



# Piety and Pleasure: Religion, Sexuality and the Cultivation of the Self among Ghanaian-Dutch and Somali-Dutch Women\*

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## Abstract

This article focuses on how religious piety and sexual pleasure go hand in hand, rather than mutually excluding each other, as is often articulated in the Dutch public sphere. The hegemonic idea of Dutch sexual progressiveness presents female sexual pleasure and satisfaction as being in conflict with religion. As a result, women from religiously inclined ethnic minorities are often seen as being suppressed or at least sexually restrained. In contrast, we found that, from a religious perspective, female pleasure is important to conjugal happiness and to women's well-being. While religious doctrine thus provides a space for the pursuit of sexual pleasure, this space is circumscribed by moral prescriptions, such as a prohibition on premarital sexuality. As a result, women need to craft a way of becoming sexually knowledgeable. Women's trajectories to do so show how piety and sexual pleasure are central to the cultivation of the self. We argue that the term 'sexual well-being' articulates how sexual pleasure and religious aspirations are interconnected, rather than being in tension: in the process of subject formation of piety, they mutually reinforce one another.

**Keywords:** sexuality, religion, gender, pleasure, piety, self-cultivation

## Introduction

Dahlia was a Somali-Dutch woman aged 27 who described herself as a religious person who has a personal and important relationship with Allah, the Muslim God. Bakuri, the first author, met Dahlia barely six months after her marriage in 2017. Dahlia lived with her husband in Rotterdam, a major city in the Netherlands. She had met her husband through a cousin's recommendation, and prior to her marriage they had met in the presence of her family, and had also had conversations over the mobile phone. She explained that she had gotten married as a virgin and that she had been anxious about her sex life once married. The first night was fraught with

anxiety, but 'Alhamdulillah [praise to God] we worked at it overtime, we had to get to know one another, especially what made each other happy, [what] our love languages [were] and [how to] explore our bodies together. It was important to understand ourselves first, we figured it out and it's been all joy my dear.' 'And sexual happiness?' Bakuri responded. Dahlia replied: 'Oh you! That's what I have been telling you. How explicit do you want me to be? I am shy [laughing]. It came when we understood ourselves. It wasn't difficult at all. It's important because you are happy, helpful and able to understand your own body and his as well. You start making love often and prepare for it. Our intention is clear to make our marriage work, 'Insha Allah [if God wills it], He'll help you.' What Dahlia refers to as 'understanding ourselves' is what we will explore further in this article.

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Dahlia's story highlights how, for many of the religious, heterosexual women whom Bakuri encountered in her study, sexual desire is important to them as persons and vital to their marriages. They explained the need for a couple to understand and work towards sexual pleasure for both spouses. They often justified their argument by relying on religious prescriptions drawn from both formal and informal sources, and would typically explain how women's sexual pleasure was important for their well-being. Dahlia explained that 'it is Allah's desire to see women happily married, and sex between spouses is *ibadah* [service to God].' Religious women like Dahlia understood sexual pleasure as part of their religious self-realization, and hence integral to their devotion to God. Just as acts of worship and service to God were crucial to their understandings of piety, the pursuit of sexual pleasure was part and parcel of their religious ethos. In other words, religious piety and sexual pleasure went hand in hand.

This is in contrast with the idea that female sexual pleasure and religious piety exclude each other, as is often articulated in the Dutch public sphere. Bartelink and Knibbe (this issue) show how, in publications and public debates that address sexuality, taboo is used as a code word for religion, culture and traditions. The hegemonic idea of Dutch sexual progressiveness presents female sexual pleasure and satisfaction as being in conflict with religion, hence women from religiously inclined ethnic minorities are often seen as being suppressed or at least sexually restrained. Religion is viewed with suspicion generally within Dutch society, and the Dutch unease with religion is arguably rooted in Dutch society's rapid deconfessionalization in the 1960s. Secularity and openness to sexuality were taken to be iconic of progressiveness, and this narrative continues to dominate the Dutch public discourse on sexual freedom (Mepschen et al. 2010, Scott 2009). As a result, religious people who uphold premarital and extramarital chastity are pitted against non-religious people who are imagined to embody sexual liberalism. Such

framings are easily turned into a mechanism that separates the supposedly progressive Dutch from the conservative and hence allegedly sexually repressed religious Other (Bartelink 2016). This is not only a particular Dutch phenomenon but also part of European feminist thought, with its largely secular roots in which religion has systematically been connected to women's oppression (Bracke 2008).

