The making of a gay Muslim: social constructions of religion, sexuality and identity in Malaysia and Britain

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THE MAKING OF A GAY MUSLIM: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF RELIGION, SEXUALITY AND IDENTITY IN MALAYSIA AND BRITAIN

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PhD in the Sociology of Religion

Abstract

This study challenges many popular views and some academic perspectives on the role of Islam and gay sexuality in personal identity construction. By investigating the lived experiences of Muslim sexual minorities, it examines the complex ways in which individuals can come to identify themselves as 'gay' *and* 'Muslim', how they negotiate belonging to the wider society that tends to marginalise them, and the consequences of holding these identities. It examines their experiences in two national contexts – Malaysia and Britain. Based on ethnographic research conducted between October 2012 and September 2013, this study involved participant observation and in-depth interviews with gay Muslims, supplemented by media analysis for context-setting.

The study shows that in constructing their sexual and religious identities, gay Muslims adjust their responses – rebelling, conforming, innovating, retreating or merely keeping up appearances – based on how strongly anti-gay or anti-Muslim sentiments inform their immediate surroundings. As a minority within the religious majority in Malaysia, they contend with religiously-motivated, state-sanctioned moral policing. In Britain, they enjoy legal protection as sexual and religious minorities but are sometimes affected by stereotypes equating Islam with violence or extremism. In both countries, these conditions contribute to Islam becoming a primary referent in the construction of gay Muslim identities. However, gay Muslims form their own religious self-understandings through engagement with multiple social authorities, spaces and available interpretations of Islam. Islam therefore becomes a 'cultural resource' while the concept of 'gay' serves as an umbrella category in the construction of their self-identities.

The outcomes of this study challenge the notions that Islam is 'inherently' homophobic and that there is essentially a divide between 'Islam' and the 'West'. Rather, it suggests that the experiences of gay Muslims illustrate the fluid and variable roles of religion and sexuality in constructions of individual and collective identity.

Table of Contents

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The title of this thesis was inspired by Eileen Barker's landmark study, *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?*

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I am also blessed to love and be loved by Giles William Goddard – thank you for everything and more.

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Mohd Sidik Ibrahim and Sharifah Halina Abdullah, for their abundant love and uncluttered faith.

Notes on transliteration and transcription

As far as possible, transliterations of Arabic, Malay and Urdu terms are based on: Esposito, J. L. (2003). *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; *Kamus Dewan*. (2005). Fourth Edition. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Institute of Language and Literature Malaysia); and Platts, J. T. (2008 [1884]). 'A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English.' University of Chicago digital resource. *Digital Dictionaries of South Asia*. http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/platts/. When quoting directly from secondary sources, I use the authors' original styles.

Translations of the Quran are taken from M.A.S. Abdel Haleem. (2010 [revised]). Oxford University Press.

Translations from Malay are my own, indicated in italics. Italicised and non-italicised words appearing in the same passage indicate code-switching between English and Malay.

In ethnographic excerpts, all dialogue that has been paraphrased is marked with an asterisk (*) at the end of the relevant sections. Verbatim speech is non-asterisked.

Introduction

How could – or why would – anyone identify as 'gay' *and* 'Muslim'? Especially given the widespread perceptions, doctrines and legislation (in many Muslim countries) upholding the notion that Islam condemns homosexuality? For people who do identify in this way, what are the consequences of being a 'gay Muslim' and how do they negotiate their lives?

This study examines the experiences of gay Muslims in two national contexts – Malaysia and Britain. It explores how gay Muslims create everyday narratives, practices, and strategies to respond to understandings of Islam often used to vilify, marginalise or persecute them. Its main objective was to develop a useful and systematic framework for collecting and analysing qualitative data on the lived realities of people identifying as gay and Muslim in two different environments. More broadly, it aims to provide a perspective on how religion and sexuality intersect and inform the creation of particular groups of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in society. It was guided by the following research questions:

- How do sexual minorities who are marginalised on the basis of their sexual identity use religion to negotiate their belonging in different social contexts?

- What can the experiences of gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain tell us about majority-minority relations and how society embraces or excludes particular groups of people?

Such concerns are not confined to Islam or Muslims, and concern gay followers of other religions, too. For example, Christian leaders and groups make the headlines in different parts of the world, voicing often vehement opposition to what they see as sexual deviance (e.g. see Luxmoore, 2013; Rajan, 2012; Vallely, 2014). There are therefore trends across different religious traditions in which influential religious actors condemn sexual outsiders. These condemnations have doctrinal and historical roots in many religions, which some religious actors continue drawing upon to justify the marginalisation, punishment, or violent persecution of sexual difference.

These specific concerns about religion and sexuality also relate to larger questions about the experiences of people belonging to marginalised groups. How do they conceive of their circumstances? Do they accept their marginalised status or try to challenge it in the hopes of making society more inclusive? These questions further

suggest that marginalised groups are not preordained or permanent, but are formed through social processes involving the manipulation of power by specific actors. Examining these questions from the perspective of the marginalised allows us to see how they respond to these power dynamics under particular conditions.

My focus on the experiences of gay Muslims comes from an understanding that they, and other Muslims, are shaped by and respond to socially-produced expressions of 'Islam'. I therefore explore the interactions between individual *and* collective dimensions of religion and how this affects expressions of sexuality and vice versa. I am not merely interested in how religion can be used to justify marginalisation, but also how marginalised groups might use religion to adapt to or perhaps challenge their circumstances.

This study argues that there are conditions now which increasingly enable individuals to use religion and sexuality as 'cultural resources' (Beckford, 2000: 178; 2001: 232) to build personal identities and actively shape religious change. However, this does not occur in a social or cultural vacuum – agencies and institutions with the power to regulate religious and sexual expressions also influence the trajectories of identity-making and religious change. Shifting social conditions therefore create new opportunities *and* constraints for constructions of self-identity.

In broad terms, the analytical approach I take can be referred to as social constructionist. Bearing in mind the wide range of understandings of social constructionism within the social sciences, I mostly draw upon the framework suggested by the sociologist of religion James Beckford. For Beckford (2008: 3), 'social construction' does not mean that social reality consists of nothing but text and discourse, as argued by some radical constructionists. Nor does it merely mean that 'human beings create or construct meanings when they interact with each other'. Beckford's approach 'lies somewhere between these two extremes' and, in reference to religion, 'social construction' refers to the 'processes whereby the meaning of the category of religion is, in various situations, intuited, asserted, doubted, challenged, rejected, substituted, re-cast, and so on'. It is a useful 'analytical strategy' for investigating 'the construction of religion as a complex and variable category of human knowing, feeling, acting and relating' (Beckford, 2008: 4). For my purposes, I extend this analytical strategy to investigate the construction of sexuality as well. I view religion and sexuality not as independent entities which can 'do' anything but as

'interpretive' categories whose meanings need to be related to the social contexts in which they are used.

Following this, I do not take 'gay', 'Muslim' or 'gay Muslim' as uncomplicated or self-evident identity labels. In fact, there are numerous scholarly debates and disputes about whether terms such as 'gay' or 'homosexual' can even be used to describe people from Muslim or other non-Western cultures accurately (e.g. Boellstorff, 2005: 8, 154–155; El-Rouayheb, 2009: 1, 5; Gaudio, 2009: 10; Habib, 2010: xx–xxii; Ioannides, 2014: 124–128; Kugle, 2014: 14–19; Massad, 2007: 41–42, 2013; Murray, 1997: 41; Najmabadi, 2008: 275, 2011: 551). It is beyond the scope of this study to settle these disputes, but my usage 'gay Muslim' does require further explanation as it is informed by particular analytical interests and preferences.

On the whole, the term 'gay Muslim' in this study serves as a 'reportive definition' (Barker, 2004: 89), i.e. this is how the majority of my participants described themselves. However, many did not *exclusively* use 'gay', often accompanying it with terms such as 'bisexual', 'lesbian', 'transgender', or 'queer', and in Malaysia even combining it with local terms and euphemisms. A minority were in same-sex relationships but would not identify as gay, lesbian or even bisexual. Ultimately, however, most of the men and women I encountered accepted 'gay' as an umbrella term to describe themselves, while the minority who rejected it had various reasons which I discuss in upcoming chapters. My usage of the term 'gay' is thus not meant to be reductionist, but to highlight its centrality in shaping my participants' understandings and expressions of their sexuality.

Similarly, I use 'Muslim' as a reportive definition – regardless of their personal commitments to Islam, this is how the majority described their religious identity, with a tiny minority no longer identifying as Muslim. Furthermore, other Muslims would also have differing reactions towards gay Muslims – from regarding them as too 'deviant' to be considered 'Muslim' to tolerating them only as 'inferior' co-religionists, or even embracing them as moral and religious equals. My choice to use 'Muslim' should therefore be read as shorthand for the sheer diversity of experiences that can be found under Islam as an umbrella category.

This study has therefore found no 'precise cut-off point' (Hospers, 1990: 119) between the applicability and non-applicability of the terms 'gay' and, to a lesser extent, 'Muslim'. For this reason, it has proven exceptionally difficult for me to produce a 'stipulative definition' (Barker, 2004: 90) of 'gay Muslim', *i.e.* what *I* as a

researcher mean by it. In fact, I initially withheld from developing such a definition but decided upon a 'defining characteristic', namely, looking for individuals who saw themselves as Muslim *and* were attracted to the same biological sex. From here, I drew upon the range of my participants' self-explanations and my own observations to develop this account of how they constructed, negotiated or challenged the boundaries of 'gay' and 'Muslim' identity.

I chose to research in Malaysia and Britain because the two countries share crucial similarities and differences which make comparing gay Muslims' responses to dominant perceptions of Islam and homosexuality useful.

Most significantly, Islam is the religion of the majority in Malaysia and also the official religion, meaning that it informs state laws and public policies over a range of issues. Also, the Malaysian Federal Constitution (Malaysia, 2010: 153) *defines* ethnic Malays as Muslim and the state recognises only Sunni Islam, mostly based on the Syafii[1] school of jurisprudence. In Britain, Islam is a minority religion within a liberal democratic state, with laws and institutions protecting various minorities. British Muslims consist mostly of migrants from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, countries of origin, and Islamic schools of thought. In other words, in relation to religion and sexuality, Malaysian gay Muslims are a minority within a majority, while British gay Muslims are a minority within a minority.

Britain's liberal democratic institutions also grew out of its particular trajectory of modernisation, e.g. through the various phases of parliamentary reform in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Harling, 2001: 6–8). Malaysia, however, experienced the beginnings of modernisation under British colonial rule from the late eighteenth century, with post-independence state policies driving modernisation much more aggressively in the latter half of the twentieth century (Abdul Rahman, 2001: 82–83; Gomez & Jomo, 1999: 17). The expansion of Islamic or *syariah* legislation has gone hand-in-hand with state-led modernisation and has often been motivated by what tan beng hui[2] (2012a: 66) refers to as an 'anti-colonial factor'. Furthermore, although post-independence Malaysia is formally a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy,

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[1] In this study, I style Arabic terms based on the predominant or official spellings in each national context. Thus, 'Syafii' would be styled 'Shafii' when referring to the British context. See also my *Notes on Transliteration and Transcription* and *Appendix 1: Glossary*.

[2] The author prefers to style her name in lowercase letters only, and I will respect this preference when citing her throughout this study.

Islamic laws have often been used by successive governments to justify authoritarian rule (tan, 2012a: 44–45, 2012b: 373–375). Meanwhile, since the 1960s, the influence of the established Churches on the British state and society has reduced significantly alongside the liberalising of policies on various social issues (Brown, 2006: 36; Davie, 1994: 33; Guest, Olson, & Wolffe, 2012: 63; Nye & Weller, 2012: 49).

With these distinct trajectories of modernisation, the multi-ethnic middle class in Malaysia largely emerged after independence (Abdul Rahman, 2001: 83), more than a century after the rise of the middle class in Victorian Britain. In particular, the Malay middle class came into being as the result of various state policies on development and affirmative action, especially in education, employment, and finance. In Britain, however, the majority of Muslims come from immigrant backgrounds and statistics show that they are relatively more disadvantaged than other religious minorities, for example in health, employment and educational attainment (Gilliat-Ray, 2012: 113–114). Therefore for many British Muslims, the experiences of being religious and ethnic minorities have been compounded by socio-economic disadvantage.

Against this backdrop, the British state has also adopted increasingly liberal and inclusive attitudes towards sexual diversity even though it historically outlawed homosexuality and other sexual offences (Weeks, 2012: 21). These developments include passing legislation enabling same-sex marriage in 2013, albeit amid staunch opposition from some of the more conservative sectors of the political establishment and the Church of England (Rajan, 2012; Vallely, 2014). On the other hand, alongside other former British colonies, independent Malaysia inherited colonial policies on sexual immorality through its Penal Code and Islamic legislation, which postcolonial state actors have expanded and strengthened (Human Rights Watch, 2013: 97; tan, 2012b: 350–351). In other words, while British gay Muslims now enjoy legal protection of their sexual and religious identities, Malaysian gay Muslims could potentially be targeted under anti-homosexual civil and *syariah* laws (tan, 2012b: 371).

Thus, gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain construct their identities in different circumstances that include factors such as religious majority/minority status, class, ethnicity, and the state's position on sexual diversity. However, these differences should not elide some key similarities.

For one thing, the British and Malaysian populations are very ethnically and religiously diverse which, in recent decades, has formed the backdrop for particular minority demands for equal treatment and recognition. For example, Muslim activists

in Britain began campaigning in the 1990s for greater state recognition as a single religious minority (Hussain & Sherif, 2014: 419–420), while there has been increased campaigning and activism in the interests of marginalised Malaysian Indians (Lee, Wong, Wong, & Yeoh, 2010: 295). These and other developments have contributed to greater public debate on the rights and positions of ethnic and religious minorities in both countries, which often involve direct and indirect questions about national identity. Gender relations and sexuality are often implicated in such debates.

At the same time, both countries are affected by trends of religiously-inspired movements, including within Islam, promoting or defending conservative moral values. These trends also involve challenges or contestations by relatively more liberal actors from religious and non-religious backgrounds, especially regarding gender and sexuality. This raises specific questions about how Islam is contested in both countries – from those advocating anti-Western, anti-liberal expressions to those seeking to harmonise Islamic with Western or liberal values. For example, anti-gay expressions of Islam in both countries are challenged by other Muslims (e.g. see Ahmad Fuad, 2011; Bunglawala, 2007, 2009; Sisters in Islam, 2011), but the specific dimensions and implications of these debates need further investigation.

Against this backdrop, certain other actors in both countries – including politicians, media commentators and religious leaders – tend to construe Islamic and Western values as mutually incompatible. In some spheres, the debate is led by ideologues trying to polarise public opinion about the relationship between 'Islam' and the 'West', but this has different consequences in Malaysia and Britain. In Malaysia, state Islamic institutions paint 'Western' values as threats to the sanctity of Islam and can police and punish state-defined moral infractions among Muslims[3]. These and other non-state actors often list 'gay rights' or 'homosexuality' as one of the prime evils sent by Western powers to subjugate Muslims or destroy Islam. In this study, I analyse them as 'moral entrepreneurs' (Becker, 1991: 147) who create and police categories of deviant behaviour. In Britain, on the other hand, anti-Muslim ideologues often portray Islam or Muslims as particularly prone to extremism or violence, therefore threatening national security and social cohesion. Unlike in Malaysia, however, British legislation explicitly protects the rights of religious, sexual and other minorities, most prominently

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[3] For example, Muslims who drink alcohol in public, engage in extra-marital or non-marital heterosexual sex, *liwat* (male homosexual sex) or *musahaqah* (female homosexual sex) can be fined, imprisoned and/or whipped under the Syariah Criminal Offences Act (SCOA) (Malaysia, 1997: 13–17).

through the Equality Act 2010 (Hunt, 2012: 693; Nye & Weller, 2012: 43). Within this context, however, counter-terrorism policies and rhetoric have arguably still contributed to a highly visible 'securitization of Islam' (Croft, 2012: 16).

Thus, although gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain construct their identities in environments where Islam and sexuality are regulated differently, the dominant expressions of Islam in both countries appear to be morally conservative and anti-homosexual. Despite this, gay Muslims are increasingly aware of more inclusive Islamic approaches and other struggles for equality around the world. In this study, I pay attention to how these aspects shape the ways in which gay Muslims associate with Islam and their sexual identity.

This study is ethnographic – I conducted long-term participant observation and in-depth interviews with gay Muslims and analysed relevant mass media coverage between October 2012 and September 2013. Before and during my research, I met, interacted with, and often befriended many men and women identifying as gay Muslims who were willing to participate or help. I also drew upon my own experiences and insights as a gay Muslim, often reflecting upon the same questions that I posed to all my participants.

This, and my background as a Malaysian who completed undergraduate study in Australia and pursued postgraduate study in Britain, gave me a particular vantage point throughout my research. Mainly, I could empathise with my participants by drawing upon our shared Muslim backgrounds, experiences as sexual minorities, and cultural frames of reference in Malaysia and Britain. This does not mean that I have become their mouthpiece or vice versa. In fact, I encountered great diversity among the gay Muslims I interacted with, indicating the variety of individual constructions and expressions of identity within and between the two contexts. Some participants saw themselves as more strictly 'Islamic' than others, while some expressed themselves as more explicitly 'gay' than others. Their diverse opinions, questions, and experiences have shaped this study.

This empirical and systematic study aims to enrich our knowledge and enhance our understanding of the lived experiences of gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain. I investigate the making of gay Muslim identities in relation to the impacts of multiple social networks, understandings of Islam and sexuality, and Islamic and non-Islamic authorities in both countries. In this way, this study provides a glimpse of the fluid and

diverse roles that religion and sexuality can play in contemporary constructions of identity and of 'insiders' and 'outsiders'.

Structure of the thesis

Why did I as a gay Muslim choose to study other gay Muslims as a topic of academic study? How did I even find any gay Muslims participants in Malaysia and Britain and how did I proceed once I found them? These questions are addressed in Chapter 1, where I introduce my settings and methods and discuss some of the key challenges I faced conducting ethnographic research.

In Chapter 2, I review the academic literature that has addressed 'Islam' and 'homosexuality' as inter-related objects of study. I begin by discussing the textual and interpretive strategies of progressive Muslim academics to promote more inclusive understandings of Islam, focusing especially on the work of the openly-gay American convert Scott Siraj Al-Haqq Kugle. I demonstrate that these interpretive strategies are often informed by other empirical studies of Islam and sexuality in various social contexts. I then examine studies of historical constructions of sexual expression in Muslim societies to contextualise my ensuing discussion on contemporary studies of Muslim sexual minorities in Western and non-Western contexts. In the second half of the chapter, I discuss the different social constructionist approaches I draw upon for this study to investigate the making of 'outsider identities'. I focus particularly on sociological approaches to 'deviance' and insights into social constructions of ethnicity, nationalism and globalisation.

Chapter 3 provides a historical background of the management of Islam and sexuality in Malaysia and Britain, beginning with a brief account of the shared legal and cultural legacies left by the British Empire. From here, the chapter compares the key variables in how Islam and sexuality are now managed by the British and Malaysian states and highlights those aspects especially relevant to the experiences of gay Muslims.

The next three chapters form the core of the thesis and discuss my empirical findings. My narrative starts with individual meaning-making processes, then relates these to various dimensions of Islamic socialisation, and finally explores the influence

of larger transnational and geopolitical trends on everyday expressions and institutional regulations of Islam and sexuality.

Chapter 4 looks at the complex processes involved when an individual comes to self-identify as 'gay' and 'Muslim'. It begins with an analogy between widespread assumptions about the incompatibility of being gay and Muslim, and the anthropologist Mary Douglas's (2002: 44) conceptualisation of 'dirt' as 'matter out of place'. It then illustrates the 'role adjustments' (Merton, 1968: 672) gay Muslims engage in to negotiate their 'out of place'-ness, i.e. how they create a sense of coherence in their identities and try to belong within wider society. The chapter also specifically examines the consequences of adopting 'gay' as an identity label and engages critically with claims of it being an Orientalist, imperialist imposition on non-Western or non-European sexual minorities (Massad, 2002: 372–373). It also examines how ethnicity is a factor in the construction gay Muslim identities.

Chapter 5 builds upon this analysis specifically by looking at the individual and collective aspects of Islamic socialisation in forging a specifically 'gay Muslim' identity. It begins by analysing three aspects of identity-making among gay Muslims – Islamic socialisation by multiple authorities and institutions; variations in self-conceptions of sexuality based on their understandings of Islam; and the presence or absence of concrete spaces and networks to express a collective 'gay Muslim' identity. The chapter goes on to illustrate how gay Muslims utilise various physical locations to avoid, subvert or even challenge conventional Islamic authorities. I suggest that gay Muslims increasingly use Islam as a 'cultural resource' to fashion eclectic expressions of self-identity.

In Chapter 6, I look more deeply at how gay Muslims are caught between competing ideological agendas which reinforce the idea that Islam condemns homosexuality, starting with a comparison of how these images appear in the mass media in both countries. I investigate how the politicised state regulation of Muslims in Malaysia and Britain affects the everyday negotiations of the *halal* (permissible) and *haram* (forbidden) among gay Muslims. Regarding Malaysia, I demonstrate that these images are strongly related to the aggressive anti-gay 'moral panics' often triggered by pro-*syariah* 'moral entrepreneurs'. In Britain, they partly inform the anti-Muslim or anti-gay rhetoric of particular non-state ideologues, but this is mitigated by legislation protecting the rights of various minorities. The bulk of the chapter then investigates how gay Muslims in both countries respond to these state regulations and wider

sentiments, and highlights the influences of geopolitical and nationalist trends on expressions of Islam and sexual identity.

The Conclusion draws these different strands together and discusses their implications for our current understandings of the roles of religion and sexuality in constructions of 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' identities.

Chapter 1: Looking for gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain

Nobody is 'born' Muslim or gay. Instead, we might be born into families or communities with a particular sense of inherited religious identity. Also, while research shows that we might develop unique and inherent sexual predispositions from birth, there is a consensus among biologists that it is a mistake to reify 'human nature' (Wade, 2013: 279, 287). We interpret our biological states, including the sexual, within particular cultural frameworks.

Thus, we *acquire* particular sexual or religious concepts of identity through socialisation – for example within families, schools, peer groups, communities, and via mass media images. Through complex processes of social interaction, some individuals can come to understand the religious and sexual components of their identity as 'Muslim' and 'gay'. *Individually* produced religious and sexual identities are thus interconnected with *collectively* produced understandings of religion and sexuality.

Socially constructed images of religion and sexuality often also consist of stereotypes that can become particularly salient depending on the context. For example, some might construe 'Islam' as violent or anti-modern while others might construe being 'gay' as hedonistic and promiscuous. Neither image adequately reflects or represents the social reality of many gay people or Muslims, but they persist and are reproduced in various sectors of society. Ethnographic research on marginalised or stigmatised groups is thus an empirical and systematic way to examine and understand the social production of stereotypes that some groups can perceive as damaging or offensive.

Ethnographers, however, are also products of society – they might hold unexamined assumptions or prejudices about the very groups they are interested in studying. For example, the sociologist Mitchell Duneier (1994: 149–150) has shown how landmark ethnographies of African American men have unintentionally reproduced racist stereotypes about blacks and yet are cloaked in an aura of scholarly rigour. Yet, an ethnographer's particular experiences can contribute to fresh insights into the lives of the people being studied.

In my case, my experiences and perspectives as a gay Muslim meant that I had a great deal in common with the gay Muslims who participated in this study. Like many of them, I have a complex relationship between my sexuality and religion. However, I

engaged with them not primarily for friendship or moral support – although some were already friends of mine and new friendships developed in the course of my research – but to produce academic knowledge on Islam and sexuality in the contemporary world. Thus, despite my seemingly self-evident status as an 'insider', I still had to constantly analyse the complex range of positions and viewpoints within myself as objectively as possible alongside those of my participants. As the religious studies scholar Russell McCutcheon (2007: 53) puts it, '*there are insiders and then there are insiders*'.

In this chapter, I discuss my research design and how it helped me produce useful knowledge about gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain. I elaborate on why I chose my three methods to gather and interpret data – the central methods of participant observation and in-depth interviewing, supplemented by media analysis for context-setting. In-depth interviews allowed me to listen to and learn from my participants' stories in their own voices, while participant observation provided an opportunity to verify and contextualise their accounts as well as to immerse myself in their everyday environments. Familiarising myself with mass media coverage on Islam and sexuality in the two countries helped me develop a fuller picture of the overall settings in which my participants lived. With all these methods, I used my 'knowing self' (Davidman, 2002: 20) to gather and analyse data and I discuss the strengths and limitations of my approach.

1.1 Why ethnography?

An ethnographer 'seeks a deeper *immersion* in others' worlds in order to grasp what they experience as meaningful and important' (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011: 3). The ethnographic method involves the researcher's long-term, first-hand participation in the group's social world and the production of a written account drawing upon this participation (Emerson et al., 2011: 1). It produces knowledge based on people's diverse experiences of social reality, encompassing the personal knowledge of the ethnographer and his or her participants. However, ethnographic research also aims to go beyond personal knowledge to help us gain fresh and useful insights about wider social interaction and change (Spickard & Landres, 2002: 13)[4]. At the same time, it

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[4] For other reflections on ethnographic methods in the study of religion, see the contributions in James V Spickard, J Shawn Landres, and Meredith B McGuire, (eds.) 2002. *Personal Knowledge and Beyond:*

creates social reality – the written ethnographic account is firstly a narrative constructed by the ethnographer who assumes 'authorial privilege' (Emerson et al., 2011: 241).

While ethnographic research provides a nuanced, detailed view of the lives of the people involved, this view still requires many levels of interpretation and translation. To begin with, the participants in the study often have to explain their actions, opinions, relationships or beliefs in terms that are intelligible to the ethnographer. The ethnographer then has to record these as comprehensively and accurately as possible in his or her fieldnotes. The ethnographer eventually has to use these notes to construct a final, written report of the study for an audience that most likely did not have the same direct and prolonged access to the research context. Instead, they will probably interpret it for their own purposes through personal filters influenced by prior exposure to information and experiences they perceive as relevant. Therefore at every stage, there is potential for distortion or loss of information simply due to the limits of human communication.

The role of the ethnographer in controlling potential distortions or losses of information is crucial since there is no such thing as an unmarked, '"universal" researcher' (Spickard & Landres, 2002: 7). As well-meaning or rigorous as any ethnographer intends to be, he or she still comes to the research enterprise with a set of images and assumptions about the self and the 'Other'. This is why some anthropologists have become sceptical about the validity of ethnography and have even advocated replacing it with textual research[5]. However, the anthropologists John Borneman and Abdellah Hammoudi (2009: 20) assert that ethnographic research remains valid if we understand that the 'mutual, intersubjective questioning' between researchers and interlocutors is itself an integral aspect of the ethnographic enterprise. Ethnographers can reduce error and bias by taking into account 'the dynamics of our interactions as well as the differences between our locations and those of our interlocutors' (Borneman & Hammoudi, 2009: 19).

I chose ethnographic methods to study gay Muslim experiences in Malaysia and Britain precisely because my research required comparative insights into the nuances

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Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion. New York: New York University Press.

[5] For example, John Borneman and Abdellah Hammoudi (2009: 8–9) critique fellow anthropologist Talal Asad's advocacy of 'textualist' rather than ethnographic methods.

and layers of being gay and Muslim under particular social conditions. I experienced, recorded and thought through the 'mutual, intersubjective questioning' among my participants and also between them and me in specific, concrete circumstances. In the following sections, I discuss the main issues that presented themselves through my specific methods: participant observation, interviews and analyses of the mass media.

1.2 Participant observation: Context and complexity

On 8 October 2012, I boarded a plane in London headed for Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. This was my first of two research visits – from October to December 2012 and from July to September 2013 – to study 'gay Muslim' lives in Malaysia, in the hope that I *could* find enough gay Muslims to participate in my research[6].

When I first decided to research the lives of gay Muslims, I was asked by several British non-Muslims – gay and straight, white and non-white – if it was possible to even find such people in Malaysia. The fact is, even before I began this study I had already befriended many gay Muslims in Malaysia and elsewhere. I chatted informally with several of the Malaysians among them – online and in person when I was in Kuala Lumpur in 2011 – to gauge whether they were interested. In Britain, my task was even easier, as I had already made a few new friends in Imaan, the British lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) Muslim organisation. I simply needed to explain my research to the chair and a few trustees who then granted me access to several potential participants. Therefore, in both countries, I had no problems obtaining replies from potential participants offering varying degrees of assistance and support.

Yet, why did so many of my non-Muslim British friends assume that it would be nearly impossible or even dangerous to recruit participants while I took for granted that this would be the easy part? In brief, our divergent perspectives were related to how our worldviews were shaped by our different social networks and experiences.

In my case, even before starting my doctorate, I had already spent much time and energy seeking out supportive LGBTQI Muslim communities, networks and friends. My selective openness with various people about being gay and Muslim

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[6] I conducted the British phase of my research between January and July 2013.

enabled me to build and maintain these networks of trust. This is why recruiting participants appeared so easy – my 'insider status' and previous experiences meant that I had forged relationships which provided a ready basis for my research sample.

The questions I was asked in London, however, affected my thoughts the minute I touched down at Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA). At the baggage reclaim area, I noticed the elegant hairdos, thick makeup, and high heels of the Malay-speaking female flight attendants from Malaysia Airlines. The Malaysian Federal Constitution defines all ethnic Malays as Muslim[7], but how could I take this for granted with this group of women? Could I assume that none of them were gay, or that all of them were practising Muslims? Their appearance contrasted with the Malay women workers at the airline taxi counter, who were all wearing demure yellow *tudung*, or Malay-style Islamic headscarves. Could I take for granted that *they* were 'proper' Muslims, or that none of them were gay? How could I find out if external markers such as the *tudung* or discernibly feminine dressing styles reliably indicated private, individual beliefs and practices?

These questions were part of my consciousness as a Malaysian who was raised Muslim. I grew up in Alor Setar, the capital of Kedah State[8], and studied for my undergraduate degree in chemical engineering in Australia. I returned to Kuala Lumpur and worked there for nine years, switching careers a couple of times. My work often took me to different parts of Malaysia – as a corporate executive, a human rights activist, a performing artist, and a journalist – and I thought I knew my country inside out. Conducting ethnographic research, however, made me see Malaysia with new eyes – hence my meticulous mental notes when touching down at KLIA in October 2012.

Ethnographic research also forced me to reflect upon how my self-perception as gay and Muslim has influenced my social networks and worldview. For one thing, despite numerous negative media images of Islam's doctrinal position on homosexuality, I personally managed to forge happy and deep friendships with other gay Muslims. By being open about my religious and sexual identity in several circumstances, I have also managed to nurture closer and more affectionate

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[7] Article 160(2) states: '"Malay" means a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, [and] conforms to Malay custom' (Malaysia, 2010: 153).

[8] Throughout this work, I use the word 'state' in two ways – as a broader concept referring to a political structure of government and authority (styled 'state'), and in relation to the different territorial units that make up the Federation of Malaysia (styled 'State').

relationships with some of my family members and other heterosexual Muslims and non-Muslims. Even before I embarked on my research, I knew that several other gay Muslims had similarly positive experiences.

Of course, this does not discount the negative and even traumatic experiences that many other gay Muslims have had with their families, communities, or state agencies in Malaysia, Britain and beyond. In my case, although I was open about my sexuality with friends, immediate family, and most of my colleagues, I never actively 'came out' in ways that made me visible to the Malaysian authorities. I lived in a social world where all the people who mattered to me knew about my sexuality but understood that they, too, needed to protect me from potentially hostile state and non-state actors. I relate my experiences to show how our choices to adopt and express certain facets of self-identity create particular yet fluid social worlds that we inhabit.

When I assumed the role of researcher, I faced the question of how exactly to define a 'gay Muslim' social world *as a concrete site for study*. As the anthropologist Tom Boellstorff (2005: 20) argues in his study of Indonesia, there is no gay or lesbian 'village' for an ethnographer to visit and inhabit. Instead, individuals express their religious and sexual identities in fragments, through specific interactions at certain times and in certain locations. Additionally, in environments where non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality are considered deviant or even criminal, people learn how to display conformity depending on whether the coast is clear.

Therefore, instead of identifying a permanent, bounded locale in which to study 'gay Muslims', I asked my friends about particular activities, events, or networks where I could observe other gay Muslims in everyday social interactions. This proved considerably easier in Britain because all I needed to do was keep up with Imaan's calendar of activities and events. It was more complicated in Malaysia, because local self-identified LGBTQI collectives do not necessarily provide the space for gay-identified Muslims to explore the *religious* aspects of their identity. Throughout the Malaysian part of my ethnographic fieldwork, I did not find a comparable equivalent of Imaan, i.e. a visible, organised collective primarily focusing on supporting LGBTQI *and* Muslim people.

In Malaysia, nevertheless, I persevered and found informal groups such as women of diverse sexualities, including Muslims, who played indoor football (or 'futsal') weekly. I also encountered many gay Muslims at various arts events or public forums on human rights and progressive discussions of Islam organised by civil society

groups. I even attended a *buka puasa* or Ramadan[9] fast-breaking party organised by a group of 'bears'[10] in Kuala Lumpur – catered for gay Muslims and non-Muslims and their friends.

1.2.1 Logistics of the research

In terms of geographical locations, my research in Malaysia was conducted primarily in Kuala Lumpur and its surroundings, with a short visit to Kedah on both trips. In Britain, I focused mostly on Greater London, interspersed with a few short visits to Greater Manchester and Lancashire.

My encounters and activities in the field involved capturing my experiences and observations in writing. I had to judge when to take notes contemporaneously as things were happening or when to put pen and paper aside to fully engage with my surroundings. I balanced between making 'jottings or scratch notes' whenever I could, and keeping 'mental notes or "headnotes"' (Emerson et al., 2011: 23) at other times, which I wrote down in my notebook immediately afterwards – in cafes, on the Tube, in libraries or in bed.

Whether I made jottings or headnotes, I followed the recommendations by Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz and Linda Shaw (2011: 24–27) to record: my 'initial impressions' of the scene, including all things available to my senses such as tastes, smells, sounds, and sights; my personal sense of the 'significant or unexpected'; 'what those in the setting experience and react to as "significant" or "important"', i.e. beyond my personal impressions; and finally 'how routine actions in the setting are organized and take place'. At the end of the day or the first thing the next day, I would construct full fieldnotes in Microsoft Word based on these headnotes and jottings, and stored these in an encrypted folder on my laptop.

Where dialogue was concerned, I placed only those phrases captured verbatim in quotation marks and indicated all others as indirect quotations or paraphrases (Emerson et al., 2011: 63). In this thesis, for readability, I render all dialogue and direct

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[9] The ninth month of the Muslim calendar, during which the third of Islam's five pillars states that Muslims need to fast, i.e. refrain from food, drink and sex from just before dawn until sunset. *Buka puasa* means 'breaking the fast'.

[10] In the gay subculture, this is a reference to gay or bisexual men who are stocky, heavyset, and are also hairy or sport facial hair (PBWorks, 2008).

speech in quotation marks, but indicate non-verbatim exchanges with an asterisk (*) at the end of the relevant excerpt or paragraph. I also italicise my translations of exchanges originally in Malay[11].

Along the way, I also wrote 'in-process memos' based on particular themes or analytical leads that I was picking up in my data. These were not intended to produce a final, systematic analysis but rather 'to provide insight, direction, and guidance for the ongoing fieldwork' (Emerson et al., 2011: 123).

All in all, I accumulated nearly 250,000 words worth of fieldnotes. Once I had finished participant observation, I read through these fieldnotes and in-process memos as a complete corpus. Upon my first reading, I began 'open coding', i.e. identifying and formulating 'any and all ideas, themes, or issues they suggest, no matter how varied and disparate' (Emerson et al., 2011: 172), using the 'Comment' function in Microsoft Word. Upon second reading, I embarked on more 'focused coding', i.e. subjecting my open codes to more fine-grained analysis based on clusters of topics of particular interest, also using Word's 'Comment' function. During this process, I also wrote separate, more systematic and theoretically informed 'coding memos' based on the topics and categories generated by my open and focused codes. From here, I identified and pursued the ideas and themes that addressed my research questions and matched these with episodes or vignettes to include in this thesis.

Besides providing rich data, my fieldnotes also made me aware of how power dynamics in the field influenced my methods and subsequent insights, which I now turn to.

1.2.2   Gender, class and power

From the beginning, I strove to include the experiences of gay Muslim men *and* women, because I did not want to ignore women's experiences or contributions in my examination of constructions of religion and sexuality. Furthermore, in the Malaysian context, the government-controlled mass media regularly demonise male *and* female homosexuality, sometimes alongside negative reports on what are portrayed as 'deviant' or 'misbehaving' heterosexual women. On the other end of the spectrum,

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[11] Italicised and non-italicised words appearing together are examples of code-switching between English and Malay. See *Notes on Transliteration and Transcription*.

discussions on the protection of sexual minorities in Britain accompany continuing campaigns and policies to achieve gender equality.

At the same time, my gendered position as a Muslim man meant that I initially did not have equal access to gay male and female social worlds. For example, when one of my gay Muslim women friends invited me to observe her all-women futsal group, I somehow felt that it was more appropriate to sit on the side instead of joining in. I initially reflected that this was because I had discerned a gender boundary – these futsal activities were obviously an important avenue for the women to socialise comfortably and I did not want to disrupt them unduly. Later, I wondered if I was driven by other unexamined assumptions – gay men are often stereotyped as bad at sports whereas lesbians are often stereotyped as uncommonly sporty.

Eventually, I discovered another female-majority futsal group which welcomed all genders and players of all abilities, which I joined regularly. Thus, although I initially found it more difficult to gain access to the social worlds of gay Muslim women, I persevered and managed to find welcome in some key women's spaces. It was relatively easier with the men – for example, I knew the main nightclubs patronised by gay Muslim men and so did most of my male participants.

Soon, however, I realised that these social circles – whether predominantly male, female, or mixed – consisted largely of middle class individuals within urban surroundings. Even the many people I spoke to who were raised in rural or working-class environments had moved into more urban settings and were upwardly mobile. My own middle class background probably had a role to play in how I came into contact with most of my lower- to upper-middle class participants. Thus, when I heard of a restaurant in Kuala Lumpur with an adjoining pool hall that sounded like it was frequented by working-class gay Muslim women, I immediately asked one of my participants, Isma[12], if we could visit. I recorded this visit with Isma and Fauziah, her girlfriend, as follows:

> The pool hall is a dimly-lit, cigarette smoke-infused room with eight
> to ten pool tables. There are two to four people playing at every

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[12] I use pseudonyms for all participants.

table. The first table to our left has a *pengkid*[13] and a woman player. I see at least three other tables with *pengkids* – either playing with other *pengkids*, or in a mixed group with their girlfriends. One table has a girl wearing a *tudung*, and a man who looks like he could be a *lelaki lembut*[14]. The table at the far end of the room, to the left, has a couple of Indian men – besides them everyone else is Malay. There is moderately loud hip hop music playing on the sound system.

The *pengkids* are all dressed in loose, baggy clothing. Many are in flannel shirts, and have short, spiky and even dyed hair. When we walk past they stare at us quite sternly. Eventually, Isma asks, 'Do you guys want to leave?' I say, 'I don't know, are you uncomfortable?' Isma says, 'I'm not, but both of you look uncomfortable.' I say, 'Yes, I am a bit.' She says, 'Okay, then, let's go.'*

After we exit, I ask Fauziah, Isma's girlfriend, 'Were you uncomfortable, too?' She says, 'Yes, I was.' I say, 'I wanted to scream: Please don't beat me up!' Fauziah laughs and says, 'Me too.' I say, 'They were quite fierce, weren't they?' Isma says, 'Yes, I think it's because these are people who hang out here every night, so it's like home to them. So when new people enter they check us out….'*

During and immediately after this encounter, I was at a loss to explain why I perceived the *pengkids* and their friends in this pool hall as working class. In hindsight, I understand that I carried unexamined privileges and assumptions as a middle-class, Malaysian, Muslim male into this encounter. Rightly or wrongly, I read certain aspects of the atmosphere – the lighting, music, fashion sense of the *pengkids* and their

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[13] A colloquial term, possibly coined from the English 'punk kid', used to describe masculine women who desire feminine women. For a more detailed explanation on the possible etymology of '*pengkid*', see Chapter 2.1.5, where I discuss Yuenmei Wong. (2012). 'Islam, Sexuality, and the Marginal Positioning of *Pengkids* and Their Girlfriends in Malaysia'. *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 16 (4): 435–48.

[14] Literally, 'soft man' – often used colloquially and in the mass media to refer to men perceived as gay or effeminate.

girlfriends, and surrounding neighbourhood – as 'working class', which felt alien to me. In fact, the *pengkids* and their girlfriends might have regarded *me* as an interloper and probably had better reason to feel threatened by *my* presence. Thus, while I caught a glimpse of the class boundary among Malaysian gay Muslims through encounters such as these, my own gender and class position made it difficult for me to cross it. Still, I tried my best to collect insights into class dynamics through my other encounters and to be as reflexive as possible about my own prejudices and assumptions in my analysis.

This intersection of class and gender also complicated my access to transgender social circles. For one thing, although I have friends who self-identify as transgender or transsexual, I have also observed how the boundary between being gay and transgender can become blurred in various circumstances. I personally know individuals who play with labels and do not subscribe to a fixed notion of sexual orientation or gender identity[15]. At the same time, hostile mass media coverage of homosexuality in Malaysia often lumps together the concepts of 'homosexuality' and 'transgenderism'.

Within this context, the question of gender identity for some of my participants was more complex than it first appeared. Particular individuals whom I assumed were cisgender[16] turned out to be more comfortable identifying as transgender and vice versa, and their narratives have informed my insights profoundly. For others, the notions of 'cisgender' and 'transgender' just did not emerge, or were alien to their vocabulary[17].

Against this background, I chose not to seek out individuals explicitly identifying as 'transgender' because their experiences of gender and sexuality would be distinct from those of people identifying as 'gay'. In this study, however, my use of the term 'gay Muslim' is not meant to erase the ambiguities and nuances between the

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[15] One such person, Ebry, participated in my research and features in later chapters.

[16] *Cisgender*, *i.e.* non-transgender, refers to people whose self-understandings and expressions of gender correspond with their biological sex and conform to wider societal expectations. *Transgender* as a broad category refers to people whose self-understandings and/or expressions of gender do not correspond to their biological sex and thus do not match dominant societal expectations (Catalano & Shlasko, 2010: 425).

[17] For an analysis of the legacy of blurred boundaries between 'homosexuality' and 'transgenderism' in Muslim Southeast Asia and its consequences today, see Michael Peletz. 2011. 'Gender Pluralism: Muslim Southeast Asia since Early Modern Times'. *Social Research* 78 (2): 656–86.

'transgender' and 'gay' experiences I eventually observed and learnt about[18]. Still, these observations were probably also limited by my own subjective position as a cisgender, middle class, gay Muslim man. For example, there is a stark difference between the discussions I had with my mostly middle-class participants and one chance encounter I had on the streets of Kuala Lumpur when my car broke down:

> It is nearly 9pm and the heavy traffic has subsided a little. I am standing on the pavement and waiting for the tow truck. I notice, to my left, a few transgender women loitering near the metal railing of the footpath by the river. They are about 30 feet away from me. I try to count them out of the corner of my eye, but can't make out how many there are. I decide to walk past and observe them discreetly.
>
> When I pass by them I look at my mobile phone, trying not to stare so obviously. Out of the corner of my eye, I count four transgender women. The closest one stands upright and faces me, hands akimbo. I might be imagining this, but she also thrusts her hips forward suggestively. She is in a one-piece dress – a spaghetti strap, with the skirt just covering her bum – and is wearing high heels. Her hair is long, wavy and dyed blonde, and her face is heavily made up. Again, I might be imagining this (it is night time, after all), but she pouts seductively too.
>
> Of the other three, two are sitting on the railing, and one is standing – all stare at me. The last one I pass has her hair in a black beehive and is also heavily made up and skimpily dressed. She calls out, '*You want a massage? For your "inner strength"?*' I don't look at her directly, but I smile and shake my head. I hurry past, and I can hear her still calling out, slightly more indistinctly, '*If you want a bit of bum you can get it here, too.*'*

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[18] Substituting with 'queer' would also be unsatisfactory, since it would not capture the centrality of the label 'gay' in forming the self-understandings and self-expressions of the majority of participants, as explained in the Introduction.

This fleeting interaction occurred on what, during the day, is a bustling Kuala Lumpur main road. I had not realised that at night, when the crowds have thinned, it was also where transgender women – locally known as *mak nyah* – who were probably working class, solicited attention. Like my indirect encounter with the working class *pengkids* in the pool hall, I caught a glimpse of a class and gender boundary here which I found difficult to cross because of my social position as a middle-class gay man.

These class and gender dynamics show the complex ways in which power operates in the field and affects the lens through which the ethnographer sees the world. My middle class position and academic affiliation with a top-ranking British university gave me certain social advantages which facilitated easy access with my middle class participants. Yet these social advantages sometimes became barriers making it difficult for me to enter particular social worlds. Thus, although I have gathered rich data, the gathering process itself was done from a specific position in which several aspects of my own identity intersected. Moreover, these power dynamics were not static – I also found myself in positions of relative vulnerability, which I explore next.

1.2.3   Vulnerability, self-preservation and autonomy

There were times when being *gay* made me feel vulnerable in situations where being *male* and *Muslim* might have given me certain advantages. In November 2012, an academic friend, Nai Ing – a non-Muslim, non-heterosexual Malaysian woman – informed me of an upcoming, government-sponsored workshop on the position of Islam in the Malaysian constitution. Many of the panellists were prominent Muslim opinion leaders or high-ranking officials in the Islamic bureaucracy whose anti-LGBT positions were prominently reported by the mass media. We anticipated that the audience would also consist of representatives from Islamic pressure groups, *syariah* lawyers, civil servants in the Islamic bureaucracy, and scholars of Islam.

During a break on the first day, Nai Ing and I looked for a private space to sit but were invited by another participant to join her at her table. We soon gathered that

she was Aminah Ishak[19], a pro-*syariah*, anti-LGBT, and anti-liberal scholar and commentator. Aminah[20] tried to strike up a conversation with me, asking about the nature of my research. I gave her polite but vague responses to the effect that I was investigating 'official and unofficial views of Islam in Malaysia and Britain'. When she prodded me about my findings, I said I did not have any yet. Nai Ing stared at her plate and ate silently throughout.

I doubt that Aminah or the workshop organisers had any legal basis to expel or report Nai Ing and me to the authorities merely because of our research. I am less sure of the consequences had I revealed my sexual identity − my exchange with Aminah would have probably turned out differently, perhaps becoming more confrontational. As it happened, our conversation was brief and cordial and when the coffee break ended she excused herself, saying she wanted to get ready for the next session.

During one of the later question-and-answer sessions, she got up and stated quite baldly that all advocates for freedom of sexuality should not be given '*any space at all*' in Malaysia. I was troubled that she said this so unequivocally, relieved that I had not exposed myself unnecessarily, and happy to jot down her words as data.

This was one of the few times I felt uncomfortable, frustrated, and slightly afraid during my research because of the polarised environment and its potential impacts on my personal security. I did not stop being gay, Muslim or a researcher when I met Aminah, but I did choose to present a particular version of myself to her in an environment where Islam was presented in ways that I found quite unpleasant and threatening.

In other instances, I could be anonymous and feel relatively safe, for example when I attended Friday prayers at different venues in Malaysia and Britain to observe congregational dynamics and listen to the *khutbahs* (sermons). After all, accessing male-only mosque spaces depended only on the observable characteristics of being male and Muslim, while one's sexuality could often safely go undetected or unremarked on. In fact, during several Friday prayers, I spotted other men in the congregation whom I was sure were gay.

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[19] Even though she is a public figure, I use a pseudonym for her because this was an informal, personal exchange.

[20] Malay names are patronymic, so it is correct to cite first names after the first mention.

These instances were not surprising to me, since I have attended Friday prayers in Malaysia and Britain with some of my heterosexual, male Muslim friends who know I am gay and are fine with it. Like me, they ignore or cringe at some of the more judgemental or punitive *khutbahs*, yet they worship in the mosque weekly because they consider it an important part of being Muslim. Like me, they understand that mosques can often be hostile spaces for outsiders or non-conformists, but not just regarding sexuality – for example, the state-controlled Friday *khutbahs* in predominantly Sunni Malaysia can be virulently anti-Syiah[21] (e.g. Department of Islamic Development Malaysia, 2013). At the same time, my experiences and theirs show that despite being spaces in which dominant and normative Islamic teachings are transmitted, mosques do not host homogenous congregations. Many Muslims are capable of creating islands of autonomy or alternative modes of religious belonging during Friday prayers and at other times. This insight helped me to understand better the conditions that motivate some people to seek safer spaces to belong openly as gay Muslims, which I now discuss.

1.2.4 Belief, belonging and the research endeavour

I first encountered Imaan in 2007, when I visited Britain for a week for work. It was Ramadan – I contacted them online and got myself invited to one of their *iftaris*[22] in central London. I had hoped to find kindred spirits but instead found some of the conversations quite jarring. For example, I remember one of the attendees distributing pro-Palestine, anti-Zionist flyers produced by Hizb ut-Tahrir[23], an organisation that I was personally fearful of at the time because of their extreme hostility towards homosexuality. I returned to Malaysia with an image of Imaan as an incoherent, inconsistent organisation.

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[21] The Malay style for Shii, a branch of Muslims who believe the Prophet Muhammad's religious leadership, spiritual authority, and divine guidance were passed on to his descendants through his son-in-law and cousin, Ali ibn Abi Talib. Sunnis are the largest branch of Muslims and stress the Sunnah, or Muhammad's exemplary conduct, over beliefs in divinely-inspired succession.

[22] The fast-breaking meal during Ramadan.

[23] A transnational Muslim social movement aiming 'to resume the Islamic way of life by establishing an Islamic State that executes the systems of Islam and carries its call to the world' (Hizb ut-Tahrir, n.d.).

Yet, Imaan – along with other LGBTQI Muslim organisations in the West – remained on my radar, and when I returned to London in 2010 to pursue my masters, I made contact again. This time, I attended a study session they organised with the openly gay American imam, Daayiee Abdullah. This is where I first met Waqqas and Osman, who quickly befriended me and eventually participated in this study.

At the time, however, I was jarred again by some of the discussions. I empathised with some of the questions posed to the imam, for example on the intricacies of child adoption for gay Muslim couples. I did not understand, and was privately impatient with, some other questions about the minutiae of Islamic worship. It was only much later that I understood these as the working out of individual expressions of Islam within a very diverse group – Imaan's membership consists of individuals from various schools of Islamic jurisprudence, with differing emphases on what constitutes 'true' Islam. I also realised that as much as they wanted to express Muslim piety, many Imaan members – as with many other Muslims I encountered – were insecure about the gaps in their Islamic knowledge.

I eventually spoke to the Imaan chair and asked if they had ever conducted internal seminars or discussions about the social or practical dimensions of *shariah*. In Malaysia, I had become familiar with these debates through the work of the Islamic feminist organisation Sisters in Islam (SIS). In fact, I joined SIS as their first male associate member in 2004 and was trained to facilitate workshops that deconstructed gender and *syariah* for a lay audience[24]. The workshop modules were essentially a compilation of traditional and contemporary scholarship – including jurisprudence, Quranic hermeneutics and social scientific studies – on Islam and gender. The Imaan chair was enthusiastic, assuring me that nothing like it had ever been done in the organisation, and invited me to run a pilot session. I conducted this in April 2012, a few months after I had started my doctorate, and received positive feedback and requests to conduct further sessions for other Imaan members.

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[24] The main takeaway from these workshops is that there is much diversity in Islam – from doctrinal to political expressions – now obscured by polarised, polemical debates that pit it as inimical to human rights. Specifically, the workshops explore the considerable flexibility *within* Islamic teachings to conceptualise gender, sexuality, and religious freedom in relatively non-judgemental, egalitarian, and inclusive ways.

My entry point into studying Imaan was thus preceded by a strong need to participate and belong with other gay Muslims[25]. This does not mean I have overwhelmingly met like-minded individuals – indeed, I have very different experiences and views on Islam compared to many Imaan members. It does mean, however, that I finally found a space in which I could meet other people who, like me, were working out the relationship between Islam and their sexuality.

It also means that in coming to Imaan, I altered some key organisational dynamics. It could be argued that I therefore 'contaminated' my own research, but this view reproduces the myth that social researchers can aspire to invisibility or complete neutrality. My own view is that I worked with and through my 'knowing self' to gain an 'emphatic, nuanced and sensitive account' (Davidman, 2002: 20) of the lives of the people I studied.

There were also other boundaries that affected my initial perceptions of and interactions with Imaan members. For example, I had assumed they were middle class like me but realised only later that the vast majority were second-generation Britons who had grown up in predominantly working class families and communities. I sometimes found it hard to join their conversations or understand their sense of humour, but in time I learnt that *they* were evaluating *me* before incorporating me into their fold.

Initially, the Imaan chair and a few trustees built on my willingness to engage, recruiting me to coordinate some panel discussions and deliver the Friday *khutbah* during their national conference in August 2012. At the end of the second day, however, I became aware of another layer in our interactions when some of us decided to hang out in one member's hostel room.

Naved, a former Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Osman, a former Tablighi Jamaat[26] member, Waqqas, and a few others decided to take turns teasing me. Naved started asking me about my partner Giles[27], an openly gay Anglican priest. He expressed mock

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[25] When I had decided upon my research topic, however, I approached the Imaan chair during an *iftari* to explain what I wanted to do and why. He was supportive and told me I could start once I had been granted ethical approval, and subsequently helped explain my research to the other Imaan trustees and members.

[26] A transnational Muslim movement aiming to persuade other Muslims to become more pious and rigorous with their beliefs and practices.

[27] Not anonymised.

disdain that I identified and practised as a Muslim *and* sang in the church choir on Sundays.

'What are you?' Naved demanded, and the others egged him on. Naved maintained a mock stern expression, while some of the others giggled.*

I laughed, and every time I tried to reply, Naved interrupted, making everyone laugh even more.

'Are you a cut-and-shut[28]?' he asked.*

'That's what you is!' said Osman, in an exaggerated East London accent.*

After this ritual teasing, most Imaan members became warmer and more affectionate with me. As I overheard Waqqas say to Osman later, 'She's[29] one of us now.' This ritual teasing also happened in other situations, such as when I attended the Imaan annual general meeting (AGM) in February 2013 and asked if I could be added to the Imaan WhatsApp[30] group. Ebrahim, a member in his mid-20s, added me when approximately 30 of us were having a post-AGM meal at a kebab restaurant in East London, and I captured the ensuing exchange in my fieldnotes:

> Once added, I text a *salam* (greeting of peace) to everyone. Salleh, an Arab member in his late 20s, responds by calling me a 'man-gash' – an extremely rude term meaning 'male vagina'. I laugh out loud – Salleh is sitting at the other end of the restaurant. 'Did Salleh just call me a rude word?' I type.

> The ensuing WhatsApp exchange is chaotic, funny, and rude, and occurs alongside our real-time exchanges, which are equally funny and chaotic. One member asks me on WhatsApp, 'Slag[31], why aren't you sitting with me?'

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[28] Slang referring to a form of automobile repair in which the wrecked section of a defective car is sawn off and replaced with a matching section from another car.

[29] Some Imaan members enjoy reversing gendered pronouns playfully, although they refrain from doing this to people who are uncomfortable with it.

[30] An electronic messaging system that operates across different smartphone platforms.

[31] Derogatory British slang for promiscuous woman.

These digital conversations provided crucial albeit unseen context to my participant observation and belonging within Imaan. On WhatsApp and the social networking site Facebook, for example, Imaan members share jokes about being gay and Muslim and keep in touch about important life events. When someone's family member or partner is ill, they share *dua* (supplications) for *shifa* (cure). Members who are nervous about job interviews or 'coming out' to family or friends get moral support and *duas* through these virtual worlds. Occasionally they also argue viciously. Eventually, I left the WhatsApp group because I was overwhelmed by the volume of messages – I soon learnt that I was not the only member to leave for this reason. Yet, some of the newer members have told me that Imaan is their lifeline, and they communicate through WhatsApp and Facebook intensely and devotedly.

My research in Britain thus introduced me to Imaan as a structured, close-knit social network *primarily* focusing on Islam *and* sexuality, which as yet has no direct equivalent in Malaysia. For balance, I also contacted gay British Muslims who did not belong to Imaan – a doctoral colleague introduced them to me. Eventually, I also found belonging as an openly gay Muslim in another British Muslim organisation, The Muslim Institute, and helped introduce some of the members and leaders of the two groups to each other. This eventually led to them jointly organising a conference on diversity in Islam in May 2014 (Muslim Institute & Imaan, n.d.).

Whether in Malaysia or Britain, then, my participant observation was influenced by my own emotional and intellectual trajectory even as I was studying my participants' journeys. Furthermore, while our lives were filled with concerns beyond religion and sexuality, I was asking them *and* myself to throw the spotlight on our religious and sexual identity. This study's validity thus lies in whether I have rendered their experiences accurately and holistically enough to produce viable social scientific analysis. In the next section, I examine the kinds of insights I gained from in-depth interviews.

1.3 Interviewing: Power and presentations of self

I interviewed 29 participants in total – 17 in Malaysia and 12 in Britain – consisting of nine men and eight women in Malaysia, and seven men and five women in Britain. They were mostly in their 20s and 30s, with an average age of 31.5 and a

median of 31. The average and median ages of my Malaysian participants was 32 and 33.5, slightly higher than those of my British participants, 29 and 28.7. Also, my Malaysian sample consisted entirely of Muslims who were categorised officially as ethnic Malays, whereas my British sample included Pakistanis, Indians, Somalis, an Arab, a Bengali, a mixed-South Asian individual and an English convert[32].

I contacted my Malaysian interviewees through a combination of going through my personal contact list and snowball sampling, which led to 15 interviews in Kuala Lumpur and its surroundings, and two in Alor Setar, Kedah. In Britain, I contacted ten interviewees through Imaan, supplementing these with two non-Imaan contacts. I focused on Imaan in Britain specifically to compare the dynamics of an organised LGBTQI Muslim social movement with looser, more indirect or hidden networks in Malaysia. Six interviews were conducted in London and six in Greater Manchester and Lancashire.

In both countries, I focused on anyone self-identifying as 'Muslim' and was attracted to the same sex, but for fuller comparison also included a few who had privately disaffiliated from Islam. Also, during the course of my ethnographic research, I had informal conversations with several other Muslim and non-Muslim sexual minorities in both countries, as well as with progressive Muslim activists or community leaders.

The interviews were semi-structured – I had on hand a sheet covering various potential aspects I wanted to find out about people's religious and sexual self-understandings, the dynamics of their close relationships, and their wider views on Islam and sexuality[33]. Prior to each interview, interviewees were given time to read the participant information sheet and the opportunity to ask clarifying questions before deciding to proceed. During the interviews, I referred to my printed guide but did not stick to the questions rigidly and instead allowed my participants to explore or elaborate on what they felt was important. My main objective was to gain a nuanced perspective of their 'life-worlds' (Stroh, 2000: 202).

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[32] The ethnic homogeneity of my Malaysian sample is due mostly to the constitutional definition of Malays *as* Muslims. For a more thorough breakdown of my interviewees' profiles, please see Appendices 2a and 2b.

[33] For my full interview schedule, please see Appendix 3.

On average, the interviews lasted two to two-and-a-half hours, with one lasting just under an hour. They took place in locations which my interviewees found convenient and comfortable, including cafes, parks, restaurants and their homes. During each interview, I also made headnotes and jottings about the settings and other non-verbal events, such as the interviewees' body language or my own.

I recorded each interview with my thumb-sized Sony MP3 player (NWZ-B153F) and later transferred them into an encrypted folder on my personal laptop. I transcribed each interview onto Word with the aid of a transcription foot pedal. I transcribed my Malay interviews in the original language, capturing the particularities of different patois – in most cases, my Malaysian participants and I code-switched anyway – and only translated the excerpts I selected for analysis. The transcripts were stored in an encrypted folder and the audio recordings were deleted after transcription.

I transcribed the interviews in three batches – after my first trip to Malaysia, after I finished interviewing in Britain, and after my second Malaysian trip. Along the way, I wrote in-process memos and eventually embarked on open and focused coding of each transcript, as I did with my fieldnotes (as explained in section 1.2).

In essence, these interviews provided valuable opportunities for me to ask my participants about their inner states and views directly and at length. They allowed me to compare how they described their lives in their own words with my own observations. In the following sections, I discuss some key issues to take into account regarding my interview data.

