



"Unnatural Vices" or Unnatural Rule? The Case of a Sex Questionnaire and the British Mandate

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In 1923, the Director of Health in the British Mandate government in Palestine sent out a questionnaire to his Principal Medical and Health Officers in the country, asking them to report on various sexual practices and attitudes among the Muslim Arab population. Information solicited included: the extent to which polygamy was practiced in Palestinian society, and the "Moslem attitude" toward it; the prevalence of "promiscuous sexual intercourse" or the "existence of societies with sexual rites and ceremonies"; the age of marriage among women and the effect of "youthful" marriage on women and children; and "the attitude toward immorality amongst

men and women and the extent to which unnatural vices [were] practiced."¹ Although the archival record is not explicit about why the government solicited this information, the "results of polygamy from a health point of view and its effect on the birth rate" were sought, as was information on "the effect of youthful marriage on the female and the child, and the status of the widow."² It is not clear, however, why information about "immorality," "vice" and societies with sexual rites was solicited.

The historian nosing through government documents can hardly help asking what this was all about. Why were the British authorities interested in "unnatural vices" and "immorality" along with marriage practices? How did these records serve the colonial state? Was the Mandate government interested in regulating morality through knowledge of sexual practices? And, if so, to what purpose? What does one make of the fact that probably a majority of the respondents were "native informers"?

One interesting fact to note about this survey is that it took place very early on in the Mandate (1923), which was formally

ratified by the League of Nations July 24, 1922. The British civil administration, which predated the ratification, had only been in power for three years. Considering the residual public health problems from the devastating effects of World War I, which, among other things - deforestation, currency devaluation, and economic distress - caused widespread starvation and epidemics, it is curious as to why the Department of Health was so interested in matters related to marriage and sexuality, unless it was to control sexually transmitted diseases. However, the latter is by no means clear, since no specific information on venereal diseases was requested in the surveys.³

The question arises: did official interest in sexuality reflect the colonial government's concern with specific Palestinian practices derived from their thus far limited experience as health officials in Palestinian society? Or, did their concern with this issue reflect British attitudes about "native" sexuality in colonial situations in general, particularly among Muslims?

This article will first examine the responses in the surveys to the questions about polygamy, "immorality" and "unnatural vices," identifying and highlighting some intriguing, recurring themes. Finally, it offers

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all documentary references come from Israel State Archives RG 10 (file 90/46), which includes these individual reports: I. Report by a Muslim officer of health, submitted to the Director of Health by the Principal Medical Officer, Jerusalem, June 29, 1923, entitled "Polygamy in Palestine and the Relation of the Sexes" [hand-written, signature illegible]; II. Report of Medical Officer of Health, Dr. N.A. Hamzeh of Ramallah, May 23, 1923; III. Principal Medical Officer of Nablus, June 7, 1923; IV. Report from a Medical Officer of Health from Jaffa district, circa May 1923; V. Some comments by the Senior Medical Officer of Acre [n.d.], and VI. Report of Safad Medical Officer of Health, Apr. 27, 1923. Hereafter, citations will refer to the individuals by these roman numerals in parentheses.

² *Ibid.*

³ According to Marcella Simoni, the government was quite passive in tackling the problem of venereal diseases, which "were mainly provided for by missionary hospitals." In 1932, the Director of the Department of Health admitted that, "due to financial restrictions, a general scheme for the prevention and treatment of venereal diseases cannot be undertaken." She also notes that "the first serious and detailed report on this issue appeared in 1933." Marcella Simoni, quoting Colonel Heron, "At the Roots of Division: A New Perspective on Arabs and Jews," *Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 3 (July 2000), p. 63.

some exploratory interpretations and suggestions for future research.⁴

About the Surveys

Six health officials responded to the survey. Two were definitely Arab - one of these was a self-identified Muslim, and the other was the only respondent with a name, N.A. Hamzeh;⁵ the nationality or religious identity of the other four are indeterminate from the sources. One can guess that at least an additional two may have been Palestinian Arab, extrapolating from the style of the written English. Only two of the respondents wrote in excellent, idiomatic English, which leaves one to infer that at least four of the officers were Arab - two explicitly identified as such and two definitely non-native speakers. It is possible that all six men were Arabs, as there were many Arabs during the Mandate whose command of English was fluent. Thus, one can tentatively assume at least four of the six were Palestinian Arabs.⁶

The Medical Officer of Health from Jaffa may have been a Christian, as he articulates a decided anti-Muslim bias, as is discussed below. The responses to the actual questions varied widely in how specifically they addressed the questions; the extent and amount of detail supplied; the nature and interpretation of the data; and the language used. Some of the responses are long, seemingly disorganized, almost stream of consciousness commentary on selected topics from the Director of Health's list. The officers did not answer the questions in any particular order, nor did any of them answer all questions comprehensively.

