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DECOLONIZING SEXUALITY IN ISLAM: A DIALOGUE WITH BRAZILIAN MUSLIM WOMEN

*DECOLONIZANDO A SEXUALIDADE NO ISLÃ:
UM DIÁLOGO COM MULHERES MUÇULMANAS BRASILEIRAS*

*DECOLONIZANDO LA SEXUALIDAD EN EL ISLAM:
UN DIÁLOGO CON MUJERES MUSULMANAS BRASILEÑAS*

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ABSTRACT: Gender and sexuality studies are prominent topics in current research regarding the Islamic field. There is an incentive to pleasure within the religion that contradicts the oppressed and repressed Muslim woman stereotype, as well as the problematic relationship between feminism and religion that many Muslim academics and militants have been trying to deconstruct. Reflections on sexuality in Islam from a decolonial perspective are derived from the ethnography conducted by the authors. The article seeks to highlight the practices and meanings that Brazilian Muslim women who reverted to Islam attribute to sexuality, within the following axes: (a) Islamic clothing and the fetishization of Muslim women; (b) licit/illicit and the capacity of agency and protagonism of these women; (c) religious knowledge and women's empowerment. The research shows dimensions of the experiences of Muslim women that differ from the position of subalternity to which they are constantly submitted.

KEYWORDS: Sexuality; Muslim women; Decoloniality; Islam in Brazil.

RESUMO: Os estudos de gênero e sexualidade vêm se destacando nas pautas atuais de pesquisas realizadas em campo islâmico. Existe dentro da religião um incentivo aos prazeres que contraria a visão estereotipada da opressão e repressão da mulher muçulmana, bem como a relação problemática entre feminismo e religião que muitas acadêmicas e militantes muçulmanas vêm tentando desconstruir. A partir da etnografia realizada pelas autoras, são tecidas reflexões sobre a sexualidade no Islã a partir de uma perspectiva decolonial. Busca-se ressaltar as práticas e os sentidos que as mulheres muçulmanas brasileiras revertidas ao Islã atribuem à sexualidade, dentro dos seguintes eixos: (a) vestimenta islâmica e a fetichização da muçulmana; (b) lícito/ilícito e a capacidade de agência e protagonismo dessas mulheres; (c) conhecimento religioso e empoderamento feminino. A pesquisa permite destacar dimensões das experiências das mulheres muçulmanas que diferem da posição de subalternidade a qual são constantemente submetidas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Sexualidade; Mulheres muçulmanas; Decolonialidade; Islã no Brasil.

RESUMEN: Los estudios de género y sexualidad se han destacado en la actual agenda de investigación llevada a cabo en el campo islámico. Dentro de la religión existe un incentivo al placer que va en contra la visión estereotipada de la opresión y represión de las mujeres musulmanas, así como de la relación problemática entre el feminismo y la religión que muchas académicas y militantes musulmanas están intentando deconstruir. A partir de la etnografía realizada por las autoras, las reflexiones sobre la sexualidad en el Islam se realizan desde una perspectiva decolonial. El artículo busca resaltar las prácticas y los significados que las mujeres musulmanas brasileñas que volvieron al Islam atribuyen a la sexualidad, dentro de los siguientes ejes: (a) vestimenta islámica y fetichización de las musulmanas; (b) lícito/ilícito y la capacidad de agencia y protagonismo de estas mujeres; (c) conocimiento religioso y empoderamiento femenino. La investigación nos permite destacar dimensiones de las vivencias de mujeres musulmanas que se diferencian de la posición subordinada a la que están constantemente sometidas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Sexualidad; Mujeres musulmanas; Decolonialidad; Islam en Brasil.

Introduction

This article derives from the Master's thesis¹ defended at the Department of Psychology from the Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences and Letters at Ribeirão Preto (FFCLRP/USP), in which the author carried out an ethnographic study on sexuality in Islam, with an emphasis on the experiences of Muslim women. Our interlocutors, far from coming from Arab countries as one might suppose, are all Brazilians with different accents: Ângela, Tereza, Bruna, Márcia, Cristina, Rita, Sandra, Luciana, Paula, Luana and Marília². Although we already perceived it as a fertile field, in 2015 we realized that this topic had never been academically addressed on the national setting. Moreover, we realized how Muslims had been neglected in psychological literature in general, given how scarce are the studies with followers of this religious denomination³. We share the position of Maldonado-Torres (2007) that "epistemic disqualification converts into a privileged instrument of ontological denial" (p. 145) and, as Alves and Delmondez (2015) convey, non-representation and non-recognition of certain individuals in the field of Psychology is a means of perpetuating the oppression and subordination that these subjects experience.