1.3.1   When interviewer becomes interviewee

An early conversation with Rina, a Malaysian *tudung*-wearing lesbian in her early 30s, shows the fluidity of power dynamics in an interview. During a pre-interview dinner chat, she asked me to explain my research and I said one of the things I was interested in was how people defined and described themselves. I said I did not want to impose or suggest any categories for them, but wanted to hear what they would tell me.

Rina asked, 'So how do you define yourself?'*

I paused and replied, 'You know, this is so interesting. I've been the one asking this all this while, and I've always understood it can be a difficult question to answer, but now that you're asking me I can feel first hand why it's so difficult.'*

'Why is it difficult?' she asked*.

'Because I don't know if what I think of myself matches what other people think,' I said.*

'That's how I feel, too!' she said. 'So what do you think of yourself?'*

'I think of myself as gay,' I said.*

'That's it? Just gay?'*

'Well, I always thought of myself as *lembut* (soft), too,' I said.*

'But then what do other people think of you?'*

'Well, one of my friends the other day said I could be *abang-abang*.'*

'What is *abang-abang*?' she asked.*

'*Abang-abang* can mean masculine gay man. But he says I could be *abang-abang jambu*,' I said. (Another interviewee defined '*jambu*' as 'twink' or young, boyish gay man.)*

'Yes, I think that's an accurate way to describe you. But let me know what you settle on, because I'm really curious, too,' Rina said.*

During this part of the exchange, Rina took the reins, becoming the interviewer and asking me to reflect on the very things I was asking her and my other participants to reflect on. By probing into my deeper thoughts, Rina reminded me not only to look out for the various subjective interpretations of the term 'gay' but also to be aware of how demanding my questions could potentially be.

1.3.2 Influences of electronic recording

Many interviewees appeared more conscious about speaking 'properly' when the conversation was being recorded, even though I often continued asking questions and jotting notes after turning off the recording device. In some instances, there was a distinct shift in tone even when participants appeared to be addressing the same topic during and after recording. For example Sulaiman, a gay Malaysian in his early 30s, agreed almost immediately to an interview but during our actual conversation, I noticed that his facial expressions and body language appeared slightly tense. This was especially clear when we discussed the issue of Azwan Ismail, the Malay man who came out as gay via a YouTube video in December 2010. This was part of an online video series produced by the Malaysian sexuality rights collective Seksualiti Merdeka

(literally 'Independent Sexuality')[34], inspired by the American gay rights activist Dan Savage's 'It Gets Better' (n.d.) campaign. In particular, Azwan's public confession provoked intense backlash among state Islamic authorities and other Muslims which involved some violent online threats and condemnations.

During the recorded portion of our interview, Sulaiman mildly critiqued the timing of Seksualiti Merdeka's campaign and their lack of preparedness in dealing with the backlash. When I asked if he was angry about the campaign, he replied calmly, '*No, I didn't say anything – it's just, I was worried that [the authorities] might* screen my Facebook [account] or whatever, right? But then again, I don't go to [gay] nightclubs and all, so it's fine.' Once the interview had ended and I had turned off my recorder, our informal chat returned to the topic of Seksualiti Merdeka. This time, Sulaiman rolled his eyes and sighed exasperatedly, saying:

> What I really hate is that after the incident *with Azwan's video, every day on TV there* were all these [negative] statements about gays and so on. *It didn't affect me*, because I could just turn off the TV. *But think about the people in rural areas, every day they'd be watching news like that*. Of course it would have an impact on them. *It's like, if the government came out with daily messages, don't drink too much water, it's bad for your health* – surely people will start paying attention to how much water they drink, right? *Same thing applies here*.*

Sulaiman was aware that I was notating all my interactions and observations, but my use of a recording device clearly affected how he chose to express his opinions. A similar dynamic occurred with Ebry, a childhood friend in his mid-30s who lived outside Kuala Lumpur, in the far northwest of Malaysia. Ebry and I have always code switched between English and northern Malay patois, yet the minute I turned the recorder on he spoke in English only, which unsettled me slightly.

After I turned the recorder off, signalling the end of the interview, Ebry reverted to code switching. I noted our post-interview exchange as follows:

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[34] Explained further in Chapter 3.3.2.

> I ask, '*Was the interview OK?*' He says, '*Ya Allah, I had to control my emotions a little when you asked me those questions.*' I say, 'Really?' (I thought he appeared calm and relaxed for the most part.) He said, '*Yes, because I always think, how would I respond if a journalist were to ask me about* Malaysian politics?' I say, 'But do you feel better after talking to me?' He says, 'Yes, I do, especially since I also have done my own research, *watching YouTube videos and so on, even though I'm not as great as any professor.*'*

Ebry, like Sulaiman, was moderately critical of Seksualiti Merdeka during the interview but much more cutting after the recorder was switched off. This post-interview candidness played out differently, however, on the issue of his religious observance. During the interview, Ebry said his decision to practise Islam more piously now made him calmer and less prone to gossiping or insulting others, something he reiterated after I stopped recording. Yet when I met him again two days later, he shared a hilarious account of a heated argument he recently had with a mutual gay Muslim friend, dripping with sarcasm and insult.

> I say, '*You're a funny one, Ebry. The other day you went on and on about how Islamic worship is wonderful, it calms us, makes us better people, and then today you say you've just had this bitch-fight with Mazlan.*' Ebry replies, '*No, Shanon, you don't understand – the more pious we are, the more Satan tests us.*' We both laugh.*

Thus, although all my participants consented being interviewed and the majority appeared to relish the opportunity to share their experiences and opinions, they were also performing idealised aspects of themselves for my consumption. I suspect that some erred on the side of responding normatively when the recorder was on, especially regarding their feelings about Islam, while others might have opted for more provocative answers. I balanced these aspects with my own in-depth participation observation in various settings, as explained in section 1.2, to triangulate my data.

1.3.3 Confronting personal discomfort

A minority of interviewees confessed feeling uncomfortable or unsettled by the interview experience. For example, Isma, a Malaysian lesbian in her early 30s, tried her best to answer all my questions, but smoked several cigarettes nervously during and after the interview.

> When the interview's over, Isma says, '*Oh, I'm* stressed *now*.' I say, 'Really? *Why are you* stressed?' She says, 'No, whenever anyone asks me about religion and sexuality I get stressed. Even before this when I was interviewed by another researcher, she asked me all about Islam and homosexuality and I got quite stressed.' I say, 'But you know I just wanted to ask you your opinions, and I am totally not judgemental about anything you say.' She says, '*Yes I know, but it's still stressful*.'*

In such situations, I felt guilty and protective of my interviewees – I did not want to simply feed off their insecurities for my own research goals. I tried to mitigate this by always thanking each interviewee via text message, phone call, email or Facebook, and catching up with them informally afterwards whenever possible. In one instance, I jointly interviewed a Malaysian lesbian couple in their early 30s, Ezan and Elly, who seemed wary initially but ended up saying they enjoyed the experience. They even asked if we could have a follow-up session for *them* to interview *me*. I agreed and got their permission to record this as well. Their desire to learn about me and my research was moving and humbling.

Other participants were even more visibly enthused, for example Razak, a gay Malaysian in his late 20s who commended me after the interview:

> Razak tells me he doesn't think I'll have a problem with my interviews. He says, 'You allow people to tell their stories and you don't appear judgemental at all regarding their answers.' I say one of my *pengkid* interviewees was 'stressed' when I asked her about Islam and sexuality, but I assured her that it was all confidential and

that I wouldn't judge her at all. He says, 'Yes, that's what I feel about you.'*

The majority of my interviewees responded similarly positively. In Britain, only one participant expressed anxiety via email months after our interview, but seemed reassured after I reiterated that I was bound by the ethical requirements spelt out in the consent form. These concerns, however, allowed me to infer the various potential anxieties that my participants might not have felt comfortable discussing with me. I suspect that in varying degrees, such anxieties also affected many of the more secretive Muslim sexual minorities that I did not have the chance to engage with.

1.3.4   Physical, cultural and emotional locations

The non-verbal and incidental details which I jotted down also taught me much more about my participants than the interview transcript alone. I first met Waqqas at an Imaan event in London in late 2010 but it was only in May 2013 that I travelled to Greater Manchester to visit him and some other Imaan members for my research. On the day of our interview, Waqqas was delivering a talk on behalf of Imaan in the seaside town of Blackpool in Lancashire and invited me to accompany him. After the talk, we strolled down the seaside and decided to carry out the interview over lunch at one of the restaurants there.

A significant portion of the interview involved Waqqas explaining his upbringing to me, and what it was like growing up Muslim and gay in the north of England. I identified with much of his story, but not before asking many hesitant, clarifying questions about his school and home life. I was trying to visualise Waqqas's world and imagine its similarities and differences with mine, but my mental picture remained a bit vague.

After the interview, Waqqas and I walked to Pleasure Beach – an amusement park – because Ebrahim, based in London but originally from Lancashire, had earlier asked me to get him a souvenir from there. I promised I would but did not fully understand the request.

I ask Waqqas about Ebrahim's request: 'Am I supposed to get a stick or a rock?' Waqqas laughs and says, 'You don't know what rock is?' I say no. So when we get to the beach, I spot a stall selling really long sticks of rock candy – this is what Ebrahim requested, because the thought of rock brought back childhood memories for him.*

Waqqas tells me this beach is filled with childhood memories for him, too. His extended family used to come here for picnics – the Pakistani mothers making tons of samosas beforehand and packing them in big plastic bags. Sometimes whole families would hire coaches to come to the beach – Pakistanis on their British beach holiday.

Some other Imaan members told me they don't like Blackpool because it's too kitschy and Giles described it to me as predominantly working class. I could not develop a mental picture of the place from these verbal descriptions alone – being there with Waqqas changes this. And because of Waqqas's story, I end up liking Blackpool, too.

In hindsight, I realise that being in Blackpool was the most memorable aspect of my interview with Waqqas. It allowed me a priceless glimpse into the making of British Asian Muslims, and specifically the making of Waqqas as a gay British Muslim.

As a gay Muslim, I sometimes assumed that I had a straightforward 'insider's' perspective of the lives of gay Muslims in Malaysia *and* Britain. Being in Blackpool with Waqqas alerted me to the cultural distance between us, but our shared experiences in grappling with being gay and Muslim also helped reduce this distance. Waqqas's Blackpool anecdote was also a reminder of the need for a balanced picture – the experiences of ethnic, religious, or sexual minorities, especially migrants, are not only punctuated by hardship and uncertainty, but also joy and celebration. As Waqqas and Ebrahim show, these experiences constitute what it means to be British for them, and they are proud of this.

1.4 The mass media: context-setting and public debate

The mass media – print, broadcast, and digital – provide us with a 'common stock' of information and culture which influence our daily interactions as private citizens (Jacobs, 2005: 80). The news media, for example, are one of the most important sources of information that people use to talk about matters of common concern. This does not mean that there is only a one-way flow of information from media producers to a passive audience – the media cannot simply *dictate* what people think. Rather, the mass media provide people with information resources to construct their understandings and perspectives about the world. The mass media therefore *shape* the topics that people are most concerned about at any single moment in that most discussions about these issues would probably already be influenced by existing news coverage.

The mass media are therefore integral aspects in how we each understand religion and sexuality in contemporary society. The question is *how* and *to what extent* the mass media shape these understandings and experiences. These questions are especially important in relation to mass media constructions of Islam and homosexuality or LGBTQI issues, since these are politically charged topics and subject to intense public debate in various contexts. In many instances, Muslims and sexual minorities are likely to be misrepresented and have their concerns and experiences distorted in the mass media.

In this study, I analysed media coverage on Islam and sexuality as a supplementary method to set the context for my interviews and participant observation. This helped me develop a more informed picture of the similarities and differences in media constructions of Islam and sexuality in Britain and Malaysia and how these affected gay Muslims in each setting. To do this, I followed relevant coverage on Islam and/or sexual diversity in the main newspapers in both countries.

Given the authoritarian government's control over the media and the prevalence of ethnic and religious politics in Malaysia[35], my concerns here were linguistic and political balance. I focused on *The Star*, the most widely circulated English daily, and *Harian Metro* ('*The Daily Metro*'), the most widely circulated

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[35] Discussed further in Chapter 3.

Malay-language daily. These two dailies, however, are owned by the two biggest parties in the ruling coalition, so for further balance, I also followed the politically independent, most established, widely-read and multilingual news website, *Malaysiakini*.

Within the wider context of the liberal democratic British state, I focused on political balance – I followed the right-leaning tabloid, *The Daily Mail*, and the left-leaning broadsheet, *The Guardian*. For further balance, I also followed *The Muslim News*, a monthly newspaper catering particularly to British Muslim concerns.

For both countries, I focused mainly on online content but would occasionally browse print editions to check for other relevant coverage, and used bibliographic software to compile relevant items.

Because of the degree of government control of news sources in Malaysia, I also made it a point to browse non-news Malay-language publications, focusing on *Mastika* (a popular, often sensationalist, monthly current affairs magazine), *Mingguan Wanita* (the Malaysian version of *Women's Weekly*), and *Mangga* (a popular, glossy entertainment magazine). I did this to compare whether sexuality-related issues were represented in different or more nuanced ways in non-news publications aimed for a wide readership.

I also paid attention to relevant television or radio broadcasts and online discussions, and took account of theatre, cinema, and written fiction. This is because these media forms are just as powerful as the news media in shaping public conversations about issues such as religion, gender and sexuality (Jacobs, 2005: 82).

There are some important caveats in my comparison of media constructions of Islam and sexual diversity in Malaysia and Britain. Most clearly, there is overt state control and ownership of the mass media in Malaysia compared to Britain, along with an array of laws censoring public debate on Islam and sexuality. This does not mean that there were no misrepresentations and distortions about Islam and sexuality in the British media, since the political or ideological leanings of outlets here also influence their coverage of contentious issues.

Furthermore, although Muslims and sexual minorities are liable to be misrepresented or sensationalised in the mass media, the type, extent, and consequences of these can differ. For one thing, sexual minorities are unlike ethnic and to some extent religious minorities because people who belong to them tend to arrive at their sexual identities later in life and may not be easily identifiable by others

(Gross, 1991: 20). Also, they remain particularly vulnerable to prevailing majoritarian attitudes about sexual norms and difference. Islam, on the other hand, is a minority religion in some countries and a majority religion in others. Thus, while distortions or misrepresentations of Islam might draw on a common stock of widespread assumptions, these are often expressed differently and for different purposes depending on particular national contexts. Where Muslims are a minority, certain media outlets might sensationalise aspects of Islam which run counter to the values or expectations of the majority. In Muslim-majority countries, however, state-endorsed versions of Islam are often used by political elites to *justify* the status quo and marginalise those construed as deviants.

Thus, the lives of the people involved in this study have political dimensions that must be made explicit. Part of the reason why I was moved to pursue this study was precisely because of the intensity of public debates around Islam and sexual minorities. This is also partly why many participants were so eager to help me – they, too, needed to work out responses to these debates. Thus, the mass media were not only a source of data for me – their constructions of Islam and sexual diversity powerfully shaped my motivations and the direction of my research.

1.5 Conclusion

Ethnographic research does not take place in a social and political vacuum. From the beginning of any ethnographic endeavour, the researcher is part of the power relations that shape the context under study. The ethnographer can avoid neither complex emotions nor inadvertently influencing, through his or her interactions, the relationships and events being studied.

In my case, I could not avoid feeling impatient at the ways in which Islam and sexual minorities were misrepresented or stereotyped in Malaysia and Britain. As a gay Muslim, I felt hurt, angry, and sometimes even afraid when I encountered unjustifiably negative attitudes about Islam *and* homosexuality. What assurances can I provide my readers that these negative emotions have not led me to reproduce unhelpful stereotypes about those whom *I* perceived as stereotyping Islam and sexual minorities? Along similar lines, how can I demonstrate that the overall social and

political context has not led me either to reproduce damaging stereotypes about my participants or over-idealise them?

In this chapter, I have spelled out the various ways in which my participants and I experienced 'shifting identities' (Narayan, 1993: 682) in relation to Islam and sexuality. I have argued that ethnographic methods provided me with the necessary tools to investigate the making of gay Muslim identities empirically *and* reflect on the strengths and limitations of my approach. As the anthropologist Kirin Narayan (1993: 682) puts it, 'Knowledge, in this scheme, is not transcendental, but situated, negotiated, and part of an ongoing process.'

This also means that for me and my participants being gay and Muslim is not a pre-existing or static fact of life. Rather, interest in studying gay Muslims or Muslim sexual minorities has emerged within a context of heightened image-construction of 'homosexuality in Islam' by the mass media, activists, political ideologues and other social actors. Thus, while my research aims to challenge inaccurate or stigmatising views of people based on their religion and sexuality, I am also maintaining and continuing the construction of 'gay Muslims' or 'homosexuality in Islam' as objects of study and discussion, which may carry social and political consequences.

Amid these larger political concerns, my study aims to provide a comprehensive picture about the lived experiences of the people I encountered, including their prejudices and stereotypes about themselves or others. As Duneier (1994: 149) argues, 'sociology cannot survive the burdens of political correctness'. Indeed, my participants in particular would not benefit from an inaccurate or sanitised portrayal. Similarly, the views of those who have prejudices against Muslims and/or sexual minorities in Malaysia and Britain deserve to be represented accurately and fairly. All these perspectives need to be contextualised as part of the social processes leading people to construct, maintain or challenge the boundaries that separate 'insiders' from 'outsiders'.

In the next chapter, I review the academic literature that has contributed to the construction of 'Islam' and 'homosexuality' as inter-related objects of study. I also identify some of other relevant theoretical and conceptual frameworks that I draw upon and indicate the gaps in knowledge that I intend to fill.

Chapter 2: Studying Islam and homosexuality

For many, the impression that Islam inherently opposes homosexuality is compounded by widespread stereotypes linking Muslims to terrorism and other anti-modern religious expressions. In this climate, academic studies are vital to develop more nuanced and accurate public debates and policies on Islam, Muslims or religious diversity more broadly. This includes analysing the contingent nature of identity construction among misunderstood, stigmatised and often invisible minorities such as gay Muslims.

In the first half of the chapter, I review relevant empirical literature on Muslim sexual minorities in various social contexts and point out the gaps that this study can help to fill. This review shows that the making of gay Muslim identities in these different contexts is importantly a story of the making of 'outsider' identities.

The second half of the chapter thus opens with a review of core insights from sociological studies of deviance which can offer novel perspectives for the study of gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain. This discussion builds upon my 'social constructionist' starting point in studying the making of gay Muslim identities (as mentioned in the Introduction to this work). I suggest that this theoretical approach can be strengthened by drawing upon relevant social scientific insights from studies of ethnicity, nationalism, social movements and globalisation. I show that these concepts help to identify and analyse some key factors that influence the perception of 'gay Muslims' as 'outsiders'. Finally, I discuss pertinent examples from non-Muslim contexts to highlight the crucial yet variable role of state regulation of 'sexual outsiders' beyond Muslim settings.

2.1 Studies of 'Islam' and 'homosexuality'

To understand the lived experiences of gay Muslims, it makes sense to investigate the specific content and contexts of Islamic rulings that forbid or condemn homosexuality. This section discusses growing scholarship – focusing on textual hermeneutics, historical analyses and contemporary empirical studies – complicating

widespread assumptions that Islam 'inherently' opposes homosexuality and demonstrating the intersections of the doctrinal, political and social dimensions.

I begin with the work of Scott Kugle, the openly-gay Muslim American academic who has consistently published on Islam and sexual diversity since the early 2000s. Kugle advocates an inclusive interpretation of Islam, but neither solely as an activist nor on the basis of doctrinal sources only. He conducts his own empirical research informed by interdisciplinary approaches on Islam, gender and sexuality. His *Living Out Islam: Voices of Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims*, for example, is based on interviews with fifteen activists in South Africa, the Netherlands, the UK, the US and Canada and engages critically with the work of the political scientist Joseph Massad[36] and the anthropologists Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood (Kugle 2014:4–7).

I focus my discussion on Kugle's *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflections on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (2010) because it contains the bulk of his doctrinal reflections on the subject (Kugle 2014:8). After reviewing Kugle's approach and the relevant critiques of it, I discuss clusters of scholarship on historical dimensions of sexual diversity in Muslim contexts, and contemporary case studies of gay Muslims – in the West, in Muslim-majority countries, and in Malaysia specifically. These clusters might not always overlap, but they still shape and contribute to a growing body of academic work on Islam and homosexuality as inter-related topics.

2.1.1 A gay-friendly Islam?

Kugle is a convert to Islam and holds a doctorate in the History of Religions[37] with a concentration in Islamic Studies. He publishes as 'Scott Kugle' for works directly related to his academic speciality and as 'Scott Siraj Al-Haqq Kugle' for more explicitly activist scholarship to allow the public to distinguish between these two orientations[38].

Kugle (2010:3) characterises his activist scholarship as 'reformist' or 'progressive', aiming to re-assess Islamic doctrines and traditions on gender and

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[36] I discuss Massad's work and the critiques of it, including by Kugle, in section 2.1.3.

[37] From his official page on the Emory University website (2010).

[38] Personal communication at the fifth Imaan national conference, London, 2012.

sexuality from the perspectives of contemporary lesbian, gay, and transgender Muslims[39]. In his earlier work, he credits the influence of Islamic feminist scholarship particularly on his thinking on the 'ambiguities' in Islamic teachings on gender and sexuality (Kugle 2003:194). Like these Islamic feminist scholars, Kugle is also not a traditionally trained *alim* (Islamic scholar) and his attempts to re-articulate Islamic knowledge challenge or even bypass conventional Islamic authority structures. He is an example of how non-institutional Muslim actors – or those aligned with institutions not deemed 'traditionally' Islamic – are contesting normative expressions and interpretations of Islam.

Kugle (2010:2) engages the full range of the Islamic religious tradition and its texts – 'from Qur'an as scripture and *hadith*[40] as oral teachings to *fiqh*[41] as legal rulings and the *shari'a* as a rhetoric of orthodoxy'. He argues that, historically, Islam did not address 'homosexuality' as this is a modern term conceived out of particular cultural and political circumstances. Instead, Muslims interpreted the Quran and *hadith* to formulate historically and culturally specific rulings on various sex acts and gender expressions (Kugle 2003:194).

The foundation of Kugle's (2010: 50) approach lies in his assertion that there is no Quranic term corresponding with 'homosexual' or 'homosexuality'. Instead, the Quran contains particular vignettes about the people of the prophet Lot[42] – in parallel with the Biblical Lot – who were punished for particular transgressions[43]. He demonstrates that medieval Quranic commentators saw the transgressions of Lot's tribe as not simply about anal sex between men, but involving inter-related acts including

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[39] Kugle (2010:10) has not yet addressed the issue of bisexuality, arguing that while he finds 'oblique but potent scriptural reference to gay men, lesbian women, and transgender persons' in the Quran, there is no equivalent 'positive acknowledgement of bisexual people'. He further acknowledges that his 'essentialist' approach – i.e. that sexual orientation is inherent and innate, and not primarily the product of social influences – presents him with specific analytical problems regarding bisexuality (Kugle 2010:9–12). I touch on the relevant aspects of essentialist and constructionist perspectives on sexuality in section 2.2.1.

[40] Written accounts of exemplary conduct and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.

[41] Islamic jurisprudence.

[42] Also styled 'Lut' by other Muslim writers – here, I follow Kugle's style.

[43] Amreen Jamal (2001: 69) has also conducted detailed semantic analysis of these narratives, concluding that 'same-sex abominations are not an exceptional category of sin' and 'Islam is not clear about the position of same-sex sexuality'.

hostility towards strangers and disobeying Lot's authority[44]. Some interpreters, however, concluded that Lot's people were punished *primarily* because they condoned anal sex between men and coined the term '*liwat*' to label this act.

Kugle (2010:50–53) shows that these interpretations did not go unchallenged – for example, the prominent eleventh century Andalusian jurist Ibn Hazm argued that Lot's tribe was subjected to divine punishment but *not* for *liwat*. Kugle (2010:56) also suggests that the Quranic narratives condemn the non-consensual nature of these sexual acts but are silent on loving and mutually consensual same-sex relationships. He argues that these particular verses should be read alongside other Quranic passages enjoining diversity which are just as contextual and ambiguously worded, but could be interpreted as encompassing sexual diversity[45] (Kugle, 2010:66-68).

Furthermore, according to Kugle (2010:86-87), the bulk of the anti-*liwat hadith* reports were most likely fabricated by politically-motivated groups or factions in the early history of Islam. They proliferated alongside numerous other politically-motivated fabrications, leading early Muslims to develop a methodology of verifying *hadith* which actually rejected many anti-*liwat* reports that remain popular today[46] (Kugle, 2010: 98-110).

Kugle contends that selective interpretations of the Quran and *hadith* had a knock-on effect on *fiqh* rulings regarding sexual behaviour. For example, the major Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence which emerged in the eighth century CE all forbade *liwat*, but with divergent reasons resulting in different legal consequences. The Hanafis did not consider anal sex between men analogous to *zina* (heterosexual fornication), but the Shafiis, Hanbalis and Malikis considered *liwat* and *zina* equivalent (Kugle 2010:157–159). Therefore, the Hanafis still regarded *liwat* as a crime but

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[44] Different aspects of the Lot narrative appear briefly in several sections, e.g. Quran 7:80-83, 27:55, 26:165-166, 11:78, and 15:68-71 (Kugle, 2010: 54-56), for example: 'We sent Lot and he said to his people, "How can you practise this outrage? No other people has done so before. You lust after men rather than women! You transgress all bounds! The only response his people gave was to say [to one another], "Drive them out of your town! These men want to keep themselves chaste!" We saved him and his kinsfolk – apart from his wife who stayed behind – and We showered upon [the rest of] them a rain [of destruction]. See the fate of the evildoers.' (Quran, 7:80-83).

[45] For example: 'Another of His signs is the creation of the heavens and earth, and the diversity of your languages and colours. There truly are signs in this for those who know.' (Quran, 30: 22)

[46] See his detailed analysis of variations of this *hadith*: 'The Prophet said, "Whoever you find doing the act of the people of Lot, kill the one doing and the one done-to"' (Kugle, 2010: 102).

recommended a limited number of lashes while the other schools advocated capital punishment. The Zahiris were the most lenient in suggesting the punishment for *liwat*, recommending no more than ten lashes (Kugle 2010:161).

Kugle highlights these ambiguities in traditional Islamic rulings[47] to demonstrate that there was no historical consensus about the nature of *liwat*, which also informed disagreements about how to punish it or why. He juxtaposes this insight with historical evidence that Muslim jurists constantly reformed and reinterpreted *fiqh* rulings in light of changing social and political circumstances. In fact, for many medieval Muslim jurists, the *shariah* was meant to protect individual liberties and the public interest, which depended on specific circumstances. For Kugle (2010:172–174), this evidence from Islamic history justifies a need to rethink Islamic teachings on sexuality based on fresh understandings of *shariah*.

While Kugle's writings on Islam and sexual diversity are explicitly activist-oriented, they are still based on valid empirical data, especially his historical sources. His analysis and combination of activism and scholarship have been dismissed by ideologically-driven secular gay activists and anti-gay Muslims as 'wishful thinking' or a futile exercise in identifying 'scriptural loopholes' (Kelly, 2010:248). These criticisms are largely driven by assumptions that Islam is static and reject the possibility that it can or does change through social action.

On more substantive grounds, Christopher Grant Kelly (2010:259, 264) argues that Kugle's essentialist framing of sexuality is too narrowly informed by the US context, where minority rights are often conceived through 'ethnic' models. Against this background, asserting that gays, lesbians, and transgenders are 'born this way' results in a particular politics of difference that might resonate in the North American context, but possibly not in others. Kelly suggests that this essentialism also frames Kugle's interpretation of Quranic passages on diversity, which similarly might not hold in contexts where sexual preferences are simply not considered an aspect of human diversity.

Kecia Ali, a Muslim feminist scholar focusing on Islamic jurisprudence and women in early and modern Islam, critiques Kugle's stretching of the concept of consent in his revisionist interpretation of the Lot narrative. Ali agrees that the Quran

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[47] Kugle (2010: 24) addresses similar problems in traditional Islamic rulings on sex between women, which I do not reproduce in the interest of space and because contemporary condemnations of *liwat* often extend to female homosexuality, too.

condemns Lot's tribe for larger ethical crimes, not just sex between men, but disagrees with Kugle's contention that this condemnation was partly for non-consensual anal sex. According to Ali (2012:83), 'elsewhere in the Quranic text, as with female captives [,] consent is not always relevant to the formation of licit sexual relationships'. For Ali (2012:xvii), contemporary analyses of sexual relations in Islam still need to address whether the institution of slavery directly or indirectly influenced rulings on gender relations.

Like Kugle, Ali is also a convert[48] writing from activist and scholarly angles and advocating an overhaul of basic Islamic doctrines on sex and marriage. She, too, argues that this is possible since classical Islamic rulings were developed through constant interpretation of sacred texts according to specific social contexts, i.e. Islamic law has always been dynamically reinterpreted and revised (Ali 2012:154).

Kugle's and Ali's analytical flexibility could be related to their position as converts who embraced Islam by choice within the context of a liberal democracy. As Wim Peumans and Christiane Stallaert (2012:118) suggest, Muslim converts in the West feel more able to engage critically with 'the hegemonic interpretations and meanings of religious texts' compared to those born and socialised into Muslim families and communities or in Muslim countries with state-controlled expressions of Islam. Furthermore, many of these converts might also emphasise Islam's teachings on diversity 'to negotiate and even justify their conversion to their Muslim and non-Muslim peers' (2012: 117).

Additionally, Mahruq Fatima Khan (2010:362) observes that in the North American context, white gay or lesbian converts are more able to 'reconcile their sexuality with their faith […] compared to their Muslim-born counterparts who were raised within immigrant households and religious communities'. In other words, Kugle's background was probably not shaped by the same factors influencing the upbringing of individuals born into Muslim families or communities. Also, he would probably not face the same pressures to defend his ethnic and religious identity the way many Muslims in the West of immigrant backgrounds might feel compelled to. These

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[48] In a 2005 interview, Ali explained her conversion as follows: 'The reality is that I don't think I have made my peace with everything contained in Islamic religious texts and certainly not with everything that transpires in Muslim communities. But the rest of the world isn't a feminist paradise either, and I found the overall core of Islam, the overall core of the Quran's message to be so convincingly egalitarian that the rest seemed to be in some sense just details.' (Tippett, 2005)

factors could have contributed to his flexibility in critique-ing Islam *and* dominant attitudes towards it in the West.

Kugle's and Ali's works have yet to gain vast influence among the majority of Muslims but are still part of a growing body of 'contemporary texts and forms of cultural production' contesting 'monolithic' conceptions of Islamic attitudes towards homosexuality (Shannahan 2012:108). These include the works of Amina Wadud, the African-American woman convert and scholar of Islam, who identifies as an 'ally' of LGBTQI Muslims (2012:111). Therefore, while scholars such as Kugle, Ali and Wadud are not Islamic authority figures in the traditional sense, they do inform contemporary contestations of Islam in various social and political contexts.

More crucially, their ideas – although marginal – are informed by and contribute to a wider cross-pollination of research on Islam, gender, and sexuality. This study partly tests whether these ideas directly or indirectly influence the self-understandings of gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain.

2.1.2 Translating the past

From a historical perspective, there is abundant evidence of intimate acts and relationships between partners of the same sex which were tolerated in Muslim societies, despite *fiqh* rulings against *liwat* and other unlawful sexual conduct. Still, it is problematic to refer to them using contemporary concepts – such as 'homosexual', 'gay', 'lesbian', 'transgender', or even 'queer' – unquestioningly because these might obscure or misrepresent historical lived realities.

Historical research is therefore necessary because the claims that 'homosexuality' was always condemned in Islam – or not inherently condemned, as argued by Kugle and Ali – often utilise history to construct or contest religious 'authenticity'. It is also risky because when we translate the past through contemporary filters we might lose or distort crucial nuances and insights. For these reasons, we would encounter similar problems employing the category of 'Islam' uncritically, as though its meaning has remained static or uncontested amongst Muslims throughout history.

Bearing this in mind, I now review arguments for the usefulness of the term 'homosexuality', focusing on Stephen Murray's and Will Roscoe's perspectives, and

that it is a misnomer, focusing on Khaled El-Rouayheb's approach. I then discuss some other approaches on historical sexual diversity in Muslim contexts, especially Afsaneh Najmabadi's on Qajar Iran and Michael Peletz's on early modern Southeast Asia.

In their edited collection, *Islamic Homosexualities*, Roscoe and Murray (1997:6–7) posit that there have been two main expressions, or models, of 'modern homosexualities' in the history of the West. According to their 'gender variant' model, 'to be homosexual was to be a non-masculine man or a non-feminine woman', while their 'sexed being' model applies to those attracted to the same anatomical sex, regardless of their degree of masculinity or femininity. They argue that historically, homosexuality in Muslim societies consisted mainly of the gender-variant type while the sexed-being type was largely non-existent. Murray (1997:32) further contends that these gender-variant 'homosexual roles […] were and are lexicalised and written about' in various genres of literature in predominantly Muslim societies. Both writers contend that these labels for homosexual roles and the social networks that emerged around them demonstrate the existence of homosexual *identities* in pre-modern Muslim societies (Roscoe and Murray: 1997:5).

Roscoe and Murray (1997:4) see the development of 'Islamic homosexualities' as a challenge to what they refer to as the 'Eurocentrism' of social constructionist conceptions of 'homosexuality'. According to them, this Eurocentrism underlies notions that contemporary expressions of homosexuality are 'incomparable to any other pattern' throughout history or in non-Western societies. They argue instead that there are shared characteristics in past and present expressions of homosexuality, and between Muslim and European societies (Roscoe and Murray 1997:5–7).

The counter-argument is that the concept of 'homosexuality' simply did not exist among pre-modern and early modern Muslims in the Middle East (El-Rouayheb 2009:1). According to El-Rouayheb (2009:3), Islamic legal rulings from the early sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries only prohibited sexual intercourse between men, while non-sexual expressions of same-sex affection were allowed to unfold publicly and privately. Still, there was a hierarchy of prohibitions of sexual relations between men – the most severe being on penetrative anal sex (*liwat*), while 'kissing, fondling, and non-anal intercourse' were considered 'less serious transgressions' (El-Rouayheb 2009:6). There were also grey areas, such as whether legal and moral sanctions should apply against men who gazed at and wrote love poetry to youths (El-Rouayheb 2009:111–118, 147). Muslim jurists even debated about whether *liwat*, like

wine, would be permissible in the hereafter even though it was forbidden in the earthly realm (El-Rouayheb 2009:130–134).

According to El-Rouayheb (2009:137), the definition of *liwat* during this period was much narrower than current definitions of homosexuality, and qualitatively different. Therefore, there was no contradiction between the co-existence of visible, public same-sex affections and stringent punishments for *liwat*. In their analysis of pre- and early modern expressions of sexuality in Europe, Kim Phillips and Barry Reay (2011:5) concur with El-Rouayheb, arguing that the terms 'heterosexuality' and 'homosexuality' inadequately and inaccurately explain 'pre-modern desires'. They suggest that El-Rouayheb's description of same-sex affections among the Ottomans could also apply to other pre-modern societies such as the ancient Greeks who commended 'chaste infatuation with youthful, male beauty' but not 'baser, carnal longing'. Murray (1997:14) maintains, however, that 'homosexuality' *did* exist in Muslim contexts but was tolerated because of 'a common Islamic ethos of avoidance in acknowledging sex and sexualities', or 'the will not to know'.

Despite these disagreements on the applicability of the term 'homosexuality', El-Rouayheb (2009:1–2) and Murray (1997:15) share the view that after the advent of modernity, Europeans were shocked and even scandalised by overt and affectionate behaviour between males in Muslim societies. Many European travellers and writers interpreted these displays as examples of sexual immorality characteristic of Muslims. According to El-Rouayheb (2009:9), this encounter with 'European Victorian morality' is what led Muslims themselves to equate *liwat* with 'homosexuality'.

Focusing on Iran, Najmabadi (2008:288–289) also argues that political elites and reformists began equating local same-sex practices with European conceptions of 'homosexuality' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, alongside other 'culture wars' about gender and sexuality. She argues that when Europeans associated the country with 'homosocial and homosexual practices, Iranian modernists came to identify with and simultaneously disavow this abject position' and all traces of 'homoerotic desire had to be covered' (Najmabadi 2005:4; 2008:286).

Najmabadi does not insist that pre-modern Iranian same-sex practices were 'homosexual' or claim that there is a clear dividing line between sexual *acts* and *identities*. Instead, she proposes that we should look for various 'directions of meaning' to 'illuminate the complex node at which notions of gender and sexuality are worked out' (Najmabadi 2008:282). For example, she examines how perceptions of the *amrad*

(an attractive youth pursued by adult males), shifted from pre-modern to early modern Iran. In pre-modern understandings, the *amrad* was not yet fully male but also not classifiable as female. This intermediateness meant that the *amrad* was initially seen as a legitimate object of adult male desire, but gradually turned into an object of ridicule at the turn of the twentieth century (Najmabadi 2008:283).

According to Najmabadi (2005:8), conceptions of gender and sexuality were and still are central to modernist and counter-modernist rhetorics in the Middle East but were not solely imposed by European powers. In the case of Iran, she argues that for centuries, there was 'cultural hybridisation' with Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and the Indian Subcontinent (Najmabadi 2005:5). Iranians, Europeans, and people from other cultures influenced and mutually informed each other's sensibilities about gender, sexuality and other matters. Thus, even though European powers used their military and economic influence to colonise many non-European societies, 'cultural traffic' more likely flowed on a 'two-way street'. The issue now is how the regulation of gender and sexuality becomes tied to nationalism, or the rhetoric of 'us' versus 'them' in contemporary constructions of the 'West' and 'Islam'.

Amid these and other concerns, the edited collection *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire* by Najmabadi and Kathryn Babayan (2008:xiii) aims to historicise constructions of gender and sexuality in 'Islamicate cultures' to avoid a 'monolithic rendering of Islamicate sexual practices and discourses throughout the ages'. In one case study, Frederic Lagrange (2008:165, 169) details how Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, a prominent tenth-century writer, insults the vizier 'Ibn Abbad for 'his avowed love for boys as an active partner and the secret reality of his character, which is passively effeminate and obsessed by obscenity'. Lagrange (2008:189) argues against simplifying these as attacks on 'homosexuality,' but suggests that the 'insult may accidentally construct what it denounces' and build on conceptions of 'homosexuality' more broadly and indirectly. According to Dina Al-Kassim (2008:307), this example also suggests that in the 'East', as with the 'West', particular sexual norms influenced constructions of sexual 'types', complicating the idea of a total 'East/West divide' in sexual epistemologies.

Non-Middle Eastern Muslim societies also had particular sexual hierarchies that partially accommodated same-sex relations in the pre-modern era. Michael Peletz (2011:661) argues that the 'gender pluralism' of early modern Muslim Southeast Asia – alongside less hierarchical relations between men and women compared to

neighbouring regions – informed some degree of tolerance for homosexual relationships. However, they needed to comply with a 'heterogender' pattern, e.g. where feminised men formed relationships with masculine men (Peletz 2011:665), resembling Roscoe and Murray's concept of 'gender-variant' homosexualities.

For example, the *bissu* – feminised male ritual specialists among the Bugis of Sulawesi, Indonesia – could marry and live with masculine men amid wider acceptance of 'gender pluralism'. They 'identified with a highly syncretic variant of Islam influenced both by Hindu-Buddhist beliefs and practices, and by the Austronesian ritual cults that predated Indic and Islamic influences in the region' (Peletz 2011:664). From the seventeenth century, they were discredited, expelled and even executed by rising Islamic movements driven by overly anti-feudal and legalistic interpretations of *syariah*. As court specialists, the *bissu* also suffered under Dutch colonialists who sought to subjugate the sovereign kingdoms of Sulawesi in the early twentieth century (Peletz 2011:669).

Like the *amrad* in Iran, the *bissu* went from enjoying relative acceptance to becoming targets of punishment and humiliation but, like Najmabadi, Peletz does not attribute this solely to European influence. Although Peletz does not use Najmabadi's term 'cultural hybridisation', he shows how the interwoven cultural legacies in Southeast Asia have shaped diverse or even contradictory expressions of gender and sexuality. In Malaysia, for example, while the sodomy charges against former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim originated from British colonial legislation, until the 1960s the State of Kelantan had villages inhabited by male couples known to practice 'same-sex erotics' (Peletz 2011:671, 673). These villages were patronised and supported by the Sultan, while the main breadwinners among these same-sex couples were 'transvestite dancers of a Thai-origin dramatic genre known as *mak yong*'.

While the desires of many gay Muslims for their identities and relationships to be recognised and even sanctioned within Islam might be unprecedented, they are also shaped by these multiple historical factors – Western/colonial, national, and local. My comparison of gay Muslims in 'Western' Britain and 'non-Western' Malaysia partly expands upon these insights on cross-cultural influences in Muslim societies and how they impact on contemporary constructions of 'gay' and 'Muslim' identities.

2.1.3 Gay Muslims in the West – identities in flux

From here, I review research on contemporary contexts of Islam and sexual diversity published after 2001[49], dividing my discussion between the 'West', 'non-West', and Malaysia for clarity and convenience. However, I am aware of edited or single-authored volumes examining case studies from both Western and non-Western, or Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority, contexts (e.g. Habib 2010; Yip and Nynas 2012; Rahman 2014). Also, while there have been notable works on Muslim sexual minorities by journalists and other non-academics since 2001 (e.g. Bradley 2010; Sharma 2007; Whitaker 2011), I focus solely on academic publications.

In reviewing studies on the West, I focus on two recurring themes – the possibilities for reconciling being gay and Muslim, and the perceived gap between Muslim and Western attitudes on sexual freedom. These themes often accompany wider public debates in which the claims of religious and sexual freedoms are often construed as incompatible.

Studies investigating the experience of being gay and Muslim often explore their strategies to renegotiate their religious beliefs and/or advocate more inclusive interpretations of Islam. In North America, Omar Minwalla, Simon Rosser, Jamie Feldman and Christine Varga (2005:123) propose that the identity journeys of gay Muslim men consist of three inter-related dimensions: 'religious identity', 'ethno-cultural identity' and 'colour identity'. Their insights were based on participant observation and in-depth interviews at two annual conferences for LGBTQ Muslims organised by the Al-Fatiha Foundation – one in the US in 2002 and the other in Canada in 2003 (Minwalla et al, 2005: 116).

Minwalla et al observed that their participants constantly tried to balance and renegotiate their belief in Allah, family and community connections, and belonging within the predominantly white and non-Muslim gay scene. These strategies were made more complicated by the growing climate of suspicion towards Muslims in the US after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, including within the gay community. In a more recent ethnographic study of American Muslims, Mahruq Fatima Khan

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[49] I choose this year as a cut-off in the interest of space and because of increasing scholarly interest Islam, gender and sexuality since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 (e.g. see Charrad, 2011:418).

(2010:356) identified similar conditions and argues that 'queer Muslims' employ some common narratives to reconcile their religious and sexual identities: 'God Is Merciful'; 'This Is Just Who I Am;' and 'It's Not Just Islam' (that contains anti-homosexual interpretations).

In Britain, Andrew Yip's (2005:272, 283–285) work – based on qualitative interviews with 20 female and 22 male LGB Muslim participants in 2001 and 2002 – also highlighted similar issues, suggesting that Muslim LGB identities are more politicised than other LGB identities in a post-9/11 context. Against this backdrop, Yip (2005: 278) argues that LGB Muslims, like LGB Christians, engage in 'religious individualism', i.e. 'a religiosity that prioritises the authority of the self over that of the institution'. However, Yip (2005: 285) also proposes that their 'individualisation' of Islam is constrained by 'religious and sociocultural roles and obligations' related to their immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds.

Matthew Wood (2010:278) criticises Yip's argument that 'self-authority' has the upper hand over institutional authority, which implies that 'the self is always distinguishable from, and exists in opposition to, that which lies outside it'. Rather, Wood (2010:279) argues that Yip's findings are evidence of the 'relative *formativeness*' of religious institutions – instead of a dichotomy between self and institution, there are 'diverse social authorities' individuals engage with when constructing their identities.

More recently, Yip, in a mixed-method study with Sarah-Jane Page (2013:5), has focused on the 'lived experiences' of religion, gender and sexuality among young British adults. Based on online questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, and video diaries from participants of various religious backgrounds, Yip and Page (2013:160) propose that 'the best way to understand how individual religious actors make sense of the connection between their religious faith and sexuality is through the lens of embodiment; in other words, how religious faith and sexuality mutually inform the construction of bodily subjectivities and practices'.

Through his interviews with British Muslim gay men and gay Iranians in Britain, however, Rusi Jaspal (2012:84; 2014:56) argues that conflicts between religion and sexuality resulted primarily in 'anxiety', 'suicidal thoughts', 'shame', 'guilt' and 'fear'. This theme of conflict also emerges strongly in Asifa Siraj's (2006:204) ethnographic research on British LGBT Muslims. In her more recent work, Siraj (2014:205–206) focuses on Scottish Muslim lesbians and argues that they try 'to

reconcile conflicting parts of their lives through fundamentally shifting their interpretation and understanding of Islam'. This sense of belonging to Islam is strengthened by their involvement in Imaan, which lets them develop networks and friendships with other Muslim lesbians.

In earlier publications, however, Siraj's (2006:204) own assumption was that the Quran unambiguously condemns homosexuality, with no room for interpretive flexibility. She has since acknowledged that her personal identity as a *hijab*-wearing, heterosexual Muslim woman produced a certain amount of 'heterosexist bias' in her earlier work, for example, when she found herself 'judging' her participants' 'beliefs regarding the accommodation of homosexuality in Islam' which subsequently affected her interpretation of the data (Siraj 2012:65). Siraj's reflections illustrate the specific ways that scholarship on being gay and Muslim can be shaped by the researcher's own unexamined assumptions. They provide constructive and complementary insights for this study which I, as a gay Muslim researcher, began with my own personal assumptions about Islam and sexuality (discussed in Chapter 1).

Gay Muslims in the West do not only grapple with dominant Muslim attitudes on homosexuality, but also widespread stereotypes about Islam and Muslims. In her study of queer Muslim women in North America, Ayisha Al-Sayyad (2010:377) argues that 'Orientalist' stereotypes portraying 'Islam and homosexuality as incompatible' did not prevent her participants from feeling 'comfortable being Muslim and queer'. Furthermore, she suggests that 'diasporic Muslims or Arabs' internalise the idea that Islam and Arab culture oppose homosexuality amid the 'unbearable pressure to assimilate in North America' (Al-Sayyad 2010:381).

Through his qualitative study of twelve queer Muslims in Australia, Ibrahim Abraham (2009:84–85) similarly argues that public debates overwhelmingly equate Islam with terrorism while Australian Muslim communities largely disapprove of homosexuality. Against this backdrop, '[for] conservative Muslims a *queer* Muslim becomes the unviable subject, [and] for some in the queer community, a queer *Muslim* is an impossible—or at least dubious—subject' (Abraham 2009:88–89). Abraham argues that gay Muslims therefore try to 'compartmentalise' their religious and sexual identities, downplaying being gay or Muslim depending on how unsafe or uncomfortable they feel.

Other studies examine this dimension without focusing directly on the experiences of Muslim sexual minorities, but on controversies or polarised debates on

Islam and gay rights. In the Netherlands, for example, Paul Mepschen, Jan Duyvendak and Evelien Tonkens (2010:965) argue that discussions on multiculturalism often involve and indicate negative attitudes towards Islam, which is widely perceived as hostile to gay rights. Numerous Dutch polls reflect this, with a high proportion feeling that the integration of Muslims into Dutch society has failed or that Muslim immigrants threaten national identity.

Sindre Bangstad (2011:5–7) contends that in Norway similar assumptions led to a moral panic about Islam in early 2010, when several newspapers reported that immigrant Muslims had formed 'morality squads' harassing gay men and women not wearing *hijab*. These reactions overlooked class dynamics, i.e. the deprived nature of the Oslo neighbourhood where these events occurred, escalating instead into a nationwide panic portraying Muslim immigrants as illiberal and European Norwegians as liberal.

Joseph Massad argues that such Western assumptions about Islam's 'inherent' homophobia are informed by a legacy of Eurocentric, Orientalist distortions and misrepresentations of Middle Eastern peoples, including their sexual attitudes. Massad (2007:37) contends that on the eve of modernity, Europeans predominantly considered Muslims inferior for being too *permissive* about homosexuality, whereas current Western public opinion considers Islam too *repressive*. This argument resonates with El-Rouayheb's regarding the impacts of 'European Victorian morality' on Middle Eastern societies after the advent of the modern era (discussed in Chapter 2.1.2 above). However, Massad goes further in claiming that this is what drives Western gay rights groups – which he labels the 'Gay International' – to prioritise the 'rescuing' of Arab, and by extension Muslim, homosexuals. According to Massad (2007: 173-174), Arabs who identify as 'gay' are a Westernised, 'minuscule minority among […] men who engage in same-sex relations and who do not identify as "gay" nor express a need for gay politics'. Massad characterises gay Arabs and/or Muslims as 'native informants' and 'diaspora members' of the Gay International, engaged in 'a simple political struggle that divides the world into those who support and those who oppose "gay rights"'.

Massad's dualistic conception of the 'Gay International' has sparked off numerous criticisms, but I focus for now on those addressing the experiences of gay Muslims in the West. While agreeing with Massad's critique of 'Orientalism', Al-Sayyad (2010:384) disagrees that 'Western liberationists can create homosexuals in the

Arab world', arguing that her participants had 'the agency and determinism to choose their own identifications'. Similarly, Momin Rahman (2014:5) partially agrees that 'current forms of queer political strategies contain a Western bias', but criticises Massad's monolithic portrayal of the 'Gay International'. Instead, Rahman argues that Massad runs the 'danger of reinstating a Eurocentric view of modernity by ceding the construction and regulation of homosexuality as exclusively "Western".' Also, Kugle (2014:4–5) frames his latest work as a documentation of 'the lives of the kinds of activists whom Massad denounces' and who complicate the notion of a 'Manichean struggle between postcolonial Arabs and the Western imperium driven by American military interests and UN declarations'.

The issues raised in these growing studies of gay/queer Muslims in the West also emerged in my research, in which I came across similar themes of identity conflict and stereotypes about Islam. In fact, Massad's arguments and the critiques of his work also informed my choice to compare the experiences of Malaysian and British gay Muslims. As I show in upcoming chapters, my findings complicate the notion that gay Muslims are either collaborators or victims of 'Orientalist' and/or Islamist politics.

2.1.4 Sexual minorities in Muslim-majority countries

Research on sexual minorities in Muslim-majority countries also addresses how they construct sexual and religious identities when their individual dispositions conflict with wider social and cultural expectations. Some of these studies also explicitly respond to Massad's critiques by problematising notions of 'foreign' or 'indigenous' sexual categories. For example, in the introduction to her two-volume edited collection, *Islam and Homosexuality*, Samar Habib (2010:xix) argues that Massad unwittingly 'oppresses' the work of grassroots LGBTQI groups in the Arab world, 'reducing these initiatives, in an academic discourse, to nothing more than agents of Western/imperialist sabotage of Arab nations'. Bearing these debates in mind, I focus on works discussing the impacts of dominant expressions of Islam on the experiences of Muslim sexual minorities.

Focusing on Indonesia, Tom Boellstorff (2005a:5) argues that many sexual minorities there increasingly adopt Western-derived labels and render them partially meaningful within the national context, e.g. 'Indonesianising' gay and lesbian into

'gay' and 'lesbi'. According to Boellstorff (2005a: 35), although historically there were 'indigenous' labels to describe gender and sexual minorities, there is no 'clear temporal trajectory connecting *gay* and *lesbi* with "indigenous" homosexualities'. Through his ethnographic research, Boellstorff (2005a:154–155) contends that actually, the state itself has unwittingly fostered the emergence of *gay* and *lesbi* identities through its own modernising policies. In contrast with Massad's claim that non-Europeans who adopt gay identities are Westernised elites, Boellstorff (2005a:118–119) suggests that *gay* and *lesbi* identities are more likely linked with the rise of a new middle class.

Boellstoff also argues that *gay* and *lesbi* Muslims construct their identities without necessarily feeling the need to reconcile with Islam's position on homosexuality. Some of his *gay* Muslim interlocutors did not see being gay as sinful, while others saw it as a minor sin easily forgiven by God (Boellstorff 2005a:183). Their individual understandings of Islam enabled them to 'inhabit' the apparent 'incommensurability' between being *gay* or *lesbi* and Muslim (Boellstorff 2005b:575).

Boellstorff (2005a:8) further argues that *'gay'* and *'lesbi'* do not necessarily mean the same thing in Indonesia as 'gay' and 'lesbian' would in the English-speaking West, where their meanings are neither settled nor monolithic anyway. In Indonesia, however, the gap is considerably larger in the translation of 'gay' and 'lesbian' into locally intelligible terms, yet this does not make *gay* and *lesbi* incoherent 'subject positions' (Boellstorff, 2005a:5–7). Rather, it means that in a globalised world, translation is always necessary at different levels *and* necessarily incomplete.

Through his ethnographic research in northern Nigeria, Rudolf Gaudio (2009:9–10) argues that it is mostly the educated urbanites who adopt the term 'gay' which, in that context, might partially support the notion of it being a 'Western' and 'elite' identity. The predominant categories used by most Hausa speakers to describe homosexual dispositions are *'yan daudu* (feminine men who have sex with other men) and *masu harka* (masculine men who have sex with other men, including *'yan daudu*). Neither is accurately translatable as 'gay', and Gaudio argues that to translate *'yan daudu* as 'transgender' instead is equally problematic.

Despite not adopting a 'Westernised' identity themselves, *'yan daudu* have become increasingly vilified and targeted by state authorities and the mass media which portray them as transmitters of Western decadence and threats to Nigerian society. Gaudio (2009:124) maintains, however, that *'yan daudu* enjoyed a relatively high degree of tolerance in Hausa Muslim society before the turn of the twentieth century,

after which they began being viewed increasingly negatively. This transformation resembles Najmabadi's account of changing perceptions of the *amrad* and Peletz's of the *bissu*. Gaudio (2009:191) further contends that the increasing persecution of Nigerian sexual minorities at the turn of the twenty-first century was 'incited not by Northern Nigerian activists affiliated with a supposed "Gay International", nor by an intrinsic cultural or religious hostility towards homosexuality, but by a nationalistic desire to defend the North's reputation against negative sexual stereotypes'.

On another level, Gaudio's findings are similar to Boellstorff's in that although *'yan daudu* perceive their religious identities and sexual dispositions as incompatible, this does not cause them too much internal conflict. Gaudio (2009:141) argues that 'although *'yan daudu* understand that their unconventional gender and sexual practices make them imperfect Muslims, they also know that such imperfection exists throughout the Muslim world, even among those who revile them'. Armed with these understandings, *'yan daudu* often use confrontational humour to poke fun at themselves and hostile *social* manifestations of Islam while remaining 'devoted to their Islamic faith' on a personal level (Gaudio, 2009:117–122, 141).

Gaudio and Boellstorff show how Muslim sexual minorities negotiate their lives in the face of increasing hostilities towards sexual diversity, especially in light of the inter-related transformations of the nation-state and expressions of Islam. In her more recent work on Iran, Najmabadi explores how transsexual advocacy there *actively contributes to* the transformation of the state. She argues that bio-medical, psychology, and *fiqh* practitioners have mutually influenced each other's discourses to construct 'transsexual' as a distinct category of persons in post-revolutionary Iran (Najmabadi 2011:540). But despite the initially negative loadings attached to this category, Iranian transsexual activists are gradually carving out spaces of acceptance by engaging critically with these overlapping discourses. According to Najmabadi (2011:534), 'trans-activism — far from being a state-driven and controlled project that at most has produced some policy benefits for transsexual persons — is part of the ongoing and volatile process of state-formation itself'. What is usually glossed as 'the state' is therefore constantly being shaped and re-shaped, fractured and re-fractured, ordered and re-ordered by different actors.

Najmabadi's approach addresses the problems of translation (as articulated by Boellstorff and Gaudio) and supposedly 'foreign' impositions (as articulated by Massad) of sexual categories. In particular, she shows how Western bio-medical and

psychological categories relating to gender and sexuality entered Iranian discourses and now circulate within the Iranian Islamic bureaucracy. Najmabadi (2011:550) calls for a deeper analysis of what such 'borrowing, appropriation, and embracing means for the importers' rather than with the 'origin of the import'. Her insights suggest that people mix foreign and local or old and new terms – encountering various opportunities *and* risks along the way – to make sense of their lives amid changing circumstances.

For my purposes, these works on sexual minorities in Muslim-majority contexts are important for their deconstruction of the concepts of 'Islam', 'sexuality' and 'the state', and their focus beyond the Arabic-speaking Middle East. They contain useful and relevant analytical leads for exploring the experiences of Muslim sexual minorities in Malaysia, which has already been initiated by some Malaysian researchers.

2.1.5 Muslim sexual minorities in Malaysia

In Malaysia, rising controversies and moral panics involving Muslim sexual minorities need to be understood within a context of overt state regulation of Islam which, according to tan beng hui (2012:8) 'upholds heterosexuality as the sole legitimate form of sexuality'. Through her qualitative study of the Islamic bureaucracy, however, tan (2012:53) also found that state and non-state actors advocating more stringent applications of Islamic law consist of competing ideological strands and political loyalties. State-led efforts to systematise and expand the application of Islamic laws might appear uniform but are fraught with factional rivalries, involving contests for financial and human resources and political leverage. Within this context, state-crafted *syariah* laws criminalising sexual offences – including homosexuality and transgenderism – are applied only arbitrarily and selectively, making the state's 'anti-gay bark […] worse than its bite' (tan 2012:148, 158). Still, this creates a climate of fear amongst Muslim sexual minorities, especially when pro-*syariah* ideologues also drive sensationalist and negative mass media coverage of those labelled as sexual 'deviants'.

Based on her ethnographic research, Yuenmei Wong argues that some Malaysian Muslim *pengkids* (masculine women erotically attracted to feminine women) remain largely indifferent or defiant towards increasing stigmatisation. Wong (2012:443) highlights a 2008 *fatwa* (official Islamic ruling) from the Islamic authorities

forbidding *pengkid* or 'tomboy' identities, which resulted in much negative media coverage. In the midst of this controversy, some *pengkids* agreed to be interviewed in the mass media and openly challenged the *fatwa*. Wong (2012:439, 444) suggests that *pengkids* are increasingly subject to religious and political scrutiny because *pengkid* identity is modern – it may be an appropriation of the English term 'punk kids' – and becoming more visible.

On the other hand, Zainon Shamsudin and Kamila Ghazali (2011:287) argue that the young gay Muslim men they interviewed did not want to challenge the state or religious authorities, and instead expressed contentment at being gay in Malaysia. They did not report feeling persecuted or discriminated against by state authorities, but confessed feeling conflicted about being gay and Muslim and aspired to get married eventually for 'a better future' (Zainon and Kamila 2011:298). These findings resemble the observations by Boellstorff and Gaudio about how *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians or Nigerian *'yan daudu* did not necessarily try to 'reconcile' their sexual and religious identities.

Still, Joseph Goh (2014:609) argues, the challenge posed by gay Malaysian Muslims towards 'Malaysian institutional Islam' need not be overtly confrontational – they influence their surroundings simply by being gay and Muslim. Goh analyses the same-sex civil partnership of Ariff Alfian Rosli, a Malaysian Muslim man, in Ireland in late 2011 which triggered the fury of Muslim pressure groups, especially after leaked pictures of the ceremony showed him in traditional Malay costume. According to Goh (2014:606), '[t]hese images manifested the unthinkable coalition of a Malaysian Malay-Muslim masculine identity with non-heteronormative sexuality within a matrimonial framework'. Yet, in response to the controversy, Ariff Alfian did not deny that he was in a civil partnership, asserting instead that he was Muslim and nothing could shake his faith. Goh (2014:607) suggests that Ariff Alfian's response might have been possible because the anti-homosexual sentiments of state Islamic authorities are rarely matched by the everyday attitudes of many Malaysians, Muslim or non-Muslim.

These studies of Muslim sexual minorities in Malaysia show that even amid strong state impositions of anti-homosexual interpretations of Islam, Muslim sexual minorities might still have nuanced connections with Islam on an individual level. These studies also demonstrate that many supposedly 'Islamic' positions are shaped by particular political exigencies. They highlight the timeliness and value of comparing the lived experiences of gay Muslims in differing national contexts.

2.2 Beyond gay Muslims – potential analytical directions

The issues at stake in the lived experiences of gay Muslims are not confined to debates about 'homosexuality' and 'Islam'. They touch on broader concerns regarding the roles of religion and sexuality in the construction of stigmatised, 'outsider' identities, especially the impacts of majority-minority dynamics on groups that society embraces or excludes. Besides, majorities, minorities, and the myriad expressions of religion and sexuality in society are not pre-ordained or 'naturally'-occurring either – they emerge out of particular social and cultural conditions.

