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The art of no-seduction: Muslim boy-band music in Southeast Asia and the fear of the female voice

Religion, more often than not, equates the arts of seduction – whether in traditional performances or popular music – with immoral behaviour. The status of music and dance in the Islamic world, especially the fear of its sensuous powers, has been heatedly discussed in religious treatises; with its clean-cut performers and moral messages, *nasyid*, the Islamic boy-band music of Southeast Asia, seems to epitomise the art of no-seduction. Reality, however, is more complex, as Muslim pop music struggles to combine two competing powers – the eroticism of pop music and the persuasive power of religion. And especially when the female voice comes into play....

Bart Barendregt

One of the most significant developments in present day Southeast Asia is the rise of an Indonesian-Malay Muslim middle class. With its own social aspirations, this group fuels what might be termed Islamic chic – a cosmopolitan lifestyle characterised by new media and consumerism, Muslim fashion labels, popular ‘tele-evangelists’ such as AA Gym, and a range of lifestyle magazines that affirm that it is hip and modern to be a Muslim.

Nasyid is the musical component of this emergent civil Islam (see also Barendregt 2006). The term *nasyid* comes from the Arabic word *annasyid*, which means ‘(singer of a) religious song’. In Southeast Asia today it stands for an *a cappella* song genre that mainly uses vocal harmonies and is predominantly performed by male vocalists. Not surprisingly, performers of *nasyid* trace the genre to the Middle East, especially to the verse *thola’al badru ‘alaina* (finally the moon has arisen amidst us), which many Muslims think was sung when the Prophet Muhammad first arrived in Medina.

Malaysian students studying in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan were probably the first to bring home *nasyid* cassettes, and by the late 1980s the genre had become popular in Malaysia. From there it spread to neighbouring countries with Muslim populations: Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, and especially Indonesia. Practitioners of *nasyid* are found in religious schools (*pesantren*) and mosques, secondary schools and universities, where it is used to propagate ‘Campus Islam’, an often radical mix of student activism, youth culture and religion. Many trace *nasyid*’s popularity to its accessibility: sung in Malay rather than Arabic, *nasyid* touches on not just religious issues, but social ones as well.

Between the persuasive power of religion and the eroticism of pop

Inspired by the international boy-band craze of the late 1990s, *nasyid* is a perfect showcase for the issues that confront today’s younger Muslim generation. Groups like Indonesia’s S’nada or Malaysia’s Raihan and Rabbani have gained superstar status, performing regularly on radio, television and MTV. Today *nasyid* is one of the best-selling genres of the local recording industry and one of the few that could potentially go international – some groups already having performed for Muslim audiences in the West and the Middle East. *Nasyid*’s very success, however, might prove to be one of its main challenges, due to tension between innovation and *nasyid*’s status as a vehicle for moral teaching.

Some *nasyid* artists have recently begun to experiment with crossovers such as hip-hop, R&B and break beat, and to collaborate with renowned rock artists. Others like Izzatul Islam refuse to experiment with newer forms of *nasyid* and insist that the religious message must be primary; they therefore do not use musical instruments other than the hand-held frame-drum or Malay *kompang*. As Muslim musicians and music lovers grapple with two competing powers – the eroticism of pop music and the persuasive power of religion – the crucial question remains: At what point does religion end and the eroticism of pop take over?

Artists and fans recognise the religious restrictions on the uses of the performing arts by Muslims, and among them there is lively discussion about the form that *nasyid* should ideally take. Indeed, there is a long-standing discourse in Islamic law about the permissibility of music and singing, which has recently been summarised by Van Nieuwkerk (1998). Islamic law classifies music into three categories: the commendable recitation of the Koran; the singing of work or wedding songs, which

is neither discouraged nor encouraged (*makroh*); and ‘sensuous music that is performed in association with condemned activities, or that is thought to incite such prohibited practices as consumption of drugs and alcohol, lust, prostitution etc.’ (Al-Faruqi 1985: 1-13 as quoted by Van Nieuwkerk). This discourse includes many, varied positions and has been more or less stringent in different times and places; discussion on what ‘pure’ or authentic Islamic music should sound like continues unabated.

Meanwhile, a new style of Islamic popular culture is developing which in many respects follows western manifestations of popular culture. Many regard *nasyid*’s success as inspired by western boy-bands like Boys II Men and the Back Street Boys – their style, singing techniques, and even lyrics. One of the most controversial aspects of this new style of Islamic popular culture is the greater focus on visuals, nowhere better captured than in the recent critique of the Festival Nasyid Indonesia, a song contest modelled on the programme *American Idol*, which first took place in 2004. The festival, shown on national television during Ramadan, led to fierce debate among *nasyid* enthusiasts, many of whom condemned the show’s blatant commercialism. Like their western equivalents, young *nasyid* singers are often worshiped by largely female audiences.

Fear of the female voice?

