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Christian Lange

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Introduction: The sensory history of the Islamic world

Christian Lange

Utrecht University, The Netherlands

This special issue seeks to introduce the cultural history of the senses in the Islamic world to a broad audience of scholars in the Humanities and Social Sciences. While there has been a groundswell of historical scholarship on the senses in the west (see Classen 2014), much remains to be done for the “sensual turn” (Howes 2003, 29) to leave more than just a passing mark in the study of Islamic history and culture. Contributors to this special issue examine how the senses have been conceptualized, and calibrated, in a variety of Muslim environments, ca. 600 to 1900 CE. How can we conceive of the Muslim sensorium over the long course of Islamic history and across Islam’s wide geographical compass? In fact, *is* there such a thing as a Muslim sensorium? If yes, what are its main features, how was it theorized by Muslim thinkers, and what were its salient historical manifestations?

These questions are important and timely on several, interrelated counts. In scholarly discourse, the history of the senses is closely entangled with that of Western-style modernity, while Islam’s compatibility (and indeed, the desirability of aligning Islam) with modern Western ideas and institutions is a perennial subject of discussion. Controversially, Marshall McLuhan (1962) and Walter Ong (1982) linked the European enlightenment to the primacy bestowed on the eye over the other sense organs. They also theorized that, by contrast, African and Oriental societies privilege the ear, as well as the other nonvisual senses. From this vantage, Islam’s supposed denigration of vision is seen to undermine the ability of Muslim peoples to modernize. However, this sweeping narrative, influential though it may be, does not stand the test of even a cursory examination of the evidence. The Qur’ān clearly elevates sight above hearing; Plato’s and Aristotle’s notion of a hierarchy of the senses, in which sight is preeminent, was well-known in classical Islam; and the Iraqi-Egyptian physicist Ibn al-Haytham (Alhazen, d. 1040 CE) analyzed the mechanics of vision so successfully that he is counted, to this day, among the fathers of modern optics. In other words, the ratio of the senses in Islamic culture (a contested singular), and the relationship between the two distal senses in particular, is by no means evident; a more nuanced and balanced account is long overdue.

A related issue is that disembodied Western rationalism is often contrasted, by both its defenders and its detractors, with an alleged Muslim celebration of the senses – an imaginary dichotomy that recalls stereotyped characterizations of “sensual” Catholics as Protestantism’s Other. This finds expression in enduring stereotypes about an indulgent Orient full of colors, smells, and tactile sensations. While the proximal senses, smell in particular, carry a stigma in modern Western culture, Islamic culture supposedly emphasizes them. Not only do such characterizations facilitate caricatures of Muslims as irrational

and easily aroused, but they also ignore the important strands of sense denial in Islamic intellectual and social history, which always existed side by side with sensory, embodied ways of life. Indeed, classical Islamic ethics, whether philosophically, theologically, or mystically grounded, is replete with warnings against the machinations of the “lower soul” (Arab. *nafs*), whose dominance over the human condition is regularly attributed to the uncontrolled use of the five senses. In addition, when Muslim discursive formations and cultural traditions and practices *do* foreground the proximal senses, they often demonstrate highly sophisticated and complex understandings of how human beings perceive and interact with the world. The alleged Muslim emphasis on the proximal senses, as well as the notion that such an emphasis somehow undermines Islamic culture, deserves to be interrogated and, in as much as is necessary, debunked.

As a final point, it is worth recalling that protocols of the senses engender and demonstrate cultural difference, thereby both complicating and enriching cross-cultural encounters. Ingrained sensibilities toward sight inform public debates about the headscarf and about what may or may not be shown in the public sphere; initiatives to build minarets and to broadcast the call to prayer in environments in which Muslims are in the minority result in arguments over the organization of urban soundscapes; the cultural significance of olfaction and gustation (think of the global popularity of Middle Eastern aromatics and food), but also of touch (think of handshaking) frames the daily encounter between Muslims and non-Muslims all over the world. A coherent and properly communicated account of the genesis and the varieties of Muslim attitudes toward the senses would go a long way in making such sensory encounters more comprehensible and easier to navigate, whether by explaining the historical moorings of these attitudes or, as the case may be, by showing that sensory difference is often more imagined than real.

