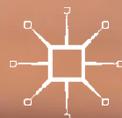

*Palgrave Studies in Lived Religion
and Societal Challenges*

THE MAKING OF A GAY MUSLIM

RELIGION, SEXUALITY
AND IDENTITY IN
MALAYSIA AND BRITAIN

Shanon Shah



Palgrave Studies in Lived Religion and Societal Challenges

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‘This is a rich ethnography of a taboo subject, theoretically sophisticated, and full of insightful observations and analysis of what it means to be a gay Muslim in two different parts of the world. In *The Making of a Gay Muslim*, Shah takes the reader into a relatively unknown “life-world”, and tells how two seemingly irreconcilable identities can come together as part of the process of shaping religious change.’

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'The Making of a Gay Muslim is a rare glimpse into the life of gay and lesbian Muslims in Britain and Malaysia. With exemplary ethnographic fieldwork, author Shanon Shah interviews gay Muslims to reveal their hopes, dreams, aspirations and everyday struggles. This book presents their stories with warmth, compassion and humour. It is a must-read for those interested in contemporary Islam, and offers touching insights into sociology and sexuality, identity and politics, and media and human rights.'

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'The Making of a Gay Muslim provides an engaging, sophisticated, and exceedingly timely account of the entanglement of religion, sexuality, and identity in Malaysia and Britain. Clearly written, well argued, and admirably reflexive, the book offers incisive comparative perspectives on the formation of sexual and gender identities among Muslims in both a Muslim-majority context and a Western nation where Muslims are at once a minority and a deeply suspect "Other". Along the way Shanon Shah examines the ethical and other dilemmas of studying Muslims' engagement with gender and sexual identities conventionally seen as beyond the pale. The brave and empathetic book will be welcomed by scholars in a number of different academic disciplines and also has great potential for use in the classroom.'

—Michael G. Peletz, *Emory University, USA*

Shanon Shah

The Making of a Gay Muslim

Religion, Sexuality and Identity in
Malaysia and Britain

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macmillan

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St John's Vicarage
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*For Giles William Goddard.
Thank you for everything and more.*

Notes on Arabic Terms, Transliterations, Qur'anic Quotations and Paraphrasing

As far as possible, translations of Arabic terms were guided by *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (2003), edited by John Esposito. However, where relevant, I have highlighted the ways in which several of my participants creatively reinterpreted, subverted or challenged conventional Islamic concepts and terminology. I have relied upon the conventions of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* for Arabic transliterations but without diacritics.

Malay transliterations are based on the fourth edition of the *Kamus Dewan* (2005), published by the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Institute of Language and Literature Malaysia). Urdu transliterations are based on 'A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English', (2008 [1884]), a University of Chicago digital resource that can be found at <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/platts/>. I use the original spellings with proper nouns and when quoting directly from secondary sources—for example, with Malaysia's Syariah Criminal Offences Act and the 'Syariah lobby' (not *shari'ah* lobby). Non-English terms that are used repeatedly throughout the work are italicised only on their first occurrence.

Several of my participants preferred translations of the Qur'an that they saw as alternatives to those that were Saudi backed. In this work, I take all Qur'anic quotations from M.A.S. Abdel Haleem's 2010 translation.

Translations from Malay are my own, and I indicate these throughout the book. Extended excerpts from my field notes are indented. All quotations here are very close paraphrases simply because it was not always possible to record speech verbatim—I bear responsibility for any inaccuracies.

Recorded interviews are presented verbatim, in quotation marks—extended quotes are indented. I do not use phonetics for dialect—for example, I render ‘wanna’ as ‘want to’. For readability, I have removed false starts and repetitions. For the sake of clarity, I use square brackets for word substitutions and additions, italics in square brackets for non-verbal communication and ellipses for editorial omissions. I include profanities in direct quotes but substitute part of the spelling with asterisks.

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passion for justice gave me the spirit and courage to celebrate mine. And I am forever grateful for my family—my ferociously intelligent siblings, my incredible niece and my parents, for their abundant love and faith.

This work gets its greatest strengths from these contributions—the shortcomings are mine alone.

Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	Looking for Gay Muslims	19
3	Studying Islam and Homosexuality	53
4	Comparing Malaysia and Britain	103
5	Coming to Terms with Being Gay and Muslim	143
6	Gay Expressions of Islam	187
7	The Wider Politics of Halal and Haram	243
8	Conclusion	299
	Glossary	311

Appendix A: Information on Interviewees	315
Appendix B: Interview Question Guide for Gay Muslims	319
References	323
Index	347

1

Introduction

It is a Thursday night in April 2013, and I am in the Friendly Society, a gay nightclub in London. Waqqas and Ebrahim have ordered alcoholic cocktails, but Salleh is drinking something soft.¹ I know that some of the gay Muslims I have come across strictly observe *halal* (Islamically permissible) dietary requirements, while others are more relaxed. However, I also recall seeing Salleh drinking alcohol before. I must look a bit perplexed, because he explains, unprompted, that an angel recently appeared to him in a dream and ordered him to give up cigarettes, drugs and alcohol. ‘So you’re not doing any of those things now?’ I ask, perhaps more incredulously than I should. He says, ‘Well I haven’t given up sex—I’m still gay!’ I raise one eyebrow and say, ‘You sure it was an angel?’ He laughs and insists it was.

Salleh, a British Arab, Waqqas, a British Pakistani, and Ebrahim, a British Indian, are gay Muslim men in their early to late 20s. I have come to know them through Imaan (‘faith’ in Arabic), a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) Muslim organisation. Waqqas and Salleh have known each other for years, and we all met Ebrahim for the first time when he attended an Imaan conference in 2012.

Their offbeat and playful exchanges were not at all rare during my research into the experiences of gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain. Yet, given the widespread public perceptions, religious teachings and laws (in many Muslim-majority countries) upholding the notion that Islam condemns homosexuality, many people might ask: How could—and why would—anyone identify as gay *and* Muslim? This question is indeed asked increasingly—in 2016, there was especially intense discussion in the wake of the massacre at Pulse, an LGBT nightclub in Orlando, Florida. This violent incident—the deadliest mass shooting by a single shooter in US history—was carried out by Omar Mateen, a 29-year-old Muslim American who had pledged support for the Islamic State, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The incident's aftermath saw an outpouring of grief for the victims, soul-searching amongst many Muslim public figures and vehemently anti-Muslim rhetoric from several right-wing ideologues (5Pillars 2016; Al Arabiya 2016; BBC 2016; H. Brown 2016; Burke 2016; D. Murray 2016; Yiannopoulos 2016).

But the general thrust of discussions about Islam and homosexuality has not altered significantly, whether in Muslim or non-Muslim contexts. Gay Muslims are still often stereotyped either as victims of a barbaric religion or as deviants who sully the sanctity of Islam. These stereotypes share the underlying assumption that Islam is monolithic and inherently condemns gender pluralism and sexual diversity. And in debates that recycle these stereotypes, rarely do we hear the voices of gay Muslims themselves. Nor are we offered meaningful insights into how they negotiate their lived realities of Islam and sexuality.

In this book, I compare the experiences of gay Muslims in two different national environments—Malaysia, where Islam is the majority and official religion, and Britain, where Muslims form a minority of the population. I offer a framework for understanding how the gay Muslims I met navigate Islam and sexuality in their everyday lives—often in circumstances where both are highly politicised but in different ways. I pay special attention to their 'lived religion', which is 'ever-changing, multi-faceted, often messy—even contradictory' (McGuire 2008, p. 4). My focus on 'lived' or 'everyday religion' does not ignore or dismiss the viewpoints of religious institutions and authorities, but it does mean I 'privilege the experience of [religious] nonexperts' (Ammerman 2007, p. 5)—in this case, gay Muslims.

I make their experiences visible but I do not romanticise them. Rather, I contextualise and highlight how they fluctuate over time. For example, a couple of months later, on a Saturday night in June, I met Salleh, Waqqas and Ebrahim again in the Friendly Society. We were invited by a lesbian Muslim acquaintance who was celebrating her birthday there. Salleh, a social worker with a local council, confided in me about his awful day—he had to put six children into care. He said they were part of a Muslim family and had been subjected to exorcism rituals that involved getting physically abused. He said, ‘As a Muslim who loves Islam, Shanon, I feel like I want to turn to Buddhism or something now.’ That was also why, he explained, he had started drinking booze again—lots of it. Before long, Salleh, Ebrahim and Waqqas were drunk, and so were our host and her other friends. After the Friendly Society closed, we made our way to Heaven, another well-known gay nightclub, and Salleh and Ebrahim sang and danced in the streets along the way. At some point, Salleh even wandered into a corner shop, gyrating his hips and warbling for the bemused workers behind the till.

Stories like these are windows into the lives of the gay Muslims I met, which might offer unexpected and unique insights for many readers. But these stories also help to build a larger analysis of how religion and sexuality intersect and inform the creation of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ in society. Whom do we decide to accept or reject on the basis of religion and sexuality? And how do gay Muslims experience and adapt Islam to forge a sense of meaning and belonging in the world?

Of course, such concerns are not confined to Islam or Muslims. They 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. Several Anglican, Roman Catholic, Evangelical Christian and Orthodox Jewish leaders and movements staunchly continue to oppose liberalising tendencies on same-sex marriage in the West, especially within their own congregations (e.g., see Kampeas 2015; Luxmoore 2013; Ring 2016; Williams 2015; Zmirak 2015). 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.

Having recognised that Islam does not hold a monopoly on this phenomenon, the question remains—what about the experiences of the gay Muslims who are marginalised by these religious interpretations? How do they conceive of their circumstances? Do they accept their 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 specific conditions. After all, gay Muslims, like many other Muslims, are shaped by and respond to expressions of ‘Islam’ that are products of complex social dynamics. These expressions of Islam are often individual and collective, and inform varying understandings of gender and sexuality. But I am not merely interested in how religion can be used to justify marginalisation—how might marginalised groups use religion to adapt to or perhaps challenge their circumstances?

A powerful way of addressing some of these questions is by appreciating people’s everyday lives through first-hand experience. This book is therefore based on ethnographic research—I observed and participated in many of the activities that my participants engaged in. I also conducted in-depth interviews with 29 people who identified as gay and Muslim—men and women—in both countries and analysed relevant mass media coverage between October 2012 and September 2013. Before and during my research, I met, interacted with and often befriended several gay Muslims who were willing to participate or help. Importantly, I drew upon my own experiences and insights as a gay Muslim, often reflecting upon and grappling with 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, which indicates the variety of individual expressions of identity in Malaysia and Britain. In both 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 resonated with me sometimes and challenged me at other times—all have shaped this book profoundly.

As someone writing about lived experiences of Islam, I do not argue for or against particular interpretations of the religion as ‘true’ or ‘authoritative’. The question of religious authenticity is beyond the scope of this book. However, I do argue that there are conditions now which increasingly enable individuals to use religion and sexuality as ‘cultural resources’ (Beckford 2000, p. 178, 2001, p. 232) to build personal identity and actively shape religious change. This does not occur in a social or cultural vacuum—agencies and institutions with the power to regulate religious and sexual expressions also influence our trajectories of identity-making and religious change. Shifting social conditions therefore create new opportunities and constraints for us to construct our self-identities. Thus, while this book does not advocate a particular interpretation of Islam, I do devote significant attention (in Chap. 3) to the work of Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, the American academic focusing on South Asian and Islamic Studies who is also openly gay and Muslim.

In broad terms, my analytical approach can be referred to as social constructionist. Social constructionism is explained and understood in different ways within the social sciences—my approach mostly draws upon the framework suggested by the sociologist of religion James Beckford. For Beckford (2008, p. 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, p. 4). I maintain that this analytical strategy can be extended to the study of sexuality as well. With this approach, religion and sexuality are not regarded 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 rationale, 'gay', 'Muslim' or 'gay Muslim' are not uncomplicated or self-evident 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., see Boellstorff 2005, pp. 8, 154–155; El-Rouayheb 2009, pp. 1, 5; Gaudio 2009, p. 10; Habib 2010, pp. xx–xxii; Ioannides 2014, pp. 124–128; Kugle 2014, pp. 14–19; Massad 2007, pp. 41–42; S. O. Murray 1997, p. 41; Najmabadi 2008, p. 275, 2011, p. 551). This book does not settle these disputes but shows how some individuals come to accept and use the term 'gay Muslim' to describe themselves, while others might not.

On the whole, I use the term 'gay Muslim' as a 'reportive definition' (Barker 2004, p. 89). In other words, this is how the majority of the people whose stories are told in the following pages describe themselves. But many did not exclusively refer to themselves as 'gay', often accompanying it with terms such as 'bisexual', 'lesbian', 'transgender' or 'queer'. In Malaysia, they even combined it with local terms and euphemisms, which I explore further in Chap. 5. A minority there were in same-sex relationships but would not identify as gay, lesbian or even bisexual. But even they implicitly acknowledged the centrality of the term 'gay' in shaping their understandings and expressions of sexuality. Ultimately, however, most of the men and women I encountered in both countries accepted 'gay' as an umbrella term to describe themselves, while the minority who rejected it had their own rationale, which this book also addresses.

Along similar lines, I use 'Muslim' as a reportive definition—regardless of their personal degrees of commitment, this is how most of the people in this book describe their religious identity. (Two in Malaysia no longer identified as Muslim but did not divulge this publicly for fear of potential punishment or persecution.) Many of them had also encountered heterosexual Muslims with varying reactions to their sexual and religious

identities—including rejecting them as ‘deviants’, tolerating them as less-than-ideal co-religionists and embracing them as moral and religious equals. My description of my participants as ‘Muslim’ should hence be read as shorthand for the sheer diversity of experiences that can be found within Islam.