On that account, we carried out a rereading of Spivak (1988/2010) to ask: can the Muslim woman talk about sex? Bothered by the misconceptions around the so-called "condition of women in Islam" (El Hajjami, 2008), usually linked to stereotypes of an alleged oppression and repression that would fall on them, and motivated to understand the experience of sexuality for Muslim women in line with their religious identity, the first author was introduced to the Islamic field, to which the second author has been dedicated for over two decades. As we proceeded with the research, we noticed, alongside the still so poorly known (Cardeira da Silva, 1997) reverted⁴ Brazilian Muslim women, the need for greater attention to be focused on them, which made us delimit our ethnography around these women. An attempt was made to break the deep-rooted belief that Muslims are necessarily Arabs⁵: Islam is present globally and increasingly raises interest in new issues.

The boom in gender and sexuality studies started in the 1960s and has been gaining strength over the last few decades with the growth and impulse of social movements and their participatory insertion in academia. The axes are diverse, an explosion of discourses: femininities, masculinities, homo/heterosexualities, reproductive rights and health, sex education, pornography and eroticism are some of them. In the field of Human Sciences, sexuality went from being conceived through the organicist perspective to be understood as a social construct, permeated by culture. In this contemporary scenario of resurgence of research in gender and sexuality, anthropological studies stand out, attentive to how different peoples and traditional communities conceive these issues. In Psychology, in addition to fruitful psychoanalytic and clinical studies, there is now a demand for these topics to be debated from a more socially oriented perspective: a call to "rediscover" the potential of research on sexuality through the lenses of others approaches (Paiva, 2008).

Not ignoring the difficulties faced in this field full of nuances and restraints, but stressing the need to hear from the women themselves what their agendas were, we spoke with reverted Brazilian Muslim women about the theme of sexuality. Although the ethnography is wider, communicating directly with them was crucial to broaden the understanding of this subject. In this article, we intend to raise some points of interest from this approximation between sexuality and religion: we are not addressing themes that oppose each other or distance themselves from one another, but rather draw near

insofar as we consider religion as an important factor in the constitution of subjectivities. If sexual activity “has always been linked to rules that vary according to societies” (Santos & Ceccarelli, 2010, p. 23), we have religions as one of the main regulating instances of the experience and exercise of sexuality. Sex and religion are intertwined, even though this relationship oscillates between “the secular and the religious, sex and virtue, religion and lust, sin and holiness, sex and liberation, sex and truth, sacrifice and redemption..., pleasure and gender” (Birman & Benítez, 2007, p. 9).

The last pairing, pleasure and gender, is a sore point not only in its relation to religious belonging, whether to Islam or any other, but one which must be problematized due to the patriarchal structure of Brazilian society. In her analysis of how modern Western medicine emphasized and legitimized sexual difference, Rohden (2001) observed that women were historically conceived by the idea that “female characteristics would reflect the passive mission that nature had reserved” for them (p. 29). Sexually, such “nature” would lead to “feminine frigidity” and the understanding that “a woman’s pleasure during the sexual act was not necessary for procreation” (p. 30) – discourses that evidently acted to reinforce the “presumed passivity, modesty and domesticity” (p. 42) of women. Even in a scenario favorable to ruptures and challenges, some gender conventions persist through the maintenance of certain dichotomies, such as the association between masculinity/sexual activity and femininity/sexual passivity (Simões, França, & Machado, 2010), as well as its correlation with domination/submission (Simões, 2016).

These stigmas and tensions radiate when we contemplate the intersection between being a woman and being a Muslim: as we will show over the next sections, through extracts from materials circulating in the media and the reports from the interlocutors, the religious belonging of these women is often mistakenly associated with sexual dissatisfaction and relations strictly linked to reproduction. In this article, we will seek to highlight how the discussion on gender and sexuality is also present within Islam and is an important agenda for Muslim women, which on previous occasions has led us to point out that sex in Islam is not taboo (Paiva & Barbosa, 2017), but rather devotion (Barbosa & Paiva, 2017). Subsequently, we will highlight multiple spheres of sexuality that emerged in the dialogues we established with these women: beyond the rules, also the diversity of practices and experiences, the various ways of exercising and understanding female empowerment, the solutions to dealing with the difficulties arising from the subject of sexuality, the choices and negotiations that are made on a daily basis, among others.