In sum, the varieties of sensory discourses in Islam deserve to be more comprehensively examined. In their programmatic introduction to the first issue of *The Senses and Society*, Michael Bull, Paul Gilroy, David Howes and Douglas Kahn highlighted the need to pay proper attention to “the startling multiplicity of different formations of the senses in history and across (as well as within) cultures” (2006, 5). More than fifteen years later, research on the sensory dimensions of Islamic history and culture has resulted in no more than a few, largely disconnected studies, far from constituting an identifiable academic field. Here, let us briefly mention some noteworthy examples, with the aim of showing in what ways this special issue builds on them.

In regard to the study of Islam as a religious tradition, a niche of Qur’ānic studies is concerned with the oral performance and aural experience of the Qur’ān (e.g. Kermani [1999] 2014; Gade 2004; Osborne 2016). The oral-aural event of the Qur’ān was the bedrock on which Muslim theologians pondered questions regarding the reliability of knowledge transmitted and acquired through hearing and/or seeing (in reading and writing) (Schöler and Toorawa 2009). Taking a broader view of the sensorium, Muslim theologians and philosophers of the classical period explored the role and functioning of all the sensory organs (*hawāss*, sg. *hāssa*), including the “inner senses” (*al-hawāss al-bāṭina*) of the soul, developing various epistemological divisions, such as that between sensibilia (*maḥsūsāt*), intelligibilia (*ma‘qūlāt*), and revelation (*wahy*, *tanzīl*), or between sensation (*ḥiss*), reasoning (*nazar*), and transmission (*khābar*), next to various other models ([1997] 2017).

In the study of Islamic law, or Sharia, it is the specular sense that has garnered most scholarly attention. Thus, quite a few scholars have studied the scopical regime developed by the jurists of Sharia law, whether in regard to the rules concerning the obligation to veil certain parts of the human body (Chaumont 2006; Maghen 2007; Johansen 2015) or to shield private space from the gaze of others (Alshech 2004; O'Meara 2007). Far fewer studies exist of how Islamic law seeks to discipline hearing, not to mention the proximal senses (Wheeler 2004), despite the fact that such studies shed much light on the world-making mechanisms of Sharia law. Islamic mysticism, or Sufism, is another fertile arena for research on the senses. Sufi theorists usually reject the reliability and sufficiency of sense perception and accord greater importance to higher forms of perception and intellection. Nonetheless, they frequently, and strikingly, use the metaphors of vision (*ru'ya*), hearing (*sam', samā'*) and, above all, taste (*dhawq*), to describe moments of mystical experience. Again, studies that explicitly address sensation in Sufi contexts are rare (Böwering 1996; Papas 2014; Abuali 2019; Weinrich 2019; Knysh 2020). Although scholars have increasingly challenged entrenched views of Sufism as a disembodied intellectual discipline, instead stressing that embodied religiosity is essential to Sufism (Kugle 2007; Bashir 2011), sensing as a socially determined act and a discipline to be practiced in Sufism has yet to become the subject of an in-depth study. Also the many ways in which Sufi thinkers have sought to deny or minimize the bodily senses call for further study, even though scholars of Islamic asceticism have occasionally touched on the sensorium (Gramlich 1997).

Turning to sensory studies in the history of Islamic science and of Islamic material culture, it is worth noting that the two definitive studies of the history of premodern Islamic medicine (Ullmann 1978; Pormann and Savage-Smith 2007) include no separate chapters or even paragraphs on the senses. The standard assumption is that physicians and physiologists of the premodern Islamic world followed Galen's teachings on the senses. The little research that there is on the physiological history of the senses in Islam has focused on optics, and that of the above-mentioned Ibn al-Haytham in particular (Omar 1977; Sabra 1989; on color theory, see Kirchner 2015 and the literature cited there). The physiological history of audition, olfaction, gustation, and touch in Islamic sciences, by contrast, remains virtually unstudied. There are a number of excellent studies of Muslim culinary traditions and of perfumery in the Islamic world, but these studies do relatively little to contextualize gustation and olfaction in social, economic, or political terms (Gyselen 1998; Lewicka 2011), even if some recent works herald a shift in this regard (Bonnéric 2016; King 2017); in this context, one should also highlight some excellent anthropological work on perfume in the modern and contemporary Middle East (Kanafani 1983). Historians of Islamic architecture have studied visual imperial ideologies in the Ottoman period (Necipoğlu 1993), as well as the particular sensory esthetics of buildings such as the Alhambra (Bush 2011; Blessing 2019). Recently, Islamic art historians have started to push for less ocularcentric approaches in the study of Islamic art, instead focussing on embodied and multisensory experience (Ergin 2014; Flood 2014; O'Meara 2019; Shaw 2019). In another move aiming to broaden the usual, visual and object-focused study of Islamic material culture, the sensory dimensions of the Muslim afterlife have also been examined by a number of scholars, building on a thought-provoking article by Aziz Al-Azmeh (Al-Azmeh 1995; Lange 2016, 128–54; O'Meara 2017).

