

Andrew N. Weintraub, ed. *Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia*. London and New York, NY: Routledge Publishing, 2011. 272 pp.

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This volume on Islam and popular culture in the Malay world contains chapters by prominent senior as well as up-and-coming scholars of Southeast Asia. The essays examine contemporary discourses and public debates surrounding films, tabloids, musical genres, fashion, television programming, and the Internet to explore the varied ways that popular culture and Islam have become “mutually constitutive as sites for defining Muslim lives” in Indonesia and Malaysia (p. 1). The larger context is that of a resurgent Islam, dating from the late 1970s in Malaysia, and in Indonesia, intensifying with the fall of the dictatorial president Suharto in May of 1998, the subsequent decentralization of political authority, and the liberalization of the media.

A significant number of the collection’s authors (Ishadi S. K., Raju, Che Dan, Omar, Khoo, and Heryanto) assess the impact of a resurgent Islam on films and television programming. In Malaysia, Islamic-themed television has become commonplace; by comparison, in Indonesia, media liberalization and the doubling of the number of commercial television networks since the end of the New Order has not resulted in a great expansion of Islamic shows. Ishadi S. K. (“Negotiating Mass Media Interests and Muslim Audiences in Indonesia”) argues that, aside from programs shown during the holy month of Ramadan, religious programs have a limited presence on Indonesian television because they are unable to draw adequate audiences. He presents data that indicate that in 2006 religious content in television programming increased 285 percent during the month of Ramadan when compared to the previous month, but dropped precipitously in the months following, as viewers lost interest in shows with religious themes. Over the years 2006 to 2008, the amount of religious programming during the holy month actually decreased from 50 hours per week to 42 hours per week, due in part to the protests of religious leaders that many “religious” programs included themes of mysticism that were contrary to Islam. Conservative and Islamist Muslims continue to voice the desire for more serious and consistent Islamic shows; however, Ishadi emphasizes the “historically tolerant and moderate characteristics of Indonesian Islam” and argues that the majority of Indonesians feel content with the current concentration of religious programming during the month of Ramadan, viewing it as adding to the festive atmosphere in households during the Muslim fast.

R. Anderson Sutton makes a similar argument in his analysis of music genres identified as Muslim (“Music, Islam, and the Commercial Media in Contemporary Indonesia”); he, too, finds that while the market is expanding, the popularity of religious musical genres, styles, and groups is, at least in Indonesia, circumscribed. He notes that Indonesian consumers are eager for Islamic entertainment during the month of Ramadan, and many mainstream music groups respond by producing special albums for the Ramadan market. However, the market seems to have a low saturation point with regard to music that “often sounds similar from one song to the next, both in the conservative musical style and in the moralizing messages” (p. 95). Making a point also introduced in fascinating chapters by Rhoma Irama and Bart Barendregt, Sutton recognizes the morally ambiguous position of music within Islam and the continuing debates over the sensuality and overtly commercial aspects of popular

Muslim music genres. The authors argue that despite these obvious tensions, Muslim music has a firm presence in the Indonesian and Malay marketplace, and Muslim genres like *nasyid* (Islamic popular music sung a cappella) have become increasingly identified as the “soundtrack of the emerging Islamic middle class” (p. 242).

The push and pull of market and religious sensibilities is also present in discussions of Islamic themes in Malaysian and Indonesian films. Gaik Cheng Khoo considers representations of the headscarf (Malay: *tudung*) and its multiple meanings in a Malaysian short-film competition for independent filmmakers on the subject. The *tudung* is widely viewed as connoting not just Islamic piety but an ethnic Malay identity; however, these filmmakers approach the phenomenon from the margins to explore veiling using a lens of cosmopolitan “transethnic solidarities.” The films’ subjects include a Chinese Malaysian teenager who plays in a band made up of Chinese girls in *tudung* and silver-blue lipstick and a sixteen-year-old sex worker wearing a *tudung* who is interrogated by the police. A short “mockumentary” focuses on five young women and their varied reasons for taking up the headscarf (piety, feminist militancy, blind acquiescence, fashion statement, conformity) to exemplify the tensions between the new Islamic morality, state capitalism, and individual consumption practices. Khoo argues that although not a form of mass culture, the films tap into popular discourses surrounding the headscarf to offer new space for debate on women, capitalist modernity, Islam, and questions of female agency (p. 208).