In this half of the chapter, I argue for the usefulness of drawing upon sociological studies of deviance to make sense of the experiences of gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain. They offer a rich legacy for analyses of social constructions of 'deviant' or 'outsider' identities. I propose that these perspectives can be sharpened by relevant social scientific insights on ethnicity, nationalism, social movements, and globalisation – factors which often complicate or overlap with contestations of religion and sexuality. Finally, I explore some examples from non-Muslim contexts to highlight the similarities and differences between these and the Muslim examples already discussed.

2.2.1 Social constructions of deviance

Although there were growing debates and controversies about sex and gender in the nineteenth century, 'classical sociologists' were silent on these issues – perhaps because of 'their privileged gender and sexual social positions' as men (Seidman 1997:4). In the 1950s and 1960s, however, shifting sociological perspectives on the phenomenon of 'deviance' provided a new framework for studying homosexuality (Seidman 1997:7). These studies argued that 'deviance' was not inherent, but rather that conformity to and defiance of socially-produced norms was what produced 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in society.

Among the pioneers of this approach was Robert Merton (1968:188–189), who proposed that there are different degrees to which 'institutional controls' regulate culturally defined values and goals. According to Merton, when people who adhere to 'institutionally prescribed conduct' fail to meet culturally defined goals, the

discontinuity between institutionalised norms and cultural expectations leads them to explore 'deviant' alternatives. Merton (1968:194) proposed five 'modes of individual adaptation', depending on the degree of continuity between their responses to institutional control and cultural expectations – conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism and rebellion.

Merton's insights paved the way for subsequent sociological studies of deviance, which incorporated homosexuality as part of larger analyses of deviant *behaviour* (e.g. Becker 1991:30, 34–35, 36–38, 167–168) and stigmatised *identities* (e.g. Goffman 1990:53, 71, 102, 109). These studies rarely mentioned religion, however, and focused on overall societal reactions towards the perceived disreputability of various 'deviants', including drug users, single mothers and homosexuals.

Particularly relevant here is Howard Becker's theory of moral enterprise in his study of societal reactions towards marijuana users and jazz musicians in the 1950s US. Becker (1991:147) coined the term 'moral entrepreneurs' to describe the organised collectives that define and police acceptable behaviours and moral boundaries in society. This analysis formed part of Becker's larger approach – now often referred to as 'labelling theory' – in his *Outsiders: Sociological Studies of Deviance*. According to this theory, those who label particular behaviours 'deviant' are the ones who create and maintain social and moral norms, and go on to designate 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in society. Often, the outsiders end up adopting these labels for themselves and exaggerating their 'deviance' in response.

Among 'moral entrepreneurs', Becker (1991:147-148, 155-156) distinguished between 'rule creators' and 'rule enforcers'. Rule creators are 'crusaders' who 'typically believe their mission is a holy one', identifying moral problems and seeking to eliminate them by pressuring the authorities into action. When they manage to convince a significant section of society that there is a problem, the authorities often create a new moral rule or law to be implemented by 'rule enforcers' consisting mainly of state-salaried bureaucrats.

There is no clear dividing line between rule creators and enforcers, however – some enforcers might have the same moral zeal as rule creators. Still, enforcers are constrained by institutional limitations – e.g. finite human and financial resources making it difficult to juggle different moral portfolios – leading to arbitrary and selective enforcement (Becker 1991:161). The resulting inconsistencies or inefficiencies often lead to tensions between rule creators and rule enforcers, and can

inspire rule creators to refresh or expand their campaigns (Becker 1991:162). This, in turn, can incite sporadic, zealous bouts of enforcement by rule enforcers to maintain favourable public opinion.

Becker's insights formed the backdrop for emerging sociological studies of homosexuality in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In his ethnographic study, Laud Humphreys focused on men who engaged in anonymous homosexual sex in public restrooms in the US but did not necessarily identify as 'gay' or 'bisexual'. Within this context of intense social stigma against homosexuality and state repression, Humphreys (1970:143–146) found that many of these men were married, outwardly 'respectable', and even displayed conservative attitudes on issues such as civil rights and the Vietnam War. According to Humphreys (1970:135), this conservatism functioned as pre-emptive defence – what he termed 'the breastplate of righteousness' (originally from Ephesians 6:14) – to conceal their 'deviance' from potentially damaging public scrutiny. Humphreys' and Becker's insights remain especially relevant for the Malaysian context, where state and non-state actors do label sexual minorities deviant and call for them to be punished or rehabilitated.

Taking a different direction, Mary McIntosh critiqued the ethnocentrism of some gay liberation activists in the 1960s who assumed that homosexuality was universal or inherent. According to McIntosh (1968:184–186), notions of 'homosexuality' have changed over time and differ depending on the social context, and the 'institutionalised homosexual role' is a consequence of social control. She proposed that society creates and vilifies this 'homosexual role' to maintain the purity of the rest of its members, the same way punishing criminals is meant to keep the majority law-abiding. This societal regulation contributes to the formation of a bounded homosexual identity or 'condition', which many 'homosexuals themselves welcome and support', since this 'removes the element of anxious choice' of staying 'deviant' or becoming 'normal'.

The above perspectives contrast with essentialist or biologically deterministic notions that 'sexual desires are not a "preference" but a fixed "orientation"' (Epstein 1987:133). According to Steve Epstein (1987:134), 'hard' anti-homosexual essentialists might condemn homosexuality as an 'incurable illness' where 'hard' constructionists regard it as a sin open to rehabilitation. At the same time, pro-homosexual essentialists might defend the view that some people are born gay, while for constructionists sexuality is fluid and sexual expressions should spring from free individual choice. In

practise, the condemnation or advocacy of sexual diversity often mixes essentialist and constructionist views.

Sometimes, these perspectives can drive the emergence of moral panics, specifically where religion and sexuality are concerned. The puzzle is why some kinds of social deviance trigger moral panics and not others, or as Stanley Cohen (2011:8) puts it, why 'the deviant label […] does not always "take"'. According to Cohen (2011:14), moral panics emerge from a combination of 'structural conduciveness' (social conditions under which particular types of collective behaviour become seen as legitimate) and 'structural strain' (e.g. 'economic deprivation' or 'population invasion' creating openings for 'race riots, sects, panics', etc.). Cohen (2011:219) suggests that *prolonged* strain can produce a 'boundary crisis,' i.e. 'a period in which a group's uncertainty about itself is resolved in ritualistic confrontations between the deviant and the community's official agents'. During such boundary crises, the escalation of social control often triggers more extreme expressions of deviance, or 'deviance amplification' (Cohen 2011:226).

Particular concerns about homosexuality and Islam have provided the basis for potential moral panics in different contexts, directly or indirectly. In the aftermath of the 7 July 2005 bombings in London, for example, British policy-makers and media reports zoomed in on disaffected young Muslim men as particularly prone to radicalisation, following a pattern of what Stuart Croft (2012:2) calls the 'securitization' of Muslims in the West. In Malaysia, homosexuality is overwhelmingly portrayed as deviant in mass media reports and the pronouncements of political and religious leaders. Nevertheless, these portrayals of homosexuality or certain types of Muslims as deviant do not always produce sustained moral panics, even though they have the potential to do so. Understanding these variable dynamics can provide more nuanced insights into how gay Muslims experience and negotiate polarised social conditions.

In this study, I draw upon these sociological approaches on deviance for different levels of analysis. In Chapter 4, I examine individual pathways into identifying as gay and Muslim by looking at Merton's theory of 'role adjustments'. In Chapter 6, I engage with theories of 'moral enterprise', particularly as developed by Becker and Cohen, to explore how gay Muslims respond individually and collectively to wider regulations of their religious and sexual identities.

Sociological studies of homosexuality have nevertheless been critiqued by some queer theorists for being too narrow and rigid, and reifying Eurocentric conceptions of homosexuality (e.g. see Ferguson 2005:53, 61-62). These criticisms, however, refer to particular sociological views and approaches and cannot devalue the entire sociological endeavour in the study of sexuality. Moreover, they can only enhance it, considering that queer theorists are also concerned with fluid aspects of meaning-making and socially constructed expressions of gender and sexuality (e.g. see Butler 1993:21; 2008:34; Jagose 2003:3; Seidman 1997:11, 17). Furthermore, prominent queer theorists such as Judith Butler are also influenced by the work of Michel Foucault (Green 2010: 319; Mills 2003:253), who argued that modern conceptions of sexuality are constrained by state regulation (e.g. see Foucault 1990:143; 1991:95; 2003:243–245, 252, 257).

These shared analytical perspectives have resulted in a growing cross-fertilisation of approaches between queer theory and the social sciences in studies of religion and sexuality (e.g. see Goh 2014:601; Hamzic 2012:25; Ioannides 2014:128; Rahman 2010:949–951; Taylor and Snowdon 2014:1). As Claudia Schippert (2011: 82) points out, these rejoinders from queer theorists can encourage scholars of religion to analyse inter-related aspects of religion and sexuality more critically. Bearing in mind these developments in relation to queer theory, this study takes a different approach by exploring the analytical possibilities offered by sociological studies of deviance.

2.2.2 Related factors – ethnicity, nationalism, and social movements

In Malaysia and Britain, unstated assumptions about the links between religion and ethnicity often inform everyday interactions and wider debates on national identity. In Malaysia, being Muslim correlates with being part of the ethnic majority, while in Britain, Muslims consist mostly of ethnic minorities of immigrant backgrounds. Studying the construction of gay Muslim identities in both countries can therefore benefit from analyses of ethnic and national identity as inter-related factors informing wider attitudes about particular groups of 'outsiders'.

The term 'identity', however, can be used in various and often contradictory ways. As Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2006:31) point out, 'identity', as with terms such as 'race', 'nation', and 'ethnicity', 'is both a category of practice and a category of analysis' and so its usage requires analytical precision and clarity. Brubaker and Cooper (2006:41–48) recommend three analytical clusters to help sharpen investigations of identity construction – categorisations by self and other (including the

state as a 'powerful identifier'); fluid self-understandings motivating action in particular circumstances; and whether there is an 'emotionally laden sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded group'. These clusters can help clarify the connections between the individual's identity construction and his or her surrounding social networks, institutional authorities, and religious or non-religious meaning systems.

This framework assumes that there is no causal or inevitable relationship between religion, ethnicity and national identity, but that they can share overlapping meanings, symbols and rhetorics. In particular, Brubaker (2012:3) proposes four approaches to analyse the relationship between religion and nationalism – treating 'religion and nationalism, along with ethnicity and race', as '*analogous* phenomena'; specifying the ways that 'religion helps *explain* things about nationalism'; considering 'religion as *part* of nationalism', paying attention to specific 'modes of interpenetration and intertwining'; and positing a 'distinctively religious *form* of nationalism'.

For my purposes, these approaches can help distinguish between 'the various ways in which Islam has accommodated itself to – and been inflected by – differing national and state contexts' (Brubaker 2012:12). For instance, on a broader level, Islam can be conceived as being mobilised by certain actors as a 'politicised ethnicity' (Brubaker 2012:5) in Malaysia and Britain. In Malaysia, however, Muslim identity coincides with Malay ethnicity such that Islam becomes 'so deeply imbricated or intertwined with nationalism as to be part of the phenomenon' (Brubaker 2012:9). Here, advocates of Malay privilege often use Islamic rhetoric to defend the traditional family against 'economic and cultural forces that weaken its authority or socializing power' by upholding 'traditional gendered divisions of labour' and promoting 'a restrictive regulation of sexuality' (Brubaker 2012:13). On the other hand, Muslim activists in Britain have mobilised around religious identity to negotiate claims for 'economic resources, political representation, symbolic recognition [and] cultural reproduction' (Brubaker 2012:5), for instance, in campaigns for 'official statistics on British Muslims and to introduce a religious question in the 2001 census' (Hussain and Sherif 2014:415). According to Serena Hussain and Jamil Sherif (2014:420), 'Muslim campaigners hoped [for] more extensive government engagement' and were supported by census findings 'that Muslims were […] the most socioeconomically disadvantaged' among the religious populations surveyed. In Brubaker's terms, the use of Islam by

British Muslim activists is *analogous* to but not the equivalent of nationalism, whereas in Malaysia, Islam becomes *part* of Malay nationalism[50].

On the relationship between sexuality and nationalism, George Moss (1985:3) points out that modern European nationalisms emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries alongside marked changes in notions of moral respectability. Mosse (1985:4) argues that nationalism and this new 'ideal of respectability' in sex and morality was also tied to the rise of the middle class. The national stereotypes in Germany and England during the Napoleonic wars therefore conceived 'manliness' as a combination of courage, manners and moral uprightness (Mosse 1985:13). By extension, conceptions of the 'inferior' races often portrayed them as transgressing ideals of respectability – '[the] black was thought feckless, while the Jew was without a soul' (Mosse 1985:134). In some rhetoric, Jewish men were portrayed as inferior for behaving like women, illustrating how conceptions of sexual purity, race and homosexuality intertwined in these forms of nationalism (Mosse 1985:17, 140).

Nira Yuval-Davis (1997:1, 23) therefore argues that constructions of nationhood also incorporate specific notions of manhood and womanhood, in which '[g]ender symbols' play a particularly significant role. Along similar lines, Joane Nagel (2003:1) coins the phrase 'ethnosexual frontiers' to describe convergences in the construction of ethnic and sexual boundaries.

To analyse how the boundaries of religion, ethnicity, sexuality and the nation can overlap, it is helpful to refer to Brubaker's (2006:10) concept of 'ethno-political entrepreneurs' which shares similarities in approach with Becker's 'moral entrepreneurs' (discussed in section 2.2.1). The entrepreneurial analogy suggests deliberate yet adaptable actions by particular groups to promote what they construe as their core interests and business, in this case ethnicity and morality, possibly infused with religious references.

These interests can overlap when, as Mary Douglas (2002:4) suggests, particular notions of sexual 'pollutions' become 'analogies for expressing a general view of the social order'. Bodily symbolism – particularly the rhetoric of sexual morality – is therefore a powerful framework for maintaining or defending notions of ethnic, religious and national cohesion and unity.

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[50] I explain the context of Islam in Britain and Malaysia in more detail in Chapter 3.2.1 and 3.2.2.

In relation to this, Jasbir Puar (2007: xxiv) argues that post-9/11 the issue of gay rights is increasingly manipulated by political ideologues in the US to justify military intervention in unstable and/or hostile Muslim-led regimes. She argues that where homosexuals were once cast by the political establishment as potential threats to the nation (e.g. as Communist collaborators in the 1950s and carriers of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s), they are now held up as beneficiaries of liberalising laws and attitudes on gay rights (Puar, 2007: 4). According to her, this produces 'homonationalism' – shared attitudes by the political establishment and some gay activists that sexual minorities owe their rights to liberal, democratic Western states and should therefore support military campaigns against so-called terrorist 'Others', especially in the Muslim world (Puar, 2007: 51).

Puar (2007: 81, 92) contends that such attitudes are also informed by enduring stereotypes about supposedly exceptional sexual repression in Muslim societies. This puts greater pressure on people who are queer and Muslim to justify and explain their identities and escape scapegoating in the US (Puar, 2007: 169). She is therefore also interested in the strategies that 'queer Muslims and queer Arabs' use in such ideologically charged circumstances (Puar, 2007: xiii).

Although Puar raises important questions about how nationalist rhetoric might influence expressions of religious and sexual identity, her analysis ends up focusing more heavily on the producers of 'homonationalism' than on the responses of 'queer Muslims'. My study can be regarded as an attempt to balance her analysis by looking at how gay Muslims respond to real or perceived attitudes that could be construed as 'homonationalist' in two different social contexts. For my purposes, it is therefore useful to analyse religion as a 'cultural resource susceptible to many different uses' not just within formal groupings, but also among configurations of 'people, material resources, ideas and feelings […] outside the framework of conventional religious activities' (Beckford, 2001:232; 2000:169). This approach can illuminate the everyday responses of gay Muslims towards surrounding sentiments and attitudes on ethnicity, religion, and the nation.

This line of questioning can be further pursued by focusing on organised social movements and, as Beckford (2001:244) suggests, approaching religious and social movements as analogous phenomena. Along similar lines, Mayer Zald and John McCarthy (1998:34) propose that social movement theory can provide a helpful basis

to investigate religious trends, for instance, sect formation or transformations in religious doctrines and expressions.

These analytical nuances on social and religious movements also apply to LGBT groupings, especially in light of the significant advances in sexuality rights in some countries and backlash in others. David Paternotte, Manon Tremblay, and Carol Johnson (2011:5–7) propose that studies of lesbian and gay movements should look at their complex relationships *with* the state – which should be conceived as a multidimensional concept – and *beyond* the state. As with religious movements, LGBT movements also include less formal, diverse and fluid mobilisations which are shaped by and respond to particular cultural and social conditions.

These perspectives on ethnicity, the nation and social movements supplement my engagement with sociological approaches on deviance in my ensuing data chapters. In Chapter 4, my analysis of the 'role adaptations' (Merton, 1968: 672) of gay Muslims is framed with Douglas's (2002: 44) conceptualisation of 'dirt' as 'matter out of place'. This is in line with my exploration of how gay Muslims in Britain and Malaysia try to bridge seemingly incompatible identities, with ethnicity often a crucial but unstated factor in their strategies. In Chapter 5, I zoom in on how gay Muslims engage specifically with Islam, drawing upon Brubaker and Cooper's formulation of 'identity' as an analytical concept and Beckford's suggestion to view religion as a 'cultural resource'. Finally, my discussion on 'moral enterprise' in Chapter 6 also critically engages with Brubaker's conception of 'ethno-political enterprise' and Puar's of 'homonationalism'. Together, these threads provide another layer of insights into the intersections of sexuality, religion, ethnicity and nationalism in the construction of 'outsider' identities.

2.2.3 Globalisation, religion and sexuality

According to Roland Robertson (1989:14), globalisation involves the *'particularisation of universalism* (what is taken to be applicable to *all* is increasingly interpreted as referring to a particular *global* all) and the *universalisation of particularism'*. For my purposes, taking globalisation into account can help contextualise the universals and particulars in the construction of gay Muslim identities within and *beyond* specific national contexts.

According to Dennis Altman (2001a:91), sexuality is 'an important arena for the production of modernity, with "gay" and "lesbian" identities acting as markers for modernity' interpreted differently in different contexts. He suggests that we can see 'continuity' between 'precolonial forms of homosexual desire and its contemporary emergence', or a 'rupture' with tradition in the emergence of gay and lesbian identities in 'Delhi, Lima or Jakarta' (Altman, 2001a:88). Either way, Altman (2001a:100) argues that homosexuality is now an 'obvious measure of globalisation [since] the transformation of local regimes of sexuality and gender is often most apparent in the emergence of new sorts of apparently "gay" and "lesbian", even "queer", identities'. He sees the parameters of globalisation as being led or determined by the West, but is also 'sceptical of sharp divides between Western and non-Western experiences of sexuality' (Altman 2001b:36).

Altman's framing of globalisation provides a wider view of changing attitudes about sexuality beyond specific national contexts, but is problematic when it comes to analysing religious attitudes. According to him, the anti-homosexual positions of the Moral Majority and the Taliban exemplify religion's 'retreat from and attack upon secularism and rationality' (Altman 2001a:139). Altman (2001a: 155) also conflates the activities of 'Mormon missionaries' with the growth of a 'powerful evangelical Protestantism' as typical examples of the globalisation of religious homophobia. He concludes that appeals to 'religion, tradition, and culture are often no more than justifications to perpetuate the worst kinds of institutionalised subordination and barbarism' (Altman 2001a:164). In effect, he uses the terms 'religion, tradition, and culture' to generalise broadly about anti-gay ideologies, without analysing other aspects of their socially-contingent manifestations.

In contrast, James Beckford (2000:165) argues that religion, with its fluidity and diversity, is actually an important factor 'shaping the various processes leading to globalisation'. According to Beckford (2000:173), this is because many religions conceive of their reach and relevance in global terms, but attempt to elaborate this according to their own particularistic frameworks. He further suggests that there is an 'elective affinity' between the concerns of some religious movements and global themes such as the promotion of peace, basic human rights and care for the environment. From his perspective, 'religious movements, representing dissatisfaction with conventional religion and commitment to change, tend to be in the forefront of positive and negative responses to globalisation' (Beckford 2000:183). With this

approach, we can analyse how sexual minorities can be targeted by *and* contribute to various movements associated with religion and/or sexuality within and beyond specific country contexts.

More specifically, Olivier Roy (2004:ix) argues that globalisation is not transforming Islam per se, but the various ways Muslims are *relating* to Islam by enabling new challenges to notions of legitimate Islamic authority. Roy (2004:5) contends that this involves the 'de-territorialisation of Islam (namely the growing number of Muslims living in Western non-Muslim countries)' which partly enables 'the spread of specific forms of religiosity, from radical neo-fundamentalism to a renewal of spirituality or an insistence on Islam as a system of values and ethics'. Roy (2004:19, 30) further suggests that this partly contributes to some Muslims imagining themselves and reacting as a 'minority', even in Muslim-majority countries, including asserting their Islamic identities more explicitly and individualistically. Although speculative in parts, Roy's approach has the potential to contextualise the emergence of modern gay Muslim identities as an example of the impacts of globalisation on Muslim self-expressions.

My study of gay Muslims in Britain and Malaysia requires an awareness of transnational dimensions of religion and sexuality. In this respect, I find Beckford's recommendation to analyse religion as a 'cultural resource' particularly useful to account for local and transnational nuances in the construction of gay Muslim identities. I pursue this line of inquiry in Chapter 5, which investigates if a collective 'gay Muslim' identity is being expressed within, between and beyond Britain and Malaysia.

2.2.4 State regulation of sexuality and religion beyond Muslim contexts

Homosexual behaviours and identities remain stigmatised and/or criminalised in various non-Muslim countries, too, with sentiments about homosexuality being a 'foreign contamination' often spearheaded by religious groups or authorities. Studies on sexual diversity within non-Muslim contexts can shed light on key factors beyond Islam in the shaping of state policies and public attitudes towards homosexuality and how sexual minorities respond. In this section, I discuss examples from Russia and the Caribbean, contrasting these with developments in the US and Britain, to illustrate

possible permutations of state-religion-sexuality relations and their impacts on the lived experiences of sexual minorities.

I begin by drawing upon the insight from Nicholas Jay Demerath III (2007:386) that state 'constitutions themselves are an unreliable guide to actual relations between religion and power, even in the US'. Demerath (2007:382) contends that while many countries 'have developed their own forms of "separation" [between religion and state], in no country […] is the separation absolute'. Instead of classifying states simply as religious or secular, Demerath (2007:387) recommends making two important distinctions – whether 'religion has a legitimate role in national electoral politics', and whether 'religion is officially established within the formally constituted state or government'. The overlaps between these distinctions produce four combinations: 'religious politics with a religious state'; 'non-religious or secular politics and non-religious or secular state'; 'secular politics and a religious state'; and 'religious politics with a secular state'. These indicate the various possible permutations of religion-state relations in Muslim and non-Muslim countries.

According to Demerath's typology, Malaysia would be a religious state with religious politics – the constitution establishes Islam as the official religion and Islamic rhetoric drives many debates among political actors. The UK could be considered a religious state with secular politics (with its established Anglican and Presbyterian churches) or, since the state is so minimally religious in practice, as a secular state with secular politics (Demerath 2007:388–389). A country like Russia could be considered a secular state with religious politics – while it has a secular and democratic constitution, political leaders and the Russian Orthodox Church often drive religious and nationalist rhetoric (Essig 1999a:140).

Homosexuality was decriminalised after the collapse of the Soviet Union, yet in her ethnographic study of 'queer subjects' in Russia in 1994 Laurie Essig (1999a:xi) encountered numerous 'queer' men and women who were still extremely secretive about their sexualities. Within this context, Essig (1999b:283) argues that they did not define their homosexual relations primarily in terms of sexual identity, but as 'a set of signs, symbols, rituals, a "style".' According to her, these 'queer subjectivities' allowed some to identify as 'heterosexual' yet engage in homosexual relations and 'queer performance without identity' (Essig, 1999b: 282). This sort of 'queerness' was also visible on a national scale in popular music, literature and theatre, even though homosexual and/or gay identities were widely stigmatised by political and religious

figures (Essig 1999b:289). Essig's findings complicate assumptions that 'secular' laws or values necessarily translate into explicit acceptance of sexual diversity, or that there are no shared dimensions in some 'secular' and 'religious' reactions towards sexual minorities.

The Russian case contrasts with the US which could also be considered a secular state with religious politics, with its own history of anti-homosexual laws and sentiments spearheaded or supported by religious groups. However, the landscape of politics and public opinion there appears to be shifting significantly in favour of the rights of sexual minorities[51]. These developments can also be observed in the UK which, between 1967 and 2013, went from partially decriminalising homosexuality to legalising same-sex marriage[52]. Contestations of the religious and secular therefore also influence public debates on the rights of sexual minorities in the UK and US, but within environments that increasingly support liberal values on sexuality. Still, various British and American religious groups maintain that homosexuality is aberrant or sinful, for example when prominent Church of England clerics openly opposed the passage of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 (Vallely 2014).

Yip (2003:136) argues that LGB Christians in Britain resolve their individual sexual identities with the mainstream churches' position against sexual equality by privileging the individual self rather than religious authorities in shaping their spirituality. However, Michael Keenan demonstrates that the divide between the individual and the institution is not always that clear. In his qualitative study of gay Anglican clergy, he found that many remained *within* the Church because 'it provided a space wherein [they] felt able to relate more closely to their emerging sense of self than they had been able to outside of Church' (Keenan 2008:174). These examples raise questions about what sexual minorities who are followers of other religions might share in common with Muslim sexual minorities, especially regarding shifting state policies and public attitudes on religion and sexuality.

Perspectives from non-Muslim contexts can also shed light on the impacts of overlapping or shared histories between contemporary nation-states, for example among former territories of the British Empire. According to Human Rights Watch

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[51] This can be seen, for example, in President Barack Obama's open support for gay marriage (Mears 2013).

[52] I discuss these developments in more detail in Chapter 3.3.1.

(2013:86), of the eighty or so countries that still criminalise homosexuality, 'more than half […] inherited these laws because they were British colonies'. Anti-sodomy provisions in the penal codes of India (1860) and later Queensland (1899) spread across immense tracts of the Empire and were also influenced by legislation introduced within nineteenth century Britain (Human Rights Watch 2013:86–87, 96–99).

Seen in this light, Malaysia shares with many other Commonwealth countries a defence and/or strengthening of colonial legislation dressed in *anti*-colonial rhetoric. For example, the Jamaican government has often characterised the pressure to revise its anti-sodomy legislation as postcolonial imperialism (LaFont, 2001), while Hindutva nationalists defend it as a component of 'native' Indian values (Waites 2010:974). In the 1980s and 1990s, former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew claimed that 'Asian values' were superior to and incompatible with 'Western' values which tolerated homosexuality and extra-marital sex (Peletz 2003:3). In these examples, it also appears that anti-homosexual sentiments are part of various political elites' wider justifications for authoritarian government in post-colonial nation-states.

On the whole, these examples demonstrate the importance of clarifying how and why religion contributes or does not contribute to rising hostilities against sexual minorities in different national contexts. Specifically, this means investigating how states regulate religious and sexual diversity and the impacts of functioning democratic institutions on the experiences of minorities. In the case of Malaysia and other former British colonies, there is also the question of the role of religion in wider anti-colonial rhetoric, especially when this is wielded by authoritarian governments. In this study, Chapter 3 takes these state-religion-sexuality configurations into account by systematically comparing and contrasting the management of Islam and sexuality in Britain and Malaysia.

2.3 Conclusion

Studies of Muslim sexualities have become complicated by increasingly politicised expressions of and reactions towards Islam, notably after the events of 9/11. Within this landscape, one recurring debate is whether concepts such as 'gay' identity or even 'homosexuality can apply to Muslim and other non-Western societies. In a strong version of the argument, Joseph Massad (2007; 2013) maintains that 'gay' identity is a Western construct and that gay rights advocacy is largely a continuation of

Orientalist imperialism. This has been increasingly challenged by newer studies on the contemporary experiences of Muslim sexual minorities in various country contexts showing that 'gay' and 'Muslim' identities are not necessarily incompatible. These contemporary accounts are accompanied by growing historical scholarship contesting the idea of an 'East/West' divide in sexual epistemologies. One of Massad's critics, Scott Kugle (2003; 2010; 2014), not only documents the lived experiences of LGT Muslims in secular liberal democracies, but also advocates a more inclusive interpretation of Islam through his re-reading of sacred and historical texts.

These studies provide the backdrop for my comparison of gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain, particularly on the question of whether being 'gay' and/or 'Muslim' means the same thing in different times and places. They indicate the overlapping issues confronting Muslim sexual minorities in Western and non-Western contexts based on the dominant notion that Islam opposes homosexuality, but crucially highlight that this is not the full story.

Sociological studies of 'deviance' can therefore provide useful insights into how norms are drawn, broken and redrawn around acceptable behaviours and groups of 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. This approach is especially helpful when combined with insights into the overlapping constructions of religious, national and ethnic identities, the impacts of globalisation, and the role of state regulation of religion and sexuality. However, I have highlighted some pertinent criticisms of sociology from perspectives within queer theory, namely the danger of conceptualising sexuality in rigid and/or Eurocentric terms, but these enhance rather than undermine sociological analysis.

Overall, these diverse empirical studies and theoretical approaches suggest that gay Muslims construct their identities based on their individual dispositions and interactions with multiple social authorities – Islamic and non-Islamic. Exactly how similar or divergent their experiences are in differing national conditions is the focus of the rest of this study.

Chapter 3: Emerging gay Muslim identities – comparing Malaysia and Britain

The previous chapter contained discussions on how Muslims who express non-heterosexual desires or identities engage with notions of Islam and sexuality affected by various factors. This chapter sets the stage for my ensuing analysis of the experiences of gay Muslims by comparing how the contexts of Islam and sexuality have been shaped in contemporary Malaysia and Britain. I argue that while some developments resulted directly from British colonialism, in particular the spread of anti-sodomy laws, other trajectories of modernisation have also affected the ways in which Muslims construct their identities.

I begin by discussing the impacts of three developments on expressions of Islam and sexuality in the two countries – colonial legal and political legacies, notions of nationhood, and the growth of ethnic and religious diversity. I then expand on the dynamics of Islam in both countries – its role in identity construction, marking out majority-minority boundaries, and its relations with the state. After this, I discuss the dynamics of sexuality, specifically how it is managed by the state and how gay identity is construed by wider society and Muslim communities in particular. State management of Islam and sexuality is a recurring theme in my comparison, especially the role of functioning liberal democratic institutions.

3.1 From Empire to Commonwealth – shared histories and cultural exchange

Malaysia consists of territories which were once part of the British Empire between the late eighteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. Colonial policies regulating expressions of religion and sexuality in vast tracts of the Empire were eventually inherited by many former colonies – now part of the Commonwealth – including Malaysia. As I show in this section, the British often regulated religion and sexuality in the colonies by adapting their domestic legal frameworks.

The breakup of the Empire from the mid-twentieth century resulted in mass immigration of former colonial subjects, including Muslims, into Britain. They have

since become involved and implicated in public debates on social equality, multiculturalism, human rights and other issues. Contemporary Britain and Malaysia thus share intertwining colonial legacies affecting the dynamics of Islam and sexuality.

3.1.1 Legal and political legacies – regulating Islam and sexuality

In colonial Malaya, British administrators systematically codified Islamic laws, specifically in the Malay sultanates, and gradually established Islamic bureaucracies in the Malay Peninsula (R. L. M. Lee & Ackerman, 1997: 33). In post-independence Malaysia, successive administrations expanded upon these colonial laws and bureaucratic structures in a process some scholars refer to as 'Islamization' (*e.g.* J. C. H. Lee, 2010: 19; Ong, 1990: 272). The historian William Roff (1998: 211) suggests that codification was one strategy for the British to engineer more obedient and quietist versions of Islam to contain and neutralise burgeoning anti-colonial varieties. Roff further argues that these colonial interventions became the 'vehicle for much subsequent "Islamization" of Malaysian society […] right up to the present day'.

Alongside codifying Islamic laws, the British also constructed notions of 'race' in their Malay colonies. The historian Anthony Reid (2004: 10) argues that Thomas Stamford Raffles, the scholar-administrator and founder of modern Singapore, was one of the first colonial officials to propound the idea of a '"Malay" race or nation […] embracing a large if unspecified part of the [Malay] Archipelago'. This use of 'Malay' as a catch-all term referring to a particular race or ethnicity was a British peculiarity and was not, for example, replicated in Dutch-controlled Indonesia[53].

The British eventually expanded the term 'Malay' to encapsulate all Malay-speaking, Muslim peoples in British Malaya. For example, the early colonial censuses of 1871 and 1881 listed 'Malays, Boyanese, Achinese, Javanese, Bugis, Manilamen, Siamese, and so on as separate groups' (Reid, 2004: 16). However, the 1891 census and subsequent censuses organised the population into three main 'racial categories' – 'Chinese, "Tamils and other natives of India", and "Malays and other Natives of the Archipelago", each elaborately sub-divided' (Reid, 2004: 16).

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[53] The Dutch recognised Malay as the *lingua franca* in their territories, but preferred to label their colonial subjects 'Indian', which evolved into 'Indonesian' as an all-encompassing regional identity (Reid, 2004: 20).

This construction of 'Malay' as a race alongside the codification of Islamic law unwittingly fused Malay and Muslim identity. This is now expressed in Article 160 of Malaysia's Federal Constitution which states that '"Malay" means a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, [and] conforms to Malay custom' (Malaysia, 2010: 153).

In relation to sexuality, the Indian Penal Code (IPC), which criminalised 'carnal intercourse against the order of nature', became the parent law for penal codes in many parts of the Empire (Human Rights Watch, 2013: 86). Colonial Malaya effectively received a duplicate in 1871, subsequently inherited by independent Malaysia and Singapore.

This wave of anti-sodomy colonial legislation occurred alongside internal developments in mid-Victorian England, namely rapid industrialisation and urbanisation facilitating the emergence of a middle class that increasingly defined standards of respectability. According to Ronald Hyam (1991: 65), many middle-class reformers became concerned about 'the easy-going attitudes of the working class', 'adolescent sexuality', and linked sexual pollution with fears of social instability and the downfall of the Empire. Lesley Hall (2000: 6) suggests that class-stratified notions of respectability and morality meant that even 'early British surveys on sexual activities focused on the working classes'. Within this wider context, trials for sodomy occurred frequently (Hall, 2000: 20).

The attitudes of these reformers towards working class sexualities were also affected by the influx of immigrants to England, beginning in the late eighteenth century, resulting from trade associated with the Empire. These immigrants – consisting of lascars (African or Asiatic seamen) and ayahs (female domestic workers) – were often viewed by reformers and politicians through the lens of class tensions and conflicts. According to Diane Robinson-Dunn (2006: 158), middle-class reformers and missionaries viewed the 'un-Christianised poor as no better, and often as even worse, than the "uncivilised heathens" of the Empire'. Working-class radicals objected, sometimes by advocating universal equality but often by expressing outrage at being compared to foreign races.

Within this context, some reformers campaigned against 'white slavery' – initially a description of the trafficking of Circassian women in Egypt but eventually also referring to prostitution and vice within England, effectively framing these as foreign and un-English (Robinson-Dunn, 2006: 131–132). Robinson-Dunn (2006: 135)

argues that this racialising of prostitution and vice followed the evolution of 'race science' in Victorian England. Previously widespread beliefs in 'monogenesis' – 'that all human beings had the same origin and that physical differences were simply the result of climate or environment' – gave way to more hierarchical beliefs about race from the mid-to-late nineteenth century. These cultural and political sensibilities were exported to the rest of Empire, resulting in tensions between what British administrators saw as proper behaviour and the behaviours of the people they ruled (Levine, 2013: 166).

In 1861, against this backdrop, the Offences against the Person Act removed sodomy as a capital offence in England and instead made it punishable by up to 10 years' imprisonment (Marcus, 2011: 515). Within a decade, moral reformers gained momentum and successfully pushed for amendments to the Criminal Law Amendment Act in 1885, mainly to ban prostitution and purportedly to protect women and girls. As part of these developments, the 'Labouchere amendment' in the Act criminalised *all* sexual activity between men, not just sodomy, becoming known as the 'gross indecency' law (Hyam, 1991: 65–67). Its most high-profile use was on Oscar Wilde, charged in 1895 after a much-publicised and sensationalised trial in the midst of escalating moral panics about sexual pollution (Marcus, 2011: 517).

Meanwhile, colonial administrators throughout the Empire inserted and adapted their own attitudes and assumptions about sexuality into the laws and policies they introduced. In their Malay territories, these interventions meant that the British effectively created the template for post-independence state actors to regulate 'acceptable' expressions of Islam, Malay-ness and sexuality. These interconnected developments throughout the Empire influenced and were influenced by other related issues, such as the formation of national identity and modern state institutions, as I discuss next.

3.1.2 Nationhood, statehood, and the shaping of Islam

Between 1689 and 1815, Great Britain (and subsequently the United Kingdom) was often at war with and vulnerable to invasion by Catholic France. According to historian Linda Colley (2009: xx) this, along with France's close alliance with Spain, fostered a perception among many Britons that theirs was 'a coherent and embattled

Protestant nation'. In the nineteenth century, this self-perception in relation to a Catholic 'Other' evolved into 'a less sectarian sense of combined English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish effort in the face of a colonial and overseas "Other"' (Colley, 2009: xxii). At the closing of the nineteenth century and the height of imperial expansion, Britishness was emphasised in the face of 'new and formidable "Others": a unified Germany, a burgeoning United States, and the Russian empire threatening Britain's position in India' (Colley, 2009: xxv).

Muslims were part of this changing landscape of multiple 'Others', notably because the British dominated territories which included substantial Muslim populations whom they continued to trade and exchange cultural and intellectual expressions with (Gilliat-Ray, 2012b: 5). In fact, before the turn of the eighteenth century, the English associated Muslims primarily with the Ottoman Empire which they considered a great power. Furthermore, between the mid-sixteenth and late-seventeenth century, England's trade with Muslims resulted in wealth but not territorial possession – imperialist ambitions were focused on America (Matar, 2008: 13).

These pre-colonial legacies and eventual imperial expansion led the British to perceive Islam and Muslims in complex and contradictory ways. For example, within England 'works which derided the Prophet Muhammad and attacked Islam remained popular throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as Humphrey Prideaux's *The True Nature of Imposture fully displayed in the life of Mahomet* published in 1697' (Gilliat-Ray, 2012b: 21). Yet, other British entrepreneurs introduced products and fashions from the Muslim world locally, such as Turkish-style coffee houses in the seventeenth century, which quickly became 'a central institution in urban life in London' (Gilliat-Ray, 2012b: 14).

The sociologist Kishan Kumar (2006: 416) contends that it is crucial to account for the 'imperial factor, and of imperial rivalry, in the making of English national identity'[54]. Kumar compares the development of English and French national identities in light of their external, imperial rivalry, and also internal social dynamics during the nineteenth century. He argues that revolutionary zeal, combined with competitiveness with the English, drove French colonialists to export the values of the Enlightenment aggressively to their colonies and integrate them into a uniform administration centred

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[54] Details in the debate on whether to refer to English or British national identity and if 'Britons' is merely a synonym for 'the English' have been discussed in other works (e.g. Colley, 2009: xvi–xvii).

in Paris. In contrast, aside from exceptions such as direct rule in India, 'British imperial rule was generally indirect and marked by considerable local variation' (Kumar, 2006: 423).

Compared with the French, the British were less hostile towards various expressions of local culture in their colonies, and eventually tolerated a degree of religious and ethnic diversity throughout the Empire. Kumar argues that this also 'made it easier for British statesmen to espouse a policy of "multiculturalism" when, in the post-war period, the question arose of how best to integrate immigrants into British society'[55]. In contrast, the French model of a highly centralised and uniform imperial administration continues to frame contemporary policies requiring the 'hard' assimilation of post-colonial immigrants (Kumar, 2006: 422).

Evolving notions of British nationhood were also accompanied by events which catalysed the formation of the modern British state. Historian Philip Harling (2001: 3) argues that the development of parliamentary democracy throughout the eighteenth century was partly influenced by protests against the state's surging war-related taxation, leading to calls for parliamentary reform. In the following century, industrialisation, urbanisation, and accompanying demographic changes drove newer reforms, such as the extension of voting rights through the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867 (Harling, 2001: 8). Part of Britain's modernisation therefore involved the gradual development of liberal democratic institutions alongside emerging notions of nationhood.

Meanwhile, Britain's administration of its colonial territories was not accompanied by the growth of comparable liberal democratic institutions. Rather, the Malaysian sociologist Syed Husin Alatas (2010: 18) argues that the colonies were primarily 'markets for industrial goods [produced in Britain] and […] producers of raw materials and cash crops'.

This does not mean that political consciousness was absent in British Malaya, as a culture of politics emerged among Malays partially in response to the 'administrative and ideological forces of imperialism' (Milner, 2002: 2). This resulted in fierce debates and disputes between 'defenders of the old [Malay] monarchical system' and 'the exponents of new and subversive doctrines derived both from a resurgent Islam and

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[55] A prominent example is former Home Secretary Roy Jenkins's espousal of a benign, tolerant form of multiculturalism in the 1960s (Weeks, 2012: 412).

Enlightenment Europe' (Milner, 2002: 3). These political actors were not completely overpowered by colonialism, however, and some early Malay nationalists even engaged constructively with the British to expand the education system, employ more Malays in the bureaucracy, and establish advisory councils (Milner, 2002: 129).

British imperial administrations, however, were neither consistently nor uniformly benign. When they abruptly wound up the Empire after World War II, they left intact racial, religious, and tribal animosities which they themselves created and fostered during colonial rule. These divisions fed into bloody sectarian conflicts and wars in India, Pakistan, Uganda, Nigeria, and to a lesser extent Malaya (Kumar, 2006: 420).

In Malaya, many British administrators rejected the idea that Malays might benefit from higher levels of education, with one governor writing a novel 'showing the catastrophic results of Malays becoming infected with Western ideas' (Reid, 2004: 14). British policies aimed at keeping Malays politically quiescent and confined largely to the rural agricultural sector. Simultaneously, the British developed protectionist attitudes towards Malays amid the influx of Chinese and Indian immigrants, creating a small but influential Malay administrative class, a Malay elite (second only to the British colonialists), and a lower-ranked Malay clerical class (Mariappan, 2002: 205).

This pro-Malay protectionism unintentionally laid the framework for specifically ethnic forms of Malay nationalism to emerge, for example the formation of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in 1946. By this time, the British had changed tack and wanted to promote more civic forms of nationalism to facilitate Malayan self-rule through their creation of the Malayan Union in 1946 (Alatas, 2010: 29; Mariappan, 2002: 208). The Union was disbanded, however, after Malay nationalists – especially from UMNO – opposed it, and the British agreed to institute the Federation of Malaya instead in 1948 (Mariappan, 2002: 208). This Malay ethnonationalist framing of the nation continued into the independence of Malaya in 1957 and the formation of Malaysia in 1963.

While nationalists such as UMNO were forging notions of nationhood based on ethnicity, others were organising around more politicised and anti-colonial expressions of Islam, such as the Pan-Islamic Malayan Party (now the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS), formed in 1951 (Roff, 1998: 218). Successive post-independence UMNO-led governments have competed with PAS's calls for greater emphasis on Islam in the education system, media, law, and economy. In this competition, UMNO itself

increasingly tries to foster more obedient expressions of Islam which contributes to the larger trend of 'Islamizing politics' (Roff, 1998: 218) in contemporary Malaysia.

This narrative of developments in connection with the Empire highlights the role of 'Others' in the formation of national identity in Malaysia and Britain. In Malaysia, the colonial 'Other' has historically shaped the understandings of religion and ethnicity among political actors such as UMNO and PAS which still influence current definitions and contestations of nationhood. In Britain, Muslims were historically part of a landscape of multiple 'Others' and continue to be involved and implicated in contestations of British national identity. As I have pointed out, however, one key aspect of the development of modern British nationhood is the growth of liberal democratic institutions. Modern Malaysia has inherited the Westminster system of government and holds regular multi-party elections, but has yet to democratise fully and still has an authoritarian government (Gomez & Jomo, 1999: 2; J. C. H. Lee, Wong, Wong, & Yeoh, 2010: 294; Welsh, 2013: 137). Against this backdrop, constructions of gay Muslim identities directly and indirectly reveal how Malaysian and British ideas of nationhood have been influenced by specific notions of Islam, race and sexuality, and constructions of the 'Other'.

3.1.3 Implications of ethnic and religious diversity

Much of the ethnic and religious diversity of contemporary Britain and Malaysia is connected to the legacies of Empire. During colonial rule, the British brought in large numbers of Chinese and Indian migrant workers, who eventually settled and were granted citizenship upon Malaya's independence (Mariappan, 2002: 200)[56]. In Britain, mass migrations from the Caribbean and the Indian Subcontinent occurred after World War II, accompanying the breakup of the Empire[57].

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[56] Muslims comprise 61.3 percent of the Malaysian population of 28 million, while 19.8 percent are Buddhist, 9.2 percent are Christian and 6.3 percent are Hindu. In terms of ethnicity, 67.4 percent are categorised as Bumiputera (a state-created term comprising ethnic Malays and other indigenous peoples, mostly in Sabah and Sarawak, who may or may not be Muslim), 24.6 percent are Chinese, 7.3 percent are Indian, and 0.7 percent are classified as 'Other' (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2011)

[57] As of 2013, the UK's population is slightly more than 63 million, with England having a population of 53 million. According to the 2011 census (BBC, 2012), in England and Wales, 59 percent percent identify as Christian, 25.1 percent say they have 'no religion', 4.8 percent are Muslim, 1.5 percent are Hindu, 0.8 percent are Sikh, 0.5 percent are Jewish, and 0.8 percent are classified as following other

In both countries, ethnic and religious minorities have sometimes challenged notions of nationhood and the cultural and political dominance of the 'majority'. In Malaysia, the Malays form this majority whose position and interests are constitutionally enshrined, as discussed in section 3.1.1. Meanwhile, a significant but decreasing percentage of the white British majority still identifies as 'Christian' – 72 percent according to the 2001 Census and 59 percent in 2011 (BBC, 2012). However, it has been argued that in these official statistics, identifying as 'Christian' might be a 'cultural rather than religious self-ascription' or a 'social marker […] to mobilise against those perceived as a threat' (Day & Lee, 2014: 346; Guest, Olson, & Wolffe, 2012: 66).

With these nuances in mind, it can still be argued that the 'ethnic' and 'religious' majorities in Malaysia and Britain come to view Islam from different vantage points. For Malays, the constitutional provisions and post-independence 'Islamisation' policies have elevated Islam to become a core aspect of their individual and collective identity while the majority in Britain tend to associate Islam with immigrants and foreigners. From these different vantage points, various groups in both countries engage in highly visible and politicised debates on Islam, especially regarding majority-minority relations.

In Britain, public debates on Islamic religious leadership, the integration of Muslims and other issues are often coloured by other global and national events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the 7 July 2005 bombings in London. In this climate, Muslims in Britain have become the 'subject of public debate and focus for social and security policy in British society' (Gilliat-Ray, 2012b: 262). Stuart Croft (2012: 16) argues that 'in the specific case of the United Kingdom, discourses and practices of "Britishness" have led to the securitization of Islam'.

These politicised public debates on Islam can sometimes oversimplify or distort the complex experiences of Muslims in Britain. The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) explains that this is partly why it campaigned for official statistics on British Muslims and initiated the move to include a question on religion in the 2001 census (Hussain & Sherif, 2014: 415). The findings showed that Muslims were 'the most socioeconomically disadvantaged of the general religious populations described in the

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religions. In terms of ethnicity, the proportion of white British people stands at 80.5 percent of the population.

census', lending support to the MCB's calls for more government engagement with Muslim issues (Hussain & Sherif, 2014: 420). These socio-economic dimensions rarely inform politicised debates and news headlines linking British Muslims with 'radicalisation', religious extremism and other controversies. Despite this, many Muslims in Britain shape and expand more pluralistic understandings of being British, including intellectuals, artists, activists and entrepreneurs (Gilliat-Ray, 2012b: 262–263).

In Malaysia, many politicians and the government-controlled media also politicise Islam, but in terms of whether foreign or 'un-Islamic' agents are threatening the sanctity of Islam or Malay privileges. In recent years, state-appointed religious officials, government ministers, and government-controlled media commentators have increasingly construed LGBTs, Syiahs, Christians and other minorities as dangerous or deviant, along with concepts such as 'secularism' and 'pluralism' (Bernama, 2012, 2013; Spykerman, 2014; Star, 2013; Sun, 2012; Teh, 2013). Such rhetoric often ignores or distorts historical evidence of tolerance and pluralism in colonial and pre-colonial times. For example, the historian Sumit Mandal (2012: 358, 364) argues that from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, *keramat* sites − or Sufi shrines − enabled 'heterogeneous', 'multi-ethnic and hybrid cultural practices' of Islam and other religions. In many parts of Malaysia, Muslims continue to express Islam pluralistically and inclusively, albeit far less visibly and being vulnerable to politicised and polarised sentiments.

For many gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain, ethnic and religious diversity is a fact of life and their day-to-day experiences of Islam are likely to involve multi-layered interactions with non-Muslims and other Muslims. At the same time, they need to negotiate these everyday expressions and relationships amid strongly politicised notions of Islam in wider public debates. In Britain, these occur in a liberal democratic context where Muslims are a religious minority with high rates of socio-economic disadvantage. In Malaysia, Muslims form a religious majority, many of whom enjoy state-given privileges due to the fusion of Islam with Malay ethnicity within an authoritarian context.

3.2 Managing Islam

While Islam is a common factor in the identity constructions of gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain, it is managed and mediated through diverse social authorities and institutions in the two countries. As I have highlighted in section 3.1.3, how Muslims relate to Islam also partly depends on whether they form a majority or a minority in a particular national context.

In this section, I compare how the British and Malaysian states manage Islam and how this influences its role in public policy, identity construction, and majority-minority relations. Part of my argument is that state authorities in Malaysia and Britain directly and indirectly try to foster those expressions of Islam that they see as shared by the majority within these nations. However, these officially approved expressions of Islam often compete with those of other actors – including gay Muslims – who construct and sometimes promote their own versions of Islam.

3.2.1 Britain: Fostering obedient Muslims?

In Britain, Muslims come from various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, and have become part of the national landscape mostly through distinctive waves of immigration[58]. The first significant wave came immediately after WWII, consisting mostly of Pakistani and Indian refugees in the aftermath of the creation of independent Pakistan in 1947 and ensuing violence with neighbouring India (Gilliat-Ray, 2012b: 46). In the 1960s and 1970s, larger numbers of Pakistanis, Indians, and Bangladeshis came to Britain as cheap labour for various industries. They eventually settled down, often bringing along kinsfolk from their countries of origin (Gilliat-Ray, 2012b: 47).

The 1960s and 1970s also saw significant but smaller numbers of East African Asian immigrants settling in Britain after being expelled from Uganda and Tanzania (Gilliat-Ray, 2012b: 50–52). In the 1970s and 1980s, Iranians and Arabs began

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[58] Around three-quarters of Britain's Muslim population are from Asian ethnic backgrounds, particularly Pakistani (43 percent), Bangladeshi (17 percent), Indian (9 percent) and Other Asian (6 percent). It is estimated that 6 percent of Muslims are of Black African origin (mainly from Somalia, Nigeria and other North and West African countries). Some 4 percent describe themselves as of white British origin, and a further 7 percent from another white background (including Arabs, Turks, Cypriots and East Europeans – especially refugees from Bosnia, Albania and Kosovo) (Gilliat-Ray, 2012b: 120).

immigrating in larger numbers following global trends and events such as the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Civil wars and unrest brought waves of Bosnian, Somali, Algerian, and Kurdish immigrants and refugees from the 1990s onwards.

On the whole, Muslim immigrants brought not only ethnic and linguistic diversity to Britain, but also much doctrinal variety and often personal experiences of war, discrimination and material hardship. The fact that they were all Muslim did not override these or other differences in economic status, education and their urban or rural origins. According to Humayun Ansari (2004: 3), intra-Muslim social ties in Britain have rarely cut across divides of ethnicity, national origin (for Muslims of the same ethnicity, e.g. Arabs), and class.

Despite the heterogeneity of the British Muslim population, in the early 1990s Muslim activists began lobbying for recognition as a single religious minority rather than simply as a collection of distinct cultural communities (Hussain & Sherif, 2014: 418). This foreshadowed the MCB's campaign to include a question on religion in the 2001 census, discussed in section 3.1.3. Among the reasons for such campaigning, two are particularly relevant here – the state's inconsistent framing of ethnicity and religion, specifically in Britain's legal framework of anti-discrimination, and the state's interests in managing Muslim groups.

In response to the demographic effects of immigration, the British legislature and courts had to introduce new laws or amend existing frameworks regarding discrimination. For example, the courts eventually interpreted the Race Relations Act 1976 as including Sikhs as a racial *and* religious minority. Nasar Meer (2008: 70) argues that some legal experts at the time advocated including religious dimensions when interpreting the Act such that it would extend to Muslims and other religious minorities, too. Nevertheless, confronted with ensuing controversies such as the Rushdie Affair[59] – Parliament and the courts upheld a binary distinction between race and religion for Muslims.

According to Meer (2008: 63), this binary was especially prominent in public debates leading up to the passage of the Racial and Religious Hatred Act of 2006.

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[59] In 1989, Muslim protesters in Bradford burned a copy of British Indian author Salman Rushdie's controversial novel *The Satanic Verses*, which many Muslims regarded as insulting to the Prophet Muhammad. Shortly after this incident Iran's spiritual leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, released a *fatwa* calling for Rushdie's death (Nye & Weller, 2012: 38–40). The Rushdie affair brought British Muslims into the public spotlight, with the media coverage created long-lasting images linking Muslims to anti-democratic and anti-Western values (Hussain & Sherif, 2014: 418).

Opponents of the proposed Act claimed that race should be protected as an ascribed characteristic of identity, whereas religious beliefs are chosen and do not require protection. Meer argues that such a dichotomy is untenable, firstly because race is not as 'natural' a category as some people claim – the way we conceive of 'race' depends upon different cultural, social and historical factors. Furthermore, people who are subjected to 'racial' prejudice or attacks often find that their religious backgrounds are also targeted. Meer contends that discrimination or hate incidents against Muslims in Britain often involve this blurring of the victims' racial and religious identity.

Meer (2008: 72) contends that a doctrinaire separation of 'race' as involuntary and 'religion' as voluntary can lead to paradoxical legal outcomes. For instance, the London Borough of Merton asked the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) to prosecute a British National Party (BNP) member and others who distributed offensive and threatening anti-Muslim material during the party's 2005 general election campaign. The CPS refused on the grounds that Muslims were not a 'racial group' and therefore not covered by the Public Order Act (POA) of 1986. However, the same BNP member pleaded guilty to distributing similar material and inciting racial hatred against Jewish minorities – who are covered by the POA – in the *same* borough.

Government decisions to categorise and conceptualise the status of ethnic and religious minorities can thus create unanticipated challenges which can be exacerbated when various groups vie to represent these minorities nationally. In the case of Muslims in Britain, at particular times, the British state has preferred or even fostered some Muslim groups at the expense of others to engineer state-compliant expressions of Islam. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s, common political goals between Britain and Saudi Arabia regarding the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan meant that Saudi preachers were given clearance to enter the country. They were able to recruit young British Muslims to fight in Afghanistan as well as finance charitable outfits and Islamic relief operations to aid Afghan refugees (Al-Rasheed, 2005: 156)[60].

The above are just some examples of the complex and politicised nature of the question of 'representation' among British Muslims, illustrating the diverse and decentralised social organisation of Islam in Britain. Yet, as I have already mentioned, successive British governments and Muslim activists have tried to streamline and

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[60] This does not mean that British Muslims went on uncritically accepting Saudi Arabia's overtures. For example, some became disillusioned and angry about the kingdom's overt request for European and American military assistance during the first Gulf War in 1990-91 (Al-Rasheed, 2005: 160).

organise a definable British Muslim identity, often amid rivalry among various Muslim collectives. One milestone in these efforts by the state and a particular section of British Muslim activists was the formation of the MCB in 1997. Nevertheless, according to Sophie Gilliat-Ray (2012b: 109), rival Muslim individuals and groups have accused the MCB of being out of touch, remote, and elitist, and 'presenting a monolithic view of Muslim opinion to government, media and policy-makers'.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the British government expected the MCB to manage the anger from British Muslims regarding the 'war on terror'. Instead, under pressure from its grassroots membership, the MCB openly criticised British foreign policy (Gilliat-Ray, 2012b: 109–110). These events, along with ensuing protests against the 2003 Iraq invasion and the 7/7 bombings, partly led the government to rebalance its relationship with British Muslim organisations, for instance by giving preference to the British Muslim Forum and Sufi Muslim Council over the MCB (Gilliat-Ray, 2012b: 110). Gilliat-Ray (2012a: 117) argues that the government's partisanship divides British Muslims and alienates those critical of its policies, and suggests the government may be 'deliberately creating the conditions whereby Muslims from one school of thought are placed in opposition to, or competition with, others'.

This background suggests that multiple factors – doctrinal and non-doctrinal – are at play regarding the attitudes of British Muslims towards specific issues such as homosexuality. Based on her qualitative interviews with heterosexual Muslims in Scotland between 2001 and 2002, Asifa Siraj (2009: 55) concludes that they exhibited 'disproportionately negative attitudes towards homosexuals and homosexual relationships' compared with the wider population. Siraj suggests that those who identified as 'practising' Muslims formed their attitudes about homosexuality through a combination of their 'belief system and cultural upbringing', yet some participants whom she characterises as 'non-practising Muslims […] were just as critical and intolerant of homosexuality as their practising counterparts'. This raises the question of whether attitudes to sexuality can become an ethnic or religious boundary marker regardless of the degree of people's religious commitment, which requires further investigation as existing quantitative surveys appear contradictory. For example, a 2009 Gallup poll found that none of the British Muslims interviewed believed that homosexual acts were morally acceptable, but according to a 2011 Demos poll 47

percent agreed with the statement 'I am proud of how Britain treats gay people' (Butt, 2009; Pink News, 2011).

Against this backdrop, gay Muslims in Britain are affected by and can potentially shape the landscape of Islam in different ways. By affirming their sexuality they explicitly or implicitly challenge anti-gay interpretations of Islam, which pits them against Muslims who hold Islamic interpretations that wider society is also likely to deem problematic. Yet, by highlighting the fact that they are Muslim, they emphasise the religious rather than racial aspect of their identities and, like other Muslims, can be critical of Britain's foreign and domestic policies on Islam. In doing this, they complicate stereotypes of Muslims as flatly anti-Western or inherently conservative *and* of gay people as anti-religious.

3.2.2 Malaysia: An assertive Islam?

As discussed in section 3.1.1, the Federal Constitution of Malaysia explicitly links Malay and Muslim identity while the political arena is dominated by ethnic and/or religious parties. The Malay-based UMNO governs in a coalition which includes other ethnicity-based parties, including the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). The federal-level parliamentary opposition coalition includes the multi-ethnic and multi-religious People's Justice Party (PKR) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP) in partnership with the Islamic party, PAS.

Ethnic and religious concerns thus dominate the political arena, influencing and even driving the interpretation and application of public policies. The New Economic Policy (NEP) – which the government instituted as a corrective after bloody racial riots in 1969 – initially aimed to redress inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic economic disparities. At the same time, it was construed by successive UMNO-led governments as affirmative action for Malays and involved government-led expansion of the Malay middle class (Gomez & Jomo, 1999: 23, 39). The new Malay middle class grew especially rapidly since Malays benefited the most from state-sponsored higher education, loans for home ownership and starting up businesses, and other NEP-related developments (Abdul Rahman, 2001: 88).

A middle class had already surfaced at the beginning of the twentieth century as a result of colonial policies, but it was relatively small and mostly Chinese (Abdul

Rahman, 2001: 82–83). The growth of a *multi-ethnic* middle class – incorporating the rapidly emerging Malay middle class – is largely a post-independence phenomenon directly linked with modernisation and industrialisation policies, including the NEP. Johan Saravanamuttu (2001: 107) estimates that 'the middle class would have edged upwards to 45.8 percent in the year 2000', and argues that 'Malaysian society had become predominantly middle class by the end of the 1990s'. Against this backdrop a younger generation of Malaysians – especially Malays – has become increasingly upwardly mobile (Abdul Rahman, 2001: 87).

