THE MODERN MUSLIM WORLD

GLOBALIZED MUSLIM YOUTH IN THE ASIA PACIFIC

Popular Culture in Singapore and Sydney

Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir

Globalized Muslim Youth in the Asia Pacific

The Modern Muslim World

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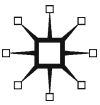

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For my parents

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Preface

In April 2015, the Pew Research Centre released a report titled *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010–2050.* It detailed a rising religiosity in the Asia Pacific with the reverse holding true in North America and Europe. Islam is the fastest rising demography and will equal the number of Christians in the world by 2050, at about 30 percent. The proportion of Muslims in Singapore is expected to grow from 14.3 percent in 2010 to 21.4 percent in 2050. During that same period, the number of Muslims in Australia will double from 2.4 percent to 4.9 percent.

Meanwhile, international media headlines on young Muslims in 2015 is populated with stories of radicalization, securitization, and lashing out against Islamic identity markers, such as the hijab, or the irreverence of traditional authority structures. Anti-Islamic protests are sprouting in Australia under the banner of the Reclaim Australia movement, whose mission statement is, "We as patriotic Australians need to stand together to stop halal tax, sharia law & Islamisation." In Singapore, organized outbursts such as these are rarely seen although random rants do surface in the social media. The state has assured the populace that the government will play a proactive role in maintaining Singapore's racial quota, mainly, through its migration policies. Since more than three-quarters of Muslims in Singapore are Malays and almost all Malays are Muslims, and conversion to Islam among locals remain low, this capping of the number of Malays in the country will stump the growth of the community unless there is a high intake of Indian and Chinese Muslim migrants, which is unlikely.

Amid all of this, there are numerous accounts of enhanced striving among national muftis and imams in both cities going on campaigns to specifically reach out to the youth. Disparate snapshots of young Muslims inevitably lead to confusion, exacerbated in the media by the adoption of various suffixes such as moderate Muslims, fundamentalist Muslims, liberal Muslims, so on. These have been running themes in mainstream media since the turn of the millennium. Is there a schism or a polarization among the new generation? So what is it? Are young Muslims becoming more religious or less so?

Granted that each country or locality has its specific sociopolitical realities, the overarching problem seems to lie in the fact that the contemporary world has often been argued as a battle against two irreconcilable trajectories. On the one hand, many scholars have documented an increase in piety in the Muslim world. Many point to the steady Islamization process that Muslim countries have undergone since the 1970s, funded by Arab oil money and influenced by events emanating from the Middle East, from the Iranian revolution to the Arab Spring, culminating in electoral victories for Islamic parties such as Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood and the increasing roles of Islamic parties in Southeast Asian Muslim majority countries.

On the other hand, Muslims, especially those living as minorities, have to reconcile with the ideals of their respective countries. Compounded with the democratization of knowledge brought about by the digital age and by international travel, academicians have also noted a liberalization trend especially among the young. In the grand scheme of things, one might be misled to think that this culminates in a world of dichotomies and binaries. The reality cannot be further from this. There is *liberalism in today's pietization movements* and *conservatism in embracing the secular lifestyle*. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the domain of popular culture.

Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir
April 2015, Singapore

Acknowledgments

This book is a culmination of seven years of work that went through several phases. It started out as a PhD thesis, which I embarked on in 2008 and completed in 2011. Over the past four years, in various capacities, I have had the opportunity to go back to my field sites to update and hone my data. It is inevitable that there are numerous people and institutions to thank in a project of this nature.

