

Medieval Muslim Culture: A Day in the Lives of the Youth

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Abstract

This study explores the daily lives, recreational activities, and cultural engagements of the youth in early Muslim societies in cities like Mecca, Medina, Damascus, and Kufa, focusing on the first two centuries of Islam. While religious and educational aspects of the youth in Islamic history have been extensively documented, this work shifts the focus to their leisure activities, sports, games, and entertainment. Using a variety of historical, literary, and religious sources, including classical Arabic poetry and jurisprudential texts, the study reconstructs the multifaceted experiences of young Muslims. It examines popular pastimes such as horse riding, archery, swimming, wrestling, board games like Shitranj (an old form of chess), poetry recitation, and music. Furthermore, the study analyses societal attitudes towards recreation and the delicate balance between religious injunctions and cultural practices. By drawing upon primary sources and secondary scholarship, this research presents a nuanced understanding of medieval Muslim youth culture, highlighting their role in shaping early Muslim society while providing insights into broader socio-cultural dynamics.

Keywords

youth, entertainment, sports, medieval Muslim culture.

Introduction

Studying the everyday lives, activities, games, and forms of entertainment of the youth during the early Islamic centuries offers important insights into that period's social, religious, cultural, and historical fabric. Early Muslim society, particularly after its expansion, was vibrant, multifaceted, and largely multicultural, and offered ample evidence of the lifestyle and recreational activities of the youth.

Having fun has been an essential part of human culture and societies since the beginning of time. Islam, being God's answer to human needs, does not put undue barriers upon culture or civilization. Youth is the age group where people who partake in it may not be fully aware of its

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importance. Thus, throughout Muslim history, we come across numerous instances of slips where the youth indulged or even got addicted to activities that might have harmed them eventually.

However, the lives of young people in medieval Muslim societies are hitherto an under-explored aspect of their history, especially from a socio-cultural perspective. While the youth have been well-covered in the annals of Islam, their accounts that made it to modern works are predominantly religious, focusing on the demeanour expected of this important age group. Writings like Ayyad's "How Were Young Muslim Minds Shaped?"¹ generally serve to call the Muslim youth to their medieval counterparts, to educate them religiously. Its significance notwithstanding, their daily lives and pastimes demand an exploration of various Muslim sources, including academic works, religious texts, and, perhaps more importantly, the poetry produced at that time. Classical Arabic works mention the youth, and one can cull several of their pastimes, activities, and trends of thought. Some works have addressed these aspects partially. They include *Humor* by Rosenthal² and *The Venture of Islam* by Hodgson.³ *Daily Life in the Medieval Islamic World* by Lindsay⁴ also touches upon youth activities during this era. Hermansen's "Muslim Youth"⁵ delineates the classical Islamic dimensions of what it means to be "the youth." Hasan Shuraydi's *Raven*⁶ offers insights into the poetic anthropography of the early Muslim youth throughout the early Islamic centuries.

Diverse games and recreational activities were practised by the youth besides traditional sports like horse riding, archery, swimming,

¹ Essam Ayyad, "How were Young Muslim Minds Shaped: A Critical Study of the Kuttāb in Medieval Islam," in "Situating Sanskrit after the Sultanates," special issue, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 32, no. 1 (2022): 141-85, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S135618632100002X>.

² Franz Rosenthal, *Humor in Early Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

³ Marshal G. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

⁴ James E. Lindsay, *Daily Life in the Medieval Islamic World* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2008).

⁵ Marcia Hermansen, "Muslim Youth and Religious Identity: Classical Perspectives and Contemporary Challenges," in *Children, Adults, and Shared Responsibilities: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 119-34.

⁶ Hasan Shuraydi, *The Raven and the Falcon: Youth versus Old Age in Medieval Arabic Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

and wrestling.⁷ Moreover, board games such as Mancala and Shiṭranj (an old form of chess) were popular pastimes among the Umayyad youth.⁸ Primary sources alongside modern works give us a glimpse into the recreational lives of early Muslim youth. While volumes have been written on the religious and educational activities of Muslim youth in the early Islamic centuries, much remains to be written on youthful activities in early Muslim societies.

To offer a broader view into the lives of early Muslim youth as they went about their daily routines, this article builds upon different historical and cultural works that describe the daily routines of the youth in early Muslim societies and draw a picture of their daily lives as they lived them. Depicting the youth as envisaged in classical Arabic language and literature, it affords their contemporary counterparts a panoramic view of their rich lives. It focuses on the pre-Abbasid period around the centres of the Muslim world, such as Mecca, Medina, Damascus, and Kufa, which covers about the first two centuries of Muslim history, which is approximately the period from the Prophet's (peace be on him) childhood to the end of the Umayyad period.

This work sidesteps the strictly religious discourses of Islamic law on fun and games and offers a glimpse into the first two Islamic centuries of Muslim societies, drawing upon different kinds of examples from the Qur'ān as well as the Islamic and historical repertoire available today. To keep the descriptions as close to the actual historical instances, it generally reports the narrations verbatim. This preserves the flavour of these historical narrations and offers a pen picture of early Muslim youth's lives and activities other than their religious and educational ones.

The article first offers a glimpse into some of the popular and well-documented activities in the lives of early Muslim youth. Then, it analyses the texts to highlight the underlying discourses therein. The findings of this work are paired with the conclusion.