What about Muslim equivalents to female pop singers in the West? Siti Nurhaliza seems to many Malaysians to embody the perfect blend of western fashion and distinctive Malaysian flavour. Siti is often seen as an icon of the New Malay, one who can uphold cultural and religious traditions and still be progressive. But while Siti is Muslim, she is not a Muslim artist. She is able to cleverly switch between the two personas, which allows her to get away with it. A similar strategy is used by one of Malaysia’s latest *nasyid* sensations, the 25-year-old Waheeda, whose mini-album *Wassini* sold 20,000 copies in 2003; a full album followed in 2005. Some attribute Waheeda’s success to her odd mix of pseudo-Arab songs, her wearing a veil and her cute but sexy on-stage persona. Waheeda herself (like Siti) denies singing *nasyid* songs, defining what she does as world music (*muzik dunia*) with Asian and Middle Eastern influences.

Malaysia is home to some well-known female *nasyid* groups such as HAWA (Eve), Huda and Solehah, who also perform earlier variants of Islamic pop like *qasidah moderen*. Female groups, however, are the exception. Similarly, Indonesia has only a few female *nasyid* groups (*munsyid akhwat*), the Jakar-

The audience for boy band concerts is predominantly female. Rising *nasyid* stars Fatih perform here in early 2006.

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ta ensemble Bestari and Bandung-based Dawai Hati being the most prominent. During *nasyid* competitions there are separate contests for male and female performers and, with the exception of children’s *nasyid* choirs, mixed ensembles are clearly taboo.

Why? Because controlling women’s behaviour – especially the fear of westernised women – has long been a central tenet of Islamic society. The sociologist Göle (2002) explains that tensions arise from the need of public Islam ‘to redefine and recreate the borders of the interior, intimate, and illicit gendered space (*mahrem*).’ Public visibility is an issue that has long remained unaddressed in Muslim thinking; new ideas here easily break with tradition. To outsiders, moreover, such dialogues result in ironic contradictions, like those of recent discussions on the fashionability of headscarves or ‘*jilbab sexy*’ in Indonesia.

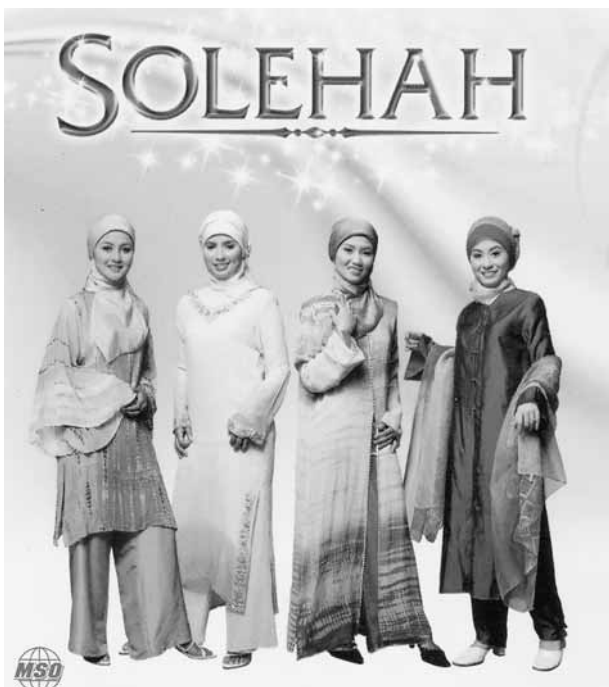
Many aspects of *nasyid* music present us with a similar mix of contemporary gender reinterpretations, highlighting both changing ideas about gender relations in Southeast Asia and the tensions this brings to an otherwise modern musical genre. Thus, when the female *nasyid* group Bestari’s first album was released in 1996, it met with considerable resistance. Islamic magazines refused to advertise it and even women were reported to boycott their cassettes. Since then, the situation appears to have become more relaxed, but *munsyid akhwat* remain hotly debated. Conservatives continue to emphasise the taboo on women singing in public, claiming that the female voice is part of the *aurat*, the parts of the body that must be concealed.

Why are the powers of the female voice so feared? A summary of the discourse can be found in Van Nieuwkerk’s work (1998), which explains why female performances are so controversial. Women are often seen as the weaker sex in need of protection from male desire; this power balance could be reversed were women to seduce men. As Hirschkind (2004) has recently argued, Muslim scholars have been relatively uninterested in elaborating a theory of vocal persuasion and agency; any positive or negative effect is largely attributed to the listener. As the 9th century mystic al-Darani said: ‘Music does not provoke in the heart that which is not there.’ That is, the female voice itself does not have the persuasive power to incite a person to commit evil deeds; this can only happen if the evil already reigns in the listener’s heart. Besides, if the origin of female *nasyid*, as its proponents claim, truly is the *shalawat badr* sung by those who hailed Muhammed’s arrival in Medina, and if claims that it was women who did the singing are true, a woman’s singing voice might one day resound more as a blessing than as a bane. For now, the debate continues.

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Female *nasyid* group Solehah as featured on their recent *Inti* album (2005). When the Malaysian band performed in Indonesia it was for an all-female audience.

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