There is therefore no ‘precise cut-off point’ (Hospers 1990, p. 119) between the applicability and non-applicability of the terms ‘gay’ and ‘Muslim’ for my participants. It actually proved exceptionally difficult for me to produce a ‘stipulative definition’ (Barker 2004, p. 90) of ‘gay Muslim’, or 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 people of the same anatomical sex. From here, I drew upon the range of their self-explanations and my own observations to develop a narrative of how they construct, negotiate or challenge 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’ experiences particularly 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 vast spectrum of issues. Also, the Malaysian Federal Constitution (Malaysia 2010, p. 153) defines ethnic Malays as Muslim and the state recognises only Sunni Islam, mostly based on the Shafi‘i 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, for instance, through the various phases of parliamentary reform in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Harling 2001, pp. 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, pp. 82–83; Gomez and Jomo 1999, p. 17). The expansion of Muslim or Syariah legislation has gone hand in hand with state-led modernisation. Also, it has often been motivated by an ‘anti-colonial factor’ (tan 2012b, p. 66). Furthermore, although post-independence Malaysia is formally a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy, Islamic laws have often been used by successive governments to justify authoritarian rule (tan 2012a, pp. 373–375, 2012b, pp. 44–45). 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 (C. Brown 2006, p. 36; Davie 1994, p. 33; Guest et al. 2012, p. 63; Nye and Weller 2012, p. 49).

With these distinct trajectories of modernisation, the multi-ethnic middle class in Malaysia largely emerged after independence (Abdul Rahman 2001, p. 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, pp. 113–114). And so, for many British Muslims, their 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 sexuality even though it historically outlawed homosexuality and other sexual offences (Weeks 2012, p. 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; Valley 2014). On the other hand, alongside other former British colonies, independent Malaysia inherited colonial policies on sexual immorality through its Penal Code and Muslim legislation, which post-independence state institutions have expanded and strengthened (Human Rights Watch 2013, p. 97; tan 2012a, pp. 350–351). Thus, 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, p. 371).

Gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain thus come to understand and express their identities in different circumstances, influenced by factors such as religious majority or minority status, class, ethnicity, and the state's position on sexuality. However, these differences should not elide some key similarities.

For one thing, the British and Malaysian populations are very ethnically and religiously diverse. In recent decades, this fact of diversity has formed the backdrop for particular minority demands for equal treatment. For example, Muslim activists in Britain began campaigning in the 1990s for greater state recognition as a single religious minority (Hussain and Sherif 2014, pp. 419–420), while there has been increased campaigning and activism in the interests of marginalised Malaysian Indians and indigenous peoples (Idrus 2010, p. 89; J. C. H. Lee et al. 2010, p. 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 these discussions.

At the same time, both countries are affected by constantly evolving, religiously inspired movements, including within Islam, which promote or defend conservative moral values. These movements are often challenged by relatively more liberal individuals and groups from religious and non-religious backgrounds, especially regarding gender and sexuality. Instead of casting these actors as simply 'liberal' or 'conservative', it might be more useful to ask how Islam is being contested in both countries among groups with particular histories and significant internal diversity. Anti-gay expressions of Islam in both countries have been confronted by prominent Muslim activists (Ahmad Fuad 2011; Bunglawala 2007, 2009; Sisters in Islam 2011), but the specific dimensions and implications of these disputes need further investigation.

In both countries, discussions on Islam and sexuality are also influenced by some politicians, media commentators and religious leaders who argue that Islamic and Western values are mutually incompatible.

The more ideologically driven commentators often try to polarise public opinion about the relationship between ‘Islam’ and the ‘West’, but this has different consequences depending on the context. 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—for example, Muslims who drink alcohol in public, engage in extra-marital or non-marital heterosexual sex (*zina*), *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, pp. 13–17). 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. They can be regarded as ‘moral entrepreneurs’ (Becker 1991, p. 147) who police and punish what they define as 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 through the Equality Act of 2010 (Hunt 2012, p. 693; Nye and Weller 2012, p. 43). Within this context, however, counterterrorism policies and rhetoric have arguably still contributed to widely held notions that Muslims are a latent and enduring security threat to the nation (Croft 2012, p. 16). While the gay Muslims I encountered in Britain largely appreciated the civil and political rights they enjoyed, they were also severely critical of this ‘securitization’ of Islam.

Thus, while dominant interpretations of Islam in Malaysia and Britain appear to be morally conservative and anti-homosexual, gay Muslims have to negotiate this reality in national environments where Islam and sexuality are regulated and expressed differently. Many of the gay Muslims who appear in this book are increasingly aware of alternative Islamic positions on gender and sexuality and other struggles for equality around the world. I explore how they navigate religion and sexuality in their everyday lives amid this confusing terrain of competing, controversial and sometimes condemnatory perspectives about Islam and homosexuality.

Being confused was not always a bad thing, however, and was sometimes unexpectedly funny. The night that Salleh told me he had been

visited by an angel advising him not to imbibe, it was clear that he, Waqqas and Ebrahim were not about to retire early. When the Friendly Society closed, we made our way to Heaven. We got there and realised it was Porn Idol—a themed night where male members of the public could volunteer to strip onstage, get feedback from a panel of ‘judges’ and win a prize. The security guard asked Waqqas, ‘Do you want to be a contestant?’ Waqqas pointed to me and replied, ‘No, but that one does.’ When I protested—a bit too nervously—he howled with laughter.

The nightclub was packed with young men and women. I could not tell who was queer or straight. We danced for an hour or so until the show started. Then we nudged our way to the front to get a better view. Six men paraded onstage and slowly removed their clothes. It was quite orderly, though—they never exposed themselves fully. If any clothing was flung into the audience from the stage, the security guards would dutifully retrieve and return it to the performer. After the six preselected participants were finished, the judges opened the contest to the rest of the audience. A few men went onstage, including a muscular, Mediterranean-looking hunk. The judges then selected three finalists based on audience applause. Then it was narrowed down to two finalists and eventually the Mediterranean-looking man was announced the winner.

Salleh, who disappeared for a few moments before, reappeared excitedly and shouted to Waqqas, Ebrahim and me, ‘He’s Arab—the winner’s Arab! I heard him and his friends talking just before he went up!’ As the winner made his way back into the audience, Salleh, the suddenly angelic teetotaller, glared at him in mock disgust. ‘I’m going to report him to his embassy,’ Salleh said. ‘Behaving scandalously here while they would do God-knows-what to him in his own country.’ Then he winked at me and giggled.

The Book

Why did I as a gay Muslim choose to study other gay Muslims for academic research? How did I even find any participants in Malaysia and Britain? What did I do once I found them? Chapter 2 relates the answers to these questions. I introduce my research settings and explain how I

managed to find gay Muslims who were willing to speak with me in both countries. I also discuss some of the key challenges I faced when conducting this scholarly investigation in the two differing contexts.

Chapter 3 traces the ways in which the topics of ‘Islam’ and ‘homosexuality’ have become interrelated objects of study in academia. I begin by focusing on the work of the openly gay American convert Scott Siraj al-Haq Kugle, a scholar of South Asian and Islamic Studies at Emory University. I demonstrate that while Kugle explicitly tackles religious interpretation and promotes progressive understandings of Islam, his scholarship is also grounded in historical and contemporary studies of sexual diversity in various Muslim contexts. The chapter then goes on to explore this landscape of studies on sexuality—specifically homosexuality—among Muslim societies in Western and non-Western environments. Yet, I do not limit the story to that of ‘Islam and homosexuality’—there are other relevant perspectives that can shed light on how society creates its insiders and outsiders. The chapter then concentrates on relevant sociological perspectives on deviance, ethnicity, nationalism and globalisation. For added insight, I end the chapter with brief examples of the relationship between religion and homosexuality in relevant non-Muslim contexts.

Chapter 4 provides a historical background of the state’s management of Islam and sexuality in Malaysia and Britain. It begins with an account of the shared legal and cultural legacies left by the British Empire that continue to shape laws and public opinions about Islam and sexuality in both countries. From here, I highlight the aspects that are especially relevant to the experiences of the gay Muslims I include in this book.

How did the people I encountered come to terms with being gay and Muslim? How did they understand and interpret Islam and gay identity for themselves? Although there was no single, definitive story, I did discern shared factors that enabled them to harmonise their religious and sexual identities, which I illuminate in Chap. 5. One recurring theme in their accounts was the assumed connection between Islam and their ethnic identity, which I discuss in depth in the latter part of the chapter. This chapter therefore complicates the idea that gay identity is entirely a Western construct or imposition, based on the experiences of my participants.

While Chap. 5 outlines the basic building blocks of gay Muslim identity in Malaysia and Britain, Chap. 6 takes the story further. Here, I look

more closely at the influences of Islamic socialisation on how the people in this book forged a specifically ‘gay Muslim’ identity. I propose that their understandings were significantly shaped by three big factors—the ways in which their families, schools, peers and state authorities approached Islam and homosexuality; their own immediate circumstances and networks; and the presence (or absence) of groups that promoted a discernible ‘gay Muslim’ identity. I also show how they creatively avoided, subverted or even challenged conventional Islamic authorities by reclaiming Islam as a ‘cultural resource’ to fashion their own eclectic expressions of identity.

Chapter 7 examines how the gay Muslims in this book were often caught between competing ideological agendas that reinforce the idea that Islam condemns homosexuality. I begin by comparing how these sentiments appear in the mass media in both countries. I investigate how they affected the everyday negotiations of the *halal* and *haram* (forbidden) among the people I studied. Regarding Malaysia, I explore the ways in which they fuelled the anti-gay ‘moral panics’, often triggered by pro-Syariah ‘moral entrepreneurs’. I compare this with Britain, where vehemently anti-Muslim or anti-gay attitudes also exist but are mitigated by legislation that protects the rights of various minorities. The bulk of the chapter then probes how the people I met responded to these state regulations and wider sentiments. I also consider the influences of geopolitical and nationalist trends on expressions of Islam and sexual identity in Malaysia and Britain.

The Conclusion draws these different strands together and scrutinises their implications for our understanding of the roles of religion and sexuality in how society constructs ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ identities.

Notes

1. Throughout this book, with the exception of my partner, Giles, I use pseudonyms for all my participants and remove the personal details that might make them identifiable. For a full list, see Appendix A: Information on Interviewees.

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2

Looking for Gay Muslims

On 8 October 2012, I boarded a plane in London headed for Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It was my first of two research visits there to study the lives of gay Muslims, and I was trusting that enough of them would want to participate in my study.¹

Yet, the minute I touched down at Kuala Lumpur International Airport, I noticed details here and there that made me question some of my own long-held assumptions. At the baggage reclaim area, Malay-speaking female flight attendants from Malaysia Airlines sashayed stylishly—all with elegant hairdos, thick makeup, and high heels. The Malaysian Federal Constitution defines all ethnic Malays as Muslim,² but during this trip, I made myself look at my country of birth with new eyes. I thought, what could I really know about how these women understood and lived out Islam just by looking at them? And could I assume that they were all straight? Their appearance contrasted with the Malay women workers at the airline taxi counter with their demure yellow *tudung* (the Malay for ‘headscarf’). 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 feminine dress reliably matched private, individual beliefs and practices?

‘Will you even be able to find any gay Muslims there?’ I had been asked by several British non-Muslims—gay and straight, white and non-white—before my trip. This question was usually accompanied by others, such as: ‘Isn’t it a crime to be gay in Malaysia?’; ‘Isn’t it a Muslim country?’; ‘Wouldn’t all of them be in the closet?’; ‘Will you get in trouble?’

I often found it challenging to respond. Mostly because these were thoughts I might have once entertained, too, but which in time were complicated or clarified by my own experiences. I had already made many friends who were gay and Muslim long before I started my research. When I began my study, I caught up 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 to participate. It was even easier in Britain as I had already made a few new friends in Imaan, the LGBTQI Muslim organisation there. I simply needed to explain my research to the chair and a few trustees who then granted me access to several potential interviewees. Therefore, in both countries, I had no problems obtaining replies from potential participants offering to help in different ways.

So, in fact, I was initially confident that finding participants would be the easy part. But why did I take this for granted, whereas many of my non-Muslim British acquaintances wondered if it would even be possible? Perhaps it’s because, whoever we are, our world views are uniquely shaped by our different upbringings, experiences and closest social circles. And for my own emotional needs and as part of my wider activism, I had already spent much time and energy seeking out supportive LGBTQ Muslim communities, networks and friends long before starting my doctorate. All my friends and most of the people I worked with as an activist, musician, playwright and journalist in Malaysia knew I was gay and Muslim. I was selective about the extent to which I made these aspects visible, however, mainly because of the repressive legal and political environment. Still, being able to be relatively open about my religious beliefs and sexual identity in so many circumstances also shows the significant acceptance of sexual diversity among the Malaysians I knew. My selective openness enabled me to build and maintain important networks of trust among several other gay Muslims along the way. This is why recruiting participants appeared so straightforward—my status as an ‘insider’ and

previous experiences meant that I had forged relationships which made it easy to find people to talk to.

Developing these perspectives and relationships, however, was by no means ‘natural’ or inevitable for me as a Malaysian who was born into a Muslim family and raised Muslim. I grew up in Alor Setar, the capital of Kedah State,³ with quite a provincial, middle-class childhood and adolescence. I then 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 musician and a journalist—and allowed me to get to know my country more intimately. Conducting ethnographic research, however, made me see Malaysia with new eyes—hence my meticulous mental notes when touching down at the airport for that first research visit.

Ethnographic research also forced me to reflect upon how my self-perception as gay and Muslim has influenced my friendships, interests, worldview and choice of work. For one thing, despite repeatedly hearing about Islam’s supposedly blanket condemnation of homosexuality, I had personally forged happy and deep friendships with other gay Muslims. By being open about my religious and sexual identity in many situations, I also eventually managed to nurture closer and more affectionate relationships with some of my family members and other heterosexual Muslims and non-Muslims. And even before I began my research, I knew that several other gay Muslims had similarly positive experiences.

