

A Public Space for Muslim Women: The Hammams

Middle East/North Africa

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Abstract: This paper examines the role that hammams have played in giving women a public sphere within male-dominated societies. It synthesizes three relevant academic articles that have conducted research on this topic. First, “The women's quarters in the historical hammam, Gender, Place & Culture” by Aksit Elif Ekin analyses hammams impact on women by focusing on urban planning and the physical placement of the hammams within the city of Ankara, Turkey. Second, “Communication and the social production of space: the hammam, the public sphere and Moroccan women” by Said Graiouid discusses both the trip to the hammam as well as what takes place inside of it. Lastly “Ritual, Strategy, or Convention: Social Meanings in the Traditional Women's

Baths in Morocco” by Valeria Staats gives extensive details on the activities inside of the hammams based on her personal observations. Upon a review of the literature, I found that despite the negative aspects that may arise from attending hammams, they provide women with a space where they can celebrate their femininity, perform their religious activities, and discuss their lives as well as current events that make them active members of their community.

A common misperception worldwide is that Muslim women are highly oppressed and stripped of any control over their bodies, voices, or actions. In response to this, academics have done research on the life of Muslim women in order to interrogate this perspective. Specifically, the study of gender dynamics of public spaces in the Muslim world has been, and still is, key to this debate. According to the *Theory in Social and Cultural Anthropology* encyclopedia, the public sphere is “a social space between the family and the state...in which citizens come together as private persons to discuss issues of public concern” (Warms, and McGee 2013,663). Although Muslim society is dominated by men, and therefore most public spheres within it, women do have authority over their life in specific locations; their own public spheres. Anne Meneley, a cultural anthropologist, wrote in her article about hierarchies in Yemen, “the male public sphere includes the

local market, the mosques, and the government buildings... Women have public spheres despite the fact that it is enacted in private homes,” (Meneley 2000, 67) or out of the eye of the public. In their public spheres, women control the conversations and activities that take place. An example of such a space is the hammams that can be found in all Muslim cities. It is upon this aspect of Muslim life that academics have done further research in order to investigate how and where women utilize their power.

Hammams are public baths that originated during the Roman and Byzantine empires with the primary function of bathing one’s self, as well as discussing issues with the other bathers. They were then developed and adapted by the Islamic culture and became extremely versatile. The baths are, however, segregated by gender. Hammams with more funding typically have two separate buildings, one for each gender, that

are connected to each other. Smaller hammams will have one building for both women and men but will have designated hours of operation for each gender. Hammams have played a key role in many religious purifying activities for Muslims, but have also been a topic of controversy. In some cases, hammams have been perceived as inappropriate and not religious enough due to the nudity it invokes. This view has not applied so much to men, but rather women, whose naked bodies are taboo in Muslim society. The modernization of Muslim cities is another factor that has affected the usage of hammams. At present, hammams are either located in low-income neighborhoods that are dangerous, restricting their visitor access, or they have been modernized or developed into different facilities for tourists. Nevertheless, there are plenty of people who still use hammams today and they continue to play an important role in Islamic culture, especially in the lives

of Muslim women. They serve as a multifunctional public sphere for women (Sarmiento and Kazemi 2014).

Every aspect of being an active member of the hammams impact women's roles within society, whether it is for better or for worse. This includes the location of the hammams in the city as well as the trip the women must take from their households to the hammams. Elif Ekin Aksit, a professor at Ankara University, explains the impact hammams have had on Muslim women by focusing on urban planning and the physical placement of the hammams within the city of Ankara, Turkey.

According to Aksit, the mere act of walking to and from the hammams gives women power over themselves. It allows them to walk around the city without any supervision during their visit. They gain the authority to explore and formulate their own routes to get to the hammams. However, in recent years, with the modernization of

Turkey (which also applies to other Muslim cities), there has been a fundamental shift in the way women choose to visit hammams.

As mentioned before, hammams are now either located in low-income areas that are poorly maintained or have since been restored and modernized to cater to tourists. This has created an additional separation between women, based on class. On one hand, upper-class women will only go to modernized hammams or will not go at all if they possess a private bath at their homes. On the other hand, middle to lower class women are left with no choice (due to economic restrictions) but to attend the historical hammams located in dangerous areas. The women that visit the historical hammams must be hyper-aware of the dangers that they are being exposed to when making their way there. As Aksit explains, the women belonging to the lower class develop a plan of action to stay safe on their journey. They must be extremely familiar

with every part of the neighborhood and constantly change their route so they may not become easy targets (Aksit 2011). They become aware of the people and places to avoid as well as safe passages that can shield them from the crime.