Let's start where it all began. I am extremely grateful to the University of Western Sydney for hosting my doctoral candidature. Even though the arrangement was not straightforward to begin with, the university aided me in every step to make it work. I am forever indebted to my supervisors, Steven Drakeley, Greg Noble, and Bryan Turner, for their valuable insights and empathetic care the whole time I was under their tutelage. They have been unfailing sources of motivation and inspiration throughout my entire candidature. Michael Atherton, Kevin Dunn, Samar Habib, and my supervisors made up my Confirmation of Candidature Committee. Their constructive criticism, farsightedness, and kind words guided me through a stage where many things were yet to fall in place. Adam Possamai and Jan Ali, as part of the initial Centre for the Study of Contemporary Muslim Societies team, now known as the Religion and Society Research Centre, were always generous with their time and insights. The examiners for my thesis, Gary Bouma and Michael Humphrey, were very encouraging and guided me in the right direction. Eva Garcia always went the extra mile in providing excellent administrative and logistical assistance during the course of my study. I would like to thank the University of Western Sydney also for granting me the International Postgraduate Research Scholarship and the opportunity to be a casual research staff. My alma mater also kindly invited me to deliver a public lecture in 2014 on an aspect of this book.

In late 2009, I attended the Culture, Religion and Society Summer School for junior scholars at the University of Antwerp. The advisors of the school, namely, Robert Hefner, John Hutchinson, Steve Bruce,

and David Voas, as well as my colleagues there provided useful advice during my presentation and discussions when the project was still in its infancy.

When I returned to Singapore from western Sydney, and while waiting for my doctorate to be conferred, I was appointed as the Lee Kong Chian Research Fellow at the Singapore National Library for six months, which allowed me the time to reflect on this project. Upon my appointment as assistant professor of Sociology in 2011 at the Nanyang Technological University, I was awarded a substantial two-year grant to work on this book project. The generous university grant allowed me to return to Sydney and, more importantly, to test out some of the ideas and concepts in this book at various international conferences. Since then, I have presented parts of this book in various sessions at the University of Leeds, Lehigh University, The Graduate Center (City University of New York), National University of Singapore, and Oxford University. As part of the grant, Nurliyana Daros was employed as my research assistant. She proved to be an intelligent and competent helper, who was always on top of things. In Singapore, Geoffrey Benjamin, Syed Khairudin Aljunied, Lim Chee Han, and Alexius Pereira among others provided critical feedback on aspects of this book in its different stages that have improved it in many ways. Chua Beng Huat, Hing Ai Yun, and Kwok Kian Woon started me on this academic exploration with their words of encouragement. Sim Kian Ming and Sim Hee Juat persevered in proofreading some of my earlier drafts despite the excruciating experience of proofreading my previous writings.

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I could not have done this without the support of my wife, Kalsum. She has been with me every step of the way, going through my writings and being a sounding board to my juvenile ideas, always reminding me to be clearer in expressing my thoughts. I apologize for the many times you were talking to me and my thoughts seemed to stray. My son, Luqman Hakim, and my daughter, Sumayyah, have, as a formidable team, kept my sanity intact. Besides keeping me grounded, they have provided me with many moments of sheer joy throughout this journey. The times we spent in Sydney were some of the best.

This book is also dedicated to all my young respondents—you have made this study possible. My sincere gratitude does not convey any responsibility for my obstinacy; only I am to blame for the errors remaining.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The attacks on the World Trade Centre on September 11, the Arab Spring, and the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East have all directed the attention of politicians, scholars, and the media on the role that young Muslims play in their countries. Observers have noted that the active military campaigns in Muslim countries contribute to the increasing global awareness of young minority Muslims today. With the upsurge in migration into Western countries and the rise of Islamophobia, the social conditions of Muslim youth have now become a litmus test to the success of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism in many states around the world. It is against these seismic shifts in the world we are in today that it becomes pertinent to analyze how Muslim youth respond to these global processes in the context of their specific localities. These will also enable us to imagine the social conditions of Muslims in the decades to come. Undoubtedly, the fate of contemporary Muslim youth is not only vital to the sustainability of states, kingdoms, and republics in Muslim majority countries but also where they form significant minority communities.