Historically, the Malaysian middle class – of all ethnicities – has been supportive of the state, especially during times of rapid economic growth as evidenced by the government's landslide victories in the elections of 1990 and 1995 (Abdul Rahman, 2001: 80). However, many sectors among the new Malay middle class became deeply unsettled during the political and economic crisis of the late 1990s, in which Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad sacked his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim. Mahathir's humiliation of Anwar – including lurid accusations of sodomy and corruption – caused a split in attitudes among the Malay middle class. Many objected strongly to Mahathir's treatment of Anwar but others supported Mahathir's overall approach to the crisis, including his scathing criticisms of Western-led globalisation (Abdul Rahman, 2001: 95).

In response, a sizeable proportion of middle class Malays voted against the Mahathir-led government during the 1999 elections, which led PAS and other opposition parties to make significant parliamentary gains. According to Virginia Hooker (2004: 165), PAS's rise challenged the Mahathir-led government's dominant vision of modernity, especially in relation to Malays. She argues that before the crisis, Mahathir *and* Anwar drove the state's regulation of Islam and Malay-ness by each trying to balance Malay communal interests and framing Islam as Malaysia's 'civil religion' (Hooker, 2004: 155–156). However, the political crisis disrupted their project to define Islam in this way and the Mahathir-led administration more aggressively fostered 'moderate' or state-supportive Muslims and repressed 'radical' or unacceptable Muslims (Hooker, 2004: 165–166). Within this framework, Mahathir was especially keen to monitor PAS and its supporters *and* more progressive Muslims who objected to the treatment of Anwar and were critical of the UMNO-led government in other ways.

Ironically, Anwar was one the architects of the expansion of Islam in Malaysia. Initially an influential leader of the student-driven Muslim Youth Movement of

Malaysia (ABIM), Anwar was successfully persuaded by Mahathir to join UMNO in 1982 and rose swiftly in the political ranks (Ahmad Fauzi, 2008: 218). By 1994, he was UMNO's deputy president and Malaysia's deputy prime minister. During his time in government, Anwar spearheaded or was associated with several projects to expand the influence and administration of Islam, for example the setting up of the International Islamic University of Malaysia (Ahmad Fauzi, 2008: 219). ABIM became a crucial partner in the state's Islam-oriented nation-building (Ahmad Fauzi, 2008: 225).

Before Anwar joined UMNO ABIM's relationship with the state was more antagonistic, with one of its most prominent confrontations occurring during the mass demonstrations of 1974 in the northwest of Peninsula Malaysia (Nagata, 1980: 408). These were triggered by rumours that Malay farmers were starving in the State of Kedah, suggesting that UMNO politicians were mismanaging the NEP and only certain groups of Malays were benefiting from it. The federal government arrested more than 1,000 protesters, including Anwar (Nagata, 1980: 408).

ABIM's confrontational stance was similar to those of other groups which emerged within the milieu of activism amongst various Malaysian Muslim students' associations during the late 1960s. Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid (2009: 145) argues that ABIM traces its intellectual and political lineage to its founders' networks with the Muslim Brotherhood diaspora in Britain and also Abul A'la Maududi, founder of Pakistan's Jamaat-i-Islami. By 1979, ABIM had a membership of 35,000 (Nagata, 1980: 423).

The state was disturbed not only by ABIM's potential reach with young, upwardly mobile Malays but also its transnational networks. For example, Anwar, who was ABIM president from 1974 to 1982, was welcomed by Ayatollah Khomeini in post-revolutionary Iran and was also a supporter of Pakistan's Zia ul-Haq (Ahmad Fauzi, 2009: 146). In response, UMNO often attacked ABIM and other groups it accused of 'attempting to import the Iranian revolutionary ideology' into Malaysia (Ahmad Fauzi, 2009: 146), but ABIM's fortunes changed when Mahathir came to power.

According to tan beng hui[61] (2012a: 40), these transformations occurred alongside distinct phases of state-led 'Islamisation', which was more 'haphazard, weak and ineffective' in the 1980s and 1990s and left largely to the various States. Starting

[61] I also discussed tan's work in Chapter 2.1.5.

from the late 1990s, however, tan (2012a: 41) argues that the federal state embarked on 'Syariahtisation', i.e. systematically expanding Syariah legislation and wrestling jurisdiction over it from the States. In this project, the federal state was and continues to be aided by a group of actors tan (2012a: 53) refers to as the 'Syariah lobby' – state-salaried 'religious functionaries', 'ethno-nationalists' and 'religio-nationalists'.

The 'Syariah lobby' advocates stricter punishments for Islamic offences, such as drinking alcohol and non-marital sex, including homosexual behaviour. Nevertheless, successive UMNO-led governments have not consistently implemented the rhetoric of 'Syariahtisation', leading to selective, arbitrary and, as tan (2012a: 148) suggests, half-hearted prosecutions of Islamic offences. With homosexuality, specifically, tan (2012a: 158) argues that 'the official anti-gay bark is worse than its bite'.

Rather, the state deploys Islam to ground its other development projects, especially post-NEP, even as younger Malays have started seeing Islam as a resource to critique and even challenge the government. Ever since the advent of 'Syariahtisation', however, the 'Syariah lobby' has become increasingly intolerant of alternative interpretations of Islam. For example, it frequently dismisses, condemns, or threatens Muslim women who interpret Islam from feminist perspectives, the most prominent example being the continuing harassment faced by the non-governmental organisation Sisters in Islam (SIS)[62] (Ding, 2009). In fact, the Islamic Religious Council in the State of Selangor has an official *fatwa* accusing SIS of subscribing to 'pluralism' and 'liberalism', hence 'deviating' from Islam (Bedi, 2014). In Malaysia, state-produced *fatwa* can carry the force of law and it is a crime for any Muslim to defy, disobey or dispute any *fatwa* currently in force (Zainah, 2013).

Attitudes towards sexuality among Muslims in Malaysia are therefore informed by wider, politicised, and state-approved interpretations of Islam *and* Malay ethnicity. Given the state's authoritarianism, it is difficult to measure public attitudes frankly but a 2010 survey of 1,060 Malaysian Muslims aged between 15 and 25 found that 99.4 percent disagreed with the statement, 'It's OK to be gay or lesbian' (Chiam, Tunku 'Abidin, Wong, & Suryana, 2011: 20). In the same survey, 97.5 percent disagreed that '[it's] OK to watch pornographic movies' and 98.4 percent that '[it's] OK to have sex before marriage'. The report's authors suggest that the attitudes of young Malaysian

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[62] I am an Associate Member of SIS, as explained in Chapter 1.2.3.

Muslims are shaped by 'highly-controlled' broadcast media, local religious teachers and parents and, to a lesser extent, peers and other social networks.

Gay Muslims in Malaysia understand and express their religious and sexual identities within this matrix of state management, wider political sentiments and public attitudes related to Islam. At the same time, state-led modernisation has enabled them to pursue middle class lifestyles, including with the sexual dimension. As John D'Emilio suggests in the context of the US (1983: 109), capitalism can create the material conditions for homosexual desire to become the central component of some peoples' lives. In the case of Malaysia, state-managed capitalism and the rise of a Malay middle class have enabled gay Muslims to explore new lifestyles and sexual expressions, but amid Islamic rhetoric that increasingly demonises sexual difference.

3.3 Managing sexuality

According to Jeffrey Weeks (2012: 1), analysing a 'history of sexuality' means analysing a 'history without a single, clear, fixed object'. Sexuality is not an 'unproblematic natural given' – our perceptions and expressions of it are shaped by multiple factors which keep transforming throughout history (Weeks, 2012: x). Still, an analysis of the regulation of sexual expressions in different societies can illuminate how social relations were structured and how these historical patterns affect us now. With this in mind, in this section I focus on significant turning points in the state-led management of sexuality in Britain and Malaysia and how these impact on gay Muslims.

3.3.1 Britain: From criminalisation to equality

Uneven industrialisation in nineteenth-century Britain led to 'new class alignments, rapid population growth, changes in the social environment, urbanisation, and a disruption of settled and traditional patterns of sexual life' (Weeks, 2012: 15). In various ways, these developments pushed the new Victorian middle classes to adopt and display largely conservative attitudes on sex, as discussed in section 3.2.1.

British public debate increasingly revolved around sex-related panics from the turn of the nineteenth century, even as the rapid expansion of the Empire enhanced

public awareness of cultural differences and informed sexual attitudes. Many of these panics also had a class dimension, with public and voluntary initiatives in the later part of the century effectively increasing surveillance of the urban poor (Hall, 2000: 6). In the 1830s and 1840s, for example, Parliamentary Commissions were 'saturated with an obsessive concern with the sexuality of the working class', and from the 1850s, 'venereal disease and prostitution' entered 'the heart of Parliamentary debate' (Weeks, 2012: 28).

In aspiring towards 'respectability', nineteenth-century middle-class reformers increasingly sought to condemn or curb sexual deviance by forming movements which they framed with Christian doctrines and values (Hyam, 1991: 66–70; Mosse, 1985: 24; Weeks, 2012: 39, 100–101). They pushed for greater state intervention on sexual issues, including laws on prostitution and 'gross indecency' as discussed in section 3.1.1, and drove conceptions of moral purity as a metaphor for a stable society (Hyam, 1991: 65; Weeks, 2012: 107).

Anti-sodomy laws, however, were in force from the sixteenth century and were applied in waves in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At the end of the seventeenth century and in the 1720s, for example, there was a spate of convictions for sodomy 'coinciding with morality crusades and the emergence of a distinctive male homosexual subculture in London – famously the molly houses' (Weeks, 2012: 123). There was also a sudden increase in prosecutions in the first third of the nineteenth century in England, during which 50 men were hanged for sodomy[63].

These waves of prosecutions and persecutions do not constitute the complete picture of the various historical sexual subcultures and how they changed over time. There is evidence, for example, that conceptions of homosexuality in the late seventeenth century conflated it with effeminacy and transvestism, whereas by the nineteenth century the emphasis on transvestism had diminished (McIntosh, 1968: 188).

Also, contrasting the visibility of male homosexuality in the nineteenth century, erotic relations between women were able to flourish under the broad category of friendship which was virtually ignored by state authorities (Marcus, 2011: 524–525). Rather, the state regulated women's bodies primarily in terms of their relations with

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[63] 'In one year, 1806, there were more executions for sodomy than for murder, while in 1810 four out of five convicted sodomists were hanged.' (Weeks, 2012: 123)

men through laws on reproduction, marriage and economic exchange. Within this context, in the late nineteenth century, financially independent women were able to set up households with other women – for mutual convenience but perhaps also as sexual or romantic partnerships (Hall, 2000: 40). According to Sharon Marcus (2011: 525–526), 'literate, educated women' were able to manoeuvre their legal rights – e.g., through wills, property deeds, and even alimony payments – to 'create approximations of marriage with other women'. The authorities ignored such women possibly because there were so few of them and they 'were not seen as belonging to a type or category latent in all women'.

Still, Weeks (2012: 128) argues that in the conditions of the nineteenth century, the increasing stigmatisation of homosexuality unintentionally led the individuals targeted to develop a sense of homosexual *identity,* especially among the upper and middle classes. By forcing this awareness of sexual difference among the individuals targeted, newer forms of legal regulation created what Weeks calls 'a new community of knowledge'.

These dynamics continued into the twentieth century, and Weeks (2012: 13) contends that 'in the 1950s, Britain was still widely regarded as having one of the most conservative sexual cultures in the world, with one of the most draconian penal codes'. Homosexual men were increasingly arrested and prosecuted for 'gross indecency' up to the 1950s, with 622 arrests in 1931, 2,000 in 1945, 4,416 in 1950 and 6,357 in 1954 (Waites, 2013: 152; Weeks, 2012: 307). Matthew Waites (2013: 152) argues that this might have had more to do with changing policing practices than a witch-hunt led by politicians, but nevertheless the 'increasing press coverage of homosexuality led to political concern'.

This legal and political dimension was supplemented by medical and psychological opinion considering homosexuality a disorder (Hall, 2000: 4). According to Matt Cook (2007b: 166), family background and psychological explanations for sexual behaviour became increasingly cited in court cases from the 1920s, effectively portraying homosexuals as criminals who also required medical treatment. For example Alan Turing, who helped crack the enigma code during WWII, opted for hormonal therapy rather than a prison sentence after his relationship with another man was exposed and prosecuted (Cook, 2007b: 166). This led to depression and Turing was found dead in 1953, most likely from suicide.

Continuing panics and debates around homosexuality led the government to appoint the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution in 1954 to examine the regulation of homosexuality and prostitution in England, Wales and Scotland (Waites, 2013: 150). Chaired by John Wolfenden, it published its report in 1957 which became a major turning point in public policies and attitudes towards sexual diversity.

The Wolfenden Report recommended the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality, clarifying that this was not equivalent to condoning it – the implication was that public expressions of homosexuality should remain banned (Waites, 2013: 153). The Church of England and some influential media outlets, such as the *Times* and *Daily Mirror*, supported the report's recommendations, with the Church producing its own interim report in 1954 supporting partial decriminalisation (Waites, 2013: 152–153).

Even so, the government did not implement the Wolfenden recommendations immediately. Instead, new pressure groups and social movements such as the Homosexual Law Reform Society, formed in 1958, began lobbying for the recommendations to be implemented (Waites, 2013: 154). These demands grew amid a wider trend of liberalising social attitudes in the 1960s, for example rising pre-marital sexual relations among youth – a trend strengthened after the introduction of the contraceptive pill (Lewis & Kiernan, 1996: 373).

This 'sexual revolution' accompanied the changing attitudes towards homosexuality among some sectors of society. While academics now felt less restrained to explore homosexuality as a subject, films such as *Victim* (1963) and *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1964) portrayed it in relatively more sympathetic terms (Hall, 2000: 168). Within this wider cultural climate, the Labour government also introduced other reforms including abolishing stage censorship, partially legalising abortion, and stopping prison floggings, partly from the influence of progressive leaders such as Roy Jenkins and Anthony Crosland (Waites, 2013: 155; Weeks, 2012: 341).

These events were also a major turning point for mainstream churches, which enjoyed brief post-War rejuvenation but whose influence on moral and social issues declined steadily from the 1960s (Brown, 2006: 36; Davie, 1994: 31–33; Guest et al., 2012: 63). After this, Conservative Christians began reacting more negatively towards what they referred to as a 'permissive society' while other sectors of the mainstream churches continued to liberalise (Brown, 2006: 224, 240; Davie, 1994: 33; Ganiel & Jones, 2012: 308). Prominent liberal Christians were at the forefront of heated debates

and crises within the Church of England, for example with the publication of Bishop John Robinson's controversial *Honest to God* in 1963 (Brown, 2006: 224; Brown & Lynch, 2012: 333). These took place within a wider trend of declining church attendance and membership from the turn of the twentieth century, which according to Steve Bruce (2002: 73) indicates the irreversible secularisation of Britain[64].

Despite these liberal changes in religious and non-religious spheres, stigmatisation of homosexuality did not disappear overnight. While Parliament, the courts, and the police ceased criminalising homosexuality, medical researchers and professionals persisted in framing it as a medical condition, effectively shifting it from being a legal to a medical problem (Waites, 2013: 162). Furthermore, the partial nature of decriminalisation meant that prosecutions for public acts of homosexuality *increased* by 150 percent between 1967 and 1973 (Waites, 2013: 157).

Due to this gap between the more liberal atmosphere and continuing anti-homosexual stigma, more radical gay and lesbian activists formed new action groups, such as the Gay Liberation Front (Cook, 2007a: 180; Hall, 2000: 180). Weeks (2012: 365) argues that gay and lesbian activists therefore helped to 'fix' homosexual identity, making it almost comparable to an 'ethnic identity'.

The increasingly assertive activism of the gay and lesbian movement prompted morally conservative activists, for example Mary Whitehouse[65], to renew and escalate moral purity campaigns. In one of her more prominent efforts, Whitehouse brought a successful court action against the *Gay News* for 'blasphemous libel' for publishing James Kirkup's poem 'The Love that Dare Not Speak its Name', in which a Roman centurion has sex with Jesus (Cook, 2007a: 192). The onset of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s introduced another phase of backlash against homosexuality, as expressed by some members of the then ruling Conservative Party. One such development was Conservative backbencher David Wilshire's successful introduction of Section 28 of

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[64] It is beyond the scope of this thesis to argue for or against the secularisation thesis, but the debates around it have been discussed elsewhere, e.g. in Shirley Hanson's (1997) methodological and theoretical critique and Linda Woodhead's (2012) overview of the state of the debate in Britain.

[65] Mary Whitehouse (1910-2001) was a teacher who, in the 1930s, joined the Oxford Group – a Christian pressure group founded in the late 1930s to oppose immorality (Brown, 2006: 198, 250). She went on to start a Clean-up TV campaign, and later the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, to protest violent and sexually explicit content in the mass media. She was also a prominent leader in the Festival of Light, an evangelical Christian effort to halt moral decline which later became Christian Action Research and Education (Ganiel & Jones, 2012: 308).

the Local Government Act which made it unlawful for local authorities to 'intentionally promote homosexuality' (Weeks, 2012: 379).

According to Weeks (2012: 410), despite the backlash, the reforms of the 1960s created possibilities 'throughout Britain, [where] many lesbians and gays were increasingly routinising their homosexuality, with a double life less and less a defining aspect of their lives'. Similarly, these reforms reflected and facilitated profound changes in heterosexual relationships, where 'marriage, civil partnerships, [and] various forms of cohabitation or non-cohabitation [have] increasingly become choices, not moral imperatives' (Weeks, 2012: 400).

Following these developments, the incoming Labour government of the late 1990s brought in other sexuality-related reforms, including: lifting the ban on lesbians and gays serving in the armed forces in 2000; equalising the age of consent for heterosexual and homosexual relationships in 2001; abolishing the 'gross indecency' provision in the Sexual Offences Act in 2004; and introducing the Civil Partnership Act in 2005 (Cook, 2007a: 211–212; Weeks, 2012: 406–407). In 2013, under the coalition government of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, Parliament passed the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act, which came into force in March 2014 (UK Government, 2014).

From the 1960s, therefore, the British state has gone from criminalising and stigmatising homosexuality to protecting and defending it as a human right. At present, sexual orientation is a 'protected characteristic', alongside religion, under the Equality Act of 2010 (Nye & Weller, 2012: 43–44). This has led to some high-profile controversies on whether one protected characteristic can 'trump' another, notably involving Christians claiming workplace discrimination for upholding their religious beliefs, including on homosexuality. For example, British courts upheld the legitimacy of disciplinary measures taken against four Christians – British Airways employee Nadia Eweida, dismissed for refusing to remove a crucifix displayed over her uniform; nurse Shirley Chaplin, prevented from working on hospital wards after declining to remove her crucifix; registrar Lilian Ladele, dismissed after refusing to officiate at civil partnership ceremonies; and relationship counsellor Gary McFarlane, dismissed for refusing to give sexual therapy to same-sex couples (Hunt, 2012: 705). The four challenged these decisions at the European Court of Human Rights, which eventually found in favour of Eweida but not the rest (Bowcott, 2013)

Gay Muslims in Britain, along with other religious groups and sexual minorities, are directly affected by such debates. As members of sexual *and* religious minorities, they are protected by existing legislation but the tone and substance of current debates often implies an incompatibility or irreconcilability between their religious and sexual identities. By holding on to these identities, however, gay Muslims in Britain potentially problematise and expand current notions of equality, diversity, and civil liberties.

3.3.2 Malaysia: Politicisation of sexuality

As discussed in section 3.2.2, the UMNO-led government began politicising homosexuality at unprecedented levels after Mahathir sacked Anwar in 1998 for abuse of power and sodomy. The ensuing political crisis unfolded amid a regional economic crisis which also sparked off political unrest in other Asian countries, such as Thailand, Indonesia and South Korea (Gomez & Jomo, 1999: 185). Anwar was eventually jailed for corruption and sodomy, but the Federal Court overturned the sodomy conviction in 2004 (BBC, 2014). After his release, he was barred from active politics until 2008 but quickly emerged as the *de facto* leader of the People's Justice Party (PKR), led formally by his wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail.

When Mahathir sacked Anwar, he did not conjure anti-gay rhetoric out of thin air – he had previously espoused 'Asian values', in which he described homosexuality as one of numerous, unacceptable Western ills (Peletz, 2003: 3; tan, 2012a: 19–20). Mahathir's anti-gay stance therefore accompanied his policies to modernise Malaysia and he targeted Anwar particularly viciously at a time when the state seemed on the brink of a major structural crisis. In this sense, politicised anti-gay sentiment in Malaysia during the 1990s resembled the anti-gay moral panics in Britain from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries in that it emerged alongside drastic and unpredictable social changes. However, anti-gay rhetoric and policies were more explicitly and overtly manoeuvred by the Malaysian government for specific political purposes.

As I have discussed in sections 3.1.1 and 3.2.2, however, homosexual behaviour was already criminalised under colonially-created civil and Islamic laws, i.e. long before Anwar was sacked. This does not mean that Islamic rulings did not exist before

British colonialism, only that these were not uniformly enforced. At best, there were Islamic digests and codes in the different Malay sultanates but it is unclear to what extent their contents were applied (tan, 2012b: 350).

The state and more specifically the 'Syariah lobby' (tan, 2012a: 53) are therefore not advocating something entirely new, but rather want to strengthen and expand existing Islamic legislation. In this context, the state is not a non-partisan arbiter of public debate – state officials and government ministers actively politicise and polarise public debate on Islam and sexual diversity.

Since the late 1990s, the state has continued to politicise and polarise notions of Islam and sexuality on different levels at different moments. At times, UMNO leaders and the UMNO-owned mass media demonise homosexuality in thinly and not-so-thinly veiled references to Anwar, while at others, the 'Syariah lobby' whip up seemingly non-Anwar-related panics about sexual deviance. Sometimes only sexual minorities are attacked but at other times they are lumped together with Syiah and liberal Muslims and other so-called 'deviants', amid state-sanctioned rhetoric that paints 'human rights' as a threat to 'Islam' (Bernama, 2014).

Such sentiments against sexual and other minorities are espoused amid growing contestations of the state – especially since the 2008 and 2013 elections – by civil society actors demanding more accountable and democratic government. The 2008 elections in particular took place amid widespread discontent against the ruling coalition and Mahathir's successor, then Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (J. C. H. Lee et al., 2010: 294–295). In the run-up to the elections, these grievances were expressed in mass demonstrations consisting of multi-ethnic, multi-religious participants. In late 2007 alone, there were protests by Malaysian Bar Council members against corruption in the judiciary; the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (BERSIH), petitioning the monarchy for electoral reforms; and the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) highlighting the exploitation of Indians in colonial Malaya.

Following these developments, the 2008 general election left the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition severely weakened, winning its slimmest victory since independence in 1957. Commentators regarded the BN's loss of its two-thirds majority in Parliament as a watershed in Malaysian politics (J. C. H. Lee *et al.*, 2010: 293). In light of their massive gains, the three major opposition parties – the DAP, PKR and PAS – formed the People's Alliance (PR). Within months, however, Anwar was hit with new accusations of sodomy but still contested in a by-election and was returned to

Parliament, becoming Leader of the Opposition. He was charged with sodomy a second time the same year, but was acquitted by the High Court in 2012[66].

The events of 2008 resulted in an expansion of civil society *and* backlash by the BN federal government, intensified by the formation of pro-regime, ultranationalist Malay groups, the most prominent being PERKASA (the Association for Indigenous Empowerment) (Welsh, 2013: 139). Against this backdrop, BERSIH continued organising public demonstrations for electoral reform in 2011 (as BERSIH 2.0) and 2012 (as BERSIH 3.0), which were violently broken up by the police. UMNO leaders, Malay ultranationalists and UMNO-controlled media then intensified their targeting of BERSIH and those associated with it, most notably BERSIH 2.0 chairperson Ambiga Sreenavasan – a non-Muslim Indian – when she agreed to speak at the sexuality rights festival Seksualiti Merdeka in late 2011 (Surin, 2011).

Initiated in 2008, Seksualiti Merdeka is a loose collective of individuals and groups supporting gender equality and LGBT rights. After the BERSIH 2.0 demonstrations and ensuing threats against Ambiga, Seksualiti Merdeka was banned by the police – a decision it has unsuccessfully challenged in court (Sklar & Poore, 2012). Seksualiti Merdeka had earlier courted controversy when it produced a series of YouTube videos in 2010, including one of Azwan Ismail – a Malay man in his early 30s – coming out as gay. Azwan was threatened and condemned by the Syariah lobby and other Muslims online (Star, 2010), but has not been subjected to any legal action or vigilante persecution and still lives and works in Kuala Lumpur[67].

In the 2013 general election, the BN lost the popular vote to the PR, with 47.4 percent against 50.9 percent, but managed to retain government (Welsh, 2013: 136). This victory was somewhat made possible by Malaysia's Westminster-style first-past-the-post voting system, and also due to the malapportionment of electoral districts in the BN's favour and other irregularities (Welsh, 2013: 140). Against this background, the state and other pro-regime actors continue to politicise homosexuality and LGBT rights, framing them as a Trojan horse that will be the undoing of Malaysian society. This position does not go uncontested by civil society actors – in fact, Muslim non-

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[66] The government appealed and in March 2014 the Court of Appeal overturned the High Court's acquittal (BBC, 2014). Anwar challenged this decision and at the time of writing, the Federal Court has reserved its verdict for a later date (Arukesamy, 2014).

[67] Personal communication, November 2011 and August 2013.

governmental organisations such as SIS and the Islamic Renaissance Front (IRF) openly criticise anti-LGBT expressions of Islam (Ahmad Fuad, 2011; Sisters in Islam, 2011).

Within this political climate, not all gay Muslims in Malaysia are affected by the politics of sexuality in the same way. Some might not connect the state's targeting of Anwar with their personal circumstances, while others might feel affronted by the state-sanctioned anti-gay rhetoric. Many might feel conflicted in wanting to defend their position as Malays and Muslims but also wanting to protect their private sexual lives. Regardless of these individual perceptions, they need to negotiate how they express their sexuality in ways that escape the state's regulation of homosexuality, often by exploiting the gaps and inconsistencies in practical aspects of regulation.

3.4 Conclusion

Gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain live in environments where highly visible contestations of Islam impact their identity constructions. However, the conditions influencing the place of Islam in their identity-making differ and are shaped by multiple factors associated with colonial legacies and domestic trajectories of modernisation.

In Malaysia, Islam is not just the religion of the majority – it is also the state religion and the Federal Constitution explicitly links it with Malay ethnicity. It informs numerous public policies, including *syariah* laws, and is used to underline other state-led modernisation projects, including those giving rise to a Malay middle class starting from the 1970s. However, successive UMNO-led governments have had to manage diverse expressions of Islam, especially those espoused by political actors critical of the regime, such as PAS. This management of Islam also has to be balanced with the management of wider ethnic and religious diversity. Within this context, various civil and *syariah* laws are often used by the authoritarian government to stifle debate and dissent in relation to Islam, even though Malaysia is formally a parliamentary democracy. Being Muslim is therefore not merely a religious and/or ethnic identity marker – the kind of Islam expressed by Muslims can also determine their economic and political fortunes.

With the sacking of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in 1998 on charges of corruption and sodomy, homosexuality became publicly vilified and politicised in

unprecedented ways. The expansion of an ethnically and religiously diverse civil society since then – calling for greater democracy and respect for human rights – has triggered further backlash by state leaders, Malay ultranationalists and the 'Syariah lobby'. Against this backdrop, gay Muslims have to navigate increasingly politicised condemnations of sexual minorities in the name of Islam *and* weigh the costs and benefits of complying with state-approved expressions of Islam and Malay-ness.

In Britain, Islam was historically part of a landscape of multiple 'Others' – albeit with a small Muslim presence within the country during the colonial era – against which modern British identity was constructed. The bulk of the British Muslim population consists of immigrants arriving after WWII and the Empire's dissolution. The resulting landscape of British Islam is heterogeneous, with much diversity and sometimes even division along ethnic lines. Beginning with controversies such as the Rushdie Affair in the late 1980s, British Muslims have not only become highly visible but also linked with conservative, anti-democratic or anti-Western attitudes – a view which has been exacerbated by the events of 9/11 and 7/7.

Muslims in Britain are also relatively more socio-economically deprived compared to other religious minorities, for example, experiencing higher levels of unemployment and ill health. This was one reason why Muslim activists, spearheaded by the MCB, began lobbying for official statistics on Islam – including a question on religion in the 2001 census – to justify socio-economic betterment for Muslims. Such campaigns are set against a background where Islam rather than ethnicity is becoming a primary referent in the identity constructions of British Muslims.

Meanwhile, the British state has also gradually evolved in its policies and attitudes on sexuality, going from partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967 to the recognition of civil same-sex marriage in 2013. Within this context, the attitudes of British Muslims and other religious groups towards homosexuality have also come into the spotlight, especially when religious leaders seem out of step with more accepting public sentiment. Thus, gay Muslims in Britain – like gay Muslims in Malaysia – must navigate increasingly politicised notions of Islam and ethnicity alongside the assumption that Islam inherently condemns homosexuality. However, they do this as a minority within a minority in a liberal democracy.

This chapter's comparison between Malaysia and Britain demonstrates that conceptions of 'Islam' and 'sexuality' are socially and historically contingent and shaped by multiple actors. Thus, while gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain are

affected by widespread assumptions that Islam condemns homosexuality, they engage with them under different national circumstances.

Chapter 4: The making of a gay Muslim

In the previous chapter, I compared the wider contexts of Islam and sexuality in Malaysia and Britain to set the stage for analysing the construction of gay Muslim identities in both countries. In this and the next two chapters, I draw upon my ethnographic data to investigate how my British and Malaysian participants came to see and express themselves as 'gay' and 'Muslim'.

In this chapter, I unpack how my participants came to make sense of their apparently incompatible religious and sexual identities. To do this, I follow Becker's (1998: 26-27) suggestion to look at the processes enabling individuals to make seemingly improbable or unexpected life choices. My aim here is to analyse the adaptations that my participants made or did not make to come to identify as gay and Muslim. I do this by examining the choices and constraints in expressing their religious and sexual identities, and demonstrate that ethnicity is a related, even pivotal, but sometimes unstated factor in the bigger picture. I argue that it is increasingly possible in both countries for them to claim and hold 'gay Muslim' identities by taking advantage of available spaces and opportunities to challenge, modify, or subvert institutional authority.

I frame my analysis by engaging with Mary Douglas's (2002: 44) conceptualisation of how the cultural boundaries between what we consider permissible and impermissible, legitimate and illegitimate, or 'purity' and 'dirt' are socially constructed. According to her, we often apply our conceptions of 'dirt' to that which we are unable to classify or order into a coherent system, i.e. 'matter out of place'. Within this framework, 'purity' and 'dirt' can be conceived in concrete or symbolic terms, for example imagining society as a body to be defended against real and symbolic pollution. Douglas (2002: 194) argues further that compared with other social pressures, sexual relations have greater potential to be perceived and interpreted as contaminating the *internal* 'purity' of a particular social body. By examining the boundary between the pure and impure, we can therefore understand much about the construction of hierarchies and relations between *and* within groups.

Examining why so many people think of gay Muslims as 'out of place' or embodying moral 'pollution' can therefore help us learn more about the socially constructed boundaries between sexuality and religion. We can ask how people who

feel 'out of place' find ways to belong within wider society. To explain how gay Muslims make these choices, I find it useful to engage with Robert Merton's (1968: 672–673) typology of people's 'role adjustments' to negotiate 'acceptable modes of achieving […] culturally defined goals, purposes and interests'.

We can also ask if the perception that gay Muslims are 'out of place' symbolises other assumptions about divides between societies or ideologies, for example between the so-called 'West' and 'Islam'. Who exactly creates and polices these boundaries and can they shift or dissolve? Joseph Massad (2002: 362) argues that Western LGBT activists inadvertently strengthen these boundaries by regarding Muslim sexual minorities as victims needing to be saved from 'Islam', which they often construe as inherently homophobic. As I have discussed in greater depth in Chapter 2.1.3, Massad also argues that 'LGBT' is Eurocentric terminology imposed by Western governments, activists, academics, and journalists upon non-Westerners.

Massad has been critiqued on various grounds, but usefully points out that Western *and* Muslim ideologues often use sexual identity to imagine a binary between the 'West' and 'Islam'. This, however, is not the focus of this chapter which explores how gay Muslims adapt, transplant and use local and imported concepts in ways they find personally meaningful. Instead, I take up Afsaneh Najmabadi's (2011: 550) call to look at 'what the borrowing, appropriation, and embracing [of sexual concepts and practices] means for the importers'. The cases I discuss therefore complicate or challenge some of Massad's generalisations.

I also highlight that some of the diverse conceptions and expressions of gender and sexuality among Muslims are rooted in history, using my Malaysian cases as examples. I engage critically with Michael Peletz's (2011: 661) contention that there was a certain degree of 'gender pluralism' in Muslim Southeast Asia before the advent of Western colonialism[68]. I demonstrate that while this may be true, gay Muslims rarely draw upon this history consciously when forming their present-day identities. Rather, they adapt and experiment with various expressions of religion and sexuality, with some conforming to wider society's expectations more than others.

Structurally, the chapter begins with an ethnographic section comparing two episodes – of Ramadan gatherings organised by some gay Muslims in London and Kuala Lumpur – to introduce some common themes in the construction of gay Muslim

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[68] Discussed further in Chapter 2.1.2.

identities. This paves the way for two substantial sections – the first analysing the steps that my participants took and continue taking to identify as Muslim and the second focusing on their journeys in identifying as gay. This leads to a final section examining how notions of ethnicity contribute and complicate their engagement with religion and sexuality. This section argues that in forging their sexual and religious identities, they also draw upon and respond to some of the unstated assumptions among wider society linking religion with ethnicity.

4.1 Two *iftaris*

In this section, I narrate my experiences at two different *iftaris* organised by gay Muslims in Britain and Malaysia. Through detailed descriptions of the people I interacted with, I analyse some similar patterns which can illuminate how gay Muslims make and maintain their identities.

4.1.1 London

In July 2013, my partner Giles and I attend an *iftari* in East London organised by Imaan. Imaan organises regular *iftaris* every Ramadan which began in London but now also take place in Manchester and Birmingham. We've arrived early because I am here to help Ebrahim, a gay South Asian male in his early 20s, co-facilitate a pre-*iftar* discussion, Demystifying *Shariah*.

Around ten Imaan members show up for the session proper, from various ethnic backgrounds and doctrinal orientations within Islam. They are: Rabia, a lesbian Pakistani Shii in her early 40s who is Ebrahim's co-facilitator; Ananta, a bisexual Bengali in his early 20s; Azeez, a gay Pakistani in his late 30s; Salman, a gay Pakistani and self-confessed former Salafi[69] in his late 20s; Nat, a gay Southeast Asian convert to Islam in his early 20s; Luqman, a gay Indian convert to Shii Islam in his mid-20s; Noel, a gay South Asian of East African origin in his mid-20s; Sumaiya, an East African woman in her 20s who is new to the group; Imtiaz, a student from Pakistan in his early

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[69] A contested term referring to movements within Islam often stereotyped as fanatically anti-liberal and anti-rational.

20s; and Abdul, a gay Egyptian temporarily in London and in his mid-20s. More than half were born and raised in Britain.

I introduced the Demystifying *Shariah* workshop to Imaan in April 2012, adapted from a module developed by Sisters in Islam (SIS) (2004). The SIS workshops focus on how Islamic jurisprudence was historically constructed and contemporary Muslim laws impact on gender, which I drew upon but added material on same-sex relations[70]. Today's workshop by Ebrahim and Rabia is a shortened version of the full-day session I piloted in 2012.

Demystifying *Shariah* usually starts with a discussion on the socially constructed dimensions of 'gender' and 'sexuality', followed by a session on Quranic hermeneutics focusing specifically on gender and sexuality. This leads to separate sessions analysing *hadith* and *fiqh*, followed by a chronology of developments in the constructions of *shariah* throughout Islamic history. In today's shortened version, Rabia will lead a brief discussion on the Quran and Ebrahim on the *hadith*.

This is Rabia and Ebrahim's first experience in facilitating this session so I agree to assist them in case they get stuck. They are aware that in addition to discussing content, they should also refrain from displaying bias towards particular *madhahib*, or schools of jurisprudence, which is also SIS's approach. Like SIS, however, Imaan now presents these sessions as a means to advocate for more egalitarian and inclusive interpretations of Islam, specifically regarding gender and sexuality.

At the end of Rabia's and Ebrahim's presentations, some hands go up. Abdul and Ananta, in particular, want to know if we more fully address what the Quran 'says' about homosexuality. Ebrahim assures them that we do, and I add that for this, we also draw upon the work of the openly gay American Muslim scholar Scott Siraj Al-Haqq Kugle[71].

Others are interested in whether the Quranic narrative of the Prophet Lot is the same as Jewish and Christian narratives of the Biblical Lot. I say we do not have the benefit of a Jewish presence today but invite Giles, who is an Anglican priest, to tell us how some gay Christians approach the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament. According to Giles, inclusive Christians understand the story of Lot in the book of

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[70] I explained my involvement with Sisters in Islam and how I introduced 'Demystifying *Shariah*' into Imaan in more detail in Chapter 1.2.3.

[71] I reviewed his work in detail in Chapter 2.1.1.

Genesis as condemning arrogance, inhospitality and male rape, not consensual and loving same-sex relationships. I respond that this is similarly how Kugle and other progressive Muslims interpret the parallel Quranic narratives. I add that Imaan does not, however, seek to impose this interpretation of Islam on anyone but instead advocates diverse interpretations. Ananta smirks and says, 'Oh, I fully intend to hit my parents on the head with this stuff.'*

After the discussion ends, Ebrahim asks if I could lead congregational Asar prayers and a post-Asar *zikr*[72], since there are still a few hours before *iftar*. I agree, and before we start we clarify to everyone that Imaan practices mixed-gender, non-sectarian prayers which are also open to non-Muslims. We also make it clear that congregational prayers in Imaan are not obligatory, so those who opt not to pray can relax and chat outside. About a third of the attendees do not participate, but Giles joins us and follows all the prayer movements.

Over the next couple of hours, there is a steady trickle of new people arriving for the fast-breaking. Soon, we decide to play a guessing game in a large circle to distract ourselves from thirst and hunger. By the time *iftar* arrives, the table at the back of the room is laden with samosas, biryani, *halal* pizza, homemade Vietnamese summer rolls, chapatti, and different curries. The number of people in the room has tripled.

When it's time for Maghrib prayers, Salman asks if I'd like to lead, but I suggest it would be better for someone else to have a turn and ask Luqman if he'd like to[73]. Luqman accepts and some of us break to pray in a corner of the room while several others go on eating and chatting.

When it's time for Giles and me to leave, I lose track of the number of Imaan members I hug and give *salam* to. These goodbyes are especially long because I inform them that I'm going back to Malaysia in a few days and will be spending Eid-al-Fitr[74] there with my family. Several people say they will make *dua* (supplications) for me and my family and wish me a wonderful trip.

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[72] Devotional chanting and supplications usually associated with Sufi expressions of Islam.

[73] Imaan's policy is to enable as many people taking turns leading prayers as possible – men, women, Sunnis, Shiis, newer and older members, etc.

[74] The end-of-Ramadan feast.

4.1.2 Kuala Lumpur

Two Saturdays later, I am with two gay Malay men in a suburb on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur just before *buka puasa*. I first met Dax and Zainal, both in their early 30s, at a presentation I gave at SIS in November 2011[75]. I stayed in touch and they eventually agreed to participate in my study – I conducted in-depth interviews with them during my first research visit in 2012.

This time, when I informed them on Facebook about my return to Malaysia, Dax immediately asked, 'Would you like to attend a *buka puasa* here?'* I told him I would be more than happy to, asking him to tell me more about it. He said it's organised by a group of 'bears' in KL. After checking with the organiser, i.e. the Bear King, Dax told me I had been given the green light[76].

We are now walking in the grounds of the Bear King's condominium complex. Dax and Zainal are not fasting, but I am. On our way, we bump into three Malay men getting out of a car and carrying several bags of food. Dax and Zainal recognise two of them, hugging them and giving *salam*. I give *salam*, clasp hands with all three men and introduce myself and learn that they have also come for the Bear King's *buka puasa*.

The Bear King hosts at least one *buka puasa* gathering at his house every year. He also hosts other parties, for example during the birthdays of some people within the circle of bears and their friends. Usually, it's a very mixed crowd in terms of ethnic and religious background, but Dax tells me that tonight might be more predominantly Malay and Muslim because it's Ramadan. It's mostly attended by gay and bisexual men but sometimes their heterosexual male and female friends attend, too.

When we finally get into the Bear King's condominium, we are greeted by a dining table spilling over with food. I am embarrassed because I had no time to bring anything special but the Bear King greets me warmly and tells me not to worry – there'll be plenty.

The house is a stylish duplex that the Bear King shares with his live-in partner, Goh, a heavyset, polite and soft-spoken Chinese Malaysian man. Dax, Zainal and I

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[75] The presentation was based on my MA dissertation which examined the impacts of LGBT activism within the Church of England.

[76] Dax and Zainal are not bears, and neither am I – the Bear King's parties are meant to be inclusive.

make our way to the plush living room area, where some men are already lounging on the huge sofa, the soft rug, or among scattered, giant cushions.

Soon, one of the Malay men announces to everyone, 'It's time to *berbuka*!' Some ask, 'Are you sure? It's not 7.30pm yet, is it?' The Malay guy says, 'Yes, because we're in Petaling Jaya, we're breaking at 7.28pm, not 7.30pm.' A white Canadian rolls his eyes and whispers to me with a sneer, 'What, so is it a different time in the State of Johor[77] then?' I reply, 'Yes, it's different in Johor.'*

Soon, different conversation circles form and I find myself in one with the Bear King. I tell him about my research topic and he nods vigorously and says, 'Yes, look, there's a prayer space upstairs and it's always full during my *buka puasa* gatherings because there will be people who want to pray.' He continues, 'Why should it be a big deal? You can be Muslim and you can be gay – why should people be so judgemental?' He adds that his bookshelf has an entire section on theology.*

At around 10pm, I find myself in another circle in the plush living room. Surrounding me are: Harun, a funny, loud Malay man in his 40s, wearing *baju Melayu*[78]; Walt, his Australian partner, also in his 40s and wearing *baju Melayu* and a *songkok*[79]; Charlie, a soft-spoken Chinese bear in his 30s; Saloma, a campy, cheerful Malay man in his 30s; Ning, a Malay-Javanese man in his 40s; Goh; the Bear King; and Zainal.

Soon, Harun starts trying to recall the names of the gay venues that began mushrooming in KL from the 1980s, with others jumping in and trying to remember exactly what had happened, when, and where. Harun says he remembers that when Crooked Corner[80] opened in the mid-1990s, they were very 'radical' and pushed for 'gay rights' – he corrects himself and says 'not gay rights, but gay lifestyle'. They even held a striptease performance once where he remembers the first performer stripping to complete nudity. But when the second performer had just taken his clothes off, the music stopped and the lights came on – the police were 'raiding' the place. There was an announcement on the sound system about the raid and the police escorted the performer, clad only in a towel at this point, out of the building.

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[77] The southernmost State in Peninsula Malaysia.

[78] Traditional Malay costume.

[79] Headgear for men.

[80] Not the actual name of the venue.

Harun says, 'I was watching him, hoping and hoping that the towel would fall off but I didn't say this to anyone. Suddenly a man beside me blurted out, wouldn't it be sweet if that towel just came off!' Everyone guffaws.*

4.1.3 Comparing the *iftaris*

How are these two *iftaris* related to wider perceptions of gay Muslims as 'out of place' or embodying moral 'pollution'? Douglas (2002: 48) suggests that we can have different ways of 'treating anomalies'. Negative treatments include ignoring or condemning them and positive treatments might involve creating a 'new pattern of reality' in which the anomaly has a place. These *iftaris* can therefore be seen as positive attempts by gay Muslims in London and Kuala Lumpur to create a 'new pattern of reality' in which they have a place. What are the building blocks of this alternative reality?

Most significantly, the *iftaris* were an opportunity for gay Muslims to celebrate a religious ritual collectively *as* gay Muslims. The Imaan *iftari* explicitly catered for people of diverse sexualities and genders, while the Bear King's *buka puasa* was a coming together of a particular subculture ('bears') within Malaysia's wider gay 'scene'. Despite catering for a specific subculture, though, the Bear King's *buka puasa* parties are open to non-bears, non-Muslims and non-gays, so long as he finds these individuals trustworthy.

Imaan and the Bear King were able to convene these gatherings because they were held in urban spaces that those attending could feel safe in[81], with much of the prior organising happening online. The Bear King had initially forwarded his *buka puasa* invitation to a closed list of contacts on the social networking site Facebook. Similarly, Imaan publicises its *iftaris* via Facebook, Twitter and its online forum, only disclosing a public meeting point at which an Imaan trustee will lead the attendees to the actual venue.

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[81] The London-based Imaan *iftaris* are usually held in the home of Ehsan, a senior Imaan trustee. I have attended Ehsan's *iftaris* in the past and observed a similar light-heartedness there as I did at the Bear King's *buka puasa*. On this particular Saturday, however, Ehsan's place was unavailable and therefore some other Imaan trustees had organised for an alternative space. The proposal to conduct a Demystifying *Shariah* session at this *iftari* was also a first within Imaan.

The existence of these urban spaces allows Imaan and the Bear King to design these *iftaris* as social events and also for attendees to exchange information and insights on their specific concerns. At the Imaan *iftari*, they discussed various aspects of Islam as well as Imaan's upcoming activities. At the Bear King's party, they also discussed various aspects of religion and the gay scene in Kuala Lumpur but more informally. Furthermore, these *iftaris* were opportunities for Muslim sexual minorities to express Islam in whatever ways they felt comfortable, for example in the non-coercive, inclusive observance of congregational or individual prayers.

Within these settings, the gay Muslims who attended not only felt comfortable expressing Islam in their own way but also critiquing religious and non-religious anti-homosexual attitudes. In Kuala Lumpur, this was a bit more indirect and light-hearted despite moral policing being sanctioned and encouraged by the state, while the Demystifying *Shariah* workshop provided a more direct, structured discussion in London. In fact, the discussions and other practices in the Imaan *iftari* were specifically about *creating* expressions of Islam that were inclusive of gender, sexual and religious diversity[82].

Lastly, these *iftaris* also provided those who attended an opportunity to encounter people of diverse backgrounds, including gay non-Muslims. At the Imaan *iftari*, this even facilitated a critical exchange about how Christian and Muslim sexual minorities share similar strategies to interpret their sacred texts more inclusively.

On the whole, both *iftaris* provided their gay Muslim attendees with opportunities to express their religious and sexual identities without being harassed by anti-gay or anti-Muslim actors. They are examples of how gay Muslims can avoid or bypass formal and informal Islamic authorities by making use of urban spaces to gather and interact safely enjoyably. They illustrate how people who are 'out of place' can forge social networks and use spaces creatively to foster a sense of individual belonging and group solidarity. Yet, what were the pivotal points in these gay Muslims' own lives that enabled them eventually to gather and invest the *iftaris* with these meanings?

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[82] I discuss these 'gay expressions of Islam' in more detail in Chapter 6.

4.2 Making, unmaking and remaking Islam

In this section, I introduce a Malaysian Muslim, Rohana, in her late 20s, to show how gay Muslims shape their understandings of Islam based on a combination of external interactions and internal reflection. After discussing Rohana's story, I compare it with the stories of Ebrahim and Rasheed, two gay Muslim men in their early 20s from Britain. To understand how they have fashioned their individual understandings of Islam in relation to their sexuality, I draw upon Robert Merton's typology of our 'role adjustments' in different circumstances.

4.2.1 Rohana's story

8pm, Thursday night. I am in Petaling Jaya, a satellite city of Kuala Lumpur, for a game of indoor football, or futsal. I am in a building that looks like a warehouse housing four futsal pitches. Three are currently occupied by teams of young men who appear to be of various ethnic backgrounds. I enter the fourth pitch, the only one with women, one of whom is Rohana while the other two are our mutual friends.

Soon, the pitch fills up with a few more men and women including two Malay women, Rafika and Elisa. Rafika, a mutual acquaintance of Rohana's and mine, has her hair in a ponytail and appears quite feminine. Elisa is wearing a red football jersey and black shorts. With her glasses and almost-Mohawk hairstyle, she – like Rohana – looks like a teenage boy. Rafika and Elisa are Muslim and I know that they are a couple, but I wonder if everyone else does as well.

When the game is over we gather around some tables and chairs in the lobby area, panting and sweaty. We are surrounded by grunting, laughing, and swearing men on the other pitches, other men lounging in the lobby, and the blaring of a sports channel on television. I am gulping down a sports drink and notice that Elisa is on Rafika's lap, in full view of everyone. Occasionally, they hug and are physically affectionate, and I'm surprised that they are so openly tactile here.

After playing futsal with Rohana and her friends, I understand why she describes these friends, who see themselves as Muslim feminists, as her community. Rohana is what many Malays would call a '*pengkid*' – a colloquial, often pejorative term describing masculine women who desire feminine women. In October 2012, just

after a Malaysian television station ran a documentary series portraying *pengkids* in a negative light, she was verbally and physically harassed on the street near her home.

Tonight, however, Rohana feels safe and appears to be enjoying herself. She later told me she did not expect to become friends with so many Muslim feminists – she was merely looking for a job in Kuala Lumpur to pay the bills and ended up getting to know them through work. When she found out just how strongly feminist so many of her colleagues and their friends were she thought they were 'deviant' and freaked out:

> *I was like, oh my God, who are these people? I didn't say anything to anyone [...] But I was like, because everyone [...] was so kind, very kind, that was what made me feel that [...] all the negative perceptions people have about them, they're twisted*[83].

Rohana is comfortable with these Muslim feminist friends knowing about her gender identity and sexual preference. In fact, through the influence of numerous discussions with these friends and other feminist activists, Rohana now says, 'I prefer to describe myself as "trans man[84]" rather than *pengkid*.' When I ask her why, she says she agrees with the activists she's met that '*pengkid*' is derogatory. She says, '*Because they say that* "trans man" doesn't mean that you have to go for *sex reassignment* surgery or anything. If you just, how to say, want to dress this way, you can *call yourself this* [....] *I think I prefer this.*'

When Rohana was growing up, she believed that Islam condemned people like her. In secondary school, she had several girlfriends and was often reprimanded by one of her Islamic Studies teachers who caught on to this. The teacher made her attend counselling sessions during which Rohana was told that Allah had meted out a terrible punishment to the people of Lot, which troubled and terrified her. Now, however, she says:

> *I feel that Islam is not a religion that only pinpoints people's faults. I feel that actually Islam is more like, to me, when I read the*

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[83] For example, the constant demonising of SIS by state and non-state Islamic actors is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.2.2.

[84] I.e. transgender man, but she is still comfortable being referred to with the feminine pronoun.

translations [of the Quran] *bit by bit, what I understand, the Quran, Islam, it's asking us to live our lives, to do good for humanity, I feel it's that. It's not like, you only find fault in people, and you want to punish, punish, punish, punish.*

According to Rohana she revised her views on Islam based on her own study of the Quran and reflections on it. Yet it was her Muslim feminist friends who first exposed her to alternative ways of looking at Islam. It was probably a *combination* of meaningful interactions with friends and her own individual initiative that led Rohana to develop an understanding of Islam affirming her gender identity and sexuality. Would all gay Muslims respond to this combination of external and internal factors in the same way? In the next section, I further explore how and why some of them develop different pathways as Muslims.

4.2.2 Adaptations of faith

Rohana's story allows us to glimpse how some people develop specific self-understandings and behaviours based on wider social and cultural pressures and their own internal aspirations. Merton (1968: 672-673) divides the various social and cultural constraints into two 'elements' – '[the] first consists of culturally defined goals, purposes and interests', while the second 'defines, regulates, and controls the acceptable modes of achieving these goals'.

Merton (1968: 677–678) suggests that individuals adapt to the structural conditions of society in five broad ways: *conformists* accept dominant 'culture goals' and socially regulated 'norms'; *innovators* accept the goals but reject the socially regulated ways of achieving them; *ritualists* reject the goals but conform to the norms; *retreatists* reject the goals *and* norms; and *rebels* want to overturn existing structures and introduce a 'new social order' altogether. Merton clarifies that he is not freezing people into personality types but categorising their 'role adjustments in specific situations'. One useful way of examining Rohana's experiences with Islam is to look at the 'role adjustments' she has made at specific points in her life.

Like many Muslims, Rohana was brought up to believe that Islam forbids homosexuality and non-conformity to clear-cut gender roles. Islamic teachings and practices have always defined the background of her life. She attended a state-run all-girls' school which, in the late 1990s, made it compulsory for all Muslim students to wear the *tudung*. Still, many girls only put the *tudung* on after they entered the school gates and would take it off as soon as school was dismissed. Many also did not wear *tudung* for sports practise or other extra-curricular activities[85].

At home, Rohana's late father would read and memorise the Quran every day and listen to daily Islamic sermons on the local radio station. Once, when Rohana and her siblings were watching a local variety programme on television he told them those sorts of shows were sinful.

All of Rohana's sisters and her mother now wear the *tudung* but her mother has never pressured her to wear it. When Rohana started cutting her hair very short at the age of 13 – like a boy, she says – her mother never scolded her or asked her to stop. Rohana says, however, '*After a while, when I was like 17 or so, when all my cousins started wearing* tudung*, she started, she didn't ask me to wear the* tudung*, but she persuaded me to keep my hair long.*' Rohana did not comply.

Thus, even though it appears that Rohana's childhood was infused with normative and conservative interpretations of Islam, in practise her mother and many of her friends did not expect her to absorb every last drop. In fact Rohana, like many other gay Muslims I encountered in Malaysia and Britain, experienced a range of everyday expressions of Islam and adapted or rebelled depending on the circumstances. Like Rohana, all my participants reported initially believing that Islam forbids homosexuality in the strongest terms.

How can Merton's scheme of 'role adjustments' help illuminate how someone like Rohana responds to the cultural goals and socially-regulated norms of Islam in Malaysia? For one, Rohana's father and teachers could be seen as conformists, but Rohana alternated between innovating in certain spheres and making a show of obeying the rules ('ritualism') in others. For example, she once did accept widespread cultural expectations for Muslim women – to cover their hair and get married – yet found ways to resist the *tudung* and explored romantic relationships with girls.

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[85] I attended an all-boys secondary school in the mid-1990s which was near an all-girls school and witnessed similar dynamics around the *tudung*.

After finding her Muslim feminist friends, however, Rohana started questioning punitive expressions of Islam while trying to make the religion personally meaningful by innovating on her understandings of its dominant teachings. This is how she has developed a new perception of Islam as an inclusive religion, and has adapted and transformed it for herself within *her* particular circumstances.

Gay Muslims in Britain make similar 'role adjustments' within a different social context of Islam. Take the experiences of Rasheed and Ebrahim, who are both of South Asian background and grew up in an industrial, working class area in the northwest of England. Rasheed and Ebrahim are second generation British Indians and their parents made them attend the local *madrasa* (mosque school) every day after school. Ebrahim says:

> So, we learned how to […] read the Quran in Arabic. We read *kitabs*
> or books on, you know, how to pray *namaz*, how to do *wuzu* (ritual
> ablutions), learn prayers, you know, about burial, quite a variety of
> things. It was mainly a lot of […] it was kind of things you are and
> you aren't allowed to do in Islam. Even to the minutiae of how to
> sleep in the *sunnah*[86] way.

In Ebrahim's Indian Muslim neighbourhood, parents sent their children to the mosque to socialise them into accepting the community's goal to live as Muslims in Britain. The mosque teachers thus helped socialise the neighbourhood's children into becoming 'good' Indian Muslims in Britain. Nevertheless, Ebrahim says he was dissatisfied with the lack of intellectual content in his *madrasa* studies:

> It was, you know, this is Islam, what we are telling you. You do this,
> don't question it. There's no need to ask questions because this is
> what it is. Nothing was justified in terms of, well, we do this because
> in the Quran it says this. It's just, 'We do this.'

In his account, Ebrahim is not reacting against the content of the Quran per se but rather the authoritarianism of his mosque teachers. Rasheed experienced something

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[86] I.e. as practised by the Prophet Muhammad.

similar and explains how his parents would echo his mosque teachers' attitudes: 'I used to be in that situation and that made me used to hate Islam so much, like, you know, go do *namaz*, go do *namaz*, pray your *namaz*, dadadada, digging at you all the time.'

Like Rohana, Ebrahim and Rasheed grew up in environments where the closest Muslim authority figures in their lives – parents and teachers – were highly conformist and authoritarian. However, even though Ebrahim and Rasheed grew up in near-identical contexts, Ebrahim's response alternated between innovation and ritualism, whereas Rasheed showed flashes of rebellion even from a young age.

Rasheed has a learning disability which went undiagnosed throughout his childhood and he used to get hit for not reciting the Quran fluently. He says:

> First I used to accept it. Second, I used to be like, this is unacceptable, and because of that, I'll show you what I'm made of. And I used to terrorise the mosque teachers, and they used to hate me [….] I used to do so many things, like, oh God, like we used to lock the doors of the mosque, the teachers can't come in [….] (Laughs) I remember one point, finding loads of dead spiders and putting them onto where the mosque teacher sits, and he sat on the spiders (giggles) and the other kids screamed really loud.

Rasheed explains further that his rebellious actions were only possible because he was supported by other mosque 'terrorists'. Rasheed and Ebrahim, unlike Rohana, then both went through a *retreatist* stage as well, where they contemplated renouncing Islam altogether, i.e. its goals *and* norms. Like Rohana, however, Rasheed and Ebrahim have now found what they describe as a community that accepts them – Imaan. This means that Imaan provides them a safe space from the anti-gay attitudes they associate with their Indian Muslim community's version of Islam and the anti-Muslim attitudes they experience sometimes among certain sectors of British society, including the gay scene.

Coming into contact with Imaan has also allowed them to rebel against homophobic and misogynistic expressions of Islam, and to innovate between conventional Islamic practices and new understandings of it as an inclusive religion. They value this aspect of Imaan, regarding it as their 'community'. Ebrahim says:

Imaan is a community that I'm really grateful for. I think, you know, within Imaan, some of these people I'd pick out for being kind of like my family, and everybody else is extended family as it were. So yeah, the queer Muslim community I think are my community.

Even so, Ebrahim and Rasheed innovate and rebel differently from each other. For example, Rasheed still steadfastly keeps *halal* in terms of food and drink, while Ebrahim is not too concerned.

These stories of Ebrahim, Rasheed and Rohana illustrate the options open to Muslims in modern societies to engage with Islam in different situations and at different stages in their lives. At every step, these Muslims could respond in any of the five ways that Merton has outlined, and they might even alternate between more than one response at any point. They might comply with the surrounding cultural and social expectations of Islam by choice to some extent *and* because they feel pressured to conform to particular conventions and norms. Others may have gone through similar experiences as Ebrahim and Rasheed, but decide to retreat from or renounce Islam altogether. This is a viable option in a country like Britain, where the state does not deliberately impose legal and political constraints on affiliating or disaffiliating with Islam. In Malaysia, where there are heavy legal, political and social penalties for renouncing Islam, retreatism might often take the guise of *ritualism*, i.e. rejecting the goals of Islam but keeping up the appearance of adhering to its norms[87].

The experiences of not conforming to social and cultural expectations of gender and sexuality lead some gay Muslims to fluctuate between or experiment with conformist and non-conformist expressions of Islam. Many of those who end up conforming would probably have chosen to do so thoughtfully and carefully but there is no guarantee that they will 'settle' into this role permanently. In the next section, I discuss how culture and social structure shape how people express themselves as gendered and sexual beings.

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[87] In fact, when I separately approached two individuals for interviews in Malaysia – Dax and Wahid – they were initially doubtful that they were the 'right' people. Both said they privately do not identify as Muslim anymore even though by official state categorisation they were 'Muslim'. I reassured them that I had no negative views about this but wanted to understand the various aspects of their life journeys in relation to Islam and their sexuality and they agreed to participate.

4.3 Naming romantic and erotic desires

When people decide to adopt particular identity labels, they are not necessarily or merely describing what they are − they are also announcing particular preferences which allow them to associate with others who share these preferences. A person's preferred label for sexual identity therefore describes his or her sexual *and* social preferences. For example, a 'queer' woman and 'bisexual' man might use 'queer' and 'bisexual' to describe their sexual attraction to both men and women. These labels might also signify their preference for a particular imagined community of 'queers' or 'bisexuals', or a politics of being 'queer' rather than 'bisexual' and vice versa.

