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“We Don’t Need to be Saved”

An Investigation of *My.Kali* Magazine and its Related LGBTQIA+ Community in Amman, Jordan

Abstract: This chapter investigates the positioning of Islam within the various debates and articles that appeared in the Jordanian LGBTQIA+ online magazine *My.Kali*. I will build on two statements taken from an interview with the magazine’s founder, Khalid Abdel Hadi, published by *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: “Religion is not the problem” and “We don’t need to be saved”. This text will then add other voices from the magazine to his perspective and embed them within broader discussions around being Muslim, queer, and Arab. This will touch on ways Muslims are embracing their religiosity at the same time as their queerness, as well as debunking the twin myths of the “Western queer paradise” and the “Muslim homophobe”. This also includes Muslim awareness of racism, Islamophobia, and heteronormativity in so-called Western countries. Juggling local and global activism, the concepts of queerness, histories, and languages makes visible the complex nature of Arab LGBTQIA+ communities.

Introduction

This chapter builds on two statements taken from a 2020 interview with Khalid Abdel Hadi, the founder of the Jordanian LGBTQIA+ online magazine *My.Kali*: “Religion is not the problem” and “We don’t need to be saved”.¹ These statements will serve as a frame to the wider discussions around being Muslim, queer, and Arab that are taking place at *My.Kali*. I will draw in particular on eight English-language² articles published in *My.Kali* between 2013 and 2020 that speak to Abdel Hadi’s interview. Some of them are based on personal

I would like to thank Hinemoana Baker for her support and much appreciated input on this chapter.

1 Abdel Hadi 2020, 2. Translated from German by Claude Kempen. The interview was originally conducted in English and translated into German for *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. The original quotes were requested but not received by the time of this chapter’s publication.

2 This chapter marks only the beginning of possible research around *My.Kali* magazine. Expanded research could take the Arabic articles into account as well.

LGBTQIA+ experiences or memories, others are (self-)critical of the magazine's work, and some discuss academic concepts such as Joseph Massad's "Gay International" or Jasbir K. Puar's "Homonationalism"³ – concepts which will be discussed at length below.

Fig. 1: *My.Kali* cover, featuring Rashed, no. 64 (Arabic version). With friendly permission by the editor: *My.Kali* 2018.

Further, I will investigate how some of these individuals are embracing their religiosity at the same time as their queerness, debunking the twin myths of the "Western queer paradise" and the "Muslim homophobe". The chosen articles also demonstrate a heightened awareness of racism, Islamophobia, and hetero-

³ See, for example, Nasser-Eddin and Abou-Assab 2018, Shadeedi 2018 or Hanna 2019.

normativity in so-called⁴ Western countries. This juggling of local and global activism, the concepts of queerness, histories, and languages makes visible the complex nature of Arab LGBTQIA+ communities. The question of positionality is omnipresent in the articles: Who are we addressing? Who are we as a community? What knowledge do we draw on? How independent are we in making our own choices about the ways in which we are queer? I consider these questions inspirational and important for queers as well as non-queers, no matter their nationality or religiosity.

I have an uneasy feeling writing this chapter. As a *white*,⁵ Franco-German queer I am personally involved with the topic, while also wanting to disrupt academic writing practice about the 'Muslim Other' that has been constructed as the opposite to a 'Western Self' since the end of the first millennium.⁶ The crusades, the military confrontations with the Ottoman Empire, European Imperialism in the 19th and 20th centuries, and the more recent events since 9/11 have been further used to reproduce these religious demarcations of 'Western-Christian' and 'Eastern-Islamic', marking one as 'good' and the other as 'bad'.⁷ The academic tradition of Orientalism has substantially contributed to this formation of the 'Other', as Edward Said has very poignantly shown in his 1978 book "Orientalism". Orientalism is the "discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically, as a topic of learning, discovery and practice".⁸ I powerfully believe in the need to interrupt this Orientalist tradition, while acknowledging that it has inevitably left its mark on me, as powerful hegemonies do. My aim in this chapter is not to talk over or overwrite existing activist voices, but rather to try and amplify their discourses in this academic context.⁹ In this way, I hope to give an additional platform to diverse ideas around being Muslim, Arab, and queer.

