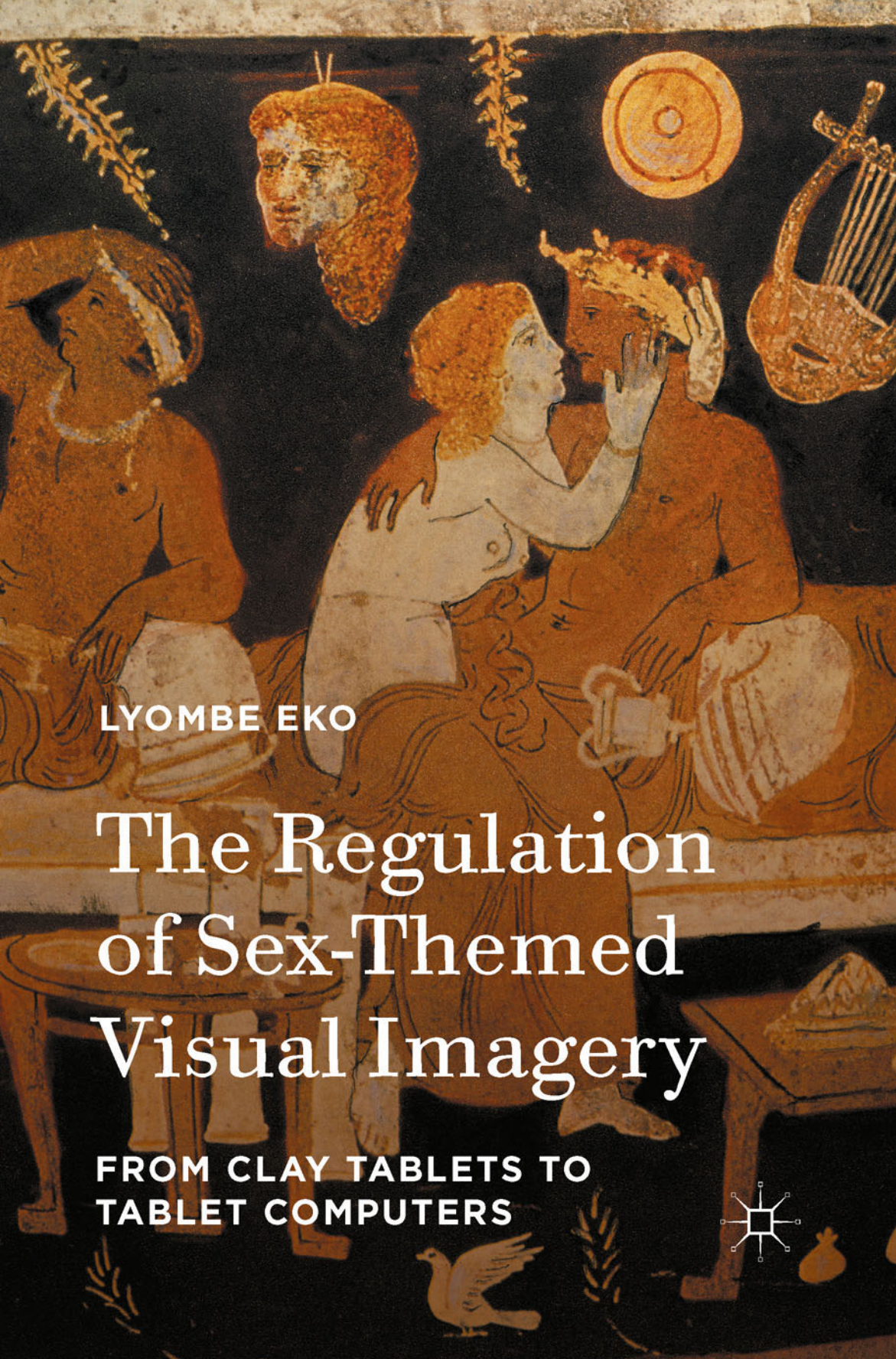

LYOMBE EKO

The Regulation of Sex-Themed Visual Imagery

FROM CLAY TABLETS TO TABLET COMPUTERS

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Lyombe Eko

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Sex-Themed Visual Imagery as Regulated Representations