“They think we have sex wearing *abaya*⁶: Islamic clothing and the fetishization of Muslim women

When talking about Muslim women, the first item that comes up in discussions is Islamic clothing. An informal search on a search engine gave us, among many other sometimes curious, sometimes unsettling results, the following headline: “Under the burqa: Muslim women invest in sensual lingerie from the city of Nova Friburgo” (2012)⁷. The text states: “the long garments almost completely cover the body of Muslim women”, but “between four walls and under burkas, the rules literally fall to the ground”. The article continues: “underneath the heavy and sober women’s clothing hides an infinity of colors and shapes”. Another, entitled “*Sexual liberation in Islam*” (2009)⁸,

while pointing out that “the taboo is beginning to fall”, as “[Muslim] women are talking openly about sex”, does so along a cropped image of female green eyes with extremely heavy makeup and seductive outlines, depicting only a small portion of the veil. These articles, published around a decade ago, are just a starting point: we still see nowadays a proliferation of articles with headlines saying things such as “under the veil”, “behind the veil”, “beneath the veil”, “Islam without the veil”, among others. It shows how Muslim women are fetishized along the cliché of “unveiling themselves”: what are they hiding under the *hijab*, the *burqa*, the *niqab*?

Paula is the interlocutor who notices how Islamic clothing takes on a sexualized aspect the most: “there is a tendency to create an image that we, I don’t know, maybe they think we have sex wearing *abaya*”, a conception that composes this colonialist stereotype about the body of Muslim women. The negating of the difference of the colonial individual causes one to be represented by the fixed and repetitive stereotype resulting from the articulation between the racial and the sexual difference (Bhabha, 2007): we would always know in advance that Muslim women are oppressed and repressed, their difference is always negative and never eradicable. The stereotype is, therefore, “a fetishistic mode of representation” (p. 119). The demarcation of difference has always been a part of colonial projects, with sexuality being one of its central elements – if not the main one. As McClintock (2010) points out, women were the land to be “discovered, penetrated, named, inseminated and, above all, possessed” (p. 32). In *The Colonial Harem*, Alloula (1986) analyzed the pictorial representations of Muslim women made by the French during the period when Algeria was under French colonization and realized how flagrant the obsession of European men with the covered bodies of Muslim women was. The discomfort with the sexual inaccessibility of these women extrapolated a mere analogy: colonizing implied appropriating, including sexually, the “exotic veiled women”, “penetrating the secret” that they seemed to hide (p. XVI).

The fetishized body of the Muslim woman has, therefore, an ancient, deep, traumatic and colonial origin. The basis for this discussion is provided by Said (1978/1990) in his classic work on how the so-called “West” constructed an “East” not based on what it really is, but rather on the representations made about it. For a long time, the “Orient” was constructed as a sexual paradise, a delight for licentious sex: a juxtaposition of harems, deserts, princesses, veils, dancers. Currently, this image has become polarized: the “Orient” is imagined as retracted, contrary to the liberal Europe and North America, since it is characteristic of Orientalism to forge an “experience of contrast” (p. 14). Narrated by Said, an example of this contrast used for the sexualization and objectification of Oriental women are the accounts from French writer Gustave Flaubert of his encounters with Kuchuk Hanem, a famous Egyptian dancer at the time. Said remarks: “she never spoke for herself, never represented her emotions, presence or history. He spoke for her and represented her” (p. 17). Him, the colonizing white man. In this orientalist and colonialist perspective, “women are often creatures of a male fantasy of power” (p. 214). They are credited with an “unlimited sensuality”, the veil being represented with “a deep and rich background of female sexuality” (p. 189), which generates an “almost uniform association between the Orient and sex” (p. 195).

In our dialogue, Marília, who is married to a Moroccan Muslim man, says that she became close to religion due to her strong fascination with an Arab cultural item (and not a religious one) which is quite intruded in our orientalist imagination: belly dancing.

The image of Islam spread over Brazil through the dance and the sensuality it carries, a fact that is partly attributed to Brazilian soap operas, such as the frequently evoked *O Clone* (“The Clone”), originally aired between October 2001 and June 2002 on the TV Globo television network. If, on the one hand, this production reinforced stereotypes, on the other it brought visibility to Arab-Islamic communities, introducing them to Brazilians (Barbosa-Ferreira, 2015). After reverting to Islam, Marília strongly feels the clash generated by the representations of the “exposed dancer” and the “covered woman”:

The way I dress became more modest, without exposing my body. I stopped wearing makeup and nail polish, and these facts all happened even before I adopted the hijab. For someone who studied dance for seven years, who danced exposing her body... it was like going from wine to water!

