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A Note from the Editors:

The strength of this year’s *Zaytoon* rests exclusively in the scholars who contributed their research, writing, and editing to craft this 2012 issue. From architecture, Jews in Chinese imperial history, women’s transnational development organizations, and Egyptian feminist literature, these articles represent a burgeoning awareness across disciplines within the scope of Middle Eastern Studies. It was an honor to bring their ideas together and well as to work with our colleagues at the University of Arizona in review and publication in this journal. We hope that our combined efforts in this Spring 2012 edition of *Zaytoon* can highlight some of the breadth, depth and care of the scholarship within the field of Middle East Studies.

Sincerely,  
Isra Yaghoubi  
ST McNeil  
Zaytoon Editors

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*This year’s Zaytoon is dedicated to the legacy and memory of longstanding department director and professor, Dr. Michael Bonine (1942-2011). The members of the Middle East and North Africa Graduate Student Organization are honored to have learned so much from our dear, departed mentor, and to be learning in a school whose very name and thriving programs owe so much to his dedication, encouragement, and generosity to students.*
The intention of this paper is to trace a philosophical correlation between the geometry of *muqarnas* domes with the philosophy of optical theories present during the Abbasid period. There is a further correlation between the structure of the *muqarnas* dome and the perceptual function of the eye and its connection to the perceptual field. I propose that the origin of the *muqarnas* dome in the early eleventh century was not brought about solely through the philosophies of Caliph al-Qadir and Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn al-Tayyib al-Baqillâni, as proposed by Yasser Tabbaa, whose thesis rests upon a cosmological concept within Islamic orthodoxy. A greater epistemology stems from the optical theories of Abû Yûsuf Ya`qub ibn Ishaq al-Kindî who lived from c. 805–870 CE, and his successor Abû `Alî al-Hasan Ibn al-Haytham (Alhazen), who lived from 965–1040 CE. The philosophies of Al-Kindî and Alhazen dually recognized the intractable relationship between the behavior of light and the laws of geometry. However, important yet subtle delineations may be made between their theories, such as al-Kindî’s visual ray theory as opposed to Alhazen’s theory of perceptual construction, as well as within the historical roots of optics, which can be traced to scholars such as Euclid, Ptolemy and Apollonius of Perga.

The origin of Islamic optics is in the translation and systematic analysis of Greek optical treatises. The focus of optics in the Islamic world is a closer analysis of light in the form of rays, which is originally a Euclidean concept. The understanding of light as rays is the manner by which there is a correlation of optics with geometry; the rays are represented by lines, which reflect and refract at different angles. Therefore, the behavior of light constructs geometric structures through its proliferation.

The Islamic conception of light within the universe is defined by geometric parameters. As optical theories from Euclid to Alhazen have pointed to the fact that there is a geometrical explanation for everything that exists within light, this essay will attempt to trace this coincidence between the study of light in the Islamic world and the *muqarnas* dome as the artifice through which these optical ideas are realized and embodied. The complex geometrical configuration of the *muqarnas* reflects and refracts light, representing the tumultuous nature of the Islamic conception of the universe. In order to facilitate the conception of this type of form, this paper postulates that the *muqarnas* is designed in a manner which further reflects an optical/geometrical model in relation to the anatomical structure of the eye and its perceptual function. This model, along with the complex interlaced facets of the *muqarnas* also reveals an interest in sidereal light, and an alignment with the cartographic delineations of mathematical astronomy. As mathematics and geometry in Islam are the intellectual mechanisms through which the universe is described, the *muqarnas* dome is representative of the relationship between rationality, light and the celestial realm.

Drawing upon sources extrapolating the meaning of Islamic optical science within a geometrical and mathematical framework, I propose that the geometry of the *muqarnas* dome is the reification of the optical theories proposed by al-Kindî and Alhazen, as well as those present...
in other referents of Islamic science. The study of optics will be employed to theoretically derive the coincidence of light with the intricate structure of the dome itself. This proposition will be explained with an investigation of the historical underpinnings of Islamic optical theory, emphasizing the studies of al-Kindī and Alhazen and how their observations of light may form a reference point by which to understand the formation of the muqarnas.

The origin of the muqarnas as an architectural structure can be geographically traced to Iraq from the fifth to the eighth century, with further developments in the Iberian Peninsula in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The development of foliated ornamentation, such as cusps or intertwined organic shapes along the edges of archways, began the evolution of the muqarnas within architectonic structures, from complexified arcuate systems (arches) to pendant vaults (ceiling systems), which eventually evolved into increasingly sophisticated muqarnas in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

1 The culmination of this evolution is an incredibly intricate, complex system of vaulting constructed of stalactite extensions with geometric facets. These facets, which extend downward from the ceiling, exist either as an integral part of stone vaulting, as a brick construction, or as a terracotta or plaster structure that is attached to it. They are composed of an intricate system of cells that are structured within a complexity of squinches and colonnettes. The distinctive cells of the muqarnas are often painted with exquisite arabesques or other vibrantly colorful patterning. Those muqarnas, in which the roof is an outer shell separate from the stalactite vaulting, often contain small fenestrations allowing brilliant points of kaleidoscopic light to stream into the space below.

The relation between structure and light within the muqarnas dome, and the optical theories of al-Kindī and Alhazen may be best understood through an idea known as tarkīb, which represents a synthesis between the study of optics, physics, and mathematics, in which the concepts of one science correlate with the others. The subject of light becomes the generative source, which is described through its existence among the world of forms, shapes, and various positions upon which it perhaps falls in or is propagated by a synthetic association with tarkīb. The physical and mathematical principles of vision or optics was first conceptualized by al-Kindī and Alhazen, although al-Kindī’s interpretation was a sole adherence to visual ray theory, which maintains that there is an interaction or continuity between the eye and what it perceives.2 Philosophical concepts similar to tarkīb can also be traced to Aristotle’s Physics and Posterior Analytics, as well as further back to Euclid’s Optics.3

Through the composite science of tarkīb, a complex interaction between light and the structures with which it interacts with the physical world is realized. The manner by which this interaction between structure and light takes place is the core dynamic of my inquiry into the opticality of the muqarnas. The light seen through the oculus of the muqarnas dome is a speculum in which the perception of this illumination is formed by the substance that contains it, forms it, and structures it according to the refractions and reflections that exists within it. The perception of light within form exists as an object of luminous radiation. Light, according to al-Kindī and Alhazen is not from a single source, such as the sun or from fire; rather, all forms and elements in the physical world radiate light on their own.4 Both al-Kindī and Alhazen state that what the eye perceives as physical reality is in fact constructed upon the perception of light, and furthermore that form coincides with the light that exists within that object. While al-Kindī believed in a universe in which light radiated in every conceivable direction, Alhazen posited the idea that the perception of physical objects is the product of a language that facilitates the awareness of light and color of which the world is constructed.5 The significance of this theory in
relation to the *muqarnas* is that light is not merely an element of reflection and refraction interacting with the facets of its form; rather the physical structure of the muqarnas itself is in fact constituted of light. Our eye as the apparatus of vision, through its anatomical construction and perspectival relation to the object, in turn perceives this light as the *muqarnas*.

One source of evidence that depicts this optical/geometrical correlation is al-Fārābī’s *Ihsā’ al-‘ulūm* [Catalogue of the sciences]. Al-Fārābī states that the properties investigated by optics are essentially the same as by the science of geometry. However, he points to the fact that geometry is a more general study of surfaces, solids, and abstract lines. The study of optics deals with the perception of objects as light is causing them to be perceived, and for this reason, objects appear differently from a distance than close up, such as a square that is perceived as a circle from afar. According to al-Jāhiz’s *Kitāb al-Tarbi‘ wa al-Tadwīr* [Book of Rectangularity and Circularity], since an object that is quadrilateral in geometry is seen from a distance as circular, then perhaps the sun which appears round is in fact a polygon. He further states that while the sun itself is a polygonal construct, that the stars themselves are in fact quadrilateral.

This model of perceiving celestial bodies is therefore aligned with the facets and dimensions expressed in Islamic geometry, including those that make up the geometric structure of the *muqarnas* dome. The Islamic conception of the universe is evident in the manner in which optical theory permeates the field of perception according to geometrical correlation. This correlation is evident within the geometry of the *muqarnas* as well as other fields of geometrical forms, such as the latticework systems known as *girih* mode patterns, typically constructed of interlocked tessellations of stars and polygons. The intricate cells of certain *muqarnas* are also made up of stars or polygons, or a combination of both, which are inset within the hanging stalactite forms.

The etymology of the term *muqarnas* may also reveal the form and meaning of its intricate and sophisticated architectonic design. Some scholars, including archaeologist and Iranologist Ernst Herzfeld, have related the term to the Greek word *koronis*, meaning cornice. The Arabic etymology stemming from the verb *qrn*, meaning “to join,” is interesting not only from a structural but also a potentially cosmological standpoint, as one theory of the *muqarnas* represents the structure as an embodied cosmos, and the joining of heaven and earth. The scholar of medieval Islamic architecture, Yasser Tabbaa, has presented such a cosmological theory of the *muqarnas*, in which the intricate structure of cells within the ceiling are interpreted through a synthetic theory involving a coincidence of atoms and accidents known through the study occasionalism in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Occasionalism is a theological concept that states that there is no independent causation other than God, and that the universe is in a constant state of creation and recreation.

It is necessary to maintain a certain reticence in upholding claims that the *muqarnas* represents a verifiable cosmology or manifestation of theological doctrines, due to a lack of historical evidence to corroborate such a claim. My method of inquiry involves purely the optical in relation to the *muqarnas* as an architectural feature, and I in no way intend to represent the *muqarnas* within an order of cosmology per se. Rather, the idea of cosmology is applied here as a point of aesthetic orientation to the concept of light, molecular structure and mathematical astronomy.

Tabbaa postulates that the epistemological origins of the *muqarnas* can be traced to a cosmological concept within Islamic Orthodoxy, and the Abbasid philosophy of the Caliph al-Qadir and the Ash’arite scholar al-Baqillani. Tabbaa relates the complex, teleological structure of the *muqarnas* to a theory developed by al-Baqillani, designed to reconcile a schism between
Islamic theology and the influence of Aristotelian thought that became prevalent during that time. The Aristotelian view of an eternal universe greatly conflicted with Islamic cosmogony, which defines Allah as the one creator who brought forth the universe from his own free will at a specific spatiotemporal location, while he himself is eternal and unbound by any conceivable dimension.\(^{15}\) Allah as the ultimate progenitor exists eternally, while the universe itself has a specific point of emergence and finality. Al-Baqillani’s solution to this theoretical conflict states that the \textit{physis} of Aristotelian theory was to be bound by a law of strict occasionalism, in which the universe was composed of a dynamic world of colliding atoms as particles that cannot be divided to any further degree.\(^{16}\)

It must also be noted that Tabbaa’s reference to the term “accidents” is derived from the English translation of Aristotle’s \textit{Physics}, in which he discusses the idea of \textit{change as an accidental cause}. This translation stems from the Latin \textit{accidens}, which denotes a coincidence between two or more things, rather than the definition of “accident,” as something that is more often defined as happenstance or a kind of error. \textit{Accidens}, according to Aristotle, is the generative cause brought forth from this coincidence, while at the same time Aristotle postulates that nothing exists purely by accident or chance.\(^{17}\)

This generative cause, \textit{per accidens}, is what brings forth change through molecular interference, and it is this constant metamorphosis that is required for the continuous existence of matter. The collision of atoms in this description of the universe promulgates an ever-changing system of energy reflecting the experience of the \textit{muqarnas} as a dynamic structure. Its many facets shift in various degrees of sunlight, like a vision of the atomic universal system found within \textit{occasionalism}. The interlaced geometry of \textit{girih} patterns, of which the \textit{muqarnas} are designed, represents this world of tumultuous collision, where linear coordinates of geometric shapes coincide through \textit{accidens}, transforming and shifting in direction, colliding once again at their vertices to form a system reflecting the harmony of the universe.\(^{18}\) While it may be difficult to corroborate Tabbaa’s views of the \textit{muqarnas} as a form of cosmology, his theory may serve as an aesthetic model of interpretation, which applies light as a system of energy that dynamically forms the structure of the \textit{muqarnas} dome. In this manner, it can be seen that light and energy form matter – or forms the desire to design architecture that reflects the interaction of light and energy. The work of architecture is but a remnant or solidification of this energetic interaction. This system of light and movement is traced by the linear dimensions of geometry to form the architectonic structure, like the luminescent trace of stars as they travel across the night sky. While this geometric pattern can be applied in the description of molecular energy, it can also be used to define the anatomy of vision and the structure of light in relation to the eye as the organ which perceives it.

By conceiving of the geometric surface of a \textit{muqarnas} dome as the downward facing branch of a \textit{hyperbola}, there is an infinitude of geometric possibilities available within its spatial construction.\(^{19}\) The hyperbolic structure of the cupola (\textit{qubba}) has been analyzed according to the calculations of the Persian astronomer and mathematician al-Sijzi, who wrote a treatise pertaining to the mensuration of domes, entitled \textit{Epistle about the Characteristics of Hyperbolic and Parabolic Domes}.\(^{20}\)

A hyperbolic model of the \textit{muqarnas} dome also correlates in a heuristic manner with the optical model, in which the downward branch is necessarily connected to the upward facing one, in which one mirrors the other. A correlation can also be found between the hyperbolic representation of the dome and the analytical device used in the study of optics known as the visual cone. The visual cone originates in the ray theories of Euclid and Ptolemy, which later
influenced those of al-Kindī and Alhazen.\(^{21}\) The cone of vision represents the eye as it emits a visual flux, at which point it perceives the object. Light coming into the eye meets at a vertex at the center of the eyeball, where it continues toward the optic nerve at the eye’s posterior. The image that the optic nerve receives continues in an orthogonal direction and flips, as in the model of the hyperbola, in which two cones reflect in opposite extension and meet at a conjoined vertex.\(^{22}\)

When this optical model is viewed in correspondence to the physiognomy of the \textit{muqarnas}, one can imagine light extending through an oculus like a pupil, surrounded by a complex pattern of intricate cells that resemble the brilliant, multifaceted, colorful iris. The light streams into the space below, and as through any aperture, it forms a flux of light in the form of a visual cone. Consequently, the surface of the \textit{muqarnas} resounds the appearance of a great and complex eye. As its form resembles the apparatus of sight, it is self-referential to the idea of light and vision that is embodied within the theoretical principles of its creation.\(^{23}\)

The complex construction of the \textit{muqarnas} involving design, craft and production requires the formulation of two different geometrical paradigms. The first is a two-dimensional design of the cells, squinches and overall geometry of the \textit{muqarnas}, while the second is the coincidence of this pattern with the conical space of the dome. This constructive process is exemplified in Aplay Özdural’s article, “On Interlocking Similar or Corresponding Figures and Ornamenal Patterns of Cubic Equations.” In his paper, Özdural traces the history of interlocking geometrical figures to a source known as \textit{Fi taddkhul alashkal al-mutashdbiha aw al-mutawdfiq} [On Interlocking Similar and Corresponding Figures], which also has many similarities to a treatise written by the Persian mathematician and astronomer, Abu'l Wafa' al-Buzajani (940–998 CE).\(^{24}\)

There are two main points to consider in Özdural’s paper in relation to the \textit{muqarnas} and optical theory. The first consideration involves the correlation between optical theory and the design and craft of the \textit{muqarnas}, including considerations theorized by al-Kindī that relate to the structure of the \textit{muqarnas} dome. The second consideration is whether or not it is possible to find a correlation between the cubic equations employed in the design of interlocking geometrical figures, with the equations used in the optical theories of al-Kindī or Alhazen.