The Netherlands is historically a society characterized by migration. Transnational migration since the 1970s has given rise to a discourse on autochthony that sheds a particular light on certain groups of Dutch citizens as not authentically Dutch (Geschiere 2009). In particular, migrants from ethnic minority groups who are Muslims have come to be viewed with suspicion, probably due to the growing visibility of Islam in the Netherlands (Schrijvers and Wiering 2018, Rana 2017, Beekers and Schrijvers 2020). More specifically, the headscarf or *hijab* has become a preoccupation in public debate, articulating an anxiety with migration that becomes projected upon Islam (Moors 2009, Fadil 2011). The veiled Muslim woman has become the icon of religious repression, particularly sexual repression (Scott 2009). While there is less antagonism to Christian groups, their extensive religious networks and particular religious practices, such as devil worship, HIV healings or so-called homo-healings, are distrusted if not suspected of breaking the law (Knibbe 2018). Christian women are also seen as being repressed by religion, as Christianity emphasizes male headship and women's submission in many spheres of life (Schrijvers and Wiering 2018). In short, public debates on migration and ethnicity polarize around issues of gender and sexuality (Knibbe and Bartelink 2019), and religious communities are seen as an obstacle to the emancipation of women. Within this Dutch discursive setting, persons from religiously inclined minorities, such as the Somali-Dutch and Ghanaian-Dutch women in this study, are seen as restricted in general, particularly regarding their sexuality.

Interestingly, as the introductory paragraph shows, religious women in this study prioritized their sexual pleasure through practices and choices that are central to their religious self-realization. For them, a good life is a religiously inspired life. According to Mahmood (2005; 2001) religious duties and acts of worship cannot simply be represented as religious obligations, as they are crucial to the cultivation of the pious self. Religious practices have a deeper meaning, as they are crucial to self-understanding and self-respect. Mahmood's work elaborates how care of the self is something to be learned and practised through techniques of the body such as prayer or dress. As religious regimes endorse the pursuit of sexual pleasure, they provide routes to do so, while simultaneously sanctioning other morals such as the prohibition of premarital sexuality. Moreover, they prescribe chastity more strictly for women. Hoel and Shaikh (2013) outline the same paradox for women in South Africa. On the one hand, women's notions of the self are informed by gendered understandings of the God-believer relationship, including notions of what constitutes worship or devotion. Generally, this means that women are understood to be submissive, while at other times they demand full recognition of their sexual agency and equal personhood by stressing ethical ideals such as mutuality and reciprocity in marriage. Whereas Hoel and Shaikh stress how this often renders women vulnerable, we are also interested in the instances in which women successfully create spaces for manoeuvring through contradictions and tensions.

We argue that women need to craft a way of becoming sexually knowledgeable. While this is the case for non-religious women as well, for the women in this study it meant a careful weighing of being virtuous while dealing with issues that easily slip into being impious. By taking care of themselves, religious women create diverse trajectories to enhance their knowledge and sexual well-being. According to Foucault, the study of the experience and use of the body as a locus of sensory aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and

resourceful self-fashioning uncovers how discourse, knowledge and discipline structure what he calls care of the self. And vice versa, there is the issue of how these experiential practices develop discourse, knowledge and discipline. With regard to sexuality, people explore, acquire and assume responsibility for their sexual well-being as part of their efforts towards a good life through a variety of bodily practices. We intend neither to justify nor to argue in favour of cultural relativism, but instead wish to explain the processes through which religious relations of domination also provide the means for agency.

### **Religion and Sexuality**

This article is based on an ethnographic study by the first author of the lives of self-identifying Ghanaian-Dutch and Somali-Dutch people in the Randstad area of the Netherlands (the cities of Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht) from February 2017 until July 2018. Data collection started with informal conversations focusing on daily life in the Netherlands, followed by participant observation involving accompanying interlocutors during religious and social events and visiting them in their homes, as well as in-depth interviews. In total, 61 interlocutors were involved, 40 Ghanaian-Dutch and 21 Somali-Dutch. In terms of gender there were 33 women and 28 men, and their ages ranged from 20 to 66 years old. Whereas the majority of the Somali-Dutch people were born in the Netherlands, the majority of the Ghanaian-Dutch people were born in Ghana. All the Somali-Dutch people involved in this study identified as Muslim. The majority of those of Ghanaian descent identified as Christian (32), the remaining eight being Muslim. Marital status varied widely among the research group, from being single, married, unmarried, divorced or living with a partner to having an informal relationship. People came from different socio-economic backgrounds and worked as sales personnel, taxi-drivers, lawyers, cleaners, social workers, journalists and non-governmental organization (NGO) employees, and a few were self-employed. Their educational back-

grounds also ranged widely, from elementary school to tertiary level. Some were on social welfare support from the government, others were seeking job opportunities, and a small number (four) were students pursuing tertiary education. To ensure the anonymity of the interlocutors we use pseudonyms and have also changed their occupations, residences and family details when these characteristics are not directly relevant to the analysis.

In general, the religious discourses and practices of both the Ghanaian-Dutch and the Somali-Dutch centred extensively around the notion of the complementarity of gender, sexuality, reproduction, family life and spirituality. Marriage relationships were understood to be based on hierarchies of female submission and male leadership. Both Muslim and Christian discourses articulated gender in essentialist terms and portrayed husband and wife as complementary yet different, with different responsibilities.