This is not meant to dismiss the negative and even traumatic experiences that many other gay Muslims have had with their families, communities, or state agencies in Malaysia, Britain or beyond. It also should not trivialise the intense depression, guilt, fear and anxiety I felt when I was coming to terms with my sexual identity—mostly in my late teens and early 20s but which sometimes resurface when I least expect. And although I grew to be quite open about my sexuality with friends, immediate family, and most of my colleagues, I never actively ‘came out’ in ways that made me a target of the Malaysian authorities. All the people who mattered to me knew that they also needed to protect me from potentially hostile state and non-state actors and I trusted them. My personal experiences illustrate 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 a 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, p. 20) argues in his study of Indonesia, there is no gay or lesbian ‘village’ for an ethnographer to visit and settle in. Instead, individuals express their sexual (and, in this case, religious) identities in fragments to the people they encounter for finite durations and in particular locations. Additionally, in environments where certain expressions of gender and sexuality are considered deviant or even criminal, people learn how to display conformity depending on whether the coast is clear.

Besides, nobody is ‘born’ Muslim or gay. We might be born into families or communities with a particular sense of inherited religious identity but we as individuals would need to be brought up to grasp, accept and internalise this. And 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 think of ‘human nature’ as static (Wade 2013, pp. 279, 287). We also interpret our biological states, including the sexual, within particular cultural frameworks.

We thus acquire particular sexual or religious concepts of identity through socialisation—including within families, schools, peer groups and communities, and through the mass media. This is how people arrive at specific understandings of the religious and sexual components of their identity—as ‘Muslim’ and ‘gay’, for example, in the case of the people I include in this book. Individually produced religious and sexual identities are therefore interconnected with collectively shaped 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 people are convinced that Islam is generally violent and anti-modern, while others assume that gay people are inherently promiscuous and hedonistic. Neither image adequately reflects or represents the lived realities of many gay people or Muslims, but they persist and are reproduced repeatedly in different societies. Ethnographic research on marginalised or stigmatised groups is thus an evidence-based

way to examine and understand the social production of stereotypes that could be hurtful or harmful or both.

Ethnographers, however, are also products of society—they might hold unexamined assumptions or prejudices about the very groups they want to study. For example, sociologist Mitchell Duneier (1994, pp. 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 authority. At the same time, an ethnographer's particular experiences can contribute novel 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 I encountered throughout my study. Like many of them, I have a complex relationship with 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 fresh scholarship on Islam and sexuality in the contemporary world. Thus, despite my seemingly self-evident status as an 'insider', I constantly had to take note of and analyse my own positions and viewpoints as objectively as possible alongside those of my participants. As the religious studies scholar Russell McCutcheon (2007, p. 53) puts it, '*there are insiders and then there are insiders*'.

This chapter tells the story of how, despite there not being a gay Muslim 'village' in which I could plant myself, I forged in-depth connections with the many gay Muslims I encountered. It is also about the essence and effect of participant observation as a method of research. I narrate how I came to know about and participated in various activities, events, or networks where I could observe other gay Muslims in everyday settings. In Britain, this meant keeping up with Imaan's social calendar but, for balance, I also spoke with gay Muslims who were not from the organisation. It was more complicated in Malaysia, because local self-identified LGBTQI collectives do not necessarily provide spaces for gay-identified Muslims to focus on the religious aspects of their identity. During the period of my research, I did not come across a Malaysian equivalent of Imaan—in other words, a visible, organised collective primarily focusing on supporting people who identified as LGBTQI *and* Muslim. But I

persevered and found informal groups such as women of diverse sexualities, including Muslims, who played indoor football (or ‘futsal’) weekly. I also met 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 Ramadan⁴ fast-breaking party, organised by a group of ‘bears’⁵ in Kuala Lumpur for gay Muslims and non-Muslims and their friends.

Some of these connections sprang from my friendships which predated my study. Other, newer friendships emerged as I went deeper into my research and blossomed after my ‘official’ fieldwork ended, which made me feel as though I never left the field. And so, in this chapter, I also reflect upon how these friendships affected my study and why they were (and continue to be) so central to the stories I share in this book. This chapter can thus be seen as a story of how I used my ‘knowing self’ (Davidman 2002, p. 20) to understand the lives of the gay Muslims I met in Malaysia and Britain.

Making the First Move

It’s a Friday night in December 2012, in the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. The pool hall is dimly lit and infused with cigarette smoke. There are two to four people playing at each of the ten tables. A *pengkid*⁶ and a feminine young woman occupy the first table on the left. There are at least three other tables with *pengkids*—either playing with other *pengkids* or with their girlfriends in mixed groups. One table has a girl wearing a tudung and a man who looks like he could be a *lelaki lembut*.⁷ The table at the far end of the room, to the left, has a couple of men of South Indian background—besides them everyone else is Malay. Moderately loud hip-hop music plays in the background and I get the feeling that the clientele here is mostly Malay speaking and working class.

The *pengkids* are in loose, baggy clothing. Flannel shirts and short, spiky, dyed hairstyles abound. They eyeball us as we walk past. Isma, whom I asked to show me this place, eventually asks, ‘Do you guys want to leave?’

‘I don’t know, are you uncomfortable?’ I reply.

Isma says, 'I'm not, but both of you look uncomfortable.'

'Yes, I am a bit,' I reply. Fauziah, Isma's girlfriend, nods in agreement.

'Okay, then, let's go.'

After we exit, I ask Fauziah, 'Were you really uncomfortable, too?' She replies, 'Yes, I was.'

'I wanted to scream: Please don't beat me up!' I say.

Fauziah laughs and says, 'Me too.'

'They were quite fierce, weren't they?' I ask.

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 ... '

We're here because one of my other participants had mentioned, in passing, that there was a 24-hour restaurant in Kuala Lumpur mostly frequented by pengkids and their girlfriends. I made a mental note of this but had no idea where the restaurant was or how to get there. And so, when Isma mentioned the restaurant during our interview, I asked if we could go together one day. I felt comfortable making the request because she was the partner of my friend Fauziah (whom I also interviewed separately). Isma agreed, adding in Malay, 'They do a delicious fried quail.'

Our whirlwind visit to the adjacent pool hall was only a part of the night, during which we shared a late supper. I couldn't resist ordering the fried quail—yes, it was delicious. The episode in the pool hall remains particularly memorable to me, however, because afterwards I was at a loss to explain why I perceived the pengkids and their friends as working class. It is clear to me now that this was one example of how my unexamined privileges and assumptions as a middle-class, Malaysian, Muslim male influence my perceptions of the world. On this particular night, rightly or wrongly, I took certain aspects of the atmosphere—the lighting, music, fashion sense of the pengkids and their girlfriends, and surrounding neighbourhood—to be 'working-class Malay', which felt alien to me. I cannot say with certainty that the majority of the clientele there that night was in fact Malay speaking and working class. After all, Isma was a semi-regular there and she comes from a middle-class, primarily Malay-speaking family. Furthermore, as she pointed out, the pengkids and their girlfriends probably regarded *me* as an interloper and therefore had better reason to feel threatened by *my* presence. This particular

encounter therefore made me aware of not only the class boundary among some Malaysian gay Muslims but also of how my own gender and class background made it difficult for me to cross it. This episode alerted me that I needed to be sensitive about class dynamics throughout my study and to make sure that I also put my own prejudices and assumptions under the spotlight.

It was also important that, as a man, I did not unwittingly ignore the lives of Muslim women who had homosexual desires or relationships. After all, in Malaysia, the government-controlled mass media regularly demonise male and female homosexuality, sometimes alongside sensationalised reports about so-called deviant or 'misbehaving' heterosexual women. On the other end of the spectrum, social justice advocates often include concerns about the rights of sexual minorities alongside campaigns and policies to achieve gender equality.

At the same time, my gendered position as a Muslim man meant that I found it hard to negotiate equal access to male and female social worlds. When one of my gay Muslim women friends invited me to observe her all-women futsal group, for instance, I somehow felt that it was more appropriate to sit on the side instead of joining in. I initially thought 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 be the male fly in the ointment. But it later dawned upon me that I could have also internalised other unexamined, unconscious 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 semi-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 circles—whether predominantly male, female, or mixed—consisted largely of middle-class people within urban surroundings. Even the many people I spoke to who were raised in rural or working-class environments had moved into more urban areas

and were upwardly mobile. My own middle-class background probably also predisposed me to have readier access to most of my lower-middle to upper-middle class participants.

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 certain circumstances. I personally know individuals who play with labels and do not subscribe to a fixed notion of sexual orientation or gender identity. One such person, Ebry, participated in my research and features in later chapters. At the same time, anti-homosexual mass media coverage in Malaysia often lumps together the concepts of ‘homosexuality’ and ‘transgenderism’.

The question of gender identity for some of my participants was therefore more complex than it first appeared. Particular individuals whom I assumed were cisgender⁸ turned out to be more comfortable identifying as transgender and vice versa, and their stories and responses have informed my insights profoundly. For others, the notions of ‘cisgender’ and ‘transgender’ just did not emerge, or were alien to their vocabulary.

Upon considering these different facets, 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’ does not erase the ambiguities and nuances between the ‘transgender’ and ‘gay’ experiences I eventually observed and learnt about.⁹ Still, these observations were probably also limited by my own subjective position as a cisgender man. For instance, it was a markedly different experience sitting down and chatting with my mostly middle-class participants and a chance encounter I had on the streets of Kuala Lumpur when my car broke down one night. It was nearly 9 p.m. and the heavy traffic had subsided a little. I was standing on the pavement and waiting for the tow truck. To my left, I noticed a few *mak nyah*, or transgender women, rambling around the footpath by the river. They were about 30 feet away from me. Normally, I would have left them to their own devices but I sensed this was an opportunity to do some brief, spontaneous observation, so I tried to get a bit closer.

When I passed by I tried not to stare so obviously. I eventually made out that there were four transgender women. The closest one stood upright and faced me, hands akimbo. I might have imagined this, but I think she thrust her hips forward suggestively. She was wearing a one-piece dress—a spaghetti strap, with the skirt just covering her bottom—and was in high heels. She wore heavy make-up and her hair was long, wavy and dyed blonde. She was pouting seductively—but that could have been my imagination, too.

Of the other three, two were sitting on the railing that lined the footpath, and one was standing—all were staring at me by now. The last one I passed wore her hair in a black beehive and was also heavily made up and skimpily dressed. She called out to me in Malay, ‘You want a massage? For your “inner strength”?’ I found myself smiling and shook my head—I was too shy to look her in the eye. I hurried past, and she called out again, ‘If you want a bit of arse play you can get it here, too.’

This fleeting encounter 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 where *mak nyah*—whom I assumed were also working class—solicited attention. Like my encounter with the *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 offer a glimpse of how power operates in ethnographic research and affects the lens through which the ethnographer sees the world. My middle-class position and academic affiliation with a reputable British university gave me certain social advantages which facilitated easy access with my middle-class participants. Yet, this leverage sometimes became a barrier that made it difficult for me to enter other social worlds. So, while I did gather rich data, the gathering process took place from a specific, subjective position.

Moreover, I did not always hold greater power as a researcher. At times, being gay made me feel vulnerable in situations where being male and Muslim might have been an asset. 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 routinely 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 realised that she was Aminah Ishak,¹⁰ a pro-Syariah, anti-LGBT, and anti-liberal scholar and commentator. Aminah¹¹ 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 could be wrong, but 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 not to tell her the whole truth in a situation where Islam was presented in ways that I found 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 *khutbah* (sermon). 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.

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-Shi'ah¹² (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.

Making Friends, Finding Participants

Several of my friends in Malaysia and Britain gave invaluable help during my research. In Britain, a doctoral peer who is also a friend (and is neither gay nor Muslim) introduced me to two of her gay Muslim acquaintances who were not members of Imaan. In Malaysia, a few of my friends helped enthusiastically and generously—with some participating in interviews—because they felt that this sort of research was urgently needed. Through them, I met other gay Muslims, some of whom I developed friendships with after completing my fieldwork.

In Britain, the growing friendships between me and some of my participants were more emotionally and analytically complicated, mainly because I also met them through the organisation Imaan. I was worried

initially about blurring the boundaries between fieldwork, friendship and activism, thinking that this would ‘contaminate’ my data. However, in line with the approach advocated by the ethnographers Helen Owton and Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson (2013, p. 2), I ultimately embraced the ‘emotional involvement and emotional reflexivity’ that these friendships brought. They provided me with rich analytical resources and were not ‘a methodological “problem” to be avoided at all costs’. In hindsight, the enduring intensity of these friendships within the context of Imaan also highlights the relationship between my emotional, psychological and spiritual needs as a gay Muslim man and my larger research journey.

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* (the fast-breaking meal during the month of Ramadan) 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,¹³ an organisation that I was personally fearful of at the time because of their hostility towards homosexuality. I returned to Malaysia with an image of Imaan as an incoherent, inconsistent organisation and yet one which I remained drawn to for personal reasons.

Imaan—along with other LGBTQI Muslim organisations in the West—therefore remained on my radar. When I returned to London in 2010 to pursue my Master of Arts in the sociology and anthropology of religion, I made contact again. This time, I attended a study session they organised with the openly gay American *imam* (prayer and community leader), Daayiee Abdullah. This is where I first met Waqqas and Osman, who quickly befriended me and went on to participate in this study.

At the time, I found some of the discussions during this session off-putting. While I empathised with some of the questions posed to the imam, for example, on the intricacies of child adoption by gay couples, I did not understand and was privately impatient with others about the minutiae of Islamic worship. As a Malaysian who sees state policies on Islam as excessively restrictive and rigid, I interpreted and privately objected to these questions as unnecessarily public performances of piety. It was only much later that I empathised with these as the working out of

individual expressions of Islam within a very diverse group—Imaan's membership consisted of individuals from various schools of Islamic thought, with differing emphases on what constituted 'true' Islam. I also realised that as much as they wanted to express Muslim piety, many Imaan members were insecure about the gaps in their Islamic knowledge and so found this meeting spiritually invaluable.