Özdural describes the process of creating the geometric figures through the employment of craft and the use of tools in relation to the geometry and mathematics involved, and used for drawing and mensuration by a scribe (\textit{kātib}).\(^{25}\) He describes certain constructions that employ conic sections involving the Pythagorean Theorem, Euclid’s completion of circles, as well as the extreme and mean ratio of the golden section.\(^{26}\)

Özdural also includes excerpts directly from the treatise on \textit{Interlocking figures}, in which is described a T-shaped ruler used for geometric mensuration (angular measurement) that resembles the alidade of an astrolabe.\(^{27}\) Although not implicitly stated within Özdural’s paper, I propose that there is a correlation between the design of the T-ruler with the alidade of the astrolabe beyond mere similarity of appearance. An alidade is a bar that is attached to the back of an astrolabe that allows one to locate an object such as a star, with the use of a direct line of sight. Further correlations between the mensuration of geometry and other facets of an astrolabe include its use as an instrument of spatiotemporal calculation within the celestial sphere, and as a tool for stereographic projection in order to align with astral coordinates. The construction of interlocked geometry also includes the use of specific degrees of angular measurement concerning the construction of sextuple and quintuple angles. These two angles used in conjunction have been employed by astronomers to create sine tables since the age of Ptolemy.\(^{28}\)
The mathematician working with the kātib is not merely devising arbitrary geometric patterns, but creating designs which mirror and align with the universe, according to an accurate cartographic calculation of the stars. Tabbaa among others state that the muqarnas dome does in fact contain a universal referent, and therefore one must consider that this reference requires a correlation between craft (technē) and purpose according to cosmic design (telos).

According to this coincidence between geometric mensuration, cartography and astronomy, it would be important to pinpoint exactly how the movements of the T-ruler and the angular and arcuate shapes created by them coincide to form a universal model. Parallels can be made between the drawings done with the T-ruler presented by Özdural as well as other schematics, such Alhazen’s construction of an inverted image of the partially eclipsed sun in his optical treatise, The Shape of the Eclipse. This pattern is also comparable to two of the drawings using concentric circles in Özdural’s article, which are examined in order to represent the degrees and angles used in their construction, and to exemplify any deviations from theoretical accuracy.

Özdural also states that the second stage of designing the interlocking geometry is to place the design within a conical form. Although not stated in his paper, this model can be theoretically applied to the formation of a muqarnas dome. The study of conics has its own branch of analytical geometry, which pertains to the curve obtained through an intersection of a cone (or conical surface) with a plane. Alhazen’s extensive treatise on the subject, entitled Completion of the Conics, reflects an interest in the analytical understanding of geometry, calculable enumeration through equations, and an advanced understanding of the Euclidean plane. Alhazen’s conical constructions, like much of the geometry in the medieval Islamic world, is a progression from, or augmentation of the Euclidean model, although he was not aware of any of Euclid’s works which would have influenced his own studies. The greatest advancement however, during the age of the Greeks is ostensibly Apollonius of Perga’s eight books on Conics. As a successor of Euclid, these advancements eventually led to the encompassing knowledge found within Completion.

A variant proposition exists pertaining to the correlation between the origin and behavior of light and the muqarnas dome. According to scholar of medieval philosophy Pinella Travaglia, al-Kindī’s theory is a progression from Euclid’s Optica, who reduces the behavior of light to a mathematical abstraction, excluding any idea of ontology or psychology from his treatise. The development of al-Kindī’s optical theory is traced from the point at which it diverges from the influence of Euclidean as well as Aristotelian thought, while also exemplifying points of inclusion. Al-Kindī’s major contributions to the field of optics include his De Aspectibus, De Radiis and De Gradibus. Travaglia first noticed al-Kindī’s departure from Euclid and Aristotle through the concept of the omnidirectional emission of light from all created things, which he describes in De Radiis. Al-Kindī’s theory is primarily one of extramission, which was originated by the theories of Euclid and Ptolemy. Extramission theory states that the eye perceives objects because of the virtus, which emanates from within the eye itself and connects with the object, thereby facilitating its perception. Euclid’s theory is also connected to both the Ptolemaic as well as the Aristotelian idea of vision, both of which are variant forms of extramission theory.

Travaglia’s correlation of al-Kindī’s optical theory with Euclid’s brought about the realization of yet another departure. Euclid’s theory considers the rectilinear behavior of light within purely abstract mathematical terms, while al-Kindī posits specific aspects of his optical theory within the realm of purely sensate, perceptual experience. Al-Kindī’s relation of optics
to sensate perception is derived from Aristotle’s De Anima. Through this influence, al-Kindī writes in his book, On the Definitions and Descriptions of Things, about four types of sense, including: imagination (tawahhum), sense (hāss), sensation (hiss) and the sensible (al-mahsūs).\(^{40}\) This treatise also has a correlation in book II, chapter five of Aristotle’s De Anima, entitled “Sense, sensation, and the object of sensation.”\(^{41}\)

Beyond extramission, al-Kindī’s optical theory pertains to a causality between elemental and astral forms of light through reciprocity. Causal reciprocity between these two forms of light provides a harmonious lens through which to view the cosmos, which is essentially connected through an integral network of relationships, whether through optics, conics or mathematical astronomy.\(^{42}\) Al-Kindī believed that the elemental or terrestrial realm is not merely a reflection, but rather a kind of simulacrum, of the sidereal realm.\(^{43}\) Al-Kindī’s theory of optics places the conception of light within a realm in which light cannot be reduced to static mathematical abstraction, but is experienced as pure phenomenon. In relation to the proposed cosmology of colliding atoms and accidens proposed by Tabbaa, al-Kindī’s perception of light is reified through a scientific model that exemplifies a universe of dynamic transformation. The hyperbolic model of the muqarnas and its structural relation to the anatomy of the eye forms a model that is architecturally transposed to create an oculus that connects the astral and terrestrial worlds. The complex fabric of the muqarnas, composed of cellular facets, is integrally constructed through a geometric coincidence with this sidereal light, by placing the mathematician and the kātib in correlation to the cartographic degrees and astral coordinates of the astronomer and mathematician. The muqarnas dome theoretically resides in structural relation to these optical, geometrical and astronomical parameters, in a manner which forms a coincidence between architecture and cosmos as a vessel of light.

**Notes**

1. Yasser Tabbaa, *The Transformation of Islamic Art During the Sunni Revival* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001): 137–40. Tabbaa points also to Baghdad, Iraq, as a specific point of origin for the muqarnas within the designs of arcuate systems, which conceal the static sense of stability provided by earlier post and lintel or trabeated systems. This development is prior to the generation of muqarnas domes on the Iberian Peninsula.

2. Ibn al-Haytham, *The Optics of Ibn al-Haytham, Books 1–III, On Direct Vision, II Introduction, Commentary, Glossaries, Concordance, Indices*, trans. A.I Sabra (London: The Warburg Institute, 1989), 6. “That certain disciples, such as those mentioned by Aristotle, conjoint physical and mathematical principles in an observation which we find expressed in Arabic writers before and after I.H. (In the case of al-Kindī it is to be noted that the role of physical considerations is accepted by one who adhered to the ‘mathematical’ theory of visual rays and who rejected the Aristotelian account of vision in terms of forms received in the eye...”); Ibn al-Haytham, *The Optics of Ibn al-Haytham, Books 1–III, On Direct Vision*, trans. A.I Sabra (London: The Warburg Institute, 1989), 78. This is al-Haytham’s description of the doctrine of the ray, from Chapter 5 of his Optics, “The Structure of the Eye”: “May it be said that the transparent body receives something from the eye which it conveys to the visible object, and that sensation occurs through the continuity of this thing between the eye and the object. That is the view of those who hold the doctrine of the ray.”

syllogistic question is the same as a proposition stating one half of a contradiction, and every science has its own premises from which are drawn the conclusions proper to that science, then there must be a scientific question corresponding to the premises from which the conclusions proper to science are drawn. Hence it is clear that not every question will be geometrical (or medical, and similarly with other sciences), but only those which correspond to the grounds for the proof of geometrical theorems, or the theorems of any science, such as optics, which uses for its proofs the same axioms as geometry (and similarly those of other sciences).”

4 Al-Haytham, *Optics*, 44. “Furthermore, we find that many of the colours in opaque bodies that shine with accidental light accompany the lights that radiate from those bodies — the form of the colour being always found together with the form of the light. And similarly with bodies that shine with their own light: their lights are found to be similar to their forms, which are of the same sort as colours. For the form of the sun’s light that is of the same sort as colour is similar to the form of the sun. Similarly, the form of the light of fire is similar to the form of the fire.” For an explanation of al-Kindī’s theory of light and radiation, see: David C. Lindberg, “Alkindi’s Critique of Euclid’s Theory of Vision” *Isis*, 62, 4 (1971): 471. This theory specifically pertains to al-Kindī’s treatise *De Radiis Stellarum*, in which he discusses that this type of radiation is a universal activity or force which generates light from every conceivable object or element in the universe.


7 Ibid., 57.

8 Ibid., 58. The quadrilateral orientation of the stars relates to a subject of inquiry presented later in this paper, in which Aplay Özduar’s article, “On Interlocking Similar or Corresponding Figures and Ornamental Patterns of Cubic Equations” Vol. 13, 191–211 (1996): 191–211, is interpreted in relation to the design of the muqarnas in correlation with tracing the linear dimensions of the stars.

9 For a more detailed, complex account of this aspect of Islamic geometry, refer to: A. J. Lee, “Islamic Star Patterns” *Muqarnas*, Vol. 4 (1987): 183. “In their simplest form all Islamic geometrical patterns are examples of periodic tilings (tessellations) of the two-dimensional plane, consisting of polygonal areas or cells of various shapes abutting on neighboring cells at lines termed the edges of the tiling, and with three or more cells meeting at points termed the vertices, or nodes, of the tiling.”

10 Tabbaa, *The Transformation*, 104.

11 Ibid., 104-05. Tabbaa states that the etymology of the muqarnas stems from “the Arabic verb qrn (qarana = join), which made muqarnas “a joined form. This etymology, however, assumes a derivation of the term from the standard trilateral verb root qrn, when the root is clearly the quadrilateral qrms.” See this text for more detailed information on the etymology of muqarnas. The inference to cosmolgy is taken from the subsequent article on the origin and meaning of muqarnas.; Yasser Tabbaa, “The Muqarnas Dome: Its Origin and Meaning” *Muqarnas* 3, 61–74 (1985): 68.

12 Tabbaa, “Origin and Meaning.” 68. “The Ash’arites of the tenth and eleventh centuries, in particular al-Baqillani (d. 1013), modified this atomistic theory into one of strict occasionalism—that is a theory of atoms and accidents (a ‘rādh, pl. of ‘ardh).”

13 *Muqarnas* and cosmology is a line of inquiry that has been developed by many scholars. One example is in an article is by Samer Akkach, “In the Image of the Cosmos Order and Symbolism in Traditional Islamic Architecture, pt. 2,” *Islamic Quarterly*, 39, 1 (1995): 93. There is one significant difference between Tabbaa’s description of occasionalism an Akkach’s architectural theory of “The Symbolism of the Centre.” While Tabbaa’s cosmology according to al-Baqillani states plainly that the universe exists in time and space, while only Allah, who exists beyond it is outside it, Akkach’s theory plainly depicts a world within Islamic architecture that is outside time and space: “From another perspective, the architectural centre, whether marked explicitly or geometrically implied, is definable only in relation to the architectural form, which is, in a sense, its manifestation. Thus it signifies the principle that, although recognisable by its spatial determinations, is the container of all spatial manifestations, ‘a
container which has no existence except through the realisation of its possible content.’ In summary, the centre embodies the spaceless and timeless Principle of space and time, which is the locus wherein all virtualities of spatial extension and temporal duration are eternally present.” By this, Akkach is placing the eternality within the structure itself, while its manifested presence is in one sense a kind of projection of it.

14 Tabbaa, “Origin and Meaning,” 69. Tabbaa’s postulations connect Islamic theology and cosmology directly to the muqarnas dome. “I would like to suggest that the muqarnas dome is an architectural manifestation of a thoroughly orthodox Islamic concept. Its likely origin in Baghdad in the early eleventh century coincides well with the triumph of the atomist-occasionalist view of the universe as formulated by al-Baqillani and supported by Caliph al-Qadir (991–1301). It must have been obvious to al-Qadir, or a mathematician-artist in his court that the usual smooth dome which rests on squinches could no longer express this truly new Muslim view of the universe: it was too solid and continuous; its particles were imperceptibly small; and it was visibly supported by squinches.”


16 Kevin Staley, “Al-Kindi on Creation: Aristotle's Challenge to Islam” Journal of the History of Ideas, 50, 3 (Jul. - Sep., 1989): 356. The ideological conflict posed by Aristotle was also derailed by al-Kindī, who refuted the eternality of matter, motion and time, stating that the universe as a living body could only have been created by something external of its own existence. Tabbaa’s proposition in turn proposes that the muqarnas represents a dynamic system of atoms, which incessantly collide through “accidents” which cause a constant metamorphosis of matter. “…unlike later Moslem philosophers such as Ibn-Sina and al-Farabi, he was compelled to overturn a tenet central to the Aristotelian Physics and Metaphysics and directly contrary to the Moslem creed, namely, the eternity of matter, motion and time.”; Ibid., 359. “In its most general form, al-Kindi’s attempt to demonstrate the non-eternity of the world and its creation in time consists of the following premises. 1) All that is quantitative (which includes body, time, and motion) is finite. 2) But there is a measure of the being of the body of the universe. 3) Therefore, the universe is of finite duration, that is to say, it must have a temporal beginning with regards to its very existence. 4) But the body of the universe cannot have been the cause of its own existence. 5) Therefore, it has been caused to exist by another, in time, and from nothing.” Tabbaa, “Origin and Meaning,” 69. Tabbaa also expresses the idea of the muqarnas as a representation of the cosmos. Ibid., 68: “I started with the premise that subdividing matter into tiny interrelated segments implied a certain attitude toward matter, or, more specifically, that the division of a dome into segments implied a certain conception not just of the dome but of its referent, the universe.”

17 Aristotle, Selected Works (The Peripatetic Press: Grinnell, Iowa, 1982): 188–189. “There are some who say that chance is a cause both of this heaven and of everything that is in the ordered universe; for they say that the vortex came to be by chance, and so did the motion which separated the parts and caused the present order of the universe. And this is very surprising; for they say, on the one hand, that animals and plants neither exist nor are generated by luck but that the cause is nature or intellect or some other such thing (for it is not any chance thing that is generated from a given seed, but an olive tree from this kind and a man from that kind), and, on the other, that the heavens and the most divine of the visible objects were generated by chance, which cause is not such as any of those in the case of animals or plants. Yet if such is the case, it deserves attention, and it is right that something should be said about it.” By this Aristotle is stating the irrefutability of cause as the generative force of change. This concept of accidens is also stated within Aristotle’s Metaphysics; Aristotle, Metaphysics, with an Analytical Index of Technical Terms, trans. Richard Hope (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press): 148.

18 Jale Nejdet Erzen, “Islamic Aesthetics: ‘An Alternative Way to Knowledge’” The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 65, 1, (2007): 70. Erzen also expresses this atomic idea within the realm of aesthetics, by stating that the first principle of metaphysical beliefs in Islam is, “the principle of constant change within permanence.”