The Youth

The Qur'ān describes the stages in human life interlaced with strength, which may be taken in its multiple connotations. Allah says,

It is Allah Who created you in a state of (helpless) weakness, then gave (you) strength after weakness, then, after strength, gave (you) weakness

⁷ See Boaz Shoshan, "Sports," in *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Josef W. Meri (New York: Routledge, 2006), 2:768-69.

⁸ See Kāmil Ṭāhā al-Wīṣ, *al-Tarwīḥ 'an al-Nafs fī 'l-'Aṣr al-Umawī* (Amman: Dār Amjad, 2016), 47-48.

and a hoary head: He creates as He wills, and it is He Who has all knowledge and power.⁹

Hermansen observes that Islamic law does not enumerate youth as a distinct age group between adulthood and childhood, while Muslim sources, classical and modern, do address youth-related issues.¹⁰ She gives an example of a wise youth from the Qur'ān, where Allah describes Prophet Yaḥyā (John) (peace be on him) that he had been granted wisdom and other good qualities when he was a boy.¹¹ The Qur'ānic story of young Abraham (peace be on him), in which he destroyed all the idols save one, also illustrates the qualities of a young, wise, believing youth: uprightness and aptness.¹² The Qur'ān tells the story of a small group of believing youth who left their town to protect their faith. They also serve as an exemplar for the youth in the Qur'ān as Allah praises them.¹³

The Prophet Muḥammad's (peace be on him) own young life is not much described in biographies, but he was a young adult after the death of his grandfather, 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib (d. 578 CE), when he was just eight years old. Onwards, he remained under the guardianship of his uncle Abū Ṭālib (d. 4 BH/619 CE). Around the last two decades of the sixth century CE, he was young and known to have helped his uncles in the Sacrilegious War (Ḥarb al-Fijār) at around twenty years of age.¹⁴ He was also a part of the Ḥilf al-Fuḍūl (Alliance of Excellence) before his call to Prophecy in 611 CE. This alliance was formed to defend the weak and oppressed persons in Mecca.¹⁵

The young cousin of the Prophet (peace be on him), 'Alī (d. 40/661), is also the first young Muslim man. He stood by the Prophet's side when many were afraid to do so, as Hermansen points out.¹⁶

The point in life when a child reaches puberty is the time when the *sharī'ah* becomes binding upon boys and girls. While no age is fixed for puberty, it usually occurs in one's teen years. A person becomes

⁹ Qur'ān 30:54. All translations of Qur'ānic verses are of Yusuf Ali as recorded by <https://corpus.quran.com/>.

¹⁰ Hermansen, "Muslim Youth and Religious Identity," 123. Also see Yektin Yildirim, "Children and Childhood" in *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Josef W. Meri (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1:150.

¹¹ Qur'ān 19:12-16.

¹² Ibid., 21:51-66.

¹³ Ibid., 18:9-14.

¹⁴ Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah*, ed. 'Umar 'Abd al-Salām Tadmurī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1990), 1:210-11.

¹⁵ Ibid., 1:153-55.

¹⁶ Hermansen, "Muslim Youth and Religious Identity," 124.

responsible once he reaches this stage in life, owing to the maturation of his 'aql or reason.¹⁷

In other words, the youth are considered responsible Muslims in Islamic law and polity. One who has reached this stage in life is traditionally expected to start a family. This, however, has changed in modern times, where marriage is usually delayed until mid to late twenties, at least until after eighteen years of age.¹⁸ The youth thus start their religious lives to the full, and a young man who grows up in the worship of Allah is highly praised in Islamic tradition.¹⁹

Youth Activities and Their Forms

The Muslim youth of early centuries used to engage in many pastime activities.²⁰ These can be broadly divided into recreation, entertainment, sports, and games.

Recreation

Individuals and societies have always found ways to keep themselves hale and hearty. To that effect, recreation has served as a favourite tool. The Qur'ān relates the story of how Prophet Joseph's (peace be on him) brothers took him along for recreation and games, while they intended to throw him in the well since their father was more affectionate to him.²¹ The story shows that recreation and sports were a pastime for the people, even among families of the prophets like Jacob, the father of Joseph (peace be on them).

Though the Qur'ān mentions *lahw* and *la'ib* or recreation and games apparently in a negative connotation, it is predominantly so when compared to the life hereafter. The message conveyed here is perhaps that of priority and abstinence from overindulgence in recreation and games, since Islamic historical sources are replete with instances of recreation in the early centuries of Islam. The incident when the Prophet's young wife, 'Ā'ishah (d. 58/678), watched some Ethiopians playing in the Prophet's Mosque in Medina shows the permissibility of playing and its spectacle.

Narrated 'Aisha: The Prophet (ﷺ) was screening me with his Rida' (garment covering the upper part of the body) while I was looking at the Ethiopians who were playing in the courtyard of the mosque. (I continued watching)

¹⁷ See *ibid.*, 125.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁹ Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, kitāb al-ḥudūd, bāb faḍl man tarak al-fawāḥish, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:6806>.

²⁰ See Anīs Zakariyyā al-Naṣūlī, *al-Dawlah al-Umawiyyah fī 'l-Shām* (Cairo: Mu'assasat Hindāwī, 2012), 190-91.