Still going about this contrast, Marília comments how curious it was to walk through the streets of some Moroccan cities she visited in the company of her husband and see covered women entering stores that sold sensual clothes. At the time, she thought there was a contradiction in the fact that Muslim women consumed and even valued these items, which surprised her about “this sphere of restricting and allowing”, which “go together, side by side”. This supposed ambiguity is attenuated, from a religious point of view, when thinking about the public/private, an important key to understanding the dynamics of gender relations and sexuality in Islam. As Ângela says, using a phrase repeated by many women in the field, “*we don’t dress up for the outside, we dress up to be inside the house*”. In this regard, we mention an excerpt from Barbosa-Ferreira’s thesis (2007), in which she asks an interlocutor about the meaning of dance, an activity with high sensual connotation, if only women could appreciate other women, to which the interlocutor replies that they dance for their husbands (p. 47), that is, in the intimacy of the domestic space.

Lamrabet (2014) notes: “it is the Muslim woman’s body that today seems to embody the place of tension between the representations of modernity and anti-modernity” (p. 31), or, in other words, of freedom and oppression. The *hijab*, the Islamic veil, ended up being taken as a visible mark of the supposed sexual repression of Muslim women, whereas, for them, it is about devotion to God, or something that we can also read as a diacritical sign that marks their identity and belonging as a woman and as a Muslim. More often than not, it is ignored that it is a religious prescription: it is not an accessory and must not be imposed by family members, but rather understood as a religious duty. In the field, many discourses surround the veil: in addition to being a marker of this identity, it is common to hear that it protects women, including from harassment. These comments are made generally by men, and many women disagree. The veil also has a political tone, according to which using the *hijab* would signal resistance to the prohibitions of its use: by choosing to use it, it would represent the pride that that woman feels in being a Muslim.

Despite all these meanings, a cruel reality presents itself, like Luciana’s, who showed deep suffering⁹ for having withdrawn her clothing. After years of unemployment, she realized that her difficulty in relocating was due to her *hijab*. Sorrowful, she abandons its use, deletes public posts about Islam from her social networks, and is quickly admitted to a new job. However, “having to deal with an upper-class public”, she was still asked to straighten her curly hair. In addition to religious intolerance, the racism: it is never enough, the multiple forms of violence that affect women’s bodies are never-ending. The controversy about Islamic clothing is so strong that it leads Adlbi Sibai (2016)

to work the “*Muslim woman with a hijab*” as a construct. Because the *hijab* is treated as disabling, the “*Muslim woman with a hijab*” is constructed as passive, monolithic, inferior, sexually repressed, a symbol of universal female oppression, a victim of the patriarchal system, unable to speak and incapable of social agency (p. 34): all Arab-Islamic realities start being dictated by this frozen image of the “*Muslim woman with a hijab*”, which feeds and strengthens colonial agendas (p. 134).

For years we have been witnessing the debate on the prohibition of Islamic clothing in certain public environments, especially in some European countries, under the argument that the *hijab* would be a threat for freedom. The question is: to whom? The “white men seeking to save dark-skinned women from dark-skinned men” (Spivak, 2010, p. 115); the “white women seeking to save women of coffee color” (Bidaseca, 2011); and the claims that “Muslim women need salvation” (Abu-Lughod, 2013) are problematic in that they suggest a need to rescue women from their own lives, from their own contexts. Adopting the salvationist stance is to act as a colonizer of these bodies: there are many forms of violence associated with the assumptions being made about the superiority of that which you are saving her for and the inferiority of that which she must be saved from. The interlocutors, by establishing the clothing-sexuality relationship in a very distinct way from what the common sense circulates, signal that it is unacceptable for Muslim women to be unveiled, concretely or symbolically, in order to have their existence recognized.

“This is not *haram*, so do it”: Muslim women’s agency and protagonism

In July 2017, a publication comes up that catches the attention of some members of the international Islamic communities: “*The Muslimah sex manual*¹⁰: a *halal* guide to mind blowing sex”, a guide on *halal* sex specially dedicated to Muslim women. *Halal* and *haram* are two important categories to explore the theme of sexuality in Islam: *halal* is what is licit, permitted; *haram* is the forbidden. Under the pseudonym Umm Muladhat, the author explains that her book is dedicated to married women, who experience sex within the context of marriage, but who want to try a range of experiences with their spouse. She adds that she stresses the term *halal* because she realized that women got married knowing little about sex, and what little they knew was about what is considered forbidden, and not everything else that is allowed and encouraged.

