult in Africa and Beyond*, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
- 27 Amy Aisen Kallander, *Women, Gender, and the Palace Households in Ottoman Tunisia*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2014, p. 109-122.
- 28 On Sayyida Manubīyya, see: Katia Boissevain, *Sainte parmi les saints*, Rabat, Institut de recherche sur le Maghreb contemporain, 2005.
- 29 Montana, "Enslavable Infidels...", art. cit.
- 30 Arthur John Newman Tremearne, *The Ban of the Bori. Demons and Demon-Dancing in West and North Africa. With ... Illustrations, Etc.*, London, 1914, p. 152-53; John O. Hunwick and Eve Troutt Powell, *The African Diaspora in the Mediterranean Lands of Islam*, Princeton, NJ, Markus Wiener Publishers, 2002.
- 31 Ismael Musah Montana, "The Bori Colonies of Tunis", in Behnaz A Mirzai, Ismael Musah Montana, and Paul E Lovejoy (eds), *Slavery, Islam and Diaspora*, Trenton, NJ, Africa World Press,

2009, p. 156.

32 John Hunwick, 'The Religious Practices of Black Slaves in the Mediterranean Islamic World', in *Slavery on the Frontiers of Islam*, ed. Paul E Lovejoy (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2004), p. 149.

33 Montana, "The Bori Colonies of Tunis", art. cit., p. 159.

34 Y. Hakan Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and Its Demise, 1800-1909*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1996, p. 174-76.

35 Even by the beginning of the 20th century the chief priestesses in the Tunisian *dīyār* had to be West African and speak Hausa to direct the rituals. Tremearne, *The Ban of the Bori*, op. cit., p. 30.

36 Larguèche, *Les ombres de la ville*, op. cit., p. 404.

37 al-Timbuktāwī, 'Hatk al-sitr 'ammā 'alayhi sūdānu Tūnis min al-kufr', 67; Temimi, 'Transcription of the manuscript Hatk al-sitr 'ammā 'alayhi sūdānu Tūnis min al-kufr by Aḥmad al-Timbuktāwī', 81; al-Timbukti, *A Fulani Jihadist in the Maghrib*, op. cit., p. 67.

38 It is likely that al-Timbuktāwī would have used the term *sūdānīyya* to refer to a sub-Saharan slave brought into Tunisia during the Husaynid era, and not *khādīm* (pl. *khidm*, *shwāshīn* in Tunisian Arabic), generally used for both freed and enslaved blacks. For the specificities of this terminology, see Montana, 'Enslavable Infidels'.

39 Leila Hanoum, the daughter of the physician of the Ottoman palace in Istanbul, recounted that the black women therein professed "a great veneration mixed with terror for the Godia". See Leila Hanoum, *Le harem impérial au XIX^e siècle*, éd. Sophie Basch, Brussels, Éditions Complexe, 1991, p. 76-80, transcribed in: John Hunwick and Eve Troutt Powell, "XII: Religion and Community", in *The African Diaspora in the Mediterranean Lands of Islam*, Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2002, p. 159-61.

40 I have mostly reproduced the translation offered in Ismael Musah Montana, "Aḥmad Ibn Al-Qāḍī Al-Timbuktāwī on the Bori Ceremonies of Tunis", in Paul Lovejoy, *Slavery on the Frontiers of Islam*, Princeton, Markus Wiener Publishers, 2011, p. 190-191, although I made some minor changes and added the following phrase which was missing from the original: "Do you not see, O my lord, that the weak men have also entered this abomination?" See this excerpt in: al-Timbuktāwī, 'Hatk al-sitr 'ammā 'alayhi sūdānu Tūnis min al-kufr', 69a; Temimi, 'Transcription of the manuscript Hatk al-sitr 'ammā 'alayhi sūdānu Tūnis min al-kufr by Aḥmad al-Timbuktāwī', 84; al-Timbukti, *A Fulani Jihadist in the Maghrib*, op. cit., p. 75.

41 al-Timbuktāwī, 'Hatk al-sitr 'ammā 'alayhi sūdānu Tūnis min al-kufr', 70a; Temimi, 'Transcription of the manuscript Hatk al-sitr 'ammā 'alayhi sūdānu Tūnis min al-kufr by Aḥmad al-Timbuktāwī', 85-86; al-Timbukti, *A Fulani Jihadist in the Maghrib*, op. cit., p. 78.