It might have been expected that the surveys would disclose an agenda (perhaps hidden or even subconscious) of the Mandate government regarding regulation and control of sexuality. Scholars of colonialism have noted colonial governments' seemingly "unlimited interest in the sexual interface of the colonial encounter." Ann Stoler writes, "probably no subject is discussed more than sex in colonial literature and no subject more frequently invoked to foster the racist stereotypes of European cultures...Sexual control affected the very nature of colonial relations" as a "fundamental class and racial marker implicated in a wider set of relations of power."⁷ In the case of the Mandate government, there are not, in fact, voluminous records on the subject to enable us to make the case quite so clearly. As Gauri

⁴ It should be emphasized that this paper is very much a work in progress. The data upon which it is based constitutes the type of research that develops when, toiling in the archives on another topic, one stumbles across fascinating material that causes one to detour into material seemingly unrelated to the project at hand. This data was collected during research for the author's dissertation on the history of the Palestinian women's movement during the Mandate period. Since it appears that no one else has worked with these intriguing files, the primary purpose here is to introduce and present some of the data. However, more research needs to be done, and additional information sought.

⁵ One of the more frustrating aspects of doing research on the British archives on Palestine is the fact that Mandate officials frequently did not sign their names to documents, but only their titles. This could be because the files, which are often photocopies of mimeographs, omit the signatures that were on the originals. Sometimes where a signature exists (as in the case of the Muslim officer mentioned above), the signature was illegible and the name impossible to decipher.

⁶ Of course, this does not take into account that one or more of the men could have been Armenian.

⁷ Ann Laura Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable: the Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in Twentieth-Century Colonial Cultures," in Ann McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat eds., *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 345-346.

Viswanathan points out, "detailed records of self-recrimination are not routinely preserved in state archives."⁸ In examining the empirical record, one has to be careful to not just read between the lines and overly theorize, but also look at the uniqueness and specificity within both a broad and local context. One intriguing theme that begins to emerge with some clarity in these surveys is that the responses of the medical officers reveal as much (if not more) about their attitudes toward sexuality, class, Muslims, education, foreigners and other interesting topics than they do about the ostensibly "objective" data sought, or the intent and agenda of the colonial state itself. The issue of identity - the fact that most of the respondents seem to have been Palestinian Arabs - makes attempts at understanding and interpretation that much more complex. Thus one issue that comes to the fore is the nature of their relationship to colonial authority, a difficult topic to research from the paltry information on them. Questions abound: did the officers internalize British colonial attitudes regarding "native" sexuality and morality? If so, to what extent? Were they willing collaborators in the collection of data? These questions will be addressed after an examination of the responses to the survey.⁹

Polygamy

The first three out of six questions in the questionnaire were about polygamy, including "the extent to which polygamy is practiced among the richer classes, the labor classes and the Bedouin" and "the Moslem attitude" toward it. Information was also solicited as to its increase or decrease (since when, precisely, was not clarified) and its effects on health and the birth rate.

The first respondent, a Muslim officer of health in Jerusalem, reported that, among the richer classes, the extent to which it was practiced was "practically nil" and that one could "hardly find an educated Palestinian Muslim with two wives," unless the first wife was sterile. Among the laboring classes, he estimated the occurrence at about 3-5% of the population, with the same motivation as above but added another: "indulgence in sexual intercourse." In the villages it was more widespread because it was an economical way to obtain cheap labor. According to his analysis, the Bedouin, being more "primitive," practiced it the most (I). The other officers reached similar conclusions; the richer classes were the "least inclined" and those in touch with "occidentals and their civilization and who know the mode of family life of such people" tended not to engage in it (II). Nor was it common among "older families," since the husband would have to deal with the wife's (wives') relatives (III). Polygamy was on the decrease due to the spreading of "occidental" mores (II) and increase in education (III), but increased prosperity could cause it to rise (III). This last point highlights the officers' contradictory attitudes about class and the issue of polygamy. Most of the officers equated higher education levels and economic status with

⁸ Gauri Viswanathan, "Currying Favor: the Politics of British Educational and Cultural Policy in India, 1813-54," in Ann McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat eds., *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 113.

