

## **Obscured existence of homosexuality and transsexuality inside Kurdish culture; Case studies of Gays and lesbians in Kurdistan and diaspora**

- **By Kameel Ahmady**

This ethnographic paper try to give an anthropological perspective on the all too obscured existence of homosexuality and transsexuality inside Kurdish culture. While this has always existed within Kurdish, as any other society, cultural norms mean that it has at the same time been kept as an ‘open secret’; everyone knows it happens, but nobody talks about the controversial subject. Because of this unwillingness to treat the topic, transgender and homosexual people in Kurdish society have never been given a recognised role. This also has a great deal to do with conventional gender roles; although male homosexuality has been informally known about, if not discussed, lesbianism and transsexuality is much less tolerated, even informally. But with the rise of feminism for Kurdish women, they are now experiencing their sexuality too through this paradigm. There is a scarcity of written records about the issue of homosexuality in Kurdish society as well, although there have been attempts by Kurdish or non-Kurdish writers to research this cultural taboo. This leaves little documentation to reference. As Kurdish society in all parts of Kurdistan and throughout diaspora struggles – sometimes violently - with modernity and the changing gender roles which follow, there remains a big challenge to the acceptance of open practice of sexual freedom. In what follows I show some case studies of individuals whom I interviewed for this research, and explore their motivations and practices of homosexuality, as well as the ways they see themselves viewed in Kurdish society.

### **Case One**

He walked into the room and I offered him a seat. He sat himself down then I greeted him in Farsi and started by explaining that we are going to work together in professional capacity for some time. I began by asking how liked to be called he or she? He becomes very serious. Please call me she at all times, I am a woman. She quickly go on to asking for my help in referring her to a specialist who could provide sex change operation, also the changing of his name to female, and lastly she wanted some help with finding where Soho is.(Gay hangout area in London-UK).

“H” was wearing a very short mini skirt and a pink top, open so that the shape of her breasts was obvious to see. Her legs were full of razor cuts, making it easy to understand that she had tried very hard to shave as smooth as possible for her lags

to be showing hair less. She had thick black hair and it looked as though it was not easy. Her earrings, rings, chains and high heel shoes seemed to me to be trying very hard to make a statement: I am a woman.

Through the weeks I spent with her she tells me all about her life in Iran, and how he was given permission by a senior clerk in the religious city of Qom to have a sex change. Iran is perhaps unique in the Muslim world for its lenient attitude towards transsexuals; although homosexuals may face the death sentence if open about their sexuality, transgender individuals are not only tolerated, but government support is available for their treatment. The Imam Khomeini is famous for having said that in 1989 those who feel stuck in the wrong body should be given the chance to 'liberate' themselves from this prison, and also be given every right to new identity papers after changing sex. It is probably because homosexuality is seen as so criminal that transsexuality is tolerated in its place. H however did not feel she had a positive experience in Iran; she told me how they got it wrong in Iran and she then had to go to Belarus in east Europe to seek medical help and finally the operation for the sex change. In our second visit, and half way through our appointment my telephone rang, it was a Kurdish friend from Kurdistan calling to ask if I could post him some books. Soon after this happened, I noticed H's attitude had changed. She calmly asked me where I come from. Iranian Kurdistan, I reply. She hesitated for a short while and with an almost whispering voice said, I am Kurdish too, from Karmanshah. I asked her was that ok, that I am Kurdish too. She said, well I was disowned by my family. My father almost killed me when he found out that I was gay/transsexual, I had to flee Kurdistan and go to live in Tehran. She continued Kurdish people are very "Motahasb". Please, I don't want anyone to know that I am Kurdish, I don't even say that I am from Iran, people will create problems for me and look down on me, they just don't treat me like a human being. At that point she burst into tears.

H had only two dreams - to have a successful sex change operation, and to be reunited with her boyfriend, who promised to marry her as soon as she became a woman. H said I had a really tough time in Kurdistan, I wasn't allowed to say that I was gay; I was so scared that my father would one day find out. Although most people knew about my sexuality, or at least they were suspecting from the way I was behaving, I mean behaving like a woman and I had a soft voice. Nobody openly talked about it; it was like an open secret. While the older men stared at me, or just angrily turned their heads and left with anger when I came past, younger men sometimes tried to pick me up, or to make comments about my appearance. Well, Tehran was a bit different, nobody knew who I was, and to be honest, I didn't care anymore. Through years I lived with a feeling of being ashamed of

myself, for who I was and what I wanted to be. It was my fault, I was just different right from my childhood, and I liked boys more than girls. I always wanted to wear nice soft clothes and secretly in my private times and in my room I would wear makeup and take photographs of myself.