⁴ I am using "so-called" here to remind myself and the reader of the constructedness of geographical references. Not only do 'Western' and 'Eastern' limit our thinking to unnecessary and prejudiced binaries, they are also inaccurate and create only seemingly logical entities. For an interesting discussion on the naturalisation of the Middle East see Culcasi 2010.

⁵ When referring to a person, the term *white* is written in italics to deconstruct race as a natural category and to indicate the structural privileges that come with being *white*.

⁶ Attia 2009, 71.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Said 2003 [1978], 73. For further reading, see Amir-Moazami 2018.

⁹ Sarah Hamdan calls this practice "reconceptualizing agency and exposing colonialist/secular discourses in the Arab world (...) located primarily in a Western geopolitical context." Hamdan 2015, 69.

The *My.Kali* magazine is a bi-monthly online magazine founded in Amman in 2007 by then 17-year-old Khalid Abdel Hadi. Today, it has about 15,000 subscribers and 100,000 website visitors per month.¹⁰ It tackles topics of gender and its (non-)binarity, sexualities, politics, and pop culture.¹¹ Furthermore, it functions as an informant for policymakers, other activists, and media outlets.¹² The magazine promotes itself as an important platform for and from queers of the North African and West Asian region. Most users come from Algeria, Tunisia, and – before the war – Syria. In countries where the magazine is blocked, i.e. Qatar, Jordan, and Gaza, users can access the content via social media.¹³ The staff at *My.Kali* is also very aware of the fact that some subscribers and users need to read and receive the articles and pictures privately via mail, rather than being able to follow the magazine's activities on social media. Initially, English was the only language of the publication; this changed in 2015 when it was decided that Arabic should be added. The magazine has full-time employees, as well as guest writers, editors, stylists, photographers, and models. Most of them are locals with an Arab background, while the magazine is mostly open to international contributions if the content is deemed relevant to the main readership. They form a close and discreet network in the city of Amman, working hard to maintain safety around the places and offices where they meet. Many friendships have formed around the magazine.

Besides the underlying value of the reflections within the *My.Kali* community, there is more to discover. In the first section of the text which follows, I demonstrate that by engaging with the religious Islamic tradition, Muslim queers make religion their support system. In Abdel Hadi's words: "Religion is not the problem". This statement, and the wider work that *My.Kali* does, together disrupt 'Western' ideas that Islam is intolerant towards queerness, amplifying queer Muslim voices for those who need to hear them. In the second section, I will debunk the illusion of a 'Western' paradise that either serves as an example for queer Arabs and Muslims, or offers them refuge. Either way, religion and for the scope of this chapter Islam, is always part of their considerations, whether as part of a religious queering practice or through awareness of Islamophobia – the latter because in 'Western' countries, Islam is ascribed to them regardless of their religiosity and they are most likely be stigmatised for it.¹⁴

¹⁰ Abdel Hadi 2020, 1.

¹¹ Leach/*My.Kali* n.d.

¹² See, for example, Abdel Hadi 2017.

¹³ Abdel Hadi 2020, 4.

¹⁴ Kesinkilic 2019.

Fig. 2: *My.Kali* Cover, featuring Khalid Abdel Hadi, first *My.Kali* issue. With friendly permission by the editor: *My.Kali* 2007.

Islam is not the problem: Engaging religious tradition

Yes, there are many people here that have suffered from attacks coming from religious camps. We are being told, though, that Islam is the problem. Religion is not the problem, there are many gays that are believing Muslims and Christians.¹⁶

Abdel Hadi's words mark an important counter-argument to an essentialist and orientalist notion that Islam and those who believe in it are inherently homophobic. Jasbir K. Puar has very poignantly analysed the mechanisms of sexual

¹⁶ Abdel Hadi 2020, 2. Translated from German by Claude Kempen.

othering in her 2007 book “Terrorist Assemblages – Homonationalism in Queer Times”. She points out that because of the assumption that homosexuality is naturally secular “gay- and lesbian-identified Muslims (...) [become] inconceivable”.¹⁹ In ‘Western’ countries today, Islam thus seems to be identified as the opposite of homosexuality which becomes part of a “racializing technology” that marks Muslims as ‘Others’.²⁰ It should be noted at this point that Christianity is less likely than Islam to be seen as a contradiction to homosexuality or queerness, precisely because a certain secularity and enlightened character is attributed or granted to it.²¹ Islam, however, is thought of as a monolith, as the most homophobic religion of all, more homophobic than the “white mainstream queer communities are racist”.²² This leads to “a collective vilification of Muslims”.²³ Non-Muslim gays and queers are integrated into the *white* patriotic project, an ‘us vs them’, while also being constructed as victims of the homophobic ‘Muslim Other’.²⁴ In Puar’s analysis on the US, this in turn serves the nation state’s domestic and foreign interest, when the idea of gay rights is being used to legitimise war and military aggression.²⁵ Puar calls this dynamic ‘Homonationalism’,²⁶ a concept mainly developed with her analysis of the torture scandal of Abu Ghraib in 2003.