Much has been said about a globalized Muslim identity that is forming among the young. Often, this notion of globality among Muslims takes on a somewhat paradoxical and communal slant. It is often described as a growing consciousness and a sense of belonging to an imagined community, loosely termed the *ummah*. Hence, it is not that Muslims are becoming truly global; they are just getting together with other Muslims to form a larger transnational enclave. What is seldom mentioned is that the youth today are burdened by the conflicting cultural and sociopolitical influences emanating from the Islamic, Western, and traditional cultures. Young Muslims struggle to make sense of their Islamic identities in the different secular domains where they are situated. Because cultures have become so porous and are transmitted at such a rapid pace, it is important to delve into the ways in which the local and the global, the religious

and the secular, the spiritual and the political, the cultural and the social intersect. This challenge of reconciling competing ways of life is something that this book is concerned with.

Young Muslims today ought to be analyzed through the dialectics of popular culture and Islamic piety. To be sure, there is no monolithic youth culture or Islamic piety. Many studies of young Muslims have committed the error of assuming a trend toward a homogenization of Muslim youth culture by giving primacy to the sweeping influence of the new media. This obscures the attempts by young Muslims to marry Islamic piety to their encounters with diverse forms of popular cultures. Put differently, past scholarship has ignored the possibilities of a *glocalization* of Muslim youth culture. While studies of contemporary youth culture in general have moved to conceptualize hybrid identities, biculturalism, and the formation of urban tribes, there is an inclination to treat Muslims as immutable objects, and Islam as resilient and unchanging. Consequently, even though some recent studies have acknowledged the emergence of a pop, chic, and cool Islam, there is still a strong tendency toward understanding youth piety in terms of traditional rituals such as the strict observance of dress codes, participation in religious activities, and heightened halal consciousness that spawns from a lucrative multibillion-dollar industry. There has been little consideration of the everyday manifestations of Islam that are grafted with global popular culture. Hence, young Muslims are made out to live compartmentalized and segmented lives.

Globalized Muslim Youth in the Asia Pacific: Popular Culture in Singapore and Sydney addresses such gaps in the literature through a sociological study of popular Muslim youth culture in two economically dynamic and globalized cities in the Asia Pacific—Singapore and Sydney. These two cities feature as sites of contestations, where the contradictions and paradoxes of Muslim life are most stark. This book attempts to make a methodological contribution by taking on a comparative transnational perspective and introducing the Asia Pacific as an important unit of analysis. Australia's and Singapore's proximity with other Southeast Asian countries is all the more significant as about 240 million or around 40 percent of the Muslims in the world are located here. They both share as neighbors Indonesia—the most populous Muslim country in the world—as well as Malaysia and Brunei, which possess significant Muslim majorities.

Hence, Muslims in Singapore and in Australia find themselves in a very unique position when juxtaposed spatially with their neighbors. Their Muslim population can therefore be said to be in a

double bind. First, it is odd for them to be in a position of minority within Australia and Singapore; second, it is odd that they find themselves as a minority community within a larger geographical region of Muslim-dominated countries. Furthermore, from a public policy perspective, with the increasing focus on Indonesia as the alleged breeding ground and exporter of Islamic radicalism in the region, it would be interesting to look at how the two governments have come to manage the increase in Muslim piety observed within their Muslim populations and how local communities, and Muslim youth specifically, are responding to these approaches. The use of a comparative framework also enables a comparison of the positive and negative features of both the liberal and authoritarian models and explains differences between countries in specific patterns of behavior, implying that a given outcome may be expected in all countries of a similar type.

It is important to provincialize the Middle East in the study of Islam and Muslims around the world. The comparative angle enables us to challenge the notion of center-periphery relationships as espoused by world system theorists. The nodes of influence in the modern world are increasingly proliferated. Although scholars should not ignore the relationships of power in the globalization of culture, and these configurations are shifting, gone are the days where Muslims all over the world, by and large, look to the Middle East as a source of authentic Islam. Conversely, young Muslims from the streets of Gaza, Tehran, and Dubai are presently ingesting various derivatives of global culture to make sense of their place in this world, recognizing that their aspirations and predicaments are not merely personal troubles. Hence, in comparing young Muslims in Singapore and Sydney, this book locates the dilemmas of the Muslim youth squarely within a transnational perspective. Only then can the complexities of globalization, nation-state, religion, and youth culture be appreciated in all its nuances.

