

*Being Different: Intersexuality, Blindness, Deafness, and Madness in Ottoman Syria*

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Dissertation Abstract

*Being Different* is a work of social and cultural history aimed at recovering the histories of marginal individuals and groups whose lives remain strikingly absent from Middle Eastern historiography: the physically and cognitively different. The book's theoretical foundations draw upon the efforts of scholars working within three distinct yet interrelated fields: the history of the body, gender history, and disability studies. Each chapter constitutes a concrete case study. These are, respectively: 1) Genital abnormalities and intersexuality; 2) Blindness, which, partly due to its pervasiveness, enjoyed a privileged place in the region's panoply of physical impairments; 3) Deafness and muteness. Taking as a starting point the remarkable aggregation of deaf and mute attendants at the Ottoman Court in Istanbul and the high status accorded to them, I explore prevalent attitudes toward both deafness and muteness; 4) The complex and multifaceted world of madness, which included manifestations as varied as melancholia, raving lunacy, and holy madness, and which displayed a broad spectrum of symptoms, behaviors, responses, and treatments.

I integrate several types of sources produced in Ottoman Syria (present-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine) between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. These include local chronicles, travel accounts, biographical dictionaries, legal manuals, fatwa collections, treatises on medicine and physiognomy, dream interpretation manuals, poetry, and the vast repertoire of essays on a wide range of subjects. I argue that while several physical and mental impairments were certainly identified as such, the modern notion of disability as an abstraction, and one that operates as a determinant of identity, appears to have had little purchase in the early modern period. Impairments were usually believed to be rooted in the physical body and were rarely attributed to supernatural forces and, with the exception of the intersexed (for whom no explanation was provided) and the holy fool (whose state was explicitly ascribed to the ineffable will of the divine), the most commonly cited explanation for embodied difference was the disruption of humoral balance. Another major finding is that impairments of the body and the mind did not necessarily result in the ascription of stigma, be it social, religious, or otherwise. The reader rarely encounters the positing of a causal relationship between such impairments and guilt, sin, ritual impurity, or divine displeasure. Most notably, in marked contrast to other societies, there is no evidence that the deaf and mute were considered "dumb" or mentally deficient.

I contend that Islam, as a set of historically grounded and culturally constructed beliefs and practices, played a fundamental role in the development of attitudes that featured little stigmatization of embodied difference. As is perhaps most clearly illustrated by Qur'anic and Prophetic pronouncements on blindness, the foundational texts of Islam largely refuse a causal relationship between "guilt" and disease, illness, and impairment. A second explanation can be found in the highly stratified nature of early modern society: it was a world of differences made glaringly visible, one in which an individual could be immediately located within the social hierarchy through a glimpse of his or her attire. In addition, geographic origin, ethnicity, and a host of other factors functioned as cardinal constituents of individual and collective identity. In light of this, I suggest that Ottoman Syrian society, already so complex and featuring such a wealth of "others," simply felt no need to seek, identify, designate, or exclude "ultimate others" among the physically and mentally different.