In support of deconstructing such an essentialised vision of Muslims, I would like to quote the Jordanian activist and writer Maher Al-Haj. He was interviewed in 2013 by the *My.Kali* reporter Julijan Rahaleh about his project “to educate and advocate on the permissibility of homosexuality within the Sharia Law of Islam in our Muslim and Arabic surroundings”.²⁷ Al-Haj felt there was no-one and nowhere he could turn to as he grew up questioning his sexuality. He describes his upbringing as “culturally conservative”,²⁸ rather than religious, and says he felt rejected by the people around him who deemed his “abnormal” sexual preferences disgusting. After many difficult years, he came to terms with himself: “I finally arrived to the only truth about my sexuality that matters: that homosexuality is a beautiful creation from Allah that needs to be respected,

¹⁹ Puar 2017 [2007], 93.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

²¹ Hall 1992, 277.

²² Puar 2017 [2007], 15.

²³ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁵ Schotten 2016, 357.

²⁶ Puar 2017 [2007], 39.

²⁷ Al-Haj 2013, 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

protected, and celebrated."²⁹ Al-Haj himself felt religiously drawn to Islam, even more so than his average relative: "I felt an affinity to the religion Islam since a very young age. And as soon as I became aware of my sexual differences, I sought refuge, peace, and comfort in it."³⁰ He turned towards God, his religion, and found safety within, rather than without, religious practices. It is important to him to dismantle the idea that what he calls "traditional Islam" forbids homosexuality. In his opinion, homosexuality is part of God's intentions "that should be acknowledged and celebrated".³¹ He is aware of the existence of many homosexual, queer Muslims to whom Islam is very important and wishes to support them on their quest for self-acceptance and piety.

These kinds of possibilities and this adaptability in reading and interpreting the Qur'an are also demonstrated by what is known as the feminist or women's re-reading of the Qur'an, a movement associated with scholar-activists Amina Wadud, Margot Badran, and Asma Barlas, among others. Their goal has been to recover sexual equality within an Islamic paradigm by adding a women's perspective to what they think is an androcentric Qur'anic interpretation.³² They conceptualise theological premises that would suspend certain misogynist interpretations of the Qur'an. For example, thinking of God's unity, *tawhīd*, and exclusive divine sovereignty over humans, would rule out men's authority over women.³³ Furthermore, if God is understood as inherently good, incapable of doing bad, then bad things cannot be taught by God's speech.³⁴ These scholars also contextualise and historicise the Qur'an as a text of its time: Wadud distinguishes "universal and particular norms",³⁵ meaning that there are some verses that apply to seventh century Arab society, while others can be applied to today's circumstances. The universal meaning of verses must be hermeneutically filtered out. If the "original intention"³⁶ intended advances for women compared to the former status quo, the essence of this verse is progress.³⁷ We can identify a similarly fresh and daring new approach to interpreting the Qur'an regarding homosexuality in what Al-Haj says about God's nature and creative intentions: God is loving and wholesome which rules out a homophobic reading of religious sources.

²⁹ Al-Haj 2013, 2.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 4.

³² Afsaruddin 1999, 23.

³³ Barlas 2002, 13 and 106.

³⁴ Ibid., 14.

³⁵ Wadud 1999, xii.

³⁶ Shah 2006, 881.

³⁷ Ibid., 883.