42 The use of this very *ḥādīth* in an informal setting is what motivated Fatima Mernissi's pioneering study on Islamic sources, the construction of tradition and gender. Fatima Mernissi, *Le harem politique: le Prophète et les femmes*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1987. In parts of the Western Sudan, however, the strong tradition of women's leadership was backed by *aḥādīth*: Jean Boyd, *The Caliph's Sister: Nana Asma'u (1793-1865), Teacher, Poet, and Islamic Leader*, London; Totowa, N.J., F. Cass, 1989.

43 Recent studies on masculinities in the Middle East and North Africa are challenging the prevalent approaches to men as if they were a-gendered, and critically engaging with non-binary frameworks and identities. For a literature review on these works, see Frances S. Hasso, "Decolonizing Middle East Men and Masculinities Scholarship: An Axiomatic Approach", *Arab Studies Journal Online*, 15 October 2018, <http://www.arabstudiesjournal.org/4/post/2018/10/decolonizing-middle-east-men-and-masculinities-scholarship-an-axiomatic-approach.html>.

44 Stephen O Murray and Will Roscoe (eds.), *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities*, London, Macmillan, 1998, p. 105.

45 Lidwien Kapteijns and Jay Spaulding, "Women of the Zar and Middle-Class Sensibilities in Colonial Aden, 1923-1932", *African Languages and Cultures*. Supplement No. 3, *Voice and Power: The Culture of Language in North-East Africa. Essays in Honour of B. W. Andrzejewski*, 1996, p. 171.

46 Émile Dermenghem, *Le Culte des saints dans l'Islam maghrébin*, Paris, Gallimard, 1954, p. 247.

47 Fatima Mernissi, "Women, Saints and Sanctuaries", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 3, 1977, p. 111-112.

48 Samar Habib, *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East: Histories and Representations*, New York, Routledge, 2007; Sahar Amer, "Medieval Arab Lesbians and Lesbian-Like Women", *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 18, n°2, 2009, p. 215-236; Samar Habib, "17. Sexualities and Queer Studies", in Souad Joseph (ed.), *Women and Islamic Cultures*, Leiden, Brill, 2013, p. 325-338.

49 See Abdelkebir Khatibi, Chapter 4 "La rhétorique du coït", in *La Blessure du nom propre*, Paris, Denoël, 1986.

50 Habib, *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

51 Montana, "Aḥmad Ibn Al-Qāḍī al-Timbuktāwī on the Bori Ceremonies of Tunis", *art. cit.*, p. 190.

52 Temimi, "Transcription of the manuscript *Hatk al-sitr 'ammā 'alayhi sudāni Tūnis min al-kufr* by Aḥmad al-Timbuktāwī", 84. This transcription might be based on another manuscript copy, perhaps the one stored in the Tunisian National Library under the number 21183, which I have not been able to access. For my translation of *al-khidm* as "black women" see note 35 above.

53 The account was published in a larger volume edited by the orientalist Jean Joseph Marcel in Paris in 1851, although Frank sent his piece to Marcel in 1816 when he was back in Europe. Frank must have written most of it throughout the previous decade he spent in Tunisia.

54 Louis Frank, *Histoire de Tunis : précédée d'une description de cette régence*, Paris, Firmin Didot Frères, 1851, p. 102.

55 Larguèche, "Anthropologie de ...", *art. cit.*, p. 63.

56 Frank, *Histoire de Tunis*, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

57 Frank, *Histoire de Tunis*, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

58 For the norms shared among elite Tunisian households see Kallander, *Women, Gender, and the Palace Households...* *op. cit.*, p. 92-94. For the harem (and/or household) as shaped and represented within societies of the Middle East and North Africa, see Marilyn Booth (ed.), *Harem Histories: Envisioning Places and Living Spaces*, Durham, N.C - Chesham, Duke University Press, 2010 and the chapter in it: Julia Clancy-Smith, "Where Elites Meet: Harem Visits, Sea Bathing and Sociabilities in Precolonial Tunisia, c. 1800-1881", in Booth, *Harem Histories*, *op. cit.*, p. 177-210, where the centrality of women in Husaynid politics is stated, as is in Kallander above.

59 The most well-known cases in Algeria were the Nāilīyyāt and the 'Aṣrīyyāt. See: Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question*, New York - London, Psychology Press, 1994, p. 30-33. For the Tunisian case, see: Abdelhamid Larguèche, "Anthropologie de la prostitution dans la ville arabe", in Larguèche, *Marginales en terre d'Islam*, *op. cit.*, p. 13-84.

60 On the (in)visibility of women's sexual/erotic relations, and especially beyond the West, see Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia Wieringa, *Female Desires: Same-Sex Relations and Transgender Practices across Cultures*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1999; and particularly the chapter "Sapphic Shadows: Challenging the Silence in the Study of Sexuality", p. 39-63.

Pour citer cet article

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