²¹ Qur'ān 12:11-17.

till I was satisfied. So you may deduce from this event how a little girl . . . who is eager to enjoy amusement should be treated in this respect.²²

Among the ways of recreation popular among the early Muslims, especially girls, was singing, like on 'Īd (Islamic annual festivals) days. Various traditions of the Prophet (peace be on him) in *ḥadīth* and *sīrah* collections describe such recreational activities in vivid detail. 'Iyāḍ b. 'Amr al-Ash'arī²³ visited Anbar during the day of 'Īd and asked, "Why do I not see you having fun (*taqlīs*) as people used to have fun in the presence of the Messenger of God (peace be on him)?"²⁴ Similarly, the Companion Qays b. Sa'd b. 'Ubādah al-Anṣārī (d. 59 AH) says that I have seen everything that was practised during the life of Allah's Messenger except one thing, which is, people used to have fun in the presence of Allah's Messenger on the day of 'Īd al-Fiṭr.²⁵ Fu'ād 'Abd al-Bāqī explains *taqlīs* as playing the tambourine and singing. It is also said that this is what people play in front of the rulers when they visit a city. *Taqlīs* also refers to receiving the governors by providing different entertainments.²⁶ Al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) says, "Some narrators interpreted it to mean that the slave girls and the boys would sit by the roads, playing with the drums, etc."²⁷ It seems that people used to show signs of joy and pleasure in the presence of the Prophet (peace be on him), and he approved of that, just as he approved of the girl who vowed to play the tambourine in front of him, and the two girls who were singing in the presence of 'Ā'ishah.²⁸ Al-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 321/933) elucidates the case of such practices, which primarily serve the purpose of recreation. In his *Sharḥ Mushkil al-Āthār*, he mentions, "*Taqlīs* refers to the game and amusement that are not reprehensible, such as what is done at weddings, although what is done at 'Īd days and what is done at weddings are different. This is—God

²² Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, kitāb al-nikāḥ, bāb naẓar al-mar'ah ilā 'l-ḥabsh wa naḥwihim min ghar rībah, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:5236>.

²³ It is disputed whether he is a Companion or not. See Aḥmad b. 'Alī b. Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *al-Iṣābah fī Tamyīz al-Ṣaḥābah*, ed. 'Alī Muḥammad al-Bajāwī, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1412/1992), 4:756.

²⁴ Muḥammad b. Yazīd b. Mājāh, *Sunan* (Cairo: Dār Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyyah, n.d.), 1:413, kitāb iqamat al-ṣalāh wa 'l-sunnah fihā, bāb mā jā'a fī 'l-taqlīs yawm al-'Īd.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 1:413n.

²⁷ Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, ed. Shu'ayb al-Arna'ūṭ et al. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2001), 24:227n.

²⁸ Ibid.

knows best—because the Jews and Christians should know that there is tolerance in Islam.”²⁹

Playing with roosters, pigeons, and other birds was also a popular recreational activity among some sections of society, as elucidated in the following reports. When ‘Ubayd Allāh b Ziyād (d. 67/686) encountered Ibrāhīm b. Mālik al-Ashtar (d. 71/691) on the battlefield of al-Zāb, he asked, “Who is this who came to fight me?” He was told, “It is Ibrāhīm b. al-Ashtar.” He said, “Yesterday, I left him as a boy playing with pigeons.”³⁰ Reporting an interesting piece of information about a pious man, Yazīd b. Hārūn said, “Abū Balj (d. 130 AH) was our neighbour. He had no interest in women. However, he kept pigeons in his house to gladden himself with their company. He used to remember God a lot.”³¹ Ibn Sa’d (d. 230/845) comments that the name of Abū Balj is Yaḥyā b. ‘Alī Sulaym al-Fazārī. He was a trustworthy person (*thiqah*) and stayed in Wāsiṭ. Shu’bah, Hushaym, and Abū ‘Awānah reported narrations from him.³² This shows that even a pious and trustworthy *ḥadīth* narrator kept pigeons for amusement, and this was not considered a negative trait on his part by other *ḥadīth* scholars. The trained pigeons were quite expensive, as al-Jāhīz (d. 255/868) narrates in his book *al-Ḥaywān*, so much so that some sellers of the carrier pigeons were hopeful of selling one of their pigeons for fifty dinars.³³ Anas b. Mālik (d. 93/712) narrated,

The Prophet (peace be on him) used to visit my mother, Umm Sulaym. She would present him with food. One day, he entered upon us and found my younger brother heavy-hearted. He asked, “O Umm Sulaym, what happened to your son?” She said, “O Messenger of God, the hummingbird he used to play with has died.” He said, “O Abū ‘Umayr, the chiffchaff (*al-nughayr*) has died and met its destiny?”³⁴

Regarding roosters, it is reported that Muḥammad b. Ishāq (d. 151/769) used to play with them.³⁵ These are among the various reports that touch upon many aspects of recreation as enjoyed by the early Muslims.

²⁹ Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Taḥāwī, *Sharḥ Mushkil al-Āthār*, ed. Shu’ayb al-Arna’ūṭ, 16 vols. (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1415/1994), 4:130.

³⁰ Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Rabbih, *al-‘Iqd al-Farīd* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1404 AH), 5:152.

³¹ Muḥammad b. Sa’d, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1968), 7:311.

³² Ibid.

³³ ‘Amr b. Baḥr al-Jāhīz, *al-Ḥaywān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1424 AH), 3:141.

³⁴ Abū Dāwūd al-Ṭayālīsī, *Musnad* (Cairo: Dār Hajar, 1999), 3:605.

³⁵ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Suhaylī, *al-Rawḍ al-Unf* (Beirut: Dār al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2000), 1:22.