From the Euphrates Valley to Silicon Valley

One of the ironies of explicit images that portray sexual scenes is that they are rooted in the religious experiences of most cultures. From the dawn of time, religion and sex have been intertwined. This is especially true of the civilizations of the peoples of the ancient Near East, the region of the world that covers parts of modern-day Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel. Contemporary events in this part of the world remind us of this fact from time to time. In 2006, a court in Istanbul, Turkey, acquitted 92-year-old Turkish archeologist Muazzez Ilmiye Cig of the criminal charge of inciting religious hatred. The crime with which Cig had been charged was connected to her academic research. One of the foremost experts in ancient Near Eastern civilizations, and especially the civilization of Sumeria, Cig had written that the veil worn by millions of women in the Middle East—and by religious women in the Western world—was a religious and sexual artifact that predated both Christianity and Islam. She stated that five thousand years ago, the religious headscarf, or veil, was a symbolic garment that helped set sacred temple prostitutes or priestesses apart from other women (Arsu, 2006). She had written that these sacred prostitutes had sex with young men in the pagan temple as an act of worship and celebration of the goddess of love, sex, and fertility. Cig argued that wearing a headscarf in contemporary society should therefore not be taken as an expression of a woman's morality or religiosity (Arsu, 2006).

Many Turks were not amused. The claim that the religious headscarf, or veil, was the distinguishing attire of temple prostitutes in ancient Sumeria was an explosive claim to make in Turkey, an Islamo-secular country. Though Turkey has a secular constitution and sees secularism as its official creed, it has a population that is almost 98 percent Muslim. Furthermore, its Islamist prime-minister-turned-president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and increasingly assertive Islamist political parties slowly but surely oriented Turkey away from its twentieth-century dogmatic secularism toward being a country in which Islam is the guiding politico-cultural ideology (Eko, 2012). Indeed, in Turkey, it is a criminal offense to offend the

religious sensibilities of others. Article 24 of the Turkish Constitution (1982) states that "no one shall be allowed to exploit or abuse religion or religious feelings, or things held sacred by religion, in any manner whatsoever." As a result, Turkey criminalizes "incitement to religious hatred," a coded expression for blasphemy, criticism of God and of religion. Cig was charged under this provision of the law. Professor Cig's trial and acquittal demonstrates that issues of politics, sex, religion, and freedom of expression are very sensitive in many parts of the world, especially in the "Muslim world," where it is believed that all sex-themed material—obscenity, pornography, erotica, and indecency (four-letter words that describe sexual and toilet functions)—originate from a decadent "Western world" out to infect the cultures of the rest of the world. Indeed, in virtually all majority Muslim countries, portrayals of sex or sexuality of any kind in the media or in public are part of the so-called triple taboo. The two other legs of the taboo are religion and politics (Hafez, 2002).