I eventually asked the then Imaan chair if the organisation had ever conducted internal seminars or discussions about the social or practical dimensions of *shari'ah* (divine law). In Malaysia, I had become familiar with these debates through the work of the Islamic feminist organisation Sisters in Islam (SIS). I became conversant with the workshops that SIS facilitated which deconstructed gender and *shari'ah* for a lay audience. The main takeaway from these workshops was that there is much diversity in Islam, from its doctrinal to political expressions. This internal diversity is now obscured by polarised, polemical debates that pit Islam as monolithic and inimical to human rights. Specifically, the workshops explored the considerable flexibility within Islamic teachings to conceptualise gender, sexuality, and religious freedom in relatively non-judgemental, egalitarian, and inclusive ways. The workshop modules were essentially a compilation of traditional and contemporary scholarship—including jurisprudence, Qur'anic hermeneutics and social scientific studies—on Islam and gender. The Imaan chair was enthusiastic, assuring me that this would break new ground within 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.

My entry point into studying Imaan was thus preceded by a strong need to participate and belong with other gay Muslims. When I had decided upon my research topic, 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. I did not meet overwhelmingly like-minded people—indeed, I have very different experiences and views on Islam compared to the many Imaan members I spoke with. I did, however, find a space in which I could meet other people who, like me, were working out the relationship between Islam and their sexuality.

This also means that my presence influenced some key organisational dynamics within Imaan. Perhaps I did ‘contaminate’ my own study, but seeing things in this way reproduces the myth that social researchers can aspire to invisibility or complete neutrality. Instead, the friendships I developed as part of my research and growing involvement with Imaan reduced the ‘hierarchical separation’ between me as a researcher and my participants. Our interactions were also framed within an ‘ethic of caring’ that invited mutual ‘expressiveness, emotion and empathy’ (Owton and Allen-Collinson 2013, p. 3).

This added intimacy in my research was accompanied by some key challenges, however. With Imaan, for example, I was not only juggling the role of a friend and a researcher with some participants but also as a volunteer within the organisation. Sometimes it proved challenging to identify and respect the boundaries between friendship, research and volunteer work. With my Imaan participants whom I befriended, I made sure to clarify that our friendship was independent of my research and my voluntary work within the organisation—I was not going to prey on these relationships for data. In this book, aside from assigning pseudonyms and withholding other personal information that would compromise my participants’ confidentiality, I have left out accounts that were made privy to me exclusively in my role as a friend or as an Imaan volunteer. I do not divulge proprietary information about organisational infighting, factionalisms and personal disagreements.

At the same time, I must clarify that some issues remain complex—I felt vulnerable, for example, when some of my participants whom I became close to withdrew abruptly after the end of my research. In other instances, some participants might have assumed that a friendship was developing when that was not my expressed intention. But I was fortunate because when things got too emotionally intense, I had numerous supportive people looking out for me who were not immediately involved in my research—my partner, Giles, my friends among his church congregation, and other friends in Malaysia and Britain who are also academics, activists or writers. Ultimately, I maintained my professional ethics while recognising that my research was fulfilling deeper emotional, spiritual and psychological needs that I also had to reflect upon. I therefore worked with and through my ‘knowing self’ to gain an ‘emphatic, nuanced and sensitive account’ (Davidman 2002, p. 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 also evaluating *me* before welcoming me into their fold. Initially, the Imaan chair and a few trustees capitalised 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 saw another side to 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 (a transnational Muslim piety movement) member, Waqqas, and a few others suddenly started picking on me. Naved began asking about my partner Giles, an openly gay Anglican priest. He expressed mock disdain that I identified and practised as a Muslim yet also sang in the church choir on Sundays.

'What are you?' Naved demanded, and the others egged him on amid much giggling. I laughed, and every time I tried to reply, Naved interrupted, making everyone laugh even more.

'Are you a cut-and-shut?'¹⁴ he asked.

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

After this ritual teasing, the Imaan members who were there became warmer and more affectionate with me. I overheard Waqqas say to Osman later, 'She's one of us now'¹⁵ 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 group. Ebrahim, a member in his mid-20s, added me when a bunch of us were having a post-AGM meal at a kebab restaurant in East London:

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,¹⁶ why aren’t you sitting with me?’

These digital conversations provided crucial albeit unseen context to my research and belonging within Imaan. On WhatsApp and the social networking site Facebook, for example, Imaan members shared jokes about being gay and Muslim and kept in touch about important life events. When someone’s family member or partner was ill, they shared *du’a* (supplications) for *shifa’* (healing). Members who were nervous about job interviews or ‘coming out’ to family or friends received moral support and *du’a* through these virtual worlds. Occasionally they also argued viciously. Eventually, I left the WhatsApp group because I was overwhelmed by the volume of messages—I later learnt that I was not the only member to leave for this reason. Yet, some of the newer members told me that Imaan was their lifeline, and they communicated 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 the intersections of Islam, gender and sexuality, which at that point had no direct equivalent in Malaysia. For balance, I also contacted gay British Muslims who did not belong to Imaan, introduced by a doctoral colleague. 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 and Imaan 2014).

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 simultaneous analysis of the social environment under study and the researcher’s own subjective position is a hallmark of the ethnographic method. An ethnographer ‘seeks a deeper *immersion* in others’ worlds in order to grasp what they experience as meaningful and important’

(Emerson et al. 2011, p. 3). This method involves the researcher's long-term, first-hand participation in the group's social world and the production of a record—usually a written account—based upon this participation (Emerson et al. 2011, p. 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 and Landres 2002, p. 13). At the same time, it creates social reality—the written ethnographic account is firstly a narrative constructed by the ethnographer who assumes 'authorial privilege' (Emerson et al. 2011, p. 241).

While ethnographic research provides a nuanced, detailed view of the lives of the people involved, this perspective 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 field notes. The ethnographer eventually has to use these notes to construct a final 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 because of 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 and Landres 2002, p. 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. For example, John Borneman and Abdellah Hammoudi (2009, pp. 8–9) have critiqued fellow anthropologist Talal Asad's advocacy of 'textualist' rather

than ethnographic methods. Borneman and Hammoudi (2009, p. 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 and Hammoudi 2009, p. 19).

I chose ethnographic methods to study gay Muslim experiences in Malaysia and Britain precisely because I wanted comparative insights into the everyday layers of being gay and Muslim. I experienced, recorded and thought through the ‘mutual, intersubjective questioning’ among my participants and also between them and me in specific, concrete circumstances. In terms of geographical locations, I conducted research in Malaysia 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. I supplemented my participant observation with in-depth interviews in all these areas—15 in Kuala Lumpur, 2 in Kedah, 6 in London and 6 in Manchester/Lancashire.

Making Conversation

Giles, my partner, used to joke that most of my research amounted to meeting and yakking with other gay Muslims in different cafés. He wasn’t that far off the mark, even though field work entailed much more than that. I did begin by contacting different friends and acquaintances and inviting them to have tea or coffee so that I could introduce my research. Sometimes, I would meet the same person twice or three times informally before we arranged a proper interview, which also usually took place in restaurants, cafés, parks or sometimes in their homes. All of this was meant to build comfort and rapport amongst people whom I had not met before. With participants who were already friends, it was also about clarifying different aspects of my research before they decided if they wanted to participate.

In both countries, I started with people I knew—I focused on those of my friends and acquaintances who personally identified as Muslim and were attracted to members of the same sex. In some interviews, however, it emerged in conversation that some individuals had privately disaffiliated from Islam or that some were still questioning their sexual identity. For example, one participant had always thought of himself as ‘gay’ but was now wondering if he preferred the terms ‘bisexual’ or ‘queer’. Another previously thought of herself as ‘lesbian’ but was contemplating the label ‘trans man’ (but was still comfortable being described with feminine pronouns). Others would fluctuate in their degrees of commitment to Islam—one participant said initially that he was quite relaxed about drinking alcohol, but when we met a few months later he was teetotal.

I was generally happy for participants to talk at length about things that mattered to them. I did not have a rigid set of questions but had a sheet listing various things I wanted to find out about people’s close relationships and their personal views on Islam and sexuality (see Appendix B: Interview Question Guide for Gay Muslims). My main objective was to gain a nuanced perspective of their ‘life-worlds’ (Stroh 2000, p. 202). On average, the interviews lasted two to two-and-a-half hours, with one lasting just under an hour. I asked three or four of my initial interviewees in both countries if they knew anyone else I could speak with and if they could make the introduction. I recorded each interview and transcribed them as faithfully as possible—Malay interviews were transcribed in the original language, capturing the particularities of different patois, and translated later. In most cases, my Malaysian participants and I code-switched between Malay and English, which I captured in the transcripts. In this book, I present all interviews in English for readability, but indicate when excerpts were originally in Malay.

I interviewed 29 participants in total—17 in Malaysia and 12 in Britain—consisting of 9 men and 8 women in Malaysia, and 7 men and 5 women in Britain. They were mostly in their 20s and 30s, with an average age of 31.5 years. At 32 years, the average age of my Malaysian participants was slightly higher than that of my British participants—29. 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. 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, see Appendix A: Information on Interviewees. I also had numerous informal conversations with other Muslim and non-Muslim sexual minorities in both countries, as well as with progressive Muslim activists or community leaders.

The formal, semi-structured interviews did highlight some crucial issues to think about when researchers rely on interviews or conversations as data. For example, an early conversation with Rina, a Malaysian tudung-wearing lesbian in her early 30s, showed me the fluidity of power dynamics in an interview. During a pre-interview dinner chat, which I recorded meticulously in my notebook, 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?'

Hearing her use the phrase 'just gay' made me feel like I needed to think a bit more about my answer. 'Well, I always thought of myself as *lembut* (soft), too,' I said, after a pause.

'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*—which literally means guava—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 to reflect on. By probing into my thoughts, Rina reminded me not only to look out for various subjective interpretations of the term ‘gay’ but also to be aware of how demanding my questions might be. And I still don’t know if I’ve ‘settled’ on a term that fully describes me—I use ‘gay’ because it works, even though I am aware that it has its limitations.

I also began noticing that some interviewees tried to speak ‘properly’ when the conversation was being recorded, but became far less formal after I had turned off the recording device—even when they were aware that I was still taking notes. 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, easily agreed to an interview but during our conversation 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’), inspired by the American gay rights activist Dan Savage’s ‘It Gets Better’ (2016) campaign. 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 criticised 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 in Malay, ‘No, 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 in Malay:

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 noting all my interactions and observations, but my use of a recording device clearly affected how he expressed his opinions. When I stopped recording, his expression became more colourful and I noted that his tone of voice was more animated. Something similar occurred with Ebry, a childhood friend in his mid-30s who lived in the northwest of Peninsula 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 asked, 'Was the interview OK?'

He said, 'Ya Allah, I had to control my emotions a little when you asked me those questions.'

'Really?' I said, because 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?'

'But do you feel better after talking to me?'

He said, '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. A couple of days later we also had a laugh about how he described his religious observance. During the interview, Ebry said he was now much more pious and this meant that he was less prone to gossiping or insulting others. Yet, when I met him again two days later, he told me about a heated albeit hilarious argument he recently had with a mutual gay Muslim friend, Mazlan, dripping with sarcasm and insult, which I recorded in my notebook.

I said, '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 replied, 'No, Shanon, you don't understand—the more pious we are, the more Satan tests us.' We both laughed at this.

Most of my participants relished the opportunity to share their experiences and opinions, but they were also performing idealised aspects of themselves for my benefit. Some erred on the side of responding with more 'acceptable' ideas about Islam when the recorder was on, while others decided to become more provocative than usual. This kind of 'interactional "game play"' (Owton and Allen-Collinson 2013, p. 11) happens in many interviews but it is still important to make this dynamic between researcher and participant visible to readers so that they have a fuller picture.

Sometimes there were interactional aspects that I was less sensitive to during the interviews but became aware of in retrospect. For example, a couple of interviewees confessed feeling uncomfortable or unsettled by our conversations. 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. After I turned the recorder off, Isma said, 'Oh, I'm stressed now.' I asked, 'Really? Why are you stressed?' She said, '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 said, 'But you know I just wanted to ask you your opinions, right? I am totally not judgemental about anything you say.' She said, 'Yes, I know, but it's still stressful.'

In these 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 them afterwards via text message, phone call, email or Facebook, and catching up with them informally at another time whenever possible. In one instance, I jointly interviewed a Malaysian lesbian couple in their early 30s, Ezan and Elly, who initially seemed wary 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 moved and humbled me, and when I responded positively they ended up sharing even more candid thoughts when I was the one being ‘interviewed’.

Other participants were even more enthusiastic, for example, Razak, a gay Malaysian in his late 20s who told me after our interview that he didn’t think I’d have problems with my research. He said, ‘You allow people to tell their stories and you don’t appear judgemental at all with their answers.’ I replied that 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. He said, ‘Yes, that’s what I feel about you.’

On the whole, I received positive feedback about these interviews in both countries. 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 spelled out in the consent form. These concerns, however, showed me that there could have been various anxieties that my participants were less comfortable discussing with me. I suspect that in varying degrees, many of these anxieties affected several of the more secretive and vulnerable Muslim sexual minorities that I did not have the chance to engage with.

Still, early on in the process, I knew that the interview recordings and transcripts alone were not the full picture of the interaction between me and my participants. This is why I jotted down non-verbal and incidental details which sometimes provided crucial context to these conversations. For example, Waqqas, whom I first met in London in September 2010, lived in Manchester. In 2013, I went up to Greater Manchester and Lancashire a few times to meet him and a few other Imaan members. On the day of our interview, Waqqas was delivering a talk 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.