19 Lee, Islamic Star Patterns, 183. Lee explains the possibilities of hyperbolic geometry as such: “On the surface of the sphere the restrictions are somewhat different, whereas on the hyperbolic plane virtually anything is possible.”

20 J. P. Hogendijk and A. I. Sabra, The enterprise, 251. According to Yvonne Dold-Samplonius’ chapter “Calculating Surface Areas and Volumes in Islamic Architecture,” Jan Hogendijk’s examination of al-Sijzi’s treatise
proves it to be purely mathematical, with no apparent reference to architecture. However, this may serve its purpose here as a heuristic form of interpretation, with no reference to specific architectural applications.

21 A. Mark Smith, “Alhacen’s Theory of Visual Perception: A Critical Edition, with English Translation and Commentary, of the First Three Books of Alhacen’s ‘De aspectibus,’ the Medieval Latin Version of Ibn al-Haytham’s Kitāb al-Manāẓir: Volume One” Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, New Series 91, 4 (2001): xxv. “That Euclid, Ptolemy, Aristotle and Galen were known to Ibn al-Haytham were not just mediateley, through their later proponents, but immediately, through their actual writings, is evident from Ibn Abi Usaybi’a’s catalogue.” Smith also makes a strong delineation between the Ptolemaic and Euclidean models and the progression in the Islamic World to al-Kindī and Alhazen. This also relates to what is delineated on pp. 1–2: “Between al-Kindī’s death and the early eleventh century, Arabic thinkers had developed their own corpus of philosophical and scientific works in the form not only of critical commentaries, but also of original treatises. These were based on classical sources, to be sure, but in many respects they transcended those sources in acuity of depth and insight. Hence, by the time Ibn al-Haytham undertook his study of vision, not only had the core sources for that study been transformed in various subtle and not-so-subtle ways, but the interpretive context within which they were read has also been transformed.”; David C. Lindberg, Theories of Vision from Al-Kindī to Kepler (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 15. “Ptolemy attributed sight to the action of a visual flux issuing conically from the observer’s eye; in this regard, as well as in his mathematical approach to optics, he must be counted among the followers of Euclid.”

22 This optical model is described within the following sources: Ibn al-Haytham, The Optics of Ibn al-Haytham, Books 1–III, On Direct Vision, trans. A.I Sabra (London: The Warburg Institute, 1989), 125. “It is therefore clear from this experiment that vision through the middle of the eye and through the axis we have defined is clearer and more distinct than vision through the extremities of the eye and through lines surrounding the axis; and that vision through what is closer to the middle and to the axis is clearer than vision through what is farther from the middle and from the axis. It has therefore been shown by induction and reasoning that vision through the axis of the radial cone is clearer than vision through any of the other lines of the ray, and that vision through what is closer to the axis is clearer than vision through what is farther from it.”; Smith, “Alhazen’s Theory,” lx-lxi. “Simplicity itself, Alhacen’s response is based on the dynamic properties of the ray and the sensitive capacity of the lens. Only those rays that strike the lens orthogonally make an adequately strong impression to be felt by it. The rest, impinging at an angle, are simply ignored because of their relative weakness. Moreover, as a refractive body, the glacial humor allows the orthogonal rays to pass through unobten; the rest are deflected out of consideration.”; Nader El-Bizri, "A Philosophical Perspective on Alhazen’s Optics" Arabic Sciences and Philosophy. 15, 2 (2005): 194–95. El-Bizri’s conception of the visual cone after al-Haytham is as follows: "In all of this, the object of vision is seen by way of the reception in the eye of light that propagates linearly in the shape of a virtual visual cone (makhrūt), with its vertex at the centre of the eye and its base on the surfaces of the visible object; in so far that the distinction is drawn here between the conditions of sight and those of the rectilinear propagation of light. (sic) The light rays that are structured within this mathematical model, travel on every point on the lit and appearing surfaces of the object, like a punctiform/corpuscular configuration of pointillism. This phenomenon secures the ordering of the visible aspects of the seen object, while meeting the crystalline humour (al-rutūba al-jālīdiyya) perpendicularly.”

23 Bruce S. Eastwood, “Al Fārābī on Extramission, Intromission, and the Use of Platonic Visual Theory” in Astronomy and Optics from Pliny to Descartes (London: Variorum Reprints, 1989), 425. Eastwood’s article on al-Fārābī’s extramission and intromission theories of vision contains a brilliant quote from Book VI of Plato’s The Republic, which enumerates the self-referential relationship between light and the eye itself: “The bond then that yokes together visibility and the faculty of sight is more precious by no slight form than that which unites the other pairs [of sense and object]….Neither vision itself nor its vehicle, which we call the eye, is identical with the sun….But it is… the most sunlike of all the instruments of sense….And does it not receive the power which it possesses as an influx, as it were, dispensed from the sun?…It is not also true that the sun is not vision, yet as being the cause thereof is beheld by vision itself?”
Özdural, “On Interlocking,” 191. Özdural incites further information about the origin of the manuscript as such: “The only copy so far known is preserved in MS Persan 169 in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, a compilation of twenty-five works on mathematical subjects, mainly practical geometry.”

Ibid., 192. Özdural makes it a point to specify in his paper the varying points of view on the involvement of the scribe, and as to whether mathematical errors in it are due to original lack of knowledge or subsequent copying and commentary: “…was the compiler a mathematician involved in ornamental arts, or an artisan familiar with geometry, or someone else? While describing an instrument used, it is said, for certain constructions involving conic sections, the writer refers to himself as a scribe (kātib) and admits his ignorance of such procedures. Two alternative explanations are that the katib was a copyist of the manuscript who had added comment of his own — which would not have been unusual in medieval times — or he was the compiler who had taken the notes.”

Özdural is extremely specific about the mathematics of these sine tables, and stresses the fact that it was most likely an astronomer who was also employed as the cartographer/geometer. “The last construction concerning the topic of angular measurements explains a method of constructing the sextuple and quintuple angles. According to this method, the sextuple angle corresponds rightly to 30°, but the tangent of the quintuple angle is equivalent to \( \sqrt{3} - 1 \), which corresponds to 36° 12' 21'' 41 iii, an approximation of 36°. The combination of sextuple and quintuple angles had, since Ptolemy of Alexandria (fl. A.D. 125–141), been used by astronomers to prepare the sine tables through the difference between them. The fact that an angular module of 6° was used in this construction points to that common practice in astronomy, and thus suggests that it may be an astronomer who dealt with the construction.”


Sabra, Optics, 195-6.


Ibid., 88. Hogendijk states clearly that, “It is relevant that Ibn al-Haytham did not know any reference work in the style of Euclid's Data, containing theorems on conics to be used in analyses.”

Ibid., 2. It must be noted however that, “…Apollonius’ approach to the theory was much more general than that of his predecessors.” Also, see Chapter 3, “The Conics of Apollonius,” 30-40.

Travaglia, Magic, 57.

Ibid., 1-2.

Ibid., 55.

A description of extramission theory is also evidenced by David C. Lindberg, “Alkindi's Critique of Euclid's Theory of Vision” Isis, 62, 4 (1971): 473. “In the first place it is apparent from such expressions as ‘proceeding from the eye’ and ‘those things . . . upon which visual rays fall’ that vision is the result of rays issuing from the observer's eye; there is no warrant, so far as I can see, for construing these as awkward metaphors, intended (but failing) to convey purely geometrical truths. The eye is thus the active member in the visual process, reaching out to apprehend its object.”

Ibid., 57.


Aristotle, Selected Works, 257.

Travaglia, Magic, 24-5.

Ibid., 21. The Latin transcription of al-Kindī’s text pertaining to this concept of sidereal and terrestrial light reads as such: “Age ergo, cum mundus elementaris sit exemplum mundi siderei ita quod quelibet res in ipso contenta eiusdem speciem contineat…”
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Colonized Bodies: Nawāl Sa’dāwī and the Mechanisms of Power

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Numerous bodies inhabit the narrative of Nawāl Sa’dāwī, the Egyptian writer and physician born in 1931 who is often defined as a literary iconoclast. By writing, she brings into focus her own body, other women’s bodies, and the body of the Egyptian nation, dissecting the patriarchal practices that afflict and colonize them. In her autobiography, which first appeared in Arabic in 1996, she portrays her trajectory from childhood to adult life, intertwining the tale of her life with the narration of historical events that have shaped it. Notwithstanding the fact that hers is a personal and subjective recall of events, the importance of analyzing Nawāl Sa’dāwī’s autobiography lies in its potential to voice an individual as well as collective experience, where the personal becomes political and the private sphere merges into the public one. According to Sa’dāwī, her life, the lives of other Egyptian women, and the state of their society are all chronically affected by “a patriarchal class system.” The corporal emerges as a central element in such examination: perhaps during her medical training, Sa’dāwī learned how to fix her medical gaze on the traumas inflicted on the women’s flesh as well as on the psychological pain they suffer.

In Sa’dāwī’s account it is possible to recognize what Foucault defined as the mechanisms of power that function “outside, below and alongside the State apparatuses, on a much more minute and everyday level.” As Foucault claims, “Power relations can materially penetrate the body in depth, without depending even on the mediation of the subject’s own representations […] There is a network or circuit of bio-power, or somato-power, which acts as the formative matrix of sexuality itself as the historical and cultural phenomenon within which we seem at once to recognize and lose ourselves.” Her autobiography is then one possible testimony to the workings of this “bio-power” brought about by the evolution of the ruler’s power over people’s life and whose advent is marked, according to Foucault, by the numerous and diverse techniques necessary to achieve the discipline of bodies and the control of populations. Beginning in the 18th century, specific mechanisms of knowledge and power centering on sex were formed. They would develop only in time, but it was then that they “took on a consistency and gained an effectiveness in the order of power,” as explained by Foucault. These mechanisms encompassed the “hysteri-zation” of women’s bodies: the feminine body was analyzed, qualified, and disqualified as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality; it was integrated into the sphere of medical practice; it was placed in organic communication with the social body.

The importance of the corporal in Nawāl Sa’dāwī’s writings is emphasized by her personal experience as a physician, which marks her linguistic and thematic choices and molds her social criticism. For Sa’dāwī, who graduated from the medical school of Cairo University in 1954, “[w]riting is like a surgeon’s knife. It tears the body apart […] cuts the head off from the neck, from the heart, from the chest, the guts, the belly” and her pen is like “a scalpel which cuts through the outer skin, pushes the muscles aside, probes for the roots of things.” Her literary flow often lingers on details of physical diseases, such as the prolapsed disc in her spinal column, from which she suffers, her grandmother’s malignant tumor, the epidemic of cholera that spread in Egypt in 1947, and the tuberculosis afflicting the human skeletons who haunt the ʿAbbāseya Hospital for Chest Diseases where she worked in 1958. Alive, dying and dead bodies populate the pages of her autobiography. In the university dissecting room where she and her colleagues were trained, when staring at the equally lifeless corpses of a man and of a woman, she was struck by the glaring contrast between the elevated status that a man enjoys when he is alive and his equality with the woman’s status when they are both...
dead. Such contrast proved, she avers, that “it is society that elevates the man.” In the wards of the Kasr el ‘Aini Hospital in Cairo, she witnessed the inability of doctors to treat patients humanly and learned the value of a compassionate way of practicing medicine. In the Egyptian countryside, where she moved in 1956 to work as a village doctor, she witnessed the “triple scourge of poverty, ignorance and sickness” afflicting the people, and the greater burden women had to bear, that of “the oppression exercised on them by fathers and husbands, brothers and uncles and other men.”

Not only does Sa’dawi’s medical eye influence her literary choice of a “corporate” kind of lexicon and topics, but it also brings her to question the dynamics of power and social hierarchy that concern women. The female figures portrayed by Nawal Sa’dawi in her autobiography are constantly informed by the medicalization of their bodies and their sex, carried out in the name of the responsibility they owe to the health of their children, the solidity of the family institution, and the safeguarding of society. Sa’dawi’s critique coalesces first and foremost around the notion of marriage. In her autobiography, she defines the marriage law as immoral, since it does not assign spouses equal rights and transforms women into “obedient wives or domesticated animals, who live locked behind closed walls and dare not disobey their masters”. According to a village woman she befriended, “Starting from the wedding night a man must beat his wife if he’s a man, so that she should not forget that God is supreme in the heavens above and her husband supreme here below”. In recalling experiences from her childhood, she notes that several suitors followed one another asking in vain for the hand of the ten-year-old recalcitrant Nawal, whose aunts ripped the hair off of her body, violently brushed her teeth with salt, and straightened out her frizzy curls with an iron rod heated on a flame. Her outstanding performance at school, however, persuaded Sa’dawi’s parents to allow her to pursue an education, not to get married, and to eventually become a medical student. The science of the body helped Nawal Sa’dawi to control her own body.

For the female subject, the physical and psychic loss of the ownership of her body, mind, and sexuality is violently epitomized by the practice of clitoridectomy. In the 1930’s, the time Sa’dawi refers to in her autobiography, all Muslim and Coptic girls of any social class had to undergo clitoridectomy before they started menstruating, as a preparatory measure for their married life. Thirty-five years later, Nawal Sa’dawi remembered how the midwife had come along and circumcised her: “That day it all came back. I picked up a pen and wrote about my circumcision, then tore it up.” They “cornered me and pinned me down by the hands and feet, as though crucifying me […] That deep wound in my body has never healed. But the deeper wound has been the wound left in my spirit, in my soul.”