Entertainment

While entertainment has a much wider meaning today, it was a much limited experience in early Muslim societies.³⁶ This was partly due to the absence of many ways and means which are easily accessible today, and partly due to the encompassing nature of Islamic law and polity around all spheres of life. While Islam does not support asceticism, it defines humans' role and purpose in life. This led many to focus on life's sublime and subtle aspects rather than the profane. Still, youth is a phase when people are learning life itself and tend to taste whatever comes their way. Pickthall mentions two forms of entertainment available and prevalent in Muslim societies: 1) shadow plays and poetical recitations, and 2) storytelling. The background stories from pre-Islamic classical Arabic poetry of the likes of 'Antar were picked up as script for such activities.³⁷

Humour was probably the simplest and most popular form of entertainment for early Muslims since their exemplar, the Prophet (peace be on him), himself had a very good sense of humour.³⁸ Humour's primary objective is to make people happy, and the Prophet (peace be on him) is known to have prayed for people to the same effect. A tradition narrates, "The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) laughed. Abu Bakr or Umar said to him: May Allah make your teeth laugh!"³⁹

Music, at least in its simple form, and singing were known to the Companions of the Prophet (peace be on him).⁴⁰ They used to show signs of joy and pleasure in the presence of the Prophet (peace be on him), and he approved of that.⁴¹ In a tradition, the Prophet (peace be on him) cleared a misconception about singing that it was the devil's work.

Narrated Aisha: Once Abu Bakr came to her on the day of 'Id-ul-Fitr or 'Id ul Adha while the Prophet (ﷺ) was with her and there were two girl singers with her, singing songs of the Ansar about the day of Buath. Abu Bakr said twice. "Musical instrument of Satan!" But the Prophet (ﷺ) said, "Leave

³⁶ For an overview of sports and games in medieval Europe, see Earle F. Zeigler, ed., *Sport and Physical Education in the Middle Ages* (n.p.: Trafford, 2006).

³⁷ Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Cultural Side of Islam* (Lahore: Sheikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1993), 72-75; D. M. Dunlop, *Arabic Civilization to AD 1500* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1971), 37-50.

³⁸ For details on humour, see Rosenthal, *Humor in Early Islam*.

³⁹ Sulaymān b. al-Ash'ath Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, kitāb al-adab, bāb fī al-rajul yaqūl li al-rajul: Adhaka Allāh sinnak, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud:5234>.

⁴⁰ For details, see Al-Ghazali, *Music and Singing*, trans. Duncan Black MacDonald (Islamic Book Trust, 2009).

⁴¹ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 24:227n.

them, Abu Bakr, for every nation has an 'Id (i.e., festival) and this day is our 'Id."⁴²

The Prophet (peace be on him) showed his blessed affection for tribal girls who were singing praise for him:

It was narrated from Anas bin Malik that the Prophet passed by some part of Al-Madinah and saw some girls beating their Daff and singing, saying: "We are girls from Banu Najjar, what an excellent neighbour is Muhammad." The Prophet said, "Allah knows that you are dear to me."⁴³

While there are examples of singing either without any instruments or using just a tambourine and the Prophet (peace be on him) accorded his approval, there are many traditions which show the Prophet's abhorrence towards professional singing with musical instruments and rented or bought singing girls involved. Such activities may be compared to today's concerts and other musical shows, which often involve professional singers, as well as other impermissible activities like drinking. Examples of such activities were negligible in the early Muslim cities of Mecca and Medina, although Shuraydi reports instances of singing and music with reference to the poet 'Umar b. Abī Rabī'ah (d. 93/712 or 103/721)⁴⁴ and female singer Jamīlah (7th century CE), who had a choir of *qiyān* (sing. *qaynah*, singing girl) and trained some of the great early musicians and singers. She performed concerts only in her salon. 'Abd Allāh b. Ja'far (d. 80/699) did not think it beneath his dignity to visit her salon to hear her sing a couplet of the Jāhilī poet Imru' al-Qays (d. 544 CE), although she told him she would have been only too glad to perform at his house. 'Umar, the above-mentioned poet, would also visit her.⁴⁵ This kind of singing was not approved of religiously, and the reports of such flirtatious incidents are exaggerated by poets and may even be untrue, as Shuraydi himself points out.⁴⁶ He further reports that some Umayyad rulers banned singing and other such immorality-inducing activities. However, Yazīd b. Mu'āwiyah (r. 680-683 CE) and Yazīd b. 'Abd al-Malik (r. 720-724 CE) were the two young rulers who loved singing.⁴⁷

Al-Aṣma'ī says that Mu'āwiyah used to criticize 'Abd Allāh b. Ja'far for listening to songs. One year, Mu'āwiyah came to make the pilgrimage. He

⁴² Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, kitāb manāqib al-anṣār, bāb maqdam al-Nabī ṣallā Allāh 'alayhi wa sallama wa aṣḥābihi al-Madīnah, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:3931>.

⁴³ Ibn Mājah, *Sunan*, kitāb al-nikāḥ, bāb al-ghinā' wa al-duff, <https://sunnah.com/ibnmajah:1899>.

