

EUNUCHS AND CONCUBINES IN THE HISTORY OF ISLAMIC SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Abstract

In the early 17th century, male servant eunuchs were common, notably at the Persianised Acehnese court of Iskandar Muda. By mid-century, the castration of male slaves mysteriously disappeared. Concubinage, however, lasted much longer. While there were sporadic attempts to stamp out abuses, for example sexual relations with pre-pubescent slave girls, and possibly, clitoridectomy, a reasoned rejection of the institution of concubinage on religious grounds failed to emerge. This paper discusses the sexual treatment of slaves across Islamic Southeast Asia, a subject which sheds important light on historical specificities pertaining to both Islam and sexuality in the region, yet which continues to be treated with silence, embarrassment or even scholarly condemnation.

Southeast Asian Islam was characterised by a peculiar prominence of *adat*, or customary law, and *qanun*, or statute law (Hooker 1988). In the Middle East and South Asia, where the *sharia* was better established, eunuchs and concubines were widespread up to modern times.

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Moreover, they were always of servile status, as the holy law demanded. In Southeast Asia, in contrast, concubines (*gundik*) were sometimes free, and eunuchs (*sida-sida*) mysteriously disappeared around 1700.

Unfortunately, the nature of these practices in Islamic Southeast Asia is hard to unravel, as they are covered by a veil of silence. Servitude itself is seen as highly embarrassing (Salman 2001). 'Sexual aberrations' merely compound the embarrassment, and outsiders writing about such matters easily attract accusations of 'Orientalism' and 'voyeurism.' This is unfortunate, because a study of these topics helps to illuminate historical specificities pertaining to both Islam and sexuality in the region.

Concubinage in Islam

Across Islamdom, the *ulama* accepted that a man could have an unlimited number of servile concubines. Quranic references to 'those whom your right hand possesses' seemed to justify the institution, and the Prophet himself was believed to have owned two concubines in the latter stages of his life (Ruthven 2000: 57, 62-3, Awde 2000: 10, Zaidi 1935). Concubinage also eased conversion, overcoming the 'four wives barrier' to embracing Islam (Hughes 1885: 600). The ownership of concubines certainly became widespread, extending to men of quite modest means (Hodgson 1974: II, 65, 144).

A concubine could rise high in the social scale, although this was exceptional. If she bore a son for a mighty ruler, she wielded great influence, especially after her master's death (Peirce 1993, Babaie et al. 2004). However, enforced sexual continence was the lot of discarded and

neglected sexual partners in large harems, while the bondmaid who attended to their needs faced both celibacy and drudgery (Peirce 1993: 138, 141-2). Concubines at times resisted their fate. Islamic law strictly prohibited the molestation of dependants, but subordination in the protected sphere of the household made it hard to police transgressions (Hodgson 1974: I, 344).

The *ulama* displayed persistent unease about concubinage, discouraging excesses, protesting at abuses, and forbidding the holding of free concubines. The huge harems of rulers and nobles flouted repeated recommendations in the Qur'an to treat slaves and wives well, and not to be prodigal (Hodgson 1974: II, 143-4, Crone and Cook 1977: 148, Khan 1972: 35-9). Canonical stories of Hagar, Ibrahim's ill-treated concubine, introduced a note of uncertainty. These were reinforced by folk traditions that elaborated on Hagar's tribulations in the desert with her young son Isma'il, believed to be the ancestor of the Arabs (Crone and Cook 1977, Awde 2000: 143, Ruthven 2000: 13-18).

The *ulama* thus attempted to mitigate the evils of the institution from an early date. They insisted that children of concubines were free, and of equal social status to children of free wives, as long as the father recognised paternity. The mother of such children was also to be freed at the death of her master (Brunschvig 1960).

More radical measures against concubinage were rare, came late, and remained contested. The Druzes of Greater Syria formed an unusual exception, banning slavery, concubinage, and polygyny from the eleventh century, but they were marginalised by their sectarian beliefs (Abu-Izzedin 1984: 122, 230).