⁹ The fifth question about marriage is omitted in order to concentrate on the issues of sexuality, which constituted the major focus of the surveys. However, discussion of marriage is included when other questions relate to it.

westernization and "civilization" and thus, lower levels of polygamy. But this last officer infers the opposite, which historically is more accurate regarding the occurrence of polygamy: a man must be economically able to afford more than one wife, since it is expensive to maintain more than one household. Thus, polygamy has generally been practiced more frequently among the wealthier classes. The comments of the officers are thus more indicative of their attitudes about polygamy, as opposed to being based upon any empirical evidence, it would seem.

"Immorality" or "Sexual Promiscuity"

The fourth and sixth questions asked for information on "the prevalence or otherwise of promiscuous sexual intercourse or the existence of societies with sexual rites or ceremonies" and "the attitude toward immorality amongst men and women and the extent to which unnatural vices are practiced."¹⁰ None of the officers wrote anything about secret societies or rites. Three of the respondents highlighted the reasons for what they perceived to be an increase in immorality. These were: later marriages, when males remained unmarried during the most "try[ing] period of their lives from a sexual point of view" (II); the introduction of "foreign elements"(I); poverty and economic effects of the War (I, IV); and the lack of education (IV). Several of the officers furthermore locate the cities and towns as the

primary sites of immorality, not surprisingly.

The Jaffa officer writes that men indulge in immorality more frequently than women because "they are more predisposed to it." Women, on the other hand, practice immorality on a "small scale" but "in cities women of other religions than Moslems although they are shown openly to have attitudes towards immorality but secretly it is more with moslem women"[sic] (IV). This respondent demonstrates a decided anti-Muslim bias, claiming that "Moslems have got a special instinct towards intercourse...due to a religious point of view and...lack of education," and that "Moslem women...lead a lazy life at home and have nothing to busy their minds with" other than talk about their husbands, marriage and sexual intercourse (IV).

Dr. Hamzeh writes that immorality is not so widespread in Palestine as neighboring countries, "yet it is quite very common especially in the big towns where women, who is [sic] a weak creature cannot overcome the daily temptation and where immorality has effected [sic] a large number of the population." He claims that "early marriage" "diminishes immorality to a great extent, and adds to the happiness of the couple, as the girl at that time, has not seen anything of the world yet, and so she will be quite devoted to her man, having taken lessons from her mother as to how she must behave towards him, and be loyal to him"(II).

"Unnatural Vices"

Four of the six respondents discuss "sodomy" and "pederasty." The Jerusalem officer maintains that "both active and passive pederasty are known and practised...but to a

¹⁰ Because of a certain amount of blurring between the responses to these questions, the questions themselves are combined.

rare degree" among school children. He differentiates between it and sodomy, which he says is also known but rare. This officer is rather comprehensive in covering all the bases. He writes that bestiality occurs mostly among villagers although it is not heard of with women and animals. He has never heard of necrophilia, and only of two cases of incest, one between a German father and daughter. He continues, "lesbian love and sophism...have been imported from the neighboring countries, Syria and Egypt." He finished up his report editorializing that "the moral and social status of Palestine is...changing for the disadvantage of its inhabitants...The West is not giving us its purest, it is tempting us, and we of this country and the East as a whole, being susceptible, are falling an easy prey" (I).

The other officers are less comprehensive. Dr. Hamzeh concurs with his colleague that there is sodomy among schoolchildren. He points to their "imprisonment...in schools day and night, where most of them reach puberty and find no other ways to satisfy their newly developing sexual appetite" (II).¹¹

The Nablus officer finds sodomy and "similar vices...not uncommon in some of the towns but less so in the villages where...bestiality is by no mean unknown" and "immorality...rather lightly regarded" in those villages that are closer to the larger towns. He comments, "in the villages there seems to be curiously little feeling against bestiality, which I have heard admitted in a very airy way on more than one occasion. Sodomy is considered disgraceful but not I

think more so than ordinary immorality" (III).

The Jaffa officer says that sodomy and "the act of intercourse with women themselves where [there is] no interference of the male sex" are both common and the second is "very common among the rich class of Moslem women." "Sodomy," he claims, "is practiced by Moslem people more than others" (IV). The Acre officer also distinguishes sexual practice by religion. According to him, the Greek Catholics are "more prominent" regarding sexual promiscuity, while sodomy is the most common "vice" among Muslims but rare among Christians (V).

Analysis

After reading these surveys, one of the most obvious questions that arises is: how did these officers "know" these things? In other words, what formed the basis of their "knowledge"?

