

The Making of a Gay Muslim: Religion, Sexuality and Identity in Malaysia and Britain

Shanon Shah

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Identity is a variant thing. In one sense it is simple. It is the way in which humans elect to name themselves. At times the names chosen appear to be bestowed to a person by virtue of birth without much choice (nationality, religion, or race) and at other times these names are certainly deliberately adopted (political or ideological commitments). In another sense it is more complex. Identities always have a history and that history is dynamic. People are accepted or excluded or killed or incarcerated on the basis of one or more identities. In some instances, a person may also work towards transforming or altering a particular identity (changing one's nationality, converting to another religion, or altering one's expressed gender to align with one's internal gender identity). Some people due to social, economic and/or political circumstances or personal choice or easy access to geographical mobility (or a combination of these factors) choose a nationality, religious or gender identity. But the general tendency is that people overall perceive certain identities to be static or derivative of an origin that a person had no hand in choosing or constructing while other identities are badges of individual or group demarcations that people willingly adopt as an accurate description of themselves and their worldview.

Shanon Shah's *The Making of a Gay Muslim* is above all a study in the nuances of identity at the intersection of religion, sexuality, race/ethnicity and nationality. The monograph carefully navigates the discussion on sexual orientation and Muslim identity through both an analysis of scholarly material written on the subject as well as the experiences of a group of discrete British and Malaysian Muslims who also identify as queer in a broad sense. Shannon's theoretical analysis and ethnographic research rather urgently and importantly muddies the lazy stereotypes of LGBTIQ hating Muslims and deviant LGBTIQ Muslims, which is often based on a notion of a singular monolithic and archaic Islamic tradition. Shah's work, in this regard at least, follows in the line of Scott Kugle's *Living Out Islam*, both of which give expression to the multifaceted lives of queer Muslims that are brought to the fore as a lens through which to view both sexual diversity and Islam.¹

Chapter 1 which constitutes an introduction briefly sets out the contours of the book. It sets up some of the questions relating to the contexts of the study participants and that of the author as well as the similarities and differences between the two geographical locations that the study takes place in, namely Britain and Malaysia. Chapter 2 provides a self-reflexive narrative of the motivations of the writer behind the study

and information relating to the details of the study in respect to how Shah sought out the participants for this project and once they were identified how Shah went about assessing their views and behaviours and his challenges in this regard. Shah's ability to demonstrate an awareness of his own positionality during the research project is worthy and important to the larger background of discussing Muslim subjectivities. Shah is explicit about his sexual identity as "gay" and his religious identity as "Muslim." While he provides a narrative of his background as a person of Malaysian origin who grew up and worked in Malaysia and studied in Australia and now lives in Britain with his Christian partner, he does not give much away in terms of how his identity as a gay Muslim was crafted. What is evident is that Shah did not experience pernicious persecution on the basis of his sexual orientation nor an urgency to flee his social context in Malaysia to be accepted. That Shah could open up in more or less a relaxed way with certain parts of his social circle and gain the trust and protection of his family and close heterosexual acquaintances may have something to do with Shah's socio-economic context and the religious orientation of his family, but this is not explored fully. Shah readily admits to his insider status in respect of this project – something which seems to have been extremely helpful in securing him interviews and time with the 29 people who form the core ethnographic sample of the study. Furthermore, some of these people were friends of or familiar to the author or part of a network that the author was already integrated into. That Shah readily had the accoutrements of familiarity – positive self-identification as gay and a Muslim and Malaysian – probably benefited Shah in at least some of his interactions. That dimension is central in that one receives the impression that the research process was as meaningful to the participants as it was to the author, as through the act of engaged conversation both parties were delving deeper and exploring facets of their religious and sexual identity which enriched the data. Shah's narration of the interviews and the description of the locations and the unspoken physical expressions of people provide a rich and textured tapestry of queer lives. However, while Shah is cognisant of the other factors of his participants – for example, the mostly middle class location of the people he interacted with in Kuala Lumpur and the mostly second generation working class people of South Asian heritage from a LGBTQ organisation in Britain – he does not take this line of enquiry sufficiently far in enough in assessing whether these specific locations and experiences of class affect in concrete ways how people construct their religious identity in tandem with their sexual proclivities. Nonetheless, this chapter presents an evocative picture of queer Muslim lives that humanise the subject of queer Muslims.

Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 are foundational chapters that set the scene for the description and findings of the ethnographic project. Chapter 3 offers an excellent overview of the various discussions relating to Muslims, Islam and sexual diversity and the nuances in the debate in a Muslim majority country and Western liberal democracy where Muslims constitute a minority. The chapter integrates the material in a clear and systematic manner that is accessible and essential to understanding the larger issue of sexual diversity and Islam and can be utilised as an effective teaching chapter on the subject. The author summarises and critically examines the material produced by Islamic studies scholars on whether an Islamic piety can be accommodating of people who have same-sex sexual relationships. In this regard, Scott Kugle's work plays a central role in developing an Islamic methodology for legitimising same-sex relationships based on essential notions of sexual orientation. Furthermore, the author complicates the question of a gay-friendly Islam by acknowledging the robust history of homoeroticism and same-sex

sexuality in pre-modern Muslim societies, presenting critiques of the liberal gay rights movement which was founded in the West and discussing the effects of a universalising homosexual identity culture as well as critiquing and offering comments on some of the assumptions in pro-gay Muslim scholarship such as that of Kugle's. Shah also introduces into the discussion the complexity of an anti-Muslim bias that results in queer Muslims having to continuously explain how both their Muslim and sexual identities can be reconciled. This chapter demonstrates the varied terrain involved in discussing homosexuality and Islam and that each discussion on the subject is not only influenced by a theoretical discussion on Islamic law and sexuality but also larger debates about race, ethnicity, the role of the state in condoning or curtailing certain types of sexual practices, and how identities are created, adopted and travel from their place of origin and adopted or rejected by others in turn.

Chapter 4 provides an examination of the two geographical locations wherein the study was conducted, namely Britain and Malaysia. The shared history between the two countries, the relationship between religion and the state in each, the Malaysian and British models of approaching and regulating diversity, and the position of Islam and minorities – racial/ethnic, religious and sexual – in both polities are surveyed. The result is a sufficiently detailed account that furnishes the reader with pertinent information to augment the ethnographic research that will be presented. The value of this chapter is in demonstrating that while queer Muslims in both countries have to work with entrenched notions of the irreconcilability between Islam and homosexuality, the circumstances surrounding this discussion is not the same. In Malaysia, the state is the guardian of Islam and asserts an Islamic Malay identity that is difficult to substantially depart from without some negative consequences. Tolerance for homosexuality, even without the more daring claim of accommodating homosexuality within the ambit Islam, clearly does not fit into the state and popular notions of Islam and what constitutes normal and morally licit sexual relations. In Britain, there has been over decades a gradual overturning of discriminatory laws towards LGBTQ people and the civic space is the opposite of Malaysia in respect of its accommodation of homosexuality. However, the British state, especially after 9/11, is invested in cultivating a certain type of compliant Muslim where Islam and Muslims signify an Other in the context of an overall socioeconomically and somewhat marginalised religious community. Within this context, queer Muslims have the burden of both defending their sexual identity in their religious community and shielding their religious identity within a larger public space.

This positioning of Muslims in Malaysia and Britain shows how homosexuality is clearly characterised as forbidden and excluded from the realm of that which can ever be permissible or wholesome. On this point, Chapter 7 serves as a convenient conduit to further elaborate on the ethical concerns or politics implicated in respect of the issue of homosexuality and deviance or in Islamic parlance the *halal* (permissible) from the *haram* (prohibited). In Malaysia it is part of a larger state regulatory policing of forbidding for Muslims that which is deemed prohibited. In Britain, Muslims also have to deal with this discourse of homosexuality as deviance, albeit within the Muslim community which does not have the coercive power of the state. Shah shows how queer Muslims grapple with the permissible and prohibited in relation to their sexual identity and sexual conduct almost always – whether in respect of their own internal struggle or in response to

public characterisation of their sexuality as deviant and religiously unacceptable – compounded with national discourses on Islam and sexuality.

Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 form the core of the book as it is in these sections that the full breadth of Shah's study participants are displayed. Shah's ability to provide excellent thick descriptions, as he had done in Chapter 2, is present in these two chapters. Through the study participants' responses and Shah's careful descriptions of behaviour one observes the construction of both a visceral and at times very thoughtful process of identity-making. If the reader were to start this book with the question of whether the identities of Muslim and gay are compatible, the content of these chapters would at the least persuade the reader that those dual identities are not exclusive of each other even if they may sit somewhat incommensurately at times. Shah demonstrates that in the process of the construction of both Muslimness and queerness, his study participants are also intimately involved in the construction and interpretation of what is Islam and what it means for them individually and collectively. Islam as identity, community and religious tradition, influences the study participants but is also in turn influenced through the mediation of their sexuality and positionality in relation to the other contextual identities that they espouse. Some of the participants construct a uniquely Islamic queer sexual identity through embracing Islamic spirituality and rituals as well as forms of embodied performance through reconstructing these very same rituals through an egalitarian framework that privileges gender, sexual, religious and/or ethnic diversity and non-hierarchical forums that are aware of the fluidity and politicisation of identity. The social dimension of the participants' engagement with each other serve as a means through which queer Muslims preserve a connection to their religious identity by forming communities where the non-heterosexual and non-orthodox Muslim features of its members are celebrated positively and as markers of belonging. Shah's research, at least in the Malaysian context, also demonstrates that some queer Muslims do not uncritically accept labels such as 'gay' and 'lesbian' and rather prefer to use indigenous signifiers of sexual or gender identity that furnish a more nuanced understanding of sexual attraction, desire and conduct in the local setting. Shah's research suggests that the queer Muslim communities and queer Muslim individuals that he interviewed are not monolithic, thoughtful about their relationship with religion, careful about how they craft their sexual identity, and part of a larger Muslim dynamic that is contesting the meaning of what it means to be Muslim in the contemporary world.

Chapter 8 functions as a conclusion in which Shah continues and rounds off some of the discussion threads that appear in earlier chapters. An interesting point which Shah raises in the conclusion is his experience of building bridges and opening up lines of communication through his activism work with sectors of the Muslim community in Britain that one would ordinarily think would not be natural allies towards queer Muslims. It would seem that precisely due to the queer Muslim contestation of what constitutes the permissible in Islam particularly in relation to sexuality that such a conversation can take place. By continuously challenging the normative understanding of homosexuality or sexual diversity and Islam as antithetical to each other, a more pronounced space for individual moral agency within the realm of Islamic ethics is

possible.

Shah's *The Making of a Gay Muslim* is a valuable contribution to this nascent but expanding area of study. It combines the academic study of a subject with the humanity of the people that the subject matter primarily relates to. Its limitation is that the 29 participants cannot be representative of the entire spectrum of queer Muslim voices and lived realities globally (admittedly, the author does not claim to do this). It is limited to the context of Britain and Malaysia but even here, while certainly informative and insightful, I am inclined to be cautious in assuming that the findings, based on the sample size and location of the participants, are sufficiently comprehensive to explain the full extent of the queer Muslim experience in these countries. Nonetheless, these limitations do not detract from the good quality ethnographic work and insightful analysis. For anyone interested in contemporary Islam, queer Muslims, and sexual diversity, Shah's work is highly recommended.

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Notes

1. Kugle, Scott Siraj al-Haq. *Living Out Islam: Voices of Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims*. New York: NYU Press (2013).