In Islam, sexual interdictions are few: sex must be had after marriage (*nikah*) and exclusively with the spouse; the prohibited practices are basically anal sex and sex during a woman’s menstrual period. Although aware of the prescriptions, Sandra says she is not fond of using the term *haram*: in her opinion, “*religion shows the way and gives the guidelines*”, but “*what is done between the couple is between them only*”. For her, it is clear that the rules were established by Allah¹¹, but in her view, it is up to each couple to arrange their desires and negotiate their practices. In this regard, it is important to mention that sex in Islam does not indicate a man’s right and a woman’s duty, as one of the goals of marriage is precisely to provide sexual satisfaction in a licit way. There is, therefore, a right to sexual pleasure shared by men and women. Tereza makes a point to state that she no longer accepts the possibility of experiencing a relationship in which sex is unpleasant. In her first Islamic marriage, to a Muslim from a West African country, she faced many sexual difficulties:

Because of his culture, he was very full of no, no, and no. Everything was haram, haram, haram. So I went and asked for an individual meeting with the sheikh¹² from where we lived, I sat him down in front of the sheikh and started asking for details. I said: sheikh, is oral sex allowed? He looked at me and asked: what do you mean, Tereza? I replied: sheikh, you understand what I'm asking, just please answer me in front of him [husband], so he knows what is and isn't allowed. Then, very embarrassed, he [sheikh] looked at my husband and said: there is one thing written in the Book that is not allowed, which is anal sex. So do everything that is not that and that your wife asks you to do, because your obligation is to give pleasure to your wife.

After this conversation with the *sheikh*, Tereza says that, when her husband “started with his haram”, she would interrupt him and remind him: “you’ve already been told that it’s not haram, so do it!”. Now married to a reverted Brazilian Muslim, she recounts that, before making the commitment official, she told her then suitor that for her “sex is eighty percent of the relationship” and that she wanted a partner to “follow her in her desires”, otherwise it would be “better to be without a man”. As sex is very important in her life, Tereza seeks to fulfill her desires and wishes, conciliating them with what is stipulated by her religion.

Ângela also alludes to playful sex: “it’s not every day, but I put on some music, wear big earrings, do my makeup, put on false nails... he [husband] loves it”. The interlocutor understands her characterization as a *performance*: “I am more performative than he is, he is a good appreciator”. Not only sex is *performance*, but religion as a whole also is. On another occasion, Barbosa-Ferreira (2009) worked with one of the most performative elements of the Islamic religion, which is *salat*, prayer. Just as an actor rehearses to pursue perfection, Muslims also improve their gestures and shape their body through repetition: the senses are refined through daily religious ritual practice, which contributes to the constitution of the Islamic body. Being a Muslim woman is also a construction, a constant process, and the experience of sex in marriage will consist of learning and improving the “techniques of the body” (Mauss, 1935/2015).

As shown by the interlocutors, there is a positive view in Islam regarding the experience of sexuality, which encourages pleasure and not just reproduction (as the *sheikh* said to Tereza’s husband: “your obligation is to give pleasure to your wife”). Despite this, Azam (2013) points out that, in practice, there are several dissonances between these discourses: little emphasis is given to female desire, still relegating Muslim women to a position of timid passivity, the supposed way of conduct of a virtuous wife; and the playful and reciprocal nature of the sexual relationship is rarely highlighted, giving priority to the view of sex as a male need. Such asymmetry establishes that men are the subject of sexuality, while women are the object of it: an oppressive view of sex, which historically reproduces the exclusion of women from the debate about their own desires (Mernissi, 2002). This problem appears in the account of Marília, who says that she has sex “just to satisfy my husband and not because I feel like it”. The interlocutor says that the “decrease in sex drive” happened after she became pregnant:

Before her [the birth of her daughter], I had a lot of desire, I felt like doing it. During pregnancy, things started changing. I’ve already complained to the doctor, I thought it was the contraceptive, but she tells me that it’s the routine of working, taking care of the child and the house. This takes away our disposition to have sex, because [we women] get tired.

Marília alludes to women's overload. In Islam, men and women have different responsibilities: the man is responsible for providing for the household, and the woman for taking care of it. This in no way means that women cannot contribute financially – Marília, as well as all the other interlocutors in our research, works both inside and outside the home. Likewise, taking care of the house and children is not exclusive to women. From a religious point of view, men can (and should) share tasks – we evoke a *hadith*¹³ according to which the Prophet Muhammad performed a series of domestic tasks. When talking about women's exhausting working days and their everyday overload, Marília continues to bring up how gender issues permeate the experience of sexuality.

Bruna, who was in her second pregnancy during our interview, pointed out that she was also going through a sexually delicate period with her husband, a Muslim of Bengali origin: she was feeling pain and discomfort due to the high-risk pregnancy, and he was excessively concerned with the couple's finances, which, in Bruna's understanding, was “directly impacting his libido”. Such “crisis of Islamic masculinity” (De Sony, 2013) reinforces that the conceptions of femininity and masculinity are also being contested within Islam, which makes space for us to think about new configurations of bodies and desires (Ozyegin, 2016).