Sa’dawi became fully aware of the “unhealthy and often dangerous habits and rituals practiced in both rural and urban areas, including circumcision of female and male children” and defloration during her experience as a village doctor, when she saved more than one child from serious hemorrhages, infections, and damages to internal organs. Abiding by her sense that the “traditional” mutilation of the female sexual organs is a form of subjugation, entrenched in a society that needs to change as a whole, in its economic, social, educational, and cultural structures, Sa’dawi tried to fight it at first as a health problem, underlining its related physical and psychological damages. She started to hold health education sessions in the village where she was appointed as the medical authority, but “the men with the power” in agreement with the state authorities had her transferred, accusing her of “not respecting the values of their community, of inciting women to rebel against religion and its laws.” As highlighted by Diane Singerman, female circumcision, referred to in Arabic as *At-Tahāra* and translated to mean “cleanliness and purity,” is deemed to enhance the cleanliness and femininity of the girls’ bodies and to discourage their alleged sexual promiscuity and libidinous appetite, which is considered disruptive to society. As underlined by Foucault, in the process of hysterization of women
“sex” is considered as what constitutes the woman’s body, ordering it wholly in terms of the functions of reproduction.\(^{21}\)

In the 19\(^{th}\) century, two great technologies of power made their appearance in the West: one which fabricated sexuality and one which fabricated madness.\(^ {22}\) Both of these were present among the centers of production of discourses about sex. There was medicine and the medical formulation of “nervous disorders” as well as psychiatry, which set out to discover the etiology of mental illnesses.”\(^ {23}\)

In Nawāl Sa’dāwī’s autobiography, both the above-mentioned “technologies of power” are at play, as demonstrated by the story of Masouda and of “her devil”, witnessed by the author during her experience as a village doctor. Not abiding to the villagers’ belief that the girl was possessed and that only exorcisms could cure her, Sa’dāwī welcomed the girl in the health unit and set herself to discover the cause of the girl’s malady through a therapy made of words. Sa’dāwī asked her questions and listened to her answers, would drop in her room for a chat, and would involve her in nightly friendly talks with the nurses. It was during one of these conversations that Masouda began to tell her story. She was married off at the age of twelve to a man who was fifty years older than her, underwent his constant violence and sexual abuse for years, and, in Sa’dāwī’s words, “found no other way of escaping except through mental disease. The fear suppressed within her manifested itself in the form of a devil which mounted her.” In spite of Masouda’s despair and of Sa’dāwī’s medical report and efforts, the police brought the girl back to her husband. After a week, they found Masouda’s body floating in the waters of the Nile\(^ {24}\). Masouda’s story shows the author’s attempt to perform a medical and literary anamnesis: she engages herself in a self-analysis with and for other women, as if to bring about a psychoanalytic and historical cure. Psychoanalysis, in fact, sees resistance to recognition or remembering as a defense mechanism that continues repression; when the resistance is overcome, the trauma can be worked through.\(^ {25}\) Sa’dāwī’s commitment to address issues of mental health and her knowledge of Freudian terms emerge from a work that was published in 1976, *Women and Neurosis in Egypt*, an in-depth study that she carried out among women prisoners.\(^ {26}\) In 1987, however, replying to Georges Tarabishi’s Freudian analysis of her works, where she and her heroines are deemed neurotic for rejecting femininity, she declares her distrust toward psychoanalysis and in its ability to prescribe a cure. In particular, she addresses what she calls “Freudian duality or schism between the concepts of femininity and masculinity,” and disagrees with was she sees as a limited masculine view that sees the distinction between the sexes as hinging on the existence or non-existence of the penis.\(^ {27}\)

The need for the re-appropriation of women’s own personalities, beyond traditional definitions of femininity and masculinity, is another constant expression of the corporal in Sa’dāwī’s autobiography. As underlined by Fedwa Malti-Douglas, the body in Sa’dāwī’s writing emerges as more than a mere source of conflict: it is intimately tied to a discourse of gender and sexual definitions as to what constitutes the male and the female.\(^ {28}\) She perceives her femininity as “ascetic, struggling not to show itself,” and rejects “the traditional values of what was called manhood, or masculinity, or presumed good looks in a man.” With her taste for masculine, “flat thick-soled shoes,” covered with the dust they had picked up as she walked, she declares: “For me, masculinity and femininity enhanced one another, made each other more beautiful.”\(^ {29}\) Her choice of a medical career allows her to trespass the boundaries of the traditional world of the family, exemplified by marriage, maternity, and a life spent in the kitchen, to enter an allegedly manly world of science, reifying a dichotomy that, according to Malti-Douglas, is endogenous to Arabic literary production\(^ {30}\). In line with what the Belgian philosopher Luce Irigaray contends - “They’ve left us only lacks, deficiencies, to designate ourselves. They’ve left us their negative(s).”\(^ {31}\) Sa’dāwī fights the notion that women are by nature defined in a certain way, as the embodiment of what men are not. In fact, she believes nature has given women a creative brain and the right to play a social, cultural, economic, and political role in society, against the conditions that oppress her intellectually, ideologically, and sexually.\(^ {32}\)
In Doctor Sa‘dawi’s diagnosis, it is an overarching patriarchy, whose roots are social, religious, and political, that cause women’s physical and psychological distress. In her portraits of women identified as neurotic, she asserts that in fact neurosis does not spring only from “biological” sources but also from the causes of women’s oppression in Egypt. While she acknowledges that psychological illness might be ascribable to biological or sexual events that have occurred in childhood, and that sometimes physical and social causes are interwoven, she contends that biological factors should not be overemphasized. Her approach to women’s physical and mental illness can therefore be defined as what Rita Faulkner calls a “wildly political and literary feminist psychoanalysis” carried out in the service of literature and of a national anamnesis. In fact, Sa‘dawi identifies the causes of individual malaise in the country’s social, economic, political, and patriarchal oppression, rather than in just psychic repression. Sa‘dawi asserts that “Any attempt to undertake an in-depth study of woman’s status in society, if freed from the attitude which considers her only as a means of reproduction, will lead inevitably to an examination of a much broader range of issues related to all aspects of human life.” Such a stance stems from her understanding of gender relations within class and as well as other forms of oppression.

Saidawi’s autobiography details her recollection of two servant girls whose misfortunes are in her memory tragically linked to the story of Masouda, the village girl mentioned above. The first servant girl, named Sa‘deya, was a young girl who would help Sa‘dawi’s mother in the household chores. Suffering from homesickness, she escaped one night to return to her village, lost herself, and was never to be found again. The second girl, Shalabeya, worked as a maid in Sa‘dawi’s grandparents’ house and was seemingly raped and made pregnant by one of Sa‘dawi’s uncles, a well-off and respected bey. “She was only a child […] who had become a victim, been made a scapegoat, transformed into the sacrificial lamb to be butchered instead of the Bey.” The girl was sent back to her family in Upper Egypt, where “a girl with a bastard child in her belly must be punished by death without question”. Years later, dressed in her white doctor’s coat and with her heart heavy with grief, Sa‘dawi notes that she would look at Masouda’s corpse, feeling like she had abandoned her and failed to save her, just as she had done with Shalabeya several years before. In spite of both her writing and her medical activity being done according to her political conscience, Nawal Sa‘dawi never joined any political party. According to Malti-Douglas, the relationship between politics and the issues of women’s freedom in a non-Western cultural context is complicated, since supporters of liberation causes do not necessarily support the emancipation of women. From Saidawi’s point of view, women’s oppression must be fought as an integral part of all struggles for human liberation in the region, including the fight against imperialism.

In this overarching view of the problem of violence, encompassing the state and the family, the national and the international level, the body that needs protection is also the body of the entire nation. Through her own story and that of the other women who inhabit her autobiography, Nawal Sa‘dawi highlights the material and cultural conditions experienced by her society, where women are occupied and colonized, as is their nation, “either by imperialists or patriarchal nationalists or both, working hand in hand.” The figurative violence of this synecdoche is exemplified by the image of an “evacuation by blood” that Sa‘dawi employs to indicate both her spontaneous abortion of an unwanted fetus (during her unsuccessful, second marriage) and the armed struggle waged by Egyptians against British troops, in order to force them to leave. “The evacuation”, she states in her autobiography, “had freed me from the foreign occupation of my body” and “the word ‘evacuation’ seemed to echo in my ears from a distance, from way back in time to 1946 when I was a student in secondary school,
marching out of the gates in a demonstration and shouting at the British soldiers.” When recalling the national demonstrations in which she had taken part, Sa‘dawi emphasizes how her body would become part of the crowd and how the love for the country would sweep her along, “breaking down the barriers between dream and reality, body and mind.” The 1946 demonstration against the British occupation forces was the first one of her life: many others would follow, when her body would be propelled by some hidden force to rush out and join the crowds, where people “became one sex.” During those demonstrations, she notes, “We fused to become one body, or one spirit with no body.”

According to Rita Faulkner, the tropes of this kind of national allegory, of a unified physical body, are also found in the works of Sa‘dawi’s male predecessors, such as Mohammad Haykal, Yahya Haqqi, Tawfiq Al-Hakim, and Naguib Mahfouz.45 On the other hand, as noted by Jasmin Zine, the feminization of land is also a prevalent motif in colonial consciousness, which metaphorically ties the conquest of the female “other” to the conquest of indigenous land (Zine 2006, 5). Sa‘dawi’s works, nevertheless, appropriate, mimic, and subvert the “land-nation-woman metaphors,” suggesting a reordering of the laws of gender and a de-structuring of class and patriarchy. In the post-revolution era, patriarchal nationalism indeed failed to liberate the Egyptian nation and its women. While national allegories in the 1940’s and 1950’s aided the nationalist revolutions and the critique of the old patriarchal and colonial order, Sa‘dawi’s appropriation, mimicry, and subversion of national allegory from the 1970’s through the 1990’s call into question whether a new order was ever created under Egyptian nationalism. Thus, her use of the “patriarchal nationalists’ novelistic motif of national allegory” is aimed at responding to the “post-independence nationalist patriarchy’s occupation of the female body as well as of the nation.”46 Sa‘dawi contends that:

…the political climate in the Arab world has produced a number of false revolutions bandying slogans of justice and socialism, only to murder and imprison the genuine socialists and seekers after justice. Under the shadow of these false revolutions, new breeds of revolutionaries have sprung up, mouthing the slogans of the revolution but actually exploiting those under their domination.47

The disappointment with these unfaithful revolutionaries is at best expressed, once again, by the allegoric identification of the country as a woman. One of her friend’s wonders, “Can a man be loyal to his country and yet unfaithful to his wife?” and asks, “Don’t you think the two are related?” “A man who is unfaithful to his love can be easily disloyal to his own country,” explains Nawâl Sa‘dawi in another passage of her autobiography.48

The cure prescribed for women by Sa‘dawi for the personal and national traumas described so far consists in refusing the “nation’s muzzling, its silencing, as well as the silencing, the ‘occupation’ of the nation’s women […] the cutting (e. g. of female genital mutilation), the veiling, the hysterical invisibility, the loss of the body and its feeling, its walling in.”49 Part of the cure is also rewriting the psychological, social, political, and economic discourses and practices. “Writing for me is like breathing the air of life”, Sa‘dawi states. “As I write, moments of the past emerge in the light. Body memory becomes one with my spirit, with my blood. I discover the past, rediscover it again and again, try to catch hold of the moments, but they escape me like a fish in a mercurial sea, enveloped in the darkness of night”. “The written word for me became an act of rebellion,” she contends, “against injustice exercised in the name of religion, of morals, or love”. Through the re-telling of her own story, she gives way to a sort of literary psychoanalysis, seeking “to reveal the self, what is hidden inside” and to heal the suffering of both body and mind. According to Sa‘dawi, an “autobiography is more real, more true than fiction, more creative, and more steeped in art.”50 “Am I trying to discover what is buried deep down inside me into a “dark void of nothingness”? she wonders, doubting whether her whole life has been a “search for the real hidden behind what is false.”51 As argued by Dinah Manisty, women who question the relation of the conscious to the unconscious, of the mind to writing, of inside
and outside, have found themselves questioning social and literary conventions, a process which has led to a rethinking of the notion of form itself, raising the question of where to place the “I” of the autobiographical work. Women’s writings thus have the potential of challenging the coherence of the autobiographical genre because they challenge the notion of a coherent self. According to Manisty, and Sa’dawi would agree that “a woman cannot experience herself as an entirely unique identity because she is always aware of how she is being defined by the dominant male culture.”

On the whole, in her individual and collective portrayal of women’s bodies and lives, Nawal Sa’dawi strives to describe what Foucault called “the new methods of power,” working not by right but by technique, not by law but by normalization, not by punishment but by control. These methods are employed by Sa’dawi on all levels and in forms that go beyond the state and its apparatuses. She tries to resist such methods of power and to denounce them in her literary works. As noted by Robin Ostle, autobiographies may spring from a sense of powerlessness on the part of the subject and they can thus become instruments of strategy through which a position of relative marginality is transformed into something which is able to challenge or occupy the center. In her medical and literary diagnoses, Dr. Sa’dawi identifies in the oppressive system of patriarchy, classism, and imperialism as the malaise that afflicts both women and the Egyptian nation. “Where there is power, there is resistance,” Foucault claims, “and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.” According to Foucault, in fact, there is a multiplicity of points of resistance that are present everywhere in the power network. “Resistance are in odd terms in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite.” Often, these points of resistance produce cleavages in society, fracture units and effect regroupings, and furrow across individuals themselves. It seems therefore that Nawal Sa’dawi’s literary and political activism can be framed, especially considering her role as a doctor, as taking an active part in the medicalization processes and in the “polymorphous techniques” of power. Her account is meaningful insofar as it shows that “deployments of power are directly connected to the body, to bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures.” Her autobiography makes the body visible “through an analysis in which the biological and the historical are not consecutive to one another [...] but are bound together in an increasingly complex fashion in accordance with the development of the modern technologies of power that take life as their objective.” Where does the path to recovery for Egypt and its women start from? By re-inscribing her own story, the author lets the healing begin.

Author’s Note

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Notes

1 Malti-Douglas 1995, 12
2 Faulkner 2005, 43
3 Sa’dawi 1997, 91
4 Foucault and Gordon 1980, 60
5 Ibid, 186.
6 Foucault 1978, 140
7 Ibid, 104.
8 Sa’dawi 2002, 56, 24
9 Sa’dawī 1999, 293, 173-174, 236; Sa’dawī, 119
10 Tarābishī 1988, 207
11 Sa’dawī 2002, 57-58, 70; Sa’dawī 1999, 290
12 Malti-Douglas 1995, 2
13 Foucault 1978, 139
15 Malti-Douglas 1995, 27
16 Faulkner 2005, 44
17 Sa’dawī 1999, 62-63, 11; Sa’dawī and Hatātah, 1982, 7-8
18 Singerman 1995, 97; Sa’dawī and Hatātah 1982, 33-43
19 Sa’dawī 1999, 291
20 Singerman 1995, 96, 105
21 Foucault 1978, 153
22 Foucault and Gordon 1980, 185
23 Foucault 1978, 56, 30
24 Sa’dawī 1999, 102-116
25 Faulkner 2005, 77, 73
26 Sa’dawī 1983, III
28 Malti-Douglas 1995, 3
29 Sa’dawī 2002, 27, 42, 76
30 Malti-Douglas 1995, 25
31 Irigaray 1985, 207
32 Tarābishī 1988, 206
33 Malti-Douglas 1995, 7
34 Tarābishī 1988, 202-203, 211
35 Cooke 2001, 61
36 Faulkner 2005, 73
37 Sa’dawī and Hatātah 1982, 1
38 Malti-Douglas 1995, 13
39 Sa’dawī 2002, 115; Sa’dawī 1999, 79, 195
40 Sa’dawī 2002, 206
41 Malti-Douglas 1995, 12
42 Tarābishī 1988, 200
43 Jameson 1986, 69; Faulkner 2005, 77
44 Sa’dawī 2002, 189; Sa’dawī 1999, 228-229, 285
45 Faulkner 2005, 3
46 Faulkner 2005, 3, 12, 18, 42
47 Tarābishī 1988, 203
48 Sa’dawī 2002, 170, 216
49 Faulkner 2005, 76-77
50 Sa’dawī 1999, 54, 2, 292-293
51 Sa’dawī 2002, 157, 53
52 Manisty 1998, 273-274
53 Foucault 1978, 89
54 Ostle 1998, 22
55 Foucault 1978, 95-96
56 Ibid, 11
57 Ibid, 151-152
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The Jews of China

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Introduction

Scholarship surrounding Jewish populations in China is surprisingly plentiful. Though their population in China has always been small relative to other ethnic minorities and minuscule relative to the Han majority, Chinese Jews have been at the center of many studies, especially among Western academics. At its historical maximum, the population of Jews in China is known to have at least numbered in the tens of thousands. All known primary and secondary resources have been exhausted in by Western and Chinese scholars in an effort to know the origins and lives of the earliest Jewish migrants to the Middle Kingdom. Some sources, such as those among Christian missionaries, were later debunked as ahistorical, making the whole subject of Chinese Jews suspect. Other perplexities surrounding the fates of early Jewish settlements in China and finding Jewish descendants living in China today have led scholars to make great speculative leaps in drawing their conclusions. This paper, like many before it, will address the historical presence of Jews in China; however, it will seek to challenge some of the more common interpretations that have been gleaned from the limited empirical evidence available. In doing so, the purpose of the paper is not to discredit the work of good historians, but to reopen the questions of who were the historical Jews of China and how might they be better understood?