Popular youth culture provides the lens to understand the lived experiences of these young Muslims within secular, multicultural settings. Over the past few years, there has been a flurry of books published on popular culture in Muslim Southeast Asia (Heryanto, 2008; Weintraub, 2011; Seneviratne, 2012; Daniels, 2013; Mueller, 2014). Despite the extensive research, all the works focus almost exclusively on the Muslim majority countries of Malaysia and Indonesia.

In this book, I focus on Muslim youth's engagement in three aspects of popular culture—hip-hop music, tattooing, and cultural consumption—to show the impact of globalization on Muslims in global cities, in a way that not only emphasizes the "flattening of the

world" but also the differential paths that Muslims in these cities follow in the process of globalization. This is so because different social cultural actors in these cities function as crucial mediators of popular Muslim youth culture. As a result of this, young Muslims in Singapore and Sydney adopt a range of attitudes and strategies to reconcile popular youth culture with piety. Examining these struggles allows us to capture the range of responses among young Muslim practitioners. This study of the practice of youth culture will take into account the matrices of power that are ingrained in these relationships.

One central question grounds the book. *To what extent does globalization result in a convergence of popular culture among young Muslims in Singapore and Sydney?* I demonstrate how Muslim youth employ a globalized identity as a strategy to circumnavigate local constraints. This is reflected in their musical choices, use of language, Islamic performativity, and consumption patterns. This strategy leads to a rereading of Islam as the younger generation contests the conventional wisdoms of the preceding generation of Muslims and their interpretations of the religion. Such a rereading should not be conceived easily as either "liberal" or "conservative." This is evident when we examine the variegated responses to the boycott movements in support of Palestine. The reactions of my respondents with regard to this global call defy these labels as they highlight the complex relationship of young Muslims toward national identity, religious authority, and basic human rights.

A set of corollary questions results from this: *how does Muslim youth reconcile competing ethnic and religious identities with secular, national identities and other sources of selfhood through their participation in popular culture? How do the state and other social actors interact with global cultural flows to mediate cultural homogenization and shape different manifestations of Muslim youth culture?* Answering these questions necessitates an examination of the varying responses and the pluralization of youth culture and the issues of governmentality. The roles of states are pivotal in shaping the disparate or common expressions of youth culture. It has become trendy since the Digital Age to downplay the role of governments in shaping the predispositions of their respective citizens. The notion that technology has equalized the playing field, leading to free and uninterrupted global cultural flow is flawed. Alternatively, I call for bringing the state back in the study of popular youth culture. The state, through the enactment of various laws, cooption of community icons, and appropriation of a global youth culture, to various degrees, aims to control the perimeters of what can and cannot develop in their respective countries. By

comparing Muslim youth culture in authoritarian Singapore and liberal Sydney, I make evident the tensions within state-youth relationships; how governments' positions shift and at times appear out of sync with regard to its management of other spheres, as states attempt to play an instrumental role in shaping youth culture.

Book Organization

This book is divided into seven chapters. The first couple of chapters serves as a foundation and provides a framework to broach the more substantive topics. It provides some historical and structural perspectives on the micro-contexts of peripheralized communities. Chapter 2 lays the groundwork for a comparison between the two global cities and provides a brief description of my research methods. Chapter 3 problematizes and deconstructs the idea of a Muslim youth identity. It presents the social worlds of the youth in the two cities and illuminates divergent and convergent trends in their lived experiences, especially since the minority status of Muslim youth in both societies has placed them in a disadvantaged position with regard to economic and social capital. To wholly grasp the context in which Muslim youth culture has developed in the two cities, the chapter also goes on to map the status indicators of the Muslim youth in question, charting employment and education statistics, intergenerational differences, and residential arrangement.