In response to the stereotyping of Muslims in the Netherlands, many of the women we interviewed strongly objected to popular views in the media and argued that, instead of representing Islam as repressive, a careful study of the Quran and the *hadith*<sup>1</sup> actually harbours ways to empower women. The women in this study drew on religious authority in a variety of ways, often citing religious texts (see also Beckman 2010, Rahbari and Longman 2018). Similarly, this Sunna<sup>2</sup> goes as follows: 'Do not engage in sexual intercourse with your wife like hens; rather, firstly engage in foreplay with your wife and flirt with her and then make love to her' (Halliyatul Muttaqin: 110). These words were often interpreted to mean that the prophet insists on the importance of practices of seduction and erotics

prior to sexual intercourse so that men do not climax before their wives and deprive women of sexual satisfaction. Several Islamic scholars Bakuri spoke with and listened to when accompanying her interlocutors explained that there were no specific rules for sexual intercourse for married people; whatever is pleasing is right, and likewise, whatever is mutually displeasing should be avoided. Nevertheless, some of the Islamic scholars were quick to point out that there are exceptions to this rule, arguing that the Quran clearly forbids certain acts such as anal sex. With the help of scriptures and scholars, women interpreted religious prescriptions for their benefit.

Scriptures such as those mentioned above are not always widely shared or known. When Zulaiha (29 years old, Somali-Dutch woman) was arranging the necessary requirements for her marriage ceremony in 2018, the sheikh (Islamic scholar) introduced her to the Islamic narrative on sexual satisfaction for women. She had always thought that (the importance of) sexual pleasure was a Dutch value, she explained. So she was surprised when the sheikh gave her some Islamic literature written by Islamic scholars to read so as to become knowledgeable about sex, sexuality and erotics in her marriage. She explained how the future couple were advised that they need to prioritize intimacy and romance, and that both husband and wife must be sexually satisfied.

Among the Ghanaian diaspora in Netherlands, Pentecostal groups dominate, which have a very particular take on family life, gender complementarity and sexual pleasure. Religious discourse on sexuality has expanded beyond reproduction to include happiness, intimacy, material comfort and the mutual responsibility of the spouses for achieving these goals. Churches have counsellors and leaders who discuss conjugal happiness in their sermons, and they offer a variety of booklets, courses and bible study fellowships that address building a successful marital relationship. The importance of sexual pleasure is particularly articulated during premarital counselling sessions and talks organized for would-be couples. A discourse has developed emphasizing

<sup>1</sup> The Hadith is a collection of traditions containing sayings of the prophet Muhammad which, with accounts of his daily practice (the Sunna), constitute the major source of guidance for Muslims apart from the Quran.

<sup>2</sup> The Sunna is a traditional part of Muslim law based on Muhammad's words or acts, accepted (together with the Quran) as authoritative by Muslims and followed particularly by Sunni Muslims.

the importance of sexual pleasure in creating a strong bond between the spouses, which is believed to bring joy, peacefulness and spiritual growth. An important element of this discourse is the relation between sexual pleasure and a healthy, fit and attractive body. Women and men are encouraged to work towards a healthy body, which in turn will bring spousal happiness in the enjoyment of sex. As Mama Agnes (54 years old, Ghanaian-Dutch woman and a pastor's wife<sup>3</sup>) described it during a women's fellowship meeting, 'Sex as instituted by God is a blessing and is supposed to be great. Prepare for it and enjoy God's blessings all the days of your life.'

During one visit by Bakuri to another weekly women's fellowship meeting, the pastor's wife who was presiding stressed the importance of sexual pleasure for both husband and wife by citing 1 Corinthians 7:3 (NIV): 'The husband should fulfil his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband.' Similarly, the Song of Solomon, a Bible chapter, was referenced many times because of its poetic lyrics that speak of the longing of a woman for her often absent lover. Biblical teachings on desire, sexual practices, marriage and the body are somewhat inconsistent and hence open to interpretation. However, most Christian leaders encouraged couples to satisfy each other sexually, as long as this occurred in a monogamous relationship and with mutual consent. Pastors were not explicit in sermons but used the euphemism 'marital duty', which is understood as engaging in sexual practice and was a way of letting their congregation know that every married couple must engage in sex regularly to remain good Christians.<sup>4</sup> It was often mentioned that inadequate sexual pleasure could cause lingering marital problems leading to divorce, which was considered a grave fail-

ing that had to be avoided at all costs, hence they fostered sexual pleasure as good for the marital and spiritual lives of Christians.

For most of the Somali-Dutch and Ghanaian-Dutch women, romance and sexuality coexisted with ideals of rigid sexual morality (Liberatore 2017, Bakuri 2021). Hence, the conjugal couple in Islam and Christianity is differently perceived compared with what is presumed to be the Dutch model, generally articulated in the media, that is based on the idea that the couple is ideally autonomous from any religious or other authority. Within Islam and Christianity, the couple is ordained by God. As reproduction is therefore central to living a religious life, sexual pleasure is not separate from the sacred but is part of it, an extraordinary part of life to be enjoyed by both partners. Yet, although sexual pleasure is a gift from God, it must also be cultivated.