Muslims of Sri Lanka and parts of India established a rather generous customary upper limit of forty concubines per man (Bevan Jones 1941: 209). A general and reasoned rejection of concubinage on religious grounds only emerged from the 1870s, beginning in South Asia and spreading to Egypt (Ali 1883, Hourani 1970: 164-70). Such revisionism was resisted by literalist thinkers, however, such as Mawlana Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi (1903-79) in South Asia. Still influential today, Mawdudi proclaimed the harem to be 'the last place of refuge where Islam guards its civilisation and culture' (Khan 1972: 38). He also taught that the Prophet had owned at least one concubine (Sarwar Qureshi 1983: 28-32).

Concubinage in Islamic Southeast Asia

A particular advantage of holding concubines under custom was that it could extend to free women, to the horror of pious *ulama* (Winstedt 1981: 54, Linehan 1973: 129). This flagrant breach of the *sharia* was still reported in North Sumatra as late as the 1890s (Jacobs 1894: I, 78). The nobles of central and eastern Java were most infamous for obliging free women to cohabit with them, without reducing them to slavery. In contrast, the more *sharia*-minded grandees of Banten, in West Java, took concubines only from 'those villages which during the period of Islamisation had refused to embrace the new religion, and had thereupon been declared to be slaves' (Kumar 1997: 62). However, the collective and hereditary slavery of whole villages was itself contrary to the spirit of the *sharia*.

Adding insult to injury, the children of free concubines were considered to be inferior to those of free wives (Snouck

Hurgronje 1906: I, 360). Prince Dipanagara was passed over for the throne of Yogyakarta in the early nineteenth century as the son of a concubine, possibly contributing to the outbreak of the great Java War of 1825-30 (Adas 1987: 94, 96). Although it is not stated clearly whether his mother was free or slave, the habits of the central Javanese nobility make it quite likely that she was a free concubine.

Even in the case of servile concubines, Southeast Asian men tended to dislike Islamic legal provisions, preferring to hold such women under *adat* (Lasker 1950: 32-3). The numerous debt slaves of the region were especially prone to being possessed under customary arrangements, as this category of servility found no place in the *sharia* (Clifford 1913: 122-3, Maxwell 1890: 247-8, Thosibo 2002, Ruibing 1937). Moreover, the recourse to custom may have helped in selling concubines to single non-Muslim Chinese men, which became big business from the eighteenth century, as numbers of Chinese immigrants swelled (Reid 1983: 27). Under the *sharia* such sales would have been frowned upon. Indeed, they would technically have been prohibited if the female slaves in question were Muslims.

Southeast Asian Muslims also invoked customary law to evade *sharia* provisions that imposed an equal status on children of concubines (Lasker 1950: 32-3). In Aceh, where considerable stress was placed on the maternal line, descendants of concubines retained the 'taint' of slavery for several generations. To avoid this, people practised birth control or infanticide, both of which violated the holy law (Snouck Hurgronje 1906: I, 21-2, 359, Loeb 1972: 230-1). In Lampung, South Sumatra, children of concubines had to be recognised by their free half-

siblings in a special *adat* ceremony, and even then they were not completely equal (Djajadiningrat 1929: 90). Among the Alas of North Sumatra, adoption, prohibited in the *sharia*, was employed to clear the 'stain' of slave descent (Iwabuchi 1994: 130, 158).

However, Muslims in Southeast Asia might also turn to the *sharia* in dealing with matters of concubinage. This is clear from a 1892 collection of Meccan *fatwas* for Southeast Asian believers. *Fatwa* 34 explained why the child of a female slave, born as the result of illicit sexual relations with her owner, inherited the mother's servile status. Had the mother been a legitimate concubine, the child would have been born free. *Fatwa* 96 stressed that a master had to free a slave if he wished to marry her, rather than merely have her as a concubine (Kaptein 1997: 195).