The matter of femininity-masculinity is also elucidated by Cristina. The interlocutor defines herself: “*I am a Muslim, a Brazilian, a student, a worker, a wife, a mother*”. Cristina lists her multiple roles performed daily and, at the time of our contact, she was responsible for financially supporting the household, while her husband, an Egyptian, was the one more actively dedicated to taking care of the house and children, which reverses traditional Islamic logic. For her, married life is far from being “*a fairytale world*”, but “*is real life*”: Cristina's vision of conjugality and sexuality, which is quite realistic, differs from the idealization often made about marriage with a Muslim man, whose (dis) enchantments were studied by Pasqualin (2018).

While many look to foreign Muslims for a “prince of Arabia”, Tereza cherishes her current marriage – we reiterate that she is the only interlocutor married to a Brazilian Muslim man, who was also reverted. She says that they managed to unite culture and religion in “*a Tupiniquim marriage, with the heat of the tropics*”. Tereza brings up an important discussion about the ethnic-racial marker, which is very present in the discourse from the women. An attempt is often made to discredit Brazilian Muslim women through a perverted use of this marker in association with gender and religion, which promotes the stereotype of “Arab superiority” or, as we heard in the field, of the “original Muslims”, referring to those born in Muslim families, bringing about a derogatory view of reverted Muslims. Here, Tereza makes another use: she combines Brazilian nationality and eroticism, valuing her choice for a Brazilian husband and not for a foreigner of Arab origin as is the case for the majority. However, it is worth noting how gender and race have been articulated to create the imagery of the “tropical sex” (Piscitelli, 1996), which establishes Brazilian women as possessors of an innate, native sensuality, culminating in a position of sexualization and objectification.

All this data helps us think about how identities are being produced by these women within the community. Whether openly like Tereza, or subtly like Sandra when she gives us a very enlightening metaphorical example – “*if you leave the stove open on weekends, the husband understands that you're going to cook, if you leave it closed, it's implied that he can order a pizza... everything is in the woman's hands*” –, the women allow us to think about how they

are going against the idea that men are in charge. Islamic rules on sexuality are usually considered easy to understand, which makes sexuality in Islam at first sight seem like a matter closed in on itself. However, as the women point out, their cross-intersections are complex. The interlocutors extrapolate the *halal/haram* polarization, bringing in their reports their comforts and difficulties with sexuality, looking for ways to give new meanings to sex and seek their personal satisfaction, without disregarding their religious belonging. Even though they sometimes take for themselves particles from dominant patriarchal discourses, the women quoted position themselves as desiring subjects, assuming their protagonism, or signaling the desire to leave the margins towards this position of centrality.

“If Prophet Muhammad talked about it, why can we not?”: religious knowledge and female empowerment

An emerging topic from women’s narratives, considered important for the gaining of consciousness about the body and the right to pleasing sex, is the very knowledge about the religion itself. Cristina says her critical view only formed when she started studying Islam more, meaning that empowerment also comes through knowledge. One of the questions surrounding our research since the beginning regarded why would there still be difficulties to transmitting knowledge about sexuality, taking into consideration that religion in its origins treated the subject openly and directly. It is said that Prophet Muhammad himself incentivized Muslim men and women to raise question about all subjects, not allowing “*shyness to be an impediment to learn religion*” (notes from the field notebook). Luana, recently reverted and full of questions, wanted to talk to other Muslims about sex, but thought it better to wait for her marriage to become official to avoid judgements about the reason behind “*wanting to know too much about certain things*”. One of the participants from Mossuz-Lavau’s (2005) research explains: “*we Muslims remain virgins until marriage, so these things are not talked about*” (p. 381). As sexual life is not conceived outside marriage, maybe this is the key behind the difficulty in offering Islamic sexual education, or at least have a dialogue about the subject.

Luciana further expresses that the difficulties a recently reverted Muslim woman faces are several, especially due to virginity being the main boundary established. It is important to stress that not only Muslim women must marry as virgins: the same principle is valid for Muslim men. Luciana, however, says she was surprised by that, since she “*believed only women were educated that way*”. She talks about visiting Lebanon, home country to her husband, and being surprised when seeing “*twenty-year-old men who had never even tongue kissed*” and “*men who avoid looking us in the eye, because they consider that a lack of respect towards women*”. The matter of “lowering the gaze” is a part of two verses (Quran, 24, pp. 30-31) that describe the ideal behavior for both men and women to prevent any illicit sexual-intimate contact: as indicated, not only sex is forbidden before marriage, but any physical contact with the opposite sex¹⁴. Despite that, Luciana understood that such regulations were exclusive to women: this alludes to a double standard in morals, which is permissive and flexible to men, but requires from women “rectilinear sexual and moral conduct” (Moutinho, 2004, p. 67), an idea that the interlocutor reproduces, even if unaware of it.