This section looks at how gay Muslims construct logics of sexuality for themselves and addresses the notion that 'gay' is an 'imported' or 'imposed' term when applied to Muslim sexual minorities. I show how, instead of passively accepting it as an 'imposed' label, gay Muslims play and experiment with a range of foreign and local terms for self-expression. I focus on examples from Malaysia that especially complicate the idea that English terms are incompatible with Malay or 'local' concepts because they are 'foreign' or 'Western'.

4.3.1 The logic of sexual attraction

Amin is a Malay man in his mid-20s, born and raised in a small town in the northern region of Peninsula Malaysia nearing the border with Thailand. In his teenage years, he was a promising athlete and represented Malaysia at several regional sporting events and alternated between schooling in his village and training at a sports complex in Kuala Lumpur. For the past nine years, Amin has been in a sexual and romantic relationship with Ebry, a man who is 10 years older. They live together with Ebry's mother and siblings.

Amin does not identify as gay and says he is 'straight'. When I ask what he understands about being 'gay', he confesses that it is not something that makes complete sense to him:

Is it like, I apom[88] *you first, and then when I've climaxed, I've ejaculated and everything, then you* apom *me? Is it like that? I don't know, I can't figure it out. Or is it that you both masturbate and ejaculate and you think, wow, that's nice? I have no idea.* (Laughs.) *I've never experienced it.*

Reflecting upon his incredulity about gay sex, Amin suggests that it might stem from his particular understanding of what it means to be male or female and masculine or feminine:

I'm not disgusted by [gay sex]. I just feel like, I can't imagine, how do they do it? [...] If it were me, I don't know, I couldn't do it [...] because [...] I don't desire it, right? I'm aroused by the womanly, like for example I'm aroused by this person (gestures towards Ebry). *It's like even his body is a bit feminine, so that's my taste. I like him, and I get aroused looking at him. That's what it is. If he came and was like* (he grunts like a gorilla here)*, it's over. I'll automatically go limp.*

Amin understands 'gay' as referring to masculine men who are attracted to other masculine men. As a masculine man who is attracted to feminine men *and* women, Amin concludes that he is not 'gay' but 'straight'. In fact, he also confesses being sexually active with girls since his early teens[89].

I ask, '*So is Ebry the woman, then?*'

Amin replies, '*Yes, Ebry's the woman. He counts as a woman. Isn't that right, Ebry?*'

Ebry and I giggle when he says this.

'*So, do you want to be with him forever?*'

'*Insya Allah. If God permits us to be together forever, then yes.*'

Amin's experiences and the way he articulates his sexuality seem to fly in the face of popularly understood gender and sex categories. Should we refer to him as 'gay'? He says he is not, and based on Eurocentric understandings of 'gay' some people might

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[88] Literally, 'pancake' – a euphemism for penetrative anal sex.

[89] Although he never engaged in penetrative sex, anal or vaginal.

accuse him of being in denial or in the closet. It is clear, however, that Amin does not try to deny or conceal his desire for Ebry. He sees his relationship with Ebry as homosexual in appearance but heterosexual in essence – he is, as he says, attracted to the feminine.

This means that he is also attracted to feminine women, but does this make him bisexual? He does not identify in this way – he feels and presents himself as a masculine man and is attracted only to feminine men or women. By his logic, this still makes him 'straight'.

There is no reason to doubt Amin's reasons for identifying as 'straight', his qualification that he is not anti-gay, or his love for Ebry. In fact, Amin has stood up to his colleagues and friends who have questioned his relationship with Ebry. He says he has lost many friends in this way and only stays in touch with the very few who are non-judgemental:

> *But my friends, most of them have said nasty things. Like they say Amin, what's this, going with a* darai[90]*? You were once a playboy, Amin! You liked [women's genitals]. You can still get some of that, why go for [Ebry]?*

Amin says he stands up to these friends but does not want to be too confrontational. He still wants to be able to fit in with his village community and with society in general. He therefore balances being open to his village community about his relationship with Ebry and maintaining his identity as a 'straight' man. This is possible in his village because it includes some individuals who do not conform to dominant norms of gender and sexuality, as he elaborates when I ask for examples:

> Amin: *Couples, like, a man with another man, no, there weren't any. But there's like this* ponen[91]*, what's his name, it's Haih, I think –*
> Shanon: *So he's from the same village?*
> Amin: *Yes, the same village, but he is soft, a* ponen [….] *One day he said to his mum, you know what he said? Mum, I'm pregnant. I'm*

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[90] Derogatory term for 'effeminate man' in northwestern Malay patois.

[91] The occasional pronunciation of '*pondan*' – explained in note 92 – in north-western Malay patois.

craving mangoes – could you get some for me? And his mother went along with it! She said, sure thing, I'll get some mangoes for you. So she went and announced to all the villagers that her son was pregnant. The villagers were like, how did your son get pregnant? […] Isn't he a man? The mother said how should I know? He told me he's pregnant so I'm looking for mangoes for him! I laughed until my sides hurt when I saw this.

Shanon: *But did the villagers insult or condemn them?*

Amin: *No, there were no insults, they just laughed. There was no like, look at you, your son's a* darai, *nothing that extreme [….] But in my village there are narrow-minded people, too. Not many, though. They're like two per cent or three per cent, not many of them. But the rest are OK, no problems with them.*

Ebry often follows Amin back to his village and sleeps in Amin's parents' house, calling the mother '*mum*' and the father '*dad*'. When I ask how the other villagers react to Ebry's presence, Ebry interjects and says, '*A beautiful woman is visiting their village, dear, what do you think?*' Amin confirms that Ebry gets along with the villagers.

Yet, if his village community is so tolerant, what is stopping Amin from no longer identifying as a 'straight man' to acknowledge that he is now in love with another male? One clue might be in Ebry's self-understanding of gender and sexuality, which complements Amin's. Ebry says:

I think the best word for me is I'm a *pondan*[92] [….] *Pondan* is that, I love to be a woman, dress like a woman. But I don't dress like a woman. Because, *of course*, the custom […] surrounding me, even though my mother accepts me, but I respect [the custom by not cross-dressing].

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[92] A Malay term that can be glossed as male-to-female transgender, slightly more fluid than the English 'transgender' since it could also refer to effeminate gay men. Although it can be reclaimed in a neutral or even positive sense, as Ebry does here, it is more often used pejoratively.

In Merton's terms, Ebry could be described as a 'ritualist' – even though he feels like a woman, he dresses as a man to conform to what he perceives as social and cultural expectations. However, there is no clear-cut separation between Ebry's inner disposition and his rejection of external conventions. When I ask if he identifies as transsexual, he says:

> No, I don't take myself as a transsexual. Because transsexual, in our opinion is, you are truly woman where you go for operation and you go for plastic surgery and all that to be a real woman. I can be sometimes transvestite, or a gay.

Ebry rejects the idea that he is a 'woman in a man's body' and goes on to employ multiple terms to describe his gender and sexuality. These seem to share a certain family resemblance – '*pondan*', 'transvestite' and 'gay' – but contain subtle differences in meaning. He implies they are context specific – when he cross-dresses he is a transvestite and when he does not he is gay. Yet, he also feels like a woman on the inside which is why he thinks the best of all possible words to describe himself is *pondan*. At the same time, he rejects 'transsexual' because he does not want to modify his genitalia.

When Ebry plays with these labels, he is ensuring that he can be different and still be part of his surrounding society. The region that he and Amin come from is not as urbanised as Kuala Lumpur – there are no gay nightclubs or a gay subculture there at the moment. Instead, there are spaces, such as Amin's village and Ebry's family home, where certain kinds of gender and sexuality diversity are tolerated but within traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity. In this context, it might be more appealing for Ebry to be 'neither here nor there' or 'betwixt and between' than to fix his identity as 'gay' or 'transsexual'. Similarly, it also makes it easier for Amin to continue identifying as 'straight' rather than 'gay' or 'bisexual'. For both, not explicitly or exclusively identifying as 'gay' (or 'transsexual' or 'bisexual') enables them to enjoy a relative degree of personal security and freedom in their intimate relationship.

4.3.2 Sexual consciousness: Imposed or indigenous?

The experiences of Amin and Ebry demonstrate that we need to unpack terms such as 'LGBT' or 'gay' – even when we use them as shorthand – to understand gender and sexual diversity across cultures. In a strong version of this view, Joseph Massad (2002: 372) argues that terms such as 'gay', 'LGBT', 'homosexual' and even 'heterosexual' come out of a tradition of 'Western sexual epistemology'. He argues that in the Arab world they are adopted only by 'Westernised', upper class and middle class Arabs who 'remain a minuscule minority among those men who engage in same-sex relations and who do not identify as "gay" or express a need for gay politics' (Massad, 2002: 373).

According to Massad (2002: 362), these 'Westernised' gay Arabs/Muslims collaborate with international gay rights organisations to 'liberate Arab and Muslim "gays and lesbians" from the oppression under which they allegedly live by transforming them from practitioners of same-sex contact into subjects who identify as homosexual and gay'. He argues that this liberationist impulse is driven by these activists' assumptions that gay identity is universal and compounded by stereotypes about Islam's supposed backwardness compared to the West. He concludes that such activism triggers Arab governments and Islamist ideologues to intensify 'antihomosexual' programmes to oppose the 'deviant' and 'debauched' West (Massad, 2002: 379).

Massad's argument is potentially useful insomuch that he charts the ways in which some Western pro-gay ideologues and Muslim anti-gay ideologues counter-demonise each other. According to him, in this escalating spiral of counter-demonising, it is people like Amin and Ebry who will suffer when gay rights activists insist on naming and shaming anti-gay attitudes in what they construe as 'Islam'. In the backlash, Muslim-led governments will end up picking on easy, powerless targets like Amin and Ebry first, rather than Western-based gay rights groups.

This is what Ebry himself articulates when he justifies his opposition to the Kuala Lumpur-based LGBTQ initiative, Seksualiti Merdeka:

Malaysia is not like London, or Malaysia is not like US [….] Malaysia is half Iran, and half US, *that's what it's like*. So you have to

understand that. So if you are doing *gay rights activism*, it's not the half US *part* of Malaysia *that will be there when we need them*. The half US part is okay, they can enjoy the moment with us. But the half Iran part of Malaysia? These people are orthodox and conservative [and will] attack us until we cannot stand it anymore.

Ebry sees Malaysia as polarised between the liberal, or what he glosses as the 'US', and the conservative or fundamentalist, or 'Iran' as he puts it. In his estimation, conservatives hold the balance of power. He therefore does not oppose gay rights activism because he agrees that sexual minorities should be persecuted, but because he feels that Malaysian LGBT activists are out of touch with the reality outside Kuala Lumpur. Still, it is not that he has resigned himself to the dictates of state-sanctioned Islamic authorities – in fact he calls them 'stupid'. Amin is similarly critical of the Islamic bureaucracy.

This is why Massad's argument is problematic when he posits that 'gay' Muslims only consist of middle- or upper-class elites who subscribe to a narrow 'Western sexual epistemology'. People like Ebry and Amin do not live closed lives. Even though they live far from Kuala Lumpur – and even though Amin is of rural, working-class background – they have also been exposed to and engage with so-called 'Western' styles of living and being. They adapt, modify and play with different sexual labels – 'Western' and 'indigenous' – depending on their circumstances. The difference is in how they play with their sexual identities on a personal level and how they become anxious of risks on a larger scale. They are less concerned with 'Western sexual epistemology' than the power and privilege wielded by anti-gay state and non-state actors, especially those who claim to act on behalf of Islam.

As Amin and Ebry show, on a personal level, people can play with 'imported' and 'local' concepts, trying some on in certain circumstances but not others, or mixing and matching different categories as they please. At this level, it makes little sense to speak of a divide between 'Western' or 'non-Western' sexual epistemologies or an 'imposition' of 'Western' terms upon 'indigenous' Muslims.

Attitudes can change, however, when these sexual labels become politicised at higher levels. This is what makes Ebry uncomfortable with gay rights activism in Malaysia, not with his own personal playfulness in using the term 'gay' as a self-descriptor. As Najmabadi (2011: 550) suggests, we should ask: 'What work does the

138

import do in its local context, in relation to the many other concepts and practices with which it becomes intertwined and that inform its meaning in the transplanted space?'

4.3.3 Gender pluralism and sexual autonomy

According to Peletz (2011: 661), pre-modern and early modern Muslim societies in Southeast Asia tolerated a certain level of 'gender pluralism'. He further argues that in the pre-modern era, Southeast Asian women were less socially inferior to men compared with women in Europe, East Asia, South Asia and Melanesia (Peletz, 2011: 663). In this context, he suggests, homosexual relations were 'legitimate (even imbued with sanctity)' as long as they were 'heterogender' (Peletz, 2011: 665). It was therefore permissible, for example, for *feminine* men to have romantic and sexual relationships with *masculine* men but unthinkable for masculine men to have these relationships with each other.

Ebry and Amin's relationship appears to fit into this 'heterogender' template, even though they do not consciously draw upon the myths, rituals and cosmology that Peletz refers to. There is also further evidence from the northwest of Peninsula Malaysia – where Amin and Ebry are from – that supports this logic of gender suggested by Peletz.

In the Kedah[93] State Museum, there is a row of three diorama exhibits of the region's most popular and historic traditional Malay dances. This is the museum's description of one of them:

> The *Hadrah* is a stage performance, which incorporates singing and dancing. It has heavy early Islamic and Arabic influences and its lyrics are largely in Arabic. The *Hadrah* is usually performed at wedding and circumcision ceremonies.

> The *Hadrah* performances are sung with dances performed by four *puteri* (men dressed as princesses) and a *rasuk* who is the male character. The *rasuk* provides the humour content and tries to imitate

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[93] Kedah is a State in the northwest of Peninsula Malaysia. It is one of nine monarchical States – the other four are governorates. I visited the museum on 17 August 2013.

and throw the 'princesses' out of step. Besides the singing and dancing, the *Hadrah* also includes acting in the form of short sketches. The performances, which include all three performing art forms [i.e. drama, music, and dance], are usually held at night to enhance the festivities of particular occasions.

Besides the *hadrah*, the other two Kedahan dances on display at the museum – the *mek mulung* and *jikey* – also involve female characters played by men. While not explicitly 'gay' in ways that would be intelligible to a contemporary Western audience, these dances demonstrate a history of cross-dressing and male-to-female gender-bending in the Malay world. This history forms part of the social and cultural fabric and probably informs how people like Amin and Ebry think of gender, albeit indirectly.

According to Peletz, Malay society's tolerance of 'heterogender' homosexual relationships was part of a pre-Islamic cosmological template influenced by prevalent sacred beliefs from the Indian subcontinent. After the coming of Islam and then Western colonialism, religious and political administrators and reformers began to view heterogender homosexuality and transgenderism as synonymous with pre-Islamic syncretism and became increasingly hostile towards them (Peletz, 2011: 667–668).

Peletz (2011: 676–677) argues, however, that despite the increasing stigma against homosexuality and transgenderism, such gender pluralism remains 'robust'. Peletz (2011: 673) notes that up until the 1960s, there were villages in Kelantan, a State in the northeast of Peninsula Malaysia, with 'gender transgressors known to be involved in same-sex intimacies'. These villages were known to the inhabitants of other villages, local and regional non-religious and religious authorities, and the Kelantan Sultan himself who was their royal patron. In fact, the Sultan valued these 'gender transgressors' because they were performers of *mak yong*[94], a Malay-Thai genre of courtly dance-music-drama.

While Peletz's theory can help explain a significant degree of historical and contemporary gender pluralism in Muslim Southeast Asia, it does not mean that Southeast Asia was or is entirely exceptional. In Renaissance Italy, there was also some degree of tolerance for intimate same-sex relationships that did not transgress what

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[94] The exhibit at the Kedah State Museum suggests that the Kedahan *mek mulung* shares many similarities with the Kelantanese *mak yong*.

Peletz would call 'heterogender' norms (Phillips & Reay, 2011: 6). Likewise, in Classical Athens, 'most forms of consensual male-male sexual contact' were tolerated 'provided they respected broader social hierarchies including age, status and citizenship, or instead celebrated only chaste love between men' (Phillips & Reay, 2011: 5). In fact, the Athenians of this period viewed male-male sexual activity very similarly to the Ottomans of the early modern era – they tolerated male-male erotic relationships, but saw anal penetration as immoral[95].

Peletz stresses that 'heterogender' same-sex relationships were not merely tolerated on a practical level but part of a wider *cosmological* scheme. Overall, diverse sexual expressions were tolerated but effectively confined to the 'heterogender' framework. This contrasts with contemporary liberal thinking about sexual liberty, informed by ideas of individual autonomy and rejecting state regulation of sexual relations on this basis.

People like Amin and Ebry do not have all this information at their fingertips. Still, their ability to adopt particular expressions of gender and sexuality and be accepted in some contexts appears to be part of the contemporary 'robust'-ness of gender pluralism that Peletz observes. In fact, they appear to be negotiating *competing* understandings of sexual diversity – from contemporary, liberal notions of individual sexual autonomy to traditional attitudes that tolerate 'gender transgressors' as long as they know their 'place'. Can these understandings be made compatible?

One way to examine this is to look at how Muslim sexual minorities borrow, appropriate, and embrace what Najmabadi calls 'imported categories and practices' and intertwine these with local concepts and practices. To take another example, Razak is a gay Malay man in his late 20s who playfully mixes and matches different labels for himself:

> I'm a *gay-boy*. Consider *adik-adik* amongst *the older ones*, *who are kakak-kakak*, and I consider myself as *kakak-kakak* when *I am with the adik-adik who are below me*.

The three terms here – '*gay-boy*', '*adik-adik*', and '*kakak-kakak*' – are used by Razak to describe how he adjusts to different roles. He identifies with '*gay-boy*' as an

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[95] These examples and Peletz's 'gender pluralism' argument were also discussed in Chapter 2.1.2.

umbrella category, derived from the English 'gay' and 'boy' – the combination of both in Malaysia appears to have been coined by Malay speakers. The term *adik-adik* is literally the plural of *adik* (younger male or female sibling), while *kakak-kakak* is literally the plural of *kakak* (older sister). However, '*adik-adik*' and '*kakak-kakak*' can also be used as adjectives to describe whether someone behaves like a younger sibling or an older sister, and specifically as euphemisms for varieties of homosexuality or transgenderism. By extension *abang-abang*, literally the plural of *abang* (older brother), can be a euphemism for masculine gay men.

In Razak's case, he says he identifies – or can be identified by others – as *adik-adik* or *kakak-kakak* depending on the situation. When I ask him to explain this fluidity, he says:

> All this status is given by the other person – you cannot consider yourself as one. Because whenever you consider yourself as someone, as *adik-adik* or *abang-abang*, you will not portray yourself, you will never know, because that one is given by the others. *Like* sometimes your friend *will feel, oh there, that kakak-kakak* is here now. *But you might feel that you are adik-adik.*

In other words, these terms refer as much to the roles that others expect the individual to take in a particular situation as they do to how the individual feels inside. Razak's narrative also illustrates how people can borrow, appropriate and embrace 'imported categories' alongside local concepts and practices. The terms '*kakak-kakak*', '*adik-adik*' and '*abang-abang*' qualify the kind of 'gay-boy' an individual can be – older and masculine, older and feminine, or younger and masculine or feminine. Razak thus identifies 'status' distinctions between various expressions of sexual identity, but these are constantly negotiated and renegotiated by all those who identify with 'gay' as an umbrella category.

When Razak uses these terms, he is neither self-consciously combining so-called 'Western' and 'Malay' sexual epistemologies nor drawing upon deep knowledge of historical 'gender pluralism' in the Malay Archipelago. Instead, he is picking and mixing from the potpourri of 'imported' and 'local' terms which he feels best describe him. This picking and mixing also indirectly involves negotiating liberal assumptions about sexual autonomy (implied in the label 'gay'), traditional conceptualisations of a

sexual hierarchy (implied in the labels '*adik-adik*', '*kakak-kakak*' and '*abang-abang*') and, as he suggests below, observance of Islam:

> I don't want to be called […] *murtad* [i.e. an apostate]. […] I'm still, I want to be a Muslim. And then, *however*, I'm gay. That's why I told you *before that I don't perform my obligatory prayers now*, because I feel like that would be a sin if I do so, because I'm not '*suci*' [i.e. pure]. That's what I heard – if you are not *in a state of purity*, then you cannot [perform your prayers].

In this account, Razak still wants to belong to the wider fold of Islam but thinks being gay is an obstacle to being 'properly' Muslim since it hinders the observance of Islamic rituals. This implies that he struggles between expressing his individuality as a gay person and his loyalty to the larger community of Muslims. By grappling with these questions, however, people like Razak complicate not only the boundaries between sexual identity and religion, but also between religion, ethnicity and culture.

4.4 Ethnicity: The implicit challenge

This section investigates how notions of ethnic and national identity are implicated when gay Muslims construct and claim their religious and sexual identities. I pursue this analysis by picking up on how my participants made spontaneous and recurring mentions of ethnicity in parts of the conversation which I thought were addressing religion and sexuality. I focus particularly on how my British participants of Asian background played with the term 'coconut', and how my Malaysian participants addressed the notion of the 'typical Malay'.

4.4.1 Gay Muslim 'coconuts' in Britain

Osman is a second-generation British Muslim of Bangladeshi background, born and raised in the northwest of England. He works there now and lives with his non-Muslim English boyfriend. He is in his mid-30s and is a member of Imaan. When I was planning a research trip to the North in May 2013, I informed the Imaan WhatsApp

group and almost immediately received a phone call from Osman telling me I could stay with him. I asked, 'Really?' He said, 'Of course, you're family.'*

Osman is one of the more strictly practising Muslims in Imaan. He steadfastly consumes only *halal* food and drink, never misses his five daily prayers, and often teases me – quite mercilessly – about my lack of fidelity to *halal* dietary requirements. Yet when I visited the North, he not only gave me a place to sleep in but also a lift from the train station and even took me sightseeing. During my second trip, he stocked his kitchen with the ingredients I requested – all *halal* – because I promised to cook a Malaysian dinner for him and a few other Imaan members.

During our interview, when he tells me that he identifies as gay and *likes* the label, I ask, 'But don't you, do you not feel at some point that it's very white, the word "gay"? The minute you say "gay" you think it's a white person?[96]'

Osman replies, 'But I'm a bit of a coconut anyway.'

This is one of several times that I would hear Imaan members use the word 'coconut' as a self-descriptor and also to label me.

Ebrahim also says he is a 'coconut'. When I ask him what it means, he says, with a chuckle, 'Brown on the outside, white on the inside.' I prod further, 'White in terms of what?' Ebrahim replies:

> It's kind of like, things that, especially in the community that I grew up in, [there's this whole thing of], this is what Asian people do, and this is what white people do. Even in terms of the kind of music that you like, there would be, this is the kind of music Asian people like and everything else that isn't in that group is 'white people' music.

I still don't quite understand, so I try to test some examples. 'So, for example, is Beyoncé coconut music?' I ask.

'No, Beyoncé is fine,' says Ebrahim. 'So stuff like pop music is fine. *Bhangra* is fine, you know, kind of like clubby kind of music is fine. But say you like Sufjan Stevens or Jessie Ware, or something like that, that's "white people" music.'

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[96] I phrase my question in this way probably because at this point I was still digesting postcolonial critiques of LGBT activism such as Massad's.

I personally enjoy and follow 'alternative' British and American bands and singer-songwriters – this explains why by Ebrahim's standards and those of some other Imaan members, I am a 'coconut', too. I need to understand better and go on to ask Ebrahim about television shows:

Shanon: So if you watch *Modern Family*[97], is that –

Ebrahim: No, […] they (non-'coconut' Asians) wouldn't really get *Modern Family*. *Modern Family* is probably white people stuff. *Malcolm in the Middle*[98] is white people stuff.

Shanon: *The Big Bang Theory*[99] is white people stuff?

Ebrahim: *The Big Bang Theory* is kind of OK.

Shanon: Because there's a brown person in it[100]?

Ebrahim: Yeah, exactly.

Ebrahim: Stuff like *Miranda*[101] is OK.

Shanon: Really?

Ebrahim: Yeah, *Miranda*'s fine.

Shanon: How come?

Ebrahim: It's on BBC1[102]. It's OK. (Chuckles.)

Thus, while Ebrahim uses the word 'coconut' to describe himself and explain some of his preferences, he also admits he cannot define it consistently or coherently. Rasheed also used the word 'coconut' once as a shorthand term to explain his response to a particular incident, and I asked him if he thought of himself as one:

In [the town I grew up in] I was. I was, because I'm the one that wears skinnies[103], I'm the one that would straighten his hair, have long hair,

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[97] A very popular and critically acclaimed American sitcom that is also popular in Britain.

[98] Another popular and critically acclaimed American sitcom that has now ended but gets repeated on British television.

[99] Another popular and critically acclaimed American sitcom that is also popular in Britain.

[100] The Hindu, Indian astrophysicist Dr Rajesh Koothrappali, played by Kunal Nayyar.

[101] A popular British sitcom, with an all-white cast.

[102] Suggesting that BBC1 is 'popular' and hence acceptable to British Asians.

you know. I'm the one that doesn't have a [local] accent, that '*innit bruv*'[104] kind of attitude. I'm the one that's well-spoken in English. But when I came out of that area, I'm the one that's so Indian that eats nothing but chilli sauce, you know? So, I'm in a limbo […], because [back where I come from] I'm like the *gora*[105], I'm the white one, you know […] hangs around with white people, black people, what the hell is he doing? And then like in Liverpool, I'm the one that couldn't eat chips without chilli sauce (giggles), you know, like I love my Bollywood, I love my Indian dramas, I love speaking in Hindi with people.

Rasheed, Ebrahim and Osman do not use 'coconut' pejoratively, even though they acknowledge that it has negative connotations among many British Asians. Rather, they partially reclaim it for themselves and use it light-heartedly, with funny examples and lots of giggles.

It appears, then, that a 'coconut' – adapting from Douglas – is an 'out of place' Asian person. To go even further, it appears that the gay British Muslims who partially reclaim it are responding to particular cultural complexities in their everyday lives. In Rasheed's case, he feels and is perceived as 'white on the inside' when he is among the Asian community in his hometown, but suddenly becomes 'Asian on the inside' when among his white-majority circle of friends elsewhere.

A 'coconut' might therefore simply be an Asian individual who tries to conform to so-called 'white' British values and tastes. However, Rasheed, Ebrahim and Osman appear to be more nuanced and non-conformist than this, neither conforming to the cultural and social expectations of the communities they grew up in nor to so-called 'white' British society. Yet they all identify as British first and foremost.

These cultural and ethnic dimensions create a further level of complexity for gay *white* British Muslims. For example, Nadia is a white English convert in her late 20s – she uses the term 'revert' – in a relationship with Carmen, who is also white but non-

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[103] I.e. jeans.

[104] Working class slang – literally, 'Isn't it, brother?' but basically meaning, 'Yes, friend.'

[105] Urdu/Hindi for 'white'.

religious. Nadia eschews all sexual labels and says she finds it difficult to 'fit in'. When I asked her to explain the biggest challenge about fitting in, she said:

> I think people assume because I'm white, I don't know anything [about Islam] […] Last time I went to *Jumuah* (Friday prayers) […] I read two *rakah* (prostrations or prayer cycles) when I entered the *masjid* (mosque) and then like I sat against the wall. This girl next to me was like, oh, and then I started to take my socks off because I was going to do *wudu* (ablutions), and this girl who was sitting there was like, you know you should read *salah* (prayers) with your socks on. And I just turned and I was like, actually there's two schools of thought. One is that women can have their feet and their hands showing and the face, and one that's just hands and face. And she kind of looked at me as if to say, oh, you do know stuff, you know what I mean?

Although the girl in the mosque did not explicitly say she was correcting Nadia *because* Nadia was white, Nadia perceived this to be the case. In the mosque, she felt treated like an 'out of place' white person. However, Nadia did not use any terms that paralleled 'coconut' to explain her 'out of place' white-ness. Yet this example also suggests that there is a wider perception of a shared boundary between ethnicity and religion or, more specifically, between being non-white and Muslim.

When I first started interacting with the Imaan community, I thought that I made friends with many of them so quickly because we shared similar experiences about being gay and Muslim. It was only through more sustained fieldwork and in-depth interviews that I recognised the implicit ethnic dimension in our interactions. I realised how much pleasure my new friends took in expressing themselves as 'coconuts' and that they embraced me as a fellow 'coconut', too.

These expressions of what it means to be a 'coconut' could easily be glossed over as a symptom of so-called 'Westernisation' of non-Western peoples. It is easy to take a cue from Massad's criticism of 'upper' and 'middle' class, 'Westernised' Arabs who self-identify as 'gay' and assume that Rasheed, Ebrahim and Osman are also similarly privileged. Actually, the three of them – like almost every other Imaan member I encountered in the northwest of England – are second-generation British Asians brought

up in working-class families in areas where they witnessed or experienced varying degrees of anti-Asian racism.

They also know of British Muslims of similar backgrounds who, unlike them, have 'given up' on Muslim or British society – Merton's 'retreatists' – or who have chosen to rebel by joining extreme or radical Muslim movements. Theirs, however, appears to be a different kind of innovation or rebellion shaped by their surrounding social and cultural environments. Identifying as 'coconuts' allows them to claim a greater degree of belonging in Britain while retaining aspects of their culture, ethnicity and religion that matter to them.

Najmabadi (2011: 550) argues that we are not talking about 'just words' when we unpack categories of gender and sexuality, in this case concepts such as 'gay'. I would also argue that for these gay British Muslims, identifying as 'gay' is related to reclaiming the concept of 'coconut' which is not 'just' a word they joke about. Rather, it enables them to bridge their gay, Asian, Muslim and British identities and to negotiate multi-faceted roles within society.

In Najmabadi's (2011: 534) focus on Iran, she argues that transgender activism there is not merely a 'state-driven and controlled' project, but rather is 'part of the on-going and volatile process of state-formation itself'. She argues, 'This process continues to shape and re-shape, fracture and re-fracture, order and re-order what we name "the state".' Gay British Muslims are part of this shaping and reshaping, fracturing and re-fracturing, ordering and reordering of wider notions of what it means to be British and Muslim. Reclaiming a word like 'coconut' – which has ethnic connotations – to explain their sexuality is a powerful way of challenging and redrawing the boundaries between ethnicity, religion, nation and sexuality. To examine this further, I move to the concept of the 'typical Malay' in Malaysia to compare what 'coconuts' and 'typical Malays' can tell us about gay Muslim identities in different social contexts of Islam.

4.4.2 The enduring myth of the 'typical Malay'

Mohamad Abu Bakar, a historian at Universiti Malaya, is onstage, wearing a *songkok* and a *batik* shirt. He has just given the keynote lecture at this seminar on the uplifting of Malaysia's Islamic laws, organised by the Syariah Section of the Attorney-

General's Chambers[106]. He has speculated on the origins and evolution of Islam in Malaysia – one of his propositions is that 'Malaysia is an evolving Islamic state' – and is nearing the end of his presentation. The audience consists of around 70 to 100 rank-and-file and senior civil servants from Malaysia's many state-formed or state-backed Islamic institutions. As a full-time doctoral candidate, I was able to register for this event and pay a concessionary fee.

Mohamad is critiquing what he alleges as Muslim or Malay support for President Barack Obama of the US. '*Yes, we worship Obama, Obama's skin is black*,' he says. But, he continues, 'Obama is an embodiment of American values.' He's still a Democrat, some maintain, distinguishing him from the Republicans, but after he has been in power for a while, we think, '*Oh, looks like Obama's the same as the rest [in his attitude towards the Muslim world]*.' Mohamad questions why Malays fell for Obama in the first place and answers, 'Because Malays are naïve and gullible.'

Later, in the question-and-answer session, Mohamad gives some clues as to what constitutes this naïveté and gullibility. In the 1950s, he says, Malays were obsessed with Bollywood movies, memorising every single song and line of dialogue. Now they are obsessed with American and Latin soap operas like *Ugly Betty*. Also, he says, the Malay newspapers are only good for finding out which cat has become road-kill for the day. The historian implies therefore that Malays are not only naïve and gullible but also capricious and shallow.

He is addressing a room that is more than 90 percent Malay and is meant to be supporting the Malaysian state's elevation of the position of Islam, and by extension Malay privileges. How, then, can he get away with stereotyping and essentialising 'the Malays'? More to the point, what does this have to do with Malaysian Muslim sexual minorities?

A few days after the lecture, I interviewed Zainal, a Malay man in his early 30s identifying as 'queer'. Zainal explained to me that he could not fully connect with some of his acquaintances because they were 'very Malay'. Zainal is Malay, too, but I wanted to understand what made someone 'very' Malay and how Zainal was different. So I asked him if he wanted to be 'more' Malay. He said no and explained:

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[106] Discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.2.1.

I think it's associated with all this bad […] herd mentality […] in my opinion. I mean, I'm not being PC [i.e. politically correct] at all. But this is what I need to express. The fact that Melayu, it's a bad brand here lah[107], for me lah, personally. Because the establishment of this Bumiputera[108] and Melayu, Malay pride, and Malay superiority, [it makes me cringe], hence I don't feel the need to associate with Melayu lah.

Zainal struggled against what he saw as a pervasive discourse of Malay-ness, which he understood as simultaneously supremacist and disempowering (i.e., 'herd mentality'). I asked him if he agreed with Mohamad's characterisation of Malays as 'naïve and gullible' and he snapped back, 'Of course not!'

On the other end of the ideological divide is Ebry, who said he identified as Malay, but believed that Malays generally *were* backward. He perceived Chinese Malaysians as being unified and always acting in solidarity, whereas Malays were riven by intra-ethnic pettiness. In his perception, Chinese Malaysian entrepreneurs, for example, were eager to help each other out, unlike Malay Malaysian entrepreneurs.

Malays? No, they get envious if someone starts a new business. [They will think] let's put a hex on them, let them die! That is the Malays. Muslims, you know? Setting up partners with Allah [by engaging in black magic]. Are they not afraid of going to hell? [And yet] they say only pondans go to hell.

This reference to a primordial 'Malay'-ness came up again when I spoke to Amin while Ebry was present. Amin was telling me about how he did not really feel comfortable hanging out with his old friends anymore:

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[107] A Malay suffix that many Malaysians also use when speaking English to emphasise certain words or phrases.

[108] A state-coined term, literally meaning 'princes of the soil' as explained further in note 56, Chapter 3.2.2.

Amin: *With my other friends, I don't know. They're* exposed [to other ideas], *but like in terms of wanting to mix with Ebry it's a bit difficult* –

Ebry: (Interrupts.) Typical Malay Malaysians!

Here, Ebry drew upon the same family of traits that the Malay historian used to describe 'Malays' – naïve, gullible, and shallow – and insinuated that they were also bigoted and homophobic. This is in addition to Ebry's previous characterisation of 'typical Malays' – their willingness to practice magic in defiance of Islamic teachings.

The image of Malays as a credulous, magic-obsessed race was first explored by Victorian-era colonial writers based in Malaya. This is unsurprising because the height of British expansionism in Malaya coincided with the beginnings of Victorian-era anthropology. Several colonial accounts of Malay rituals and practices even made their way into the anthropologist James Frazer's seminal work, *The Golden Bough*, as examples of 'magic'[109].

According the anthropologist Robert Winzeler (1983: 438), colonial writers in Malaya used the term 'magic' to include a broader range of beliefs and practices that they glossed as 'folk' Malay religion. They understood this 'folk' religion as being antithetical to 'orthodox' Islam. Winzeler (1983: 438–439) argues, 'Beyond the general use of the term magic, the notion that "orthodox Islam" and Malay folk religion, however labelled, are or were distinct traditions has been a very powerful enduring idea in Malay studies.' He goes on to argue that many colonial writers and some postcolonial scholars linked Malay folk religion with the apparent economic backwardness of the Malays.

After Malaya's independence in 1957 and the formation of Malaysia in 1963, these stereotypes continued to inform the views of postcolonial political and opinion leaders. For example, in 2011, the still-influential former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad chastised Malaysian makers of supernatural horror films for exploiting a credulous Malay public. He exhorted them to concentrate instead on subject matter that was more scientific *and* Islamic (Jamin, 2011).

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[109] See Frazer's discussion on Malay charms (2009: 41–42), Malay magical beliefs about weather (2009: 193), and Malay magical beliefs about kingship (2009: 213).

This narrative of Malays needing to abandon being naïve, gullible and superstitious in order to succeed as rational leaders of a post-independence Malaysia has been bolstered by various policies. For example, the Malaysian government and other government-linked corporations provide numerous scholarships for Bumiputera students to pursue tertiary education, mainly in disciplines such as medicine, engineering, finance and law. Many high-achieving Malay students have been sent to top universities in the UK, US, Australia, New Zealand and Canada in this way. Most of these scholarships are conditional – students need to return to Malaysia to work; if not, they need to repay the scholarship's full value.

In relation to this emphasis on scientific and technological development, the Malaysian government has also worked hard to build the country's internet infrastructure. As of 2013, Malaysia recorded 67 internet users per 100 people, the highest penetration in Southeast Asia only after Singapore with 73 users per 100 people (World Bank, 2014). For many gay Muslims, the state's development policies have thus also enabled them to use the internet to seek out alternative expressions of Islam and sexuality.

On a separate trajectory, Joel Kahn (1992: 158–178) argues that the 1980s saw efforts by a new Malay middle class to revive 'traditional Malay culture'. Civil servants and new entrepreneurs packaged and promoted symbols of Malay culture for an audience of Western tourists and local Malay consumers, and unwittingly politicised Malaysia's cultural arena even further.

According to Peletz (2005: 240–272), the same period saw Malay intellectuals providing the ideological spine for the state's attempts to purify Islam from Western influence and local superstition. Daniel Regan (1976: 106–107) also argues that in the 1970s, there was a 'preponderance of Malay-Muslims in the national intellectual community' who saw it as their duty to support the state's nation-building projects specifically by elevating Islam. Regan (1989: 138–140) further notes how this same period saw the flourishing of new Islamic movements – consisting of students, young professionals and academics – seeking to transform the social order by elevating Islam in social, political and economic life.

Thus, despite the dichotomous conceptions of 'Malay' culture and 'orthodox' Islam inherited from the colonial era, from the 1980s there have been parallel efforts to elevate Malay culture *and* Islam. On occasion, these efforts from state and non-state

actors to elevate 'Malay'-ness have contradicted efforts to elevate 'Islam' and vice versa, for example when Mahathir rebuked Malay makers of horror cinema.

Given this background, what do these various Malays, such as the Malay historian, Ebry, and Mahathir, mean when they dismiss or put down the 'typical Malay'? To begin with, all of them share the assumption that the 'typical Malay' is downtrodden and an obstacle to rationality, intelligence and progress. Yet they all have different ideas of what counts as an obstacle – for Ebry, a 'typical Malay' is homophobic, for Mahathir he or she is superstitious, and for the Malay historian, he or she unthinkingly supports the US now just because President Obama is not white. They all turn the 'typical Malay' into a sub-category of *deviant* or 'Other' Malay while implying that *they* are non-typical, i.e. rational, intelligent and progressive.

These accusations are particularly charged in an environment where highly politicised notions of Malay ethnicity and Islam inform nation-building policies. Within this context, pro-*syariah* ideologues and/or Malay ultranationalists constantly try to eliminate or rehabilitate 'out of place' expressions of being Malay and Muslim. They include gay Muslims in their notions of 'out of place' Malays, but many gay Muslims counter-demonise *them* and other Malays sharing such views as 'typical Malays'. For example, Wahid, a Malay man in his mid-30s who announces publicly that he is gay, is scathing about 'typical Malays' and insists he is not one of them:

> They read *Utusan Malaysia*[110], ya, they watch TV3[111], they watch
> *Melodi*[112], they watch, they read *Harian Metro*[113], they regard
> *Harian Metro* as a newspaper [….] You don't see them at the
> Chinese vegetarian restaurants, because they don't go there[114], and
> […] they don't read that much. They still believe […] whatever the

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[110] A Malay-language broadsheet owned by the ruling party, UMNO.

[111] A television network strongly linked with UMNO.

[112] A Malay-language entertainment programme on TV3.

[113] A Malay tabloid strongly linked with UMNO.

[114] This implies that they have an overly dogmatic view of *halal*. *Halal* regulations for food generally apply to the slaughter of meat – by this logic, vegetarian food should be *halal*. Wahid insinuates, however, that because 'typical Malays' associate the Chinese with pork-eating they would not even set foot in a *vegetarian* Chinese restaurant.

ustaz (Islamic teachers) are saying are true, they think they have to obey whatever they are saying. Those [are] typical Malays.

Wahid therefore dismisses the 'typical Malay' as insular, conformist, and uninterested in exploring other aspects of the world while elevating himself as non-typically Malay. In doing this, he reproduces stereotypes about the naïve, gullible Malay which are nearly identical to those produced by the Malay historian. The difference is that the Malay historian chastises 'typical Malays' for not keeping up with the state's nation-building objectives, while Wahid chastises them for being too conformist.

When different groups of Malays dismiss what they think of as the 'typical Malay', they are thus not referring to the same thing. Some, like Zainal, struggle to resist dominant stereotypes about Malay-ness or 'typical Malays' without counter-stereotyping others. Yet Zainal, Wahid and Ebry all have to grapple with conflicting notions of being 'Malay', and being gay complicates their ethnic as well as religious identity. For each of them, affirming their sexuality also involves trying to loosen the connection between ethnicity and religion.

4.5 Conclusion

In Malaysia and Britain, gay Muslims come to form their own versions of gay and Muslim identity by internalising and interpreting significant life events or relationships. The trajectory of their identity-making often includes being socialised into particular versions of Islam, later growing uncomfortable with these expressions, and eventually being exposed to alternative interpretations. Their identity-making also involves different levels of tension with their families, peers, and communities. The deeper their connection with other Muslims in their lives, the more they refrain from outright rebellion against the strictures of Islam imposed on them. Instead, they adjust their roles according to the situation – rebelling in some circumstances, innovating and conforming in others. If for any reason they no longer value these close inter-personal connections, they might rebel more intensely and counter-demonise the entire group – e.g. 'Muslims' or 'Malays' en masse – which they try to dissociate from. Self-identifying as gay *and* Muslim therefore involves what Merton (1968: 672-673)

describes as 'role adjustments' in specific situations to negotiate ways of belonging in wider society and achieving 'culturally defined goals, purposes and interests'.

When they adapt to these roles, gay Muslims also redraw the boundaries between religion and sexuality, intentionally or unintentionally. They challenge or subvert normative and dominant understandings of Islam which assume that Muslim and gay identities are mutually exclusive by *making* these identities intersect, thus disturbing notions of religious and sexual purity. They are aware that in the eyes of wider society they are, in Douglas's (2002: 44) terms, 'matter out of place', but try to claim their own symbolic and material spaces in the world.

By putting together their gay and Muslim identities, gay Muslims also combine seemingly contradictory notions of the liberal and traditional which often involves drawing out the relationship between their religious and ethnic identities. In Britain, some reclaim the term 'coconut', which pejoratively refers to Asians with tastes and preferences normally associated with white Britons. They do this within a wider context where most Muslims come from migrant backgrounds and therefore Islam is widely perceived as 'non-indigenous' while gay identity is assumed to be upheld by the 'liberal West'.

In Malaysia, where the ethnic aspect of their identity is seen as 'indigenous', many gay Muslims try to distance themselves from 'typical Malays' whom they see as too traditional and intolerant of sexual diversity. Within this context there are also local traditions of tolerance towards sexual diversity which, Peletz (2011: 676-677) argues, remain robust to this day. This 'gender pluralism' was and still is hierarchical, however, and sexual minorities were tolerated by the rest of society as long as they knew their 'place' and did not upset the status quo. This contrasts with contemporary liberal ideals of sexual liberty based upon notions of individual autonomy. Within this context, gay Muslims in Malaysia do not self-consciously draw upon historical traditions to construct their identities but still blend local expressions of gender and sexuality with 'imported' concepts. In this way, they too combine seemingly contradictory notions of the liberal and the traditional, which implicates their religious and ethnic identities.

Some scholars, including Massad (2007: 5), argue that ideologues in the West and Muslim societies use notions of sexual liberty to construct and polarise the divide between the 'West' and 'Islam'. My findings suggest that gay Muslims do sometimes struggle between 'liberal' and 'traditional' expressions of their religious and sexual identities, whether in Malaysia or Britain, but this does not necessarily mean that gay

identity has been 'imposed' upon them. Rather, they find ways to adopt or experiment with 'liberal' or 'Westernised' expressions of sexuality while holding on to their Muslim identities.

By self-identifying as gay *and* Muslim, gay Muslims in both countries complicate, challenge or subvert constructions of 'Islam' and the 'West'. In the in-between spaces that they create, they find others like them who challenge, subvert, or adapt normative conceptions religion, ethnicity, and sexuality. My findings indirectly suggest that when societies modernise, they inadvertently allow people to create and expand these spaces which fall outside the reach of institutional authorities. In the next chapter, I pursue this analysis focusing specifically on the collective and individual dimensions of Islamic socialisation in forging a specifically 'gay Muslim' identity.

Chapter 5: Gay expressions of Islam

The previous chapter charted the cognitive, emotional and interactive aspects of meaning-making enabling some people to identify as gay and Muslim in Malaysia and Britain. This chapter pursues this analysis further, focusing on the individual and collective dimensions of Islamic socialisation in forging distinctively 'gay Muslim' identities. I also explore how the religious expressions of gay Muslims are shaped by their surroundings and whether *they* are reshaping dominant interpretations of Islam by expressing their individual identities.

My starting assumption is that individuals who identify as gay and Muslim feel strongly connected to Islam for various reasons and might conceive of this connection as 'natural' or ascribed. Also, while many might consider their sexual disposition as beyond their control, they would still express or repress it based on wider social expectations and/or religious injunctions, among other things. These dynamics contribute to multifaceted lived and prescribed dimensions of being gay and Muslim. I investigate if or how gay Muslims navigate these dimensions to construct a sense of belonging within the larger fold of Islam. I do not merely focus on their engagement with religious texts and doctrines but on their wider lived experiences of Islam.

My discussion also investigates the links between religion, sexuality and identity, bearing in mind that the word 'identity' can be used in multiple and contradictory ways. Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2006: 35) argue that in academic and non-academic circles, it has been used:

> …to highlight noninstrumental modes of action; to focus on self-understanding rather than self-interest; to designate sameness across persons or sameness over time; to capture allegedly core, foundational aspects of selfhood; to deny that such core, foundational aspects exist; to highlight the processual, interactive development of solidarity and collective self-understanding; and to stress the fragmented quality of the contemporary experience of self, a self unstably patched together through shards of discourse that are contingently active in differing contexts.

For Brubaker and Cooper (2006: 35), the term 'identity' is therefore 'made to do a great deal of work' often leading to vague analysis. They propose using 'three clusters of terms' as substitutes for 'identity' to refer to particular individual and social phenomena.

There is the question of how people are identified or categorised by others, or how they self-identify and self-categorise to differentiate *themselves* from others (Brubaker & Cooper, 2006: 41). Here, it is crucial to account for the state as a 'powerful "identifier"' since it has the 'material and symbolic resources' to impose categories that structure how those within its jurisdiction define themselves (Brubaker & Cooper, 2006: 43). This line of analysis is useful when examining the internal and external factors influencing how individuals come to *perceive* themselves and others.

People might also explain their actions more fluidly depending on a particular situation, in which case Brubaker and Cooper (2006: 44) suggest we examine their 'self-understanding and social location'. This is because in many settings, 'people may understand and experience themselves in terms of a grid of intersecting categories; in others, in terms of a web of connections of differential proximity and intensity'. From this line of analysis, we get to examine how people's sense of self can *fluctuate*, change, or intensify depending on particular scenarios.

We can also focus on how people develop 'the emotionally laden sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded group, involving both a felt solidarity or oneness with fellow group members and a felt difference from or even antipathy to specified outsiders' (Brubaker & Cooper, 2006: 46). This line of analysis allows us to examine how some people form *groups* within which there is a strong 'feeling of belonging together' (Brubaker & Cooper, 2006: 47).

Despite Brubaker and Cooper's rejoinders for social scientists to be more circumspect and perhaps reject 'identity' as a category of analysis, much research still purports to examine the relationship between 'religion' and 'identity'. According to Arthur Greil and Lynn Davidman (2007: 550), these numerous studies of 'religion' and 'identity' still need to develop a more 'coherent story' of how religion is transforming under the conditions of modernity.

These caveats are useful to clarify the different facets of 'identity' I am looking at but I do not discard or replace all references to it. Rather, I draw upon the analytical strategies suggested by Brubaker and Cooper to analyse different layers of identity construction.

Structurally, the chapter begins with a section examining the interplay between external categorisations or impositions of Islam and the individual religious self-identifications of gay Muslims. Here, I compare how my gay Muslim participants were socialised into Islam through their families, schools, and peers in Malaysia, where the state explicitly and deliberately imposes Islam as a category of identity, and Britain, where this is not the case.

This leads to the next section, analysing aspects of identity related to the 'self-understanding and social location' of gay Muslims which can fluctuate, change, or intensify depending on particular circumstances in Malaysia and Britain. The following section then investigates whether individuals express 'gay Muslim' as a distinctive, *collective* identity within and beyond their local contexts, i.e. if there is a strong 'feeling of belonging together' as gay Muslims in the two countries.

These three sections engage specifically with Brubaker and Cooper's conceptualisation of 'identity', demonstrating that gay Muslims increasingly express Islam individually and collectively in ways that resist, subvert or avoid institutional control. Often, they draw upon what they imagine to be 'true', 'correct' ideals of Islam from external sources, but adapt these to their local or individual circumstances. They still seek 'belonging' within what they construe as 'Islam' but also revise and refine their understandings of it based on their specific experiences.

These observations lead to the last section which investigates some ways in which gay Muslims use urban or virtual spaces to interact and reinforce their religious and/or sexual self-understandings and self-representations. Here, I suggest that they use 'Islam' as what James Beckford (2001: 233) terms a 'cultural resource' to fashion intentionally or unintentionally eclectic self-understandings and self-expressions. I contend that gay expressions of Islam are not merely instances of individual agency (i.e. of gay Muslims) clashing with a supposedly oppressive monolithic structure (i.e. 'Islam'). Instead, gay Muslims negotiate the opportunities and constraints provided by multiple Islamic and non-Islamic authorities, spaces, and networks to fashion their own expressions of Islam.

I further propose that gay Muslims are probably not very different from other Muslims who also use Islam as a 'cultural resource' to fashion eclectic self-expressions. However, my findings show that they feel the need to innovate on their expressions of Islam because of their specific experiences of *sexuality*. I suggest that moral entrepreneurs, such as Malaysian *syariah* advocates with their efforts to control

expressions of Islam, heighten identification with Islam among gay Muslims and unintentionally drive them to innovate on their religious expressions. This is why I find it useful to take up Beckford's suggestion for sociologists to analyse religion more as a 'cultural resource' than as a 'social institution'. This approach enables us understand the experiences of gay Muslims as indicators of how dominant, global images of Islam and sexuality are becoming refracted in new ways at national and local levels (Beckford, 2000: 183).

5.1 Identifying and being identified as Muslim

The previous chapter showed that for some people to identify as Muslim and gay, they need to develop specific understandings of what it *means* to be Muslim and gay. I also demonstrated how gay Muslims accumulate early and long-lasting understandings of Islam from their families, peers and schools. In this section, I develop this narrative and explore further how self-identifying as 'Muslim' depends on how people experience state regulation – or lack of regulation – of Islam. In Malaysia and Britain, such regulation results in different contests among Muslims – as the religious majority in Malaysia and a minority in Britain – as to what constitutes authoritative, ideal 'Islam'.

The previous chapter also indicated that many Muslims develop informal understandings of Islam alongside what they are told to accept formally. In this section, I explore further how gay Muslims – like many other Muslims – supplement their understandings of formal, normative Islam with informal, non-normative beliefs, including in magic, sorcery and witchcraft. I examine how they sometimes use these non-normative beliefs as an outlet to subvert dominant Islamic teachings on sexual difference.

5.1.1 Transmitting Islam: Families

Within families, authority figures such as grandparents or parents are the ones who most often transmit understandings of Islam to those in their care. The understandings of Islam and the strictness with which these are transmitted can vary from family to family, or from time to time within the *same* family.

Some of my Malaysian participants said when they were younger their parents were not overly concerned about observing Islam strictly but, over time, became more religious. These parents even started pressuring their adult children to do 'Islamic' things, such as performing obligatory prayers. Zulkifli, in his late 30s, and I had the following exchange when I asked whether his parents were strict about his childhood Islamic education:

Zulkifli: *When they were young, they weren't strict. They went to parties and whatnot. They'd come back late at night after all the drinking and drunkenness. But now they're very strict.*
Shanon: *OK, they've been to Mekah* (for the haj pilgrimage) *and everything?*
Zulkifli: *Yes, they've been to Mekah and whatnot, and now they're very strict. It's not like they're going to whip out the cane if I don't pray or anything, no. But they will make noise, they'll nag.*
Shanon: *And your mother – has she started wearing the* tudung?
Zulkifli: *Yes, she's put on the* tudung.

On the other hand, Osman, who grew up in a town with a significant Bengali population in the northwest of England, described his family as religiously observant from the beginning. According to him, when they were younger, his father used to drag him and his brothers by their ears to the mosque. In fact, his father sent one of Osman's brothers to a *darul uloom*, or Islamic seminary, while Osman ended up joining a conservative Muslim social movement, the Tablighi Jamaat, in his late teens and early 20s with his family's approval. His father has since passed away, but Osman said his entire family was still strictly religious. When I asked him how he would describe their religiosity now, he said:

I think we've all gotten a lot more religious-minded. And spiritual as well. I think before it was just dogmatic ritual Islam, but now there's a bit more of a, obviously with political changes and climate, things are a bit more politically charged, as well [as now there are] a lot more spiritual elements.

Osman noticed a *shift* in the way that his family members 'did' Islam now – it was more 'politically charged' but also more 'spiritual'. They appeared to be reflecting more upon the context of contemporary Britain in which they identified primarily as Muslim. In this sense, even though Osman and Zulkifli grew up in very different environments, they shared the experience of watching their families' perceptions of Islam transform. In Zulkifli's case, although his parents were never as religiously observant in their younger days as Osman's, they eventually began to grapple with how they wanted to position and present themselves as Muslims within wider Malaysian society.

According to Zulkifli, he personally rebelled and ended up identifying as Muslim on a very basic level only. He did not pray regularly, nor did he fast – instead he equated being a Muslim with being ethical and charitable towards others. This ethical dimension was important to Osman, too, but he placed far greater emphasis on adhering to what he understood as authentic Islamic beliefs and practices. I thus found it surprising that it was *Osman* who believed it was okay to be gay and Muslim, while *Zulkifli* held that Islam forbade homosexuality.

The apparent paradox here is that although Osman had the more doctrinaire family upbringing in relation to Islam, he came to see his sexuality as congruent with his religious convictions. He did not think the rest of his family shared this perspective and therefore was not open with them about his sexuality. Zulkifli, on the other hand, had a more lax upbringing and appeared to be uncomfortable with his parents' increasingly doctrinaire expressions of Islam, but could not fathom a gay-friendly version of the religion.

The family is therefore a crucial source of exposure to Islam – gay Muslims are shaped by and often react against how their families understand Islam it. Yet, Osman's and Zulkifli's divergent responses suggest that the family is not the *only* institution that shapes gay Muslims' understandings of Islam. To understand the apparent paradox between people like Osman and Zulkifli, we need to also explore how they relate to other social institutions that have shaped their views.

5.1.2 Transmitting Islam: Schools

Beyond the family, the next most common source of Islamic education for virtually all the gay Muslims I interviewed in Malaysia and Britain was special religious

schooling, e.g. in *madrasas* or mosque schools. Some enjoyed the experience but quite a number openly characterised this religious education as superficial and dogmatic.

Nonny, a Malaysian in her late 30s who described her sexuality as 'fluid', said she made steady progress at her state-sponsored religious school, but the content of the teachings never resonated with her[115]. She confessed this during part of a longer exchange we had about the *tudung*, since she used to wear it in school but later removed it. In Nonny's words:

> *I was, you could say I was the smart kid at religious school.*
> *[...]*Alhamdulillah[116] *I passed through all the levels and made it to the advanced level. Once you get to this advanced level, you are entitled to train as an* ustazah[117]. *But even though I studied all of that stuff, in my heart since I was little, I was like, it's not that I rebelled, but I always felt, why as a Muslim, why do I as a Muslim have to do all this? Why don't other people need to do this? Because my* ustazah *and* ustaz[118] *used to say, if you don't wear the* tudung, *you will be dragged by your hair through the fires of hell, right? I couldn't accept that concept. But I never dared to tell my* ustazahs, *because with these* ustaz *and* ustazah, *I was like the teacher's pet, right?*

Nonny also confessed having doubts about other Islamic teachings in the religious school but dared not express them. She conformed outwardly, but internally she was already developing what her teachers would probably have characterised as deviant beliefs. The kind of religious education she received allowed her to become familiar with Islamic concepts and doctrines but effectively prevented her from exploring her own views on Islam.

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[115] I include Nonny's accounts here because even though she does not personally identify as 'gay', as a Muslim with 'fluid' sexuality she still empathises with other gay Muslims and expresses her support for them whenever she can.

[116] Arabic for 'Thanks be to God'.

[117] A female religious instructor.

[118] Male religious instructor.

For other gay Muslims, encountering alternative authorities on Islam alongside more normative religious education helped them rethink rather than dismiss their relationship with Islam. Bilan, a British Somali lesbian in her early 30s, said that even though she became disillusioned with her *madrasa*, she eventually discovered an alternative source of Islamic knowledge. This was through an English convert who was a scholar of religion but did not reveal to anyone else that he had embraced Sufi Islam. Bilan was doubly struck when he revealed his inner faith to her because, according to her, she came from a respected lineage of Sufi saints[119] in Somalia:

> And he was like super interesting and we got on so well, so he was another big influence. He showed me another model [of being Muslim], right? And I could also retain part of me, too. As in I could say, oh, I come from a Sufi family.

Bilan went on to join and leave several Muslim movements – from Salafi-inspired groups at university to Sufi groups. For a long time, however, she struggled with the concept of being gay *and* Muslim and put her active engagement with Islam 'on hold' when she eventually came to terms with her sexuality. At the time of our interview, she said she was ready to put her faith in Islam and her sexuality together again but it was still difficult. From her narrative, her negotiation of religious and sexual identity is also linked to her family's religious legacy in Somalia, her normative and alternative Islamic education in Britain, and the various Muslim groups she joined and left.

5.1.3 Transmitting Islam: Peers

What roles do peers play in the transmission of Islam from family or school authorities? In this section, I focus on how some peers can disrupt and transform an

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[119] Sufism is 'long established and well developed' in Somalia, where the majority of Muslims adhere to the Shafii school of jurisprudence in Sunni Islam (Lewis, 1998: 8). According to Ioan Lewis (1998: 14), it is usual in Somalia for the founders of local Sufi Orders and congregations to be venerated and sanctified after their death. Their tombs often become shrines tended by followers and family members and are scattered all over Somalia and 'many, apparently, commemorate pre-Islamic figures who have been assimilated in Islam' (Lewis, 1998:15).

individual's normative understandings of Islam through a combination of forming meaningful relationships and being challenged by new ideas.

As discussed in chapter 4.2.1, Rohana said she became very troubled when she discovered that some of the Muslim women she got to know through work were feminists. According to Rohana, they spoke highly of Amina Wadud, an American Muslim woman theologian frequently demonised by many Islamic leaders around the world[120]. This piqued Rohana's curiosity, which then provoked shock and discomfort:

So I Googled, and I found out stuff about Amina Wadud, that she had 'deviated' from Islam. I was nervous as hell. Honestly, I didn't say this to anyone. I was really nervous. I was like, oh my God, what kind of people were they?

According to Rohana, discomfort gave way to acceptance when she realised that they interpreted Islam inclusively and welcomed her into their circle, which made her re-examine what she understood about Islam. She did not dismiss all the knowledge she had acquired as a Muslim but began using Islamic resources differently. She started re-reading the Quran on her own – even downloading a translation onto her smartphone – no longer assuming that Allah judged her negatively or that Islam was a punitive religion.

Osman also said his view of Islam was quite 'closed' before he joined Imaan. Through Imaan, he met and befriended gay Muslims who came from different schools of thought with differing interpretations of Islam:

I think, well, in [Tablighi] Jamaat days […] it was kind of like a closed world, you know. You only come across one type of Muslim usually, you know, your Sunni, Deobandi, whatever. So it's a very safe world and it is really nice in that sort of way. Through Imaan and the wider world, generally, you meet all sorts of Muslims, and you

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[120] In 2005, Wadud made the headlines and created much controversy when she delivered the *khutbah* and led a mixed-gender Friday congregational prayer in New York (BBC, 2005). She was subsequently condemned by several Islamic leaders and *ulama* around the world. Her actions provoked panic in Malaysia, where one writer accused her of '*mocking*' Islamic teachings and trying to '*erode the role of the* ulama *and* fuqaha (jurists)' (Ghafani, n.d.).

have to kind of like, think about how you think about them, and how you think they fit in your perspective of what Islam is, so that side has broadened massively.

