

RACE IN THE IBERIAN MIDDLE AGES: SEXUALIZING THE IMAGE OF THE MUSLIM MALE

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My research on identity-making and forced religious conversion of the Morisco investigates their literary and material culture production in the early modern Iberian World.

The assimilation process of the Moriscos incorporated laws and decrees meant to erase their past Islamic heritage and create a new reality for them. Nonetheless, many of the issued laws and bans sought affirmations of the faith not in the heart, but in the Morisco closet, clothes, and in their bodily hygienic practices. Thus, the new laws banned public baths and described them as filthy places where Muslim men practiced sodomy. In the same vein, they accused the Moriscos of breeding like rabbits even went as far as requesting that male Moriscos be castrated. In addition, the sexualization process of Morisco men demarcated their bodies into shame through prohibiting the practice of circumcision as it turned into evidence against them (Vincent). These anti-Morisco bans transformed the Morisco difference into deviance that—intersected with their ancestor's religious identity and sexuality—provoked my curiosity to investigate earlier Iberian Christian preoccupations with the figure of the Muslim and how this conception shaped the Iberian Christian world. For example, in the anonymous late fourteenth century *La danza general de la muerte* (*Dance of Death*), Death summons the alfaqui (expert in Islamic law) and orders him to forsake flavors. The alfaqui pleads with Death and says he needs to stay with his 'discrete' and 'gracious' wife, in whom he finds life utmost pleasure. Even when the Muslim alfaqui realizes that his suffering is inevitable, he begs Death to allow his sexually desired wife

to accompany him into hell. The characterization of a Muslim as a creature obsessed with carnal pleasures is predominant in earlier Medieval Iberian chronicles, hagiographies, and epic poetry. While this initial characterization could have resulted from the proximity and military confrontations in the Iberian Peninsula, recent literary and historical studies (Barton; Francomano) suggest the existence of ideological (cultural and religious) backlash to the expansion of interfaith marriages between Iberian Muslims and Christians between the eighth and the tenth centuries. These cross-frontier interfaith marriages created alliances, truces, and peace between Iberian Muslim and Christian elites.

To stop these interfaith marriages, different myths, legends, and fabricated interfaith marriage accounts began characterizing Muslim men as obsessed with sex, as transgressors against Christian women and God. The earliest Iberian Christian writings focused on attacking the character of Prophet Mohammad, describing him as a womanizer and fraudulent, thus transforming the Muslim prophet (equally, all his male followers) into a perfect parody of the ascetic biblical prototype. Examples of this sexually abnormal Muslim figure can be traced as early as the ninth century and include the *Istoria de Mahomet* (written in 850), the writings of a polemist priest known as Alvarus who depicted prophet Mohammad as a lustful man, and the Quranic afterlife as a supernatural brothel, the *Chronicle of the Kings of Leon*, known as *Chronicon Regum Legionensium* written by Bishop Pelayo of Oviedo, the *Legend of the Hundred Maidens* (twelfth century), which is a foundational text to the 'Reconquista' myth and was expanded in Alfonso X's *Estoria de España* and adopted in epic poetry such as in *El cantar de mio Cid*, Berceo's *La vida de San Milan*, and in *El poema de Fernán González*.

On the other hand, this portrayal of Muslim men might have been evoked to maintain a separation or the non-mixing of Islam and Christianity, which is true in many cases, especially in

the Iberian Peninsula. Nonetheless, many texts marked men who are Muslim as bodily different. According to Katherine Harvey's study, during the First Crusade (1096), European historical accounts often characterized the Islamic world with sexual behavior that is abnormal, excessive, and deviant. Examples of these writings indicated that Male Muslims forced the circumcision of Christian youths, raped the virgins, forced mothers and daughters to witness each other's rape, and sodomized men of all ranks including priests (Harvey 139-63). Jacques de Vitry, Bishop of Acre (1216-1228), claimed that "Muslims were not only enthusiastic sodomites, they also had sex with animals." Cardinal Eudes of Chatearoux averred that Muslim men were sexually excessive and raped Christian virgins, forcing them to become their concubines (qtd. in Harvey 140). These early Christian attitudes were not simply ideas in their texts; they meant actualities and histories and were mapped in their worldly geographies. These literary and religious accounts, accounts of historical players, myths, and legends actively constructed the figure of the Muslim as abnormal and sexually perverted. It is an image with a resilient continuum and familiar features that has resisted the passing of time and often crossed into other domains of the Muslim culture and daily practices.

When connecting the religious discourse to relations of power, Geraldine Heng's definition encourages us to look into the religious discourse and examine how it created or influenced racism as she said:

Race is one of the primary names we have... attached to a repeating tendency... to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental, in order to distribute positions and powers differently to human groups... [R]ace is a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences, rather than a substantive content. (27)

In the context of late medieval Iberia, we can see how these myths and legends precipitated the construction of newer systems of hierarchies and notions of exclusivity and separation, such as

‘purity of blood’. These hierarchy systems can be viewed as both mechanisms for discriminatory exclusion and as a form of ideological racism. I say a form of racism because it creates differences based on the assumed different nature of ethnic groups, their descendants, and ancestors. For example, in the sixteenth century, Spanish authorities prohibited converts from Islam and their descendants from emigration to the Americas. ‘Purity of blood’ is ideological because its cultural meanings are imagined through language, everyday practice, and the context of conflict and frontier.

The examples of myths and legends I mentioned earlier show that religion was not simply a set of beliefs, but a vehicle for the transmission of physical, cultural, and spiritual traits. At the same time, I think there was an early interplay between geography and religious identity that precipitated the intersection of categories such as gender, culture, color, and ethnicity. Conversely, this Christian religio-racial logic worked two ways; on the one hand, it reduced Islam and the figure of the Muslims into a deviant Other, and the other hand, it defined Christianity and Christians as a godly cohesive entity.

The question is: how much did the Christian Iberian medieval thought and language influence modern racial language and thought? Take, for example, the Danish cartoons and Charlie Hebdo's depictions of male Muslims, especially Prophet Mohammad! One can see how religion, race, gender, and sexuality have been continuously intersecting to construct the figure of the Muslim men as an abnormal creature obsessed with sex and women.

Works Cited

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