The Liberal Islamic Association in Berlin (Liberal-Islamischer Bund e.V., LIB) has positioned itself in a similar way regarding the standing of homosexuality in Islam. To them, the individuality and independence of every believer outweighs unquestioned traditions and obedience towards authorities.³⁸ The key to their understanding of Islam is a person's relationship to God, a relationship that can only be expressed when their full individuality is respected and valued.³⁹ Similarly to Al-Haj, the LIB considers homosexuality as part of God's creativity and love of diversity; a diversity that should encourage us to get to know one another.⁴⁰ Historically, the LIB states, Islamic Law has proven its potential to re-evaluate rulings on sexuality and love, listing rape within marriage, sexual relationships between slaves and masters, and intercourse with minors as examples of outdated practices.⁴¹

In his book *Living Out Islam: Voices of Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims*, Scott Siraj al-Haq Kugle contributes to the debate about the compatibility of Muslim piety and queerness. He states that the opinion of many Western observers, that "transgender, lesbian, and gay Muslims must leave Islam in order to live with dignity and pursue social reform",⁴² is wrong since "[m]any activists retain their loyalty to their religion, pursue deeper knowledge about it, and practice its rituals to the extent of their capacity. Others mine the Islamic tradition for resources for a progressive religious interpretation."⁴³ One such example that Kugle came across during his interviews and research with LGBTQIA+ Arab activists concerns Muslims' history as a formerly oppressed minority which was marginalised and vulnerable.⁴⁴ They remind their fellow Muslims that the Qur'an calls on protecting the "downtrodden", numbered among which are disabled, poor, and queer bodies.⁴⁵ "This is an example of activism in a mode that can be called 'engaging religious tradition'."⁴⁶

Engaging religious tradition as queers often means having to address the biblical and Qur'anic story of Lot that takes place in Sodom and Gomorrah (see the Qur'anic verses 7:80–84, 11:77–83, 15:58–77, 26:160–175, 27:54–58, 29:28–35, and 54:33–39). Contemporary scholars are divided when it comes to the

³⁸ Liberal-Islamischer Bund e.V. 2013, 1.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 3.

⁴² Kugle 2014, 53.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 54.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 22.

interpretation of these verses. Khalid Duran defends that the Qur'an "is very explicit in its condemnation of homosexuality, leaving scarcely any loophole for a theological accommodation of homosexuals in Islam".⁴⁷ Kugle, in contrast, sees no explicit discussion of homosexuality or homosexuals at all.⁴⁸ In order to promote a more inclusive reading of this Qur'anic segment, scholars and activists have interpreted the story of Lot as being about other issues than homoerotic acts.⁴⁹ The LIB assumes instead that it speaks of sexualised violence, assault and a lack of hospitality.⁵⁰ One of Kugle's interviewees

believes that the Qur'an does not directly address homosexuality. (...) It does speak about male assault and rape of other men in the story of the Prophet Lot (at Sodom and Gomorrah), but (...) does not address homosexuality as sexual orientation or homoerotic relationships as expressions of emotional commitment and care.⁵¹

Another voice out of Kugle's text, Omar Nahas – founder of the Islamic and educational Yoesuf Foundation – explains that in his understanding "the Qur'an condemns sodomy as the act of anal penetration rather than homosexuality as sexual orientation, while the Islamic legal tradition mistakenly conflates the two".⁵² This would mean that the "culturally specific social formations of same-sex desire as they are articulated in the West"⁵³ are considered foreign while the practice itself is not. It problematises homosexuality as a "'European identity category' which has been imposed by the West upon gays and lesbians of color".⁵⁴ By distinguishing practice from identity, the supposed universality of sexual identities is questioned. Whether that is helpful to sexually active gays is an unresolved question.

When it comes to engaging religious tradition, Ludovico Mohammed Zahed is a force to be reckoned with.⁵⁵ One of ten openly gay Imams worldwide, Zahed grew up in Algeria and France. In 2012, in Paris, he founded a mosque which welcomes people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Zahed holds a PhD in Anthropology and Psychology and advocates globally for a liberal interpretation of the Qur'an.⁵⁶ He approaches the Qur'an in similar ways to Kugle, his

⁴⁷ Duran 1993, 181.

⁴⁸ Kugle 2003, 219.

⁴⁹ For further information, see also Ali 2006, 82.

⁵⁰ Liberal-Islamischer Bund e.V. 2013, 1.

⁵¹ Kugle 2014, 31.

⁵² Ibid., 124.

⁵³ Fuss 1994, 33.

⁵⁴ Salti 1997, 27.