In addition, servile concubinage shared certain features typical of Islamdom as a whole. In late seventeenth century South Sulawesi, jealous free wives whipped their husbands' concubines, or even went so far as to murder them. At the same time, by maintaining inflated harems, masters denied a family life to unwanted partners (Gervaise 1971: 83-5, 115-16). Sultans were especially likely to have excessively large harems, as in Aceh in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Hadi 2004: 100). That said, concubines possessed their own slaves in northern Borneo in the 1840s, and were considered to be fairly socially privileged (Low 1968: 144).

Concubinage survived the imposition of colonial rule. Raja Ali, ruler of Riau, mentioned concubines at least twice in his extensive correspondence with the Dutch authorities. In 1872, he lamented that his

sex drive was weakening just as he had acquired a pretty young *gundik* (Putten and Al-Azhar 1995: 41, 115).² In the neighbouring Lampung Districts of South Sumatra, concubinage was still reported during the First World War (Broersma 1916: 76).

Many concubines were imported. Non-Muslim Chinese girls, *mui tsai* or *anak beli*, were common in Aceh around 1900 (Snouck Hurgronje 1906: I, 21). Chinese girls were still being obtained as concubines in the interwar years, and were even re-exported to Arabia (Ingrams 1970: 26-7; Miers 2003: 268-70). 'Adoption' was frequently used to evade colonial legislation restricting this "modern slave trade" (Lasker 1950: 53-5). Indeed Chinese *anak beli* continued to be "adopted" by Muslims in Singapore in the 1950s. They were almost always girls, even if concubinage was no longer specifically mentioned (Djamour 1965: 93, 99-100).

Not all female slaves enjoyed the relatively elevated status of concubines, or even that of household servants. Datu Mandi, of the southwestern Philippines, explained to his new American colonial masters in 1901 that it was women's agricultural skills that accounted for their high price, not their sexual role (Salman 2001: 90-1). In seventeenth century South Sumatra, strong young men for the pepper gardens were most in demand, and female slaves were purchased for both sexual and productive tasks (Andaya 1993: 95-7). In 1916, things had not changed much in the Lampung Districts (Broersma 1916: 73-5).

² My thanks are due to Mulaika Hijjas for drawing my attention to this text.

Even the rank sexual exploitation of servile women through prostitution was fairly common in Islamic Southeast Asia, although it flouted the strictures of *sharia adat*, and *qanun* alike. Thus, servile prostitution, "not sanctioned by law or custom," flourished in the Malay Peninsula (Sullivan 1982: 56; see also Gullick 1958: 103). The same problem arose across the straits in Sumatra (Andaya 1993: 96). *Fatwa* 127 of the 1892 Meccan collection stressed that female slaves were not to be sold for fornication (Kaptein 1997: 204). This was probably to block the common ruse of short-term sales, followed by repurchase, which allowed both pimp and customer to remain within the letter of the holy law (Erdem 1996: 34-5).

The reform of concubinage in Islamic Southeast Asia

Authors may have begun to denounce concubinage from the early to the mid-nineteenth century. However, it is not easy to interpret tales of immoral concubines dating from this period. Such exemplary stories had a long pedigree in Islamic literature, dating back at least to 'Amr b. Bahr al-Jahiz of Basra (776-869), and did not necessarily entail objections to the institution as such. Over time, though, poets and novelists writing in Malay did come to reject not only concubinage, but also polygyny itself, even if the timing of this remains to be established.³

More specifically Islamic strands of reform became evident from the late nineteenth century, reflecting developments in the Middle East. A Batavia *fatwa* of the 1880s answered a

³ Mulaika Hijjas, personal communication.

query about the legality of purchasing under-age Chinese girls as concubines from Chinese dealers in Singapore. The *mufti* stressed that concubinage was only valid with a pubescent woman, who was a Muslim, or a “person of the book.” No under-age child could legally convert to Islam by making the profession of the faith. As for marriage to a pre-pubescent girl, it was only valid if the child was already a Muslim, and the father or legal guardian authorised it. A slave trader could not stand in as such (Snouck Hurgronje 1923-24: II, 276-9). The author of this *fatwa* was almost certainly Sayyid 'Uthman b. 'Abdallah b. 'Aqil b. Yahya (1822-1931). Of mixed Hadhrami and Egyptian parentage, he had been appointed chief *mufti* of Indonesia by the Dutch (Stauth 1992: 74-5).