First, what kinds of knowledge were these officers imparting? How did they know what was meant by seemingly vague, subjective and ambiguous words such as "immorality," "promiscuity," and "unnatural vices"? The distinction among these different terms was not coincidental or casual; in fact, it was rooted in a historical process during which attitudes about European sexual matters changed over the course of the nineteenth century. What evolved was "a new system" of sexual morality which distinguished between "natural" but "immoral" sexual offenses "pertaining to marital and heterosexual matters, such as adultery and adult rape," while on the other hand, offenses and "perversions, including homosexuality and sexual relationships with children...were seen as 'unnatural' rather than simply 'immoral'..."¹² What is intriguing from the

¹¹ He also cites late marriage as a factor contributing to the increase in sodomy, as it prevents (presumably delays) satisfaction of these developing appetites.

responses of the health officials in these surveys is that they, as presumed Palestinian Arabs, seemed to understand these historically rooted and culturally specific distinctions, whereas the contemporary reader of the surveys would not necessarily immediately perceive the differences in meaning. Yet the officers also sometimes do confuse these dichotomies, and blur "perversions" such as sodomy and "ordinary immorality." (III)

Again, the issue of identity - the role of the "native" officers, their relationship to the colonial authorities for whom they worked and to whom they reported about their own people - recurs constantly when we examine these surveys. How did the officers know these distinctions, as seems the case? When dealing with the issue of "unnatural" vices, they clearly turn to discussions of sodomy, pederasty, and so forth. Did they internalize these European distinctions and typographies of ostensibly aberrant sexuality, the distinctions between "Moslem" and an (only-alluded-to) "other" type of sexuality? How did they feel about their role in colluding with collecting information about this most intimate matter for a colonial government in which they were always junior to the British?¹³ Was there internalization of the

racist stereotypes that seem to underlie the survey? The answers to these questions are ambiguous; still, it is telling that, apart from the case of the officer who harps on the "special instinct towards intercourse" (and, in another section, marriage) of the Muslims, the tone of the officers' writing is studiously objective in the specific responses on "immorality" and "unnatural vices." The editorial comments about external influences that have led toward a perceived increase in immorality are discussed below; however, the discussions of the sexual acts themselves do not editorialize or express the disgust one might expect in this particular historical and socio-cultural context. One possible explanation for the lack of dismay shown towards such acts is the officers' attempts to both obey in answering the questions while at the same time to downplay and not contribute to a certain implicit prurience in the very nature of the questions themselves, particularly since the ultimate objective in asking them is elusive. One of the more distinctive themes of the surveys is that Palestine and its people are being corrupted by outside influences and outsiders. Sometimes the writers target the West as the source of this influence, but also, intriguingly, they similarly accuse other outsiders, such as the Syrians and Egyptians. A sub-text and corollary to this theme of outside influence is the "susceptibility" of "the East" to sexual temptation and the proclivity of "Moslems" toward sexual activity. A dichotomy and systematic differentiation between "native" and "colonizer" seems to be accepted by these men, who are presumably among the colonized themselves.

Scholars of sexuality and imperialism have noted that "sexuality is the most salient

¹² Diana Jeater, *Marriage, Perversion and Power: The Construction of Moral Discourse in Southern Rhodesia, 1894-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 35-36.

¹³ Arab officers in the Mandate government rarely if ever supervised British ones. It was almost always the other way around. "No Arab was ever appointed head of a department in the Government of Palestine; nor was there ever any Arab District Commissioner. The highest positions attainable by Arabs (apart from judges) were assistant heads of central departments or District Officers." Bernard Wasserstein, *The British in Palestine: The Mandatory Government and the Arab-Jewish Conflict 1917-1929*, 2nd edition (London: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1991), p. 168.

marker of otherness" used by the colonial state in its attempt to define and maintain the cultural otherness or difference of colonized persons.¹⁴ In Palestine, a question that arises is: were the British perhaps trying to categorize and classify "tradition" through this particular lens of sexuality? The Mandate records are replete with references that hint at a strong anxiety about "tradition" and potential violations of this construct. The British authorities were particularly anxious about the sensitivities of the Muslim population. This resulted in their often conflating "women" (and possibly by extension, sexual issues as related to women) and "mosques" as metonyms for religion. There are numerous injunctions to police officials to be careful to respect "mosques and women" during the 1936-1939 Revolt, for example. The police also took pains to not publicize their searches of Muslim women during the Revolt.¹⁵ There are also explicit links between and parallels among British colonial officials' dealings with Indian Muslims and Palestinian Muslims as colonized groups. Colonial officials were keenly aware (and afraid) of upsetting Muslim sensibilities in one colony and having it spread to another. They tried to put their Indian experience to use in Palestine, regarding "Muslims" as a distinct, cohesive and homogeneous group. In the colonial files one can see the evidence for this in documents

such as their midwives ordinance for Palestine. The draft version was merely the identical one promulgated in India, with "India" crossed out at the top and replaced with "Palestine."