In terms of the study of Islamic political, economic and social history in relation to the senses, one may start by referring to studies of the odor of sanctity of martyrs and saints, a topic that links olfaction to the history of charismatic leadership, apocalypticism, and warfare (Thurkill 2016; Bonn eric 2019). Also the scenting of sacred spaces in early Islam has recently been made the object of an in-depth investigation (Bursi 2020). To the exception of a few studies (Frenkel 2018; Patel 2018), the long Middle Period of Islamic history has failed to attract the attention of scholars of the senses. As has been observed, Islamic historians are yet to embrace the senses as an object of inquiry, particularly in relation to premodern periods (Fahmy 2013). The situation is arguably better when it comes to the early modern and modern periods of Islamic history. For example, in a pioneering article, Khaled Fahmy has studied a 19th-century public controversy in Cairo about the miasmas emitted by the city's sewage system (2002). However, it is only in the writings of anthropologies of Islam and postcolonial thinkers active since the turn of the century that the sensorium has emerged as a coherent interpretive frame, with noteworthy contributions particularly in the area of the study of the visual aspects of Muslim devotion (Mahmood 2009) and of Islamic acoustic phenomena and (urban) soundscapes (Hirschkind 2006; Tamimi Arab 2017; Eisenlohr 2018; Fahmy 2020).

The last-mentioned studies focus on the contemporary period and are more interested in everyday Muslim discourses and practices than in Islam's historical, textual heritage. In this special issue, by contrast, we seek to demonstrate the historical anchorings of several important sensory paradigms in Islamic culture(s), while linking to the existing scholarship on the history of the senses, including in the anthropology of Islam and (non-Islamic) sensory studies at large. The articles in this thematic issue contribute to several of the areas outlined above: the role of the senses in Muslim religious ritual and ritual law (Abuali; Bursi); the epistemology and sensory theories developed and cultivated by Arab, Persian and Ottoman literati and natural scientists (King; Lange; Leese); the sensory culture of Muslim courts (Uzun and Macaraig); and the transformation of traditional Muslim sensory protocols under the impact of modernity (Ghajarjazi). The contributions address all the interpretive challenges outlined at the beginning of this introduction: they lay bare a variety of Muslim discourses on the senses, rather than reducing the Islamic world to a single sensory model; they examine what kind of hierarchies of the senses were developed in the Islamic world; they push analysis beyond the eye and the ear, instead paying particular attention to the role of the proximal senses in Islamic culture, as well as to the phenomenon of synesthesia; and they explore the Muslim sensorium as it interacted with "modern" Western attitudes toward the senses. Geographically, the articles cover the area from the eastern Mediterranean to Iran, dealing with Arab, Persian/Iranian and Turkish/Ottoman sensory cultures. It is our hope that with this special issue we will provide an impetus to the study of the sensory history of the Islamic world, a field of inquiry that, we believe, deserves to gain a firm foothold in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies (see Bursi and Lange [forthcoming](#)).

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Notes on contributor

Christian Lange (PhD, Harvard University) is Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Utrecht. His research interests center on the history of crime and punishment in the Islamic world, Islamic eschatology, and Islamic sensory history. He is the Principal Investigator of “The Senses of Islam: A cultural history of perception in the Muslim world” (SENSIS), which is funded by a European Research Council Consolidator Grant (2017-23).

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