### **Caring for Oneself and Cultivating the Self**

As the introductory paragraph shows, the religious women in this study prioritized their sexual pleasure through practices and choices that were central to their religious self-realization. Religious practices cannot just be seen as obligatory but become meaningful by their very exercise. According to Mahmood, religious practices are often 'critical markers as well as ineluctable means by which one trains oneself to be pious' (2001: 214). She argues how practices of and obedience to prescriptions and restrictions precede subject formation while making it possible: the pious self is not already existent and expressed through religious acts, but instead *emerges* through such acts. This processual understanding of piety uncovers how religiousness is a way of life in which the praxis of self-cultivation is central. Religious practices, such as donning the *hijab* or praying, are techniques of self-fashioning which ought to arise from and simultaneously cultivate correct attitudes, intentions and emotions. Being religious becomes a moral virtue acquired through the coordination of outward behaviour and inward dispositions (Mahmood 2005). Choices such as avoiding pre-

<sup>3</sup> In most Ghanaian churches, the religious leaders are men, and consequently their wives have a special role as female leaders.

<sup>4</sup> Although Bakuri followed her interlocutors to the mosque, because she did not understand Arabic she was not able to grasp the ins and outs of the sermons. She would ask afterwards what was being discussed but did not get to know what exactly was said and how.

marital sex and practices such as reading religious texts are religious routines which are central to self-cultivation, where the body mediates religious meanings and personal aspirations (see also Jouilli 2015).

Religious practice is also central to taking care of oneself in aspiring to a good life. Foucault employed the notion of care of the self as entailing an attitude, a mode of behaviour, that is enacted in daily life and evolves into procedures, practices and formulas that people reflect on, develop, perfect and pass on (1986). The body is a locus of sensory aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and is central to resourceful self-fashioning: 'technologies of the self ... permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts and a way of being, so as to transform and attain a certain state of happiness...' (Foucault 1988: 19). Care of the self is not just about preservation but about becoming a better person: piety is central to care of the self.

The way Foucault connects care of the self with cultivating happiness is important. Women's bodily aesthetic appreciation and pursuit of sexual knowledge shows how, in addition to being the fulfilment of religious obligation, religious practices are also sensory engagements that authorize religious meanings and enhance personal (religious) aspirations. For the women in this study, happiness was exactly this: a spiritually meaningful life where their personal aspirations regarding their health, employment and/or careers, family matters, material comfort, etc. could be worked on. Because our female interlocutors emphasized the importance of happiness, of which sexually fulfilling lives were a part, we were led to study sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure is a slippery term, of course, and it risks being a self-evident concept, as we all assume we know what we mean by it. Interestingly, Foucault has argued for a 'desexualisation' of pleasure so as to work towards a 'general economy of pleasure' and to make the body 'infinitely more susceptible to pleasure' by developing its capacities

for varieties of somatic pleasures that 'transcend the sexual' (Foucault 1997: 137). Transcending the sexual partly means going beyond genital pleasure,<sup>5</sup> and we also argue for a widening of the term sexual pleasure to encompass broader aspects of well-being. Moreover, conflict, tensions and contradictions are part and parcel of the pursuit of a good life, or sexual pleasure for that matter, and it is important to take them together in the study of religion and sexuality.

For the women in this study, a good life is a religiously inspired life, and they assessed their well-being in relation to religiously inspired and socially endorsed morals. With regard to sexuality, the women explored ways to enhance their well-being, acquiring knowledge and assuming responsibility for their own sexual well-being as part of their efforts to achieve a good life. They did so through a variety of bodily practices, social praxes and lifestyle choices.

While religious regimes endorse the pursuit of sexual pleasure and provide routes to do so, they also sanction other morals such as the prohibition of premarital sexuality. Sexual relationships before or outside of marriage were socially condemned. Opportunities for extramarital sex existed, but if such behaviour was found out it was very shameful for both the woman and the man. Premarital sex could seriously damage a person's reputation and chances of finding a suitable marriage partner, though this was true to a lesser extent for men than for women. People navigated both premarital and extramarital sexuality in socially acceptable ways by using secrecy (see also Bakuri et al. 2020). Several interlocutors discussed their ambivalences regarding premarital sex. For some, engaging in premarital sexuality did not necessarily mean that women did not consider themselves as virgins. They carefully chose sexual activities which they believed would not break their hymen, the symbol of a woman's entry into sexual life. For instance,

<sup>5</sup> Foucault's argument for the desexualization of pleasure occurs in a very particular debate. His aim is to disrupt the obsession with sex as the key to all pleasure.

Rashida (28 years old, Ghanaian-Dutch Muslim woman), explained how she learnt from some Muslim friends how to keep the hymen intact while enjoying sexual pleasure through a variety of sexual practices, such as having sex between the thighs, or rubbing a penis between the labia majora, rubbing themselves against objects such as the pillow, shower head or a teddy bear, and through oral and anal sex. This was not yet her personal experience but something she was considering trying out. She had heard that it was a nice experience and that it was possible to keep her sexual life a secret. Rashida told Bakuri that this was optional for her because one could have pleasure and not be afraid of losing one's virginity or getting pregnant. For other young female interlocutors, both Christian and Muslim, this was not viable: not engaging in any erotic practice was crucial to their understanding of being a virgin and was very important to the women themselves. There was thus a variety of positions in terms of how people related to religious prescriptions.