⁴⁴ Shuraydi, *Raven and the Falcon*, 95-97.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 98.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 98-100.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 98-103.

visited Medina. One night, he passed by the house of ‘Abd Allāh b. Ja‘far and heard someone singing on strings. He stopped for a while and listened to it. Then he went on to say, “I ask forgiveness from God! I ask God for forgiveness! When he returned by the end of the night, he passed by his house again and saw ‘Abd Allāh standing and praying. He stopped to listen to his recitation and said, “They have mixed an act that was good with another that was evil. Perhaps Allah will turn unto them (in Mercy): for Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.” When Ibn Ja‘far heard this, he prepared a feast and invited him to his house. He also summoned Ibn Ṣayyād, the singer, and asked him, “When you see Mu‘āwiyah start eating, move your strings and sing.” So, when Mu‘āwiyah started eating, Ibn Ṣayyād moved his strings and sang the poetry of ‘Adī b. Zayd. Mu‘āwiyah was fond of his poetry and was so impressed by his singing that he held his hand from eating and started striking the ground with his foot in joy. ‘Abd Allāh b. Ja‘far said to him, “O Commander of the Faithful! This is select poetry combined with select melodies. Do you see anything wrong with it? He said, “There is nothing wrong with the wisdom of poetry combined with the wisdom of melodies.”⁴⁸

Sports

Various physical activities were popular among pre-Islamic Arabs, who promoted them to showcase their chivalry and bravery, as well as training for war. Horse riding, sword fighting, and archery were among the popular sports. Qur’ānic instructions on horses also state the purpose for keeping them and their utility on the battlefield. The Qur’ān commands the believers thus:

Against them make ready your strength to the utmost of your power, including steeds of war, to strike terror into (the hearts of) the enemies of Allah and your enemies, and others besides, whom ye may not know, but whom Allah doth know. Whatever ye shall spend in the cause of Allah, shall be repaid unto you, and ye shall not be treated unjustly.⁴⁹

Some Muslim heroes in early battles between the Prophet (peace be on him) and his adversaries were even given titles like “Allah’s Sword” for Khālīd b. Walīd (d. 21/642) and “Allah’s Lion” for the young ‘Alī.

It is interesting to note that the she-camel of the Prophet (peace be on him) used to contest in races and always came out as a winner:

Sa‘īd b. al-Musayyab said, “Al-Qaṣwā, the she-camel of the Prophet (peace be on him) used to race ahead whenever she participated in a race. One day, she raced with a camel and was left behind. It was distressing for Muslims that she lost the race. The Messenger of God (peace be on him) said, “If people elevate the status of something or (he said) they wanted to

⁴⁸ Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, *al-‘Iqd al-Farīd*, 7:19.

⁴⁹ Qur’ān 8:60.

elevate the status of something, God would decrease its status.” Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī said, “From this, we infer that participating in the competitions of archery, horse racing, and camel racing is not prohibited.”⁵⁰

Abū Hurayrah (d. 59/679) reports that the she-camel of the Messenger of Allah did not enter a race competition, but she won the race.⁵¹ Later, Umayyad caliphs actively participated in horse riding and races. Several reports attest to this.⁵² A competition of horse races was held during the reign of Bishr b. Marwān (d. 75/694)—the Umayyad governor of Iraq. The horse of ‘Abd al-Malik b. Bishr won the race. Ismā‘īl b. Ash‘ath said to him, “By God, I will compete with your horse tomorrow with a horse that does not know that your father is the ruler of Iraq.” So, the horse of Ismā‘īl won the race the next day. He said, “Have I not told you?”⁵³

Bashshār b. Muslim b. ‘Amr al-Bāhalī (d. 96/715)—the brother of Qutaybah b. Muslim (d. 96/715)—gifted al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf (d. 95/714) a horse on which he won a horse race. Consequently, al-Ḥajjāj granted him seven hundred hectares (*jarīb*) of land or four hundred hectares of land. He dug a stream for it, which was named after him.⁵⁴

Sulaymān b. ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 715-724 CE) had a keen interest in teaching horsemanship to his son. He had specific directions for that. Al-Dīnawarī narrated that al-Kalbī said, “Sulaymān b. ‘Abd al-Malik summoned me. I entered upon him while I was short of breath. I greeted him with prayers for his caliphate, and he responded to my greetings. Then he gestured to me. So, I sat down, but he remained silent until I calmed down. Then, he said to me.

‘O Kalbī, my son Muḥammad is the apple of my eye and the fruit of my heart. I have hoped that God will make him attain the best that a man can attain from his family. I have entrusted you with disciplining him. So teach him the Qur’ān and recite poetry to him, for poetry is the divan of the Arabs. Make him understand history, teach him the science of inheritance, and make him understand *sunan*. Do not neglect him day or night. If he makes a mistake with a word, slips up with a letter, or makes a mistake in a statement, do not scold him in front of his companions. However, when he gets along with you, admonish him so that you do not embarrass him. If people enter to greet him, ask him to treat them with kindness and

⁵⁰ Mālīk b. Anas, *Muwatta’ al-Imām al-Mālīk’: Riwayāt Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī*, ed. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb ‘Abd al-Laṭīf, 2nd ed. (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1306 AH), 307.

⁵¹ ‘Alī b. ‘Umar al-Dāraquṭnī, *Sunan* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 2004), 5:546.

⁵² See al-Wīs, *al-Tarwīḥ ‘an al-Nafs*, 21-28.

⁵³ ‘Amr b. Baḥr al-Jāhīz, *al-Bayān wa ‘l-Tabayīn* (Beirut: Maktabat al-Hilāl, 1423 AH), 3:171.