This paper's concluding remarks will discuss the role which constant 'rediscovery' of the Kaifeng Jewish people has had on that population. One cannot and should not assume that Chinese-Jewish identity would not have persisted into the modern era had it not been for the regular revival in interest coming from outsiders, first in the form of missionaries, later in the form of academics and journalists. Kaifeng Jewish 'descendants' have, nevertheless, rediscovered and redeveloped their Jewish heritage – the origins of the impetus for this rediscovery has become a moot point. Along with the benefit of spiritual self-discovery, there have been other, material benefits. In the context of nationalism and 'imagined communities,' working from Anderson's widely cited argument, how are scholars to think of group self-identification when it is partially the byproduct of their own work and inquiry itself? Also considering the personal and professional benefits for academics and journalists to produce interesting and compelling narratives, are their attempts at engaging and reviving Kaifeng Jewish identity different than the self-centered motives of Christian missionaries of the Imperial Ages? It is not the purpose of this paper to answer this question definitively, rather to challenge us to reflect on the consequences of our actions as academics.

Medieval Jews

Much debate has gone into the question of the earliest references to Jews in Chinese historical records, or to China or the Chinese in Jewish records. Hong Jun cites one interpretation suggesting early contact, “the Hebrew Old Testament, in the Book of Isaiah (42:12) it says: 'Look, they are coming from afar, from the north and from the west, and from the land of Sinim.' Many Western archaeologists thought that Sinim was a transliteration of China.”¹ Hong then challenges this misconception by pointing out that the text was written in the 8th century BCE, before the foundation of the Qin Dynasty.
from which China gets its name. It would have been quite impossible for this text to reference China and was rather a likely reference to an area of southern Egypt. Another interpretation, based on a stone stele found at Kaifeng, states clearly that Judaism came to China during the Han Dynasty, which dates between the 206 BCE and 220 CE. Yet this claim is somewhat contradicted by two other steles discovered at Kaifeng which suggest a much later date.

Next, scholars have tried to find references specific to Judaism in Chinese imperial records, but this has not created consensus. Chinese dynastic histories are China's best premodern historical records, yet they are quite silent on the subject of Jews. Some of the transliterations of Jewish ethnonyms into Chinese are questionable, and it is impossible to verify as to whether sources are actually referring to Jews. This is an issue that Chinese scholars themselves have taken up. One of the earliest agreed-upon references to Jews in imperial records is Zhuhu/Zhuhe. Chen Yuan explains, “(In the text) Regarding Emperor Wen Zong in the History of the Yuan Dynasty it is noted that a decree was issued in 1331 stating that Buddhist monks, Taoist priests, Christian pastors, Zhuhu, and Muslim mullahs who engage in commerce shall pay the same taxes as they did before”. Ming-era terms related the Jews include yicleye (transliteration of Israelite) and Rudeya (for Judea), and the term Yutai came into usage in the Qing Dynasty and remains the term for Jews today. Other terms, such as wutuo and lan mao hui hui ('Blue Hat Hui') are used to refer to Chinese Jews by some scholars but challenged by others, including this author. The latter term of 'Blue Hat Hui' is argued to be referencing Jews because they are distinguished from the 'White Hat Hui', argued to be the Muslim Hui minority. The colors themselves have no particular significance, which contributes to the suspicious use of colors for religious identification between Muslim and Jew.

Zhu Jiang points out the problem with this distinction which he discovered in his research of Yangzhou's Hui population. Not only are there blue hats, but Hui people also wear black hats and blue and black hats, and a mere twenty percent wear just white hats, clearly discrediting the blue hat-white hat distinction. This is because the Yangzhou Hui population is known to be almost entirely Muslim. To further complicate the distinctions, both Jews and Muslims are sometimes referred to as the 'people with colored eyes', and Jews were also sometimes referred to as the 'sinew plucking sect', a phrase referring to the ritual removal of sinew from meat in the process of creating kosher food. This practice, considered unusual from the Chinese perspective, was a recognizable distinction between the Chinese Jews and Muslim Hui.

In total, the references to Jews are limited in number, and also appear quite late in the imperial records, the earliest being in the 14th century. One reason, which is demonstrated by the ambiguity of terms distinguishing Jews from Muslims, was that the Han Chinese probably found the two religions nearly indistinguishable. Gao Wangzhi explains one of the earliest potential examples. He writes:

In 750 the Arabs established the Abbasid Dynasty and in 762 built their capital in Baghdad.... Before long, their empire extended over Europe, Asia, and Africa. They were known in China as the Black Robed Dashi – Black Robed because that was the color Arabs in the eastern portion of Arabia favored, and Dashi because that was the Chinese term for Arabia. Starting in 752 the Black Robed Dashi engaged in active trade with the Tang empire... especially by sea. They resided in Guangzhou and Yangzhou in large numbers.... Since there was a large Jewish community in Babylon in the 8th and 9th centuries... it is conceivable that the Dashi merchants who came to China included Jews who settled in cities like Guangzhou and Yangzhou. Kaifeng and Yangzhou are connected by rivers and the Grand Canal, and it was easy to travel by boat.

Gao's suggestion that Jews were going to be found in the same place as Muslims is supported by numerous travel accounts in Islamic records, as well as by the adventurer Marco Polo. These Islamic travelers provide the earliest reliable evidence of Jews in China.

Pollack describes the first reference as that of an Arab traveler Suleiman, who claimed he had traveled to and encountered Jews in China in the mid-9th century. Next, Ibn-Khuradadhbih described
Jewish merchants who had made round trip voyages to China aboard European vessels. Abu Zaid al-Sirafi, who had traveled to China's major southern port city of Guangzhou (Canton), reported an 877 CE massacre against “120,000 Muslims, Jews, Christians and Magians who lived in the city”. Also at the end of the 9th century, Ibn Wahab is said to have been granted audience with the Chinese emperor, and in court records is described as well-versed in the distinctions among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (though the lack of distinctions in dynastic histories would challenge this claim). Most famous among the Muslim travelers is Ibn Battuta. He traveled through Hangzhou in 1346 and wrote, “We entered... through a gate called the Jews’ Gate. In this city live Jews, Christians, and sun-worshipping Turks [Parsees], a large number in all.” In addition, Pollack describes two Jewish sources contemporary to the Muslims accounts, which suggest that Jews may have already traveled to and may have already been settling in China. Finally, there is the 13th century report of Marco Polo, who recorded that Kublai Khan had knowledge of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian festivals, as well as the fact that Polo himself had found Jews living in China.

Gao’s assumption that Jews of Kaifeng were also connected to a greater Jewish community is supported by the previously mentioned stone steles found in Kaifeng. Kaifeng, located inland from the central coastal region, was significant in earlier eras as it acted as a dynastic capital. The presence of a synagogue at this location may have been a remnant of Kaifeng’s previous centrality to the Chinese empire. The 1489 stele records that community leaders, “obtained a copy of the Scriptures of the Way [a Torah scroll]... and Chao Ying of Ningpo respectfully brought this copy of the Scriptures to the synagogue at Pien-liang [Kaifeng].” On the 1512 stele, another scroll was said to have been gifts to the Kaifeng synagogue from a Jew of the city of Yangzhou, the city that Gao claims would have had easy access to Kaifeng via rivers and the Grand Canal.

Considering these two main points, the first being that Muslims, Jews, and Christians traveling to China’s major trading and political centers were able to find Jews in all of the places they also found Muslims, and the second being that the Jewish communities were large enough to interact and offer one another support, this then should lead one to believe that the presence of Jews in China had been firmly established by no later than the 8th century, because this would coincide with the period when Arab and Persian Muslims were establishing trade centers in the major coastal cities of China, especially Guangzhou (Canton), Quanzhou (Zayton), and Yangzhou. The silence regarding Jews in the imperial records, prior to the Yuan Dynasty, is likely due to ignorance in distinguishing Muslims from Jews. The Yuan Dynasty, it should be remembered, was founded by non-Chinese Mongols under the Khans. The Mongols being an Altaic people from Central Asia, were more familiar with the various monotheistic religions coming out of Southwestern Asia, thus it is with the rise of the Yuan that Chinese historians are also finally familiarized with those faiths as well.

In addition to the records of Muslims traveling to China by sea, there is one other fascinating record left by a Jewish traveler in a very different location. This record was discovered at the very beginning of the 20th century in Dunhuang, China. A piece written on paper, described as from selihot (Jewish penitential prayers), the note was found among one of the largest caches of Buddhist texts ever discovered. Dunhuang itself was a major trading and military outpost near the westernmost reaches of the Great Wall. It was also a major stop along the network of oases that made up the Silk Road. About twenty-five kilometers north of the city center lay a series of hundreds of caves along a valley wall. These caves were adorned with art, sculpture, and other imagery dedicated to Buddhism. These caves were places where Buddhist travelers could pray or give thanks for safe journeys along the route that became increasingly harsh as one moved westward. It was also a place where Buddhist monks engaged in meditation. Around 1010 CE, after Muslim armies sacked the nearby city-state of Khotan, Buddhist monks sealed away thousands of Buddhist scriptures in one of the caves, which had been completely forgotten until rediscovered by a local abbot in 1900 CE.
The location of the penitential prayer's discovery does not seem to warrant discussion among the scholars who cite it. Perhaps they were unfamiliar with the centrality of Dunhuang to Chinese Buddhism or they just thought it insignificant. Nevertheless, these are to be viewed as critical pieces in understanding the puzzles surrounding the origins and stories of the earliest Jews to China. Why would a Jewish prayer be found at a location almost exclusively dedicated to another religion? As already noted, the merchant center of Dunhuang was itself a full day’s journey of fifteen and a half miles from the Mogao caves where the library was discovered. Perhaps it was mere coincidence, or perhaps there are also opportunities to understand the development of Judaism in China by looking at the development of Buddhism in China. Like Judaism, Buddhism was a religion foreign to China. It was believed to have been brought to China from India sometime during the Han Dynasty – much like the introduction of Judaism to China from India as described by the 1512 stele at Kaifeng. Access to China in that period was believed to have been the result of China extending its military reach to places as far west as Dunhuang, making trade and migration safer. Unfortunately for Buddhism, its tenets were often in conflict with the dominant ideology of the Han Dynasty, Confucianism, and so Buddhism had limited influence at first. The influence of Confucianism began to wane with the decline of the Han Dynasty and, over the 400 years that followed, China experienced a series of weak central authorities. Without the strong imperial center upholding Confucianism ideology, the door opened for foreign ideas, and in this period Chinese Buddhism made great inroads into the Chinese population.

These conditions allowing for the arrival and expansion of Buddhism in China may have easily afforded Judaism the same opportunities. Centuries later, when Muslims enter China, Jews are recorded among the foreign populations settling in cities along major trade routes. Perhaps Jews were also making inroads into China along with Buddhism in these periods predating the Islamic expansion. As was seen in Dunhuang, perhaps Chinese Buddhist sources might contain small clues as to the history of the Jews. Beyond the possibility of the simultaneous entrance of Judaism and Buddhism, scholars also ought to examine the possibility that later Chinese Jews, such as those in Kaifeng, had begun to understand their faith in their local contexts (very much unlike that of Jewish populations to the west) and had begun to understand their faith in the context of their Chinese neighbors. On the surface this may seem like a blasphemous statement because of perceived irreconcilable differences between Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic religions, but it should be entirely possible that after centuries of exposure to Chinese culture and civilization, Chinese Jews would have shifted their cosmological conceptualizations. To demonstrate this possibility, and other means to better understanding the Jews of China, this paper will now shift its focus to the case of the Jews of Kaifeng.

The Jews of Kaifeng

Once the Chinese empire reconsolidated under the Tang Dynasty in 618 CE, the Tang court, based out of the western capital of Chang-An (present day Xi'an), remained open to foreign ideologies. In Southwestern Asia the Abbasid Dynasty grew out of the Islamic world and they and the Tang famously battled at Talas in 751 CE. Except for this one military exchange, the preponderance of exchanges between the two civilizations was technological or economic and facilitated by a security umbrella that extended across Asia and the Indian Ocean. This environment was conducive for exchange and remained secure until the late Song Dynasty, when serious changes destabilized China. The Northern Song fell in the year 1127 CE, and the center of the Chinese Empire shifted southwards, towards its international seaports. Foreign invaders were able to conquer China, the first being the Jurchen, who were responsible for pushing the Song south and who set up their own Jin Dynasty. After that the Mongols followed, who set up the Yuan Dynasty in the 13th Century. The Mongols pushed as far westward as the Abbasid capital of Baghdad as well; once again a period of exchange was made
possible. It is also worth noting that these two periods, the Tang to late Song, and the Yuan are also the two periods in which most of the Muslim, Jewish and Christian travel accounts marked the presence of Chinese Jews.

It is the Ming Dynasty, which began in 1368 CE, that marked a turning point in China's relationship with the Asian continent, particularly the diminished influence China could wield relative to other great powers. The Ming Dynasty was the last period of Han Chinese rule, and in its early years it had continued the outward facing orientation of the great dynasties that had preceded it. The zenith of Ming international power was likely during the naval expeditions of Admiral Zheng He at the very beginning of the 15th century. At this point, the Ming navy was made of thousands of ships and boasted a flotilla that would have dwarfed other navies of the world. Admiral Zheng, sailing under Ming Emperor Yongle, traveled as far as the Arabian Peninsula and the eastern coasts of Africa. In one of the most startling decisions in all of history, Yongle's successor chose to scuttle this behemoth naval force, and China began an inward-facing orientation and began to systematically normalize Neo-Confucian values at the expense of all other ideologies.

While Chinese imperial history was marked by regular backlashes against “foreign” ideologies, such as the massacre in the foreign quarters of Guangzhou reported by Abu Zaid al-Sarafi in the 9th century, these incidents were either isolated or limited to the reign of a single emperor. What happened in the Ming Dynasty was quite different: this was a hard-line shift towards xenophobic conservative values that was, for the most part, sustained until the end of the Imperial Era. With the Chinese navy scrapped, the Indian Ocean was left open to conquest, piracy, and adventurers. Piracy began to strangle what was left of trade to China’s port cities, all of which had seen their trade industries diminished by imperial decree. Europeans, beginning with Portugal, raced to fill the power vacuum in the Indian Ocean left by the Chinese. They were eventually able to gain a foothold in Chinese ports as well. These setbacks were then met with further reactionary policies, which continued to push the Chinese empire backwards relative to Europe.

While this brief, and admittedly generalized, history of China may seem beyond the scope of China’s Jewish communities, it is critical in creating a backdrop to understand the circumstances in which the Jews of China were 'rediscovered' by the West. As Chinese leaders focused inward, unlike prior periods, outside actors entered Chinese territory and set the stage for a new relationship. Specifically, along with European explorers and merchants to China, came missionaries. Catholic priests made their way inland from the coasts in hopes of finding ancient Christian communities and prospects for conversion. In 1605 a Catholic priest named Matteo Ricci ignited the imaginations of European religious scholars with his discovery of a Jewish settlement in the city of Kaifeng, a provincial capital in the interior of China. Up until this point Europeans had discredited records of a Jewish presence in China or at least assumed it unlikely that those communities had survived. By their reports, the priests found that the Kaifeng Jewish community had been cut off from the Jews of the outside world for a century or more. Understanding the historical events described above, this isolation is understandable.