Well, I had the permission to do a sex change, so I saved for two years, doing all sorts of jobs; you name it from washing dishes, waiting tables, and car wash. But my money still wasn't enough, so I couldn't get the full sex change operation, apart from many hormone injections and so on. That's why I left for Belarus. When I was there the UN supported me, they were trying to sort out my sex change operation there. It was very difficult to live there, when I was going out dressed like a woman old people were spitting on the ground as I passed and young men and women booed at me. Even the medical people were very homophobic, left and right everyone was insulting me.

As the time of the sex change operation approaches H becomes visibly happier but also anxious, until one day. She tells her horrifying story of being attacked on the street by two men in North London, who repeatedly kicked her in the stomach and called her a 'poof' and left her with bloody face, she was so afraid that she didn't go out for few days and when she did it was with an social worker.

After the operation, she says she is a proper 'she'. I am the happiest Kurdish woman in the world. While she works part time at a Soho bar as barwoman serving drinks, she waits for her future husband to join her.

## **Case Two**

Istanbul is home to more than a million Kurds, most of whom fled Kurdistan in Turkey's southeast during the 90's conflict between state forces and the PKK in which thousands of villages were destroyed. Not far from the tourist area of Sultan Ahmet is Aksaray, where mostly Kurdish immigrants have set up small businesses; small shops, or some selling goods directly from the pavements. Near Hotel Aziz there is rather dark and dirty alleyway which leads to an upstairs bar, a "Kurdish gay and lesbian bar". There is live music playing, the atmosphere is dark, intended to give a feeling of romance. As soon as you walk in, almost everyone seems to be checking you out, perhaps to see if you are gay/lesbian. A group of four men and women in the next table invite me and my female companion to drink at their table. A few drinks later they start talking about how and why they left Kurdistan. One of the girls, who work for a Lesbian NGO set up by a Swedish organisation, tells of her experiences and why she couldn't carry on living in her homeland (Batman).

She says: simply because I was a lesbian, I remember as a teenager I was in love with my cousin and when she got married with her high school sweetheart I tried to commit suicide, but I wasn't successful, I survived. The other woman says: I was married for 5 years, I hated my husband, he was cheating on me and since then I can't think of myself being with a man anymore, I am much happier with my Russian girlfriend, who sat a few feet away from her. The stories of the men were similar; one of them who can speak only in Turkish (while he was laughing at my Turkish Azeri) says: I come from a small village when rumours spread across the village (when they saw me with another man in the sex act). The village Mullah and elders summoned my father and my uncle to the Mosque to tell them about the news. My school friend overheard the story from other some other boys and ran to the field where I was looking after our live stock and told me the story. I had only enough money to make it to Ankara and since then I haven't returned but I speak with my mother from time to time.

### **Case Three**

F and K were both in their twenties, reading social science at one of Iran's Free Universities. I got to know them through a women's right campaigner, when I was conducting my own research in popular youth culture in Iranian Kurdistan. F says no one knows that she is a lesbian; if anyone finds out I am in big, big trouble, not only my Kurdish family might kill me, maybe the government will put me in prison. At this point she lowers her voice and says, or maybe hangs me to death just like last year when they hanged two Fars (Persian) gays. She continues saying, to be honest I didn't know that I was a lesbian until I met K at university. It's all happened at the university campus when my boyfriend left me for another girl, that night I was so down and K came to give her shoulder to cry on. We share a room together, when she hugged me it felt so good, she was very understanding and knew exactly how to comfort me. Well since then we are together. At that point she looks at K with a sweet smile.

### **Case Four**

AF is a mature young man, well-educated from Germany. He says I was born in Bashur (South Kurdistan-Iraq). I don't remember much from there although I went back to Kurdistan for visiting and a family wedding, but I don't think I can live there. At that point he seems to become upset. Well, what I mean I can't live there is, it is not possible for me as gay man, then he says I am from region of Hawraman, and that's makes it worse. In my point of view Hawraman is still kept more religious then the other regions of Kurdistan. He goes on to say: god knows

what will happen to me if my relatives find out, especially my father's cousin who is the head of our families, you know he is a Haji (someone who has been to Holly Maka) and he is very well respected amongst all our relatives. He began to smoke, and continued, it all happened over here 'Europe'. To be honest, I didn't know that I was gay until one night I was with a friend from the same college and he made a move, thinking back on the old days I understand now why I have never been interested in girls. Then he smiled and said: I live with my boyfriend now, everything is cool. The only problem I have is that we have to keep our affair secret, you know. I don't know many people from where I am from but when people come to visit us we just say we are university students and live in separate rooms. I think everyone believes us. AF's dream is that one day he will be able to say who he is. He says: I am getting a bit tired of this double life, at the begging it was kind of fun, thrilling and risky, I kind of liked it. But now my partner nags a lot and keeps saying why do we have to be like this? I really try to explain how difficult my situation is, but I guess he doesn't understand and I don't blame him. For someone who had a very different background and upbringing it's not easy. Don't get me wrong we get all sorts of bad and dirty looks from even 'his people' too. Being gay is not easy even here (Europe).