Because of religious moralities, when women were about to marry, they were presumed to be sexually innocent. Hence women were faced with a paradox: on the one hand, sexual pleasure was discussed as being important to a spiritually fulfilling marriage, while on the other hand they were expected to be ignorant of such matters and even considered gullible. Not being knowledgeable was a source of anxiety for otherwise self-confident women. Hence women sought to become informed in readiness for their wedding day by crafting ways to become sexually knowledgeable. We propose to see this as taking care of the self: religious women created diverse trajectories to become sexually knowledgeable and to enhance their sexual well-being through self-education, socializing in homo-social environments and listening to the advice of experts.

### **Self-education**

Becoming sexually knowledgeable was not only a question for women who were about to get married, it concerned a longer-term process that

stretched across a woman's life course and its shifting aspirations and possibilities.

For many women who were about to get married, print media and online textual sources were an important source of information. In fact, it became clear during the research how abundant religiously appropriate information was. Women searched for and found the information they needed by reading Christian and Muslim booklets. Many Muslim interlocutors read books by authors whose workshops and conferences on marriage and relationships they had attended, such as Umm Zakiyyah and Yasmin Mogahed. Books such as *Let's Talk About Sex*, *Muslim Love* and *Love and Happiness* were being read by our interlocutors during fieldwork. In Ghanaian Christian circles too, books and booklets addressing matters of gender, sex and sexual pleasure figured prominently, and many people in this study read them, for instance during Bible fellowship meetings. At some of the women fellowship meetings that Bakuri attended they read and discussed books such as *The Perfect Couple* by Uncle Ebo White, and *Of Spiders and Silkworms* by P.G. Sebastian.

These books were and continue to be read, though not only by the particular religious groups to which the authors belong, as they have also become general knowledge. The women in this study also used texts from various settings, and while they preferred religiously inspired texts, they also consumed medical texts, popular literature and online platforms.

The media have become an important source of information regarding knowledge about sex, sexuality and sexual well-being. Dahlia, whose story this article opened with, sought for knowledge beyond Islamic literature as well, but was careful to include teachings or information that aligned with her religious values. For instance, she watched romantic Hollywood movies and read a variety of romantic novels that enlightened her about the ideal romantic relationship. Yet, she was critical in her choices: characters in these movies and novels that were deemed appropriate were seen as embodying

religious virtues worth learning about. With the increase in online media, the ability to find more resources that are appropriate to one's religious background have also increased.

While knowledge may start with information, the praxis of this knowledge is another important part of the sequence of becoming knowledgeable. Some interlocutors mentioned how they engaged in exploring their own bodies by touching and feeling, and how sexual self-stimulation became a means of knowing their bodies. Some explained that their reasons for such 'exploration' were to discover their bodies and teach their partners where they liked to be touched; others said it was meant to help delay a partner's early sexual climaxing until both became fully satisfied. Some women described masturbation as religiously inappropriate, unacceptable, or sinful, and were very uncomfortable talking about such personal experiences. Women generally avoided the term masturbation, which they preferred to describe as 'touching myself', 'exploring my body' or 'playing with my body', among other expressions. Sandra (44 years old, Ghanaian-Dutch woman) was the only person who explicitly used the word masturbation. For her, masturbation was sinful, but it was the best way to deal with her sexual desire in the absence of her husband, who lived in Ghana.

Women's explorations and becoming knowledgeable also included practices of beautification, and many emphasized proper personal hygiene. It was not uncommon for women to use aromatic herbs in cleaning parts of the body, to smell good and to look more beautiful. Cleanliness and olfactory desirability were generally well practised. Dorcas (57 years old, Ghanaian-Dutch woman), whose husband was a pastor, explained that a 'satisfied wife is a happy wife,' which in turn enabled her to serve God wholeheartedly. Dorcas explained that sexually satisfied couples are fulfilling God's plan of appreciating the whole human body as a gift. She elaborated how she would take a bath and carefully select lingerie to look and to feel 'sexy' as preparation for engaging sexually with her husband. Similarly, Fawzia

(47 years old, Somali-Dutch woman) showed Bakuri the use of *unnsi*, a sugary and herbal incense to cleanse and odorize the body.<sup>6</sup> She then demonstrated this technique to Bakuri, when she had given her *unnsi* as a gift at a time when Bakuri's husband was returning from a trip. She explained how to burn the incense, how to stand over the pot where the *unnsi* is burned, with both legs to either side of it, letting the long dress or clothes fall all the way to the ground, and thus drawing the smoke upwards, wrapping itself around the whole body and permeating the skin.

The use of olfactory products to enhance wellness has always been widely practised. In Ghana, talcum powder has been used for decades for a variety of purposes, such as absorbing sweat and avoiding its smell, but its use has declined. One day Bakuri accompanied Ama (35 years old, Ghanaian-Dutch woman) to the Ghanaian shop, where the latter bought talcum powder. Whereas Bakuri was surprised to see her buy the powder, Ama was surprised that Bakuri did not apply powder on her face and around the genitalia to smell good and in order to stimulate sexual desire. Women's care of the self reflected a variety of techniques they employed to become sexually knowledgeable and to develop their sexual well-being. For many of our interlocutors, being able to work towards and experience sexual pleasure endorsed a sense of femininity, of womanhood. They supported their explanations with religious texts to justify themselves and to manage the ambivalence between piety and sexual pleasure.