Sandra claims she had her questions about sexuality answered within Islam, since there was never anyone to instruct her adequately before her reversion: her mother, a Catholic, “would say that the male sexual organ was the size of a snake, that it would enter us and leave through the mouth... she always made us very scared, but I know she had good intentions”. According to Foucault (1976/2015), sex is talked about a lot, but “valuing it as a secret” (p. 36): silencing or excessive discretion is established to talk about the subject, “among parents and children, teachers and students, bosses and servants” (p. 46). In the previous section, we showed how Tereza broke the silence by approaching the *sheikh* to solve the doubts her husband had about sex in Islam. The *sheikh* is the figure understood as capable of legitimizing all types of knowledge, including about sexuality. This is explicit in the account of Rita, who was very reserved, when she said it would be “more advantageous” to talk to the *sheikh* instead of her, “because he will be able to offer the correct explanation [about sexuality in Islam]”. Rita felt as if unauthorized to offer her point of view on the subject and could not understand how her experience could be important and legitimate for us.

The lack of adequate information can cause confusion for some women. When discussing about oral sex, Luciana said she had quit this practice after receiving the orientation that “*the mouth that praises Allah should not be put over a sexual organ*”. The answer had us thinking about how discourses run and are propagated in the community: from the Islamic point of view, the practice of oral sex is considered acceptable and not forbidden, but a quick search is enough to arrive at several website pages pointing towards this same distorted information that Luciana talks about having received. In a private conversation with the *sheikh* Mohamad Bukai¹⁵, he emphasized the importance of studying sexuality in religion. The *sheikh* says people rarely approach him to talk about the subject, but he raises the question: “*if Prophet Muhammad talked about it [sex], why can we not?*”. For Rubin (1975/2017), not transmitting knowledge to women is clearly a way of oppressing them (p. 15). In this scenario, the saying from the *sheikh* assumes even greater importance because he, a religious authority, stimulates Muslim women in this search. The demand of Muslim women for knowledge is not *against* Islam, but rather *for* it and *by* it (Ali, 2020, p. 16): for its original message to be recovered.

“We need to remove this taboo from people’s minds”: final considerations

The process to decolonize the ways of seeing Muslim women encompasses several categories of understanding, such as race, class and gender (Bouteldja, 2016). We understand decolonization as a contraposition to colonization: just like the authors denominated as decolonial usually put it, even with the end of formal colonization, the colonialism remains and still acts upon experiences, bodies, powers and knowledges. As we are Brazilian researchers conducting research with Muslim women who are also Brazilian, we believe that the use of decolonization encompasses this “place of enunciation” from the “body-political and geopolitical influences” (Bernardino-Costa, Maldonado-Torres, & Grosfoguel, 2019, p. 15).

Throughout the article, we attempted to show how the sedimentation of the so-called “condition of women in Islam”, ingrained on the stereotype of oppression/repression which is, in turn, directly related to gender/sexuality, results from a line of thought that has colonial origins and remains marked by coloniality, which bars or even denies Muslim women’s expressions of agency. An openness to epistemic diversity is needed, one which contemplates experiences and knowledges other than the hegemonic ones: it is, therefore, about searching for an “affirmation of existence” through the knowledge of “those who were erased, made invisible and denied by coloniality” (Bernardino-Costa, Maldonado-Torres, & Grosfoguel, 2019, p. 16) – here, the Brazilian Muslim women reverted to Islam.

We need, therefore, to abandon “*bourgeois feminism*” (Barbosa, 2019): comprehending the autonomy of these women and their practices is necessary for us to abandon the role of colonizer of the body and the desires of the other. It is not upon us to speak *for* these women, but to speak *with* them, because the factor *for* would put them in the same place of oppression that we criticize so much. We consider sexuality one of the many narratives about women that engender the form of perception of their bodies, desires, and pleasures, which are regulated by religion, but also by culture: we know the meanings alter according to whether they are Brazilian, Arab, African, or Asian Muslim women. In this sense, to conclude this article, we should present the final considerations put forward by the interlocutors themselves.

Márcia concludes: “*we are normal women, with normal needs, and we need to remove this taboo from people’s minds*”. In other words, she is pointing out that *we are all women*. We interpret this warning from her as a reminder not to treat women as a universal, homogeneous category; but also be careful to, when highlighting differences, not end up reinforcing stereotypes that would continue subordinating these women, which is the opposite of what they need.