⁵⁵ Zahed 2016, 4.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 2.

interviewees, the LIB, and activist Maher Al-Haj. Zahed similarly interprets the story of Lot as being not about homosexual practices, but rather about rape: “In the Qur’an nothing is written of homosexuality being reprehensible.”⁵⁷ He goes on to describe that Muslims need to get to the core of the Qur’an’s spiritual essence, which he says is one of tolerance and peace, ruling out the kind of homophobia and marginalisation that comes about when Muslims blindly follow the sharia.⁵⁸ Besides the text-based disputes, an important place is of course given to the figure of Prophet Muhammad and his actions. Zahed tells the story of the prophet welcoming men into his house who were described as *mukhannath*, meaning effeminate, or feminine.⁵⁹ One of Kugle’s interview partners argues that we do not know of any incident “when the Prophet Muhammad punished any woman or man for homosexual orientation or same-sex acts”.⁶⁰

In this section, I have pointed out some of the strategies used by Muslim individuals to reconcile their religiosity with their homosexuality and queerness. Activist Muslims across Jordan, France, and Germany are engaging with religious sources to find refuge and acceptance within them. Alternative and new interpretations of the Qur’an, for example the story of Lot in Sodom and Gomorrah, are essential to this activism which in turn might remind us of related reinterpretation movements, such as the women’s rereading of the Qur’an. Believers are highlighting God’s generosity, acceptance, and love towards Muslims of all stripes. They point to this welcoming of diversity as part of God’s inherent intention to merge different identity affiliations. This questions the orientalist and racist notion of intrinsically homophobic Muslims and demonstrates the diversity of Islamic practice. In Zahed’s words: “We are Islam, we create our faith ourselves.”⁶¹

What paradise? We don’t need to be saved

Western media portrays LGBT-people from Muslim Middle East and North Africa as victims of their society. That they are tortured and longing for a life in the West aka Paradise. Oftentimes this is wrong. We don’t need to be saved.⁶²

⁵⁷ Zahed 2016, 3. Translated from German by Claude Kempen.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Kugle 2014, 32.

⁶¹ Zahed 2016, 2. Translated from German by Claude Kempen.

⁶² Abdel Hadi 2020, 2. Translated from German by Claude Kempen.

Puar's "racializing technology" of pre-supposed Muslim homophobia has a close relative, that is the notion that Muslims need to be saved from their homophobic environment, saved into the 'Western Paradise' where queers can find happiness, and where tolerance reigns.⁶³ Similarly to the *white* Western women's movement, "which had sought to universalise its issues through imposing its own colonial feminism (...) in non-Western countries",⁶⁴ the Western way of being gay becomes the inevitable and universal *modus operandi* that must be internationally imposed. Joseph Massad calls this missionary state of mind the "Gay International".⁶⁵ It includes transforming same-sex practice into an identity that comes with a set of rights and practices, such as coming out of the closet, being visible, and living life out and proud.⁶⁶ When it fails to see gayness performed the right way, the Gay International assumes heterosexuality. Gay identification as performed in these ways is seen as somehow more legitimately gay than same-sex practices and behaviours in and of themselves. Queer representation or 'outness' is considered the only way to achieve "social justice, equality, cohesion, diversity, multiculturalism, etc."⁶⁷ In his 2018 *My.Kali* article "Globalizing the Closet", Musa Shadeedi writes:

[T]he concept of the closet has become more than just a personal decision, or an individual process of discovering one's identity, but rather a standard according to which LGBTQI rights are measured in various cultures. It determines whether this culture is civilized, modern[,] or backward and intolerant of homosexuality.⁶⁸

He states that Western experiences have been framed as the only way to go, ignoring "other LGBTQIA+ communities, their choices, privacies, cultural contexts[,] and their right to choose",⁶⁹ while maintaining the notion of imprisoned, closeted, and tortured queers in the Middle East. There's only one solution: come out and leave the country.⁷⁰ At the same time, protection is only granted to

⁶³ Puar 2017 [2007], 43.

⁶⁴ Massad 2007, 161. I realise that Massad has been widely criticised for generalising and dichotomising (West/East, imported/authentic), for a good overview of this, see Hamdan 2015.

⁶⁵ Massad 2007, 161.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 162. For further reading about the introduction of normalised heterosexuality, see El-Rouayheb 2005; Tolino 2014; Najmabadi, 2005.

⁶⁷ Nasser-Eddin and Abou-Assab 2018, 2.