Looking at this phenomenon from anthropological point of view:

Even though there is such a taboo surrounding any kind of non-conformist sexuality, be it gay or transsexual, a public debate is beginning to emerge on the topic, led by diaspora activists. After a terrible human rights violation in which a gay Kurdish couple had been whipped as 'punishment' in Iran, a Kurdish gay supporter on Indymedia.com wrote:

Gays in Kurdistan, like most Middle Eastern societies, are really looked down upon because of religion and even our culture. Homosexuality was always looked at as a bad thing throughout times, while in early Europe pederasty was quite common. So, naturally, we always have been against homosexuality but at the same time I don't believe in Shari'a law and the whipping of homosexuals to death at most times.

Let them live their own life style. If you're a religious person, you know what's coming to them in the end, and if you aren't, then you shouldn't have a problem with it. Mullahs will whip you for anything - whether it be speaking out against them, drinking, or having male-male or female-female sex.

A Kurdish lesbian activates writes:

*Gay and Lesbian is a true natural phenomenon and will never be considered as disease. Nature has the reason for each and all of its system. Gay people will make about %10-12 of the human beings population everywhere in this world. It is not among human beings alone but among all other living creatures and even implant world and flowers. some people says the reason behind this phenomenon is to control the overpopulation on the earth and avoid creating related disaster, over population world might bring new crises, for example when we human beings interfere the bird's world and produce large numbers of birds for our own use, we see bird flu disease started and it threat not only bird's world but our life too.*

*Usually Gay personality is very creative and artistic, if we go through the history pages we can see many famous names of creative artists and writers such as Oskar Wild, Rambo...etc.*

*The answer for gay issue cannot be violence and it will never solve the problem. We think for creating modern and creative society we need to accept our differences and live together in peace; gay can be your son, daughter, husband, good friend..... If they hide it that does not mean it is not exist? We exist along history and will stay here right beside you along the life, so better to accept it and respect it, after all love is not shame but shame is to consider love as shame.*

Giving an anthropology perspective, Margaret Mead wrote a famous book where she suggested that the anxieties that come with the transition from youth to adulthood – including the new found sexuality –are culturally constructed. She worked with young people in Samoa , where the culture encouraged them to experiment with their sexuality, even with pre-marital sex, on the assumption that it would make them more confident social and sexual partners when they reached adulthood and married. However, in societies which are neither completely pre-industrial as the Samoa she described, and also shaped largely by Islamic values, we see a similar attitude towards adolescence as a time of turmoil, stress and potential calamity. Mead’s point about the open attitude towards adult sexual and romantic relationships, and the freedom to experiment in early adolescence among Samoans, makes an interesting counterpoint to the experiences of young people in Iranian Kurdistan, where the divisions between the sexes and prohibitions of relations perceived as sexually dangerous are strictly enforced. From this perspective, attitudes about the dangers in premarital male/female interactions are perhaps unsurprising. The ‘ideals’ of female behaviour as equally theatrical, dramatic and also shy and reserved, are perhaps a result of this, and can be compared to the feelings of anxiety associated with ‘western’ adolescence and its

everyday performance. There may also be an interesting point to observe about the ongoing infantilisation of female roles in adulthood.

In contrast, boys are socialised in a uniform process through their two year military service, through which the state directly intervenes in this status transition from youth to adulthood (Sinclair-Webb, 1992; Kaplan, 1992). After this, if they have not chosen a profession or higher education, they are typically absorbed into the family business, or open a small shop with family help, as is often the case in the Kurdish region. Modernisation has tended to have a destabilising effect more on the questioning of female roles. Traditionally they would only transition to adulthood through marriage, though now many are leaving home in their late teens or early twenties to pursue education as a means to gain some degree of economic independence. Although the problem with unemployment remains high in Kurdistan generally, there are much fewer, and have been decreasingly, opportunities for women to find work in the public domain or private sector, which is mainly considered the territory of men (Tohidi, 1994).