In India, censors ensure that Bollywood (India's movie industry) is not allowed to depict kissing or other acts of sexual intimacy. Activists of the Hindu nationalist movement, the Vishwa Hindu Parisad; the Bajrang Dal (Brigade of the Monkey God); and the ruling party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Bharatiya Janata Party, use legal means to exert pressure on the Film Censor Board to censor objectionable films and sometimes resort to extralegal means to enforce the no-overt-intimacy rule in Bollywood. Indeed, activists from these groups have vandalized art pieces; attacked artists whose work was viewed as indecent, immoral, and decadent; and forced the closure of exhibitions on university campuses as part of a "campaign against artists and writers who linked Hindu deities with sexuality, or talked openly and frankly about sexuality" (Doniger, 2014, pp. 396–97). As we see in Chapter 6, activists of the Bajrang Dal come out in full force on Valentine's Day and proceed to attack shops selling flowers and cards, as well as couples showing any signs of public intimacy (Ghosh, 2012). In the last few hundred years, India has moved, in the words of Doniger (2014), "from *Kama* [the god of sex] to *Karma* [the sum total of one's deeds and misdeeds]" (p. 396). The government of Prime Minister Nehru criminalized homosexuality and other sexual acts, claiming that their existence in India was the result of "Western influence" (Doniger, 2014, p. 406). These examples demonstrate that people from many parts of the world consider the West to be the epicenter of sexual decadence. These critics of Western sexual mores claim that liberal Western sexual immoralities have diffused to the rest of the world through the traditional media and the Internet (Eko, 2001). The thinking behind this perspective is that pornography is a decadent Western phenomenon and that the pervasive presence of pornography on the Internet is a testament to the globalization of Western decadence and debauchery. Some countries declared that if this Western cultural filth were allowed into their countries unimpeded, it would infect and destroy their religions, political systems, cultures, and ways of life (Eko, 2001).

The notion that explicit, sex-themed visual imagery or pornography is a product of Western depravity and debauchery is not a new one. Indeed, association of Western decline with decadence was advanced by works like Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1782), which postulated that the Roman Empire declined and succumbed to northern European Germanic tribes in part because Romans had lost their "civic virtue" as well as the moral and ethical ideals that put society and the state over personal interests. This loss of

virtue supposedly made it easy for them to succumb to decadence and immorality. In Western academia and Hollywood popular culture, the theme of Western depravity and decadence has focused on the life of the decadent, syphilitic emperor Tiberius and especially on his successor, the autocratic emperor Gaius Caesar Germanicus, known as Caligula (37–41 AD). Caligula, who became the third emperor of the Roman Empire in 37 AD was the most notorious of all Roman rulers (Barrett, 1998). He was deified as a "living god" and led an extremely self-indulgent, decadent lifestyle marked by public spectacles, homosexuality, extreme sexual perversity, and orgies that turned the imperial palace into a brothel. Caligula's extreme sexuality was crowned by an incestuous relationship with his sister, Julia Drusilla (Barber and Reed, 2001). As we see in Chapter 13, Emperor Caligula was the subject of *Penthouse* magazine owner Bob Guccione's 1980 hardcore Italian-American international pornographic movie *Caligula*, which presented a fictionalized, imaginary, cinematic account of the sexual perversity, decadence, and downfall of Emperor Caligula (Hawes, 2009).

More recently, works like Hendrik de Leeuw's *Sinful Cities of the Western World*, published in 1934, have emphasized the theme of Western decadence. De Leeuw's list of decadent Western cities consisted of Marseilles, Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin, and New York. Interestingly de Leeuw (1934) included Algiers, Tangier, Casablanca, and Sidi-Bel-Abbès—North African cities that were part of the French colonial empire—in his list of decadent Western fleshpots whose sole purpose was "pandering to the lusts of men" (p. 98). In her book, *March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam*, Pulitzer Prize–winning American historian Barbara Tuchman (1984) echoes the theme of the role of decadence and depravity in the fall of Western kingdoms and empires. She chronicles the "self-destructive acts" carried out by a virtual historical fool's gallery of Western leaders and governments, from the city-state of Troy to the American war in Vietnam. Tuchman wrote that one of the Renaissance popes who provoked the Protestant "secession" was the depraved Pope Alexander VI. Despite his strenuous efforts to "maintain the purity of Catholic doctrine by censorship of books" (p. 90), Alexander VI, who was notorious for having many mistresses and children, was depraved and decadent to the point of organizing sexual orgies with nude courtesans (prostitutes) in the Vatican (p. 88). Tuchman suggests that his open depravity and decadence helped usher in the Protestant Reformation.