⁶⁸ Shadeedi 2018, 6.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

those who can perform and “demonstrate their gay-ness, either through appearances or using ‘western’ terminologies”⁷¹ while, in turn, being perceived

by their own communities as ‘westernised’, ‘traitors’, and ‘anti-nationalist’. This leads to even more discrimination against other non-normative people in their home countries [because] homosexuality and gay lifestyles [are] perceived as ‘western’ and related to imperialism.⁷²

That homosexuality was seen to be complicit with colonialism was also found by Ramzi Salti in 1997, this being a very

problematic assumption that has most notably led to the dual marginalization of the Arab homosexual by both the native (who now sees him as complicit with colonialism) and the colonizer (who still views him as a native and consequently as Other).⁷³

In the meantime, it is often forgotten that ‘Western’ countries are far from being safe havens for queers. In a twist that is as ironic as it is damaging, the very homophobia that was imported to the Middle East from ‘Western’ countries through imperialism is now cited when those countries are presented as the safe alternative – as the gay place-to-be.⁷⁴ In his 2008 book *Die Vertreibung aus dem Serail. Europa und die Heteronormalisierung der islamischen Welt*,⁷⁵ Georg Klauda argues that Western queer communities have forgotten about their own societies’ heteronormativity in the process of constructing Islam and traditionally Muslim countries as the cultural enemy.⁷⁶ Samer Owaida, a Chicago-based activist born in Palestine, attests to this in an interview with *My.Kali* in 2019:

It’s an illusion to think you’re completely free once you move here [to the West, and that] you will have a fantastic queer life, because of, for example, gay marriage. There is still a lot of violence against queer bodies in the USA, as seen in the high rate of homelessness among queer youth and murder [of] trans people.⁷⁷

⁷¹ Nasser-Eddin and Abou-Assab 2018, 4.

⁷² Ibid., 5.

⁷³ Salti 1997, 25.

⁷⁴ Massad 2007, 168.

⁷⁵ “The Expulsion from the Seraglio. Europe and the Heteronormalization of the Islamic World.” Translated from German by Claude Kempen. Klauda 2008.

⁷⁶ Klauda 2008, 132.

⁷⁷ Hanna 2019, 4.

Fig. 3: Digital *My.Kali* cover, featuring Juliana Yazbeck, no. 68. With friendly permission by the editor: *My.Kali* 2019.

The culturalisation of homophobia and the illusion of a Western queer safe space also conceal the racism that Muslim or Muslim-identified bodies endure in predominantly *white* countries. Amir Ashour, founder of IraQueer, was raised in Iraq and now lives in Sweden; he affirms that he struggles mostly because of the racism in Sweden.⁸² Bo Hanna, who interviewed Samer and Amir, is of Coptic-Egyptian descent living in the Netherlands. Hanna feels similarly excluded from both the Dutch LGBTQIA+ community, and his ethnic community: “I feel stigmatised within both and am constantly trying to balance in between them.”⁸³ Soumia Akachar has investigated the situation in the Netherlands further, noting that Muslim migrants are blamed for the increase in violence directed

⁸² Hanna 2019, 5.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 3.

against queers, which in turn has led to the problematisation of Islam and multiculturalism overall.⁸⁴ “Such understandings of sexuality and ethnicity tend to disregard the location of gay Dutch Muslims, embodying intersectional identities (e.g., ethnicity, religion, sexuality).”⁸⁵ Akachar stresses that an intersectional approach is essential to expose the various forms of oppression and erasure that this minority is affected by.⁸⁶

Many queers decide to stay in their home communities and search for local solutions precisely for the reasons mentioned above. They are aware of the consequences of moving to other countries where they will suffer from racialised stigmatisation and bemoaning the universalisation of queer identity that they experience as “cultural imperialism imposed by the ‘[W]est’ on the ‘[E]ast’”,⁸⁷ feeling that local histories are erased by foreign stories. As a means to move away from this hegemony and to open up spaces at home, some queers appeal to local homoerotic history, same-sex desires, and practices. Rather than universalising or projecting homoeroticism onto the past, they seek to “illustrate the sources of cultural capital”⁸⁸ to recover past knowledge in order “to understand the possibilities of alternative sexualities and social arrangements”.⁸⁹ Through the process of “mobilizing histories, reappropriating languages, and other cultural strategies, we may be able to gain affirmation and support”.⁹⁰ El Dob Al-Akbar’s 2018 article in *My.Kali* outlines his upbringing in a neighbourhood usually associated with violence and gangs. One might think, the article states, that such an area would be very conservative and condone only “‘legitimate’ sexual relations and the historic bilateral division of sexual orientation. But the truth is the exact opposite.”⁹¹ Al-Akbar tells us about the freedom he witnessed while growing up:

So, this article is about lost memories, or memories intentionally forgotten by our society that became lost in the state of denial. Memories that were lived by my generation and those who were born in the 1980’s too, those who dared to explore their sexual orientation and practices in the late 90’s.⁹²

⁸⁴ Akachar 2015, 176.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 177.

⁸⁶ Akachar 2015, 175 and 183.

⁸⁷ Nasser-Eddin and Abou-Assab 2018, 3.

⁸⁸ Afzal 2015, 127.

⁸⁹ Shah 1998, 486.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Al-Akbar 2018, 2.

⁹² Ibid.

Al-Akbar explains that relationships between young men were often more than platonic, often involving physical affection such as holding hands, hugging, kissing, or sitting on a friend's lap. He remembers that films with homosexual storylines were rare but not frowned upon. Of his friends, many had either fantasised about homosexual encounters or experienced them first-hand.⁹³ Hence, Al-Akbar goes back in time to remind us of lived sexual practices outside of imperialist ideas and identity categories. Similarly, Ahmed Afzal found that Pakistani Gay Men in Houston, Texas, are searching for "South Asian epistemologies of same-sex sexual eroticism"⁹⁴ as well as for "a religiously conceived transnationality, and appropriations of Western epistemologies of gay identity".⁹⁵

This search goes hand-in-hand with finding a language that disrupts what Sahar Amer calls the "almost exclusive reliance by Arab activists on Western terminology and Western paradigms of same-sex sexuality".⁹⁶ Amer objects to the language used by some Arab queer activists:

By adopting foreign terms and gender categories that mimic Western sexual politics and by dressing sexual preference in foreign linguistic garb, Arab gay activists unwittingly end up supporting a culture of shame that ultimately undermines Arab identity and leads to the further isolation of Arab gays and lesbians from their own socio-historical and literary traditions.⁹⁷

My.Kali magazine has been advocating for a local queer language since Arabic was introduced as a publication language alongside English in 2015. Abdel Hadi is overwhelmed by the response: "the readership of our Arabic content is three times the size of the English version."⁹⁸ Adding Arabic to the magazine was initially sparked by the accusation that *My.Kali* was serving a 'Western' agenda when the magazine's creators got involved with organising the International Day Against Homo- and Transphobia, mostly associated with US activism and a universalist mindset.⁹⁹ Abdel Hadi states that the language was an important symbolic move towards their people after that incident:

We gradually learned the importance of the language through which we communicate. We pursued an Arab identity in order to reach a wider base of readership. We realized that

⁹³ Al-Akbar 2018, 3.

⁹⁴ Afzal 2015, 124.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Amer 2012, 387.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Abdel Hadi 2020, 3. Translated from German by Claude Kempen.

⁹⁹ Al Shadeedi 2018, 3.

we had previously deprived our non-bilingual keen Arab readers from access to our contents, and, consequently, from communicating with us too.¹⁰⁰

In this section I have shown *My.Kali*'s intense engagement and related activism with 'Western' cultural imperialism around identity, sexuality, sexual expression, and lifestyle. The so-called 'West' does not stand as a queer paradise for all, but rather for 'white' bodies that participate in constructing Muslims as the intolerant enemy, consequently erasing LGBTQIA+ Muslims from our imaginations. Queer Arabs and Muslims that live in the West experience racism, Islamophobia, and exclusion from both the queer and their own communities. Many decide to remain in the countries where they grew up, sifting through religious sources, historical archives, and memories to find a language for their love, desires, and experiences. Whether they live in Jordan, the Netherlands or the US, they are navigating their lives at "the intersection of local socio-cultural vocabularies and the language of international gay rights activism".¹⁰¹