The next three chapters examine the Muslim youth cultures of hip-hop, tattooing, and cultural consumption. As a collective, the case studies illustrate, among other things, whether discussions, fatwas, and discourses that evolve in cyberspace remain as virtual semantics or if they have the potential to impact everyday practices. They provide insights into pietization by focusing on the more worldly sociopolitical actions of globalized Muslim populations rather than looking at conventional religious rituals and performances. In this way, it opens up discussions for new Islamic public spheres by illuminating how young Muslims are tweaking their social interactions to adjust to other communities locally and globally.

Chapter 4 deals with the Muslim youth's consumption of hip-hop music in the two cities. Hip-hop and rap are increasingly Islamicized and appropriated by Muslim youth in many parts of the world. It provides a vehicle for Muslim youth to fight public misconceptions of Islam through its social commentary and confrontational style, with the latter being particularly potent against moral entrepreneurs who attempt to manage the youth through music. According to Alexander

(2000:15), Muslims are becoming peripheralized. "Muslims have then, ironically, become the new 'black' with all the association of cultural alienation, deprivation and danger that come with this position." Chapter 5 explores the tattooing practices among Muslim youth in the two cities. There are evidences today of an increasing number of Muslim youth around the world living as urban minorities who deploy tattoos both as signifiers of popular culture and as strategic tools to navigate their everyday lives. Through markings, the body is used as a site of contestation in multicultural environments such as Singapore and Sydney. Chapter 6 analyzes the strategies of Muslim youth resistance through consumption. This chapter demonstrates that not only do youth make rational choices in their consumption, these choices are also influenced by global affairs as they partake in solidarity movements along with youth from other parts of the world. On one hand, these large movements showing solidarity with groups of Muslims, who are victims of oppression elsewhere in the world, can be seen as another aspect of globalization and, on the other hand, it can also be viewed as a form of polarization at a global level.

These empirical expositions would not be complete without the formation of concepts that will be instructive into looking at the dilemmas faced by globalized Muslim youth today. I advance concepts such as the homological imagination and competitive/assimilative tattooing, as well as the notion of a Muslim consumer ethics, to explain how young Muslims straddle the ambiguities of a religiosity that is universalizing, a traditional ethnic identity that is communal, and a secular national environment that is inherently limiting. Although the Muslim youth is the main subject and object of this study, they provide an entry point toward understanding how interethnic and state-society relations shape youth transitions. Examining the convergence and divergence of the lived experiences between similar social groups in society allows one to deconstruct myths of particularistic ethnic problems. As the following pages elucidate, it is also necessary to map out the structures that juxtapose themselves onto the social realities of these youth in order to illuminate how structure and agency interact in the case of youth culture. Hence, this study provides an interesting angle through which youth can be studied. An investigation into the lived experiences of youth in Singapore and Sydney becomes possible by contrasting a highly regulated religious field of the former with a largely deregulated religious field of the latter.

The design of my investigations is based on the need for studies of youth culture among minority groups to seriously examine their

relationship with mainstream popular culture. The unique social conditions facing the September 11 generation makes this more urgent. Taking on the issues of migration, securitization, piety, and a world connected by the cyberspace, young urban Muslims are devising new rationalities in explaining their social milieu. Hence, an unpacking of the exclusion of minority youth needs to take into account the complex and sometimes paradoxical ways in which mainstream culture penetrates and interacts with the lived experiences of these youth.

With the empirical data and theoretical analysis presented in this book, one will find that global cultural flows and acts of piety interact with locally promulgated forms of popular culture, which Muslim youth partake in at varying degrees. Because of these interactions, it is imperative to examine the dynamic nature of Muslim youth culture against attempts by the state, religious leaders, and other gatekeepers of particular popular cultural domains to maintain a "puritan" and "contained" view of youth culture. For these young Muslims, they exist in the interstices of local youth culture that increasingly come into conflict with the globalizing and multicultural realities of Singapore and Sydney. This results in a plurality of religious rationalities amid the emergence of an individualization of views by young Muslims.