For a good initial portion of the interview, Waqqas explained his upbringing to me and what it was like growing up Muslim and gay in the northwest of England. Although I felt like I identified with much of his story, I found myself asking many hesitant, clarifying questions about his school and home life. I just could not visualise Waqqas's world and imagine its similarities and differences with mine as fully as I had wanted to.

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 his request. I asked Waqqas, 'He said I'm supposed to get a stick or a rock or something?' Waqqas laughed and said, 'You don't know what rock is?' I shook my head. When we got to the beach, I spotted a stall selling long sticks of rock candy—this is what Ebrahim requested, because the thought of rock brought back childhood memories for him.

Waqqas said this beach was 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. I recalled that some other Imaan members told me they didn't like Blackpool because it was too kitschy. I had to ask Giles what they meant by this, and he said perhaps they were referring to it being quite northern working class. I could not develop a mental picture of the place from these verbal descriptions alone—being there with Waqqas changed this. I was there, at the beach, among the stalls selling rock, a short distance from the amusement park rides, and I could finally visualise this part of Waqqas's childhood. And because he shared this story, I now have a soft spot for Blackpool. Waqqas gave me a priceless glimpse into the journeys of generations of British Asian Muslims and specifically his journey 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 exposed the cultural distance between us. Yet, 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 by 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.

Making Sense of the Mass Media

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, p. 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—for instance, at dinner parties, lunch breaks at work, or in family living rooms—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. But how and to what extent do 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 many places. In many instances, Muslims and sexual minorities are likely to be misrepresented and have their concerns and experiences distorted in the mass media.

I analysed media coverage on Islam and sexuality to supplement and contextualise my interviews and participant observation. This helped me to 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. I focused on relevant coverage on Islam and 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, 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 Malay-language daily at the time (Audit Bureau of Circulations 2012). 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.

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 discussed differently or more subtly 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, p. 82).

There are some important caveats in my comparison of media coverage on 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. But 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, p. 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 assumptions, these are often expressed differently and for different purposes depending on the context. Where Muslims are a minority, certain media outlets might sensationalise aspects of Islam which run counter to the values or expectations of the non-Muslim majority—some overtly ideological publications can be nakedly Islamophobic. In Muslim-majority countries, however, state-endorsed versions of Islam are often used by political elites to justify the status quo and marginalise those who are labelled as deviants or ‘enemies of Islam’.

The lives of the people in this book therefore have political dimensions that I as the author and my readers must recognise. Part of the reason why I was moved to do this research 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 their 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.

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 neither avoid complex emotions nor inadvertent influ-

ence, through his or her interactions, on 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 both 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, p. 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 to reflect on the strengths and limitations of my approach. As the anthropologist Kirin Narayan (1993, p. 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 static fact of life. Rather, interest in studying gay Muslims or Muslim sexual minorities has emerged amid increasingly visible public debates about 'homosexuality in Islam' within the mass media and amongst activists, political ideologues—anti-Muslim and pro-Muslim—and Muslim religious authorities. Thus, while this book challenges inaccurate or stigmatising views of people based on their religion and sexuality, by writing it I am also maintaining and continuing the construction of 'gay Muslims' or 'homosexuality in Islam' as objects of study and discussion. This growing body of research—and my contribution to it—carries social and political consequences on many different levels.

Amid these larger political concerns, this book aims to paint a better picture about the lived experiences of the people I encountered, including their prejudices and stereotypes about themselves or others. As Duneier (1994, p. 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 or sexual minorities, or both, in Malaysia and Britain, deserve to be represented accurately and fairly. All these perspectives need to be contextualised as part of the process that leads people to construct, maintain or challenge the boundaries that separate ‘insiders’ from ‘outsiders’ in society.

In the next chapter, I continue with a story of how scholars and academics construct ‘Islam’ and ‘homosexuality’ as interrelated objects of study. I begin by discussing the impacts and criticisms of the work of Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, the openly gay American scholar of Islamic and South Asian studies.

Notes

1. My fieldwork research in Malaysia took place from October to December 2012 and from July to September 2013. I conducted the British phase between January and July 2013.
2. 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, p. 153).
3. 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’).
4. The ninth month of the Muslim calendar, during which the third of Islam’s five pillars states that Muslims need to fast, which involves refraining from food, drink and sex from just before dawn until sunset. *Buka puasa* means ‘breaking the fast’.
5. 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).
6. 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 Yuenmei Wong, (2012), ‘Islam, Sexuality, and the Marginal Positioning of *Pengkids* and Their Girlfriends in Malaysia’, *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 16 (4): 435–448.
7. Literally, ‘soft man’—often used colloquially and in the mass media to refer to men perceived as gay or effeminate.

8. *Cisgender*, or non-transgender, refers to people whose self-understandings and expressions of gender correspond with the sex they were assigned at birth and conform to wider societal expectations. *Transgender* as a broad category refers to people whose self-understandings and expressions of gender do not correspond to the sex they were assigned at birth and thus do not match dominant societal expectations (Catalano and Shlasko 2010, p. 425).
9. To me, 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 my participants.
10. Even though she is a public figure, I use a pseudonym because this was an informal, personal exchange and her anonymity and confidentiality need to be protected, too.
11. Malay names are patronymic, so it is correct to cite first names after the first mention.
12. 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.
13. A transnational Muslim social movement that describes itself as ‘a political party whose ideology is Islam’ (Hizb ut-Tahrir 2015). It remains controversial in many countries and is banned by some governments.
14. 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.
15. Some of the Imaan members I met enjoyed reversing gendered pronouns playfully, although they refrained from doing this to people who were uncomfortable with it.
16. Derogatory British slang for promiscuous woman.

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3

Studying Islam and Homosexuality

Tradition has it that the Prophet Muhammad once gave intriguing advice to a man about love. The full *hadith* (written report) is found in the Sunan of Abu Dawud, one of the six canonical hadith compilations in Sunni Islam, as follows (2010):

Narrated by Anas ibn Malik: A man was with the Prophet (peace be upon him) and a man passed by him and said: Apostle of Allah! I love this man. The Apostle of Allah (peace be upon him) then asked: Have you informed him? He replied: No. He said: Inform him. He then went to him and said: I love you for Allah's sake. He replied: May He for Whose sake you love me love you!

This hadith does not contextualise the situation and clarifies neither the men's identities nor their relationship. It is all the more puzzling for modern readers because how could the Prophet have encouraged a man to declare his love for another man yet pronounce death for homosexual activity elsewhere? As Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle (2010, p. 73), the American Islamic Studies scholar, observes, 'Hadith are full of surprises.' In reference to this hadith, Kugle (2010, p. 74)

posits that it remains a mystery ‘whether the Prophet was speaking of brotherly love, or of platonic love, or of erotic love that could take on sexual expression’.

The notion that Islam inherently opposes homosexuality thus oversimplifies the complex history of Muslim attitudes towards love and intimacy. It ignores the ambiguous aspects of the Islamic tradition and silences the diverse interpretations and attitudes among Muslims on gender, sexuality and other issues. Yet, alternative and often progressive expressions of Islam do exist. Bearing this in mind, this chapter investigates key aspects of the growing body of research on Islam and sexuality—specifically homosexuality.

In the West, news about anti-homosexual atrocities perpetrated by Muslims occasionally punctuate the far more prevalent coverage that links Islam with terrorism and extremism. For example, in the aftermath of the massacre at Pulse, the LGBT nightclub in Orlando on 12 June 2016—the deadliest mass shooting in US history—headlines were rife about the shooter Omar Mateen’s support for the Islamic State, also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Right-leaning media commentators responded with brazenly anti-Muslim rhetoric (Hopkins 2016; Yiannopoulos 2016). At the same time, the fact that Mateen had previously visited Pulse and other gay dating sites was used by many Muslim leaders to deny that the shootings had anything to do with ‘proper’ Islam (5Pillars 2016a, b; Burke 2016).

At the core of these polarised responses was a struggle to pinpoint what supposedly ‘true’ Islam says about homosexuality. The particularly vicious nature of Mateen’s attack forced several Muslim leaders to denounce him but also to reiterate Islam’s purportedly clear injunctions against homosexuality. For example, a week after the Orlando tragedy, the imam Asad Zaman appeared on the Sunday Programme on BBC’s Radio 4 (2016) and condemned the Orlando shootings. But, he continued:

Those who indulge in homosexual behaviour, there are two ways of looking at them. If ... you acknowledge that homosexual behaviour is sinful ... then you are still within the domain of Islam but you are a sinner. If you no longer regard homosexual behaviour as sinful then you are stepping outside

the domain of Islam. Because there are certain prohibitions that are hard-wired in the Qur'an and they cannot be changed by anybody.

Zaman's position could somewhat be interpreted as an ultimatum—gay Muslims need to admit they are sinners or they need to leave the religion. If they want to remain Muslim, they need to accept that acting upon their homosexual desires will result in Divine punishment. According to this view, which was prevalent among many of the Muslim religious leaders responding to the Orlando massacre, it is also unacceptable for anybody to argue that homosexuality is 'permissible' within Islam. Yet, proponents of this view were silent on its differing ramifications depending on the political situation. The option of 'leaving Islam', for example, might be viable in a liberal democracy such as Britain but is virtually impossible in Malaysia, where homosexuality and renouncing Islam are crimes under Syariah legislation (Malaysia 1997, pp. 11–12, 17).

This chapter begins at the heart of this tension and examines the positions of those Muslims who do argue that homosexuality should not be treated as a sin or a crime within Islam. I start with the work of Kugle, a pioneering scholar and activist in this area. After evaluating the strengths and limitations of his approach, I look at how works by scholar-activists like him draw upon other empirical studies on the experiences of Muslim sexual minorities in various contexts. I then introduce the key sociological and anthropological approaches towards religion and sexuality that frame the rest of this book. This chapter therefore investigates how stories of Muslim sexual minorities continue to unfold and are told in particular ways within academia. It sets the stage for the following chapters, where I explore whether the gay Muslims I met were influenced by these ideas or were even aware of them.

A Gay-Friendly Islam?

A convert to Islam, Kugle holds a doctorate in the History of Religions¹ 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.² Kugle says that when he first started writing about Islam and sexual diversity, he basically had to ‘come out’ twice—as a Muslim to his academic colleagues and as a gay man to his fellow Muslims. ‘Neither position was very comfortable. So to do both at once was very foolish. Yet, I never regret it’ (Henking 2012).

Kugle (2010, p. 3) characterises his activist scholarship as ‘reformist’ or ‘progressive’, and aims specifically to reassess Islamic rulings on gender and sexuality from the perspectives of lesbian, gay, and transgender Muslims. He admits that he 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 Qur’an, there is no equivalent ‘positive acknowledgement of bisexual people’ (Kugle 2010, p. 10). He further acknowledges that his ‘essentialist’ approach—namely, 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, pp. 9–12).

Kugle (2003, p. 194) credits the influence of Islamic feminist scholarship on his thinking about the ‘ambiguities’ in Islamic teachings on gender and sexuality. Like many of these Islamic feminist scholars, Kugle is also not a traditionally trained *alim* (Islamic scholar) and his attempts to rearticulate Islamic knowledge challenge or even bypass conventional Islamic authority structures. He is an example of how Muslims who work outside conventional Islamic institutions—or those aligned with institutions not deemed ‘traditionally’ Islamic—are contesting predominant interpretations of Islam.

As an openly gay Muslim, Kugle has consistently published on Islam and sexual diversity since the early 2000s. He 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 15 activists in South Africa, the Netherlands, the UK, the USA and Canada, and engages critically with the work of the political scientist Joseph Massad and the anthropologists Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood (Kugle 2014, pp. 4–7). In this section, I focus 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, p. 8).

Kugle (2010, p. 2) engages the full range of the Islamic religious tradition and its texts—‘from Qur’an as scripture and *hadith* as oral teachings to *fiqh*³ as legal rulings and the *shari‘a* as a rhetoric of orthodoxy’. As a core part of his argument, Kugle (2010, p. 50) asserts that there is no Qur’anic term corresponding with ‘homosexual’ or ‘homosexuality’. Instead, the Qur’an contains a number of vignettes about the people of the prophet Lot⁴—corresponding with the Biblical Lot—who were punished for particular transgressions.⁵ The Qur’anic passages that refer to the Lot story are 54:33–40, 37:133–138, 50:13, 26:160–175, 15:58–77, 38:13–14, 21:74–75, 27:55–58, 11:70, 11:74 and 11:77–83, 29:26 and 29:28–35, 7:80–84, 6:86, 22:43–44, and 66:10 (Omar 2012, pp. 225–226). These Qur’anic episodes can be seen as punchier and far less detailed summaries of the Old Testament Lot narrative, 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. (Qur’an, 7:80–83)

Kugle shows that medieval Qur’anic commentators saw the transgressions of Lot’s tribe as not simply about anal sex between men but involving other acts including hostility towards strangers and disobeying Lot’s authority. Many 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, pp. 50–53) illustrates that these interpretations did not go unchallenged—for example, the prominent eleventh-century Andalusian jurist Ibn Hazm argued that Lot’s tribe was indeed subjected to divine punishment but not chiefly for *liwat*. Kugle (2010, p. 56) also contends that the Qur’anic passages 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 Qur'anic passages enjoining diversity, which are just as contextual and ambiguously worded. According to Kugle (2010, pp. 66–68), these sections could also be interpreted as encompassing sexual diversity—for example, 'Among His wonders is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your languages and colours. In these are signs for mankind' (Qur'an, 30: 22).

Furthermore, according to Kugle (2010, pp. 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 forgeries, leading early Muslim scholars to develop a systematic verification of hadith, which actually rejected many anti-liwat reports that remain popular today (Kugle 2010, pp. 98–110). As an example, Kugle (2010, p. 102) highlights the problematic *isnad* (chain of transmission) of the still-popular hadith which says, 'The Prophet said, "Whoever you find doing the act of the people of Lot, kill the one doing and the one done-to."'