Despite the fact that the modernization of the city has placed historical and affordable hammams in areas where crime is high while modernizing others, Aksit argues that this phenomenon has created another way in which women become involved in their city and keep its history alive. The voluntary participation of women in the historical hammams allows for the preservation of its history, and of the building itself, even if poorly maintained. Additionally, by strategizing for better and safer routes to get to the hammams, women develop a presence in the city and engage in urban affairs. At the same time, the women belonging to the middle to upper class also hold a key role in women's involvement in

the city. By visiting developed and luxurious hammams, these women are contributing to the modernization of the city. As the behavior of the city changes, so does that of the women. Upper-class women accept and indulge in the new modernized hammams and lower-class women stick to the historical hammams. As Aksit says, “visiting the hammam itself becomes an adventure that brings out the political participation of women in this urban context” (Aksit 2011, 286). No matter which social class a woman may belong to, all Muslim women within the city that do, or do not, attend the hammams are actively participating in their city, although not through standard political means, by deciding the fate of hammams.

In *Communication and the social production of space: the hammam, the public sphere and Moroccan women*, Said Graiouid, a professor at the University Mohammed V in Morocco, also explores

women’s journeys to the hammams in Morocco. Like Aksit, Graiouid recognizes that there are obstacles a woman may face when traveling to the hammams. This is not only because of the violence and crime that exists on the way to the hammams but also because of how hectic and confusing Muslim cities can be. Women’s “public space is simultaneously an anticipated site of liberation and freedom and a formidable territory where the body is under constant threat” (Graiouid 2004, 111). According to Graiouid, women’s hammams have given them a space where they are in control, while also adding challenges into their life. The journey to the hammams can be a situation of anxiety and stress in which they must navigate the streets, which Graiouid deems a male-dominated space, and constantly be aware of their surroundings to avoid conflict and not get lost on their way. The challenges these women are forced to face impede them from making use of a safe

and easy route to the hammams, which may instead result in the seclusion of these women from the practice of attending public baths altogether.

Valerie Staats, the author of *Ritual, Strategy, or Convention: Social Meanings in the Traditional Women's Baths in Morocco*, also writes about a certain situation in which getting to the hammams takes control away from women. In some cases, women must ask for permission and money from their husbands to attend the hammams. This gives men the authority to decide when their wives may go, as well as the ability to track their location. This may be a way in which society “keeps women in their proscribed place” (Staats 1994, 15).

Aksit, Graiouid, and Staats all examine the journey women must take from their homes to the hammams, however, they each make different arguments about how the challenges may affect them. Aksit argues that, although middle to lower class women

are put in a threatening situation when going to the hammams, navigating the dangerous and busy streets serves as a way for them to claim their presence within their own city and society. It allows them to establish dominion over their independence in the city they live in. Graiouid introduces the treacherous journey to the hammams and the confusing Muslim cities but, contrary to Aksit, he does not believe that women gain any authority from such a situation. In fact, he argues the opposite and believes that because women have to travel through the streets (as mentioned before, a male-dominated space) it is harder for women to have control over themselves and their surroundings. Instead, it makes it more likely for them to get lost and be in a state of constant worry while making their way to the hammams. Or, as Staats states, it could be yet another situation in which the women must depend on their husbands to visit the baths.

The trip to the hammam is only a small part of the versatile role that hammams play in the lives of Muslim women. The conversations and activities that take place inside the public baths provide an in-depth insight into the public sphere of women.

Graiouid spends the bulk of his article discussing what activities and conversations take place inside the hammams. Being a man, Graiouid's methodologies were restricted. Evidently, he was not able to enter the women's section of the hammams and many women refused to discuss with him the conversations and actions that take place in their safe space. Instead, in order to defend his claims, Graiouid relies upon the accounts of women who did agree to speak with him and upon the research of other anthropologists and historians.

Much like what Anne Meneley said in her research, Graiouid explains that

traditional public spaces, such as “the marketplace, the mosque, the street, the cafe, or other public spaces are predominantly male spatial practices” (Graiouid 2004, 110). Men are free to talk, debate, or play games, without any supervision. In contrast, most women in these places are covered up and restricted from engaging in any discussions that take place. They may be found taking care of the children or having brief conversations with other women, but they do not have control over the situation or a sense of authority. For this reason, Graiouid argues that hammams play such an important role in the lives of Muslim women; it is their designated public space. Here, discussions are led and regulated by women. They may speak freely about their domestic life, problems in their cities, perform religious activities, bathe themselves, and support each other. Hammams are a space where their femininity can be celebrated and discussed;

a domain in which their privacy can be cherished.