CHAPTER 2

Muslim Youth Culture, Globalization, and Piety

The study of youth culture examines the meanings and symbolism youth attach to their own social actions and how these social actions are interpreted by guardians of the dominant culture. Youth countercultures are formed when the actions of youth groups signify a methodical antagonism against the dominant culture, resulting in social conflict. As such, Michael Brake (1985:8) defines youth subcultures as "meaning systems, modes of expression or lifestyles developed by groups in subordinate structural positions in response to dominant meaning systems, and which reflect their attempt to solve structural contradictions arising from the wider societal context." Brake's definition is useful as a heuristic tool at understanding the attempts of young Muslims to straddle the global/local, state/society, and inter- and intraethnic relationships. Living in a globalized city, youth identity is becoming less than one that is merely ascribed by the traditional institutions of school, work, or family. This is however not to proclaim that identity in a youth subculture takes on a purely achieved status. On the contrary, age, social class, and ethnicity play compelling roles in creating youth cultures. Recognizing that society is fractured along the lines of age, social class, and ethnicity, youth culture is at once a medium of assimilation and resistance of subaltern groups against the dominant culture. Hence urban young minority Muslims constitute a subordinate group that seeks to renegotiate the guiding societal norms and value systems.

Youth subcultures are usually perspicuous with their unique mannerisms, styles, and affinities. Members usually subscribe to symbolic *tangible* choices, for example, in matters associated with personal grooming. As such, fashion, footwear, and hairstyles present distinct indications of a person's membership and sense of belonging. Symbolic *intangible* choices such as communication styles and musical interests

also play a vital role among youth groups. As chapter 4 expounds, a significant part of youth cultures is the attachment to particular music genres to the point that music has become the primary identity of some youth groups such as the affiliation with hip-hop, punk rock, emo, and black metal. Chapter 5 will further demonstrate that body ornaments and speaking style, such as speaking in codes, slang, and dialects, are other decipherable elements.

The term "youth culture" was coined by Talcott Parsons in the early 1940s to describe a period whereby a decipherable generation undergoing a similar socialization process was generally becoming disenfranchised from the establishment. Mintz (2004) contends that youth subcultures did not exist till around 1950. Prior to that, adolescents strived toward adulthood, by their own choice or due to circumstances, as swiftly as they evolved physically. When the study of youth culture germinated in America in the 1950s and 1960s, sociologists of youth culture sought to explain the volatile times in the country as it underwent a period of sexual revolution, civil rights movement, and anti–Vietnam War protests. Although Karl Mannheim had already provided a sociopsychological analysis of the subject matter, it was in the United States that the examination of youth culture flourished through the works of Erik Erikson (1963, 1965, 1968), S. N. Eisenstadt (1956), and James Coleman (1961), with Howard Becker's *Outsiders* (1963) probably marking the pinnacle of a golden era of youth studies in the United States. Although Parsons (1954: 190) saw youth culture as playing a positive role by "easing the difficult process of adjustment from childhood emotional dependency to full 'maturity,'" American sociologists tend to analyze youth culture along the lines of irresponsibility. Danesi (2003), on the other hand, posits that since the 1950s, the Western mass media and other institutions have constructed youth as the dominant culture. This results in a significant number of adults retaining what is considered "immature attitudes" well into their adult life.

Youth culture is also an external that is imposed upon a social group by laying a discursive ideological superstructure whereby youths can be discussed. Stanley Cohen, in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972), points to the moral panic created by the labeling action of moral entrepreneurs. The concept of moral panic was first mooted by Jock Young in 1971. In discussions with young Muslim respondents in Singapore and Sydney, the mass media is accredited with playing influential roles in generalizing an otherwise incoherent social group of youth. Chapter 6 examines the differing strategies of resistance chosen by young Muslims in the consumption of media and cultural