In addition, these Catholic priests had noted that some characteristics of the Kaifeng Jews were distinctly 'Jewish' while others had become 'Confucian'. The Jews themselves seem to have initially welcomed the priests as foreign Jews, and were not totally able to comprehend the distinctions between Christianity and Judaism. They were excited at the prospect of meeting the religious scholars who might be able to help them better read and understand their own scriptures, because their religious leaders had begun to lose their ability to fully interpret their Hebrew texts. Eventually, the Jewish community became suspicious that the priests possessed illustrated scriptures and were engaged in proselytizing, two characteristics which did not fit their own beliefs at all. They became determined to keep the Europeans at a distance, although by the time Chinese Jews had come to this conclusion, the
Europeans had already made their presence among the Kaifeng Jews semi-permanent. Like many aspects of European imperialism, the Catholic mission to Kaifeng was not solely altruistic. Initially, they assumed that the Jews were unfamiliar with Christianity because they had emigrated from the Near East before the time of Christ. In a condescending manner and uninterested in the spiritual development of China's Jewry, they saw this as an opportunity to obtain Hebrew Scripture which hadn't been purposely altered in order to omit the predicted coming of Christ. Theories also ran awry in speculation that the Chinese Jews were actually one of the Lost Tribes, which made the prospect of converting them to Christianity even more enticing. With these consequences on the line, the priests were not deterred when they were refused the opportunity to have a glimpse of the Pentateuchs only a couple of years following Ricci's arrival. Instead they set up a nearby church, and wave after wave of priests inundated Kaifeng, perhaps like the floods which managed to destroy the synagogue in Kaifeng from time to time.

The historical records left by these priests are the most detailed regarding medieval Chinese Jews. Detailed accounts of Kaifeng Jewry's rituals, synagogue, and lifestyles were recorded. In 1702, Portuguese Jesuit missionary Gozani provided one of the most cited accounts. He explains that the community was made up of over two thousand people and that they observed the Sabbath and chanted and prayed at the temple. They also “practiced circumcision, and observed the Passover and Feast of the 'Tabernacles'”.

The focal point of Kaifeng studies were the stone steles previously noted, which sat outside the entrance to the synagogue. As cited in Pollack, a translation of the 1489 stele states that the Kaifeng Jews:

...came from T'ien-Chu; in obedience to the [divine?] command it came. There were... seventeen surnames [xing] in all. They brought Western cloth as a tribute to the Sung. The emperor said: 'Come to our China, honor and preserve the customs of your ancestors, remain and hand them down in Pien-liang [Kaifeng].' In the kuei-wei year [1163], the first year of the Lung-hsing period of the Sung Emperor Hsiao, Lieh-wei [the] Wu-ssu-ta [probably Levi the Rabbi] led the religion and An-tu-la [Abdullah?; Hamdullah?] first built the temple. (original author's notations in brackets)

From this quote, it becomes clear that these records were recorded in the context of Chinese histories, as the dates are actually referenced by Imperial reign. There is also the question of the origin of these Jews, though Tian Zhu is believed to reference somewhere in India. If this is the case, there is the possibility that this group of Jews might have gradually moved east along the Silk Road, and found themselves drawn to China during the Song Dynasty, just prior to its collapse.

The language used by the Kaifeng Jews was also a point of contention among various Western missionaries and scholars. The debate among missionaries revolved around trying to decide whether or not to try to proselytize using the language already existent for terms like Heaven (tian) and God (shangdi). The Jews had used terms such as these and many others that are well recognized and understood within the context of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. For example, as quoted previously, the 'Scriptures of the Way' or 'Scriptures of Dao' are interpreted as the 'Torah scrolls'. Xu Xin cites a vertical tablet written by Ai Shih-te which states, “It's presence is not impeded by visible form, its absence does not imply an empty void; for the Way is outside the limits of existence or non-existence”. Out of context, this phrase does not at all resonate with a description of God as interpreted by Xu Xin, rather it resonates clearly with the traditional view of Dao, especially in the context of Tiantai Buddhism which explicitly focuses on a language of existence and non-existence.

The issue of acculturation among the Kaifeng Jews has been an additional point of emphasis within scholarship on Chinese Jews. Understandings of Kaifeng Jews range from the conclusion that Kaifeng Jews were a distinct Jewish community in a Confucian society to a Confucian-dominated community with residual traces of Judaism still in place. Most scholars seem to favor the former, and
many try to reconcile Confucian characteristics with traditional Jewish values. Pollack writes that, "Judaism and Confucianism are not in disagreement, the authors of the Kaifeng lapidary inscriptions are able to convert such towering biblical figures as Abraham, Moses, and Ezra into exponents of a way of life to which no Confucianist could reasonably object."\(^{21}\) This conclusion coattails the observation that both the 1489 stele and the 1512 stele both contain language that "even seems to apologize for the fact that Judaism's sacred books are not written in the same language as Confucianism's."\(^{22}\)

The question of how “sinicized” Kaifeng Jews had become at the time of the Catholic priests arrival is probably less relevant than looking at the trends following their arrival. In fact, asking if the Kaifeng Jews were “sinicized” might be a total construction of a Western understanding of Jewishness. The stone steles are the only texts available in which the Kaifeng Jews engage in self-identification, and the fact that the language, style, and imagery they use fit quite well into Chinese social and cosmological contexts lends itself to the position that these Jews were really first and foremost Chinese. Rather than viewing themselves as the “Other” and trying to compel their neighbors into acceptance, it seems equally legitimate to assume that they viewed themselves as part of the greater in-group (ie. Chinese society) and were merely reconciling their Jewish heritage to fit that identity. Many of the social practices among the Kaifeng Jews resembled the normalizing nature of Chinese Confucian society, as opposed to Judaism. While it's true that “men prayed three times a day...liturgy and prayers were in accordance with rabbinical (Talmudic) tradition; haphtarot (prophetic proportions) were read on the Sabbath; the yearly cycle of Torah readings was observed; kashrut and circumcision were practiced”\(^{23}\) (a practice which died out in Kaifeng some time later), the preponderance of social practices including language, polygamy, foot-binding, burial, and clothing all point to Chinese customs. In addition, opportunities for social advancement in Imperial China were dependent upon successful completion of the imperial examination system, which was based upon Confucian and Neo-Confucian texts. The opportunities for Hebrew were so limited in these communities that by the mid-19th century Kaifeng Jews had not one person left who was able to read it.\(^{24}\)

Western missionaries had been expelled from China by the Qing court in an effort to turn the tide against Western imperialism during the decades between the beginning of the 18th century, when Gozani made his record of Jews of Kaifeng, and 1866, when an American Protestant missionary named W. A. P. Martin arrived in Kaifeng to find its synagogue gone and its non-practicing Jewish population in disarray. Following China's defeat in the Opium War and their humiliation in the 1842 Treaty of Nanking, the door was once again open to Westerners interested in the Jews of Kaifeng, but the once successful community was impoverished and scattered. This leads one to wonder as to the cause of such destruction.

There are any number of reasons that could explain the Kaifeng Jewry's decline. The questions are how well have these scenarios been investigated, and does the fate of Kaifeng Jewry give any insight into the fate of other Jewish communities known to have existed in Imperial China? The most obvious answer is the continuation of the point above. That is, the Jews of Kaifeng continued to assimilate into Chinese culture, and this influence has received the most attention. One interpretation would suggest that without the presence of Western missionaries reinforcing the idea that Chinese Jews were somehow different than other Chinese, they would assimilate faster. Another would suggest it was because without the support of these missionaries, Qing efforts to discredit “foreign” ideas and religions were successful at making the environment too uncomfortable for Kaifeng Jews to continue practicing their faith. In addition, there are the socio-economic considerations that Jews would have been afforded more opportunities if they abandoned their religious and Hebrew language studies in exchange for Confucian studies and the imperial examination system. Finally, the answer could be that the Jewish population of Kaifeng did not possess a self-sustaining critical mass in terms of population, and there were no other Jewish populations remaining nearby from which to draw. Like other
communities, Chinese Jews suffered casualties in times of war, famine, or flood, but unlike other communities, they were often required to rebuild from within. As daughters married into non-Jewish families, they would have lost their Jewish identity because of the patrilineal-patrilocality nature of Chinese families. If men weren't wealthy, they might have one wife as opposed to several, and families unable to afford wives for their sons might have saw those children emigrate elsewhere to seek opportunity and start new families.

Another answer to the whereabouts of Chinese Jewish descendants might also lie with the Hui minority. As already noted, Chinese officials often considered Jews as part of the Muslim minority. When facing the demise of their religious community, it is possible that Jews would choose to join the Muslim community, which would have been religiously closer to Judaism than to other faiths, such as Buddhism. In the early 17th century, a Jesuit named Alvarez Semmedo claimed to uncover a “recently existing” Jewish community in Nanjing, whose members, “abandoning their faith because they no longer had a qualified religious leader, had embraced Islam.”

In another example, Gao writes:

Zhu Jiang also supports the suggestion that Jews joined the Muslim Hui minority as a result of the political transition from the Yuan to Ming Dynasty. He writes:

The author goes onto note that to the present day, eighty percent of all Persian and Arab gravestones and tombs slabs discovered have been in the bases of the city walls of Quanzhou. Certainly if these circumstances held true throughout the Ming Empire, then more Jewish relics and records would certainly lie alongside Muslim relics in city walls throughout modern China. It is impossible to say when or if these will ever be discovered.

Finally, Xu Xin writes, “The Kaifeng Jewish community had a consecutive history of about eight hundred years. By any account, it was the most dynamic, active and important Jewish community in Chinese history”. He also writes, “The Kaifeng Jewish community reached its cultural and economic peak – its Golden Age – in the seventeenth century.” Putting the ideas together, the argument suggests that Judaism in China reached its peak at the point Kaifeng, its most important community, peaked in the 17th century. It is because of statements like this, wherein lies a romanticized view of Judaism in China, that scholars must reopen and reexamine the history of Chinese Jewish communities. Because the Kaifeng Jews are the only medieval Chinese Jews known to scholars, are they also automatically the greatest and most significant? Furthermore, are historians ready to believe that the peak of Chinese Jewish civilization coincides with Christian missionaries possessing expansionist ambitions and Orientalist frameworks descending upon their community? If what Gao and Zhu posit are correct, one could argue that there could have been any number of great Jewish communities equally rich to Kaifeng, but none of these survived periods of anti-foreign violence in the
Yuan, and were no longer present at the time of the European missionaries arrival to China.

**Sino-Jewish Relations in the Present**

In the 20th century, the trend of a declining Kaifeng Jewish population further diminished their already fragile numbers, and when researchers returned to China in the 1980s, following the 'opening' of China to Western academics, a census found that only 166 individuals remained. Of those, only about forty percent were women. On the other hand, research also found 140 families throughout the country with descendants of Kaifeng Jews.32

The Chinese state and Han ethnic majority are sensitive towards efforts to promote the revival of Jewish identity in Kaifeng. One reason is that this opens the door for challenges to China's national sovereignty. China is no doubt aware of the impact of allowing foreign nationals to patron another country's ethnic minority as was done in the heydays of Western Imperialism. This is undoubtedly demonstrated by the challenges China already faces in handling its Tibetan populations. China routinely suffers setbacks to its image as a 'benevolent power' when it is forced to assert government authority over an internal minority. Therefore, recognition of more minorities only increases the likelihood that China will face routine image problems. From the standpoint of practicality, one can understand the Chinese position.

Furthermore, the Kaifeng Jews are certainly an unusual case by Chinese ethnographic standards. As this paper has discussed, it is quite possible that this group is known today because of the romantic notions that the concept of a 'Chinese Jewry' brought up in the minds of Christian missionaries and later, Western academics. Had this group been left to itself, would it have melted into the Han majority or converted to Islam to join the Hui minority? The answer is likely affirmative. There is extensive evidence suggesting that the Kaifeng Jews were not the only Jewish populations to settle in China. One can easily draw the parallels between the Muslim and Jewish experiences in China to assume that all of the places which once held Muslims, today's Hui minority probably also contained Jews. These centers included the port cities that were home to Indian, Persian, and Arab merchants from at least the Tang Dynasty in the 7th century until the Ming Dynasty in the 14th century. Unfortunately, most of the relics and remnants of these early foreign populations were destroyed in periods of xenophobia and Han reactionary movements, such as was seen in the transition from the Yuan to Ming Dynasties.

Should most scholars assume, like Xu Xin, that Kaifeng was the greatest of China's Jewish communities or that the community 'discovered' by Catholic priests in the 17th century was experiencing a “Golden Age”? There is not nearly enough evidence present which tells the stories of the rest of Medieval Jews in China to come to those conclusions with any degree of certainty. Scholars also need to be concerned with the reliability of the historical information coming from Christian missionaries, first because of their ulterior motives, and second because of the potential impact of their presence upon the Jewish population. Christian missions were not objective observers, but self-interested actors trying to influence Jewish identity. While these are some of the only records available, they only explain the experiences and identities of the Chinese Jews through the lens of the Christian missionaries' understanding of Judaism, and this may not be consistent with Judaism as it was understood by Chinese Jews. Looking past the Chinese language and Chinese symbolism that the Chinese Jews used in their own writings can imply that these words and concepts were merely borrowed in order to demonstrate Jewish ideas or attempts to reconcile the presence of Jews as an “other” living in Chinese Confucian society. It is entirely possible that Chinese Jews were first and foremost Chinese, and that their use of Chinese language and cosmology was demonstrated their faith in those concepts. That isn't to say one interpretation is right or wrong, rather it is entirely to say that
these are questions that need to be explicitly asked and considered when drawing conclusions as to Medieval Chinese Jewish identity. It also gives academics the opportunity to return to the resources and materials available, in order to explore other possible means of studying Chinese Jews. Undoubtedly, Chinese Jews will remain a group that continues to delight the imaginations of students of Judaic, religious, and Chinese studies, but it is important that this research be analyzed in the most responsible way possible.

In his landmark work *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson explains the role of self-identification as part of his discussion of nationalism. Nationalism arose within the context of European competition during the Age of Imperialism and was then adopted as a model for anti-colonialism following revolutions in France and the United States in the late 18th century. Nationalism, replacing identification with empires, involved the adoption of language and national identity over regional or local identity. Anderson's narrative is applicable to the example of Kaifeng Jewry, but in this case relative to the position of the Chinese state and Chinese nationalism as it develops in the late-19th and early-20th centuries in reaction to historical developments experienced in the waning decades of the Chinese imperial system. This was also case during the formation of the People's Republic, when as part of the Chinese Ethnic Classification Project of the early-1950s, Chinese Jews fell under a category of 'unclassified' groups, which were still subordinate to the Chinese state identity. Secondary examples of Anderson's arguments are groups reacting to these attempts by the Chinese state to create universal nationalized identity. These cases include Tibetans and Xinjiang Uyghur, who to this day attempt to promote national identities based on historical precedence, creating narratives counter to that of the Chinese state. This is of course outside the scope of this paper, but relevant as an example.