Paula revisits the categories *halal/haram* to state that sex, whether in Brazil, in the Middle East, or in any other country/region, will always have layers of meaning:

You will always find someone who displays behaviors that maybe if you said oh, it’s from Brazilian Christian society, you wouldn’t find very different. But if I tell you that it happens here [Egypt, a predominantly Muslim country], you’ll say: wow, are you sure this really happens? It might not even be something very common, but you will think so. You will always think so, of everything, in any place... because I think that all these things are stupidly human.

It seems obvious, but is not always so, that Muslim women are *stupidly human* and, consequently, sex is a *stupidly human* matter. It becomes urgent to consider the demands and the meanings that these reverted Muslim women attribute to their experiences, the core of this article. Even so, Paula's account puts in check the idea that Muslim women have experiences that are "exotic", opposite or extremely different from other women.

It is impossible to settle the issues on such a broad theme, but it was possible to raise them in this exercise of addressing sexuality in Islam. After all, we understand the decolonial criticism as continuous, a project still on the horizon, which is envisioned to be achieved – the very title chosen for this manuscript is inflected in the gerund (*decolonizing*), as an indication of something that is in progress, a possibility to advance the discussion. The contents covered here were a part of the reality of the women with whom we talked: if any topic was not covered, it is because it was not considered relevant by them and, therefore, does not constitute data for the research. It was possible to delineate that interdictions, stereotypes and difficulties shape the experience of sex. However, for the interlocutors mentioned here, more than closing an issue, this will be a reason to start reflecting and serve as a starting point for new possibilities and subtle forms of resistance. Muslim women are allowed to experience – and talk about – sex, which is definitely part of Islamic conduct.

Notes

1 Paiva, C. M. (2018). *Women, perfumes and prayers: a symbolic approach to sexuality in Islam*. Master's Thesis, Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences and Letters at Ribeirão Preto, University of São Paulo, Ribeirão Preto/SP. Research funded by The São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP) – Process n° 2015/26295-2.

2 All names of interlocutors are fictional.

3 GRACIAS (Group of Anthropology in Arab and Islamic Contexts), headquartered in the Department of Psychology from the Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences and Letters at Ribeirão Preto (FFCLRP/USP) and coordinated by Prof. Dr. Francirosy Campos Barbosa, is the first to work on the Anthropology-Psychology-Islam interface in the Brazilian academic context. In the country, initial studies focused on mapping the Islamic communities, their formation and the construction of their identities. It is only more recently, having supplied part of these issues, that new researchers have been able to broaden their approach towards more specific topics, such as sexuality as addressed here.

4 Reverted is a native term: according to Islamic belief, all human beings are born Muslim and, when they profess their testimony of faith, they return to the religion from which they had strayed. We prefer to use this term over conversion/converted. There is not an accurate number of Muslims in Brazil, but Pinto (2010), based on his ethnographic experience, supposes it would be around 100,000-300,000.

5 Arabs make up only one fifth of the world's Islamic population. In Brazil, the Islamic presence is generally associated with the Arab immigration, especially from Syrians, Lebanese and Palestinians. However, more recently, the history of the *Malês* people, enslaved African Muslims who composed the first Islamic communities in our country, has been recovered, as shown in the documentary “*Allah, Oxalá: on the Malê trail*” (Barbosa, 2015).

6 *Abaya*, *hijab*, *burqa* and *niqab* are some varieties of Islamic clothing. The *abaya* is a long black dress that extends to the feet. The *hijab* covers the hair and neck, leaving the face exposed. The *niqab* covers the face of women, except for an opening at the eye level. The *burqa*, in addition to covering the entire body and face, also covers the eyes.

7 <https://oglobo.globo.com/rio/bairros/por-baixo-da-burca-muculmanas-investem-em-lingerias-sensuais-de-nova-friburgo-4446672>

8 https://istoe.com.br/19226_A+LIBERACAO+SEXUAL+NO+ISLA/

9 Countless adversities present themselves to reversed Muslim women, causing them much suffering. Such issues will be more deeply explored by the author in her doctoral research on mental health in Brazilian Islamic communities (FFCLRP/USP, in progress).

10 <https://themuslimahsexguide.com/>

11 *Allah* is the Arabic word for God.

12 The *sheikh* is an authority in Islamic matters and a reference for the community.

13 The *hadiths* are the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad, which Sunni Muslims look to to shape their own behavior. We clarify that we write Muhammad and not *Maomé* [a usual Brazilian Portuguese spelling], a designation considered disrespectful and derogatory by Muslims.

14 Since it is a Quranic mention, the term “sex” is used instead of “gender” due to the primacy given in this source to the biologizing meaning of the term.

15 *Sheikh* Bukai, a Syrian who has been in Brazil since 2006, is currently the incumbent *sheikh* at Mesquita Brasil. Founded in 1929, it is the oldest mosque in Brazil and in all of Latin America.

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