Osman and Rohana show that gay Muslims do not solely rely on Islamic authorities to shape their religious self-identification and often have peers who influence their overall views on Islam. Nevertheless, as Osman alluded when talking about his family, being Muslim is also influenced by the current, more 'politically charged' public perceptions and state policies relating to Islam.

5.1.4 Transmitting Islam: The state

So far, my findings show key similarities in how Islam is transmitted to gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain, through their families, religious schools, and peers. In Malaysia these intersecting relationships and institutions are managed by state authorities that have the power to impose particular expressions of Islam upon those categorised as Muslim. In Britain, state authorities do not impose such expressions of Islam but still attempt to manage Muslim minorities in light of politically charged public debates and controversies involving Muslims. In this section, I examine how gay Muslims in both countries narrate their experiences and responses to these state-driven dynamics.

According to Nonny, one key event that consolidated her rejection of state-imposed Islam in Malaysia was a *syariah* enforcers' raid on her next door neighbour in her condominium complex in Kuala Lumpur:

It happened at two in the morning […]. Suddenly I heard a loud noise below my house. Turns out it was the anti-vice officers. They were raiding the house of this actor, Ako Mustapha[121]. I didn't know it was him at the time. But I could hear loud screams: Open the door! Open the door! […] All the neighbours came out to see what was going on. I

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[121] Nonny's anecdote tallies with what was reported in the press. In 2009, Ako was charged and sentenced to a fine and three months in jail for *khalwat* by the *syariah* court. Ako paid the fine but successfully appealed against the jail term (Star, 2011).

didn't come out – I peeped through my kitchen window. And then they broke into his house. [They screamed] if you don't open the door in ten minutes, we're breaking in! [...] I was so angry. I remember I called my boyfriend, Norman (who was at his own apartment). *I said why are they doing this? I said no wonder all these kids plunge to their deaths from all these buildings[122]. To escape* (the *syariah* enforcers)*, right? Of course they don't intend to commit suicide, but they're trying to escape.*

According to Nonny, this event was a turning point in how she perceived Islam and developed a deep resentment towards state-backed *syariah* enforcers in Malaysia. Nonny's case shows the importance of the state as a network of institutions with the power to influence how people think about themselves and relate to others. In this case, her objection to the *syariah* enforcers' aggressive imposition of Islamic moral codes turned her away from state-sanctioned interpretations of Islam.

In Britain, anti-homosexual sentiments are still espoused by some non-state actors, including Muslims, for example the three men in Derbyshire convicted in 2012 for distributing leaflets advocating the death sentence for homosexuality (Press Association, 2012; Watson, 2012). My British participants were aware of such rhetoric in Britain and how similar sentiments feed the actions of Islamic authorities in countries such as Malaysia. Like Nonny, most of them disagreed with these interpretations of Islam, e.g.:

I think [religiously-motivated policing is] completely wrong. I think, you know, there's no, you know, Islam says there's no compulsion, and I think it goes against faith. (Ebrahim, early 20s)

I don't think it's anyone's business what happens behind closed doors. I could understand when people have an issue when it's outside, but in the same sense, it would be an issue if a heterosexual couple would be acting the same way [....] (Rasheed, early 20s)

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[122] She was referring to occasional news reports about young people who accidentally fall to their deaths during anti-vice raids in condominium complexes and hotels (e.g. Mohd Fadly, 2013).

I don't identify with [religiously-motivated policing], it's not the Islam I know. So it feels very alien [....] I think [Islam] should be an individual journey. (Ammar, early 30s)

Like Nonny, my British participants opposed such anti-gay policing on humanitarian and doctrinal grounds. According to them there should be no 'compulsion' in Islam, which should be an 'individual journey', while Nonny said repeatedly about Malaysia's *syariah* enforcers, '*God cannot be that cruel*'. Unlike Nonny, my British participants had the ability and legal freedom to disassociate from these sorts of expressions of Islam, although there might be strong communitarian pressures to 'stick to the Muslim side'. Nonny did not have the same degree of freedom to challenge the enforcement of Malaysia's version of *syariah*, which is sanctioned and encouraged by the state's institutions in charge of Islam. This made her even more resentful of what she perceived as 'official' Islam.

My British participants acknowledged that the legal and political framework there allowed them to express Islam as they wanted to but were also critical of the anti-Muslim and racist sentiments they sometimes encountered in society. In Chapter 5.2.2, I discussed how some were critical of what they saw as prevailing stereotypes of Muslims as particularly prone to terrorism or radicalism. Many felt that these stereotypes also informed counter-terrorism and de-radicalisation policies. Their narratives suggest that in this way the British state is also a 'powerful identifier', directly and indirectly constructing images of Islam which inform self-identification among Muslims and their identification by others.

In the case of Malaysia, state institutions are not merely concerned about homosexuality but also other groups they construe as 'deviant' or 'dangerous'. During my two research visits, for example, spokespersons for the Islamic bureaucracy and cabinet ministers decried 'threats' from Syiahs, Christians, and liberal Muslims (e.g. Ahmad, 2012; Awang, 2012; Bernama, 2013; Mhd Tahir, 2012; Mohamad & Yatim, 2012; Utusan Malaysia, 2013). The Islamic authorities also demonise groups calling for greater democratic freedoms and human rights. In May 2012, after a mass demonstration by BERSIH 3.0, a civil society coalition calling for fair elections, the National Fatwa Council declared it *haram* for Muslims to participate in rallies that could 'incite chaos and disturbances within the nation' (Bernama, 2012). Alongside this

announcement, the Council also declared that it was *haram* to support or sympathise with LGBTs[123].

State authorities therefore use Islam to justify various aspects of authoritarian rule in Malaysia. In response, people like Nonny see the state's demonisation of sexual minorities as part of a larger manipulation of Islam to suppress basic human rights. On the other hand, there are people like, Ayie, a lesbian in her early 30s, who said:

> *I don't want gay rights rallies [....] To me, when you are a Muslim you are a Muslim, you cannot oppose what is enshrined in Islam. If you feel you want to be open, you can be open [....] You can hold hands [with your partner], you can embrace, but not to the extent that you want to defend your right to get married to each other.*

In other words, although Ayie admitted her desire to be affectionate with her girlfriend, she complied with the state's wider position on Islam and homosexuality. Unlike Nonny, she did not identify the state as a *producer* of this Islamic rhetoric but regarded it as merely upholding what was 'enshrined in Islam'.

My Malaysian cases demonstrate that there is a link between state-imposed expressions of Islam and an individual's religious self-identification, with responses ranging from conformist to rebellious. In Britain, although the state does not impose particular expressions of Islam among Muslims, Islam was still a core component of self-identity among my participants. The experiences of Islam among gay Muslims therefore cannot be reduced to a struggle primarily between the individual and an 'Islam' imposed by the state or other monolithic Islamic 'authorities'. Rather, gay Muslims engage with Islam via intersecting and multiple authorities, relationships, and viewpoints, within families, religious education institutions, and among peers. State management of Islam is also a crucial factor, but my findings demonstrate that we must identify and clarify exactly *how* different state actions are experienced and negotiated by individuals.

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[123] The lumping together of BERSIH and LGBT activism as threats to the nation was explained in Chapter 3.3.2.

5.1.5 A note on non-normative expressions of Islam

During my research in Malaysia *and* Britain, I encountered accounts or talk of phenomena such as spirit possessions, sorcery, witchcraft and magic when I least expected. It struck me that these expressions are part and parcel of the primary understandings of Islam among many Muslims, even though many formal Islamic authorities discourage or condemn these beliefs[124].

Isma, a lesbian Malaysian in her early 30s, told me she used to drink alcohol and not perform her obligatory prayers, but had stopped drinking and started praying regularly. I was interested in how this transformation occurred but did not anticipate the following turn in the conversation:

Shanon: What changed?

Isma: Ah, well. Wow. (Pause.) I don't know whether this is – this is quite personal, and not many people would believe in it. You believe, you know this thing called *saka*?

Shanon: Yeah, yeah. *Is it like an inherited spirit*?

Isma: Yeah. *This is my dad's mother. And before she passed away, because my uncles and aunties knew about this before, they asked her, are you sure you don't have it anymore? She said no, I got rid of it before I went to Mekah, [...]. So before she passed away last year,* her kind of *saka*, she had to skip one generation. So I was the chosen one. It got really bad, because she was sick [and] they tried to get rid of it. […] So when it happened, I was here in KL – I got really sick over here. […] And I thought I was gonna die. […] Since then I've *stopped drinking and started praying regularly*.

I did not expect Isma to say that she was now a more observant Muslim because she had recently fought spirit possession. Her response prompted me to probe into the other circumstances that might have informed this episode:

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[124] Not only Muslims hold these beliefs within their understanding of religion – some Evangelical Christians, for example, believe that demonic possession can cause illness (Dein & Illaiee, 2013: 290).

Shanon: Were you in a relationship at that time?

Isma: Oh yes! I had two [girlfriends]. I broke up with both. (Giggles.)
I said, look, people, *like this one knew about the other one, and the other one also found out about this one. I said,* I cannot deal with this, I cannot take it anymore so I broke up with both.

Shanon: This is before you *fell ill*, or after?

Isma: After. I broke up after that.

Isma's possession episode coincided with her needing to resolve a highly stressful, untenable situation with two girlfriends. Yet to her, the possession was self-contained, real, traumatic, and has had long-lasting effects – she gave up alcohol, started praying regularly and got into a monogamous relationship[125].

In Isma's view Islam forbids homosexuality, but it was not within her power to change her sexuality. In this instance, however, breaking up with her girlfriends and turning over a new leaf was not the result of consciously reflecting on normative Islamic doctrines. It was the result of a personal religious experience which indirectly allowed her to restructure her life as a lesbian and Muslim.

After this exchange with Isma, I wanted to know whether other Muslims in Malaysia had similar narratives. I found numerous newspaper and magazine articles featuring similar topics, including one condemning *mak nyah* who used black magic to attract boyfriends (Mastika, 2012: 20–22). This suggested that popular discussions on Islam often entwined formal doctrinal perspectives with everyday superstitions albeit to disapprove of these beliefs and practices. I also asked two straight Muslim friends – Iskandar and Deanna, in their mid-30s[126] – about '*saka*'. Although I had come across this term regularly, having grown up in Malaysia, it was not a concept that I understood in much detail. Iskandar, Deanna and I then had the following conversation (paraphrased and reconstructed from my field-notes):

Shanon: What is *saka* actually? It's not just *hantu raya*[127], *is it*?*

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[125] I also asked if she became celibate. She laughed and said no.

[126] Iskandar is a full-time musician while Deanna is a freelance business consultant. They know I am gay and were aware of the nature of my research.

[127] A supreme male demon that can be tamed by a practitioner of black magic.

Deanna: (Smiling, and eyes wide open.) *Saka* comes from the word '*pusaka*', meaning it's something inherited. So if a *hantu raya* is not inherited, but you found it yourself, then it's not a *saka*.*

Shanon: Okay, I understand that, but I want to know what kind of *hantu*[128] can become *saka*.*

Iskandar: Something that will do something for you, that can perform a task.*

Deanna: Like *toyol*[129].*

From this single question about '*saka*', I continued receiving an in-depth tutorial on the Malay pantheon of spirits and demons. Not only that, Iskandar and Deanna went on to educate me about the various hexes still at work in contemporary Malay society. They told me that some restaurant owners place ensorcelled human faeces in cooking pots to ensure their patrons keep returning – among many Malays, this explains restaurants that do brisk business even though the quality of the food seems mediocre.

Because of the prevalence of these spirit beliefs, some British colonial writers dismissed the seriousness with which Malays practised Islam – Islam was seen to provide merely a façade to legitimise 'folk' beliefs and practices (Winzeler, 1983: 437). This dichotomy between conceptions of 'folk' and 'orthodox' Islam went on to inform similarly dichotomous views among anthropologists. Regarding British colonial Malaya, anthropologists and colonial administrators used the term 'magic' interchangeably with 'folk' Islam to describe a wide range of beliefs and practices which they saw as antithetical to 'orthodox' Islam[130] (Winzeler, 1983: 438–439).

This dichotomy also informs contemporary state-imposed expressions of Islam in Malaysia, where the authorities constantly condemn superstitious beliefs and practices as deviant or even idolatrous (e.g. Fatwa Committee of the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs Malaysia, 1993; Jamin, 2011)[131]. The authorities actively

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[128] Generic term for spirit, demon or ghost.

[129] A malevolent child spirit.

[130] Also discussed in Chapter 4.4.2.

[131] These state-backed views of magic or superstition as 'deviant' are not confined to Muslim societies – even in Britain, the state decriminalised 'witchcraft' and other magical practices only in 1951 (UK Parliament, n.d.).

try to marginalise these expressions of Islam to regulate the 'proper' beliefs and practices of the larger population.

In Britain, my encounter with magical beliefs occurred after one of Imaan's Demystifying *Shariah* workshops in the northwest of England. After the workshop, Waqqas, Haniya (a British Pakistani bisexual women in her early 30s, not wearing *hijab*), Rasheed, Rubeina (a British Indian *hijab*-wearing lesbian in her late 20s) and I had dinner at a Pakistani restaurant. We got nervous when we walked in – it was filled *only* with Pakistani men, some with long beards and stern looks on their faces, and Waqqas joked that we might get 'gay-bashed'.

In this context, I was surprised once again when the conversation eventually turned to black magic, spirit possession, and the occult (as I captured in my field-notes):

> The conversation turns to *jinn*[132]. They talk about something called
> *tahwiz*, which sounds to me like an amulet, worn as a bracelet or
> necklace[133]. Rubeina confesses that she's wearing one right now, even
> though she doesn't believe in it. Haniya's eyes widen and she tells
> Rubeina she needs to do *namaz* and get rid of it.

> Waqqas says this sort of conversation freaks him out. He asks me if
> we have lots of this in Malaysia. I say yes, and that I thought only
> Malays believed in this kind of stuff. He says no, it's big among South
> Asians too.

In other words, many gay British Muslims also incorporate these sorts of beliefs within their everyday understandings of Islam. According to Simon Dein and Abdool Samad Illaiee (2013: 291), many British Muslims particularly of South Asian background continue to demand for traditional healers to resolve issues related to 'spirit possession and the evil eye'. Dein and Illaiee (2013: 290) suggest that possession is experienced more commonly by women and marginalised groups and 'may be a vehicle

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[132] Invisible, capricious beings mentioned in the Quran, e.g. in 72:1.

[133] A locket filled with Quranic excerpts or symbols, and is meant to ward off evil, very popular among South Asians.

through which they can express their complaints in a context in which they can be heard'.

Anastasia Lim, Hans Hoek and Jan Dirk Blom (2014: 4) propose that non-Muslims in the West seldom hear about these beliefs because Muslims themselves are reluctant to share them, especially regarding 'any first-hand experiences of *jinn'*. Nevertheless, these experiences often become known to medical practitioners and mental health professionals because experiences of *jinn* and spirit possession are still a prevalent 'idiom of distress' among many Muslims (Lim et al., 2014: 8).

Isma's anecdote about her grandmother's *saka* can certainly be seen as part of an 'idiom of distress'. My British participants, however, discussed the occult as part of a larger conversation to contest and clarify the boundaries of normative Islam.

Another story I heard about spirit possession seemed less an 'idiom of distress' than an idiom of subversion. It was relayed to me by Ebry, a sometimes-gay, sometimes-*pondan* man in his mid-30s. Ebry and I were friends since we were 11, and he always tried to convince me to treat 'invisible beings' with at least basic respect. One day, when I was hanging out with him and his boyfriend, Amin, I asked about a *mak nyah* we knew when we were teenagers, Ivana. Ebry told me that Ivana had passed away a long time ago, probably from an AIDS-related illness but he had a funny recollection about her:

> Apparently, Ivana's mother took her to a *bomoh* (traditional healer) one day to exorcise her into becoming a straight man. Immediately after that, Ivana started dressing up as a man and even grew a moustache. The mother was very impressed that the *bomoh* managed to rehabilitate Ivana. Even Ebry was impressed when he saw the 'changed' Ivana. But then a few weeks later Ivana started wearing dresses again and looking for boyfriends – being 'cured' was just an act to get her mother off her back, and eventually Ivana couldn't stand it anymore and went back to her old ways.

This story is but one variant of other similar stories I heard in Malaysia about families forcing members perceived as transgressing gender or sexual norms to get 'healed' by *bomoh*. In other words, these families also resorted to what the authorities saw as 'deviant' Islam to cure 'deviant' expressions of gender and sexuality. Many of

174

these stories ended the same way, however – the *bomoh* cure would fail and the sex/gender 'deviant' would revert to his or her old ways. The moral of these stories, often told from the perspective of the gender or sexual minorities themselves, seemed to be that sex/gender deviants cannot be cured by religious deviants[134].

I mention these stories because they are reminders to look beyond the textual or doctrinal when investigating the experiences of Muslims. In the case of gay Muslims, beliefs in sorcery, spirits, and the occult can illuminate the different layers in their expressions of Islam. From my findings, these beliefs can provide a safety valve for them to temporarily escape the pressures of being gay and Muslim, and also strategies to assert 'belonging' within the wider fold of Islam.

5.2 Fluidity and stability in the self-understandings of gay Muslims

In the previous section, I examined how gay Muslims navigate external categorisations or impositions of Islamic identity alongside their internal self-identifications as Muslim. Here, I look at how they negotiate experiences and understandings of being gay *as* Muslims.

According to Brubaker and Cooper (2006: 35), it makes little sense to use 'identity' as an analytical term if we simultaneously claim that it is voluntary and involuntary, or multiple and singular, or permanent and stable. Instead of asking whether 'identity' is stable or fluid, or singular or multiple, we could instead examine the factors which make people fluctuate between stable and fluid self-conceptions. This line of analysis is especially pertinent in a discussion of how gay Muslims develop their self-understandings of religion and sexuality over time and in different social conditions.

I came across a range of attitudes among gay Muslims about the nature of sexuality which intersected with specific aspects of their religious beliefs. Many believed they were 'born this way', i.e. that their sexuality was involuntary, but others believed that it was possible to 'change' by the will of Allah. I focus on how these differing self-understandings intersect or are informed by larger beliefs about being

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[134] Although in Chapter 5.3.1 I include Sulaiman's account of what he called a 'successful' *bomoh* cure for his uncle's homosexuality.

Muslim, beginning with gay Muslims who entertain the idea of their sexuality as impermanent.

5.2.1 Understanding sexuality as changeable

Some of my Malaysian participants often speculated about whether they could '*change*' ('*berubah*'). I observed this kind of talk most frequently among those who believed it was a sin to be gay.

In our interview, Ayie asserted that being gay was 'wrong' in Islam and this is why she agreed in principle with the moral policing of sexual offences. However, she said nobody could 'force' her to change her sexuality or gender identity and she would prefer it if *syariah* enforcers were 'gentler' with people like her. This prompted the following exchange:

Shanon: *But if the person speaks to you gently, are you going to change, or will you stay the same? If someone tells you gently, dress like a woman, go out with a man, would you change, would you be with a man?*

Ayie: *OK, so it's like this. There are certain things, they could apply to anyone – but not to me. Because I'm already like, I don't know, maybe I can tell you in ten years? I could change without anyone telling me to. [...] I might be with Rosie* (her girlfriend at the time) *or I might not be with Rosie. [...] Maybe after this when you meet me again I might be wearing a* tudung. *[...] If Allah unlocks the doors of my heart, I will change.*

Here, Ayie suggests that 'changing' her sexuality from homosexual to heterosexual could be a future option, with the assumption that this would be desirable. However, she complicates the notion of 'change' with several terms and conditions.

She suggests 'change' might manifest as her finally conforming to expectations about women's dressing, e.g. wearing the *tudung*. There is also the 'change' which could affect personal relations – Ayie might refrain from having a girlfriend in the future. Although she stops short of saying she might be with a man, embracing the

concept of 'change' allows her to *suggest* this as a possibility. By placing these different caveats on 'change', Ayie is able to create a grey space where she can park unresolved issues about religion and sexuality[135].

This enables her to accept the premise of moral enterprise because she basically agrees that homosexuality is a sin and that she needs to 'change'. However, by asserting that only Allah can make her 'change', she reclaims and asserts a considerable degree of personal autonomy regarding the religious and sexual aspects of her life. This allows her to somewhat resolve her own 'sinful' existence as someone who feels inherently lesbian yet believing in Allah as the only legitimate power that could 'change' her.

Sometimes this idea of 'change' is used as a weapon by gay Muslims against *other* gay Muslims contemplating 'changing' and living a heterosexual life. I listened to a conversation between Isma and her butch lesbian friend Kal about lesbians who want to 'change', as captured in my fieldnotes:

> Isma says '*berubah*' ('changing' or 'change') is between the person and God, but you can't go around asking people when they are going to *berubah*. Kal adds, yes, if you *berubah* but you still don't pray and fast, then that's no good either. What if someone is a *pengkid* but prays and fasts faithfully? What further 'change' do people want from that person?

Here, Isma and Kal stretch the concept of 'change' with Isma reiterating a position very similar to Ayie's, i.e. even if sexuality is mutable, only God has the power to change an individual. Kal complicates this by distinguishing between changing one's religious as opposed to sexual *conduct*. In other words, Isma focuses on a change of inward disposition, while Kal adds a behavioural layer. They both set up a hierarchy whereby if some people 'change' the outward aspects of their sexual choices, it does not necessarily make them better than those who do not change. Kal juxtaposes the idea of a *pengkid* who prays and fasts faithfully with an ex-*pengkid* who still does not pray

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[135] Tom Boellstorff (2005: 575) describes a similar phenomenon among gay Muslims in Indonesia, where there are also strong expectations for Muslims to practise Islam visibly and the public sees homosexuality as incompatible with Islam. In this scenario, he argues that gay Muslims find ways of 'inhabiting incommensurability' to hold onto to their religious and sexual identities.

or fast. In her view, the observant *pengkid* is religiously and morally superior to the non-observant ex-*pengkid*.

The concept of 'change' thus opens up an intermediate space which gay Muslims who believe their sexuality is a sin can occupy in relative peace. It also provides them with a resource to argue against the *actions* of moral entrepreneurs without actually challenging the *basis* of moral enterprise. Appealing to the notion of 'change' hence allows some gay Muslims to fluctuate between asserting their individual sexual desires and conforming to the wider community of Muslims, or *ummah*.

Moreover, this talk of 'change' was much more prevalent in Malaysia than in Britain, which is unsurprising given prevailing state-controlled interpretations of Islam and homosexuality in Malaysia. Yet, while Isma and Ayie appeared to be articulating normative ideas about Islam and homosexuality, they were actually ambivalent about state-sanctioned punishments for homosexuality. Nonny, of a similar background to Isma and Ayie – i.e. from a 'traditional' Malay family but now living and working in the capital – used similar sentiments to *embrace* sexual variety:

> I believe that *God created variety in humankind. Right? So, yes, there are Muslims, there are Christians, there are Buddhists, there are Jews, right? There are effeminate men, there are straight people, there are people who are not straight*. But at the end of the day, *what counts is your goodness. Goodness is not merely about praying five times a day or whatever. […] It's as long as you are a* good human being *to other people. To me, how do I say it? That's what God wants, perhaps? It's like* we fail to realise, *we only think about our relationship with God. But we fail at our relationships with people*.

Nonny's narrative of God and sexual diversity has much in common with Ayie's, Isma's and Kal's, but with some crucial differences in emphasis. Unlike Ayie, Isma, and Kal, Nonny places even greater emphasis on good deeds rather than inherent personal characteristics in her interpretation of the divine will. She even expands the notion of good deeds to encompass all ethical conduct between people and not just religious rituals and acts of worship. She also believes that God created diversity and that this is desirable. She locates the need to behave ethically *and* celebrate diversity as coming from God, yet in doing so she locates agency in human actors rather than a

divine actor. For Nonny, because God has endowed human beings with a sense of good and bad, we are capable of working out ethical ways of treating each other, including respecting equality and diversity. In her view, this is 'what God wants' and so the question of whether an individual can or should 'change' his or her sexuality is irrelevant.

5.2.1 'Created' gay?

Many gay Muslims also believe that they were born gay, or that Allah created them gay and that they cannot change this. This conception of a stable sexuality can also lead to varying responses depending on whether they believe homosexuality is forbidden or permissible in Islam.

Sulaiman said as a teenager he believed that his homosexual desires were only 'temporary'. Eventually, he came to identify as 'gay' and believed this was unchangeable:

> For me, I guess, it's just me. I can't be someone else […]. But the first thing, I just believe [if] it is wrong, then it's wrong […]. I mean, you cannot challenge something that's really wrong, if [it's] really wrong according to religion. But you can't change, either. So, you live your life hoping that, you know, whatever you do, besides f**king people or being f**ked occasionally, is good enough for you to be a good person. And I want to go to Heaven too (laughs).

According to Sulaiman's narrative, same-sex desires are inherent but homosexual conduct is still forbidden in Islam. One still cannot claim that it is permissible to be gay just because it is an inherent disposition. However, Sulaiman appealed to the basic Islamic teaching that Allah will weigh the accumulation of good versus bad deeds, i.e. a works-based view of salvation. Within this framework, Sulaiman reasons that the sin of having gay sex can be offset by doing good deeds. This rationale gives him a degree of psychological relief since, according to this logic, the ultimate arbiter of good deeds is Allah and not any other human authority. In fact,

Sulaiman posited that he might actually be causing more harm if he were to try to 'change':

> Shanon: […] Do you feel that you are born this way?
> Sulaiman: […] Born this way? After a while then, you know, you realise, oh, this is genetic. Then, OK, I should not blame myself […]
> Shanon: Do you want to change? No?
> Sulaiman: It's me. If I change also, I feel that I'll go out with other guys. Change me, meaning, change means I get married *to a woman* right? Then it's the same, I think, [in that I'll still be gay].

In this logic, the only 'change' that would be possible would be superficial – Sulaiman could only *hide* his homosexuality and get married to a woman. However, even if he were in a heterosexual marriage, he believed he probably would not cease having homosexual desires. If this were the case, he might end up having sex with other men behind his wife's back which would be as sinful as being in a homosexual relationship.

On the other hand, it is also possible for gay Muslims to believe they were born gay according to Allah's will and reason from this that Islam does not condemn homosexuality. For example, when I asked Ebrahim to tell me about how his thoughts on Islam and sexuality developed over the years, he said:

> It's only really in the last […] two years […] when I kind of finally started to accept my sexuality. At the time, I was quite anti-religious in that I felt like I'm going to have to leave Islam, and I was fine with that, to be honest, at that point. […] I still kind of felt, well, is the Quran condemning me? Well, if it is, then, you know, maybe the Quran is not true, because why would I feel this way? Why would God condemn me? So it's really only like in the last couple of years where I've been able to kind of come to terms with what the Quran says and think about it in a different way, you know, through reading

books like *Homosexuality in Islam* by Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle[136],
and doing more research online and talking to people from Imaan.

In this narrative, Ebrahim felt so strongly that his sexuality was inherent and not
aberrant that he was willing to entertain the idea that Islam was not the 'true' religion.
His conception of his sexuality as 'natural' and involuntary might even have
predisposed him to seek out and eventually embrace more inclusive and alternative
interpretations of Islam:

> I don't think Islam says very much, if anything. My understanding is
> that the verses about Prophet Lot[137] in the Quran were about rape, and
> other crimes, and they've kind of been turned into talking about
> homosexuality. So I don't think there's anything wrong with
> homosexuality in the Quran.

Ebrahim's position is similar to Sulaiman's in that he also places greater
emphasis on the ethical quality of a person's actions rather than his or her inward
disposition. Ebrahim's position causes him much less stress, however, because he no
longer believes that being gay is forbidden in Islam in the first place and re-reads
Islamic texts to support this belief.

The exposure to alternative scholarship on Islam has allowed Ebrahim to develop
a very different narrative from Sulaiman, where Sulaiman believes that neither his
sexuality nor Islamic teachings on homosexuality can be changed. In Malaysia,
publications that espouse alternative interpretations of Islam are frequently banned by

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[136] Discussed in detail in Chapter 2.1.1.

[137] The Arabic name for the biblical Lot. According to the Hebrew Scriptures, God destroyed Sodom and
Gomorrah because its inhabitants did not heed Lot's warnings to 'not act so wickedly' (Genesis 19:1-28).
In all major denominations of Christianity, this passage has been interpreted as a clear denunciation of
homosexuality. However, pro-gay Christians interpret it as referring to rape, violence and other kinds of
domination, arguing that it is not anti-homosexual per se. They apply similar hermeneutical analyses to
other verses in the Old and New Testaments (e.g. Goddard, 2008: 112–117). The story of Lot also
appears in the Quran, albeit very briefly in different chapters or *surahs*, and pro-gay Muslim scholars
adopt very similar interpretive strategies as their pro-gay Christian counterparts (discussed in Chapter
2.1.1).

the Publication and Quranic Texts Control Division of the Home Ministry[138]. Within this context, Sulaiman is forced to work much harder to bridge his beliefs. Ebrahim, on the other hand, has come to believe that Islamic teachings on homosexuality can be revised and reinterpreted and has an easier time holding his sexual and religious identities together.

5.2.3 Individual autonomy and identifying as gay

Regardless of the ways in which gay Muslims try to harmonise the religious and sexual aspects of their lives, many still face enormous family pressure to marry heterosexually. This is stressful for gay Muslims who feel unable to be open about their sexuality among family. Still, even without having to 'come out', this pressure can decrease as they develop greater individual autonomy from their families and communities. This autonomy is built upon the key components of financial independence and physical separation from their families and communities. For example, Razak, a gay Malaysian in his late 20s, said his parents and siblings used to make comments about his effeminate appearance and pressure him to marry, but this has decreased over the years:

> Razak: *Because I have this new job* (with a multinational bank)*, they can't talk much about it, because I'm earning. Maybe that's how they think.*
> Shanon: *So you feel that since you've become* financially independent *they don't comment as much*?
> Razak: *Yes […]. Maybe because I've made a commitment*, like I'm still helping my parents, you know? *I give them money every month*, and take care of them financially.

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[138] As at 15 January 2015, there were 1,543 banned titles listed on the Home Ministry's website, with banning dates going back to 1971. Titles included *Allah, Liberty and Love* by the openly-lesbian and Muslim Canadian writer Irshad Manji, and *Qur'an and Woman: Re-reading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* by the Muslim feminist theologian and co-founder of Sisters in Islam, Amina Wadud (Home Ministry of Malaysia, n.d.). Surprisingly, Kugle's book was not on the banned list, but I did not spot it in any of the major bookshops when I was in Malaysia. Also, Malaysians are able to access alternative views on Islam via the Internet which is still largely uncensored.

When Razak was growing up, his parents had working class occupations – they were both factory workers and although his mother had retired his father occasionally still worked as a security guard. Razak's elder siblings were in lower-middle to middle class occupations. By having the most middle-class occupation in his family, Razak appeared to his parents to be the most financially well-off among his siblings. This is why he ended up contributing such a large proportion to his parents' finances. According to him this, and the fact that his parents moved back to their village while he remained in Kuala Lumpur, was what eventually gave him more space to live as he wanted.

Such nuanced negotiations are not always required. Isma is from a middle-class family and had a well-paying job in Kuala Lumpur while her parents continued to live in the north of Peninsula Malaysia. She said:

> I think about probably nine years ago, my dad asked when are you gonna get married or do you have a boyfriend? I snapped. I scolded him, I said stop asking me these questions. I said, you know guys out there are all useless, so you just stop asking me these questions, because I'm happy being like this. *He has never asked me again*.

In fact, Isma said her parents knew she lived with her girlfriend Fauziah. She did not know if they were aware of the precise nature of the relationship but they did not pry.

There are many gay Muslims who achieve either financial independence or physical separation from their families but not both, which exposes them to greater pressures to marry. Ammar, a gay British Pakistani, said his mother constantly tried to arrange *rishta* meetings for him, even though he told her he did not want to get married. Ammar's father knew he was gay, and therefore kept quiet when Ammar refused these *rishtas*. Still, Ammar felt particularly vulnerable when he accompanied his mother on a visit to Pakistan and was pressured into a *rishta* meeting there. He described the incident as follows:

> I went to Pakistan and my mum introduced me to a girl and everybody was there and I felt pressured to say yes. And I thought, should I say yes? But the girl was there. But in the corner I imagined Osman and

Waqqas, this image of them just standing there, and then just going,

'No, honey, you're not doing this' (laughs).

Here, Ammar described another key component in the building of autonomy – the existence of an alternative community of support. Ammar became friends with Waqqas and Osman when he joined Imaan a few years ago. They all lived within driving distance of each other in the Northwest of England, and constantly met and kept in touch. Thus, even though someone like Ammar is not fully independent in the material, physical sense, in the symbolic sense he is at peace with being gay and Muslim because of his involvement with Imaan.

Gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain can narrate their self-understandings about religion and sexuality in various ways. In Malaysia, state-controlled interpretations of Islam and homosexuality can certainly limit, but not eliminate, the possibilities for developing alternative religious self-understandings. In both countries, greater individual autonomy allows them – whatever their personal interpretations of Islam and homosexuality – to express being Muslim and gay beyond the control of state or non-state Islamic authorities. In the next section, I explore whether a combination of these self-understandings and social networks can produce a collective 'gay Muslim' identity.

5.3 Gay Muslims and group belonging

In this section, I look at whether the label 'gay Muslim' creates what Brubaker and Cooper (2006: 46) describe as 'an emotionally laden sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded group, involving both a felt solidarity or oneness with fellow group members and a felt difference from or even antipathy to specified outsiders'. I begin by looking at the case of Imaan in Britain and then move on to analyse the Malaysian context.

5.3.1 Imaan: The making of a gay *ummah*?

Imaan utilises spaces offered by other organisations within the British LGBTQI charity sector to hold regular meetings and other activities. These non-religious spaces become temporarily 'Islamised' whenever an Imaan event is held. For example, the

agenda for the Imaan Annual General Meeting in 2013 – attended by some 30 to 40 Imaan members from London and other parts of England – included congregational *Zuhr* (midday) prayers:

> After more and more people arrive and exchange *salams* and hugs, Waqqas starts appointing *bilals*[139] and *imams*[140] for Zuhr and Asr prayers. He asks if I will 'lead' Zuhr, and I agree. Soon, Azeez (a former Imaan trustee) starts going around asking those of us who need *wuzu*[141] to do it.

> After *wuzu*, Ebrahim and I chat with some other Imaan members in the corridor upstairs. Suddenly Waqqas turns up on the staircase and barks, 'Shanon, they're waiting for you!' So I rush down and enter the room. A group of around 15 to 20 Imaan members – men and women interspersed – is standing in rows facing the Qibla[142], which in this case is towards the bottom right-hand corner of the room. They are all standing barefoot on rows upon rows of prayer mats. Azeez has done the *azan*, and yes, they're all waiting for me. Naved does the *iqama*[143], I take the lead, and we start praying.

These congregational prayers are not merely guided by conventional religious obligation but grounded in Imaan's organisational ethos – members take it for granted that Imaan events will set aside time and space for collective worship. The style of this worship blends tradition and innovation. I have observed that many Imaan prayers employ conventional Sunni-centric verbal formulae and physical movements, but sometimes Shii imams will lead using Shii formulae. In fact, Imaan's leadership

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[139] The person who recites the *adhan/azan*, or call to prayer.

[140] Prayer leaders.

[141] Pre-prayer ablutions.

[142] Direction facing the Kaaba in Mecca.

[143] Smaller call to prayer.

encourages Sunnis and Shiis to pray together, forging a non-sectarian ethos within the organisation.

Also, the congregation is usually mixed gender – those uncomfortable with this can opt not to join the congregation and pray on their own afterwards. Furthermore, different members are encouraged to lead at different prayer times or to recite the *azan*. Thus, during congregational worship within Imaan, members embody an underlying goal – for all Muslim sexual minorities to be fully included and equal to other Muslims within the fold of Islam.

In other words, besides being acts of worship, congregational prayers in Imaan condense and express the organisation's vision of what it means to be a 'gay Muslim'. As an organisation for LGBTQI Muslims, Imaan makes room for these Islamic activities based on the needs and preferences of many of its members. Through their participation, members explore and consolidate their self-understandings and self-representations as LGBTQI *Muslims* individually and collectively. These rituals provide, as Brubaker and Cooper (2006: 59) put it, the 'performative, constitutive dimension' in the making of group identity.

Some Imaan members therefore see it as not only a 'gay' organisation that addresses their concerns about sexual identity but also a valid Muslim organisation that fulfils their religious needs. When I asked Rasheed whether he 'fits in' with the wider British Muslim community, he replied:

No, no no no no no no! I don't want to, though. Frankly, it's because my community is Imaan, […] and like, I fit in here, and you've got your gay community and your Muslim community joined together, what more, what better can you get?

Imaan provides people like Rasheed with the means for expressing themselves comfortably and confidently as 'gay Muslims'. For them, the combination of religious rituals and social networking creates a sense of community or belonging to a cohesive group. Imaan therefore constructs rhetoric and activities enabling someone like Rasheed to develop, within the group, a 'sense of overriding oneness vis-à-vis some constitutive "other"' (Brubaker & Cooper, 2006: 46).

At the same time, Rasheed explained that his involvement with Imaan led him to start participating in the Islamic Society at his university. Even though he was not open

about his sexuality there, he said he was trying to make it more 'progressive'. This suggests that, even for him, the boundary between Imaan and other Muslim groups was not necessarily impossible to cross.

Indeed, other Imaan members join after having been a part of other Muslim movements or communities and for some of them it becomes a replacement or surrogate community. Osman explained his attachment to Imaan in this way:

> I think it's at a weird place, because it's like, what my previous experience as a community was, [different compared] to this one, which is an unknown quantity. I think it's still very fresh in its stages, and it's like people are trying to work out where they fit in and how it fits in with them, and how, to what extent. So for me, I think it's the closest to a community I'm going to get to replace the one which I used to have, like the Jamaat days and things.

According to Osman, Imaan is still a fluid social entity, perhaps reflecting that a 'gay Muslim' identity is also fluid and new. This is also reflected in the numerous debates that some Imaan members have, which sometimes imply that the organisation is too rigidly Islamic or not Islamic enough for their liking. These debates illustrate that, as Brubaker and Cooper (2006: 59) observe, 'groupness' does not reflect pre-existing social boundaries but is 'ambiguous and contested' and constantly under construction.

5.3.2 Boundary work within Imaan

The 'performative' dimensions of identity in Imaan can sometimes result in intra-group tensions, especially when there are various communication platforms within the organisation. In addition to its face-to-face meetings, Imaan provides numerous digital platforms for its members to interact at various levels of anonymity. There is a blog, an online discussion forum, a closed Facebook group, a Twitter account, and numerous WhatsApp chatrooms.

The discussions on these different forums are saturated with questions about Islam, gender, and sexuality, as well as other casual, non-religious exchanges. There is never any doctrinal consensus, simply because Imaan's organisational structure and

ethos is such that it does not institute 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable' doctrines for gay Muslims. The chair of Imaan has even stressed that the organisation is open to anyone who self-identifies as Muslim, even 'atheist Muslims'.

Despite this, when Imaan members socialise, initial conversations are often preoccupied with various religious matters, such as whether the food and drink is *halal*. There have been numerous occasions when I have not really bothered about *halal* requirements, provoking jokes, snide comments and even admonishments from different Imaan members. Hence, when a potential member, Hirsi, a gay British Somali in his late 20s, asked me privately if it was a good idea for him to order pork and alcohol at an Imaan lunch gathering, I instinctively said no. This was not because I was trying to impose normative boundaries of *haram*, but because I sensed that it would provoke some Imaan members to react with horror. Hirsi did not expect this reaction and later told me this made him disappointed with Imaan.

In fact, Bilan – who had attended the same gathering – also told me she was deeply offended by this and other aspects of Imaan, as I later captured in my field-notes:

> Bilan says she feels excluded as a black woman in Imaan settings. She said it appears as though most Imaan members haven't seen the world or engaged with other cultures.

> First of all, I don't think this is true – I tell her I've met Imaan members who are open to new people, but she disagrees with me vehemently. I suggest that perhaps some of the members she's met were from closed communities in the North of England, and were not exposed to people outside their own cultural circles until their late teens or early adulthood. She says this is still unacceptable to her – wouldn't they have gone to universities and so on?

> I add that perhaps this reflects larger issues in the landscape of British Islam, that perhaps British Muslims are divided along ethnic lines. In some of my interviews, I was told that for a long time even Bangladeshis and Pakistanis couldn't get along with each other, let alone allow for African Muslims to enter into their worldview. Bilan

continues that this is unacceptable. Then she also says she was really offended when Hirsi couldn't have pork and alcohol at the Imaan meeting.

According to Bilan, two issues discouraged her from getting involved in Imaan – the role of ethnicity and the normative Islamic standards which she saw as governing the group. She placed herself firmly as an outsider, arguing from her position as a Muslim of African origin who found Imaan's behavioural codes too strict. These concerns were enough to stop her from joining.

Regarding the issue of ethnicity, the majority of Imaan members do appear to come from South Asian backgrounds. This does not indicate homogeneity, however – the South Asians include Pakistanis, Indians, Bengalis, and East Africans of South Asian background. Besides, I have also interacted with people of Arab, Turkish, Iranian, Southeast Asian, White British, and West and East African backgrounds at many Imaan meetings.

On Bilan's concern that Imaan was too doctrinaire, I had also come across complaints from other Imaan members that it was not doctrinaire *enough*. For example Nadia, an English convert to Islam in her early 30s, frequently complained to Waqqas that Imaan members were too lax about observing Islamic rituals and rules of etiquette. Nadia, who is in a lesbian relationship, also felt she did not completely 'fit' within Imaan but attributed this to being a *white* convert whom others assumed still needed to be educated about Islam.

These concerns from Bilan and Nadia illustrate the boundary tensions within Imaan – amongst members, amongst the organisation's leadership, and *between* members and the leadership. Eventually, Bilan distanced herself from Imaan completely, while Nadia maintains contact with only those members she considers her friends.

The boundaries of belonging within Imaan are therefore constantly being challenged and reworked by existing and potential members. On one level, Imaan does foster strong affective ties and a sense of collective belonging as gay Muslims among its members. Yet, as Nadia and Bilan show, there are also gay Muslims in Britain who do not derive their self-understandings from a tangible sense of belonging to a particular group.

5.3.3 Not needing to belong?

Despite Bilan's criticisms of Imaan, she still identified as 'gay' and 'Muslim' and when I asked what it meant for her to be Muslim, she said:

> I suppose for me now community has been stripped out of it. When I was younger, there was a community element, my family and whatever was around, and when I was practising, there was a huge community element, because I pretty much stopped talking to all of my friends [when I successively joined and left several Muslim movements], and just immersed myself into this new world, because I felt like that was what was going to save me.

Like some other Imaan members, Bilan was heavily involved in various Muslim movements before she encountered Imaan. However, she stopped 'practising' as a Muslim when she started to come to terms with her sexuality. Eventually, she did not feel the need to identify with a particular group or social network to self-identify as gay and Muslim. In fact, she said she did not fit into the gay community either and when I asked if she thought there was any difference between being a gay Muslim or non-Muslim, she replied:

> Islamophobia, and just how deeply Islamophobic the gay community is, and how, at least in my experience, the gay community seems to have a disproportion of people that call themselves liberal, but are so backward. Like have just almost never really interacted with any other cultures, and never really opened up their minds, and I don't know, think they're a minority, but don't understand that being a minority doesn't give you the right to discriminate against other minorities, yeah?

Bilan therefore retains a sense of being 'gay' and 'Muslim' while feeling alienated from Imaan *and* the larger gay community in Britain. In other words, being

'gay' and 'Muslim' are integral parts of Bilan's self-understanding, but she identifies with them on an abstract level and has developed a hierarchy of different aspects of her 'identity':

> For me being gay is pretty far down on my identity list, so I would say I identify as being black, and being Muslim, and being a woman, too, but again that's not really that high up, and I guess being gay is just right at the bottom of it. Like it's part of who I am, but it's not a huge part of who I am, right?

Bilan's experiences show that people can clearly identify and understand themselves as being 'gay' and 'Muslim' without necessarily feeling a need to belong to any 'gay Muslim' group. She provides a clear contrast to someone like Rasheed, for whom 'gay Muslim' is a cohesive identity tied very strongly to his community. Brubaker and Cooper (2006: 46) suggest that in analysing collective formations of identity, we should distinguish between 'more loosely affiliative forms of self-understanding', i.e. involving a more general feeling of 'commonality' or 'connectedness to particular others', and more 'strongly groupist, exclusive, affectively charged self-understandings'. In this instance, Bilan's self-understanding as a 'gay Muslim' is much less 'groupist' and 'more loosely affiliative' than Rasheed's.

In the absence of any involvement with an organised collective, then, it is still possible for people to come to identify as gay and Muslim. I found many instances of this in Malaysia, where there is no direct equivalent of Imaan. In fact, some of my Malaysian participants were sceptical about the value of having a specific gay Muslim group, especially to address the Muslim component of their lives. When I asked Sulaiman if he would be interested in joining a gay Muslim organisation, he replied:

> *It's good to have support groups* to address homophobia – that's a different thing if you are gay. But then again if I am in Malaysia, if *I really want to learn about religion*, then I don't have to join like a gay Muslim group, I can just go to *the mosque*.

Sulaiman's belief that Islam forbids homosexuality could be an unstated factor preventing him from entertaining the idea that gay Muslims might provide valid

191

resources on Islam. Strong state regulation of Islam, Malay ethnicity, and homosexuality probably also make him assign very low priority to being gay, especially if he has other ways of relieving the stress of being gay and Muslim.

Even though there is no direct equivalent of Imaan in Malaysia, groups such as SIS sometimes act as proxy gay-friendly Muslim spaces. When I asked Dax, a gay Malay man in his early 30s, if he had a community he identified with, we had the following exchange:

Dax: Religiously or?

Shanon: Any kind of community.

Dax: Anything, *like how*? *What about SIS*?

Shanon: SIS, *perhaps*, or the Annexe[144]?

Dax: *I'm comfortable with people at the Annexe. I'm comfortable at SIS.*

Shanon: Do you feel like they are community?

Dax: I do.

Shanon: *Are they* your friends?

Dax: Yup. *I am in my comfort zone with both, like I feel I belong, I feel comfortable.*

Dax added that he attends SIS events regularly, even the ones that did not explicitly address gender or sexuality, despite personally not identifying as Muslim anymore.

In Malaysia, then, gay Muslims have limited access to some alternative Muslim spaces where they can express their sexual and religious leanings relatively safely, even though there is no explicit 'gay Muslim' collective. They also have limited access to groups like Seksualiti Merdeka, but these spaces do not address Islam specifically. This leads not so much to a strong 'gay Muslim' identity as it does to a larger or looser alliance of alternative, more inclusive Muslim identities. This is in contrast with the British gay Muslims who feel at home in Imaan and feel a strong sense of group belonging with other British gay Muslims.

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[144] An art gallery in Kuala Lumpur that hosted the sexuality rights festival Seksualiti Merdeka from 2008 to 2010 (discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.3.2).

To put it in Brubaker and Cooper's terms, there was a sense of 'commonality' and 'connectedness' to 'gay Muslim' identity among my Malaysian participants that did not necessarily translate into 'groupness'. My British participants from Imaan, on the other hand, demonstrated 'commonality', 'connectedness' *and* 'groupness' in their expressions of 'gay Muslim' identity. This does not mean my Malaysian participants were unconcerned about homophobia, but that they chose to address this in alliance with other progressive or inclusive Muslims rather than through a 'strongly groupist' gay Muslim movement. In the next section, I explore the ways in which gay Muslims express their religious and sexual identities in tangible spaces.

5.4 The space to be gay and Muslim

Up to now, I have shown how gay Muslims negotiate three inter-related aspects of their religious and sexual identities. I began with how they fashion their self-identifications in response to external categorisations or perceptions of them as Muslim. I then looked at how their self-understandings of Islam and sexuality can shift depending upon their surrounding circumstances. Finally, I showed how they are forging a collective 'gay Muslim' identity in Britain through organisations such as Imaan, while in Malaysia the state's penalties for Islamic and/or sexual offences inhibit the desire and ability to forge a bounded group identity.

Ultimately in both countries, gay Muslims are increasingly expressing their religious and sexual identities in ways that avoid, subvert or challenge the control of normative Islamic authorities. For them, Islam is now less a 'sacred canopy' permanently providing identity, meaning, inspiration, and consolation than a resource which they actively engage with to fashion individual and collective identity.

In this section, I take up James Beckford's (2001: 233) call to think of religion 'less as a social institution and more as a cultural resource susceptible to many different uses'. I do this by examining how gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain engage with religious symbols, authorities and rhetorics in specific physical locations and at specific instances. I begin with how Imaan members negotiate their personal safety and public visibility as gay Muslims in Britain and then compare this with the Malaysian context. I suggest that in both countries urbanisation has created liminal or intermediate spaces for gay Muslims to be able to express religion and sexuality as *they* want. I also argue that

when gay Muslims negotiate these spaces, they directly and indirectly influence surrounding expressions and perceptions of Islam.

5.4.1 Gay Muslim pride in Britain

During the annual Pride parade in London, many different LGBTQI groups march under different banners, including religious LGBTQI organisations – Imaan has previously marched alongside Sikhs and Jews. Here is an excerpt from my fieldnotes on the London Pride march, 2013:

I'm just chilling out with the other Imaaners and holding Scott Kugle's book, *Homosexual in Islam*, in one hand and a banner with the other. I've grown a beard especially for Pride and I'm wearing a West African outfit that Giles lent me – it was given to him as a gift some years ago. Around thirty Imaaners are present, mostly dressed in traditional costume, holding up various placards with slogans like 'Frisk me, I'm Muslim', 'Queer Muslim Brotherhood', 'No to homophobia, no to Islamophobia', and 'Imaan: LGBTQI Muslim support'.

Two men catch me unawares. They look like father and son. They're dressed in "Western" clothing and speak with Arabic accents. They point at my book and ask me, 'What is this?' I say it's a book by Scott Kugle. 'What does it say?' they ask. I say it's called *Homosexuality in Islam*. The older one says, 'It is rubbish.' I say, 'No, it's not "rubbish", it's written by a Muslim academic,' and I invite him to read it. He says he doesn't want to read it because it's 'rubbish'.*

Then the younger one points at our banners and asks, 'What's all this?' I say, 'It's our float for Pride.' He says, 'And what does Islam say about homosexuality?' I say, 'Well, actually it says very little about homosexuality.' 'Rubbish,' says the younger man. They both tell me that we should remove the word 'Islam' from our banners. I

say we won't because we're all Muslim. The younger man raises his eyebrows and asks incredulously, 'You're *all* Muslim?'*

By this point, some of the other Imaaners have gathered around me. Ebrahim starts telling them to go away, while Salleh comes and ushers them sternly to the pavement. He exaggerates *his* Arabic accent and tells them if they want to criticise us, they can do it from the pavement.

Pride is a public event where safety and order are regulated by its organisers and the police force. I was therefore taken aback when these two men confronted me directly, but it allowed me to witness other group dynamics coming into play. Imaan members noticed that one of their own was being 'threatened' by an outsider, and so protected me in a way that reinforced the group boundary symbolically and physically.

Also, if matters had escalated, the security personnel would have been firmly on the side of the Pride organisers and participants – while they would defend freedom of speech, they would not tolerate anti-homosexual attacks. The two men had no choice but to leave us alone lest they attracted unwanted attention from security personnel. Though they confronted me with ideas that circulate freely in Malaysia or other Muslim-majority countries and might have landed me in trouble there, I did not suffer any adverse consequences from this confrontation in London. In fact, in London, these men were confronted with the reality that there are people who explicitly identify as gay *and* Muslim.

From Imaan's perspective, Pride is an event which, although occurring in a public, 'secular' space, allows for collective practices – e.g., making and carrying banners, chanting slogans, marching together, taking pictures – that bind members together. Unlike Imaan's congregational prayer sessions, there are also tangible external dynamics that can reinforce a sense of intra-group connectedness and commonality, for example the two confrontational men. This incident was an example of Brubaker and Cooper's (2006: 46) suggestion that group identity also involves as 'a felt difference from or even antipathy to specified outsiders'.

Apart from the two men, the mostly white, British, non-Muslim spectators during Pride are also external actors who help foster in-group feelings of solidarity within Imaan. Large sections often cheer loudly when they see the Imaan banner and

rush to take pictures with Imaan members. Some Imaan members respond by ululating, chanting Islamic slogans in Arabic, and doing *bhangra* steps or belly dancing. By interacting with the crowd in this way, Imaan members use Islam and ethnicity as cultural resources to construct public images of a gay Muslim collective. They make being gay and Muslim imaginable and intelligible to spectators at Pride by drawing upon universalistic images of 'Islam' and 'gay' identity and elaborating these in their own 'particularistic terms' (Beckford, 2000: 173).

It might thus seem paradoxical that many Imaan members who turn up to march during Pride employ various tactics to tone down details that might make them identifiable on a *personal* level. They might put on dark sunglasses or wear *hijabs* and *niqabs*, which become not only fashion statements or religious symbols but a means of protecting anonymity in public[145]. This is partly because many Imaan members need to balance their desire for social acceptability *and* the fear of being ostracised by their families and local communities if they were to be 'found out'.

In Malaysia, I encountered several gay Muslims whose fears about being 'found out' were even more pronounced. One recurring fear was of potential gay pride marches in Malaysia, for example in Ayie's objection to them as discussed in section 6.1.4. Ayie argued further:

> *To me, why would you want to take the risk? You are a small*
> *community – you want to fight a big community? As long as certain*
> *people are OK with you then I think that's fine. If people don't attack*
> *your home, throw I-don't-know-what into your house, you can live in*
> *a Malay community with your partner without people bashing you, to*
> *me that's good enough.*

There are some strands in Ayie's reasoning that need clarification. To begin with, she thinks 'gay rights rallies' could potentially draw unwanted attention to people like her and her girlfriend. In Malaysia, she argues, they enjoy a certain degree of freedom to be in a romantic relationship, living together in a Malay-majority area without anybody 'bashing' them or having their home attacked. She feels that attempting to be

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[145] For most Imaan members, putting on the *hijab* or *niqab* is also a strong endorsement of religious diversity in a 'gay' space.

more visible with her sexuality and demanding equal rights as a sexual minority would upset this delicate balance. A publicly visible rally would invite danger as opposed to the relative safety which she now enjoys.

Ayie's reasoning implies that there is a gap between the anti-homosexual rhetoric of Islamic authorities in Malaysia and the relatively more tolerant attitudes of the majority of Muslims in her local environment. According to her, it is possible to avoid state-led rhetoric by living semi-openly as a gay Muslim but not explicitly declaring or labelling what she is. To what extent is this true? In the next section, I examine if or how this partial invisibility works for gay Muslims in particular circumstances and whether this also involves treating Islam as a 'cultural resource'.

5.4.2 Balancing acts – expressing and concealing sexuality

Malaysia's *syariah* provisions enable Islamic 'enforcement officers' to patrol public and private spaces for moral infractions by Muslim including alcohol consumption, non-performance of Friday prayers by Muslim men, non-observance of the fast in Ramadan, intimate heterosexual relations between unmarried Muslims, and homosexual relations[146]. It is practically impossible for these enforcers to assign the same level of priority to every type of infraction *and* to police them constantly and comprehensively. In practise, therefore, *syariah* enforcers often act on tip-offs from members of the public or pressure from political leaders[147].

Yet, there are venues where gay Muslims can be semi-public about their sexual identities without being targeted by these enforcers. During my field research, I became aware of two 24-hour open-air restaurants in two different Kuala Lumpur suburbs – one popular primarily among Malay *pengkids* and their girlfriends, the other among gay Malay men and *mak nyah*. After clubbing one night, at around 3am, Razak, Dax, and

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[146] Muslim men who fail to perform Friday prayers regularly, Muslims who eat in public during Ramadan, and Muslims who drink alcohol in public in the Federal Territories can all be fined and/or imprisoned under the SCOA (Malaysia, 1997: 13–15). Also, under the SCOA, heterosexual sex out of wedlock, *liwat* and *musahaqah* are all punishable by imprisonment and/or whipping and/or a fine (Malaysia, 1997: 16–17). Similar provisions exist under the Syariah Criminal Offences Enactments (SCOE) of the other States.

[147] Precisely how these *syariah* advocates and enforcers exert their influence over state institutions and the mass media and how gay Muslims respond was discussed in Chapter 5.2.

Ikhwan – in his late 20s – and I visited the restaurant popular with gay men and *mak nyah*, as captured in my fieldnotes:

> At least five tables have *lelaki lembut*, *adik-adik* or *abang-abang* sitting, eating and chatting. Razak, who is the most familiar with the place, takes us around and we sit inside. […] Immediately after we sit two young, slim, *adik-adik* skip past us, holding hands. Razak says to me, 'Did you see that?' I say, 'I know.' Ikhwan says they were at the nightclub before, too.*

> As the hour progresses, more and more *adik-adik*, *abang-abang* and *mak nyah* turn up. I see a dyed-blond, effeminate *adik* with his exposed chest, in his early 20s, walking in and laughing with a couple of his friends. Altogether, the gay men and transgender women occupy at least ten tables surrounding us now.

> The migrant South Indian waiters are nonchalant. They take orders calmly and good-naturedly, even while the *adik-adik* lean on each other, hug, laugh, and hold hands at their tables. I make a remark noting the waiters' indifference, and Razak says, '*Maybe they are resigned to their fate.*' *

This restaurant is not hidden or 'underground' by any means. It is located beside the main traffic light junction of this suburb and surrounded by other outlets such as a 7-Eleven, more 24-hour eateries, and rows of cars parked under glaring neon lights. This square, in turn, is surrounded by numerous high-rise condominium blocks. Rohana, Sulaiman, and Razak all told me they thought many of the gay Muslims who frequented this restaurant lived within the vicinity.

In theory, the law allows *syariah* enforcement officers to police establishments like these to weed out homosexual behaviour or cross-dressing[148]. To my knowledge,

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[148] The exact wording of Article 28 of the SCOA, applicable in the Federal Territories, is: 'Any male person who, in any public place, wears a woman's attire and poses as a woman for immoral purposes shall be guilty of an offence and shall on conviction be liable to a fine not exceeding one thousand ringgit

they had never done so here but this does not mean moral enterprise does not exist in practise – it is just arbitrary and selective. Not far away in Seremban, the capital of the State of Negeri Sembilan, several *mak nyah* were so violently harassed by enforcers that they mounted a constitutional challenge against the *syariah* provision outlawing cross-dressing. The civil High Court rejected their application on the grounds that they are Muslim and Islam forbids cross-dressing and transgenderism (BBC, 2012). In November 2014, however, the Court of Appeal found in their favour, ruling that the *syariah* provisions denied them their human rights and that Islamic law is subject to the Federal Constitution (Malay Mail, 2014)[149].

In most circumstances, gay Muslims in Malaysia are aware that such policing exists and of its arbitrary and selective nature. Ebry and Amin live in a State with a reputation for stringent *syariah* enforcement and said they knew of several cases involving *mak nyah* there, too, especially those involved in drag performances. Also targeted were *mak nyah* hired by families to perform at traditional Malay weddings in villages and small towns. I asked Ebry and Amin why they thought the religious enforcers focused so much on drag shows and wedding performances, and we had the following exchange:

> Ebry: *Because sometimes the ones who inform the officers about these events, they're not outsiders. It's the* pondan *themselves who have their own agenda.*
>
> Shanon: *What kind of agenda*?
>
> Ebry: *For example if the person enters a* pondan *pageant, and suddenly loses, or she's an ex-beauty queen and is offended at not being invited as a guest of honour, she'll tip the religious enforcers off about the event. Isn't that twisted? Or maybe she spots her ex-boyfriend attending with another* mak nyah*, or someone tells her the boyfriend's cheating on her, she'll inform the authorities [anonymously that something 'immoral' is going on].*

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or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding one year or to both (Malaysia, 1997: 17).' Similar provisions exist in the SCOE in the other States.

[149] The ruling was denounced by state and non-state *syariah* advocates, including the Minister in the Prime Minister's department in charge of religion (A Azim & Lingan, 2014; Azril & Aidil, 2014).