#### **Homo-sociality. The Importance of Togetherness**

Care of the self, its techniques and religious aspirations are learned and cultivated and are thus developed in a social environment (see also Foucault 1986: 33). In other words, care of the self

<sup>6</sup> *Unnsi* is a sugary incense that gives off a thick, sweet, musky smoke. The mixture of ingredients varies depending on the individual making it, but it generally contains a combination of frankincense, fragrant spices and oils.



involves others. In the religious communities of the interlocutors, it is common for women and men to meet separately, and these homosocial environments proved to be very important spaces for becoming sexually knowledgeable.

As part of her research, Bakuri joined a social club made up of Ghanaian women called the Darling Sisters.<sup>7</sup> The majority of the women were above fifty years old, and the group displayed the Ghanaian diaspora in all its diversity: different ethnic groups, Christian women, some of whom were church leaders and pastor's wives, but also Muslim women and other women, some of whom held respectable positions in the Ghanaian community in The Hague. The majority of the women were married, but not all, the latter being considered to be above marriageable age. The main purpose of this association was to promote social support and friendship. Social clubs or voluntary associations have always been popular in Ghanaian communities. In their early days, associations were formed based on employment (clerks, policemen, teachers, nurses), and people found mutual support and recognition, as the majority were migrants and found themselves disconnected from their usual ties such as those of kinship. In the Netherlands the custom of associations has continued, and they can be formed on the basis of many criteria, from religion and ethnicity to – as in this case – gender. The meetings of the Darling Sisters were organized every fortnight. Typical of many Ghanaian-based groups, their meetings started with prayers, and they took it in turns to pray for individual families, partners, marriages, children, members of the group, their health, finances, Ghana and the Netherlands. During these meetings, the Muslim women usually excused themselves to find a quiet space in the room to pray the Muslim Maghreb<sup>8</sup> prayer, as it often coincided with the time of their meeting.

Before and during their meetings, the women allowed time to share stories from home, work and the Ghanaian community in general. They

shared their daily experiences and life events as mothers, wives and daughters and much more. Many of the members emphasized the importance of marriage and motherhood in their lives as pious Muslim and Christian women. Discussions were often informal, cordial and entertaining. Humour and the capacity to speak with wit were held in high regard. Unlike one-to-one conversations about sexual matters, group discussions on these topics were characterized by cheering, laughter and banter. And sexual matters were often discussed in between other conversations or put on the table as an issue to be addressed directly. For instance, while discussing a popular radio programme's feature on sexuality, Sister Emelda (in her 50s) asked 'But how would you know if you have reached orgasm?', to which Joyce (in her 40s) responded in an affectionately mocking tone: 'Maybe you'll feel some rush in your body or your body might react differently, but all I know is that it's a very exciting feeling and you can't describe it.' The way she explained it caused much laughter. Similarly, during another meeting, the announcements encouraged members to join the group gym visit at least once a week. Such announcements are part of a larger discourse on the need to work on one's health. One member, Sister Hannah (in her 50s), mentioned that she bought a medication from the pharmacy that gave her extra energy after a long day's work as a cleaner. In fact, it had increased her sexual appetite and stamina. She recommended: 'Since we are all over fifty, this is the medication to keep us on our feet, it contains all the vitamins. As black people we need sunshine, and we don't get it here [in the Netherlands]. There is vitamin D in it too.' Some of the women asked Bakuri to write down the name of the medication for them, and others took pictures of the package with their smartphones, while Sister Hajia Rafia (54 years old, married, Muslim) startlingly commented on whether 'it isn't women's Viagra?'

Bakuri's interactions in social meetings with Somali-Dutch women were limited due to her inability to speak Somali, the main language used

<sup>7</sup> The name is a pseudonym.

<sup>8</sup> The Maghreb prayer is said just after sunset.

in such settings. She often relied on the support of an interpreter, which presented some limitations, and thus she mainly observed. She often heard women referencing the Quran and Hadith as promising a sensual life for men and women who live by the Islamic teachings. Discussions about sexual pleasure emerged spontaneously during conversations and were also met with banter and fun. During one meeting about childbirth, women discussed the link between the conception of children and their physical resemblance: according to them there is a connection between sexual satisfaction and the physical resemblance of the child with either the father or the mother. A few women explained that when a woman climaxed or reached orgasm while the man ejaculates, the child will physically resemble her. If she does not, then the child will look like the father. Thus they claimed it was very important to prioritize sexual satisfaction. Interestingly, in the Ghanaian community there was a similar narrative but slightly different in detail, as it was asserted that, when the woman 'outperformed sexually' during conception, the child will look after her.<sup>9</sup>

Bakuri also witnessed the elaborate art of applying creams, oils and lotions to the face, back, arms and hands, feet and legs during her visits to the sauna section of one of the gyms in Utrecht with middle-aged Somali-Dutch women. They regularly went to this particular gym in pairs and would meet others on Mondays anytime between 9 am to 4 pm, when the sauna was reserved for women only. The process of moisturizing, scrubbing and reapplying took considerable time in shifting between the bathroom and the gym's sauna section. They enjoyed these moments and explained how they reminded them of Somalia and how bath houses were an important part of their lives back there. Going in groups was important so they could help each other to apply the oils and lotions, while talking and sharing about their lives. The social impor-

tance of the sauna goes hand in hand with ideas of hygiene and how cleanliness is an essential part of their womanhood (see also Lowe 2015).