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Even though male homosexuality has long been known in Kurdish society, and used as a derogatory social category even when not talked about, the public emergence of lesbianism is still in very early stages. This has begun in northern Kurdistan (Turkey), where in other parts of Kurdistan gay or lesbian public life is virtually non-existent. Kurds in diaspora, because of their focus on other more pressing campaigns, have also failed to put the issue on the public agenda. While Turkey's secular laws do provide some opportunity for gays, lesbians and transsexuals to organize public lobbying and other activities for their acceptance in society, they are mostly absorbed into Istanbul-based NGO's. Therefore the needs

of this hidden community of Kurdish gay, lesbian and transsexuals are still largely ignored.

Cross-culturally, homosexuality is usually contrasted with heterosexuality and bisexuality. Three major forms of homosexual relationships are proposed by anthropologists: egalitarian, gender-structured, and age-structured. Of these, one is usually dominant in a given society at a given time. Looking at the history of Kurdish attitudes in regards to homosexuality, one could observe a large numbers of 'local' references made to individuals (usually rich and middle aged, always men), who were believed to pay for sex with young boys. While the individual (who might in the west called a pedophile) carried on with their life as a family man, there were nonetheless always giggles whenever of young boys was talked about. It's often the case that those young boys expose to such sexual abuse need to put up with very strong sense of humiliations within the society they live in for the rest of their life, in the result many will choose to live their homeland running always from such "shameful" background. This just goes to show how the only acknowledged form of homosexuality was one in which it was placed in a deviant and even criminal status. Although pedophilia was and is recognized and maybe even alluded to in social interactions as an 'open secret', normal adult homosexuality or transgender is less accepted than this exploitive form. But this attitude towards homosexual and transgender activity may be a more recent phenomenon, and a result of conservative's struggles with modernity. Such kinds of sexual lives were common in Middle Eastern and therefore Kurdish culture for centuries.

As there are different biological, historical and psychosocial origins among many Middle-Eastern Muslim cultures, homosexual practices were widespread and public. Persian (fars) poets, such as Attar (d. 1220), Rumi (d. 1273), Sa'di (d. 1291), Hafez (d. 1389), and Jami (d. 1492), and also the Kurdish Poet Shik Raza wrote poems replete with homoerotic allusions. Recent work in queer studies suggests that while the visibility of such relationships has been much reduced, their frequency has not. The two most commonly documented forms were commercial sex with transgender males or males enacting transgender roles exemplified by the *köçeks* and the *bacchás*, and Sufi spiritual practices in which the practitioner crossed over from the idealised chaste form of the practice to one in which the desire is consummated.

For example in old Persia homosexuality and homoerotic expressions were tolerated in numerous public places, from monasteries and seminaries to taverns, military camps, bathhouses, and coffee houses. In the early Safavid era (1501-



1723), male houses of prostitution (amrad khane) were legally recognized and paid taxes. A rich tradition of art and literature sprang up, constructing Middle Eastern homosexuality in ways analogous to the ancient tradition of male love in which Ganymede, cup-bearer to the gods, symbolised the ideal boyfriend. Muslim — often Sufi — poets in medieval Arab lands and in Persia wrote odes to the beautiful Christian wine boys who, they claimed, served them in the taverns and shared their beds at night. In many areas the practice survived into modern times (as documented by Richard Francis Burton, André Gide, and others).

Homosexuality is still very much struggling in its battle for rights and justice even in western societies. As a gay, lesbian or transsexual you are still at risk of being insulted on the streets or made unwelcome in some public places. UK is currently in the midst of a dispute between the government and those in the tourism industry; some conservatives privately run Bed & Breakfast and hotels are demanding it's their right to turn away gay couples who would want, as any other couple, to share a room together. While Europeans gays have fought hard for the legislation of gay marriage in a number of countries, such events have polarised international opinion, and led to many well-publicized political debates and court battles in a number of countries. In 2006 the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Canada and South Africa legalized same-sex marriage. Regarding same-sex marriage in the United States, only the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has legalized gay marriage while the States of Vermont and Connecticut allow civil unions.

Other countries, including the majority of European nations, have enacted laws allowing civil unions, designed to give gay couples similar rights as married couples concerning legal issues such as inheritance and immigration. Numerous Scandinavian countries have had domestic partnership laws on the books since the late 1980s. In the United States, the framing of the debate around marriage rather than civil unions may have been partly responsible for the defeat of a number of measures by sparking opposition from many conservative and religious groups. For example, in California, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger stated that he supports full legal protection for gay couples - but that the issue of gay marriage is best decided by the people or in the courts.

