

## Southeast Asia



**Andrew N. Weintraub, ed., *Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia***

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THIS EDITED volume presents a series of snapshots of Islamic popular culture in Indonesia and Malaysia. Examining popular cultural forms with an Islamic bent such as novels, films, songs, and narratives, the fourteen essays seek to demonstrate that these forms “and accompanying practices of production, circulation, marketing, and interpretations of Islam are all part of everyday lived Islam in Southeast Asia today” (1). The essays are as informative as much as they are colorful and entertaining.

In the introductory chapter, editor Andrew N. Weintraub details the complexity of the Southeast Asian context, especially in regards to Islam, and everyday Islam in particular. Weintraub discusses the manner in which the case studies of his volume shy away from a theological focus, tending instead towards illuminating how popular Islam allows Muslims in Indonesia and Malaysia to make sense of their lives. Before these case studies begin, however, Weintraub makes an important observation, namely that Indonesia and Malaysia are together home to approximately one-fifth of the world’s Muslim population. In addition to this, as a nation Indonesia has the largest population of Muslims in the world. For this reason alone this book is important. Given the way in which Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia is often overlooked or misrepresented in the Western media, this book is also timely, as for too long the Western media has been preoccupied with reporting on the radical views of Islam, which are in the minority. This book aims to bring a voice to the Muslim majority of Southeast Asia whose voices have been long muted or drowned out by a noisy minority.

With Islam being such a sensitive subject in Southeast Asia and the West, Weintraub is to be congratulated for his early efforts to explore the practical, theoretical, and theological tensions and contradictions between Islam and popular culture, the latter of which is often closely associated with capitalism and the West. Weintraub also introduces the many ways in which “the popular” or rather “popular Islam” is part of an emerging Muslim public sphere, with important connections to changing modes of authority and representation in the region. He highlights the close link between the fall of Suharto’s New Order and subsequent embrace of democratisation, which has allowed many Islamic political parties and institutions the opportunity to shape public discourse, not to mention the somewhat opportunistic emergence of Islamic self-help gurus such as the infamous polygamist, A. A. Gym.

Mention is also made of the fact that there are significant differences between the two countries under examination, despite the cultural, linguistic, and religious affinities. For example, Muslim culture in Malaysia is much more closely aligned with

ethnicity and the Malay ethnic group in particular, which is overwhelmingly Muslim. Also, Islamic popular culture is pervasive in Malaysia, perhaps even more so than Indonesia. Malaysian television, for instance, seems comfortable with integrating Muslim themes, programs, and songs the whole year round, as opposed to Indonesia, where Islamic themes are normally only part of televisual culture during the holy month of Ramadan. In rounding out this fine opening chapter, Weintraub makes a few observations on the key themes of the volume, such as the effort to shed light on “new forms of participation, new forces of access, and new voices in Islam” (12).

The various case studies are rich in detail and deeply fascinating in their own eclectic way, even if some chapters, such as musician Roma Irama’s description of his efforts to communicate religious messages, or Zakir Hossain Raja’s comparison of the cinema of Bangladesh and Malaysia, are either theoretically lightweight (the former), or oddly misplaced in a book purportedly focused on Indonesia and Malaysia (the latter). Also, it is a shame that the various chapters do not take the opportunity to “speak” to the other. For instance, several chapters discuss arthouse and blockbuster films such as Malaysia’s *Sepet* and Indonesia’s *Ayat-ayat Cinta* and *Laskar Pelangi*, yet on each occasion it is as though the film is being mentioned, described, or analyzed for the first time. Similar oversights occur in regards to oft-mentioned popular songs or artists such as Indonesia’s Inul Daratista.

These minor irritants aside, the volume’s case studies begin in earnest with two excellent chapters on Islamic themes in Indonesian television (Ishadi S. K.) and cinema (Ariel Heryanto). With an “insiders” nuanced perspective, the Trans TV media mogul Ishadi convincingly reveals the manner in which the commercial interests of TV stations overwhelmingly dictate the extent to which “Islamic” programs are limited to a particular period of the year, namely Ramadan. With his characteristic combination of multilayered social, political, and critical analysis, Heryanto’s chapter reveals both the aesthetics and the contradictory impulses of blockbuster Islam-themed films such as *Ayat-ayat Cinta*, and a highlight of this chapter is Heryanto’s innovative reading of the film as a political allegory, which on the surface at least appears to be an entirely plausible approach, even if the various cultural agents involved most probably had little or no inkling of such matters.

Several chapters examine the links between popular music and Islam, raising interesting notions such as a dominant “Muslim sound” in Indonesian pop music (Sutton), Muslim boy bands (Barendregt), and the role of Arab aesthetics in Arab-Indonesian *orkes gambus*, which is a term for “a small music ensemble consisting of a *gambus* lute (the Indonesian term for the ‘*ud*), which is the centrepiece of the ensemble, several small drums, an electric guitar, electric bass, electric keyboard, and vocals, performed by young men” (Berg, 166).

Other chapters reveal thoughtful reflections on Islam, race, and sexuality in Malaysia by women novelists (Che Dan) and independent filmmakers (Gaik Cheng Khoo and Noritah Omar). Omar’s chapter in particular is a useful exploration of the discourses about Islam in Malaysia, which are shadowed by the issue of racial tension, particularly between the dominant Malays and the large Chinese and Indian minorities. However, by focusing on representations of sexuality and interethnic relations in the *early* films of Yasmin Ahmad, which is now a well-worn

path, Omar's chapter misses an excellent opportunity to explore similar themes in Yasmin's equally compelling *later* films, which were made before her untimely death, such as *Muallaf* (The Convert) (2008) and *Talentime* (2009).

Two other chapters were of interest to this reviewer, namely Krier's examination of the discourses of sex and sexuality in popular women's magazines in Indonesia, and Brenner's chapter on the discourse associated with polygamy in Indonesia. If we are to talk about Islam and popular culture in post-New Order Indonesia, reference to sex and polygamy is unavoidable. These issues seem to act as a lightning rod in contemporary Indonesia, acting as a conduit for broader conversations about Islam and national identity. Qualitative or cultural analysis based on tangible case studies, such as Krier's analysis of the sex therapy pages of *Cantiq*, which are compared to the more "pious" *Nurani*, which stigmatizes and sensationalizes the sexual realities of contemporary urban Indonesia (139), is precisely the sort of thing that cultural studies scholars need to be doing. This can feed into the national conversation on these matters, which shows no sign of abating.

Hopefully this collection can be translated into Indonesian and/or Malay to ensure a much wider readership. The editor of this collection and his contributing authors deserve accolades for not avoiding the discussion of much-debated topics in contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia, including the strong connections between Islam and sex, gender, race, and politics. All of these themes are closely related to the changing social and political landscape of contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia. Popular culture is underpinned by politics, it seems, in Indonesia and Malaysia, just as politics has its cultural underlay. The essays in this collection manage to convey this message loud and clear.

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