Middle-aged and elderly women are often overlooked in matters of sexuality due to stereotypes that during and after the menopause women have no sexual or erotic interest. Middle-aged and elderly women are often represented as asexual, and when their sexuality is considered, it is often in a medicalized way. The older women in this study understood and discussed femininity and sexuality alongside the stress of marriage and motherhood. In their discussions they enacted the importance of sexuality for themselves. And the same goes for young women: although they were expected to be sexually active in marriage only, they appropriated the religious discourse on responsibility to become sexually knowledgeable when unmarried. Women from different ages shared experiences, knowledge and advice during any social occasion, but regular meetings where the same group of women regularly met were the most productive, as they created a space in which to cultivate trust. For religious women, homo-social groups are important due to the way gender roles and gendered chastity, and gender segregation in the case of Muslims, is highlighted. These homo-social avenues provided ways to become knowledgeable in a trusting context.

The importance accorded to sexual pleasure as the panacea for a good marriage and for reproduction also put a lot of pressure on women. While the majority of the women seemed to genuinely enjoy having sex, others described sex as tiring and a wife's 'marital duty,' by which they meant that they had limited choice. A wife's refusal or reluctance to engage in sexual intercourse was often explained as allowing the husband to engage in extramarital relations, which was thought to lead to unhappiness and eventually to divorce. Women felt responsible for maintaining a sexually satisfactory marriage, which sometimes also caused anxiety, and these were some of the occasions for involving experts.

<sup>9</sup> The term 'outperforming' meant being the most active person during sexual intercourse.

### Expert Advice

Besides discussing sexual matters among friends, women also sought assistance about sexual matters through experts such as physicians, counsellors, religious scholars and leaders. Medical professionals such as general practitioners (GP)<sup>10</sup> and midwives were most often contacted. With regard to religious leaders, most Somali-Dutch interlocutors solicited the help of the imam or sheikh. Ghanaian-Dutch interlocutors also mentioned the imam and sheikh when they were Muslims, while Christians mentioned pastors, pastor's wives, other religious leaders and counsellors in their churches.

For the Ghanaian-Dutch people in the study, seeking advice from a pastor was a common choice. Sometimes couples went together to see their pastor or the pastor's wife for support. In such cases both husband and wife had an interest in resolving conflicts. For instance, Esther and Kwame (Ghanaian-Dutch couple both in their 40s) tried never to go to bed without having resolved an argument and would then make love. They had agreed to do so during their pre-marital counselling classes, it had been an explicit piece of advice of the counsellors, 'and it works,' Esther said. If their usual first steps towards reconciliation did not work, they went to their pastor: 'This hardly happens but there have been a few occasions we sought the voice of God through the pastor.' It helped them to maintain the kind of home they wanted 'out of love for my husband and towards working going to heaven.' As pleasurable sex was seen as an act of faith bringing the couple closer to God, for Esther such an 'intervention by God resisted the devil's plans to destroy Christian homes'.

During an interview in 2017, Ayisha (31 years old, Somali-Dutch woman) expressed her uncertainty about how she should negotiate sexual intercourse with her husband. He was often away from home due to his job, which required

much travelling and irregular shifts. She felt in some way stuck about what to do. On the one hand, piety required her to behave modestly, which implied that she could not demand too much attention from her husband, especially when he was tired from work. In addition, it was not appropriate to discuss her intimate marital issues with a third party. On the other hand, she recognized married women's need for sexual pleasure, and she mentioned how she missed sexual intimacy with her husband. As her husband had failed to respond to her question about how they could resolve this, she decided to seek help. She turned to a sheikh whom she and her husband knew well and whom they trusted, and whose authority was beyond question for her husband. The sheikh advised her to talk to her husband again. He had said 'Don't stop telling him what you need and like. Do not get tired of talking about your needs as a wife.' Subsequently the sheikh spoke to her husband and then to both partners and told them to take care of one another and to prioritize each other's sexual needs. He also told her she was right to seek his assistance, as her intention was to be happy, not to sin against her husband, but to make her marriage work. He concluded: 'God rewards good intentions.' She had thus handled the issue in a religiously appropriate way without having compromised her modesty. Ayisha's careful approach to solving her problems shows how little flexibility women sometimes have. Especially some Muslim women have less leeway because of religious prescriptions of modesty and shyness as gendered modes of behaviour.

There is a final remark which needs making on Somali-Dutch women and their capacity for sexual pleasure. An elephant in the room of this discussion is the question of female circumcision, often referred to as female genital mutilation. In public discourse and academic scholarship, the idea that women who have been circumcised cannot enjoy sexual intercourse and/or cannot enjoy sexual satisfaction is a very common and strong trope. From this study, a more complex and differentiated picture arises. During an event

<sup>10</sup> In the Netherlands, everybody must be registered with a General Practitioner (GP) near the place where he or she lives. The starting point for every medical intervention is the practice of this GP.

organized on the 'eradication of female circumcision (FC),' attended by Bakuri in The Hague in 2018, Hawa (in her 40s) who helped Bakuri with the translation from Dutch to English, told her that, more than the circumcision itself, she suffered from the stories about female circumcision in health programmes and the media. She had been circumcised before turning four years old, and she had not faced any difficulty when having sexual intercourse and always had a 'good time with my husband; it is a nice experience and never painful.' She had also had uncomplicated vaginal births for all her six children. Not only did the public debate distress her, so did the way that any gynaecological issue she faced was subsequently related to her circumcision.