These stories are difficult to verify because of a lack of transparent data – there are no publicly available statistics about the types and frequency of *syariah* operations. Yet according to tan (2012a: 158), despite strong anti-homosexual rhetoric from *syariah* advocates, the *syariah* laws are seldom applied. The Federal Territories only had one case of *liwat* recorded in the first half of 2008, while the PAS-governed State of Kelantan – with its reputation for severe Islamic penalties – has not prosecuted anyone for this (tan, 2012a: 130). Most of the prosecutions for sodomy have been under civil legislation, specifically Section 377 of the Penal Code (tan, 2012a: 131). The *syariah* provisions against *musahaqah* (female homosexual behaviour) are similarly rarely applied.

Mak nyahs are disproportionately targeted by the religious enforcers compared to gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals – between 2005 and 2009, 346 cases of 'men behaving like women' were brought to the *syariah* courts (tan, 2012a: 146). In the broader context, however, the number of cases involving homosexual men and women and *mak nyah* pales in comparison to the 27,277 cases of *khalwat* (illicit proximity between heterosexuals) recorded between 2005 and 2009 (tan, 2012a: 146).

Ebry's account is thus plausible and also significant in that he offers non-religious critiques and explanations of the actions of *syariah* enforcers. Even the government-controlled newspapers routinely report these moral raids when they go awry, for example those resulting in extortion (e.g. Wan Noor Hayati, 2013), physical injuries and even death (e.g. Mohd Fadly, 2013).

Despite knowing about these actual and potential abuses, many gay Muslims in Malaysia are cautious about criticising the Islamic authorities too publicly. Often, they also do not feel the need to oppose things openly since the occasional and arbitrary nature of moral policing does not make life completely unbearable. Some of them even try to 'beat the system', as Ebry put it:

> *If the religious department feels like it on a particular day, they'll just go out and target all the Muslims who drink. That's typical in Malaysia. You know what it's like? It's like when it's* pondan *season, they'll ooooooooooonly catch* pondan*! When it's alcohol season, they'll ooooooooooonly catch drinkers! During that season,* pondans *can go about freely, dancing carefree – nobody will bother them. So*

recently, like my friend, he's a Muslim and he ordered a beer while I
had orange juice. We sat together, drinking and enjoying the moment.
And then the enforcers showed up but he wasn't charged – because he
wasn't in drag.

Thus, many gay Muslims try to beat the system by lying low during 'hunting season' and come out of hiding when they think it has ended. For other gay Muslims, the very idea of even occasional moral enterprise is anathema. Fauziah and I had the following exchange when I asked her if she thought there were any differences between being a Muslim and a non-Muslim in Malaysia:

Fauziah: I don't get to choose my religion, I don't get to choose how I would like to dress, I don't get to choose what I want to eat or drink, I don't get to choose a lot of things.

Shanon: But in a very, in an everyday sense, effectively you do, right? You choose how you want to dress, you choose where you want to eat, what you wanna drink?

Fauziah: Mmm, yes, but being aware the whole time of the consequences that come from those choices, having that hang over your head.

Shanon: So you actually think about it? Like even now you're not wearing a *tudung*, are you constantly thinking about it?

Fauziah: Ya! Are you kidding me? Man, I would love to dress like a slut! Do you really think that's possible?

In Malaysia, then, the relative tolerance towards sexual minorities on an interpersonal, community level is inhibited considerably by the fear of actual and potential enforcement of *syariah* laws. People like Fauziah do try to criticise or oppose *syariah* enforcement in their own ways, however, by volunteering for or supporting organisations such as SIS and other women's or human rights groups.

My Malaysian gay Muslim participants therefore did not explicitly use Islam as a 'cultural resource' to forge sexual and religious identity in the way that my British participants did with Imaan. Rather, many of my Malaysian participants sought to explain and critique *syariah* enforcement in practical, non-religious terms to analyse

201

and address state regulation of Islam and sexuality. They all treated the idea of Islam as sacred but were critical of the administration of Islam, suggesting that Islam was no more a 'sacred canopy' for them than for my British participants. People like Fauziah even supported organisations such as SIS which challenge state-imposed interpretations of Islam. Their experiences show how, as Beckford (2000: 183) puts it, 'religion functions simultaneously on universalistic and particularistic "registers"'. In this way, gay Muslims in Malaysia, as in Britain, also engage with Islam as a 'cultural resource' and can be potential agents of social change.

5.4.3 Indications of wider change

In Britain, state-led institutions protect the rights of sexual minorities, yet anti-gay sentiment and incidents perpetrated by non-state actors persist in some situations. For example, a survey commissioned by Stonewall (Guasp, Gammon, & Ellison, 2013: 4), the British LGB charity, found that in 2013, eight in ten LGBs reported experiencing harassment, insults and intimidation.

Statistics like these go some way to explain why, despite being comfortable marching as a 'gay Muslim' *collective* during Pride, Imaan members still felt the need to mask their *personal* identity. They know their rights are protected by the state but remain concerned about the potential consequences of being 'found out' by their families, friends and local communities. In relation to these conflicting circumstances, I have discussed how gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain engage in 'role adjustments' (in Chapter 4.2.2) and how they might also form strategic connections with other sympathetic Muslims (in Chapter 5.3.2).

Yet sometimes, the gay Muslims I met in Malaysia and Britain seemed surprised or perplexed by particular trends they were noticing among other Muslims. Rasheed told me he was amused and slightly unsettled by recent developments at a famous gay nightclub in the northwest of England:

> It's the fact that every Thursday night, [this gay club] has a student night. All the Asians go there. All the Muslim Asians go there, and it's crazy, 'cause I was like, what? So I can't go [gay clubbing] on a Thursday because [of] all the Asians there! […] But it shows that […]

slowly, it's not a taboo thing, because even as a gay Muslim, you think, oh my God, if a Muslim person that I know saw two guys kissing, they'd be like, what the f**k! However, these [straight Muslim] guys go [gay clubbing], so it's not a big thing for them.

This example might not be representative, but it does make us ask whether Muslims – gay or straight, and in this case in the West – are experimenting with new ways of belonging within wider society. Rasheed was not convinced that this change was enough to protect him from being stigmatised by his community if *he* were to be seen at the same venue. To him, these other Muslims might be comfortable going to a generically gay nightclub, but would probably still be unnerved if they personally came into contact with a gay *Muslim*. This is why he stayed away on Thursday nights.

Still, Rasheed was more amused than afraid – overall, he seemed to think it was good news that straight Muslims were partying at *the* gay nightclub in town. Rasheed's account suggests that other younger British Muslims are also finding outlets to express themselves beyond the control of normative Islamic authorities. This example gives us a glimpse of how dominant, global images of 'Islam' and 'sexuality' can become refracted at national and local levels.

5.5 Conclusion

Gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain feel a strong sense of connection to their religious and sexual identities yet manage to express Islam in ways that avoid, subvert, or resist control by normative Islamic authorities. Drawing upon Brubaker and Cooper's analytical framework on the different facets of identity construction, I examined the conditions that make this possible in both countries.

In Malaysia, the state is a powerful identifier of religious identity – it categorises people's religious affiliation and imposes particular expressions of Islam on Muslims. Many gay Muslims here take it for granted that they are Muslim and that their behaviour is seen as immoral and criminal. At the same time, state authorities cannot fully dictate how they live their lives as Muslims. In this context, they still negotiate and engage with multiple social networks, authorities and perspectives of Islam and develop their own self-understandings. Some even vehemently object to state-imposed

Islam, albeit mostly in private. This does not mean that they necessarily disaffiliate from Islam or that Islam ceases to hold personal importance for them but rather that they constantly engage in personal reinterpretations of it. However, the strong state regulation of Islam and Malay ethnicity, with sanctions for violations, inhibits the formation of a bounded, 'strongly groupist' (Brubaker & Cooper, 2006: 46) gay Muslim collective.

In Britain, the state does not impose Islam upon Muslims – or religion upon the rest of the population – in the same way. Yet state management of Muslims as a religious minority makes them particularly visible especially in light of controversies and issues involving Islam. In this scenario, Islam also becomes a primary component of the identity of gay British Muslims. At the same time, they often need to grapple with anti-homosexual beliefs and attitudes within their families and communities. Here, too, normative Islamic authorities cannot monopolise the way gay British Muslims fashion their religious self-understandings. Instead, gay British Muslims formulate their own self-understandings based on negotiations and engagements with multiple social networks, authorities and perspectives on Islam. In fact, the politicisation of Islam and sexuality within the context of a liberal democracy has partly enabled organisations such as Imaan to emerge and be legitimised by the state. This wider context further allows Imaan to draw upon Islamic symbols, teachings and practices as cultural resources to build a strong sense of gay Muslim group identity.

Thus, in Malaysia and Britain, gay Muslims draw upon what they imagine to be 'true', 'correct' ideals of Islam from external sources, but they adapt these to their local or individual circumstances. They still seek to belong within the wider community of Muslims, but they also revise and refine their understandings of Islam based on their specific experiences. Gay expressions of Islam are therefore not merely instances of individual gay Muslims being dominated by or clashing with a supposedly oppressive, monolithic 'Islam'.

Furthermore, my findings suggest that gay Muslims might not be that different from other Muslims who also use Islam as what Beckford refers to as a 'cultural resource' to fashion eclectic self-expressions. In contexts where Islam is not imposed by the state, younger heterosexual Muslims might be developing less confrontational and more tolerant attitudes towards sexual minorities. In countries like Malaysia, on the other hand, *syariah* enforcers might try to control expressions of Islam yet unintentionally drive gay and other Muslims to seek alternative expressions of Islam.

These dynamics suggest that there is much analytical value in looking at religion more as a 'cultural resource' than as a 'social institution'. This allows us to examine how widespread images of 'Islam' and 'sexuality' are refracted at national and local levels, and whether these, in turn, reshape 'global' or 'dominant' understandings of Islam. The next chapter explores how the inter-related transnational and national dimensions of 'Islam' and 'sexuality' affect the regulation and expression of gay Muslim identity in Malaysia and Britain.

Chapter 6: The wider politics of *halal* and *haram*

This chapter builds upon the previous one by comparing the 'regulatory contexts' (Beckford, 2008: 211) in which gay Muslims use Islam as a 'cultural resource' to fashion their self-identities. It looks at how gay Muslims negotiate their everyday lives around the dominant notion that 'proper' Islam condemns homosexuality as *haram* (forbidden).

As I will show, this notion is not necessarily expressed explicitly but arises implicitly in several situations. My overall interest is in how state and non-state actors can construe particular kinds of *behaviour* as unacceptable and conflate these with particular *groups* of people – in this case, 'homosexuals'. To pursue this analysis, I engage with theoretical insights from the sociology of deviance and, where relevant, on the 'securitization' of Muslims (Croft, 2012: 16) and 'homonationalism' (Puar, 2007: 4, 39, 51).

Popular understandings about what Islam 'says' about homosexuality are informed by images of rigid and draconian legislation associated with the term *shariah*. This conception of *shariah*, however, is a relatively modern development in how Islamic law is conceived. To be more precise, there is a distinction between *shariah*, understood as a moral and ethical code, and *fiqh*, or Islamic jurisprudence[150]. Historically, in *fiqh*, jurists from different schools of thought debated and often revised their interpretations of the degrees of permissible (*halal*) and prohibited (*haram*) conduct. The terms *halal* and *haram* could apply to various individual activities and social interactions including consumption of food and drink, financial transactions and sexual relations. The majority view in medieval and contemporary *fiqh* is that homosexual relations are a subset of *haram* sexual conduct.

Yet in the history of Islam, there were dissenting opinions on the *types* of homosexual acts considered unacceptable, and the *degree* to which they were

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[150] Mohammad Hashim Kamali, a scholar of Islamic law and jurisprudence, argues that in the *Sunnah* (recorded traditions of the Prophet Muhammad) the words *shariah* and *fiqh* do not carry the same legalistic meanings that they are commonly associated with now (2006: 4). Kamali (2006: 6) further argues that the notion of the *shariah* as the 'principal criterion of an Islamic state' only gained prominence in the twentieth century through Muslim thinkers and activists such as Sayyid Qutb, Abu al-Ala Mawdudi and Yusuf al-Qaradawi.

punishable[151]. It is thus more appropriate to refer to contested and diverse Islamic rulings forbidding particular sex *acts*, whether with those of the opposite or same sex. However, many Muslim-majority nation-states now codify anti-homosexual laws based on particular interpretations of *fiqh* or legacies of colonial anti-sodomy laws or both[152].

To understand the everyday implications of these understandings on gay Muslims, I draw upon insights from sociological studies of deviance, specifically regarding 'moral enterprise'. I engage with Howard Becker's (1991: 147) suggestion that 'moral entrepreneurs' can be divided into 'rule creators' who define certain activities or categories of people as 'deviant', and 'rule enforcers' responsible for meting out social penalties to deviants.

We might think of 'deviants' as the ones provoking moral enterprise, but Stanley Cohen (2011: 8) argues that often, moral entrepreneurs *create* 'moral panics' to whip up anxiety or hatred towards 'deviants' or 'folk devils'. This often triggers the 'folk devils' to respond antagonistically, justifying the public's fears and leading to further confrontations between the 'moral entrepreneurs' and 'deviants' – a process Cohen (2011: 226) refers to as 'deviancy amplification'.

According to these approaches, society's perceptions of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' can and does change with time and different societies or cultures can have varying understandings of what counts as deviance. In the context of the West in the 1960s, for example, homosexuality was still widely regarded as deviant, and individuals who identified as homosexual often kept this a secret. More recently, the authorities in several Muslim-majority societies increasingly target sexual minorities as 'folk devils' while in Western liberal democracies, anti-Muslim ideologues often portray *Muslims* as potentially violent extremists or terrorists.

In Britain, Stuart Croft (2012: 16) argues that this results in some state and non-state actors bolstering 'British' identity by singling Muslims out as potential security threats – what he terms the 'securitization of Islam'. In the US, Jasbir Puar (2007: 4, 51) goes further and argues that stereotypes of Muslims as violent, misogynistic and homophobic are feeding pro-war, nationalist ideologies of America as exceptionally tolerant and gay-friendly, i.e. 'homonationalism'.

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[151] I give examples of these debates in Chapter 2.1.1.

[152] The historical background of such laws in Malaysia is discussed in Chapter 3.

These perspectives on the 'securitization of Islam' and 'homonationalism' highlight the geopolitical dimensions affecting the management of Muslim minorities in Western liberal democracies. This chapter critically engages with them by comparing how gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain respond to notions of *halal* and *haram* within politicised and ideological constructions of 'true' Islam and 'homosexuality'.

Structurally, the chapter begins with a section exploring how dominant images of Islamic prohibitions of homosexuality are presented in the British and Malaysian mass media and how these affect the everyday lives of gay Muslims. This provides the backdrop for the next section, which compares the impacts of state-led monitoring and regulation of Islam and sexuality in the two countries upon gay Muslims. Here, I engage specifically with perspectives on moral enterprise, the securitization of Islam and homonationalism. The final section then discusses a key strategy gay Muslims use to reclaim social acceptability in both countries – developing alliances with sympathetic Muslims who accept and promote alternative and more inclusive interpretations of Islam.

My analysis suggests that social constructions of deviance take on different complexions in Malaysia and Britain. In Malaysia, notions of moral, ethnic and religious purity overlap in the anti-homosexual rhetoric used by pro-*syariah* ideologues to defend the 'purity' of society. In Britain, on the other hand, there is growing advocacy tackling homophobia as part of wider activism focusing on the 'social suffering' of marginalised groups – what Cohen (2011: xiii) calls 'good' expressions of moral panics. However, some versions of gay activism can end up targeting religion, including Islam, as the 'enemy' of sexual freedom. There is therefore a more complicated intersection in Britain between activism aiming to eradicate homophobia and that which potentially scapegoats ethnic and religious minorities, especially Muslims, as exceptionally homophobic.

Gay Muslims in both countries therefore often need to negotiate their sexual and religious self-expressions based on what they perceive as the wider public mood on 'Islam' and 'homosexuality'. I suggest that the growing media channels and fragmented state bureaucracies unintentionally provide spaces for them and their allies to 'fight back', challenging various forms of moral enterprise and claiming greater acceptance in society.

6.1 'Homosexuality in Islam': mass media constructions

Mass media channels are important sites where people can construct, disseminate, and contest influential images of the relationship between 'Islam' and 'homosexuality'. In popular dailies in Malaysia and Britain, news stories, commentaries and features remind readers that 'Islam' and 'homosexuality' are irreconcilable and that this is impossible to change. In my observations, the most highly circulated Malay-language newspaper in Malaysia (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2012), *Harian Metro* ('*The Daily Metro*'), often carried reports and commentaries condemning homosexuality from what was claimed to be an Islamic perspective. In one example, a guest columnist who was also a pro-government Islamic scholar claimed:

> *The Western-controlled media uses the issue of human rights to uphold lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights, yet this is nothing more than a futile effort [...]. Upholding the rights of LGBTs is clearly opposed to the principles and foundations of Islam, which has never condoned freedom without restrictions*. (Fathul Bari, 2012)

This view pits the 'West', construed as pro-LGBT and implied as misguided, against an 'Islam' construed as anti-LGBT and defended as upright. Assumptions about *halal* and *haram* therefore do not only inform codes of religious and moral behaviour – they also implicitly shape political and ideological boundaries.

The idea that the West is pro-gay while Islam is anti-gay also often appears in many mass media channels in Britain, but with the roles of 'us' and 'them' reversed. For example the popular, right-leaning tabloid *The Daily Mail* prominently reported on three British Muslim men who were jailed in February 2012 for distributing literature advocating the death penalty for homosexuality. One headline read: 'Muslim fanatics who called for execution of gays and wanted to set up a "medieval state" under *Sharia* law in Derby are jailed for up to two years' (Faulkner, 2012). The *Mail*'s juxtaposition of the terms '*Sharia*', 'medieval' and 'fanatics' creates an image of 'real' Islam as foreign, uncivilised and barbaric, and thus alien to civilised and tolerant Britain.

Despite some portions within the body of the *Mail*'s report explaining that 'moderate Muslim leaders' objected to the men's activities, the article closes with this quote from a 'gay resident' in the area:

It used to be lovely round here [….] Now, because of these people, you don't feel safe. I don't have any problems with Muslims. But these lot need to realise we live in England, not some Islamic state. (Faulkner, 2012)

This closing line reinforces the notion that sexuality is a fault-line in the *Mail*'s construction of 'Islam' and 'England', regardless of the nuances included in the rest of the article.

The *Mail* and *Harian Metro* therefore produce and repeat dominant images of 'Islam' as inherently incompatible with 'Western values', including respect for gay rights, albeit with some key differences. *Harian Metro* claims that homosexuality comes from the West and thus constructs *homosexuals* as folk devils, while the *Mail* insinuates that violent homophobia often comes from *Muslims*, implying that Islam is potentially deviant.

Also, *Harian Metro* is owned by a media conglomerate closely linked with the senior partner in Malaysia's ruling coalition, UMNO, and so is in effect owned by proxy and controlled by the government (Ding, 2010: 18). Furthermore, all print publications in Malaysia are subjected to laws restricting freedom of expression and opinion, particularly regarding 'sensitive' topics such as Islam and homosexuality (Ding, 2010: 10–12). The *Mail* also has its own ideological leanings and caters to a specific audience but does not operate under the same restrictive media policies. These contrasts in how the mass media portray 'Islam' and 'homosexuality' as irreconcilable affect gay Muslims differently depending on their immediate circumstances.

These observations partially support Puar's conceptualisation of 'homonationalism', with both papers portraying gay rights as a Western value albeit to draw different ideological conclusions. As I show throughout this section, however, this forms only part of the picture in both Malaysia and Britain.

6.1.1 Mass media coverage: Negative experiences

On a basic level in Malaysia and Britain, media constructions of the irreconcilability between 'Islam' and 'homosexuality' affect the overall self-esteem of many gay Muslims. This is reinforced when gay Muslims also come across other reports that construe homosexuality in negative terms. Ammar, a gay Pakistani in his early 30s – born, raised, and still living in the Northwest of England – said when he was a teenager, he read an agony aunt's column advising a teenager to not identify as gay because it was probably 'just a phase':

> So I took that on board and thought I'm not gonna stick to a label [….]
> So it was only when I got to 20, then my teenage years had ended and
> I thought, oh, it's not gonna change [….] And that's when I had to
> struggle with religion and sexuality.

Ammar continues and says that even though the agony aunt's advice was not overtly hostile towards homosexuality or religiously framed, it was based on the assumption that homosexuality was undesirable at the very least. This was partly what informed his eventual 'struggle' between his sexuality and adherence to Islam.

This internal struggle is often reinforced through key interactions with family members, specifically authority figures within the family. Fauziah, a bisexual Malaysian in her late 30s, said her mother read Malay-language dailies and expressed opinions on Islam and sexuality aligned closely to what they reported. When I asked how she felt about the mass media's coverage on LGBT issues in Malaysia, she replied:

> Angry lah! Because I know my mother reads these newspapers! And
> she believes what they say! [...] She doesn't see any reason why they
> would lie or say something that's not true.

In fact, Fauziah believed such media reports reinforced what her mother learnt about 'Islam' and 'homosexuality' in other settings, for example in lectures at the local mosque that were then discussed at home:

She, apropos of nothing, she starts talking about how homosexuality is like the worst sin, worse than murder, and that homosexuals, it is *wajib* (religiously obligatory) to kill them and not just *wajib* to kill them, but kill them in a horrifically cruel way, and that supposedly, because I said no, I don't think Nabi (Prophet) Muhammad ever asked people to kill homosexuals […] she said, yes he did! And she got this from her *ustaz*, okay?

In this instance, Fauziah tried to contest her mother's views with some lesser known interpretations of the history of early Islam. While many Muslims argue that the Prophet Muhammad condemned homosexuality and transgenderism, it is impossible to verify any instances when such people were punished in his lifetime. Scott Siraj Al-Haqq Kugle (2010: 99) argues that according to key textual sources of early Islam, the first 'punishment' of a known homosexual occurred *after* Muhammad's death[153]. Even then, these sources appear to focus more on the man's political rebellion than his alleged homosexual behaviour. Fauziah was vaguely aware of this history but found it frustrating to argue it since her mother insisted on upholding the views of her *ustaz* and the government-controlled media. The way the mass media constructs images of Islam and homosexuality can therefore powerfully shape interpersonal relations within settings such as Fauziah's family.

There are other instances in which gay Muslims attribute the hostility against them to negative mass media constructions of Islam and homosexuality. Rohana, whose experiences were discussed in the previous chapter, said after negative coverage on *pengkid* on national television in late 2012 she felt threatened within her own neighbourhood. This is significant because Rohana and several of my other Malaysian participants said the neighbourhood had quite a considerable population of gay and transgender Muslims. However, Rohana described one incident in the vicinity of her home which made her feel unsafe:

It was a motorcyclist. I was crossing the road on my own – I wanted to have something to eat at this place near my condominium. The

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[153] Kugle's interpretive approach to Islam is discussed in detail in Chapter 2.1.1.

motorcyclist yelled at me, 'Woi, pengkid*!' That's all I heard, I couldn't hear anything else (he said)* [….] *Everyone stared at me.*

Rohana's story demonstrates how the Malaysian mass media's negative portrayals of homosexuality can turn gay Muslims into potential targets of hostile public sentiment. In Britain, despite laws and policies protecting sexual and religious minorities, ideological constructions of *Muslims* as 'foreign' or 'anti-Western' in certain media outlets can indirectly turn *gay* Muslims into objects of curiosity or suspicion. These images carry great force alongside other everyday situations in which gay Muslims are reminded that 'true' Islam opposes homosexuality.

6.1.2 Islam and homosexuality: Other everyday reminders

Gay Muslims regularly encounter everyday talk and banter reminding them that being gay is strange or sinful in Islam. Apart from family interactions and mass media reports, this kind of talk also happens at the workplace or among particular acquaintances. Ayie, a lesbian Malaysian civil servant in her early 30s, said her Muslim colleagues often engaged in negative talk about LGBTs whenever the issue made the headlines:

> Ayie: Yes, *they talk* about LGBT, including all the bosses, *they're* talking about LGBT *in meetings* –
> Shanon: *In the civil service*?
> Ayie: Yes, *in the civil service*, talking about LGBT, *they feel that* LGBT [is] one of the issues *that heavily affects* youngsters. *So I just keep quiet, I pretend I don't know what's going on*.

Because of restrictions on freedom of expression in Malaysia, specifically in relation to Islam[154], people like Ayie feel they have limited ways of responding to such negative talk and often have to feign ignorance. She said the most she could do

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[154] E.g., the Syariah Criminal Offences Act (SCOA), applicable to all Muslims in the Federal Territories, criminalises 'insulting, or bringing into contempt, etc., the religion of Islam' and acting in 'contempt or defiance of religious authorities' (Malaysia, 1997: 11–12).

sometimes was ask her anti-LGBT colleagues if they had ever heard the LGBT person's point of view. If they said they had not, she would chastise them for being ignorant and lacking empathy but according to her most of them did not seem bothered.

In Britain, gay Muslims also encounter everyday conversations that frame Islam and homosexuality as irreconcilable, but within a context where the law protects the rights of religious and sexual minorities[155]. Despite these protections, everyday jokes and comments about the supposed impossibility of being Muslim and gay can leave many gay Muslims feeling awkward and annoyed. Salleh, a British Arab in his late 20s who works for a local council in London, said:

> You know like at work, I'm the only Muslim in my team, and I'm gay. And to everybody, they don't see the Muslim, they see the gay, you know what I mean? [...] So for example, on Friday, I like going to *Jumuah* [prayers]. And my [English] manager will let me go off, but he'll say, oh, he'll make comments like, oh, you're such a *haram* boy because you're wearing an engagement ring (since Salleh was in a same-sex civil partnership). And I look at him and I think, you don't actually understand the concept of what you just said to me.

In this instance, Salleh's manager invoked the concept of '*haram*' to joke about what he perceived as the incongruity between Salleh's religious and sexual identities. This dynamic contrasts with many of the other accounts discussed above where the idea of homosexuality being *haram* was taken for granted and not mentioned directly. Despite the attempt at humour, Salleh was befuddled at the use of '*haram*' to refer not to particular actions but to his *existence* as a gay Muslim, which he considered a serious misconception.

These monolithic images of 'Islam' and 'homosexuality' can result in mere social discomfort, as in Salleh's example, but it can make others worried for their own personal safety. Ammar said when a heterosexual Muslim colleague who did not know he was gay heard about his trip to a stereotypically 'gay' part of England, they had the following exchange:

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[155] E.g. the Equality Act 2010 includes sexual orientation and religious affiliation under its list of 'protected characteristics' (Nye & Weller, 2012: 43–44)

He sent a text to me saying, it was quite an aggressive text, saying, he doesn't like, he used the insulting term s**t stabbers […] and if I am one, then we'll have to end our friendship.

Ammar further explained that he did not think his colleague's attitude towards homosexuality was due to his understanding of Islam per se, adding that some of their white, non-Muslim colleagues were also quite anti-gay. He attributed their attitudes to coming from a small Northern town where even many non-Muslim English inhabitants were not 'open-minded enough'.

These accounts by Ayie, Salleh and Ammar are not directly related to mass media constructions of Islam and sexuality but rather show how everyday conversations can reinforce the dichotomy between being gay and Muslim. Such everyday talk and mass media constructions work together directly and indirectly to reinforce the idea that being gay and Muslim is an anomaly. At the same time, growing spaces for debate within the mass media and in everyday interactions allow gay Muslims and those sympathetic to them to access and construct alternative images of Islam and homosexuality.

6.1.3 Alternative discussions in the news media

In Malaysia and Britain, there are also reports on 'Islam' and 'homosexuality' or portrayals of Muslim sexual minorities that subvert or challenge the idea that being gay and Muslim is incompatible. In Britain, multi-layered discussions of 'Islam's' position on 'homosexuality' are more likely to be explored in relatively liberal or left-leaning outlets, since British media outfits tend to cluster around particular political ideologies (BBC, 2009). However, the liberal and left-leaning media generally attract a smaller audience suggesting that there might still be a lack of overall critical balance in media discussions of 'Islam' and 'homosexuality'[156].

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[156] As of June 2014, for example, the left-leaning tabloid *The Daily Mirror*'s readership was 57 percent of the *Mail*'s, while the left-leaning broadsheet *The Guardian*'s was only 36 percent of right-leaning broadsheet *The Telegraph*'s (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2014).

In its news coverage, the left-leaning broadsheet *The Guardian* gives prominence to virtually the same events as *The Mail* albeit with less sensationalised headlines. On the anti-gay Muslim men from Derby, one *Guardian* headline simply read: 'Three jailed over gay-hate leaflet' (Press Association, 2012). Its commentary and opinion sections also allow for subtler discussions on 'Islam' and 'homosexuality'. A series of articles on racism, for example, contained a piece by Rob Berkeley (2012) highlighting the disproportionate assumptions and targeting of homophobia among religious or ethnic minorities. Berkeley gave the example of reactions to British Muslim journalist Mehdi Hassan:

> Mehdi Hasan highlighted the vitriolic abuse he receives when he seeks to address issues of anti-Muslim discrimination on the basis that he is homophobic – well he must be, he is a Muslim after all and everyone 'knows' Muslims are homophobes. Presumed guilty, he is asked to prove his liberal credentials before his reasonable arguments are even given a hearing.

Berkeley clarified that this did not mean ethnic and religious minorities should be exempted from efforts to eliminate homophobia and sexism. He argued further, 'It is more likely to be achieved through democratic debate, through efforts to empower women and LGBT people from these communities, and through just application of the law, rather than through threats to withdraw rights' (Berkeley, 2012). Some months afterwards, Hasan (2013) confessed struggling with 'the idea of homosexuality' as a heterosexual Muslim yet also opposing homophobia.

There are also relatively sympathetic portrayals of homosexuality in the Malaysian mass media, albeit occurring far less frequently and prominently. Such low-key coverage is partly due to the wider restrictions on freedom of expression and might sometimes be a strategy to escape government scrutiny, especially for the government-owned media. For example, an analytical piece in the most highly circulated government-owned English daily, *The Star* (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2012), examined why Malaysian LGBT activists and their allies were not advocating gay marriage (Tam, 2013). This was in relation to news that Malaysia's neighbours in mainland Southeast Asia – predominantly Buddhist Thailand and Vietnam – were contemplating legalising gay marriage. Instead, the Muslim and non-Muslim human

rights activists interviewed prioritised the need to overturn social stigma against LGBTs and to repeal existing laws that criminalise homosexuality.

Such reports and commentaries show that even though the Malaysian government tries to muzzle public debate, the mass media – even government-owned publications – are not monolithic. Among government-controlled outlets, however, these views are more likely to appear in the English- and Chinese- rather than Malay-language news media.

On the whole, these nuanced news stories in both countries do not appear to have the power to completely undo dominant images of Islam as inherently opposed to homosexuality. Instead, many Malaysians and Britons need to turn to the fiction media – including film, television, and novels – for more multi-dimensional portrayals of 'Islam' and 'homosexuality'.

6.1.4 Mass media beyond the news

Several of my Malaysian participants told me about Malay-language big-screen films and television dramas portraying Muslim sexual minorities in a relatively sympathetic light. Often, these films and programmes used the terms 'gay' or 'lesbian' or their equivalents sparingly, but the conflict in the storylines was obvious. One example is the made-for-television film *Sutun* (Shahrul Ezad, 2005), about a Malay schoolboy nicknamed 'Adik' – literally 'younger sibling' but also a euphemism for 'feminine young man' – bullied relentlessly for being effeminate.

Adik is taunted and teased by the other children in his village, his classmates, and even his father's friends and colleagues, triggering the father to verbally and physically abuse him, albeit unwillingly. Yet Adik also gets moral support from his mother, his best girlfriend in school, and his new Chemistry teacher. There is even a suggestion of a budding romance between him and Shuk, the Chemistry teacher's younger brother who is also the new boy in class.

These sympathetic characters invoke Islam in their defence of Adik not by reinterpreting homosexuality as *halal* or 'permissible' but counselling sympathy and compassion towards people who are 'different'. Adik's mother and Chemistry teacher say repeatedly that Allah made Adik this way and it would be wrong to punish him for something he has no control over. During another pivotal scene, Adik is shown praying

and saying in a voiceover, '*God must have had a reason for making me this way.*' On the other hand, Adik's bullies also invoke Islam when they taunt him and manipulate their *ustaz* to punish him and Shuk for allegedly being 'gay'.

Towards the end, Shuk confronts Adik's bullies on their daily canoe ride to school but everyone tumbles into the river. All the boys are saved but in the aftermath of the fracas, an unconscious Adik lies limp in the arms of his weeping parents. The final scene suggests that Adik has survived, grown up, and is married with children. The filmmakers thus balance an often straightforward critique of homophobia for most of the story with an ending that conforms to dominant Islamic norms and the state's censorship guidelines.

The Malaysian film censorship guidelines forbid 'deviant' portrayals of Islam and positive representations of 'wild' and 'deviant' lifestyles, including 'scenes of unnatural sex' (Department of Film Censorship and Enforcement Control, 2010: 8–15). Against this background, *Sutun* still proved extremely popular and well-reviewed and was even nominated for Best Television Drama at the state-sponsored Seri Angkasa Television Awards (Abd Aziz, 2006).

My participants also highlighted several other Malaysian films which have explicitly or implicitly criticised anti-gay and anti-transgender attitudes, albeit complying with censorship regulations. During my first fieldwork trip to Malaysia, I also caught the Malay-language film *Istanbul Aku Datang!* (*Istanbul, Here I Come!*) (Chauly, 2012) which has a small but important gay sub-plot. Thus, despite the government-controlled media's 'hard' ideological work constructing homosexuality as unacceptable in Islam and overall restrictions on freedom of expression, there are media practitioners attempting more nuanced representations of sexual minorities. Furthermore, as evidenced from the popularity of *Sutun*, *Istanbul Aku Datang!*, and other films, Muslim audiences in Malaysia appear prepared to tolerate relatively non-judgemental portrayals of gender and sexual diversity. These attitudes are difficult to gauge, however, and it might be that for many Malaysian Muslims tolerance does not mean morally *condoning* homosexuality.

Many British Muslims might hold similar attitudes, but these would carry different repercussions for them as religious and ethnic minorities[157]. For example,

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[157] I discuss the wider context of Muslim public opinion on homosexuality in Britain in Chapter 3.2.1, and in Malaysia in Chapter 3.2.2.

leading up to the passage of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, *The Muslim News*, a monthly newspaper catering for British Muslims, declared in an editorial that it opposed gay marriage. However, the editorial worded its argument as *not* anti-gay, specifically in its conclusion:

> The issue is not about discrimination against gay people but about the sanctity of marriage. The Bill will weaken the institution of marriage and will have negative implications on society[158]. (Muslim News, 2013)

The following issue also contained a letter to the editor claiming that the Muslim MPs who voted in favour of same-sex marriage were 'out of touch with the Muslim community' (Mohamed, 2013).

Unlike *The Guardian* and *The Daily Mail*, however, coverage on homosexuality or sexuality in general in *The Muslim News* was quite sparse in the period I focused on, i.e. between February and September 2013. Still, in subsequent issues it gave prominent and even positive coverage of Sadiq Khan, the most prominent Muslim Labour MP to vote for same-sex marriage. In fact, immediately after the House of Commons vote, the *Mail* ran a long article on how Khan had received death threats from other Muslims (Taher, 2013), an aspect that went unreported in *The Muslim News*. Yet in August 2013, *The Muslim News* reported positively on Khan winning the Patchwork Foundation MP of the Year Award for his work in representing minorities (Buaras, 2013). This time, my search on the *Mail*'s online archives using the keywords 'Sadiq Khan' and 'Sadiq Khan MP of the Year' returned several articles about Khan being besieged by one controversy or another, but none about this accolade. A reader would thus have a very different image of Khan depending on which paper he or she reads. According to *The Daily Mail*, Khan is an embattled Muslim politician perhaps fearing for his life but according to *The Muslim News*, he is celebrated albeit with caveats for Muslims about his pro-gay stance.

It appears that a person would get a very different picture of Islam and homosexuality in Britain depending on which news source he or she relies on. The various publications appear to be trying to discern a 'representative' Muslim point of

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[158] A similar position was expressed by some columnists and commentators in right-leaning newspapers such as the *Telegraph* and *Mail*, and by some leaders in the Church of England prior to the passage of the Act (e.g. see Davies, 2013).

view, but their efforts show the difficulty in ascertaining what this view is or if it even exists.

One way to refine the analysis is to note the specific Muslim voices portrayed or implied as 'representative' in different media spaces. For example, in 2009, the popular British soap opera *EastEnders* introduced a long-running storyline involving a gay Muslim in a romantic relationship with a gay white Englishman (Khaleeli, 2009). As reported by the BBC, Asghar Bokhari of the Muslim Public Affairs Committee opposed this storyline because:

> The Muslim community deserves a character that represents them to the wider public because Islamophobia is so great right now […]. There's a lack of understanding of Muslims already and I think *EastEnders* really lost an opportunity to present a *normal* friendly Muslim character to the British public (Mahmood, 2009, my italics).

According to this report, Bokhari would have preferred *EastEnders* to educate the British public to embrace 'normal friendly' Muslims, but does 'normal' refer to socially conservative and *heterosexual*? Did he mean, by implication, that the gay Muslim in *EastEnders* was not a 'normal' Muslim? In any case, Bokhari's voice is implied in this news article as a 'mainstream' or 'official' British Muslim perspective on the issue.

The BBC managed to get other views on the subject, including one by an Imaan trustee at the time, who said: 'It is entirely possible to be Muslim and gay and [there are] many of us in Britain today […]. It is great that the BBC have had the courage to raise such an important social issue in our society today.' The BBC article thus enables readers to glimpse how various Muslims contest Islam in Britain, but is structured in such a way that it pits a 'normative' Muslim voice against an 'alternative' one. This structuring makes it difficult to gauge the range of other views amongst Muslims which might complicate what is assumed as 'representative' Muslim public opinion on homosexuality.

This debate about *EastEnders* further shows that the fiction media have considerable influence in shaping public debate about Islam and homosexuality. Exactly how the *EastEnders* storyline impacted gay Muslims, other British Muslims and the British public more generally deserves more scrutiny. The Imaan chair told

me that registrations on the organisation's anonymous online forum doubled from approximately 1,500 to 3,000 after the storyline premiered. For him, the reasons for this and its impacts need to be analysed further but it suggests that the storyline did reach many gay Muslims in Britain. This also suggests that it reached *EastEnders'* wider Muslim and non-Muslim audience and potentially shaped their views about gay Muslims. Against this backdrop, the storyline could be interpreted as the BBC's attempt not only to open up the debate on Islam and homosexuality but steer it in a particular direction.

In summary, although the news media in Britain and Malaysia largely construct images of 'Islam' and 'homosexuality' as irreconcilable, the implications are different in the two countries. In Malaysia, the government-controlled media construe homosexuality as foreign and undesirable, but in Britain, ideologically-driven coverage in certain media outlets portrays conservative expressions of Islam as un-British and potentially disruptive. Despite these narratives, there are also multi-dimensional discussions on Islam and sexuality in both countries in less immediately obvious media spaces, especially in the fiction media. Works of fiction, including in film and television, can often experiment with images of 'Islam' and 'homosexuality' that challenge many of the stereotypes in the news.

6.2 Morality, national security and gay Muslims

Agents claiming to protect religion and morality have often targeted homosexual behaviour in different places and moments in history. Britain once had laws criminalising homosexual behaviour, while Malaysia inherited colonial era penalties for sodomy and, after independence, expanded *syariah* provisions criminalising homosexuality[159].

In this section, I examine how the notion that Islam opposes homosexuality is influenced by wider regulations of Islam and sexuality in Malaysia and Britain and the resulting impacts on gay Muslims. My starting point is Becker's (1991: 147) theory that moral enterprise consists of two seemingly complementary, functional units – 'rule creators' and 'rule enforcers'. Becker (1991: 161–162) further argues that the bureaucratic pragmatism of the rule enforcers sometimes results in tensions

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[159] Discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

between them and the more ideologically zealous rule creators. According to Cohen (2011: 8, 226), moral panics involve 'deviance amplification' in which those who try to control morality often provoke further deviant reactions through their creation and policing of categories of unacceptable behaviour.

In some contexts, ethnic and religious entrepreneurs can take on the role of moral entrepreneurs. Just as 'moral entrepreneurs' want society to be structured around particular definitions of morality, 'ethno-political entrepreneurs' – as described by Rogers Brubaker (2006: 10) – want it structured around what they claim to be the interests of specific ethnic collectives. Similarly, religio-political entrepreneurs make their own interpretations of religion the core of their campaigns to restructure society.

In Malaysia, as I demonstrate in this section, the same actors often equate the defence of morality with the defence of ethnicity and/or religion. In Britain, however, changing definitions of acceptable sexual morality mean that notions of morality, ethnicity and religion intersect differently. Here, the public's increasing tolerance of sexual freedoms is often accompanied by disapproval of or suspicion towards religious groups that are deemed conservative, including Muslims.

I begin this section by examining how various agents produce and pursue overlapping moral, ethnic, and religious concerns in Malaysia and how this contributes to perceptions of homosexuality as foreign, deviant or immoral. I then discuss the security-laden rhetoric on Islamic radicalism in Britain which influences the wider regulation of Muslim identities and how this affects gay Muslims there. I go on to illustrate some ways in which gay Muslims in both countries respond to their differing circumstances.

6.2.1 'Foreign'-ness, Islam and morality in Malaysia

Moral, ethno- and religio-political actors in Malaysia often portray the notion of the human rights of LGBTs as a 'Western', 'liberal' imposition. I observed an example of this during my fieldwork in November 2012, when I attended a two-day state-sponsored seminar – 'Constitutional Law: The Position of Islam as the Religion of the Federation'[160] (Syariah Section of the Attorney-General's Chambers Malaysia, 2012).

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[160] My observations relate to a particular perspective on sexual minorities within the Malaysian Islamic

The audience appeared to consist mostly of staff members of Malaysia's Islamic bureaucracy, including from the AG's Chambers' *Syariah* Section as well as some *syariah*-trained lawyers and students. Altogether, there were approximately 70 participants, male and female, the vast majority of whom were Muslim[161].

One of the panel discussions, 'The Agenda to Erode the Sovereignty of Islam in Malaysia: A Challenge', was moderated by a pro-*syariah* activist and consisted of a legal academic and a high-ranking civil servant from the *Syariah* Technical Committee. As part of the discussion the civil servant, Naser Disa, said unprompted that 'LGBT' interests and 'sexual orientation' cannot be claimed as rights because they 'violate' religion. He then accused some 'misguided' Malaysians of undermining 'Islam' in the name of human rights and democracy.

According to Becker's typology, Naser would be a 'rule creator' since he was a high-ranking civil servant with strong concerns about sexual morality. He is also clearly a *religious* entrepreneur or more precisely a *syariah* entrepreneur – his goal is not merely to rid society of 'immorality' but to ensure that it complies with his particular vision of *syariah*. He attacked the idea that Malaysia should become more democratic and recognise 'LGBT' rights – if unchecked, he argued, democracy could undermine Islam. He also rebuked certain quarters for referring to Islam as Malaysia's 'official religion' through an extended exchange with the audience, as captured in my fieldnotes:

> Naser asserts that we shouldn't say Islam is just an official or 'ceremonial' religion. Because by saying this we lower the position of Islam as the country's ideology. He asks if we would ever say, '*My "official" religion is Islam?*' If we did, it would mean that we are subscribing to other, unofficial religions besides Islam – if this were the case, we would be committing idolatry. The audience murmurs and nods in agreement.

bureaucracy, which is by no means monolithic. For a more comprehensive analysis of how this bureaucracy is organised and the range of views and approaches within it regarding sexuality, see tan beng hui. 2012. 'Sexuality, Islam and Politics in Malaysia: A Study of the Shifting Strategies of Regulation'. Thesis, Singapore: National University of Singapore.

[161] I attended with two of my non-Malay, non-Muslim women friends – one an academic and the other a feminist activist. As far as we could tell, they were the only non-Muslim participants.

He continues*, 'So we have official and unofficial residences, official and unofficial cars, but do we have an "official" wife or an "official" husband? The truth is, Islam is the religion of the nation, whether it is official or not. So this phrase, "Malaysia is a secular democratic state with Islam as the official religion" is crazy talk.'**

In this admonition, Naser does not merely want to merge religion and state – he appears to be claiming that Islam is the *primordial* religion of the Malaysian nation. Yet although the Federal Constitution establishes Islam as the religion of the federation, it does not explicitly designate *syariah* as the supreme law of the land (Malaysia, 2010: 20). The constitution does *define* Malays as Muslims but also recognises religious diversity by guaranteeing freedom of religion for all Malaysians (Malaysia, 2010: 25–26, 153)[162].

This constitutional linking of Islam and Malay identity appears to be the basis for Naser's merging of particular notions of morality, ethnicity and religion. In his panel presentation, he slipped back and forth between moral, religious and ethnic talk. When dismissing the claim that Malaysian Indian minorities suffer discrimination, for example, he defended the 'Malays' rather than 'Islam'. Furthermore, he rarely invoked the concepts of *halal* and *haram* explicitly and appeared to take for granted that people would equate the need for moral purity with the need for ethnic and religious purity.

Naser's views were repeated by most of the other panel speakers who could similarly be conceptualised as 'rule creators' defending their particular notions of Islam, Malay-ness and morality. Yet, several were openly frustrated that despite the existence of an elaborate Islamic bureaucracy, the position of Islam still appeared insecure and was being more openly challenged by various minorities. For example, the Mufti of Perak State complained the following day:

Now we are no longer like an Islamic state. If people visit in December they'll think this is a Christian country. If they come in

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[162] The wider background to this was discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

February they'll think it's Buddhist. They go to Batu Caves and they'll see a huge shrine*[163].

Some speakers attributed what they saw as the 'undermining' of Islam to the lack of political will, and others to lack of Malay-Muslim unity. Yet I noticed that the people who appeared to be rank-and-file Islamic civil servants – those whom Becker would term 'rule enforcers' – were hardly paying attention. A couple of middle-aged women in *tudung* and loose black suits fell asleep on both afternoons, while the young women in the row behind me chatted and giggled away. The men in front, largely in their late 30s and early 40s, were playing with their smartphones, reading the sports pages, or chatting softly. Did they even come of their own volition or were they ordered to by their superiors? In any case, even in this two-day event whose attendees were mostly Muslims linked to the *syariah* bureaucracy, there appeared to be an imbalance of zealousness.

According to Becker (1991: 147), 'rule creators' are like moral crusaders while 'rule enforcers' are often bureaucrats who see moral enforcement as merely a job. They are constrained by the realities of working bureaucratically – their priorities shift constantly, they find it impossible to enforce every piece of moral legislation on every single case, and they are sometimes implicated in corruption[164].

This tension between 'rule enforcers' and 'rule creators' was most clearly expressed during the final panel discussion: 'The Role of Islamic Institutions in Realising Islam as the State Religion: Steps Forward'. One of the panellists, Norlia Ghazali – a senior civil servant at the Malaysian Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM) – complained that JAKIM is often criticised by advocates of *syariah* for not doing enough to uphold Islam. She explained that JAKIM's hands were tied because as a *federal* agency it only had the jurisdiction to coordinate and not enforce Islamic legislation, unlike the various *State* Islamic departments that had enforcement powers.

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[163] The Mufti appears to be lumping Buddhism and Hinduism together – the shrine in the Batu Caves on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur is dedicated to Lord Murugan, the patron god of Tamil Malaysians who practice Hinduism (Nadaraja, n.d.). The February celebration he refers to is Thaipusam, observed by Tamil Hindus in Malaysia, many of whom process to the Batu Caves from the Kuala Lumpur city centre. The main Buddhist celebration is Wesak, which is in May, not February.

[164] For example, in August 2013 three *syariah* enforcers were arrested by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission for extorting tens of thousands of ringgit worth of bribes from heterosexual couples caught for *khalwat* (1 Malaysian Ringgit is approximately 0.20 British Pounds) (Wan Noor Hayati, 2013).

She added that JAKIM often had to do damage control when the actions of Islamic institutions within Malaysia were portrayed as '*discriminatory human rights violations*' by the '*international community*'. She suggested that institutions like JAKIM could '*utilise*' Muslim non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to '*defend fundamental matters*' that should not be challenged by non-Muslims. After all, she reasoned, these NGOs were not bound by the same '*disciplinary restrictions*' as state departments such as JAKIM.

Norlia's reasoning shows that when bureaucrats carry out moral enterprise, it may become less efficient and consistent than what the 'rule creators' may have envisioned. As bureaucrats, rule enforcers may run into several obstacles to implement the rule creators' vision, hence Norlia's suggestion of enlisting the help of other crusaders. Yet, according to Becker (1991: 153), while some rule creators or crusaders continue being dedicated to their moral causes, others eventually tire out. This dynamic was hinted at in Norlia's further acknowledgement that some of the non-state *syariah* actors that were more prominent in the past now appeared lacking in cohesion and zeal.

It therefore appears that there is much about moral enterprise in Malaysia that does not work at a practical level and that the system might even be falling apart. However, my impressions of these tensions or the lack of audience enthusiasm during the seminar should not be taken as conclusive of a moral enterprise in shambles. During this seminar, I also observed that the 'rule creators' and 'enforcers' among the speakers and the audience had the potential to unite against common enemies. When Naser complained about the lack of rigour in the implementation of *syariah* laws, for example, he singled out Sisters in Islam (SIS) for criticism because they openly opposed moral policing. SIS (2010; Star, 2008) has consistently criticised the policing of heterosexual couples for *khalwat*, arguing that this violates the Quran's prohibition on spying[165]. Therefore according to Naser:

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[165] Among the Quranic passages that SIS relies upon are: 'Believers, do not enter other people's houses until you have asked permission to do so and greeted those inside – that is best for you: perhaps you will bear this in mind. If you find no one in, do not enter unless you have been given permission to do so. If you are told, "Go away", then do so – that is more proper for you. God knows well what you do.' (24: 27-28). Another verse quoted by SIS is: 'Believers, avoid making too many assumptions – some assumptions are sinful – and do not spy on one another or speak ill of people behind their backs: would any of you like to eat the flesh of your dead brother? No, you would hate it. So be mindful of God: God is ever relenting, most merciful.' (49: 12)

To me they are enemies because their thinking is liberal. They say Malaysia is secular. They say khalwat *laws cannot be applied because these laws are human constructions.* (Some people laugh softly.) *They're slick. They're taught by the Jews. All of this stuff was given to them by the Jews to make society hate Islam.**

When Naser excoriated SIS in this way, he also appeared to unite the rule creators and enforcers in the room against a common enemy. Furthermore, according to his logic, Muslims like SIS were the proxies of 'liberals' and 'Jews' and therefore 'enemies' of Islam. The majority of SIS's founders are Malaysian Malays and two prominent members are daughters of former prime ministers, but by equating the 'liberal' with the foreign Naser painted SIS as effectively foreign, too. Naser and the other speakers also only needed to mention 'LGBTs' or 'sexual orientation' explicitly during certain key moments, taking for granted that these would be understood as code for 'foreign', i.e. 'enemies of Islam'. The boundaries of their vision of the nation therefore coincided with the boundaries of their particular interpretation of Islam.

6.2.2 Islam, national security and gay Muslims in Britain

From the nineteenth century until the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967, Britain had its share of influential movements advocating moral purity. However, with growing changes in legislation protecting the rights of sexual minorities, British state policies now enable the growth of movements, campaigns and public debates *challenging* anti-LGBT attitudes[166]. In the meantime, newer 'folk devils' have emerged among some sectors of society. In particular, *Muslims* in Britain remain potential targets of certain ideologues equating the 'foreign'-ness of Islam with its undesirability, or who at least construe the increasing presence of Muslims as problematic.

One potent stereotype of the 'uncivilised' Muslim is that of the 'terrorist' or the 'radical', which often leads to panics about 'radicalisation' or 'extremism' framed around *security* concerns rather than *morality*. Stuart Croft (2012: 16) argues that this is occuring to the extent that some state and non-state actors now construct 'British'

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[166] This considerable shift in public policies and attitudes was discussed in detail in Chapter 3.3.1.

identity by *securitising* Islam as a potentially dangerous 'Other'. When security experts and government officials discuss the 'new terrorism', for instance, they inadvertently put young Muslim males in the spotlight by claiming that they are especially prone to radicalisation. When this happens, young Muslims – especially males – often rebel by developing even more defensive religious identities and attitudes (Shterin & Spalek, 2011: 148).

Furthermore, right-leaning anti-immigration campaigners often coopt the language of security to fan public fears about the dangers of immigration or the threats posed by particular ethnic and religious minorities. These sentiments permeate the campaigns and slogans of groups such as the English Defence League (Townsend, 2010), which construct and defend a nominally Christian, white English 'purity'. In the previous section, I also highlighted how particular media outlets, such as the *Daily Mail*, sometimes link these fears with an image of Islam as exceptionally homophobic. I argued that the construction of such images partially demonstrate Puar's argument about growing 'homonationalism' in the West.

Some British Muslims counter these dynamics by appealing to democratic ideals on the fair treatment of ethnic and religious minorities which includes defending their religious perspectives on sexual morality. Publications such as *The Muslim News* present themselves as the main forum for the British Muslim community and designate some topics, such as same-sex marriage, as beyond the Islamic pale. In this environment, gay Muslims can fall into an indeterminate space – being 'gay' conforms to an increasingly accepted expression of Britishness, yet being 'Muslim' is largely associated with anti-gay attitudes.

Against this backdrop, I did not come across examples similar to the Malaysian *syariah* seminar in Britain but instead found instances of how security concerns affect gay Muslims. For example, Waqqas told me and a few other Imaan members about an outing he had with Salleh one afternoon in a London suburb.

Salleh and Waqqas were having a bit of a laugh, and Salleh ended up buying a *niqab*[167] as a joke. When they got to the Tube station, Waqqas dared Salleh to put it on. Although initially reluctant, Salleh did it and they got on the train. Salleh then started playing pranks on the passengers in *niqab* drag, using Waqqas as an intermediary to flirt

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[167] In their various renditions of this story, Waqqas and Salleh have used terms such as *niqab*, *chador*, and *burqa* interchangeably. This implies that it is not the specific details of Salleh's outfit that matter, but how he subverted an Islamic symbol and shocked the people around him in the process.

with a white man and reciting Quranic verses loudly to the visible discomfort of several white women. When I asked Salleh about Waqqas's account of this story, he laughed and explained what motivated him:

Because the thing is that it was just after [the 7/7 bombings]. Now what happened was [...] a couple of weeks prior to [the outing with Waqqas], I'd been to mosque, and I was wearing traditional clothing, and I got stopped by the police, [...] I was getting on the tube and [...] the police stopped me and asked me what I was doing. I said I was waiting for my husband. [...] And the policeman looked at me, and I have a stop and search form by the police that says on it, he is waiting for his husband, yeah? I've kept that. Because the thing is that, it was like, you know [...] he stereotyped me.

According to Salleh, he put on the *niqab* and played pranks on the tube with Waqqas to 'teach people a lesson', namely not to stereotype Muslims:

I thought, OK, I'm gonna wear a full, typical, you know, […] like [because] I've been called a sand-nigger, you know, and all sorts. But, I sat on the Tube and I thought you know what? Each time I got this, you know, hypocritical, very working-class, white person, they sat down and I started praying (laughs), *la ilaha illallah, muhammadun rasulullah*[168], and then […] the woman would start shaking and I'd go, boom! (Makes a noise like a bomb going off and laughs.) And you would see this person shoot out of their [seat], and I was going (ululates).

Salleh's anecdote is an example – albeit a quirky one – of how gay Muslims are affected by the security-focused debates on Muslims in Britain. On one hand, he exercises his freedom of sexuality and religion in a country that he believes should protect them, e.g. engaging in a same-sex civil partnership and going to the mosque on

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[168] The *shahadah*, or Islamic creed, i.e. 'There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.'

Fridays. From his point of view, he is being a good British citizen and even works for a local council. Thus when Muslims are stereotyped as 'foreign', 'violent', or 'terrorists' he gets offended personally.

I cannot verify Salleh's story about being stopped and searched after 7/7. Still, it is clear that he has internalised the feeling that his Muslim identity is being increasingly securitised by state and non-state actors. Even if Salleh is embellishing, his story is a response to dominant attitudes towards Islam in Britain – real and imagined – which affect him personally and he expects people to find it plausible.

In retaliating, however, Salleh unintentionally reifies the stereotype of the 'violent' Muslim, for example ululating and mimicking bomb sounds, and counter-stereotypes some of the people around him, e.g. 'the hypocritical, very working-class, white person'. He does not react directly against the police officers, i.e. the official agents of social control, but against certain bystanders whom he treats as proxies of a wider, more diffused 'control culture' (Cohen, 2011: 121). However, Salleh's actions did not provoke counter-attacks, for example no bystanders confronted him or reported him to the authorities. This episode therefore does not indicate the development of full-blown 'deviancy amplification' in the way Cohen (2011: 226) describes, but still illuminates how wider stereotypes or assumptions about Islamic symbols can affect gay British Muslims. In Puar's terms, Salleh seems to be reacting against 'homonationalist' rhetoric by subverting Islamophobic stereotypes, albeit producing his own counter-stereotypes in the process.

Thus, while gay Muslims might appear doubly vulnerable in Britain – being a minority within a minority – they can also feel empowered within the wider liberal, democratic context to challenge the multiple stereotypes imposed upon them. Ironically, they can sometimes reproduce these and also counter-stereotype those whose views they seek to challenge.

6.2.3 Gay Muslim responses to moral enterprise

In Malaysia, some gay Muslims acknowledge their sexuality and are semi-open about it, yet oppose any challenges to *syariah* regulations on sexual and other

offences. Ayie said that although she was uncomfortable about anti-homosexual *syariah*-inspired campaigns and rhetoric, she still would not challenge them because:

What other people see about Malaysia [is that] Malaysia is Muslim, [that's] our official religion. So in terms of community, and everything else, so many things will be affected. Instead of thinking of my freedom, I need to think about other people's freedoms. [...] For me it's like, if it's wrong it's wrong, so you cannot defend it openly.

In this part of the conversation Ayie emphasised her Muslim identity, putting the needs of the Muslim 'community' before her own and framing Islam as something that binds – or should bind – Malaysians together. Of particular salience in her reluctance to challenge the Islamic bureaucracy was that she personally believed homosexuality was 'wrong' in Islam.

This understanding of 'wrong' needs to be clarified – does it mean that homosexuality is *sinful* or *criminal*? Here, Ayie did not seem to differentiate between the two – homosexuality being 'wrong' meant it was a sin *and* crime punishable by the state. For her, society *and* the individual were responsible for policing the boundaries of what was *haram*. She went further and maintained, however, that Allah made her gay and that no human power could force her to 'change' – she could only change, i.e. become heterosexual, if Allah willed it[169]. In the meantime, she was content being semi-open or semi-secretive about her sexual identity.

Some of my other participants said they would prefer 'softer' moral policing, such as Elly, a woman in her early 30s identifying as 'straight' but in a relationship with a lesbian Muslim. She said:

On top of [their duties as moral enforcers], they have to also balance this with the right approach*, with* psychology*, like how are they going to approach people like us? Maybe there are, among us, those who are able to change, but they have to approach us the right way. You cannot humiliate a person. [...] Some people who are religiously*

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[169] I analysed this rhetoric of 'change' in expressions of Islam among some gay Muslims in more detail in Chapter 6.2.1.

knowledgeable, they won't come to us and just accuse us
indiscriminately. They won't do that, because they have their ways to
make people follow what they're supposed to follow.

In Elly's view, 'true' Islamic authorities do have the right to admonish gay Muslims but only after trying to empathise with their 'plight'. Her underlying assumption is that gay Muslims *want* to conform to society's expectations but are unable to – they want to escape the sin of homosexuality but cannot help being gay. For her, Islamic authorities can give moral pointers to Muslims but should gently guide rather than coerce them away from the *haram*.

In this kind of moral bargain, sometimes gay Muslims resort to putting on a modified version of what Laud Humphreys (1970: 135) calls the 'breastplate of righteousness'. According to Humphreys (1970: 143), the secretive American homosexuals he interviewed displayed *more* conservative attitudes than the general population on issues related to civil rights, gender equality and the Vietnam War. They wore this 'breastplate of righteousness' within the context of the 1960s when social attitudes towards homosexuality in the West were hardly as liberal as they are now[170]. Displaying conservative moral values was therefore a way of protecting anonymity – these secret homosexuals hoped that a public appearance of uprightness would deflect attention from their private activities.