The headscarf is also a focus of Ariel Heryanto’s chapter, “Upgraded Piety and Pleasure: The New Middle Class and Islam in Indonesian Popular Culture.” The author begins his essay by posing the intriguing question of why veiling has been largely absent from mainstream Indonesian films despite its growing public popularity since the 1980s and 90s. The chapter then considers the appearance and mass appeal of the film *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (Verses of Love, 2008) with its fully covered female protagonist, Aisha. Heryanto argues that the current and rapid expansion of Islamic popular culture is an extension of the growth of political Islam in post-authoritarian Indonesia. Until the mid-1980s, Islam was not associated with wealth, modernity, modern lifestyles, or popular culture. *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, Heryanto speculates, offered young middle-class and aspiring middle-class Muslims the pleasure of seeing their imagined and desired selves for the first time on the cinema screen. The film’s female characters all either wear headscarves or take up the headscarf in the course of the story. These women are both fashionable and well-educated. The male protagonist, Fahri, eschews Muslim styles and instead sports Western-style clothing and a trendy haircut. He speaks not only Indonesian, but Arabic, English, and a bit of German. The film’s characters, Heryanto demonstrates, combine attributes of Muslim piety, rising educated middle-class status, and post-colonial citizenship; they are fully at ease both in the world of classical Islamic texts and in the Western-dominated global world of consumption (p. 71).

The film *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* and the book upon which it is based have been the focus of great discussion and controversy across Indonesia, largely as a result of the story’s perceived pro-polygamy stance. Suzanne Brenner (“Holy Matrimony? The Print Politics of Polygamy in Indonesia”) reads the story as, in fact, subtly arguing against polygamy rather than for it. Brenner describes how the male protagonist accepts polygamy only reluctantly and with the repeated urgings of his first wife (p. 227). He

would much prefer a monogamous relationship and takes a second wife only as an emergency solution; that is, to keep himself from being imprisoned for a rape he did not commit and to save the life of a dying woman. Brenner offers a brief outline of the history of polygamy (technically, polygyny) in Indonesia, noting that the percentage of the population who practice polygamy has always been small. The public debate over the practice has become more intense with the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998, when the liberalization of the media and politics created a climate in which it was possible for supporters to speak out. Brenner sees the popularity of the book and subsequent film as part of the process of popularizing representations of Islam in the post-Suharto era. In this process, she argues, formerly marginalized symbols of Islam like polygamy have become normalized through consumerist discourse (p. 229).

Sarah E. Krier ("Sex Sells, or Does it?") also examines contemporary discourses of Islam and consumption, in this case through the analysis of two popular Indonesian women's publications and their representations of sexuality and gender. Krier argues that the apolitical tone of the non-confessional tabloid *Cantiq* is consistent with the New Order discourse on women in that it promotes a conservative gender ideology that supports patriarchy and the idea that a woman's primary roles are domestic and sexual. The publication, however, takes the "public intimacy" of the New Order one step further by suggesting that women's sexual pleasure is important and should be considered—that is, so long as one's husband is satisfied as well. By contrast, the Muslim women's tabloid *Nurani* (which, interestingly, prints twice as many copies as *Cantiq*) articulates a similarly conservative gender discourse but offers readers an explicitly "Islamic public intimacy" that highlights morality. While sex sells *Cantiq*, *Nurani* sells a pious morality within the framework of an authoritative Islam. Krier argues that *Nurani's* articles stigmatize and sensationalize sex and sexuality in contemporary urban Indonesia, positioning the pious *Nurani* reader against the sexually deviant "other" (p. 139). In these publications with their competing discourses, Krier sees evidence both of an increasingly open discourse concerning sex and sexuality and of increasing intolerance.

Muhammad Ali ("The Internet, Cyber-religion, and Authority") identifies a parallel process at work in his examination of the Muslim cyber-communities that have helped to create the new Muslim public. He argues that Internet sites offer a platform to the most liberal as well as the most conservative religious viewpoints. What is more, the "cyber conditions of gender, class, education, and religious orientations, albeit potentially more equal, still reflect the offline conditions of imbalance and inequality" (p. 117). That is, although the online market is viewed as free and open to everyone, there is a distinct tendency for online interactions to reinforce identities and affiliations.

Ali's article captures vividly many of the core themes of this important book's chapters, underscoring, in particular, the decisive and expanding role of new media in the mass production and mass mediation of contemporary popular Islam. Popular cultural forms are both more global and more local; they are, moreover, simultaneously influenced by Western culture and a growing, if highly unstable, Islamic orthodoxy. No less important, the chapters emphasize the plurality of these forms as individuals create multiple and sometimes conflicting models of the way to lead a proper Muslim life. The volume is well-written and comprehensive; the topics

presented are timely. This thoughtful collection constitutes a valuable resource for all those interested in discourses and debates surrounding Islam and popular culture in the Malayo-Indonesian world.