⁵⁴ Yāqūt b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥamawī, *Mu’jam al-Buldān* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1995), 5:318.

reverence. If they greet him, let him greet them with a better one. Be good to those who serve food on your table. Encourage him to always keep a smile on his face, be a good person, control his anger, keep away from filthy talk, be steadfast in logic, keep his promises, and refrain from lying. Do not let him ride a quick or shaggy horse or ride with a small saddle, which may expose his buttocks.”⁵⁵

While horses and camels were the animals of choice with early Muslims, some reports describe people being overly emotional at times, like the poet al-Farazdaq (d. 110/728), who says that he walked into the funeral of Bishr b. Marwān, bringing along a horse that Bishr had gifted him. When they finished burying him, he wounded the horse and recited verses, including the following:

Would I not be avaricious if I rode you after him
For a betting day, or did you run with me?⁵⁶

Javelin throw and archery were two of the popular games among the Arabs even before the advent of Islam. Many a battle has been won because of their tactical deployment and employment. ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 634-644 CE) wrote to Abū ‘Ubaydah b. al-Jarrāḥ (d. 18/639): “Teach your soldiers to throw and teach your children to swim.”⁵⁷ Muṣ‘ab b. Sa’d (d. 103 AH) advised his son, “My son, learn to throw, for it is your best game.”⁵⁸ ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb passed by some young people who were practising archery and said, “Throw, for throwing is (the best) preparedness and endurance.”⁵⁹

Salamah b. al-Akwa’ (d. 74/693) narrated, “The Messenger of God (peace be on him) went out to a group of Muslims doing military drills in the market, and said, ‘O Children of Ishmael, throw, for your father was an archer. Throw, while I am with the so-and-so people,’ intending one of the two groups. They grabbed their hands. He asked, ‘What happened to you?’ They replied, ‘How do we throw while you are with the so-and-so people?’ He said, “Throw, and I am with you all.”⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Aḥmad b. Dāwūd al-Dīnawarī, *al-Akḥbār al-Ṭiwāl* (Cairo: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyyah, 1960), 330.

⁵⁶ ‘Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad b. Abī ‘l-Dunyā, *Makārim al-Akhlāq* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qur’ān, n.d.), 143.

⁵⁷ Sa’īd b. Maṣṣūr, *Sunan* (n.p.: al-Dār al-Salafiyyah, 1983), 2:208.

⁵⁸ ‘Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad b. Abī Shaybah, *al-Adab* (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā’ir al-Islāmiyyah, 1999), 169.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Al-Muhallab b. Aḥmad al-Andalusī, *al-Mukhtaṣar al-Naṣīḥ fī Tahdhīb al-Kitāb al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaḥīḥ* (Riyadh: Dār al-Tawḥīd, 2009), 2:301.

‘Aṭā’ b. Abī Rabāḥ (d. 115/733) narrates that he saw Jābir b. ‘Abd Allāh (d. 74/697) and Jābir b. ‘Umayr al-Anṣārī practising archery. When one of them got tired and sat down, the other would ask, “Have you become sluggish? I heard Allah’s Messenger saying, ‘Everything which is not the remembrance of Allah is a trifle (*lahw*) and forgetfulness (*sahw*) except four things: a person’s running between two targets, his training of his horse, his playing with his wife, and his learning swimming.’”⁶¹ It is reported that ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb wrote to the people of Syria: “Train your children in swimming, archery, and horse riding.”⁶² The Umayyad caliphs emphasized teaching their sons swimming. Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705 CE) said to al-Sha‘bī, “Teach my sons swimming because they will find someone to write for them, but they will not find anyone to swim for them.” Their passion for swimming led them to build swimming pools in their palaces and resorts.

Another show of physical fitness is the sport of wrestling, as a tradition of the Prophet (peace be on him) illustrates. Rukānah wrestled with the Prophet (peace be on him). The Prophet (peace be on him) threw him down.⁶³ The founder of the Umayyad empire, Mu‘āwiyah b. Abī Sufyān (r. 661-680 CE) was an invincible wrestler before becoming the caliph. The Prophet (peace be on him) is reported to have said, “Mu‘āwiyah does not wrestle with anyone but he overcomes.”⁶⁴ The later Umayyad caliphs also took great interest in wrestling competitions. This is reflected in the pictures engraved on the walls of the Umayyad palaces.⁶⁵

As seen above, sports were generally linked to war exercises. However, an incident about ‘Ā’ishah indicates that the Prophet (peace be on him) also used to have fun playing with her:

Aisha reported: She was with the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, while on a journey. Aisha said, “I raced him on foot and I outran him, but when I gained some weight, I raced him again and he outran me. The Prophet said: This is for that race.”⁶⁶

Ibn Kathīr said, “It was the character of the Prophet to live in a beautiful manner with his wives, being cheerful and kind to them,

⁶¹ Sulaymān b. Aḥmad al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu‘jam al-Awsaṭ* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥaramay, n.d.), 8:118.

⁶² Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm al-Qarrāb, *Faḍā’l al-Ramy* (Zarqa: Maktabat al-Manār, 1989), 56.

⁶³ Abū Dāwūd Sulaymān b. al-Ash‘ath, *Sunan* (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-‘Asriyyah, n.d.), 4:55.

⁶⁴ ‘Abd al-Raḥman b. Abī Bakr al-Suyūṭī, *al-Musāra‘ah ilā ‘l-Muṣāra‘ah* (Jedda: Maktabat al-Sawād, 1413/1992), 89.

⁶⁵ See al-Wīs, *al-Tarwīḥ ‘an al-Nafs*, 42.

⁶⁶ Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, kitāb al-jihād, bāb fī al-sabq ‘alā al-jihād.

generously spending on them, and laughing with them.”⁶⁷ This also shows a lighter side of the Prophet’s (peace be on him) personality.