Inside the hammams, Graioud explains that women are able to create a community because the bathing experience becomes a collective execution. It is only the religious purifying rituals that are conducted by the individual. The female body is the protagonist within this sphere and nudity is no longer perceived as indecent. Women devote hours to massaging and bathing themselves, following a specific bath etiquette which they set for themselves.

Staats develops this argument further. Being a woman, she utilizes her ability to enter and observe inside the Moroccan hammams in order to describe the conversations and activities that take place. In her visits, which she describes in great detail throughout her article, she witnesses women scrubbing themselves and each other, washing henna out of their hair, and giving out massages. She observes that,

within the hammams, women will celebrate as a community when someone is to be married, has given birth to a child, or when it is a religious holiday. It is a place where women from all social classes (although modernization has made this less likely), ages, and ethnicities come together to build and strengthen relationships. Within the hammams, Staats describes seeing Muslim women of both Berber origin, who can be identified by their tattoos which represent their tribes, and of Arab origin. She also notes the presence of women of all ages, from toddlers all the way to elderly women, who are highly respected due to their age. All of these types of women come together and, no matter their backgrounds, are expected to follow the proper bath etiquette and engage in the community they are forming. Hammams give women the opportunity to be away from their domestic life and focus on themselves.

Hammams also play a major role in being a primary source of information for Muslim women. Staats makes this point by noting that, “the women’s hammam is an important place not only for relaxation but for exchange of news and information” (Staats 1994, 12). Aksit introduces the women’s section of hammams as a public sphere “where public discussion about urban contexts and history are being formulated by women” (Aksit 2011, 277). Once inside the hammams, the women in the lower class may discuss the obstacles they face during their journey. They often share strategies and various passages that will safely get them to the hammams. The women in the upper class, however, tend to discuss different subjects, like the changes that modernization has brought to their city.

Through the hammams, many women are able to keep up-to-date with current events and give and take advice. Graiouid states that one of the elderly

women with whom he spoke shared an anecdote that, when she was young, it was in the hammams that she first learned what cars were (Graiouid 2004 107). It is also a setting in which elderly women become educators for the younger generation, and discipline them, teaching them how to be a proper Muslim in a male-dominated society. To support this claim, Graiouid cites the work of Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist and author, who has “noted the pivotal role elderly women play in socialising young girls into the patriarchal order” (Graiouid 2004, 120).

Furthermore, Graiouid also points out that with any public sphere, gossip will be a central topic of conversation, and hammams are no exception. Within the hammams, there are no topics that women refrain from discussing. Everyone learns each other's secrets, especially the workers, who become very knowledgeable of the regular customers’ lives. This is important

because the information that is shared inside the hammams could easily be used to taint someone's reputation. Graiouid explains that many women commonly ask for advice about sexual matters. Considering how taboo sex is within the culture, if this information were to reach her family and friends it could very well result in serious repercussions. Overall, although hammams grant women the power to conduct these sorts of interactions, being active members makes them vulnerable to conflicts and scandals (Graiouid 2011, 119).

While all three authors provide extensive research and evidence to support their arguments, it is important to consider the perspectives in which the writers formulate their discussions. Said Graiouid is a Moroccan man and, for this reason, was unable to enter the hammams and was often turned away by many women who felt uncomfortable speaking about their experiences. The interviews he draws from

to support his arguments are the few in which the women did open up to him, which is not an accurate and complete representation of the many women who attend hammams. Additionally, all of the interviews he chooses to incorporate support his arguments, and he fails to discuss any interviews or evidence that may be contrary to his claims.

However, unlike Staats, who is a diplomat, Graiouid is a scholar, which gives him a better understanding of what to look for and ask when conducting interviews. In her article, Staats states that, in some cases, she was unsure about what was taking place inside the hammams. She may not have picked up on relevant points of research because she was not analyzing the women's behaviors, simply stating them. This is not to invalidate her research, but simply to note that this may have influenced the way she perceived the activities that took place in the hammams.

All three authors focus on explaining how it is that, in a society where Muslim women are perceived as passive, they are in fact active members of their communities and in charge of their own public spheres.

As with any public sphere, the women in the hammams are discussing social issues within their communities, gossiping, exchanging information, and seeking advice.

The hammam also serves as a place with privacy from the outside world where women can comfortably be naked and bathe themselves, as well as perform purifying religious activities. Together, they present different ways in which hammams empower women and all agree on their benefits.

However, Graiouid and Staats do raise some concerns, while Aksit uses the negative side of hammams to argue that they indirectly empower women. As society progresses,

Muslim women are gaining access to more public spaces, yet hammams remain an important aspect of their lives that encourages their individuality, as well as their religious needs.

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