The Middle Eastern connection seems to have been important in a growing Islamic condemnation of concubinage. A letter from Singapore in 1922, addressed to the Egyptian reformist journal *al-Manar*, inquired whether it was legitimate to buy Chinese girls as concubines from their families. Rashid Rida, the editor, answered in the negative (Ghazal 2003).

Haji Umar Said Tjokroaminoto (1882-1934), a Javanese aristocrat who headed Indonesia's Sarekat Islam from the early 1910s, also contributed to the debate as to the legitimacy of slavery and concubinage. He was unusual among Indonesia's political leaders in taking a modernist stance against slavery, denounced in a pamphlet first published in 1924, and frequently republished thereafter (Tjokroaminoto 1950: 32-3). In newspaper articles of 1921 and 1929, he further reprimanded Javanese nobles for their traditional practice of kidnapping “good-looking women of common stock.”

Tjokroaminoto, who read English but not Arabic, was probably more influenced by South Asian reformers than by those of the Middle East. He was close to Lahori Ahmadi missionaries, who entered Java from South Asia in 1924, preaching a sectarian form of Islam. They had resolutely opposed servile concubinage since 1914, although it is not certain how much of their material was published in Indonesia, as they were strenuously opposed by the local *ulama* (Noer 1973: 103 (n. 3), 150-1).

When and why opinion finally turned against concubinage in Islamic Southeast Asia is far from certain, but the break may have been caused more by secular than by religious developments. Europeans often blamed polygyny and concubinage as major reasons for the moral decline and political failure of Islamic societies across the world. Christian missionaries and their allies bracketed these 'social ills' with female seclusion and ease of divorce (Hardy 1972: 99). The drift into monogamy seems to have been most precocious among Southeast Asia's secular elites.

Sexual mutilation in Islam

Islam displayed a strong and persistent bias against mutilating human beings, including slaves. This was sometimes justified by referring to 4:118 in the Qur'an, condemning those who “cut off the cattle's ears ... and ... alter God's creation.” However, some scholars restricted their interpretation of this verse to animals.

Circumcision was the main exception to not mutilating humans, but female circumcision, or clitoridectomy, was patchily practised across Islamdom, and

had little scriptural backing. It was not mentioned in the Qur'an, and the traditions cited in its favour were weak and suspect (Awde 2000: 126, 192, 199, Netton 1992: 147). It was custom that underpinned female circumcision, including in the Arabian Peninsula, so that "the more careful legists could not regard it as fully binding" (Hodgson 1974: I, 324). Infibulation was even less common. Moreover, there was no particular mention of slaves in regard to either of these customs.

Removing the foreskin of the penis was clearly much more securely established in Islamic tradition. Although it found no mention in the Qur'an, male circumcision became a major marker of Muslim status, and reliable traditions took it back to Ibrahim or Abraham (Netton 1992: 147). From the Jewish Torah came not only the divine command to circumcise free males, but also the order to extend the practice to the slaves of the household, both believing and unbelieving.

In contrast, the much more serious operation of cutting off the male scrotum, with or without the penis, was clearly prohibited, at least when free believers were the victims of such an operation. The dire consequences of the process told against it. For every successfully castrated male, up to nine others died, and survivors endured complex physical and mental consequences for the rest of their lives (Hogendorn 2000; Meinardus 1969; Millant 1908). Traditions told of the Prophet teaching that, "he is not of my people who makes another a eunuch or becomes so himself," and that, "whoever castrates a slave, him also shall we castrate" (Hunwick 1992: 21; Hughes 1885: 110; Juynboll 1912: 584).