The surveys' focus on "Moslem" attitudes and practices is very suggestive of a policy that reflects the perception that the Muslim community is distinct, cohesive, "other," and, therefore potentially, a source of trouble. British officials took pains to understand and collect data on this group and its socio-cultural attitudes in order to effectively rule and control them without upsetting "tradition." British concepts of this "tradition" were colored not only by their India experience but also by their other colonial experiences such as those in Africa, for example. The confused and contradictory nature of the Mandate was reflected in the way British attempts at control seemed more unsystematic than in other colonies; yet, one can discern common colonial strategies in their efforts to construct, maintain and categorize distinctions between colonizer and colonized. Colonial officials had their particular spin on this policy, as articulated by General Jan Smuts, the prime minister of South Africa, who wrote: "The British Empire does not stand for the assimilation of its peoples into a common type, it does not stand for standardization, but for the fullest freest development of its peoples along their own specific lines."¹⁶

One might conceptualize these sex surveys within the context of an overall policy of what

¹⁴ Citing Sander Gilman in Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable," p. 346; Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, "Tensions of Empire: Colonial Control and Visions of Rule." *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (Nov. 1989), p. 610.

¹⁵ See Ellen Fleischmann, "The Nation and Its 'New' Women: Feminism, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Palestinian Women's Movement, 1920-1948" (Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, 1996), pp. 281-291.

¹⁶ General Jan Smuts, in a talk delivered in Oxford, 1929, as cited in Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 5.

another colonial official in Africa called "the doctrine of differentiation," which aimed at "the evolution of separate institutions appropriate to African conditions and differing both in spirit and form from those of Europeans."¹⁷ It is clear from the documentary record of Mandate Palestine that the colonial officials struggled with how to deal with the Muslim population as a distinct and "different" group in Palestine. We might speculate that these sex surveys were a tool in their effort to figure out the problem of maintaining social control over, and ruling a group they did not understand very well. Through collecting data that helped them conceptualize and categorize Muslim "tradition" through the lens of sexuality, they could then utilize this knowledge for that purpose. The rather prurient nature of the questions themselves and the ambiguity of the ultimate purpose in asking them in the first place (e.g., with no direct correlation to health policies) seem to indicate that their use was to be more socially as opposed to medically oriented. Yet using the medical establishment, the agent of the colonial state that dealt most closely with the physical and bodily aspects of sexuality, played a key role in helping to obscure the aim of creating a "state-centered system of scientific knowledge and power" by cloaking the whole experiment under the guise of science.¹⁸

When studying these curious surveys it is almost easier to speculate about the agenda and intent of the colonial government than it

is to understand the role of the medical officers themselves, the purveyors of the information. Scholars have a more richly documented and theorized body of knowledge from which to explore the tactics and agendas of the colonizers than the colonized. We are left with many questions: who were these medical officers? Did they write what they really believed or did they write what they thought the British wanted to read? Were they members of that group the oft-quoted McCaulay considered colonial "interpreters" between colonizer and colonized, constituting a "class of persons, Indian [in this case, obviously, Arab] in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect"?¹⁹ Certainly the British in Palestine made similar attempts at creating a class of loyal, Western-aculturated civil servants to help them in their task of governing and conquest, along the lines of a Gramscian mode of consent and collusion of the governed. Yet we are also still left with the puzzle as to what the government intended to do with this information.

In perusing such surveys, and considering other research on the Mandate period, one comes to the not very revolutionary conclusion that much more thorough and full research on the actual Mandate government itself is needed, particularly its internal workings, and the officials (British, Arab and Jewish) who carried out the task of governing

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 7. Mamdani citing Lord Hailey's *An African Survey*.

¹⁸ David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body. State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 7.

¹⁹ Thomas Babington McCaulay, *Speeches by Lord McCaulay: With His Minute on Indian Education*, ed. G.M. Young (Oxford: Oxford University Press, AMS edition, 1979), p. 359, as cited by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 282.

and executing policies²⁰. Too much of our research has focused on the "conflict" or specific aspects of the Mandate period without our really systematically understanding the Mandate government as it

affected the daily lives of the people who lived under its rule. Intriguing bits of data such as these sex surveys, while interesting in themselves, require such systematic research.

²⁰ To be sure, there are some works on the subject but not a systematic and full treatment. One admirable example of such research (albeit limited in scope) is Ylana Miller's *Government and Society in Rural Palestine, 1920-1948* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).

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