Excluded from Anderson's work on 'imagined communities' are those whose identification is external. The example of the Kaifeng Jews themselves would fit into this model. The 'revivals' in Kaifeng Jewish identity were not driven by the Chinese state, nor by Kaifeng Jewish descendants in reaction to the state. Instead, the impetus for their self-discovery came from without, first in the form of Jesuit missionaries, later by Protestant missionaries, and today by the collective interests of both scholars of the Jewish diaspora and by journalists. Western journalists serving large liberal and Jewish populations, such as the *New York Times*, have frequently turned to the story of the Kaifeng Jews for a good story with which to attract readership. Western researchers regularly propose articles and research on aspects of Kaifeng Jewry, though it is proportionately minute compared to most of the other Chinese ethnic minorities. Undeniably, these modern-day writers pursue stories and research that interests their consumers. The same self-serving, romanticized, and even Orientalist motives of early Christian missionaries do not seem so different from these modern-day writers in this regard, only the motives - from proselytizing to profit-mongering - have shown subtle differences.

As an important caveat I should state that once an identity is formed, there is nothing wrong with Kaifeng Jewish descendants reviving and capitalizing on the attention from foreign nationals, whether academic, tourist, or journalist. It would be equally “Orientalist” to say that their identity is somehow unreal because its impetus for development was externally influenced. In addition, these international connections certainly could benefit Kaifeng Jews, making them a focal point for developing international Jewish connections, much like Arabic speaking Hui Chinese find a role as intermediaries for Sino-Arab cultural and economic exchanges. Tourism to see Kaifeng Jews and Israeli and American schools encouraging Kaifeng Jews to travel abroad to learn and better embrace Jewish faith and identity certainly could benefit its community members. This is also not unlike research suggesting that the notion of “Uyghur” identity had not existed during a period from the fall of a Uyghur kingdom in the 9th century until the Qing Dynasty. Nevertheless, today Uyghur ethnic-nationalism is significant and palpable. Violence between Uyghur nationalists and the Chinese state diminish the livelihood of both entities. If ethnic revival can eventually lead to violence on its behalf or
against it, is there a moral issue if that identity was the product of some outside influence? If future members of the Kaifeng Jewish community attempt to exercise religious freedoms, such as freedom of religious assembly, outside the boundaries permitted by the Chinese state, and as a result of these actions, they face persecution or discrimination, do those droves of foreigners, long since come-and-gone again, bear any moral burden? It is not for this paper to suggest that there is anything wrong with Kaifeng and its Jewish revival. The history of the Kaifeng Jews is a link to a very compelling historical narrative. However, it isn't beyond reason to question any potential negative side effects of journalists and researchers descending upon a people, stimulating a revival of identity, and then leaving a renewed 'imagined community' to face the pressure of self-identification and nationalism in a pre-existing state, especially one as patriotic and bent on its own sovereignty as China.

Notes

4 Ibid., 32.
6 Pollack, 94.
8 As cited in Pollack, 27.
9 Pollack, 23.
10 Ibid., 22-24.
11 Ibid., 62.
12 Ibid., 63.
15 Pollack, 15-6.
16 Ibid., 16-9.
17 Ibid.
18 Chen, 41.
19 As cited in Pollack 59-60.
21 Pollack, 301.
23 Eber, 25.
24 Pollack 167-9, & Xin, 94-103.
25 Pollack 164, 113-6.
26 Pollack, 20.
27 Gao, 124-5.
28 Zhu, 146.
31 Ibid.
Works Cited


Members of the international development field have tended to approach other locations as if they were static, backwards, homogenous, and innately different while encouraging particular forms of subject formation. Yet, subjectivities, notions of self, and desires vary widely by context, given the diversity and contingency of historical processes, social structures, and membership within axes of identity including gender, race, and class. The Middle East as a region has long been the focus of the imagination of the U.S. and Europe in this respect, with women of this region exciting concern in particular. During the colonial period, this interest in women took the form of colonial feminism, which asserted that the Middle East had not yet reached the level of development attained by Europe due to its androcentric treatment of women. Since their emergence in the mid 20th century, international development projects seeking to assist women within the Middle East have focused primarily on empowerment, freedom, and the achievement of international, universalized human rights. Rather than attempting a description of the breadth of such recent efforts, I will instead take a critical look at the current rhetoric and programming of a specific subset of development organizations: those which operate from a liberal feminist and rights-based perspective, and are viewed by the field as well as themselves as uniquely radical. I have chosen to focus on this particular collection of organizations given that they are less susceptible to critiques often advanced against mainstream and multilateral development organizations, such as the U.N. and World Bank. In fact, I argue that it is despite the admirable aims of this subset to improve the lives of women in the Middle East that their efforts are commonly inappropriate, polarizing, hegemonic, ahistoric, and dismissive of alternative understandings of rights, equality, feminism, and personhood. Instead, I fault the entrenchment of this subset of international development organizations within the intermeshed discourses of liberal feminism and modernity. I assert that even the most radical and well-intentioned organizations targeting women in the Middle East frame their subjects in ways attributed to establishment organizations. This approach in which the radical rather than establishment organizations are critically considered has great potential for catalyzing transformations of the international development field and for eroding the persistent discourses within which it is imbued.

**Transnational Women’s Rights Organizations: A Phenomenon**

There is a range of organizations that may be characterized as transnational women’s rights organizations. The array of programming undertaken by such organizations include: human rights advocacy, legal aid, civil education, community mobilization, organizational capacity building, research, and improvement of economic security, health, and access to education. These organizations also provide leadership training to women to increase their participation in decision-making processes within their “families, communities and societies,” as well as work to connect local women’s rights organizations and movements to transnational
movements and networks. Organizations within this subset receive a mixture of public and private funds.

There are two prominent particularities that characterize this subset of international development organizations (henceforth referred to as transnational women’s rights organizations). First, such organizations are considered more progressive than mainstream organizations by themselves as well as others within the field, in terms of their work regarding women in the Middle East. By mainstream, multilateral, or establishment organizations, I refer to those development organizations that work primarily with national actors and institute large-scale projects, rather than providing grants to grassroots actors; these include the World Bank, UNDP, and USAID. While the difference in approach between these two types of organizations is not blatant, some disparities may be found upon comparison of the rhetoric employed and programs implemented. Considering first rhetoric, both mainstream and transnational women’s rights organizations frame their intentions in terms of facilitating women’s empowerment, rights, leadership, and equality. This is not surprising, as mainstream organizations consistently co-opt radical discourses and de-politicize them through their programs. However, transnational women’s rights organizations also tend to use rhetoric regarding their intentions that denotes passion and support. Language such as “dedicated,” “committed,” “solidarity,” and “believe” is used. This is unlike the dry, technical tone often employed by establishment organizations, which rely on terminology such as “help,” “provide,” and “aim.” Generally, transnational women’s rights organizations create rhetoric with the intention of separating themselves from the neoliberal and neoconservative stances taken by a large part of the mainstream organizations. The programming implemented by mainstream organizations varies to such a great extent that at times the difference is negligible in comparison to the progressive organizations while at other times the divergence is quite clear.

Ultimately, however, it is the overarching framework employed by the self-defined progressive subset of international development organizations that is significant. This overarching framework, and the second element that makes the transnational women’s rights organizations distinctive, is an explicitly liberal feminist and rights-based perspective. That is, these organizations must also be considered as different from those non-establishment organizations that are solely rights-based, such as CARE USA, as well as those focused on a particular issue, such as the National Endowment for Democracy, and that consider issues of gender through these lenses. Transnational women’s rights organizations, then, are those that focus almost exclusively on women and construct their aims and motivations as advancing and facilitating struggles by women worldwide for empowerment, freedom, and rights. They see these goals as important in themselves as well as for their contributions to social justice, sustainable development, and peace. These organizations also exclusively couch their human rights efforts in international standards, the most notable of which is the United Nations Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which “provides the basis for realizing equality between women and men through ensuring women’s equal access to, and equal opportunities in, political and public life -- including the right to vote and to stand for election -- as well as education, health and employment.”

As noted above, organizations within this subset also tend to position themselves explicitly as feminist and supportive of other feminist organizations and efforts. In the cases in which this is not made overt, this stance becomes clear upon examination of those individuals and organizations supported. To accomplish the objectives stated above, this style of organization often provides support to women-led grassroots organizations located in the Global
South as well as connects them to the transnational feminist movement. The latter activity is meant to raise the global visibility of grassroots struggles, thus increasing pressure on policymakers and legislators to institute reforms while ensuring that the “voice” of such local actors is heard within and contributes to international forums.

This cadre of organizations may be considered a phenomenon in that their work, while varying to some degree, tends to focus almost solely on women and is based on the interrelated discourses of liberal feminism and international human rights, as well as owing to their view of themselves as unique and unlike other organizations, establishment or otherwise. This phenomenon is neither bounded nor static, but rather must be understood as dynamic and amorphous. This particular group of transnational women’s development organizations has been chosen for examination given that is has yet to become the focus of significant scrutiny, while a multitude of critical analyses have been undertaken regarding the work of multilateral and mainstream development organizations. Critically considering the efforts of the transnational women’s rights organizations will ultimately expose the need to re-evaluate the fundamental discourses underlying and imbuing the work of Western, and many non-Western, organizations within the international development field. While many within the field have come to believe that the work of mainstream organizations is problematic, so-called radical organizations are rarely criticized. A strong critique of organizations considered radical by the field has the potential to catalyze a transformation towards new paradigms.

**Liberal Feminism and Modernity: An examination of their reproductions and limitations**

As stated, the assumptions underlying both the programming and rhetoric of the transnational women’s rights organizations aimed at women in the Middle East are flawed due to their entrenchment within the discourses of modernity and Western liberal feminism. Their resulting efforts are therefore inappropriate, polarizing, and dismissive of hybrid understandings of rights, equality, feminism, and personhood. Beginning with a critical examination of a Western liberal conception of modernity, I specifically refer to the claim that all humans yearn to and may only become modern by following the (liberal) model of the West, which entails ridding oneself from primordial practices such as religion and culture, as well as becoming individualized and autonomous. This discourse also sees the Western model of modernity as the definitive, universal way of life, which originated in and was crafted wholly by Europe and later exported in its entirety to territories delineated outside of the West.

It has long been argued that the assertion laid out above is deeply flawed. For example, Timothy Mitchell demonstrates that this narrative is predicated upon the assumed existence of a world divided into West and non-West prior to the “stage of modernity.” Within this construction, “the non-West must play the role of the outside, the otherness that creates the boundary of the space of modernity,” in the West. Further, this presentation of a linear and singular Western narrative of history leads to a situation in which all other non-Western histories “are imagined as the possible variations in a single process of development” whether they are “delayed, displaced, blocked, or rearranged.” The embedded nature of the transnational women’s rights organizations within this discourse is evident in their attempts to help women within the Western framework of what it means to be modern. For example, the mission undertaken by most transnational women’s rights organizations is the achievement of empowerment and human rights in order to ameliorate women’s position in the Middle East and worldwide. Yet, this entails efforts that are quite clearly imbued with a perception of women in
the Middle East, and other locations, as suffering given that they have yet to achieve key Western ideals including equality and autonomy. A focus on the passing and implementation of certain laws relating to human rights, such as changing family codes and legalizing abortion, is also a centerpiece of these activities. It is further apparent in their tendency to work almost exclusively with Middle Eastern NGOs run by elite women who are apt to cherish Western liberal values while slighting organizations and movements undertaking alternative struggles, including non-secular ones.

However, the contrast between a European and non-European identity was constructed through the interaction and practicalities of colonization and domination. Recommendations have thus been made for the discontinuation of a geographic understanding of modernity in which it originates in a particular space and moves, untroubled, to be transplanted in another, and to see it instead as “a mobile process of rupture and reinscription.” Alternatively, it has been proposed that “it is impossible to define modernity; rather, what one must do is to track the diverse ways the insistent claims to being modern are made.” Both the West and territories delineated outside of it must be understood as products of and contributors to the process of modernity. The dynamic expression of the production of such a demarcation is contingent on the historical specificities of a particular space, with such specificities being entangled with those of other spaces. The Western conception of modernity is reductionist and hegemonic given its recommendation for universal application and inability to perceive non-Western systems of meaning or personhood as also products of modernity.

A bounded, static “culture” figures prominently in this discourse, one that denotes tradition or backwardness, thus portraying it as a barrier to modernity. By framing culture as one of the main obstacles to development in the Arab world transnational women’s rights organizations perpetuate such discourse. However, this discourse is limited by an understanding of cultures as distinct and “object-like phenomena occupying discrete spaces.” Conversely, Ferguson and Gupta posit spaces as having always been interconnected and hierarchically arranged. Benedict Anderson has suggested that cultural space is created through a historical process of imagination, wherein a delimited geographical space is conceptualized rather than deriving from an inherent and pre-existing essence. Without this nuanced understanding of culture and space, communication is understood as occurring “not within a shared social and economic world, but ‘across cultures’ and ‘between societies.’” Therefore, understanding cultures as imagined, produced through historical processes, and situated within an interconnected world, Ferguson and Gupta advise moving forward by “exploring the construction of differences in historical” processes.

Yet, the international human rights regime, on which transnational women’s rights organizations rely heavily in the framing of both issues and solutions, fathoms itself as non-cultural and non-situated and thus universally applicable. The universality of this notion of rights has been challenged by those claiming that rights are in fact cultural practices and that the origins of this particular discourse can be clearly located in Euro-American liberal history and values including an emphasis on rationalism, equality, and autonomy. The international rights regime also essentializes culture as an obstacle to progress. For example, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and most especially its focus on personal status laws, reproduces this discourse by assuming that “underdevelopment and gender inequality in the Third World are caused by traditional values and social structures,” including religion and the patriarchal family.
Such a framework disregards historical contingency and the role of global structural violence, formulates culture as inert and geographically restricted, and produces non-Western societies as “others.” It is also unable to appreciate women’s movements (throughout the world) which frame their goals for empowerment in terms different than those of the neoliberal order and that seek gains through their religion. Such struggles have chosen to employ and augment vernacular understandings of rights or justice that have greater local legitimacy, rather than adopting Western frameworks, and may be understood as constructing hybrid claims to modernity. Therefore, those challenging the normative and universal nature of the international rights regime call for accentuating the manifold, dynamic, and situated nature of rights. There are also those which question whether a framework of rights is the only viable one, given that movements exist within the Middle East and elsewhere which either reject this language or conceive of their struggles in alternative terms. Examples of such movements will be presented further on.

Moving on to the liberal feminist paradigm, which must be understood as intermeshed with modernization theory, and its impact on the crafting of development work and rhetoric for women in the Middle East, there are several key critiques to consider. However, before continuing it is necessary to first define gender. Perhaps the most provocative and compelling theorization concerning this term has been put forth by Judith Butler. She suggests that not only are gender categories and norms within a given space socially and discursively constructed but that they are performed. This concept of performativity describes the production of gendered subjects through the habitual embodiment of norms deriving from a regulatory discourse. In other words, Butler suggests that no internal core of female or male exists but that “what we take to be an ‘internal’ feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures.” Thus, a universal category of “women” or “men” is false as it assumes a universality of gendered subjectivity, which is always socially constituted and contingent, and also ignores differences of identity within a particular space including class, ethnicity and race.

However, liberal feminists writing on women located outside of the West tend to engage in the “production of the ‘Third World Woman’ as a singular monolithic subject,” rather than recognizing the historical and material specificity of subjectivity as well as the role of differences of identity in determining experiences of oppression. Within this model, gender roles are constituted outside of such social institutions as the family rather than through them or producing them. Gender is thus taken to be the foundation of power structures, rather than such structures producing varied and constantly transforming gender systems through a dynamic process.