Female circumcision was never discussed straightforwardly. When Bakuri inquired about it, women were hesitant to reply, though eventually most of them discussed it with her, explaining how they have come to distrust any conversation about female circumcision and preferred to shun it altogether. Basr (in her 50s) explained how she had enjoyed sex with her first husband even with what she called 'being cut' (this phrase shows how it has become nearly impossible not to relate to the hegemonic discourse). However, after her divorce and in her second marriage sexual intercourse had become quite painful. According to Basr this was not because she had been circumcised but because her body was aging and her husband was incapable of adjusting and providing the appropriate foreplay. It would go beyond this article to address and discuss the complexity of the custom and politics of female circumcision: we can only point out that more research is needed to articulate the density of the topic and women's experiences of it. The current knowledge about female circumcision needs to be more inclusive: if women cannot recognize themselves in health messages, they are likely to withdraw. The suspicions harboured by quite a number of women towards the Dutch health sector is the result of longer-term global and/or racial inequalities that need to be included in the production of knowledge. Our argument,

namely that piety and pleasure are not mutually exclusive, but co-produce one another and simultaneously create conflicts, tension and possibilities, depending on the situation and context, takes paradoxes and friction as starting points to understand, rather than as problems to solve.

### Conclusion

In this paper we have been describing the lives of pious women in response to simplistic tropes about religion, gender, and sexuality. Dominant ideas of Dutch sexual progressiveness present female sexual pleasure as in conflict with religion, hence women from religiously inclined ethnic minorities are often framed as being suppressed or at least sexually restrained. In the discourse of secularism, the secular and the sexually liberated are synonymous. Sexual liberation is represented 'as fulfilling the natural inclinations of all women, whereas religion denies their innate femininity' (Scott 2018: 157). In contrast to common thought, the question of sexual pleasure and female satisfaction is situated at the heart of religious Ghanaian and Somali communities in the Netherlands. Conjugal happiness is a religious responsibility, and religious regimes therefore provide the space for female sexual pleasure. The importance accorded to female emancipation in the name of sexual progressiveness rests more on an opposition between the West and the rest, as ironically the notion of gender equality rests on a fundamental unequal complementarity of heteropatriarchy (cf. Scott 2018). Interestingly, there is thus more commonality between so-called Dutch and non-Dutch values. For the women in this study, ideals of complementarity and matrimonial well-being required exploration, acquiring knowledge and assuming responsibility for one's sexuality and general well-being. Sexual knowledge was actively searched for and negotiated by women while they positioned themselves in the different social fields of religious and cultural belonging. We have shown that sexual pleasure is important to people's well-being and that religious regimes provide a space towards achieving it. Even though religious

regimes provide a space for women to explore sexual pleasure, their agency is critically structured by, and seeks to uphold, the restrictions of a discursive tradition that holds subordination to a transcendent will, and thus in many instances sees male authority as its coveted goal.

Both Islamic and Christian regimes emphasize that God's rules make possible a unique and exceptional sexual experience that contributes to a larger narrative about being pious. Pleasurable marital sex was seen as helpful to defeat the 'plans of the devil' (to break down marriages), creating positive effects for families and one's relationship with God. Yet, the avenues provided by religious regimes are not unambiguous. Women's reputations were generally policed more than men's, and both Christian and Muslim interlocutors faced dilemmas about how to develop sexual pleasure without committing what was considered sinning. With the assistance of religious scriptures and authorities, they justified their choices by focusing on pleasure as a fundamental spiritual pursuit.

In this article, we consciously decided upon the term 'sexual pleasure' to show the importance of studying sexual enjoyment beyond genital pleasure, so as to include broader aspects of erotic practice and well-being. Similarly, the term 'sexual well-being' assumes a more inclusive approach in contrast to the common term 'sexual health,' to encompass all those social, cultural and economic aspects of life that are interconnected in people's lives. Specifically, sexual well-being articulates how sexual pleasure and religious aspirations are interconnected rather than being in tension. In the subject formation of piety, they can mutually enforce one another.

Women's bodily aesthetic appreciation and pursuit of sexual knowledge shows how religious practices are not simply religious obligations but sensory engagements that endorse religious meanings and enhance personal (religious) aspirations. Care of the self is a matter of cultivating the self as an ethical being according to culturally, religiously and historically specific formations. As sexual pleasure is a religious prescription, it

can become an integral part of a virtuous life, the overarching goal being for people to work towards a good life for themselves and their families in the spirit of maintaining their relationship with God. The cultivation of piety provided ways to pursue sexual pleasure in order to enjoy heterosexual companionate marital relationships.

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