For many traditionalists, and in the light of unfavourable views by certain religions, objections have been raised, e.g. arguing that marriage is a specific institution designed as a foundation for parenthood, which an infertile union cannot qualify for. The American Psychological Association has largely discredited such arguments (C. Patterson, 1995) and found that the majority of unbiased academic studies of gay and lesbian parents contradict these beliefs. More interestingly,

publicly gay politicians have attained numerous government posts, even in countries that had sodomy laws or outright mass murder of gays in their recent past. Gay British politicians include former UK Cabinet ministers Chris Smith (now Lord Smith of Finsbury who is also a rare example of an openly HIV positive statesman) and Nick Brown, and, most famously, Peter Mandelson, a European Commissioner and close friend of Tony Blair. Openly gay Per-Kristian Foss was the Norwegian minister of finance until September of 2005

The overall trend of greater acceptance of gay men and women in the latter part of the 20th century was not limited to secular institutions; it was also seen in many religious institutions. Reform Judaism, the largest branch of Judaism outside Israel had begun to facilitate religious weddings for gay adherents in their synagogues. The Anglican Communion encountered discord that caused a rift between the African and Asian Anglican churches on the one hand and North American churches on the other when American and Canadian churches ordained gay clergy and began blessing same-sex unions. Other Churches such as the Methodist Church had experienced trials of gay clergy who some claimed were a violation of religious principles resulting in mixed verdicts dependent on geography. Islam in this case is only part of the problem, since certain sects and approaches, as we have seen, have tolerated various kinds of homosexuality.

With respect to Kurdistan, Kurdish leftist political parties have traditionally show limited public support for gay and transgender rights, but this has rarely translated into any public action. Certainly, more pressing issues on the political agenda of the Kurds, concerning basic human rights for all, have partly prevented this. The bigger challenge for Kurdish society is not to change attitudes within the political elite, which may be more enlightened on this topic than religiously conservative American politicians, as we have also seen with Iran. The challenge is to change attitudes in the culture, and population as a whole, who still view homosexuality and transsexuality in criminal terms, and this is the only 'acceptable' scenario in which to address it.

This also has implications for women's rights in Kurdistan more generally, for a society in which the only 'acceptable' sexual expression is through the institution of marriage, and where patriarchy has been the norm as in Kurdistan, is bound to severely limit women's freedoms in not only sexual but social terms. Of course this as implications also for addressing attitudes towards the highly controversial incidence of 'honour killings' recently debated in Kurdish society both in Kurdistan and the diaspora. In sexual and social terms, we should begin to see things in more pluralistic terms, which would afford more rights to all members of

society. As far as sex and gender, no single label or description will fit all individuals, and people should be able to see this as a positive, rather than stigmatising people who are brave enough to stand up and be true to who they are for themselves. It is an issue that has long existed in Kurdish society, and if Kurds want to form modern nations, Kurds should now be willing to address this issue publicly, without shame, and with support for human rights.

Kameel maintain a website at: [www.kameelahmady.com](http://www.kameelahmady.com)

### **About the Author:**

Kameel Ahmady is a Social Anthropologist and scholar who is the recipient of the 2017 Truth Honour Award by the London Law University and the IKWR Women's Rights Organisation. He also is the recipient of 2018 first place winner award of Literary Category by Global P.E.A.C.E. Foundation at the George Washington University in D.C. Kameel has worked mainly on international and social development on gender and minority related issues. His previous pioneering research books have garnered International attention and are published in English, Farsi, Turkish and Kurdish languages. **“Another look at east and south east of Turkey”** (Truism with the touch of Anthropology) published by Etkim, Istanbul-Turkey 2009 and research of **“In the Name of Tradition”** (A Country Size Comprehensive Study on Female Genital Mutilation FGM/C in Iran), published by Uncut Voices Press-Oxford- 2015 also **“An Echo of Silence”** (A Comprehensive Study on Early Child Marriage ECM in Iran) published by Nova Science Publisher, Inc., New York 2017. **“A House on Water”** (A Comprehensive Study on temporary Marriage in Iran) and **“Childhood plunder”** ( A research study on child scavenging –Waste picking- in Tehran/Iran) printed and lunched in 2019 in Iran/Tehran. His new books **“Forbidden Tale”** (A Comprehensive Study on Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) in Iran (2018) and **“A House with open door”** (A Comprehensive Study on temporary Marriage in Iran) are printed in English and Farsi by Mehri publishing in 2020.