Games

Among the most popular classical games today is chess. Its form, known to Arabs, is called *Shiṭranj*. If played for gambling, it is rendered impermissible in Islamic law. Ḥarb b. Ismā‘īl asked Ishāq, “Do you think there is anything wrong with playing chess?” He replied, “It is completely wrong.” Someone said, “But the people living on the borders play it for war.” He said, “It is immoral.”⁶⁸

Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Ājurri (d. 360/970) mentions some prohibited games like playing with *Shiṭranj*, animals, pigeons, etc., which were prevalent in his time, and then remarks the following:

Everything we have mentioned as prohibited is invalid and impermissible to play with, yet many people in various lands engage in it, but find no one to admonish them. This is because among them are those who are referred to as people of honour; among them are those who are referred to as being among Sultan’s friends; among them are those who have (sources of) revenue and land that they rent to those who gamble in it and those who entertain themselves with falsehood so that no one can denounce them. . . . Consequently, the evil has become common and widespread. Some of them play with dice and chess; some play with pigeons and singing birds and gamble with them; and some have a gambling house in which they gamble with dirhams and clothes until a man among them makes his money and clothes gambled. Some of them incite rams, roosters, and other birds to fight. All of these are sins related to pre-Islamic times. Allah, His Messenger, and the ‘*ulamā*’ forbade them, as well as the ‘*ulamā*’ forbade the company of such people and greeting them.⁶⁹

Al-Ājurri not only lists the games, which were popular among certain segments of his society, but also points out the causes and factors which led to the currency of such games in the Muslim society of his time. Descriptions of another popular game, *al-Jahārdiyyah*, literally “the game of fourteen,” are also given in some historical reports. It is an Arabicized form of the Persian word “*chahārdah*” (fourteen).⁷⁰ In his book *Kaff al-Ra‘ā’ ‘an Muḥarramāt al-Lahw wa ‘l-Samā’*, Shihāb al-Dīn Ibn

⁶⁷ Ismā‘īl b. ‘Umar Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Aẓīm*, ed. Sāmī b. Muḥammad b. Salāmah (Riyadh: Dār Ṭaybah, 1999), 2:242.

⁶⁸ Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Khallāl, *al-Amr bi ‘l-Ma’rūf wa ‘l-Nahy ‘an al-Munkar* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2003), 63.

⁶⁹ Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Ājurri, *Taḥrīm al-Nard wa ‘l-Shiṭranj wa ‘l-Malāhī* (n.p.: n.p., 1982), 189.

⁷⁰ “*Al-Jahārdiyyah al-‘Uthmāniyyah*,” *Ahl Miṣr*, December 6, 2019, <https://ahlmasrnews.com/937737>.

Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 974/1566) explains this game as “a wooden piece in which twenty-eight holes are drilled, fourteen on one side and fourteen on the other side. The Arabs called it the game of Shahārdah. However, the Egyptians—during the Mamluk dynasty—named it Manqalah.⁷¹ Some people played this game during the time of ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb. He disliked it to the extent that he broke it on the heads of his family members who played it.⁷² Umm Salamah said, “If your homes burn with fire is better than playing this game.”⁷³

In his book *Dhamm al-Malāhī*, Ibn Abī ‘l-Dunyā (d. 280 AH) mentioned stories of Ibn ‘Umar’s hostility to it.⁷⁴ Salamah b. al-Akwa’ also prohibited his sons from playing the game of Fourteen. He did not explain the reason for his hostility to this game other than that it makes the players of both sides take oaths. This is a sin because they take oaths about an unknown thing, which is a sin.⁷⁵

While this sums up the general Islamic attitude towards some games, chess was played by many, especially in the royal courts. Ma‘mar said, “I heard that al-Sha‘bī used to play chess, wear a red blanket, and throw with *jullāhiq* (slingshot) because he was hiding from al-Ḥajjaj.”⁷⁶ *Al-Jullāhiq* refers to a rounded and smooth clay. It also refers to the device (slingshot) used to throw it.⁷⁷ Another report says that ‘Abd Allāh b. Mu‘āwiyah b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Ja‘far b. Abī Ṭālib was a friend of al-Walīd b. ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 705-715 CE). The former would come to the latter and keep him company. They would sit and play chess.⁷⁸

As mentioned above, games of dice have always played a great role in games of chance, whereby it was viewed as impermissible *a fortiori* than chess. The following examples illustrate this: Mujāhid said, “Everything that involves gambling is part of *al-maysir* (an ancient Arabian game of chance), even boys’ playing with walnuts and dice lobes

⁷¹ Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ḥajar al-Haytamī, *Kaff al-Ra‘ā’ ‘an Muḥarramāt al-Lahw wa ‘l-Samā’*, ed. ‘Ādil ‘Abd al-Mun‘im (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qur‘ān, n.d.), 116-17.

⁷² ‘Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad Ibn Abī ‘l-Dunyā, *Dhāmm al-Malāhī*, ed. ‘Amr ‘Abd al-Mun‘im Salīm (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymiyyah, 1416 AH), 83.

⁷³ Ibid., 84.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 83

⁷⁵ Ibid., 83-84.

⁷⁶ Ma‘mar b. Rāshid, *al-Jāmi’*, published as an appendix to *Muṣannaf* of ‘Abd al-Razzāq (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1403 AH), 10:467.

⁷⁷ https://www.almaany.com/ar/dict/ar-ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%82/?#google_vignette.

⁷⁸ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Alī b. al-Jawzī, *Akhbār al-Ḥumqā wa ‘l-Mughaffalīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Lubnānī, 1990), 35.