Nevertheless, Caliph Mu'awiya (r. 661-680) was said to have allowed the keeping of eunuchs (Ayalon 1999: 66). This apparent contradiction resulted from a loophole in the holy law. No canonical text clearly forbade the purchase of infidel slaves emasculated by infidels, especially those who dwelled beyond the limits of the abode of Islam. Whereas a Muslim emasculating a believer remained strictly prohibited, obtaining infidel servile eunuchs by purchase and tribute was generally held to be licit (Brunschvig 1960: 26, 33).

Like concubines, eunuchs could rise high in the social order. They were trusted as officials, because they could have no heirs (Juynboll 1912, Meinardus 1969, Hambly 1974, Marmon 1995). Originally employed to watch over harems, they became involved in palace administration, and in turn came to run many Muslim states (Toledano 1984). Caliph al-Amin also created three corps of military eunuchs, on Chinese lines, in the early ninth century, but his successors did not follow his example (Pipes 1981: 142, 145).

One particularly exalted group of eunuchs guarded the holiest locations of Islam from the eighth century, the Prophet's tomb in Medina and the great mosque of Mecca. This was because they could deal with both male and female pilgrims, without fear of the consequences of sexual mixing (Marmon 1995). However, Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d.1505), a great Egyptian scholar, inveighed against employing eunuchs in the sacred places of Islam, considering that this was an unauthorised innovation (Tounsou 1845: 269-70).

Sharia-minded distaste for emasculation was heightened by the homosexual abuse

of slaves, for castration served to preserve a “boyish and beardless appearance” in youths (Sourdel at al. 1965: 1082; Hodgson 1974: II, 145-6). Despite a flagrant breach of holy law, sexual relations with slave boys, whether eunuchs or not, were often tolerated in Islamdom. Indeed, some Barbary corsairs in North Africa kept veritable harems of 'male concubines' (Clissold 1977: 42-3). Even the prostitution of eunuchs was denounced in Lucknow in 1855 (Millant 1908: 205).

As with concubines, outright opposition was slow to emerge, even if pious *ulama* and reforming monarchs tried to restrict the phenomenon within a strict interpretation of the law (Winter 1992: 43-4, Hambly 1974, Hodgson 1974: II, 144). Around 1900, Arabs keen to shake off Ottoman rule blamed their Turkish masters: 'The eunuch is contrary to Islam, its principles, and its ethics. Did our blessed Prophet need eunuchs? ... But who ignores that the Turks have long since wandered from the straight path of Islam to follow a tortuous trail which will eventually make them, if they are not careful, blind schismatics, unworthy of the religious and political preponderance that they have desired to exercise over the sons of Islam?' (Millant 1908: 203). A congress of Islamic scholars, held in Egypt in 1908, pronounced that the *sharia* prohibited not only the making but also the owning of eunuchs, although this ruling was contested (Zambaco 1911: 36-8).

Sexual mutilation in Islamic Southeast Asia

Male circumcision was universally practiced in Southeast Asia from the earliest times. Indeed, together with abstinence from pork, this became the main outward sign of conversion. Peoples

with hardly any knowledge of the faith could claim to be Muslims on these grounds. Female circumcision was less common, but Dayak slave girls from the interior of Borneo were routinely circumcised, as part of their conversion to Islam (Low 1968:119).

Europeans reported eunuchs as numerous in Southeast Asia, using the Portuguese term *capados*. However, they did not make it clear where these eunuchs came from, or who did the emasculation. In particular, early sixteenth century Java contained many of these gelded men (Hambly 1974: 125-6).

