New Evidence for the Survival of Sexually Libertine Rites among some Nuṣayrī-ʿAlawīs of the Nineteenth Century

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Charges of sexual deviance, including sodomy, wife sharing, incest, and the orgiastic night have dogged the Nuṣayrīs from their earliest history. As similar allegations can be found in the heresiographical treatises of many cultures,¹ most scholars of Islamic heterodoxy have dismissed these types of accusations as mere polemical slander.² While this may be the case in some instances, it is important not to discount these reports simply because of their polemical packaging. The heresiographical accounts can often preserve actual sectarian customs that were merely misunderstood or misrepresented by the orthodox establishment. For example, as I demonstrated in a previous article, the charge of homosexuality that al-Nawbakhtī leveled against the Nuṣayrīs was likely based on a misconstrual of their initiation ceremonies, which were conducted as symbolic marriages between men.³ Since the Nuṣayrīs vehemently opposed homosexuality it is unlikely that the heresiographical accounts also preserve memory of an actual sodomizing rite.⁴ Nevertheless one cannot assume that a charge is libelous simply because it is shocking. Sexual behavior in the pre-modern Islamic world was far more diverse than one might imagine today and

¹ See for example Benko, Pagan Rome, 54–78; Wakefield and Evans, Heresies, 76–81, 103–4; Russel, Witchcraft in the Middle Ages, 90–4.
² Hodgson, “How Did the Early Shi’a become Sectarian?,” 7; Moosa, Extremist Shiites, xxii, 136–8, 410; Daftary, The Ismāʿīlīs, 67; Buckley, “The Early Shiite Ghulāḥ,” 314; Bausani, Religion in Iran, 140; Tucker, Mahdis and Millenarians, 114.
³ Tendler Krieger, “Marriage, Birth, and Bāṭini Taʾwil.” This article explores the ways in which the early Nuṣayrīs conceived initiation upon the analogy between sexual intercourse and the transmission of religious knowledge. Extending from this analogy, they structured their first stage of initiation as a marriage between a shaykh, who stands in the position of the husband, and a novice, who is his wife. Since both partners in this union are actually male, it makes sense that charges of sodomy should have been cast against the Nuṣayrīs, but in practice the union was strictly educational and did not involve any physical intimacy.
it is important not to impose current morality (or even the morality of the medieval Islamic theologians) on the Muslim sects.

In her recently published book *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran*, Crone demonstrates how several of the charges leveled against the heterodox sects contain kernels of truth that were distorted and sensationalized by the Islamic theologians. For example, she shows how the accusations of sexual communism ubiquitously associated with the Khurramites reflect a rural Iranian custom whereby brothers held wives and property in common. Like European primogeniture, this practice ensured that land would not be subdivided among numerous heirs. This type of fraternal polyandry was by no means the libertine free for all described by the heresiographers, but simply a practice that testifies to an alternate sexual morality that time and Islamic conformity have eliminated.

However, it is not fair to whitewash all of the charges. It is certainly possible that some of the sexual rites described in the heresiographies were actually practiced, and precisely for their transgressive value. As antinomians the Nuṣayris considered themselves above the ritual obligations of Islam. That this belief translated into complete libertinism is unlikely. It is hard to imagine a sect surviving for over a millennium without sexual regulations, and enough evidence exists that would contradict this assumption. Nevertheless the ideological groundwork for a certain libertinism is present and may even have been instantiated by antinomian factions in the sect, as will be shown in what follows.

A newly discovered manual, ms Taymūr ‘Aqāʾid 564, currently housed in the Khizāna al-Taymūriyya of the Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, appears to have belonged to such a group. Written in Hama in 1306/1889, it is a manual for

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7 The Khizāna al-Taymūriyya is the private collection of manuscripts donated to the Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya in 1930 by Aḥmad Taymūr, a wealthy Egyptian of Kurdish extraction. In the *Fihris al-khizāna al-taymūriyya* this manuscript is descriptively titled al-Majmūʿ fiʿaqāʾid al-nuṣayriyya (a collection about Nuṣayrī doctrines) and the only detail provided is that it was transcribed in 1306 AH and includes the doctrines and prayers of the Nuṣayris. (*Fihris al-khizāna al-taymūriyya* 3:117.) It is also listed as item 124 in Massignon’s bibliography of Nuṣayrī works; see Massignon, “Esquisse d’une bibliographie Nusayrie,” 648. Neither cataloger appears to have inspected the manuscript with any care, as they seem to be unaware of its unique content, which extends beyond these chapters on sexual libertinism. The actual title which appears on the cover page of the manuscript is *K. al-Majmū’,* which can literally be translated as “the canon or the compilation” under which is a subtitle explaining that the