Kugle contends that selective interpretations of the Qur'an and hadith had a knock-on effect on fiqh rulings regarding sexual behaviour. The major Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence which emerged in the eighth century 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 Shafi'is, Hanbalis and Malikis considered liwat and *zina* equivalent (Kugle 2010, pp. 157–159). Therefore, the Hanafis still regarded liwat as a crime but recommended a limited number of lashes, while the other schools advocated capital punishment. The Zahiris were the most lenient about the punishment for liwat, recommending no more than ten lashes (Kugle 2010, p. 161).

Kugle highlights these grey areas in traditional Islamic rulings to demonstrate that there was no historical consensus about the nature of liwat. There were also disagreements about how to punish it and why. He also addresses the problems in traditional Islamic rulings on sex between women, many of which were inconclusive (Kugle 2010, p. 24). In summary, the act of tribadism (*sibag*) was also morally condemned by traditional jurists—yet it was barely discussed and resulted

in virtually no punishment, since it did not entail penile penetration (Omar 2012, pp. 238–239). However, condemnations of *liwat* in many contemporary Muslim societies often extend to female homosexuality now, too.

For Kugle, these nuances need to be acknowledged alongside historical evidence that Muslim jurists constantly reformed and reinterpreted *fiqh* rulings in the light of social changes. For many medieval Muslim jurists, the *shari‘ah* was also meant to protect individual liberties and the public interest—here, Kugle (2010, pp. 172–173) highlights the work of the fourteenth-century Maliki jurist Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi on the *maqasid al-shari‘ah* (goals of the *shari‘ah*). These precedents from Islamic history justify a need to rethink Islamic teachings on sexuality based on fresh understandings of *shari‘ah*.

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. Yet, his analysis and combination of activism and scholarship have been dismissed by some ideologically driven secular gay activists and anti-gay Muslims as ‘wishful thinking’ or a futile exercise in identifying ‘scriptural loopholes’ (Kelly 2010, p. 248). The unstated assumption behind these criticisms is that Islam is static and it is impossible for ‘truly authentic’ Islam to be transformed through social action.

Since the publication of Kugle’s *Homosexuality in Islam* and other writings, however, other progressive Muslim scholars and activists in the West have periodically come forward with pro-LGBT stances (Safi 2013; Wadud 2014). They advocate their positions in the face of formidable opposition from many other Muslim leaders and movements which maintain that homosexuality is an abomination in Islam. In a way, the Orlando tragedy brought these different strands in the debate together and crystallised major points of contention on either side.

One enduring criticism made by defenders of conventional *fiqh* rulings is that Islamic law has never condemned same-sex attraction—it merely forbids acting upon them (J. Brown 2016). Proponents of this view agree that there have been differing degrees of punishment for homosexual behaviour throughout the history of Islam, but there was unanimous agreement that *liwat* was prohibited. They argue that in rela-

tion to Orlando, however, the killer violated another long-standing principle of Islamic jurisprudence—individuals are not allowed to take the law into their own hands.

Furthermore, the standards for prosecuting sexual indiscretions in medieval Muslim societies were so high that punishments for *liwat* were ‘exceedingly rare’ (J. Brown 2016). According to Islamic Studies scholar Jonathan Brown (2016), ‘Even if Mateen were living in some medieval, idealized Muslim city, ruled by the *shariah* and free from all the evils of the modern world, he would be dragged in chains before the *kadi* (judge) on the charge of mass murder.’ Yet, as a Muslim American, Brown (2016) has declared support for ‘the right of same-sex couples to have civil marriages according to US law’ even though he holds that homosexuality is a sin. For him, personal moral judgements about the sin of *liwat* should not dictate what sorts of consensual relationships the state can proscribe for different sections of the population. Brown’s stance is therefore also controversial among more traditionalist defenders of Islamic jurisprudence (Haqiqatjou 2016).

Brown’s position is indeed relevant for Muslims living as minorities in secular liberal democracies, especially when attitudes towards LGBT rights can become an ideological weapon to justify Islamophobia. However, it does not address the situation in Muslim-majority contexts where anti-homosexual sentiments and policies are often justified on Islamic grounds and where Muslims who advocate more tolerant religious interpretations of sexuality are often silenced. Yet, in these environments, even Kugle’s pro-LGBT Islamic framework has some significant limitations.

One drawback is that Kugle’s essentialist framing of sexuality could be too narrowly informed by the US context, where minority rights are often conceived through ‘ethnic’ models (Kelly 2010, pp. 259, 264). Against this background, asserting that gay, lesbian, and transgender people are ‘born this way’ results in a politics of difference that might resonate in North America but not in other environments. Using an ‘ethnic model’ to argue that sexual minorities are covered by Qur’anic passages on diversity thus might not work in contexts where ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’ or ‘transgender’ remain unrecognised as valid identity labels.

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 interpretation of the Lot narrative. Ali agrees that the Qur'an 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, p. 83), 'elsewhere in the Qur'anic text, as with female captives, consent is not always relevant to the formation of licit sexual relationships'. Thus, contemporary thinking about sexual relations in Islam still needs to address whether the institution of slavery directly or indirectly influenced rulings on gender relations (Ali 2012, p. xvii).

Like Kugle, Ali is a convert writing from activist and scholarly angles and advocating an overhaul of basic Islamic doctrines on sex and marriage. In a 2005 interview, she explained her conversion as follows (Tippett 2005):

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 Qur'an's message to be so convincingly egalitarian that the rest seemed to be in some sense just details.

This is why she, too, argues that fresh religious understandings are possible, since classical Islamic rulings were developed through constant interpretation of sacred texts in the light of specific social conditions. In other words, Islamic law has always been dynamically reinterpreted and revised (Ali 2012, p. 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. It is likely that 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 (Peumans and Stallaert 2012, p. 118).

Furthermore, many of these converts also tend to emphasise Islam's teachings on diversity 'to negotiate and even justify their conversion to their Muslim and non-Muslim peers' (Peumans and Stallaert 2012, p. 117).

In North America, particularly, ethnically white gay or lesbian converts seem more able to 'reconcile their sexuality with their faith ... compared to their Muslim-born counterparts who were raised within immigrant households and religious communities' (Khan 2010, p. 362). In other words, Kugle's background was probably not shaped by identical 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 concurrently the way many Muslims in the West of immigrant backgrounds might feel compelled to. These factors could have contributed to his flexibility in critically analysing 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, p. 108). These include the works of Amina Wadud, the African American woman convert and scholar of Islam, who identifies as an 'ally' of LGBT Muslims (Shannahan 2012, p. 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. To some extent, this is also true of LGBT Muslims in the West outside of traditional academia who are explicitly pushing for more inclusive interpretations of Islam. Prominent examples include the openly lesbian Canadian journalist Irshad Manji (2005, 2011) and the New York-based gay Indian film-maker Parvez Sharma (2007).

The ideas of these pro-LGBT Muslim academics and other LGBT Muslim activists, although marginal for now, are informed by and contribute to the cross-pollination of wider research on Islam, gender, and sexuality. This book is partly a story about whether their works directly or indirectly influence the self-understandings of gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain.

Translating the Past

The fourteenth-century Persian poet and satirist, Nezam al-Din ‘Obeyd-e Zakani (or Nizam al-Din ‘Ubaydullah Zakani), compiled some racy accounts of male homosexuality, including the following:

Sultan Mahmud [the Ghaznavid ruler, d. 1030 CE], accompanied by Talhak, the jester, attended the sermon of a certain preacher. When they arrived, the preacher was saying that whoever had made love to a young boy, on the day of judgement would be made to carry him across the narrow bridge of Sirat, which leads to heaven. Sultan Mahmud was terrified and began to weep. Talhak told him: ‘O Sultan, do not weep. Be happy that on that day you will not be left on foot either.’ (‘Obeyd-e Zakani 1985, p. 78)

The punchline here is not that the sultan had been the penetrative partner in his sexual relations with adolescent boys—it is that he had also played the receptive role in his own youth. Only a jester could get away with pointing this out to the most prominent ruler of the Ghaznavid Empire. Yet, the compilation and dissemination of this anecdote—whether true or fictitious—deliciously contrasts the religious castigation of homosexual sex with its ubiquity in society. Another anecdote reinforces this point:

A preacher was saying in Kashan that on the day of Resurrection the custody of the holy well of Kothar [in Paradise] will be with Imam ‘Ali (the cousin of the Prophet), and he will give its water to the man of anal integrity. A man from the audience got up and said, ‘Your reverence, if this is the case, he will have to put it back in the pitcher and drink it all himself.’ (‘Obeyd-e Zakani 1985, p. 82)

Besides these ribald vignettes, there is abundant historical evidence of intimate same-sex acts and relationships 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 unquestioningly—such as ‘homosexual’, ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, ‘transgender’ or even ‘queer’—because these might misrepresent historical lived realities.

Historical research is therefore necessary because the claims that ‘homosexuality’ was always condemned in Islam—or not automatically condemned, as argued by Kugle—often rely upon history to construct or contest religious ‘authenticity’. Yet, it is also risky to translate the past using contemporary filters because we might lose or distort crucial nuances and insights. For similar reasons, it would be problematic to employ the category of ‘Islam’ uncritically—as though its meaning has remained static or uncontested amongst Muslims throughout history. Bearing this in mind, there are arguments for and against the usage of the term ‘homosexuality’ in historical Muslim environments.

One view, put forward by the sociologist Stephen Murray and historian Will Roscoe (1997, pp. 6–7), begins with the premise that there have been two main expressions of ‘modern homosexualities’ in the history of the West. According to the ‘gender-variant’ model, ‘to be homosexual was to be a non-masculine man or a non-feminine woman’. The ‘sexed-being’ model includes those attracted to individuals of the same anatomical sex, regardless of their levels of masculinity or femininity. Murray and Roscoe 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, p. 132) further contends that these gender-variant ‘homosexual roles ... were and are lexicalised and written about’ in various genres of literature in Muslim societies. These labels for homosexual roles and the social networks that emerged around them therefore demonstrate the existence of homosexual identities in premodern Muslim societies (Roscoe and Murray 1997, p. 5).

The development of these ‘Islamic homosexualities’ therefore challenges dominant ‘Eurocentric’ preconceptions that contemporary expressions of homosexuality are ‘incomparable to any other pattern’ throughout history or in non-Western societies (Roscoe and Murray 1997, p. 4). Instead, there might actually be shared characteristics between past and present expressions of homosexuality as well as between Muslim and European societies (Roscoe and Murray 1997, pp. 5–7).

The counterargument is that the concept of ‘homosexuality’ simply did not exist among premodern and early modern Muslims in the Middle East (El-Rouayheb 2009, p. 1). Instead, Islamic legal rulings from the premodern to early modern era only prohibited sexual intercourse between men, while non-sexual expressions of same-sex affection were

allowed to unfold publicly and privately (El-Rouayheb 2009, p. 3). Even then, there was a hierarchy of prohibitions of sexual relations between men—most severely on penetrative anal sex (*liwat*), while ‘kissing, fondling, and non-anal intercourse’ were considered ‘less serious transgressions’ (El-Rouayheb 2009, p. 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, pp. 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, pp. 130–134).

According to the historian Khaled El-Rouayheb (2009, p. 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 coexistence of visible, public same-sex affections and stringent punishments for *liwat*. In fact, this phenomenon could also be seen in some premodern and early modern expressions of sexuality in Europe. El-Rouayheb’s description of same-sex affections in Ottoman society could also apply to the ancient Greeks who commended ‘chaste infatuation with youthful, male beauty’ but not ‘baser, carnal longing’ (Phillips and Reay 2011, p. 5). Murray (1997, p. 14) maintains, however, that ‘homosexuality’ did exist in Muslim societies but was tolerated because of ‘a common Islamic ethos of avoidance in acknowledging sex and sexualities’, or ‘the will not to know’.

Despite these different stances on the applicability of the term ‘homosexuality’, there is agreement that as the modern era progressed, Europeans became increasingly shocked and scandalised by same-sex affections among males in Muslim societies (El-Rouayheb 2009, pp. 1–2; S. O. Murray 1997, p. 15). Many European travellers and writers interpreted these displays as examples of sexual immorality that were characteristic of Islam. Eventually, this encounter with ‘European Victorian morality’ led Muslims themselves to equate *liwat* with ‘homosexuality’ (El-Rouayheb 2009, p. 9).

Against this background, the question of historical punishments for *liwat* in Muslim societies must also be contextualised further. In the Ottoman Empire, for example, *liwat* perpetrated by a married, free adult male carried two different punishments—the death sentence under the shari’ah courts and a progressive fine under the *kanun* (Sultan’s code)

(Ze'evi 2006, pp. 56, 61). The same was also true for heterosexual zina (adultery) under the two legal codes. These differences were due in part to the difference in evidentiary requirements (Ze'evi 2006, p. 65)—while the shari'ah prescribed harsh punishments for sexual offences, its standards of proof made it nearly impossible to indict and condemn any perpetrators. On the other hand, while the kanun prescribed more lenient punishments, it also enabled guilt to be proven on flimsier circumstantial grounds. The historian Dror Ze'evi (2006, p. 66) suggests that, overall, the coexistence of the shari'ah and kanun in the Ottoman Empire resulted in a new 'legal-sexual script'—from the ruling class' perspective at least, sexual offences were no longer 'grave crimes or sins against the creator'.

The relatively relaxed attitudes about sexual behaviour in Ottoman society—including liwat—can also be discerned through other historical sources, such as medical texts, dream interpretation literature and shadow theatre (Ze'evi 2006, pp. 23, 115–116, 141–143). In fact, the bulk of condemnations of homosexuality or homoerotic relationships in Ottoman society began surfacing in the writings of European travellers after the seventeenth century. Up to the late sixteenth century, European travel writing still contained a sense of awe and fear at the Ottomans' strength and power. The more disdainful tone in later European travel literature coincided with the post-seventeenth-century rise of European powers (Ze'evi 2006, p. 152). This is the context in which the attitudes of the ruling elites in the Middle East began to shift, within and beyond the Ottoman Empire.