(*ki'āb*).⁷⁹ The context suggests that the walnut is something to be entertained by, and it may involve gambling. Its association with the dice lobes indicates that it resembles them. As for the walnut, it is not defined in dictionaries as a form of entertainment. *Lisān al-'Arab* defines it as follows: "The walnut is a type of grape that is not large, but it turns very yellow when it ripens."⁸⁰ Backgammon was known to Muslims as early as the Prophet's (peace be on him) time and was among the popular games among the Arab royal courts, and it probably trickled down to the masses as well.⁸¹ Owing to its links to gambling, it was, however, disliked by the Prophet (peace be on him) and his Companions.

It was narrated that Abu Musa said: "The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said: 'Whoever plays backgammon has disobeyed Allah and His Messenger.'"⁸²

Al-Qaradāwī summarizes Islamic legal views on chess and other games and notes that the Companions held different opinions on its permissibility.⁸³ While it is beyond the point in this article to offer a view into permissibility or otherwise, it remains a historical fact that people, especially the youth, used to play chess and other games as pastimes, whence its overindulgence caused its distaste with legal experts.

Discussion and Analysis

It is evident from the texts cited in the first two sections that early Muslim youth engaged themselves in various activities apart from their day-to-day religious and work routines. If one were to enumerate and classify those activities, sports were the most popular ones since they were important for physical well-being, as well as preparing them for any expedition or war. It must be remembered that the Muslim world expanded from the confines of the Hejaz region to a superpower within a couple of centuries since the call to Prophecy by the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) in 610-11 CE. Their strength of faith notwithstanding, if there was one thing that early Muslim youth possessed, it was physical fitness. Besides that, girls were also encouraged to partake in physical activities under the conditions of *ḥijāb*.

⁷⁹ Ibn Maṣṣūr, *Sunan*, 4:1616.

⁸⁰ Muḥammad b. Mukarram b. Maṣṣūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1992), 5:326; Ibn Maṣṣūr, *Sunan*, 4:1616n.

⁸¹ Franz Rosenthal, *Gambling in Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), 88; Touraj Daryaei, *On the Explanation of Chess and Backgammon* (n.p.: H&S Media, 2021), 1:88.

⁸² Ibn Mājah, *Sunan*, kitāb al-adab, bāb al-la'ib bi al-nard, <https://sunnah.com/ibnmajah:3762>.

⁸³ See Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, *al-Ḥalāl wa 'l-Ḥarām fī 'l-Islām* (Cairo: Maktabat Wahbah, 1433/2012).

Other activities, like games and recreation, were conditionally permissible, such that their popularity and open practice remained limited, especially in the religiously normative society described in this work. While there were restrictions upon intermixing of sexes, or open forms of intimacy, some people, even some rulers like the two Yazīds mentioned earlier, appear to have shown disregard for such restrictions.

Youth is an age of development and strength, as elaborated in the aforementioned examples, and it constitutes the final stage of a Muslim's formative period. Owing to its position, the permissible and impermissible dichotomy was essential to Islamic injunctions on activities. A balanced view of fun and spirituality was the focus of the Prophet Muḥammad's (peace be on him) remarks on youth activities, while the Companions and Muslim jurists often disagreed on the extent of permissible fun.

The above notwithstanding, storytelling and competitive sports contributed to social cohesion, while games and other recreational activities supplemented it. The discourse analysis of the texts shows the following aspects:

The lexicon of these texts is primarily religious, starting with the Qur'ānic and moving on to the *ḥadīth* corpus. Fun and reason are the two nodes that connect the profane and the spiritual dimensions of early Islamic life, as is evident from the cited texts. The tone of these texts is descriptive of the society they present. At times, they draw a pen picture of the events in history, while at others, they are quite brief. This is true of texts written for the sake of history, *per se*. There are ideological constructs within the texts that carry relevance for today's Muslim youth as well. These may be summarized as follows:

Men and women, including boys and girls, participated in shared religious and social activities, with men typically engaging in public roles and women and girls enjoying recreational activities within familial or festive settings, such as annual Islamic festivals. The youth also acted as standard bearers and stewards of faith, as both Qur'ānic and traditional/historical accounts reveal. Their staunch faith is praised by Allah Himself. However, it is clear from these texts that they were supervised by their seniors, who would keep an eye on them for signs of impermissible or immoral acts. The society's hierarchical structure is emphasized here. Cultural borrowings and adaptations are showcased in these texts, which were often brought forth from Persia and even farther eastward from India. Such adaptations show a general openness of early Muslim societies towards extra-religious practices. *Shiṭranj* or chess is one such significant illustration. Regarding the elite class, it is established that they frequented the company of poets and singers.

Gambling was taboo and impermissible to early Muslims, and any resemblance to it was always frowned upon by the Muslim elders. Society had always accepted humour, and a smile was considered charity, unless stupidity or obscenity was involved.

Conclusion

The work combines an interesting array of religious and historical narratives, which remain intertwined to offer a glimpse into the balance, moderation, and cultural continuity of the first two centuries of Islamic history. While a religiously idealistic and normative discourse emanates from these texts, it remains in balance with the zeitgeist of society. The instances of disagreement remain, but never overwhelm society. This was also a reason for the political supremacy of Muslim societies till modern times. It remains to be said that this work neither serves as a religious text nor as a secular one; it carries both aspects, which Alija Izetbegovic defines as "Dualism of the Living World."⁸⁴

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⁸⁴ Alija Izetbegovic, *Islam between East and West* (Oak Brook, IL, American Trust Publication, 1984), xxix.