The US Attorney General's Commission on Pornography (US Department of Justice, 1986) gave some credence to the thesis of Western decadence. In its survey of the history of pornography, the commission wrote that "pictures of sex have been around as long as pictures . . . It is odd that historical treatment of pornography turns out to be historical treatments of the *regulation* [emphasis in the original], governmental or otherwise, of pornography. To understand the phenomenon of pornography is to look at the history of the phenomenon itself prior to, or distinct from, the investigation of the practice of restricting it" (p. 233). The commission then proceeded to discuss the presence of explicit sexual references in ancient Greek and Roman dramas and other writings. It specifically mentioned the presence of scenes of sexual intercourse in the brothels of Pompeii (p. 234). Though the commission mentioned the presence of sexual references in *The Thousand and One Nights* and the *Kama Sutra*, its "Western Civilizational" approach to the subject ignored the ancient Near Eastern and ancient Asian cultures, where regulation of explicit, sex-themed visual content did not mean restricting it. As

we see in Chapters 4 and 8, pre-Christian ancient Greece and Rome regulated sex-themed material within the context of their heterogeneous sexualities and polytheistic cultures.

The premise of this book is that sex-themed visual imagery, or what we now call pornography and erotica, is not a Western phenomenon per se. Indeed, visual depictions of scenes of human sexuality are as old as the earliest human civilizations. Archeological, historical, literary, and art-history evidence point to the fact that all civilizations in all continents had cultures of sex-themed visual imagery that were regulated under culture-specific religious and secular laws. The earliest and most well-documented sex-themed visual imagery is that of the early human civilizations that once existed in the ancient Near East and Egypt, the part of the world now known as the Middle East. The point is that visual representations of nudity and explicit sex—pornography and erotica—are universal phenomena that have existed since the dawn of human civilization. They conveyed different political, economic, social, religious, and cultural meanings in different parts of the world before and even after the advent of Christianity and Islam. In other words, archeological, historical, and art-history evidence shows that visual images of human sexuality are "pregnant" with the mentalities and worldviews of specific civilizations and cultures. Since they are produced within specific cultural contexts, explicit, sex-themed visual images abide by the values, rules, and regulations of the cultural milieus within which they are produced. As such, sex-themed visual imagery is what Kaplan (2012) calls "regulated representations" (p. 25). These are rule-based creations and depictions that carry symbolic and metaphorical messages. As used in this book, the expression "regulated representations" runs the gamut from referring to hard-and-fast, enforceable rules of law handed down by competent authorities to referring to soft, unenforceable, elastic exhortations; hortatory texts; religious edicts; commandments; institutional policies; and guidelines that rely on voluntary compliance rather than coercion. Before writing was invented, ideographs, pictographs, cave wall graffiti, and clay tablets depicting human sexuality were the first regulated representations of sex-themed visual imagery produced within the politico-cultural and religious contexts of early man and ancient civilizations. As such, they are "memory objects" that have recorded reality at specific times and in specific geographic locations (Olivier, 2011, p. 132).

Muazzez Ilmiye Cig's trial and acquittal shined the international spotlight on visual representations spawned by an ancient politico-religious institution, sacred or temple prostitution whose existence has been documented by art historians, anthropologists, archeologists, classicists, and others. This volume surveys some of those ancient civilizations' regulated sex-themed visual content. Cig's trial also cast the spotlight on the intertwined political and religious cultures of Mesopotamia—the land between the Tigris and Euphrates river system, which historians call the "cradle of civilization." This region included the Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, and Assyrian empires. The Sumerians invented mankind's first medium of systematic mass communication—writing—in the form of the cuneiform script. Interestingly, the Sumerians did not have a word for religion because the worship of gods and goddesses was an integral part of their very existence.

Figure 1.1 The Ishtar vase depicting Ishtar, or Innana, the winged, nude Sumerian goddess of love and war (second century BC; reproduced with permission from The Louvre Museum, Paris, France)

Figure 1.2 Detail of the Ishtar vase. Note the pubic triangle (reproduced with permission from The Louvre Museum, Paris, France)