Conclusion: Agency, archives, and hyphens

My.Kali magazine gives an invaluable platform to Arab LGBTQIA+ voices and debates around so-called 'Western' forms or concepts of being queer or sexually non-normative vis-à-vis local and Arab ways of living those sexualities and sexual identities. Some articles question homonationalism, others reflect on being displaced as queer Arabs ("Neither Here Nor There"¹⁰²) as well as on the racism and Islamophobia outside their own communities. Further articles explore (homo)sexuality in Islam and local homoerotic histories and practices. Some Arab queers have come to terms with the fact that leaving their home countries will not give them the freedom that they imagine – 'Western' countries' rampant Islamophobia reads all Arab bodies as Muslim, no matter their level of religiosity (and their actual confession). Islam therefore becomes a factor considered when it comes to decisions of location and living situations as well as finding acceptance within the religious realm. Arab and Muslim queers are hence intersectionally affected by oppression and must work harder to create safer spaces for themselves, no matter which country they find themselves living in.

¹⁰⁰ Al Shadeedi 2018, 5.

¹⁰¹ Dennerlein 2017, 249.

¹⁰² Yazbeck 2020.

This creation of safer spaces is reflected in a very active search for solutions on the part of people that are in the *My.Kali* community as well as the other queer and Muslim voices discussed in this chapter. Activists are aware of the local and global tools that are available to them and put them to use, mining their own archives for inspiration.¹⁰³ Sometimes the magazine and its staff are criticised for being westernised, secularised, elitist, or tone deaf. This perhaps goes some way towards explaining why they are so inclined to discuss diverse approaches to living queer lives. In a (self-)critical article on their website, Al Shadeedi and Abdel Hadi interrogate themselves: "[W]ere *My.Kali*'s means of activism affected by The Gay International, and if so, how?"¹⁰⁴ and "[d]oes the Gay International really hurt those whom it seeks to liberate?"¹⁰⁵ In order to find an inclusive and locally sensitive tone *My.Kali*'s writers prove that several things can be true at the same time: the magazine can be published in both Arabic and English; queer history is local and global; and queer Jordanian history can be marked by cultural imperialism and colonialism as well as anti-imperialist activism and pre-colonial imaginings. These writers and activists can identify as LGBTQIA+ as well as "problematizing the way ['Western' categories] are being used and utilised to serve the agenda of cultural imperialists."¹⁰⁶

Their ways of engaging with global, local, Arab, and Muslim histories, languages, and forms of self-expression are intrinsically plural. Bettina Dennerlein has named it "the hybridity and interculturality of Arab LGBTQIA communities and identities"¹⁰⁷ and also – with reference to Sahar Amer – the "necessarily hyphenated character" of these communities.¹⁰⁸ This could remind us of Audre Lorde's "hyphenated people".¹⁰⁹ a term she used to describe the heritage and plural identity of Afro-Americans, which she later introduced to the Afro-German community during her Berlin years from 1984 to 1992. The diversification of identity and the idea of a "yes" rather than an "either or" is deeply ingrained in this hyphenation: Lorde herself is known as a "black lesbian feminist mother poet warrior".¹¹⁰ This hyphenated character in turn enables "an open

103 Sara Ahmed has worked extensively on feminist, anti-racist, and queer archives, see Ahmed 2010, 88–120.

104 Al Shadeedi 2018, 5.

105 Ibid., 2.

106 Nasser-Eddin and Abou-Assab 2018, 5.

107 Dennerlein 2017, 250.

108 Ibid., 251.

109 Opitz et al. 1992, viii and xiii.

110 Fembio 2020. Quite obviously, this idea of hyphenation and multiple oppression is closely related to the concept of intersectionality as described by bell hooks, and later by Kimberlé

assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure”.¹¹¹ Butler suggests here that identity is not an essence or a goal, but rather something we do or affiliations we accumulate. A close reading of *My.Kali* magazine reveals the fact that Muslim queers don’t need saving, and shows the ways in which they find refuge in religion. However, it also makes clear that activism which centres on identity categories “in essence beats the purpose of queerness, which is meant to disturb identities rather than reinforce them”.¹¹²

Fig. 4: Digital *My.Kali* cover, featuring Mehdi Bahmad, no. 72. With friendly permission by the editor: *My.Kali* 2021. At the time of writing, this was the most current issue.

Crenshaw, and also borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari’s becoming minority (*devenir minoritaire*). See Crenshaw 1989, hooks 2014 [1984], Hamdan 2015.

¹¹¹ Butler 1999 [1990], 22.

¹¹² Nasser-Eddin and Abou-Assab 2018, 2.

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