Focusing on Iran, the gender historian Afsaneh Najmabadi (2008, pp. 288–289) 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. 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, p. 4, 2008, p. 286).

Najmabadi neither insists that premodern Iranian same-sex practices were 'homosexual' nor claims 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, p. 282). For example, she examines how perceptions of *amrad* (attractive, beardless youths pursued by adult males), shifted from premodern to early modern Iran. According to premodern 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, p. 283).

Furthermore, although conceptions of gender and sexuality were and still are central to modernist and counter-modernist politics in the Middle East, they were not solely imposed by European powers (Najmabadi 2005, p. 8). In the case of Iran, for centuries there was ‘cultural hybridisation’ with Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and the Indian Subcontinent (Najmabadi 2005, p. 5). Iranians, Europeans, and people from other cultures mutually informed and influenced each other’s sensibilities about gender, sexuality and other matters. Thus, even though European powers used their military and economic strength to colonise many non-European societies, ‘cultural traffic’ more likely flowed on a ‘two-way street’. There is therefore evidence that in both ‘West’ and ‘East’, people constructed sexual ‘types’ based on the existence of particular sexual norms, which complicates the idea that there is a straightforward ‘East/West divide’ regarding sexuality (Al-Kassim 2008, p. 307). The issue now is how the regulation of gender and sexuality becomes tied to nationalism, or to the rhetoric of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ in current understandings of the West and Islam.

Non-Middle Eastern Muslim societies also had particular sexual hierarchies that partially accommodated same-sex relations in the premodern era. For example, the ‘gender pluralism’ of early modern Muslim Southeast Asia—alongside its less hierarchical relations between men and women compared to neighbouring regions—resulted in a certain degree of tolerance for homosexual relationships (Peletz 2011, p. 661). However, these relationships needed to comply with a ‘heterogender’ pattern, where feminised men formed relationships with masculine men (Peletz 2011, p. 665)—a phenomenon that also fits into the pattern of what Murray and Roscoe refer to as ‘gender-variant’ homosexualities.

As an example, the *bissu*—feminised male ritual specialists among the Bugis of Sulawesi, Indonesia—could actually marry and live with masculine men. 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, p. 664). From the seventeenth century, however, they were discredited, expelled and even executed by rising Islamic movements driven by aggressively anti-feudal and legalistic interpretations of shari‘ah. 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, p. 669). And so, like the *amrad* in Iran, the *bissu* went from enjoying relative acceptance to becoming targets of punishment and humiliation—but this was not solely due to European influence.

These contradictory attitudes towards ‘gender pluralism’ continued well into the second half of the twentieth century. 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, pp. 671, 673). The main breadwinners among these same-sex couples were ‘transvestite dancers of a Thai-origin dramatic genre known as *mak yong*’ and these villages were patronised and supported by none other than the sultan.

The desires of some gay Muslims for their identities and relationships to be recognised and even sanctioned within Islam might very well be unprecedented. Yet, they are also shaped by multiple historical factors—Western-colonial, national, and local. The question is, to what extent do these factors influence the experiences and choices of gay Muslims in ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ contexts now?

Gay Muslims in the West

First shown on Britain’s Channel 4 in August 2015, the documentary ‘Muslim Drag Queens’ (Plowright 2015) investigates how gay Muslims in Britain publicly reconcile their sexuality with their cultural identity

and religious traditions. In a pivotal scene, the Mauritian-born student Ibrahim rehearses for a drag performance with Asifa Lahore, a famous British Muslim drag queen. Halfway through, the alarm on Ibrahim's phone goes off—it is a recording of the *adhan* (call to prayer), marking the time for 'Asr (the mid-afternoon prayer). Asifa suggests going to a mosque, but Ibrahim is comfortable praying then and there. This is unthinkable to Asifa, because even though it is closed for the afternoon, they are still in a pub—an alcohol-serving environment. Ibrahim remains unfazed.

While Ibrahim performs his prayers alone, an incredulous Asifa says to the camera, 'I'm thinking, "God, he's brave." I don't think I could do that.' When the film-maker asks later whether Ibrahim is afraid of what the wider Muslim community might think, Ibrahim replies, 'Oh no, I'm not afraid at all. I know people are going to say, "Oh my God, he's blasphemous. Oh my God, he's haram." All kinds of things. I'm fine with it. I believe in my bond with Allah, with God.'

This vital moment in the programme captures the recurring themes in contemporary scholarly research on Islam and homosexuality in the West. These mostly revolve around the possibilities and obstacles for reconciling being gay and Muslim. The scholarly attention paid to the conflicts that gay Muslims face is often in response to widespread perceptions about the gap between Muslim and secular Western attitudes on sexual freedom. These themes also inform non-academic investigations into Islam and sexual diversity, mostly by journalists based in the West (Bradley 2010; Manji 2005; Sharma 2007; Whitaker 2011). The exchange between Asifa and Ibrahim in 'Muslim Drag Queens' is an illuminating example of how gay Muslims work out their personal spirituality amid the wider politics of Islam.

In a post-9/11 environment, there is evidence showing that many gay Muslims consistently have to navigate three interrelated dimensions in their lives: 'religious identity', 'ethno-cultural identity' and 'colour identity' (Minwalla et al. 2005, p. 123). This involves balancing and renegotiating a belief in Allah, family and community connections, and belonging within the predominantly white and non-Muslim gay scene. The 9/11 attacks, however, resulted in a formidable new obstacle for gay Muslims in the West—the rising climate of suspicion towards Islam,

including within the gay community. Under these conditions, ‘queer Muslims’—particularly in North America—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) (Khan 2010, p. 356).

Further evidence suggests that, in a post-9/11 world, Muslim LGB identities in Britain are similarly and significantly more politicised than other LGB identities (Yip 2005, pp. 272, 283–285). In the British context, many LGB Muslims also engage in ‘religious individualism’—‘a religiosity that prioritises the authority of the self over that of the institution’ (Yip 2005, p. 278). However, this ‘individualisation’ of Islam among Muslim LGBs is constrained by the ‘religious and sociocultural roles and obligations’ related to their immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds (Yip 2005, p. 285).

This observation about ‘religious individualism’ does not mean, however, that ‘self-authority’ has the upper hand over institutional authority for gay Muslims. This would imply that ‘the self is always distinguishable from, and exists in opposition to, that which lies outside it’ (Wood 2010, p. 278). Rather, the experiences of gay Muslims could also be taken as evidence of the ‘relative *formativeness*’ of religious institutions—instead of a dichotomy between the individual self and religious institutions, there are ‘diverse social authorities’ people engage with when constructing their identities (Wood 2010, p. 279, italics in original). This is why it is still helpful to study peoples’ ‘lived experiences’ of religion, gender and sexuality ‘to understand how individual religious actors make sense of the connection between their religious faith and sexuality’ (Yip and Page 2013, pp. 5, 160).

Not all of these lived experiences can be empowering. For some gay Muslim men in Britain, conflicts between religion and sexuality result in ‘anxiety’, ‘suicidal thoughts’, ‘shame’, ‘guilt’ and ‘fear’ (Jaspal 2012, p. 84, 2014, p. 56). In such cases, networks of friendship with other queer Muslims are crucial in helping individuals ‘to reconcile conflicting parts of their lives through fundamentally shifting their interpretation and understanding of Islam’ (Siraj 2014, pp. 205–206).

Additionally, gay Muslims in the West do not only grapple with Muslim attitudes towards homosexuality but also widespread stereotypes

about Islam and Muslims. The portrayal of ‘Islam and homosexuality as incompatible’ is also a recurring theme in ‘Orientalist’ stereotypes, often internalised by ‘diasporic Muslims’ who face ‘unbearable pressure to assimilate’ into their host societies (Al-Sayyad 2010, pp. 377, 381).

This can result in a feeling of being ‘neither here nor there’ among gay Muslims in the West. In his study of 12 queer Muslims in Australia, for example, Ibrahim Abraham (2009, pp. 84–85) contends that public debates there 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, pp. 88–89, italics in original). Many gay Muslims therefore try to ‘compartmentalise’ their religious and sexual identities, downplaying being gay or Muslim depending on how unsafe or uncomfortable they feel.

The idea that Islam is inimical to sexual freedom—especially homosexuality—has become commonplace in many parts of the West. In the Netherlands, for example, discussions on multiculturalism often involve and indicate negative attitudes towards Islam, which is widely perceived as hostile to gay rights (Mepschen et al. 2010, p. 965). Many 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. 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 (Bangstad 2011, pp. 5–7). These reactions overlooked class dynamics—mainly the deprived nature of the Oslo neighbourhood where these events occurred. Instead, they escalated into a nationwide panic in which Muslim immigrants were portrayed as illiberal and European Norwegians as liberal.

The political scientist Joseph Massad argues that such 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. On the eve of modernity, he argues, Europeans predominantly considered Muslims inferior

for being too permissive about homosexuality, whereas current Western public opinion considers Islam too repressive (Massad 2007, p. 37). While this observation is backed by historical evidence, 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, pp. 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’. He characterises these gay Arabs 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”’.

This dualistic conception of the ‘Gay International’ has sparked off numerous criticisms, some of which are especially relevant to the experiences of gay Muslims in the West. There is the question of whether ‘Western liberationists’ can actually create Muslim ‘homosexuals’ through their activism. It is equally plausible to argue that, in the West at least, gay Muslims have ‘the agency and determinism to choose their own identifications’ (Al-Sayyad 2010, p. 384). Also, while it might be true that ‘current forms of queer political strategies contain a Western bias’, Massad’s conception of the ‘Gay International’ might be too monolithic (Rahman 2014, p. 5). The sociologist and queer theorist Momin Rahman (2014, p. 5) 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, pp. 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 or queer Muslims in the West show that the study of Islam and sexuality is not politically or ideologically neutral. In fact, this book is partly driven by the need to compare the impacts of Orientalist stereotypes and Islamophobia on the experiences of gay Muslims in two different national contexts. As I show

in upcoming chapters, the stories I came across complicate the notion that gay Muslims are collaborators or victims of ‘Orientalist’ or Islamist politics.

What these studies also highlight is that the experiences of gay Muslims in the West are observed, analysed and written about by researchers who carry their own entrenched views on Islam and homosexuality. The sociologist Asifa Siraj (2012, p. 65), for example, acknowledges that her personal identity as a hijab-wearing, heterosexual, Scottish Muslim woman produced a certain amount of ‘heterosexist bias’ in her earlier work when she found herself ‘judging’ her participants’ ‘beliefs regarding the accommodation of homosexuality in Islam’, which subsequently affected her analysis. In her earlier work, Siraj (2006, p. 204) worked from the assumption that the Qur’an unambiguously condemns homosexuality, with no room for interpretive flexibility. Her reflections illustrate the specific ways that scholarship on being gay and Muslim can be shaped by the researcher’s own unexamined assumptions. And these assumptions are equally present in studies of sexual minorities in Muslim-majority countries.

Sexual Minorities in Muslim-Majority Countries

In 2012, the South Korean musician Psy scored a monster hit with his single ‘Gangnam Style’, topping the charts in more than 30 countries including France, Russia, Italy and Britain. In December 2012, during my first research visit to Malaysia, I saw how the K-pop genre had also exploded in the underground gay scene there. At a popular gay nightclub, my friends and I enjoyed a 30-minute drag show performed exclusively to Korean hits, including ‘Gangnam Style’. The dancers consisted mostly of Malays who were either drag queens or *mak nyah*. Their choreography was slick and sexy—the crowd loved it. Yet Razak, in his late 20s, lamented afterwards that they should have also included a couple of numbers by American popstars, especially his favourite—Beyoncé.

Despite this slight complaint, Razak—who is gay and a practising Muslim—still partied with gusto. We danced energetically, cheering and laughing when we punctuated the music with campy moves. Razak occasionally pointed out things that amused him, like the T-shirts worn by two young men dancing together—one said ‘find it, f**k it and leave it’ while the other said ‘I think he’s gay.’ The club has occasionally been ‘raided’ by the police and Syariah enforcers, with some of the drag queens arrested. Yet it continues to operate, and gay and transgender Muslims still frequent it in droves.

My experiences in Malaysia show that many of the recurring themes in discussions on Islam and homosexuality in the West are also relevant in Muslim-majority countries. How would sexual minorities here navigate their sexual and religious identities, especially when these might transgress wider social and cultural expectations? The contrasting factor here would be the impact of dominant expressions of Islam as a majority religion on gay Muslims and other sexual minorities. Related to this would be the legacy of Western colonialism which continues to shape current understandings of Islam and sexuality in these contexts.

In Indonesia, some are increasingly adopting Western labels and innovating on them, for example, ‘Indonesianising’ gay and lesbian into *gay* and *lesbi* (Boellstorff 2005b, p. 5). Although there have been historically ‘indigenous’ labels to describe gender and sexual minorities, the anthropologist Tom Boellstorff (2005b, p. 35) argues that there is no ‘clear temporal trajectory connecting *gay* and *lesbi* with “indigenous” homosexualities’. In fact, it looks as though the Indonesian state itself has unwittingly fostered the emergence of *gay* and *lesbi* identities through its own modernising policies (Boellstorff 2005b, pp. 154–155). And rather than being Westernised elites, *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians are actually part of a new, post-independence middle class (Boellstorff 2005b, pp. 118–119).

Many of these *gay* and *lesbi* Muslims also fashion their identities without necessarily feeling the need to reconcile with Islam’s position on homosexuality. According to Boellstorff (2005b, p. 183), some of his gay Muslim interlocutors did not see homosexuality as sinful, while others saw it as a minor sin easily forgiven by God. Their innovative understandings of Islam enabled them to ‘inhabit’ the apparent ‘incommensurability’ between being *gay* or *lesbi* and Muslim (Boellstorff 2005a, p. 575).