According to the liberal feminist discourse, to achieve empowerment and freedom one must simply become independent of such social structures as family. The presence of this discourse in the rhetoric and programming of the transnational women’s rights organizations is most clearly exhibited in their provision of such programs as the week-long “leadership development” training, regularly administered to women located in the Middle East region. A critical look at these workshops reveals that the discussions and exercises employed appear to be based on imparting to trainees the Western liberal feminist model of what an ideal woman is: secular, autonomous, and choosing elements of a Western liberal lifestyle. For example, such trainings tend to focus on increasing women’s participation in decision-making processes both within their families and at the community-level, with particular attention given to increasing “the number of women in formal leadership roles.” The workshops often include attempts to raise women’s awareness of international human rights conventions as well as instructing them...
in methods of persuasive communication and negotiation. They also encourage participants to work outside the home, obtain a high level of education, and vote and run for political office. The tone of these workshops varies between explicitly and implicitly identifying such attributes as crucial for becoming empowered and content.  

The universalistic and normative conclusion by liberal feminists that women in the Middle East must achieve autonomy in order to become emancipated, and therefore content, is problematic in several respects. Given that this framework is based on an understanding of gender and family systems in the Middle East as static, homogenous, and innately oppressive to women, it fails to recognize the impact of historical processes on these systems and roles in the Middle East and thus regional differentiation. For example, the gender structure in Lebanon differs from that found in Iran, each being influenced by distinct, yet not completely separate, historical processes. The discourse in question also neglects to explain the role of differences such as class, ethnicity, and geographical location. In other words, “the application of the notion of women as a homogeneous category to women in the Third World colonizes and appropriates the pluralities of the simultaneous location of different groups of women in social class and ethnic frameworks.” In Egypt for example, urban upper-class Muslim women face a markedly different range of familial obstacles and opportunities than do urban middle-class Coptic women and rural lower-class Muslim women.  

Further, the liberal feminist evaluation of the patriarchal family ignores differing conceptions of selfhood prevalent in the Middle East, including that of a relational or connective self, as put forth by Suad Joseph. This refers to a “notion of self in which a person’s boundaries are relatively fluid so that persons feel they are a part of significant others.” Degrees or forms of individualism are of course at times tolerated. However, the potentially beneficial role of the family unit, in providing economic security, political and social capital, encouragement, generosity, and love, within the Middle East region and outside of it, is not appreciated by the liberal feminist discourse. An unequivocal extolling of the patriarchal family is not here implied, as this structure is certainly productive of considerably negative effects for all participating in it. Rather, the point at stake here is that the patriarchal family appears to be both supportive and constraining, and therefore that the individualization of its members will not necessarily result in their empowerment. In fact, it is questionable whether even in Western societies, in which individualism is both fostered and flourishes, this practice has lived up to liberalisms’ claims of its emancipatory benefits for women. Criticism of liberal feminism’s assessment of the patriarchal family then “recognizes that ‘intermeshing’ repressive processes occur in and between households, communities, markets, and states; it does not singularly invest any of them with the power to improve lives.”  

Finally, the limitations of this particular discourse also emanate from its basis within the capabilities approach, which in fact serves as a foundational framework for the development field, including transitional women’s rights organizations. The capabilities approach is concerned with expanding one’s capability to (alternatively conceptualized by Amartya Sen as the freedom to) make choices in order to ensure human dignity. In other words, the quantity of choices available to a given person will expand in direct proportion to how free or capable he or she is, including a psychological understanding of what is possible. For example, one of the chief authors of the capabilities approach, the liberal-political philosopher Martha Nussbaum, asserts that a key capability is “being able to live one’s own life and nobody else’s. This means having certain guarantees of noninterference with certain choices that are especially personal and definitive of selfhood, such as choices regarding marriage, childbearing, sexual expression,
speech, and employment.”

Proponents of the capabilities framework also often construe formal employment and education as necessary for a woman’s empowerment, based on the understanding that increased access should lead, among other outcomes, to increased control over household resources. This framework is palpably based in a liberal-modern conception of what is desirable. By accentuating those specific capabilities required to make choices, this approach “glosses over the larger structural barriers and power dynamics that constrain actual opportunities.”

Liberal feminism also deems secularism as better able to empower women, and therefore that religion must be consigned to the private domain. Based on logic echoing the neoliberal rhetorical distaste for the presence of religion in the public arena, this view holds that religious claims will generate “rigid and intolerant policies that are particularly injurious to women and minorities.” Such an attitude is manifest in initiatives undertaken by transnational women’s rights organizations. For example, the Association for Women In Development’s “Resisting and Challenging Religious Fundamentalisms,” includes examinations and discussions of Islamic feminism, the relationship between gender, religion and justice, as well as strategies to resist religious fundamentalisms and evidence of the ways in which they erode women’s rights. This initiative does not differentiate between formal Islamic political parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood or the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and smaller, non-political Islamic piety movements in its condemnation of the “regressive” effects they have on women’s rights. The presence of this discourse is also apparent in the case in which grassroots women’s organizations and social movements in the Middle East are being linked to the transnational liberal feminist movement. These grassroots organizations and movements are then faced with choosing between the universalized and liberal secular human rights regime and local norms and values, thus pushing them to construct their concerns with women’s status within these limited parameters.

The liberal feminist conception of religion is based on a modernist binary construction that frames religion as backwards and secularism as progressive. By viewing religion in much the same way as culture - as stagnant, inherently oppressive, and unaffected by historical and global processes -, this framework is unable to perceive of the ways in which religiosity serves, at times and in specific contexts, as a source of power for women. For example, Egyptian women of the Awlad ‘Ali tribe elevate their social status by choosing to cover their faces in certain situations, thus demonstrating morality and honor in a society that values these attributes. Additionally, the recent adoption by women across the Middle East of a modern form of Islamic garb allows them to participate in the newly “sexually-integrated social space” while retaining a reputation of morality and affirming contemporary Islamic ethics. The liberal feminist framework also has difficulty grappling with the recent widespread emergence in the Middle East of social movements which pursue the fulfillment of hybrid conceptions of rights, equality, feminism, and personhood through their religion.

An important example of this is explored by Lara Deeb in her book, An Enchanted Modern. In it, she discusses the recent emergence of a “public piety” movement in the Al-Dahiya neighborhood of South Beirut in which women have been imputed a particular duty for achieving its goals, which include “understanding and practicing Islam ‘correctly’; sacrificing one’s time, money and life to help others,” and countering secular-liberal influences. This responsibility has been termed “women’s jihad” by the movement’s participants. Further, women’s centrality to the public piety movement is strongest in terms of the visible aspects of piety such as wearing Islamic dress and volunteering in jam’iyyat (community development
Considerable pressure is put on women to undertake such practices, both from the community and oneself. However, Deeb points out that the same women are also pressured by entrenched social norms not to neglect their households in favor of their community work in jam‘iyyat. They are also excluded from certain types of work and leadership positions within the public piety movement that have been deemed fit only for men.

Therefore, many women within this community have undertaken a “gender jihad,” or a struggle to encounter those limits based on gender that constrain them from participating more freely in the community and developing their piety. The women undertaking this struggle have formulated their ultimate aim in terms of achieving equity rather than equality, the latter of which they understand as denoting that “men and women [are] identical in substance and spirit, an equation they [feel is] both impossible and undesirable. They instead [argue] for equity-equivalent but not identical rights.” To achieve this goal, participants of the movement emphasize interpretations of Islamic texts that employ an equity view of the two genders in terms of their roles and rights. They also undertake taw‘iyya, “a combination of education and consciousness raising,” both to build the capacity of female volunteers to participate in public roles and to educate men regarding the view of authenticated Islam on gender roles, including the sharing of household duties. These examples, and countless others, point to the complexity, diversity, and dynamism of local feminist positions as well as “suggest that we need to think not only about how religiously based arguments for women’s rights might be structured differently from those of secular feminism, but also about how they are imbricated in a world produced by a century of debate and developments on the ground.”

Finally, in its efforts to empower and free Middle Eastern women, the liberal feminist paradigm relies on a specific and bounded understanding of “agency”, the application of which is deemed universally necessary and desired. The liberal feminist conception of this term is based on the assumption that all humans are “endowed with a will, a freedom, and an intentionality” which are “thwarted by relations of power that are considered external to the subject.” An agent of change is thus defined by liberal feminists as an autonomous subject with the capacity to conceive of as well as to resist or subvert the dominant normative structure. Conversely, lack of agency is understood as subordination to or the reinforcement of norms. Transnational women’s rights organizations reproduce this discourse through their efforts to “increase women’s agency for achieving their social, economic, and legal rights.” It is also present in their frequent framing of women as “agents of change” or “agents for social change” in terms of norm subversion as well as in the use of terms such as “resistance” or “resisting”. Yet, this particular conceptualization of agency has been challenged for its limited nature. It has been suggested, and most notably by Saba Mahmood, that this framework must be extended to recognize the ways in which norms are “performed, inhabited and experienced,” by recognizing that embodiment and performativity are crucial to subjectification, and therefore agent-making. That is, a range of modalities of agency have been proposed to exist including the inhabitation, suffering, and survival of norms.

This point is best clarified through examination of a particular grassroots women’s mosque movement in Egypt, which is part of a larger Islamic revival and centers around the cultivation of piety. Briefly, the concept of an Islamic Revival emerged around the early 20th century and began to achieve mass appeal starting around the early 1970’s throughout the Middle East region, due to an increasing concern with the rapid secularization of society implemented first by colonialists and later by post-independence nationalist regimes. In the late 1970’s, women’s mosque movements emerged when women representing a variety of ages and socio-
economic backgrounds began to meet on a weekly basis to read and discuss religious texts and interpretations. The goals of this movement are, through religious lessons and debates, to gain and disseminate a greater understanding both of the meaning behind and the proper way to carry out religious practices. The participants of the movement also seek to transform the way in which they live their daily lives so that they are in accordance with Islamic principles of piety. Further, there appears to be little interest in the reinterpretation of Islamic texts and rather the analysis and adoption of the existing and dominant schools of Sunni religious interpretation.

In her ethnography of this movement, Saba Mahmood highlights that these women cannot necessarily be described as either resisting or reinforcing their subordination. Rather, she suggests that it is possible to understand their agency as the performance and survival of norm structures. She notes that taking on a pious lifestyle may affect “a woman’s ability to inhabit the structure of patriarchal norms” by creating access to various resources and capacities. For example, these women at times face attempts by their male kin to obstruct their participation within the movement as well as their efforts to cultivate their piety. This most often occurs when husbands or male relatives are not particularly religious and feel that their wives’ involvement in the mosque movement and increasing religiosity impedes their own non-religious habits or when they see it as taking their wives away from their household duties. Mahmood suggests that in situations where female participants counter such opposition by invoking religious principles, this can neither be understood in terms of compliance with nor subversion of norms since the ultimate impetus for these women is the ability to cultivate their piety. Thus, such movements simultaneously problematize “the universality of the desire…to be free from relations of subordination and…from structures of male domination,” and challenge the restricted nature of the concept of agency as deployed by liberal feminists and transnational women’s rights organizations.

**Conclusion**

This essay has shown that due to flawed assumptions, the discourses of modernity and liberal feminism in the contexts of transnational women’s development organizations working in the Middle East leave them unable to recognize alternative understandings of rights, equality, feminism, and personhood. Further, these discursive frameworks function as a form of transnational governmentality by making theirs the only acceptable terms of the debate. This analysis then elucidates why it is that even some of the most radical organizations within the international development field, despite their worthy intentions, are creating programming and rhetoric aimed at women in the Middle East that is commonly inappropriate, reductionist, ahistorical and dismissive of hybrid modernities.

Therefore, the following questions remain to be addressed: How might Westerners who seek to enhance people’s capacity in the Global South create change without imposing their world-view, and do so in a way that is respectful of difference? In other words, how can one consider places where religion and community play a key role in everyday life, where various forms of agency exist, and that define a meaningful life and therefore notions of self-hood in different ways? Finally, how might this be done in a way that is neither universalist nor relativist? Donna Haraway has proposed that in order to attempt objectivity and avoid the traps of both universalism and relativism, which she perceives as “promising vision from everywhere and nowhere equally,” there is a way of seeing which she has termed both a “partial perspective” and “passionate detachment.” By these terms she refers to a “view from a body,
always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity." Thus, her recommendation serves as an objection to the classic objectivist position, which denies the location of knowledge, by calling for the recognition of the location, subjectivity, and social identifiers of the researcher or practitioner. However, this by itself is not enough. There is a need to reject some of the language of identity politics, as both subjectivity and vision are multidimensional and since “there is no way to ‘be’ simultaneously in all, or wholly in any, of the privileged (i.e., subjugated) positions structured by gender, race, nation, and class.” That is, the fact of our location does not provide us with sufficient knowledge or insight. We must also take on the viewpoint of critical positioning, which calls for analytic work and the positing of questions from our location.

Additional suggestions for moving forward, coming from both academia and the international development field, have centered on transforming the framework of development from that of human rights to social justice. Specifically, such an approach would be one “that respects differences, an ethic of fairness, and [recognizes] that struggles are often necessary and valuable aspects of life,” as well as that appreciates that conceptions of freedom, justice, and empowerment are “plural, dialectical, and continuously redefined.” This is essential in order to politicize development work as well as to truly address underlying structural inequalities and power relations, at both the local and global level.

There is also a need for research to be undertaken in a number of directions, including ascertaining what types of efforts (implemented by what types of organizations or movements) might be both appropriate and effective in terms of ensuring that the every-day needs of women in the Middle East are being met, and that hybrid claims to personhood are respected. Additionally, interested academics should consider exploring ways in which development work may be modified to reflect the critiques expounded on in this paper and elsewhere. For example, there is a need to question the appropriateness of the one-week-training program for the purposes of empowerment, capacity building, and leadership development, due to the intrinsic role of performance in subjectification. In such settings it is also necessary for both academia and the development field to gain a better understanding of what women in the Middle East, including participants from a variety of struggles, perceive as the ideal role of the West in terms of attempts to improve their lives. This might entail no role at all. Clearly, it will also be important for scholars to continue to undertake ethnographic explorations in different communities throughout the Middle East of movements and phenomena that represent claims to modernity outside of the Western conception.

A powerful and sustainable remedy to the issues explored in this paper would be to address the apparent dearth in awareness and understanding by development practitioners of the critical theories and debates outlined here, and elsewhere, and to do so in terms which appeal to the practitioners’ desires to improve the lives of women in the Global South in general and the Middle East in particular. Specifically, I am proposing that the gap between development and academia be bridged by an intermediary organization committed to promoting critical theories, which provides access to scholarly publications, spurs development practitioners to make use of them, and provides a forum for debate and discussion among practitioners, donors, and academics. The intervention of such an organization is necessary in order to ensure adequate understanding on the part of practitioners as well as to generate concrete strategies for integrating critiques into development practice.
Notes

11. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid, pp. 15-16
19. Ibid, pp. 9
24. Ibid. pp. 7+11
27. Ibid, pp. 8
28. Ibid, pp. 14
29. Ibid, pp. 16
Ibid, pp. 68.
38 Ibid, pp. 333
39 Ibid, pp. 340
40 Ibid, pp. 342
41 Women’s Learning Partnership, “Leadership and Empowerment,”
   http://www.learningpartnership.org/en/programs/leadership
46 Ibid, pp. 333–358
50 Ibid, pp. 71
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56 Association for Women in Development, “AWID’s Initiatives and Programs” http://awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives
57 Association for Women in Development, “Resisting and Challenging Religious Fundamentalisms,”
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64 Ibid, pp. 204
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