The most notorious example of the use of eunuchs came from Aceh's court in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which was heavily influenced by Persian and Mughal models. The palace alone was thought to contain 150 in 1607 (Siegel 1978: 38). Beaulieu, in Aceh in 1619-22, estimated the total number at around 500, though he noted that Aceh was not typical of Malay courts in this respect. In 1637, Aceh even boasted a corps of horsed eunuch guards (Lombard 1967: 81, 97, 138, 148, 230). The power of eunuchs came from their ability to penetrate the harem, and their employment by sultans as trusted officials and traders. Under the famous four queens of Aceh, reigning up to 1699, the administrative role of eunuchs continued to be noted by European visitors (Hadi 2004: 99-101; Andaya 2001: 55-9).

Europeans no longer reported on eunuchs after this time, however, and this absence seems to have been general across all of Islamic Southeast Asia. Eighteenth-century Malay texts did still on occasion refer to *sida-sida*, but these allusions had apparently become formulaic, with the

term coming to mean court officials rather than eunuchs (Andaya 2001: 57).

The reasons for this atypically early abandoning of eunuchs remain to be unearthed. The withering away of castration may have reflected a resurgence of Hindu beliefs, notably in Java, with a horror of mutilating the body and circumscribing human sexuality. Moreover, slavery as a whole declined in Java from the seventeenth century, although the same could not be said of the Outer Islands.

Alternatively, Southeast Asia maintained privileged religious connections with the Arab world, where a dislike for eunuchs gradually developed, contrasting with the Turkic, Persian and African cultural zones. Occasional prohibitions of castration by Ottoman and Mughal emperors may have found an echo, although it remains to be explained why Southeast Asians might have been so much more rigorous in enforcing such bans, and why they might have refused to import ready-made eunuchs from unbelievers.

The disappearance of castrated slaves certainly did not imply the ending of the homosexual exploitation of slave boys and youths. Aceh was especially notorious for these practices, with Nias dancing boys, aged from 8 to 12 at purchase, highly prized (Snouck Hurgronje 1906: I, 21, 361; Tholson 1880: 47-8). In the initial stages of the Aceh War of 1873 against the Dutch, “paederasty” was one of the deeply rooted abuses of the holy law that Habib Abdurrahman Zahir, a Hadhrami Arab Islamic reformer, attempted to stamp out (Snouck Hurgronje 1906: I, 161).

Conclusion

Much work remains to be done to understand how Islamic attitudes to sexuality and slavery evolved, especially in the mutilation and sexual exploitation of slaves. Indonesian Muslim intellectuals took up the issue of slavery from the 1970s, as part of a more general set of reflections on the nature of freedom under the autocratic Suharto regime. However, their writings demonstrated three striking characteristics. Firstly, the main authors, all men, ignored the sexual aspects of slavery. Secondly, their examples of servitude were never drawn from the region itself, but from the Middle East or South Asia. Thirdly, there was no mention of predecessors in the region criticizing the servile estate. Indeed, there was a surprisingly abstract and theoretical tone to this whole debate, conducted on the level of religious and philosophical investigation, rather than historical awareness (Abdillah 1997, Maarif 1985: 168-70).

Most intriguing is the precocious disappearance of eunuchs. This was probably unique in the annals of Islamdom, with the possible exception of Hui Muslims in China, and yet it was apparently not the result of any *fatwa* or clearly reasoned religious objection. Moreover, while the case of Aceh in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has attracted much attention, far less is known about eunuchs in other areas. Even in the case of Aceh, the origins of eunuchs, and how they came to be castrated, remain to be elucidated.

Opposition to concubinage did surface here and there in Islamic Southeast Asia, but how and why this occurred is still rather shadowy. In particular, the role of

Islam remains to be clearly ascertained. In addition, a great deal of research has to be carried out to understand the exact interplay between different forms of law and local custom in relation to the status of children of concubines, both slave and free. Indeed, it also needs to be resolved whether any stigma from slave descent lingers on into our own day.

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