The semi-openly or semi-secretly gay Muslims I encountered appeared to modify how they displayed righteousness by *not* denying their deviance. Instead they constructed a *hierarchy* of deviance, in which theirs was less severe or no worse than, for example, heterosexual sex outside marriage or Muslim women not wearing *tudung*. Ayie said on an online forum where people were posting negative comments about the 'LGBT menace' in Malaysia, she responded:

If you want to talk about being an Islamic country, Islam as the
official religion, why do you allow this kind of [free mixing]? It comes
up on TV and the entire Malaysia can see, and little kids can see and
think there's nothing wrong with that! [Unmarried men and women]

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[170] This potentially makes Humphreys's observation even more relevant to the current Malaysian situation.

can sit in one compartment [at concerts], dance, grope each other and
everything? If you want to [enforce morality], do it for everyone. Men
and women should not mix.

This was a common deflection strategy among many gay Muslims I spoke to in Malaysia and is powerful in that it highlights the inconsistencies in the prevailing state-led regulations of sexual morality. However, it unintentionally reinforces the kind of overarching moral panic – not just about homosexuality but an entire spectrum of 'moral ills' – which Malaysia's 'Syariah lobby'(tan, 2012a: 53) is keen to perpetuate.

In Malaysia, I also found that gay Muslims who do not believe homosexuality is *haram* criticise the *syariah* establishment differently. Fauziah, who said she has 'reconciled' her religious beliefs and sexuality because she has come to believe that the Quran respects sexual diversity, had this to say about *syariah* enforcers:

Yeah, nothing better to do. Seriously, it's like what the s**t? They do
not realise the disservice that they are doing to the religion.

According to this perspective, the religious enforcers are not only damaging the *image* of Islam but violating Islamic *ideals*, which for Fauziah are basically tolerant, inclusive and non-coercive. In her frustration, however, Fauziah also put on a modified 'breastplate of righteousness' to explain her feelings about *syariah*-based moral policing:

Well, you know sometimes I feel like writing to them and saying, if
there are people who are turned off from converting [to Islam]
because of what you do, the *dosa* (sin) is on you. Because that is the
only language they understand.

Here, Fauziah identified the dilemmas created by religiously-inspired moral enterprise by trying to look at things from the *syariah* advocates' perspective. In her understanding, they want to purify and sanctify Islam but their aggressive zeal often provokes backlash amongst more liberal sectors of society who then develop negative perceptions of Islam. This disrupts the *religious* aspect of these advocates' goals – to spread Islam to wider society. In her frustration Fauziah wondered if perhaps the only

way to challenge moral policing was by appealing to the larger goals of religious proselytising, i.e. *syariah* enforcers could give Islam a better name and attract potential converts if only they stopped targeting personal morality so much.

Views like Fauziah's are much more common amongst the gay Muslims I encountered in Britain. Waqqas, like Fauziah, thought that Islamic condemnations of homosexuality were the result of contemporary Muslim authorities distorting the core message of Islam:

> I think that religious policing is un-Islamic. There can be no compulsion, no enforcement in religion. I think these people are going to be punished for it on Judgement Day. I feel sorry for them, that this is what they truly believe in, to be honest, because they couldn't be further removed from the truth.

Like Fauziah, Waqqas used this reasoning to out-Islamise the Islamic enforcers, or out-moralise the moral entrepreneurs. Waqqas expressed this in an entirely different context, however, where his views would probably deviate from the normative views of Islamic authorities but match wider public opinion more closely. Thus, while both expressed nearly identical responses about moral enterprise and challenged the idea that Islam condemns homosexuality, Waqqas's views are more protected because they are more in line with a liberal society's expectations.

People like Waqqas still feel frustrated, however, because despite conforming to wider British society's expectations about individual liberties and freedoms, they remain vulnerable to stereotyping and attacks by anti-Muslim sectors. Unlike gay Malaysian Muslims, however, gay British Muslims are able to appeal to the more established, inclusive *ideals* of the modern, liberal and democratic British state, regardless of whether these ideals are matched in practise.

Many of the British gay Muslims I met were therefore proud of being British. Despite his *niqab*-wearing pranks to challenge anti-Muslim stereotypes, Salleh said:

> I'm proud to live in this country that provides me with a safe haven and protection. I still feel very Arab. I feel like I'm an Arab British Muslim in this country. I feel proud to be British, I feel proud to come from a Middle Eastern background and I'll fight anybody who like,

when people say, go home, well, go home where? I'm one of you! Even though they don't see me that way. I think that the concept of being British is being proud of the country that you live in and I'm very proud of this country. […] Sometimes I don't agree with all of its policies, but I am proud of this country.

Salleh claimed a right to British-ness because he believed he was 'safe' in Britain, his 'home' and 'haven'. When he said he disagreed with some policies here, Salleh was expressing what white British citizens often take for granted – citizenship in a liberal democracy includes the right to express dissent. Perhaps Salleh felt that he needed to reiterate this because of the fear that as an ethnic and religious minority, his dissension might be interpreted as disloyalty.

Gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain therefore respond to religiously-motivated moral policing by pointing out its deficiencies on practical grounds and based on their interpretations of Islam. If they agree that homosexuality is 'wrong', they question the other 'wrongs' that go unnoticed by the Islamic authorities. If they interpret 'true' Islam as inclusive or tolerant, they recast the moral police as 'deviant' Muslims distorting the religion's underlying spirit. In Britain, however, this is complicated when gay Muslims, like other Muslims, sometimes need to contend with anti-Muslim sentiments from certain media outlets or prominent political ideologues. Within this context, they also appeal to the wider liberal, democratic principles that inform British policies and values to claim a legitimate sense of belonging as equals in society.

6.3 Sympathetic straight Muslims: Potential allies or secondary deviants?

The preceding sections have shown that there are various personal convictions among gay Muslims regarding Islam's position on homosexuality – whether it is a sin, a crime, both, or neither. In this section, I argue that these dilemmas about the *haram* and *halal* in relation to homosexuality also affect many heterosexual Muslims, and this shapes interpersonal relationships between 'gay' and 'straight' Muslims. I begin with the range of family experiences my participants recounted and then demonstrate similar dimensions in the building of more organised alliances

between gay and straight Muslims. Finally, I evaluate the effectiveness of these alliances within the larger social and political contexts of Malaysia and Britain.

6.3.1 We are family: Dilemmas of being gay and Muslim

It is entirely possible for family members of gay Muslims to hold contradictory views, e.g. openly disapproving of homosexuality but tacitly accepting gay Muslim family members on a personal level. Fauziah initially told me that she was 'disturbed' by her mother's blatant homophobia, justified explicitly on Islamic grounds, but a few months later said she had an urgent update. She elaborated when I eventually met her and her girlfriend, as captured in my field-notes:

> The big news is that Fauziah's mother told her younger sister one day, *something to the effect of, 'I prefer Fauziah to "bertenet" with Isma than with Naomi* (Fauziah's previous girlfriend)'. *It appears that* Fauziah's mother 'knows' about her present and past relationships and has taken a liking to Isma.

Fauziah was shocked because her mother chose to reveal this to her younger sibling yet never initiated this conversation with her. Fauziah was also pleasantly shocked at her mother's use of the colloquial term '*bertenet*', which means 'romancing' but with erotic undertones. She said she had also told her father about her sexuality – they were still on talking terms but he would occasionally ask her when she was going to find a husband.

These ambivalent feelings among close family members occur in Britain, too. Ammar said he would not consider contracting a same-sex marriage because that might hurt his mother's feelings, and explained the context as follows:

> Shanon: But do you think she kind of knows that you're gay?
> Ammar: Oh my dad knows!
> [….]
> Shanon: How does your dad know?
> Ammar: He asked me outright.

Shanon: When was this?

[….]

Ammar: Well, you know how I refused to attend the *rishta* meeting[171].
The following day, I said to my mum, I'm not worthy of marriage.
Main shaadi ke kabhi nahin huun[172]. So then my dad came to me
afterwards and just said, what did that mean? Are you gay? I said yes.

Shanon: Did he ask you in English or Punjabi?

Ammar: Punjabi.

Shanon: But he used the word gay?

Ammar: Yeah. *Tu* gay *eh*? (Laughs.)

Shanon: (Laughs.) And then what did you say?

[….]

Ammar: Can't remember what was the word I used. I said something
about I don't want to hurt your feelings. And he said it doesn't matter.
[…] He said I'm 63 now, and I've seen a lot of things in the world.

After this, Ammar said his mother kept arranging *rishta* meetings and his father
kept consenting to them. Ammar kept *refusing* the *rishta* meetings and his father
accepted this, too. Ammar's father played the mediator or peacekeeper between his gay
Muslim son and his 'traditional' Pakistani wife. The responses from Ammar's and
Fauziah's parents are comparable to the ambivalence of the semi-openly gay Muslims
who believe being gay is 'wrong' according to Islam, yet desire empathy and a 'softer'
solution.

There are some outright negative responses, too. Rina, a Malaysian lesbian in her
early 30s, said when her mother found out she was lesbian, she 'took away' her
'independence':

Shanon: How did she take away your independence?

Rina: She took away the car keys. So I couldn't date.

Shanon: But you were working at that time!

Rina: Yeah, man. She made sure, she'd send me to work, and, how *was I supposed to date*? The only way to date was if she took the day off, or she came home and had lunch. That lasted for one month. I went crazy. And then I moved out.

Eventually, Rina moved back home with her mother because she is an only child and did not want to be disobedient. She said she started compromising with her mother, wearing the *tudung* and not going out on dates with women. She also said she became celibate because she concluded that although homosexual sex should not be criminalised, it was still a sin in Islam. Rina's example shows that even though some family members might strongly disapprove of homosexuality, it is not so easy for gay Muslims, whether in Malaysia or Britain, to cut off close family ties. In Britain, many of my participants had to think hard about balancing being relatively open about their sexual identity with friends or acquaintances but concealing it at home.

It is even more complicated when authority figures within the family structure the family's relationships according to their particular understandings of Islam. Sulaiman's father is an *imam* (prayer leader) in his local village mosque, and his mother is an active volunteer with a local, pro-government Muslim women's collective. Sulaiman attended a religious boarding school in his teens and told me he would never reveal his sexuality to his family but also said one of his uncles was an 'ex-gay':

The family all knew that he liked this guy. That time there's no term 'gay', [and] he's not *pondan* either. So, a few times he ran away with, because the guy works in KL (Kuala Lumpur), so he ran away to meet the guy, you know. Then what my grandfather did was he forced him to get married to a girl. The other side also found a girl, they got married [….] *My uncle and his wife had* one son, and then still like, I think one time he ran away again, he left his family, came to KL, [to] look for the guy, OK? […] Every time, my grandfather *and his brother would always come look for him and bring him back*. All the *kampung* (village) knows about this. They got him to see the *bomoh* (traditional Malay healer) to cure him, to forget this guy. Apparently like *the traditional cure* works, *because after that he didn't run away anymore*.

238

Although Sulaiman did not dwell on this story for too long, he said later that he did not believe the *syariah* enforcers or the mass media were the biggest problems for gay Muslims:

I think the pressure does not really come from like external [sources]. If it's like pressure, it always definitely [comes] from the family or from peers. Not from government, not from the enforcement [of the law].

Sulaiman's family dynamics appeared to colour his perception of immediate 'threats' to his personal life and he even regarded the family as more powerful than the *syariah* enforcers in regulating sexuality. On the other hand, there are also stories of acceptance *within* the family. Dax, a gay Malay man in his early 30s, described how he 'came out' to his father. One night, when he was in his early 20s, his father came into his room and found Dax crying. His stepmother came in as well to find Dax in tears, telling them, 'I'm not straight':

My dad said it's OK, he said he understands. He said, I accept, he said this in Malay, he said I accept you how God intended you to be.

Dax maintained that his father's Sufism brought them closer to each other and made his confession easier. Yet Dax no longer identifies privately as Muslim and sees Islam as too restrictive, irrational and exclusive. Asked if he ever revealed this to his father, he replied:

He knows, somewhat. *Sometimes I tease my dad like, if in Malaysia we can, Malays are allowed to renounce their religion, I would have done it a long time ago. My dad was like, I can't remember what he said, he was like quiet or he might have laughed.*

As Islam and Malay ethnicity are tightly linked and regulated, many Malay families assume being 'real' Malays means being 'proper' Muslims, for example through sending their children to religious schools, or getting involved in the local

239

mosque. Dax's story shows that alternative views of Islam proliferate too and complicate family interactions. It is difficult to quantify or categorise these, because they are often expressed so fluidly and appear on the surface to conform to the state's approved varieties of Islam. Besides, proliferation does not necessarily equal popularity.

What this shows, however, is the importance of family ties in enabling or constraining particular expressions of identity among gay Muslims. In Malaysia, some gay Muslims manage to negotiate a relative degree of acceptance within the family but have to conform to dominant external expectations on Islam and sexuality. In Britain, gay Muslims might similarly find little room to negotiate acceptance within the family, but know that they can explore their sexual preferences more freely away from home. Still, in both countries the spectrum of family attitudes at the interpersonal level demonstrates that there is potentially much more diversity than is visible from a top-down view of Islam.

6.3.2 Crossing and redrawing the boundaries

The personal struggles among heterosexual Muslims regarding sexual diversity sometimes reach outside the confines of the family into wider social settings. I have already discussed how the Malaysian film *Sutun* portrayed this conflict even within the confines of a restrictive policy of film and television censorship. Yet if there are straight Muslims who empathise with gay Muslims, where are they and how do they demonstrate this?

At Imaan's 2012 conference, I was asked to organise a panel discussion on engaging the wider Muslim community. I emailed different British Muslim organisations, such as the Muslim Women's Network, the Muslim Institute, the City Circle, and the Islamic Society of Britain which are neither big nor 'representative'. In fact, the assumption that there is one dominant body that could 'represent' the majority of Muslims in Britain is misleading. According to a 2006 survey by Channel 4's *Dispatches* programme, less than four percent of British Muslims thought that the MCB represented them, while only 12 percent thought it represented their political views (Malik, 2006). Around 90 percent were unsure of who actually represented the views of Muslims in Britain, and around 80 percent were unsure who represented their political views.

Snapshots of British Muslims such as this are often invisible to the wider public – even many Imaan members have assumed in the past that British Muslims were monolithic and therefore unanimously hostile towards gay Muslims. Many were therefore pleasantly surprised at the presence of representatives from several British Muslim organisations at the conference. A few wept openly when one panellist opened his presentation by saying, 'The Muslim organisations have failed people like you in this room for such a long time, and for that I am truly sorry.'

Since then, Imaan has kept in touch with these and other supportive Muslim organisations, resulting in further collaborations such as campaigns, talks and seminars on Islam and homophobia or Islam and diversity. In 2013, the Tell MAMA (Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks) Project UK invited Imaan to be one of its patrons, explaining that it would include hate incidents against Muslim sexual minorities under the broader definition of anti-Muslim attacks (Tell MAMA, n.d.). Even so, not all Tell MAMA patrons were fully affirming, with one telling me he believed homosexuality was a sin in Islam but that gay Muslims deserved full social equality. The Tell MAMA staff also said they got flak from some British Muslims for engaging Imaan but were not too concerned as the majority of overall abuse they received was from the English far right.

In March 2014, the City Circle (2014) invited Imaan, along with presenters from the Muslim Institute[173] and JIMAS (The Association to Revive the Way of the Messenger)[174], to discuss ways to tackle exclusion within Muslim communities. Although there were a minority of Muslim attendees vocally defending the view of homosexual behaviour as *haram*, the majority appeared willing to engage with more inclusive or tolerant approaches[175]. In May, the Muslim Institute and Imaan co-organised a two-day conference, 'Diversity: The Gift of Islam', which included panel discussions on asylum, gender relations, conversion, sectarianism, citizenship and same-sex marriage (Muslim Institute & Imaan, n.d.). Panellists included activists, journalists,

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[173] Represented by Ziauddin Sardar, a prominent public intellectual whom the majority of British Muslim activists I spoke to saw as progressive, including on sexuality.

[174] In the 1980s and 1990s, JIMAS was strongly connected to the global *salafiyah* movement (i.e. aiming to 'purify' Islam, often supported by Saudi Arabia) and Islamist activists. After 9/11, however, it fractured largely along pro- and anti-Saudi lines (Gilliat-Ray, 2012: 81). During this particular talk, the JIMAS representative was open to more tolerant and inclusive Islamic approaches on homosexuality, but admitted not having a religiously-based position on issues such as same-sex marriage.

[175] There were approximately seventy attendees and around nine out of ten were Muslim.

and academics, while the audience of approximately 100 consisted of university students, young professionals and pensioners.

These interactions between Imaan and other British Muslim organisations demonstrate the vibrant and diverse, albeit often invisible, discussions on sexuality among British Muslims despite what the Islamic authorities might pronounce. In fact, tensions between the Muslim establishment's rejection of sexual diversity and rejoinders by other Muslim activists can be traced back to 2006, when the MCB backed the Equality Act 2006 (Muslim Council of Britain, 2007). The MCB supported the Act's protection of sexual minorities as a *quid pro quo* for its protection of religious minorities, but even this position invited considerable backlash from some prominent British Muslims. Despite the backlash, former MCB spokesperson Inayat Bunglawala (2007, 2009) continued supporting the rights of sexual minorities and even suggested that the MCB include 'a gay Muslim support group as an affiliate'.

In this sense, state policies to expand conceptions of equality and human rights have made various Muslim groups in Britain re-examine *their* notions of these principles, too. My findings suggest that heterosexual Muslims keen to discuss sexual diversity might now have greater public space and legitimacy to associate with groups such as Imaan even if they encounter opposition from other Muslims. State policies in this context enable everyday interactions between 'straight' and 'gay' Muslims to result in more organised, albeit nascent, collaborations.

In Malaysia, my findings suggest that the rhetoric and practise of *syariah* enforcement can drive some gay Muslims to seek out other Muslims who object moral policing more generally. Some of these other Muslims, such as SIS, are also viewed by the Syariah lobby as 'deviant'[176]. In this context, if gay Muslims are considered *primary* deviants in relation to how pro-*syariah* advocates frame homosexuality, then gay-friendly heterosexual Muslims run the risk of being viewed as *secondary* deviants. The same can be said of Muslims who sympathise with other 'primary deviants', such as those who renounce Islam or whom the Sunni establishment does not recognise, including Syiahs and Ahmadiyyas.

Sometimes, the primary and secondary deviants join forces to confront moral policing as a whole, which explains why many gay Malaysian Muslims do not see their priority as advocating for 'gay rights'. Instead, they locate their quest for freedom of

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[176] For examples of these perceptions of SIS and more background, see Chapter 3.2.2.

sexuality within a larger framework of freedom from religiously-motivated policing. According to Zainal:

> When it comes to gay rights I *feel like even women's rights have not yet, the position of women is more important than sexuality for now. Wait wait, sorry! The example that is most [urgent], you know, is freedom of religion. When there is freedom of religion,* because it's so fundamental that when a Malay can profess another religion, a Malay can also profess other choices that he or she makes, such as […] *well people say it's a choice,* but it's not, *the freedom to have* a gay lifestyle or whatever, you know?

In other words, because moral enterprise in Malaysia is linked with regulations of Islam and Malay ethnicity, dissenting Muslims – gay or straight – seek to break this link instead of primarily defending specific 'deviant' groups. Ironically, they do this by foregrounding *their* Muslim and Malay identities which means that counter-moral advocacy also becomes suffused with notions of religion and ethnicity, albeit in more inclusive ways.

Many of the Malaysian gay Muslims I interviewed thus thought that the identity-focused, individual-centred campaigns of Western LGBT rights groups were not entirely suitable for the Malaysian context. Some felt strongly that when secular, liberal gay rights activists from the West and in Malaysia addressed Muslims, they often misread Islam and missed the nuances of the local context. According to Fauziah:

> Homosexuality is not a Western import, but rights movements are a Western import. And with the gay rights movement, sometimes I feel like we are importing things lock, stock and barrel, and don't take into account that traditionally or culturally, psychologically, we do things differently here. And maybe it would be more effective to utilise the ways that we have always done things in order to get our point across, or in order to further […] our interests. Maybe being so in-your-face works against us sometimes.

Gay Muslims in Malaysia therefore do not deny that they need to address anti-homosexual attitudes and actions, especially from the moral police and the mass media. Still, they feel there is a predominant model of 'gay rights' – characterised by Fauziah as the 'in-your-face' or individualistic approach in Western gay activism – which they see as too culturally dissonant for Malaysia. This is why Fauziah, Zainal and some of my other Malaysian participants said they preferred to engage with and support organisations such as SIS to advocate more inclusive expressions of Islam.

In Britain, many gay Muslims perceived the LGBTQI movement similarly and felt that it was dominated by white Britons who often misunderstand religious and ethnic minorities or, worse, were hostile towards them. Yet, some did not want to dissociate from the larger LGBTQI community, but wanted it to expand its notions of diversity and cultural sensitivity. According to Waqqas:

[The British LGBTQI movement] is a white rights movement. It's not particularly in tune to the Muslim community and we've seen that with the whole discourse of marriage. [Imaan has] been asked so much about our opinion on gay marriage et cetera, to participate in the activism on it. My response, my thoughts have always been initially, and still are, that we have bigger issues to deal with than the concept of marriage and whether Muslims should be allowed to participate in same-sex marriages. [But] when [the main LGBTQI organisations] move forward, their moving forward isn't incorporating our perspectives.

Waqqas said for him, the solution was not to dissociate from the larger gay scene but to participate even more actively. According to him, more gay Muslims should attend the gay scene while asserting their own boundaries, for example visiting nightclubs but not drinking alcohol, taking drugs, or engaging in casual sex. He argued that it was this kind of social participation that would ensure that gay Muslims are 'represented' and 'visible' among other LGBTQIs. For the same reason, he insisted on marching every year *as* a gay Muslim under the Imaan banner during London Pride.

Many gay Muslims thus work to expand the conceptual and practical ways in which society negotiates diversity and pluralism. In Malaysia, they forge indirect

alliances with sympathetic heterosexual Muslims to negotiate for more individual and collective autonomy in an environment where the state uses Islam to construct a strong collective identity. In Britain, they often have to navigate between a collective minority identity as Muslims who happen to be gay and wider society's emphasis on individuality and human rights. How effective are these negotiations and strategies? In the next section, I look at how these efforts are inhibited or facilitated by particular institutions and structures.

6.3.3 The search for authority: Contexts and impacts

Like the British moral reformers in the Victorian era, those who spearhead the Malaysian Islamic bureaucracy and other *syariah* advocates often equate moral purity with a stable society[177]. Yet in Malaysia, anti-gay policies and sentiments have been much more overtly utilised by the government for political purposes, namely after the sacking of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in 1998 for corruption and sodomy[178].

Anwar and former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad – then and now – seem to illustrate part of Max Weber's definition of a charismatic leader. According to Weber (2012: 324–325), an individual possesses 'charisma' if he[179] has authority over 'followers' or 'disciples' who regard him as 'extraordinary and […] endowed with […] at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities', and is 'exemplary'. Still, Mahathir's and Anwar's 'charisma' appeared to attract different kinds of followers, even though before 1998 they seemed to join forces to project a unified vision of Islam for Malaysia.

Most of my Malaysian participants were from families with pro-government leanings before 1998, and grew up in conditions where the Mahathir-Anwar combination defined their political consciousness. This was within a context of strict government control of the mass media, especially by factions loyal to either Mahathir or Anwar.

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[177] As argued and explained in Chapter 3.

[178] Also discussed in Chapter 3.

[179] While Weber refers to 'charismatic leader' with the male pronoun, his description could also apply to women leaders depending on the context.

Zainal said he thought it was a 'good combo' when Mahathir was prime minister and Anwar was deputy and still did not prefer one over the other. He said his family were all pro-government before, especially on his mother's side – many of the pro-government women in his family were from Anwar's parliamentary constituency. When Mahathir sacked Anwar and began vilifying him, many of Zainal's female relatives became angry and he also said his parents were now capable of voting for the opposition just to 'spite' the government.

Zainal's story illustrates how charismatic authoritarian leaders can become symbols of collective cohesion or conflict. Before 1998, the combined charisma of Mahathir and Anwar held Malaysia's multi-ethnic middle class together, but Mahathir's sacking of Anwar was viewed by many middle class Malays as a crisis of ethnic and religious unity. Many chose sides based on whether they primarily aligned with either Mahathir's or Anwar's expressions of Islam and Malay-ness. Razak, who was in secondary school during the incidents of 1998, said he even defended Mahathir to his pro-Anwar teachers in school, even though he secretly had a crush on Anwar. Rohana said she 'adored' Mahathir to this day while Isma said she was 'pro-Mahathir', speaking highly of him as a 'dictator' because when he was prime minister 'everything was fine'.

When I proposed to all my pro-Mahathir participants that his dismissal of Anwar was grounded in homophobia, they agreed and said they disapproved of this aspect of his rhetoric. However, they still preferred Mahathir – and those associated with him – over Anwar and his associates. For those who ended up taking Anwar's side, the homophobic aspect of the sacking was largely irrelevant. Zulkifli, a gay Malay male in his late 30s, attended pro-Anwar, anti-government rallies in 1998 and 1999 but said the focus of his anger was Mahathir's authoritarianism, not his homophobia.

Others responded more ambivalently and had difficulty choosing between Mahathir or Anwar. Fauziah summarised her dilemma as follows: 'UMNO is *setan*[180] but Anwar is Iblis[181]. So what are you gonna do?' Fauziah was aware that the UMNO-led administration was responsible for fuelling hostile rhetoric and moral policing against Muslim sexual minorities yet was wary of Anwar and his Islamist past. In other words, she never found his charisma legitimate in the first place and perhaps knowing

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[180] The Malay pronunciation of the Arabic *shaytan*, or the followers of Iblis. In Islamic cosmology, Iblis was the angel who refused to prostrate before the first man, Adam, and was thus cast out of Paradise.

[181] See preceding note.

how influential he was among his supporters also had a *negative* effect on her. Or as Dax put it:

> *I don't belong in the BN[182]. I don't like BN because they're like corrupt. I don't like DAP because they are too Chinese. I don't really like PKR because of Anwar – it's Anwar's vehicle. So which party should I support?*

I reminded Dax wryly that there was also PAS, the opposition Islamist party which, besides UMNO, is the other major party that regularly trots out anti-homosexual statements. It also endorses moral policing – its only disagreement with UMNO is that UMNO's version of moral enterprise is too 'soft'. Dax replied, '*PAS doesn't even register on my list!*'

Gay Muslim attitudes towards Mahathir and Anwar are thus indicators of their broader concerns about social change, stability, and the cohesion of their religious and ethnic identities. They largely perceive that no existing political party would ever oppose or challenge the victimisation of sexual minorities. For many, this translates into a 'better-the-devil-you-know' position – they prefer backing UMNO rather than risking it with the opposition coalition led by Anwar and including Islamists in PAS and PKR. Even those who choose to back the opposition parties are sceptical about the prospects for sexual minorities – they are driven more by overall concerns on the state of democracy and good governance. Finally, the vast majority – from all political leanings – perceive the Malaysian government as authoritarian or not fully democratic, making it futile to demand their rights through the political process. They assume that because of the constraints that 'Islam' places on various aspects of society, it is impossible to reform or change the political system.

In this sense, the political attitudes of gay Malaysians Muslims are quite similar to other Malaysian Muslims, whom Michael Peletz argues are more ambivalent about state-led Islamisation than it might appear. These 'ordinary Muslims' are often reluctant to voice their concerns publicly – or might even regard such concerns as 'unthinkable' – for 'political and moral reasons' (Peletz, 1997: 232). Many might be uncomfortable with the state's expansion of punitive Islamic legislation but also want to improve their

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[182] Barisan Nasional, or National Front – the ruling coalition of which UMNO is a senior partner.

standards of living through the government's pro-Malay wealth-generating policies (Peletz, 1997: 243). However, Peletz observed this based on his fieldwork during the late 1970s and late 1980s, when it was possible for him to gloss 'ordinary Malays' as 'rural Malays'. In the decades since, rapid state-led urbanisation and modernisation have complicated this straightforward distinction between 'urban' and 'rural Malays'[183].

Yet my discussion of the ambivalent political attitudes among my Malaysian participants suggests that some of Peletz's observations might still hold. Although they did not state it explicitly, some of them might have been wary of upsetting the political balance because the prevailing social order still afforded them certain privileges as Malays. As I have shown in the previous sections, however, this political conservatism does not apply to all of them nor does it necessarily translate as inaction or passivity. Many of the gay Malaysian Muslims I observed did attempt to change their surrounding circumstances but more indirectly and outside conventional political structures and mechanisms.

In Britain, on the other hand, the state's legal and administrative institutions now aim to uphold equality, diversity, and the rights of minorities, including the religious and sexual. Still, the practical and sometimes uneven application of these laws and policies provokes grievances among some sectors, such as the religious groups opposing same-sex marriage discussed in section 5.1.4. Despite these complications, the legal provisions for equality and anti-discrimination enable gay British Muslims to claim, contest, and redefine their religious and sexual identities in ways that gay Malaysian Muslims would find difficult. Even so, many gay Muslims in Britain still feel uncomfortable openly debating what Islam 'says' about homosexuality.

I witnessed an example of this during a research trip to Greater Manchester in May 2013 to attend a full-day Demystifying *Shariah* workshop[184]. At the beginning, the facilitators checked the participants' comfort levels on various issues through some interactive activities, as captured in my fieldnotes:

Most people are pretty comfortable with the idea that it's OK to be
gay and Muslim. People are far less comfortable with statements

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[183] In 1980, it is estimated that 42 percent of the Malaysian population lived in urban areas, while in 2014 it was 74 percent (World Bank, 2014).

[184] Described further in Chapters 1.2.3 and 4.1.1.

about the validity of Islamic authority or whether *shariah* law can be questioned – many feel that Islamic authority or *shariah* should not be challenged. This makes others confused by the statements, and leads to more discussion about our different positions.

This activity crystallises two apparently conflicting orientations that many Imaan members have – that it is OK to be gay but wrong to challenge Islamic authority. Yet the nature or definition of 'true' Islamic authority is constantly debated within Imaan, whether on Facebook, WhatsApp, the online forum, or real group encounters, such as during meetings or informal gatherings.

I have observed instances where this saturation of religious talk was accompanied by some members feeling uncomfortable or defensive about certain expressions of Islam within the group. One possible explanation for this is that Imaan tries not only to fashion itself as an organisation for *gay* Muslims, but also as a *Muslim* organisation that advocates for sexual diversity. As Muslim 'outsiders', however, the people attracted to Imaan do not have a focus of authority to bind the group together. A few members have quite a secular outlook, but many more grew up in traditional Muslim environments enclosed by class and ethnic boundaries. Hence, there is often tension between how Imaan members express their religion and sexuality individually and collectively.

For example, Osman said as a British Bangladeshi growing up in the 1970s, he lived in majority-Bengali area, and some parents in his neighbourhood discouraged their children from befriending Pakistanis[185]. Muslims like Osman thus did not only grow up in traditionally *Muslim* environments, but also traditionally *Bengali* environments where collective ethnic identity was just as important as collective religious identity. When gay Muslims of different ethnic and/or national backgrounds encounter each other in Imaan, they therefore have to confront other expressions of Islam they might not necessarily be comfortable with. Unlike gay Muslims in Malaysia, however, they do not have to contend with state-led authorities enforcing particular interpretations of Islam and so have to work out for themselves what 'Islamic' authority means.

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[185] According to him, many harboured ill feelings towards Pakistanis in the aftermath of Bangladesh's war of independence with Pakistan in 1971.

Within this context, a small minority within Imaan – as with other British Muslims – have previously joined transnational Muslim movements with a presence in Britain, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir or the Tablighi Jamaat[186]. Usually, they disaffiliate quietly from these groups once they come to grapple with their sexual identity and this leads them to engage with Imaan. Once in Imaan, they retain some of the perspectives and experiences of Islam they previously acquired through these different groups. I have observed some of them holding sway during exchanges about what constitutes the 'authentic' Islamic position on various issues.

These examples show that in Imaan, the absence of direct 'Islamic' authority to structure expressions of Islam does not negate the desire for, and the presence of, indirect authority. Yet the debates about what is authentically Islamic take place within a larger environment where the state is seen as duty-bound to protect the rights of the individual and of various minorities.

6.4 Conclusion

The dominant image of Islam's 'position' on homosexuality is based on the assumption that homosexuality is absolutely *haram*. On an everyday level, individuals who identify as gay and Muslim have to actively negotiate such notions of *haram* and *halal* to make their existences viable. This is a continuing process, and regardless of whether they personally believe that being gay is *haram* they constantly need to interpret, internalise, and accept or reject dominant messages about Islam and homosexuality. Some redefine notions of *haram* and *halal* for themselves to balance belonging within Islam and expressing their sexuality.

When gay Muslims negotiate these notions of *haram* and *halal*, they also complicate dominant notions of normality in their immediate contexts. In Malaysia, they complicate the position that Islam is absolutely anti-gay espoused by the government, those who spearhead the Islamic bureaucracy and other *syariah* advocates. These actors can be conceptualised as the 'Syariah lobby' (tan, 2012a: 53) or as 'moral entrepreneurs' consisting of 'rule creators' and 'rule enforcers' (Becker, 1991: 147). In

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[186] For example, I once had an informal conversation with Naved, who is in his early 30s, about his teenage years as an activist in Hizb ut-Tahrir. Also, in our formal interview, Osman recalled his years in the Tablighi Jamaat very fondly. Another on-and-off Imaan member, Salman, in his mid-20s, explained how he became part of a Salafi movement in his teens but left eventually.

line with Cohen's (2011: 8) observation, they often *manufacture* and drive 'moral panics' about various 'folk devils', including sexual minorities. As I have discussed, it is a Herculean task for these moral entrepreneurs to consistently and comprehensively eliminate all the types of immorality they perceive. This even leads to tensions, as outlined by Becker (1991: 161-162), where the 'rule creators' accuse the 'rule enforcers' of being too soft or inefficient in enforcing moral rules.

Within this context, gay Muslims develop particular responses to oppose or avoid moral enterprise. Those who hold that homosexuality is *haram* point out the practical or procedural flaws in moral policing, for example, highlighting other kinds of 'immorality' that go unnoticed or unpunished by *syariah* enforcers. Those who hold that Islam does *not* forbid homosexuality turn the tables and criticise the version of Islam espoused by the moral entrepreneurs as deviant or distorted. Either way, these responses by gay Muslim involve putting on variations of a 'breastplate of righteousness' (Humphreys, 1970: 135) to out-moralise the moral entrepreneurs.

In Britain, gay Muslims have to confront similar sentiments within Muslim communities as well as certain ideological sentiments framing *Muslims* as problematic because of assumptions that Islam is inherently illiberal and violent. Some gay Muslims are therefore also implicated by wider rhetoric and policies 'securitising' Muslims (Croft, 2012: 16) or juxtaposing 'homonationalist' stereotypes of an inherently homophobic Islam against the exceptionally gay-friendly West (Puar, 2007: 39). Yet gay Muslims are sometimes also empowered to respond by claiming their right to express their gay *and* Muslim identities. This might occasionally involve counter-stereotyping the white, non-Muslim majority, partly resembling Cohen's (2011: 89) description of 'deviance amplification'.

These experiences and perspectives of gay Muslims in relation to Islam and wider society are often shared by other Muslims in both countries. Gay Muslims in both countries therefore have multi-layered relationships with family and friends, and some are even forging nascent collaborations with sympathetic heterosexual Muslims. These networks can be nurtured more safely and readily in Britain, with its laws and policies upholding equality and prohibiting discrimination. Yet similar networks are also forming in Malaysia, despite the more authoritarian and repressive political environment. My findings also suggest that everyday negotiations of *halal* and *haram* by gay and other Muslims further reflect larger contestations and uncertainties among Muslims about what constitutes 'true' or 'authentic' Islamic authority.

In both countries, the details of these interactions remain largely invisible to the wider public and are often overshadowed by wider ideological and/or nationalist agendas. In Malaysia, such agendas are explicitly pursued by state and non-state actors defending ideas of national purity by employing Islamic and homophobic rhetoric. In Britain, the situation is mitigated by the existence of laws and policies protecting religious and sexual minorities, yet some ideologically driven actors promote ideas of national purity by casting Islam as exceptionally homophobic.

My findings therefore indicate that transnational, geopolitical dimensions in constructions of 'Islam' and the 'West' influence the national contexts in which Islam and sexuality are regulated. Against this backdrop, gay Muslims do not respond to notions of *halal* and *haram* in an ideological vacuum. Their negotiations of Islamic injunctions on homosexuality are often constrained by nationalist and other agendas in Malaysia and Britain. The making of a gay Muslim in either country is thus an integral part of a larger story on the relationships between religion, sexuality, and nationalism in the making of ideological and social boundaries.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The experiences of gay Muslims and the issues they face do not solely involve questions on 'sexuality' or 'Islam'. They relate to the larger question of how people with identities widely perceived as incompatible or undesirable cope with those who stigmatise, marginalise or persecute them. They make us ask how some identities or social interactions come to be seen as undesirable, abnormal or even dangerous in the first place. Are these widely held notions static and monolithic, or can they change?

In this study, I addressed these concerns through an in-depth investigation of the lived experiences of gay Muslim in Britain and Malaysia. I chose these two countries to compare the impacts of Islam as a state-established majority religion, and as a minority religion with few state-supported privileges. Against this background, I explored how and why some people identified as 'gay' and 'Muslim' despite widespread attitudes, religious rulings and legal consequences (in the case of Malaysia) supporting the view that Islam condemns homosexuality. I also investigated the wider consequences and impacts of holding a 'gay Muslim' identity.

I found that there is no definitive story or model in the making of gay Muslims – people come to identify as 'gay' and 'Muslim' through distinct personal trajectories – but their experiences are shaped by some common factors. In Britain and Malaysia, socialisation through families, schooling and peer interactions made 'Islam' a prominent, recurring theme in the everyday experiences of gay Muslims. In Malaysia, this was strengthened considerably by policies which deliberately and explicitly impose Muslim identity and Islamic doctrines among those the state categorised as 'Muslim'. Although there are no comparable state impositions of Islam in Britain, events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and 7/7 London bombings have influenced increasing public scrutiny of Muslims and policies focused on Islamic radicalism. These dynamics have reinforced and in some cases heightened the salience of Islam as a primary referent in the construction of Muslim identities in Britain, including among gay Muslims. Regarding their sexual dispositions, most of my participants in both countries regarded 'gay' as a convenient umbrella category even though they were aware of cultural differences in concepts describing sexual diversity or attraction.

These lived experiences shaped ongoing, personal reflections and renegotiations of what 'Islam' or 'gay' identity meant to the people I studied. They still drew upon

what they understood as 'true' or 'proper' Islam to forge a sense of belonging within the wider fold of Islam. However, their personal Islamic understandings depended on whether they accepted the view that Islam forbids homosexuality. Those who saw being gay as *haram* defended themselves mostly by highlighting the moral imperfections of other Muslims and appealing to the idea that only Allah could judge human deeds and intentions. Those who did not see Islam as condemning homosexuality utilised alternative and more inclusive interpretations of the religion to claim the moral high ground or 'out-Islamise' anti-gay Muslims, portraying *their* beliefs as 'deviant'.

In both countries, I observed gay Muslims engaging in what Robert Merton (1968: 672) calls 'role adjustments' to different social and cultural expectations. Their choices to conform, rebel, innovate, retreat, or simply put up appearances to avoid trouble were partly influenced by the strength of their socialisation into Islam and relationships with other Muslims. I also found that laws, policies and the wider social climate on freedom of religion and expression significantly affected their responses. For instance, even though many of my British participants perceived the state's security or de-radicalisation policies as unduly targeting Muslims, they felt able to articulate their opposition by appealing to wider liberal, democratic principles. They were also confident that they could appeal to legislation upholding equality and prohibiting discrimination to protect their status as sexual minorities. While many of my Malaysian participants were uncomfortable with religiously-motivated moral policing, most would not criticise it too openly in light of the many civil and *syariah* laws restricting freedom of religion and expression. This was made more complicated by the constitutional linking of Malay and Muslim identity and the government's many pro-Malay policies.

Still, in both countries, many gay Muslims managed to find or create spaces where they could interact safely, away from anti-gay or anti-Muslim sentiments. This was especially possible in more urban, middle-class environments, for example in people's homes, restaurants or, in Britain, venues made available by the larger LGBTQI charity sector.

My participants also tried to forge connections with other gay or sympathetic heterosexual Muslims to work out the Islamic component of their lives. This was easier in Britain, where LGBTQI Muslim organisations such as Imaan could legitimately exist and operate alongside other Muslim organisations with alternative or gay-friendly understandings of Islam. In fact, the provisions of the Equality Act 2010 protecting religious and sexual minorities have partly provided the platform for nascent

collaborations between Imaan and some of these organisations. Still, despite the more restrictive environment in Malaysia, an expanding civil society now includes Muslim and non-Muslim actors who increasingly support the rights of sexual and other minorities. Some Muslim civil society groups such as Sisters in Islam (SIS) and the Islamic Renaissance Front (IRF) openly oppose moral policing and anti-gay sentiments by advocating inclusive interpretations of Islam. Some Malaysian gay Muslims I met were therefore supportive of SIS and IRF while others were less so, depending on whether they personally believed that homosexuality was *haram*.

Regardless of their religious beliefs about homosexuality, gay Muslims directly or indirectly challenge normative Islamic authorities across different contexts simply by holding their religious and sexual identities. My findings suggest that they are slowly but increasingly joined by other sympathetic Muslims, which makes this challenge more significant. In Malaysia, for example, public debates and contestations about Islam and sexual diversity now involve larger critiques from some Muslims about how 'Islam' is being manipulated by an authoritarian, albeit considerably weakened, government. Similarly, while the nuances of British Muslim opinions about issues such as homosexuality can be obscured by the spotlight on radicalism and terrorism, I have found evidence of 'gay' and 'straight' Muslims exploring more inclusive, 'British' expressions of Islam and therefore stretching existing notions of liberalism and pluralism. I have also found evidence of 'everyday' liberal attitudes among British and Malaysian Muslims – 'gay' and 'straight' – which are often neither explicitly or self-consciously political. These dynamics indicate that gay and other Muslims are increasingly engaging with Islam as what James Beckford (2001: 232) calls a 'cultural resource' to adapt to their specific, changing circumstances.

Additionally, my findings suggest that in both countries, gay Muslims challenge explicit and implicit conceptions that link religion, nation and ethnicity. In Malaysia, where the constitution defines Malays *as* Muslims, panics about 'LGBT rights' are often instigated and escalated by pro-*syariah* ideologues *and* ultranationalist Malays arguing that 'liberal' or 'Western' values threaten 'Islam' and the nation. In Britain, respect for sexual diversity is increasingly seen as a British value, yet gay *Muslims* still confuse several boundaries since they are part of ethnic and religious minorities often perceived as conservative or anti-Western. The emergence of 'gay Muslim' identities in both countries therefore challenges the idea of an unbridgeable divide between the 'West' and 'Islam' which often carries unstated assumptions about ethnicity. In fact,

some of my British participants appropriated the term 'coconut' – 'brown on the outside, white on the inside' – to capture their fluid and intersecting ethnic, religious and sexual identities. In Malaysia, some of them used the widespread notion of the 'typical Malay' to counter-stereotype and dismiss anti-gay Muslims as 'backward' and unthinking, while others explored their own more nuanced understandings of ethnicity and culture.

Overall, my findings challenge the notion that Islam 'inherently' opposes homosexuality, and instead suggest that 'Islam', like other religions, is fluid, internally diverse and constantly being contested at various levels. In countries such as Malaysia, the question is also to what extent the authoritarian government selects, manipulates or distorts particular Islamic interpretations to manage the population and how this impacts gay Muslims. Even so, the varieties of 'lived' Islam here indicate that strong state regulation can unintentionally foster newer and more innovative uses of Islam as a 'cultural resource'. In both Malaysia and Britain, the making of gay Muslims thus involves constant engagement with multi-layered social networks, diverse interpretations of Islam, and fragmented Islamic and non-Islamic authorities.

7.1 Contributions to theory and public debate

This study benefited from and contributes to sociological studies of deviance by investigating the construction of 'outsider', stigmatised identities *and* efforts to 'de-stigmatise' them. In Malaysia, my findings supported Howard Becker's (1991: 162) contention that moral enterprise creates 'deviance', not the other way around, and Stanley Cohen's (2011: 14, 219) argument that moral entrepreneurs tend to instigate moral panics when society becomes unstable. Becker's (1991: 147) classification of moral entrepreneurs as 'rule creators' and 'rule enforcers' was also useful to analyse the workings of pro-*syariah* actors in Malaysia, especially in explaining the complications and contestations of moral policing. Furthermore, I found that moral enterprise in Malaysia largely overlapped with ethnic and religious concerns, meaning that anti-gay Islamic authorities and Muslim ideologues could also be conceptualised as what Rogers Brubaker (2006: 10) calls 'ethno-political entrepreneurs'. These theoretical frameworks helped me identify the multiple strategies of gay Malaysian Muslims to avoid, subvert or challenge these dynamics.

In Britain, my findings add to and complicate Stuart Croft's (2012: 16) argument about the 'securitization of Islam' and constructions of 'Britishness' by illustrating how this affects the everyday experiences of gay British Muslims. I demonstrate that they, too, are implicated by securitising rhetoric but they and many other Muslims also try to bridge the perceived divide between being 'British' and 'Muslim'. My findings therefore also refine and complicate Jasbir Puar's contention about growing 'homonationalism' in the West, i.e. perceptions of the West as exceptionally gay-friendly and therefore deserving support in the 'War on Terror'. I show that this is only part of the picture – gay Muslims and other sympathetic Muslims here challenge and subvert such rhetoric in numerous, creative ways.

My study therefore contributes an important perspective on the place of sexuality in the construction of overlapping religious, ethnic and national boundaries in Britain as well as Malaysia. In particular, it illuminates how gay Muslims are caught between and respond to wider political and ideological agendas in different social contexts.

In relation to this, the study adds to the theorising on Islam and sexuality by providing a sustained comparison of the experiences of gay Muslims in two different countries. My findings support Afsaneh Najmabadi's (2011: 551) proposal that through complex interactions within and across cultures, we *produce* specific sexual labels and hierarchies, just as we produce religious structures and state structures. It is also important to distinguish between the politicisation of 'Islam' and 'sexuality' in state rhetoric and their potential as 'cultural resources' to construct fluid self-understandings in cultural and interpersonal dimensions.

My findings thus only partially support Joseph Massad's (2002: 372–373) argument that gay identity is a Western imposition and his characterisation of gay Muslims as middle-class, Westernised elites in Muslim societies and the West. Certainly, some of the gay Muslims and other sympathetic Muslims I encountered could fall into Massad's notion of a middle-class, Westernised elite, but many were from working-class backgrounds and were only recently *becoming* middle-class. These findings echo Tom Boellstorff's (2005a: 118-119), that the emergence of *gay* and *lesbi* identities in neighbouring Indonesia were linked to the rise of a new middle class resulting from the state's modernising policies.

My study further clarifies the role of human agency in the constant adaptations gay Muslims make when expressing their religious and sexual identities individually

and collectively. Their 'role adjustments' (Merton, 1968: 672) to different social and cultural circumstances indicate that they are not simply passive victims of uniformly draconian religious dogmas and practices. Rather, they consider and choose their possible responses based on opportunities made available through their social networks and locations, and the wider legal and political context.

This study also benefited from the call by Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2006: 41–47) for greater analytical clarity on the three facets of identity-making – an individual's or group's self-identification or categorisation of/by others; the development of self-understandings in specific contexts; and feelings of commonality or connectedness with a bounded group. By paying attention to these aspects, my analysis also supports Beckford's (2001: 232) recommendation to study religion as a 'cultural resource' in identity construction and not merely as a 'social institution'.

According to my findings, the responses of gay Muslims to dominant ideas about Islam and sexuality slowly but steadily influence a growing number of other Muslims. These effects indicate that religion is not static, and that Islam is neither exceptionally nor inherently homophobic. These aspects of my findings could be of particular benefit to policy-makers and campaigners on human rights, gender and sexual equality and/or diversity, especially in the West, as an empirical basis to challenge ideological claims about Islam's 'inherently' violent, anti-liberal, or anti-modern tendencies.

My study also investigates what appears to be a gap between lived experiences of Islam and the expectations of conventional Islamic authorities. The gay Muslims I met constantly grappled with what these authorities pronounced but carried on forging social networks and lifestyles that avoided, escaped or sometimes challenged these pronouncements. Yet they were not the only ones characterised as 'threats' or 'deviants' by conventional Islamic authorities and ideologues – for instance, during the period of my research, the Malaysian Islamic establishment also vilified Syiah, liberal and feminist Muslims. These overlapping panics about intra-Muslim diversity and dissent are wider indicators of the challenges confronting institutional regulation of 'proper' or 'authentic' expressions of Islam. These aspects of my findings can therefore become resources for Islamic leaders, Muslim campaigners, and others interested in contemporary transformations of Islam in different national contexts.

7.2 Implications of the study

By comparing how gay Muslims come to be seen as 'outsiders' and their responses in different national contexts, this study has probed the influences of overlapping religious, nationalist and security rhetoric on sexual minorities. It has shown how expressions of sexuality and national identity are used by different actors to construct or challenge constructions of 'Islam' and the 'West' as mutually oppositional.

The study's limitations stem primarily from its focus on 'outsiders by default' – my sample mostly consisted of people born into Muslim families who were clear about having same-sex attractions. We can develop richer insights on constructions of religious and sexual identity – and the related factors of ethnic and national identity – by investigating the experiences of people who *choose* to cross supposedly unbridgeable boundaries.

It could prove particularly fruitful to research the experiences of gay converts to Islam, especially in the West. Their narratives could provide helpful insights into how an individual chooses to cross a boundary from an environment that is construed as 'liberal' to one often stereotyped as 'anti-liberal'. Along similar lines, it could prove useful investigating the narratives of heterosexual Muslims who have gone from rejecting to accepting the rights of sexual minorities, i.e. 'the making of a gay-friendly straight Muslim'. We could also gain valuable perspectives from Muslim sexual minorities who do *not* identify as 'gay' or other related sexual labels, and who therefore do not appear to cross the boundary.

Also, this study focused mainly on the experiences of gay Muslims in their twenties and thirties. Further research on the experiences of Muslim sexual minorities from a wider age range could be useful to discern generational shifts in attitudes about Islam and sexuality. More research could also be conducted specifically on the influence of class in the formation of religious and sexual identities and its impacts on nationalist trends.

Throughout this study, I utilised ethnographic methods to make the most of my position as an 'insider', i.e. as a gay Muslim, immersing myself in and documenting and analysing the experiences of other gay Muslims. Much of my research also involved the emotional labour of being honest about and understanding my own motives, perceptions and reactions to particular situations, as discussed in detail in

Chapter 1. I therefore hope to contribute to the advocacy and enhancement of the ethnographic study of religion, sexuality and identity in cross-cultural contexts.

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264

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Appendix 1: Glossary

Note: Some Arabic loan words are pronounced or transliterated differently in Urdu and Malay. Where relevant, I give the Arabic spelling first, followed by Urdu and Malay, e.g. *wudu/wuzu/wuduk*.

As far as possible, transliterations are based on Esposito, J. L. (2003). *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; *Kamus Dewan*. (2005). Fourth Edition. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Institute of Language and Literature Malaysia); and Platts, J. T. (2008 [1884]). 'A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English.' University of Chicago digital resource. *Digital Dictionaries of South Asia*. http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/platts/.

abang-abang	elder brothers (literal), euphemism for masculine gay man/men (Malay)
ABIM	Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement)
adhan/azan/azan	ritual call to prayer
adik-adik	younger siblings (literal), euphemism for younger gay men (Malay)
BERSIH	Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil (The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections)
bhangra	upbeat music associated with Punjabi culture, popular in Britain
bilal	person who gives the call to prayer, i.e. muezzin
BN	Barisan Nasional (National Front)
bomoh	Malay shaman/healer
buka puasa	breaking the fast (Malay), see also *iftari*
Bumiputera	sons of the soil (literal), an official term including ethnic Malays and Muslim and non-Muslim indigenous natives of Sabah and Sarawak (Malay)

DAP	Democratic Action Party
darai	derogatory patois for *pondan* (Malay)
dhikr/zikr/zikir	remembrance (literal), also devotional litanies associated with Sufism
dosa	sin (Malay)
dua/dua/doa	supplicatory prayers
fatwa	legal opinion
fiqh	Islamic jurisprudence
hadith/hadis/hadis	report of the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad
halal	lawful/permissible
haram	unlawful/forbidden
hijab	headscarf worn by some Muslim women, see also *tudung*
iftari	meal at the breaking of the fast (Urdu), see also *buka puasa*
imam	congregational prayer leader
iqamah	smaller call to prayer following the *adhan*
IRF	Islamic Renaissance Front
JAKIM	Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (Department of Islamic Development, Malaysia)
jinn/jinn/jin	type of spirit mentioned in the Quran
kakak-kakak	elder sisters (literal), euphemism for effeminate gay men, *pondan* or *mak nyah* (Malay)
kampung	village (Malay)
khalwat	illicit proximity (as defined in Syariah law)
khutbah/khutba/khutbah	sermon, e.g. during Friday prayers
lelaki lembut	soft man (literal), euphemism for gay (Malay)
LGBTQI	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex
liwat	sexual relations between males (in Syariah law)
madrasa/madrasa/madrasah	mosque school
mak nyah	non-derogatory term for male-to-female transgender (Malay)

mak yong	traditional dance from northern Peninsula Malaysia, particularly associated with the State of Kelantan
MCB	Muslim Council of Britain
musahaqah	sexual relations between females (under Syariah law)
namaz	obligatory prayers (Urdu)
NEP	New Economic Policy
niqab	face veil worn by some Muslim women in addition to *hijab*
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Party)
pengkid	masculine women who desire feminine women (Malay)
PKR	Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party)
pondan	derogatory term for male-to-female transgender (Malay)
ponen	variation of *pondan* in northern Malay patois
PR	Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance)
Ramadan/Ramazan/Ramadan	ninth month of the Islamic calendar when fasting is required
rishta	relationship (literal), or meetings for arranged marriages (Urdu)
salat	prayer, sometimes rendered *salah* (Arabic)
salaam/salam/salam	peace (literal), an Islamic salutation
SCOA	Syariah Criminal Offences Act
SCOE	Syariah Criminal Offences Enactment
shahadah	declaration of Islamic faith
shariah/shariah/syariah	divine law, to be distinguished from *fiqh*
SIS	Sisters in Islam
sunnah	established custom based on Muhammad's exemplary conduct
Shafii/Shafii/Syafii	school of law in Sunni Islam
tudung	headscarf (Malay), see *hijab*

ulama	scholar/Islamic religious scholar
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
ustaz	male Islamic religious instructor (Malay)
ustazah	female Islamic religious instructor (Malay)
wudu/wuzu/wuduk	ritual washing or ablutions, pre-requisite for prayers
zina	unlawful sexual intercourse (adultery, fornication)

Appendix 2a: Details of Malaysian Participants

Name[187]	Age[188]	Sex[189]	Ethnicity	Identifies as Muslim?	Identifies as gay?	Interview date
Dax	Early 30s	M	Malay	No (Privately)	Yes	5 Nov 2012
Ebry	Mid 30s	M	Malay	Yes	Yes	24 Oct 2012
Fauziah	Mid 30s	F	Malay	Yes	Yes	19 Nov 2012
Isma	Early 30s	F	Malay	Yes	Yes	13 Nov 2012
Razak	Late 20s	M	Malay	Yes	Yes	17 Nov 2012
Rina	Early 30s	F	Malay	Yes	Yes	28 Nov 2012
Rohana	Late 20s	F	Malay	Yes	No ('Trans man')	12 Nov 2012
Shahrul	Mid 50s	M	Malay	Yes	Yes	6 Dec 2012
Zainal	Early 30s	M	Malay	Yes ('Culturally')	Yes	14 Nov 2012
Amin	Mid 20s	M	Malay	Yes	No ('Straight')	28 July 2013
Ayie	Early 30s	F	Malay	Yes	Yes	10 Sept 2013
Ezan	Early 30s	F	Malay	Yes	Yes	9 & 13 Sept 2013
Elly	Early 30s	F	Malay	Yes	No ('Straight')	9 & 13 Sept 2013
Nonny	Late 30s	F	Malay	Yes	No ('Fluid')	5 Sept 2013
Sulaiman	Earl 30s	M	Malay	Yes	Yes	27 Aug 2013
Wahid	Mid 30s	M	Malay	No (Privately)	Yes	25 Aug 2013
Zulkifli	Late 30s	M	Malay	Yes	Yes	26 July 2013

Mean age: 33.5 years old   **Median age: 32 years old**
Mean age of entire sample: 31.5 years old   **Median age of entire sample: 31 years old**

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[187] All are pseudonyms.

[188] It is necessary to be vague to protect anonymity.

[189] I refer here to biological sex, reflecting my initial aim for a balance of male and female perspectives. I eventually learnt that not everyone had corresponding, normative gender identities – some had more fluid self-understandings, while others privately identified as transgender (discussed in Chapter 1.2.1).

Appendix 2b: Details of British participants

Name	Age	Sex	Ethnicity/National heritage	Identifies as Muslim?	Identifies as gay?	Interview date
Ammar	Early 30s	M	Pakistani	Yes	Yes	25 May 2013
Archie	Early 30s	F	Mixed South Asian	Yes	Yes	4 June 2013
Bilan	Early 30s	F	Somali	Yes	Yes	17 Apr 2013
Ebrahim	Early 20s	M	Indian	Yes	Yes	20 Apr 2013
Haniya	Early 30s	F	Pakistani	Yes	Yes	26 May 2013
Hirsi	Late 20s	M	Somali	Yes ('Culturally')	Yes	22 May 2013
Muna	Mid 20s	F	Pakistani	Yes	Yes	3 June 2013
Nadia	Early 30s	F	English	Yes (Convert)	No (dislikes labels)	18 May 2013
Osman	Late 30s	M	Bengali	Yes	Yes	19 May 2013
Rasheed	Early 20s	M	Indian	Yes	Yes	24 May 2013
Salleh	Late 20s	M	Arab	Yes	Yes	6 June 2013
Waqqas	Mid 20s	M	Pakistani	Yes	Yes	18 May 2013

Mean age: 28.7 years old   **Median age:** 29 years old
Mean age of entire sample: 31.5 years old years old   **Median age of entire sample: 31**

Appendix 3: Interview Guide

Notes: **1. This was a guide to cover the same ground with Malaysian and British gay Muslims to enable a systematic comparison of their responses.**
2. The questions were not fixed, but were conversation prompters allowing me to cover the different aspects of the interviewees' experiences I was interested in.

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Background – date/place of birth, experiences with education, religious upbringing, friendships, work, current relationship/marital status etc.

> Parents' influences – on religious beliefs/practices?
> Other family members' influences?
> Influences at school/work?
> Friends' influences?

Views: What is your understanding of …

> The Islamic position on homosexuality?
> The Islamic position on gender relations?
> Terms: 'gay', 'lesbian', 'bisexual', etc.
> What would you call yourself? ('Muslim'? 'Gay'?) Why?

Who are your role models? Why? Have they influenced your current ideas and beliefs?

Are there certain books, films, events, art works, etc., that have influenced your current ideas and beliefs?

2. EVERYDAY PRACTICES

What do you think about bodies or governments that monitor Muslim practices, e.g., whether a person prays five times a day, goes to mosque on Fridays, fasts in Ramadan, consumes alcohol, etc.?

Do you consider yourself Muslim?

How would you rate your observance of Islamic rituals and practices?

> Food/drink
> Dress
> Gender relations
> Prayer
> Fasting

Is there anything you practise now that you never practised previously? Is there anything you have stopped practising? Are there things you are not practising but would like to in the future?

What does being Muslim mean to you now? Has this changed over the years?

What do you 'get' out of being Muslim? What do you not 'get' from being Muslim?

What do you 'get' out of being gay (or whatever term the person identifies with)? What do you not 'get' from being gay (or whatever term the person identifies with)?

To what extent do you 'hide' aspects about your life from other people? Is there anyone in your life who knows 'everything' about you? Who are these people? Why/how do they know about you?

(If appropriate, find out about sexual and romantic relationships, etc.)

3.   SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

Who are your best friends? How long have you known them for? Do they 'know' about you? Where do you hang out? What do you do in your free time? What do you talk about?

Is there a particular community you identify with? Why?

What are your plans for the future? (Work/personal development/relationships, etc.)

Do you think you 'fit in' society? What do you do to make it easier to 'fit in'? What is the biggest challenge to 'fitting in'?

What do you think of the 'gay rights' movement?

What do you think of the anti-gay statements by some Muslims?

Are there differences between being a gay/queer Muslim and a gay/queer non-Muslim? What are the differences? What are the similarities?

Feelings about:
>   *Hijab*/*tudung*
>   Human rights
>   Democracy in Muslim countries
>   Democracy in Europe, North America, etc.
>   The gay 'scene' – nightclubs, sex, entertainment, internet chatrooms, etc.