Also, *gay* and *lesbi* do not necessarily mean the exact same thing in Indonesia as ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ would in the English-speaking West (which is why they are italicised). Even in the West, their meanings and the way they are used by different people are neither settled nor monolithic (Boellstorff 2005b, p. 8). In Indonesia, however, the gap is considerably larger in the translation of ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ into locally intelligible terms. This does not make *gay* and *lesbi* incoherent ‘subject positions’ (Boellstorff 2005b, pp. 5–7). Rather, it means that in a globalised world, translation is always necessary at different levels yet is always incomplete.

In northern Nigeria, it can be argued that it is mostly educated urbanites who adopt the term ‘gay’ which, in that context, might partially support the notion of it being a ‘Western’ and ‘elite’ identity (Gaudio 2009, pp. 9–10). 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 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. However, as with the bissu in Indonesia and amrad in Iran, ‘yan daudu enjoyed a relatively high degree of tolerance in Hausa Muslim society up until the nineteenth century. They began being viewed increasingly negatively after the turn of the twentieth century (Gaudio 2009, p. 124). According to the anthropologist Rudolf Gaudio (2009, p. 191), the growing persecution of Nigerian sexual minorities with the coming 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’.

Gaudio’s findings are also similar to Boellstorff’s on another point—although ‘yan daudu perceive their religious identities and sexual dispositions as incompatible, this does not cause them too much internal conflict. Hence, ‘although ‘yan daudu understand that their unconven-

tional 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' (Gaudio 2009, p. 141). 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, pp. 117–122, 141).

The research of Gaudio and Boellstorff shows how Muslim sexual minorities negotiate their lives in the face of growing threats to sexual diversity, especially amidst interrelated transformations of the nation-state and expressions of Islam. In her more recent work, Najmabadi explores how the Iranian state and its administration of Islam are being transformed by transsexual advocacy. In post-revolutionary Iran, biomedical, psychology, and fiqh practitioners have mutually influenced each other's discourses to construct 'transsexual' as a distinct category of persons (Najmabadi 2011, p. 540). Despite the initially negative loadings of this category, Iranian transsexual activists are carving out spaces of acceptance by engaging critically with these overlapping discourses. Therefore, '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' (Najmabadi 2011, p. 534). What is usually glossed as 'the state' is therefore constantly being shaped and re-shaped, fractured and re-fractured, and ordered and re-ordered by different actors.

Najmabadi's work simultaneously addresses the problems of translation (as highlighted by Boellstorff and Gaudio) and supposedly 'foreign' impositions of sexual categories (as argued by Massad). In the case of Iran, there were push and pull factors behind the entry of Western categories of gender and sexuality into local discourses and which now enable them to circulate within the Islamic bureaucracy. However, rather than focusing on the 'origin of the import', we can learn much by investigating what such 'borrowing, appropriation, and embracing means for the importers' (Najmabadi 2011, p. 550). The Iranian context suggests that people mix foreign and local or old and new terms to make sense of their lives amid changing circumstances. Along the way, they face numerous risks as well as opportunities to overcome some of these risks.

Comparable developments can be observed elsewhere—for example, in the ways that ‘sexually diverse and gender-variant’ Muslims in Pakistan engage with localised understandings of Islamic and human rights laws (Hamzic 2016, p. 2).

Apart from providing first-hand accounts of the lives of Muslim sexual minorities, these examples from Indonesia, Nigeria and Iran help us to understand manifestations of Islam, sexuality and the state beyond the Arabic-speaking Middle East. They open up useful leads for exploring the experiences of Muslim sexual minorities in Malaysia, which has already been initiated by some Malaysian researchers.

The status of sexual minorities in Malaysia—particularly those who are Muslim—has remained especially controversial ever since the sacking of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in 1998 on charges of sodomy and corruption (explained further in Chap. 4). Yet, the controversies and moral panics involving Muslim sexual minorities here also need to be understood within conditions where the state’s regulation of Islam ‘upholds heterosexuality as the sole legitimate form of sexuality’ (tan 2012b, p. 8). But state and non-state actors who advocate more stringent applications of Islamic law are also split by significant ideological and political differences (tan 2012b, p. 53). Therefore, state-led efforts to systematise and expand the application of Islamic laws might appear uniform but are fraught with factional rivalries. These often involve 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 2012b, pp. 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’.

While the outcries about sexual deviance immediately post-1998 revolved primarily around male homosexuality or *liwat*, the focus soon expanded to include female homosexuality and transgenderism. Yet, the evidence shows that some Malaysian Muslim *pengkicks* (masculine women erotically attracted to feminine women) remained largely indifferent or defiant towards increasing stigmatisation. *Pengkicks* were espe-

cially targeted in a 2008 *fatwa* (official Islamic ruling) from the Islamic authorities forbidding ‘tomboy’ identities, which resulted in much negative media coverage (Wong 2012, p. 443). Amidst this controversy, some pengkids agreed to be interviewed in the mass media and openly challenged the fatwa. On the whole, pengkids are increasingly subject to religious and political scrutiny possibly because pengkid identity is modern—it may be an appropriation of the English term ‘punk kids’—and becoming more visible (Wong 2012, p. 444).

On the other hand, there are also younger gay Muslim men who are reluctant to challenge the state or religious authorities and appear content with their status in Malaysia (Zainon and Kamila 2011, p. 287). Although they might feel conflicted about being gay and Muslim and aspire to get married eventually for ‘a better future’, they do not seem to feel overly discriminated against or persecuted by the state (Zainon and Kamila 2011, p. 298). Like some Indonesian *gays* and *lesbis* or Nigerian ‘yan daudus, they do not necessarily feel the need to ‘reconcile’ their sexual and religious identities.

Another way of looking at this is that gay Malaysian Muslims do not challenge ‘Malaysian institutional Islam’ by being overtly confrontational but simply by being gay and Muslim (J. N. Goh 2014, p. 609). For example, the same-sex civil partnership of Ariff Alfian Rosli, a Malaysian Muslim man, in Ireland in late 2011 triggered the fury of Muslim pressure groups—especially after leaked pictures showed him dressed in traditional Malay costume at the ceremony. It can be argued that these images ‘manifested the unthinkable coalition of a Malaysian Malay-Muslim masculine identity with non-heteronormative sexuality within a matrimonial framework’ (J. N. Goh 2014, p. 606). In response to the controversy, Ariff Alfian never denied that he was gay or in a civil partnership, but instead asserted that he was Muslim and nothing could shake his faith. This 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 (J. N. Goh 2014, p. 607).

Thus, despite strong anti-homosexual rhetoric imposed by the state on religious grounds, Muslim sexual minorities might still have nuanced connections with Islam on an individual level. Many supposedly ‘Islamic’

positions are also often shaped by particular political exigencies. This makes cross-national comparisons of the lived experiences of gay Muslims particularly useful to examine the different ways in which Islam is understood—or manipulated—in relation to gender and sexuality.

Beyond Gay Muslims

The issues at stake for gay Muslims are not confined to debates about homosexuality and Islam. But if we interpret them solely through the lens of what ‘proper’ Islam ‘says’ about homosexuality, then we will probably be confounded by people who have reconciled being gay and Muslim. Their choices will seem incongruous, hypocritical or even deviant.

Besides, debates on Islam and homosexuality do not only affect gay Muslims. Before I embarked on this research, I had numerous heterosexual Muslim friends who were also struggling to find answers of their own on this topic. An especially good friend of mine—also a devout Muslim—confessed that during her university days, she was unwavering in her belief that homosexuality was an abomination. She also believed that non-Muslims could not enter paradise in the afterlife and that women imams (prayer leaders) such as Amina Wadud were ‘deviant’ Muslims. Yet during an extremely traumatic personal crisis, the person who gave her the support she needed most was a gay atheist classmate. Her circle of Muslim ‘sisters’ seemed to be more concerned about whether she was missing her five daily prayers or still tying her hijab properly. The gay atheist, however, was not troubled by these issues—he was her shoulder to cry on, her confidant, and her biggest cheerleader. After this crisis was over, my friend remained deeply pious but said she simply could not interpret the Qur’an as condemning LGBT people or non-Muslims anymore. It would be woefully inadequate to interpret this dramatic shift in her perspective solely through the lens of what so-called true Islam dictates.

A social scientific approach, however, would illuminate how some people make choices that they find rational, yet do not make sense to others. Sociology has a particularly rich legacy of studies of deviance, which show

how some people come to be regarded as society's 'outsiders'. The insights from these studies can help us make sense of the experiences of gay Muslims in different contexts. These perspectives can be sharpened by other insights on ethnicity, nationalism, social movements, and globalisation—factors which often complicate or overlap with debates on religion and sexuality. Also, the experiences of sexual minorities in non-Muslim environments can provide useful comparisons for us to analyse the relationship between religion and sexuality more broadly.

Furthermore, studying the experiences of gay Muslims—and their opponents and supporters—from a sociological perspective can shed light on the ways that religion and sexuality have an impact on majority-minority relations. Majorities, minorities, and the many expressions of religion and sexuality are not pre-ordained or 'naturally' occurring—they emerge out of specific social and cultural conditions.

Conformity and 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, p. 4). In the 1950s and 1960s, however, sociological understandings of 'deviance' provided new directions in the study of social norms regarding gender and sexuality (Seidman 1997, p. 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, pp. 188–189), who proposed that our values and goals—which are shaped by our cultural backgrounds—are regulated by various 'institutional controls'. Under 'normal' circumstances, we are accepted as members of society when we meet our goals by adhering to 'institutionally prescribed conduct'. But what happens to individuals who fail to reach their goals even though they have followed all the rules? According to Merton, some of them start exploring 'deviant' alternatives. Merton (1968, p. 194) further suggested that there are five 'modes of individual

adaptation' 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., in Becker 1991, pp. 30, 34–35, 36–38, 167–168) and stigmatised identities (e.g., in Goffman 1990, pp. 53, 71, 102, 109). These studies rarely mentioned religion, however, and focused on general reactions towards the supposed disreputability of various 'deviants'—including drug users, single mothers and homosexuals.

'Deviance' has a negative ring to it, however, and has fallen out of favour even as a category to be analysed. Yet, there are important insights from sociological studies of 'deviance' that can explain the current experiences of gay Muslims in specific social contexts. Particularly relevant here is Howard Becker's study of societal reactions towards marijuana users and jazz musicians in the 1950s in the USA. Becker (1991, p. 147) coined the term 'moral entrepreneurs' to refer to the organised groups 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 the '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, pp. 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'—usually consisting 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—for example, finite human and financial resources that make it difficult to

juggle different moral portfolios—leading to arbitrary and selective enforcement (Becker 1991, p. 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, p. 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 USA but did not necessarily identify as 'gay' or 'bisexual'. Within this context of intense stigma against homosexuality and state repression, Humphreys (1970, pp. 143–146) found that many of these men were married, outwardly 'respectable', and even held conservative attitudes on issues such as civil rights and the Vietnam War. Their conservatism functioned as pre-emptive defence—what Humphreys termed 'the breastplate of righteousness' (originally from Ephesians 6:14)—to conceal their 'deviance' from potentially damaging public scrutiny (Humphreys 1970, p. 135). These insights remain especially relevant for Malaysia, 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 some gay liberation activists in the 1960s who assumed that homosexuality was universal or inherent. Instead, notions of 'homosexuality' had changed over time and differed depending on the cultural context. For McIntosh (1968, pp. 184–186), the 'institutionalised homosexual role' emerged as a consequence of social control. Society created and vilified this 'homosexual role' to maintain the purity of the rest of its members, the same way punishing criminals was meant to keep the majority of the population law-abiding. This societal regulation contributed to the formation of a homosexual identity or 'condition', which many 'homosexuals themselves welcome and support' now, since this 'removes the element of anxious choice' of staying 'deviant' or becoming 'normal'.

The aforementioned perspectives contrast with essentialist or biologically deterministic notions that 'sexual desires are not a "preference" but a fixed "orientation"' (Epstein 1987, p. 133). Homosexuality can be

viewed as an aberration according to both perspectives—hard essentialists might condemn it as an ‘incurable illness’, while hard constructionists might regard it as a sin, albeit open to rehabilitation (Epstein 1987, p. 134). At the same time, homosexuality can also be defended from both viewpoints—essentialists can assert that some people are just born gay, while constructionists might regard sexuality as fluid and therefore that sexual expressions should spring from free individual choice. In practise, the condemnation or advocacy of sexual diversity often mixes essentialist and constructionist notions.

Sometimes, a combination of these perspectives can spark off 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 why ‘the deviant label ... does not always “take”’ (Cohen 2011, p. 8). According to Stanley Cohen (2011, p. 14), moral panics grow out of ‘structural conduciveness’ (the 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’). Prolonged strain can produce a ‘boundary crisis’ or ‘a period in which a group’s uncertainty about itself is resolved in ritualistic confrontations between the deviant and the community’s official agents’ (Cohen 2011, p. 219). Such boundary crises are characterised by the escalation of social control—for example, by law enforcement agencies—which often pushes those who are targeted as ‘deviant’ to retaliate more aggressively, resulting in a spiral of ‘deviance amplification’ (Cohen 2011, p. 226).

Concerns about homosexuality and Islam have triggered or nearly triggered moral panics in different national environments. In 2013, for example, so-called Muslim patrols made the headlines in Britain when a group of young men put up online videos of themselves harassing and intimidating people in East London. Their actions included making homophobic remarks and insulting women whom they accused of dressing immodestly, on the pretext of ‘enforcing [shari’ah] law’. The three men involved were charged and jailed later the same year (Jones 2013). Such incidents have occurred alongside other security panics that focus on Muslims as particularly prone to radicalisation, especially in the aftermath of the 7 July 2005 bombings in London. According to the political

scientist Stuart Croft (2012, p. 2), the disproportionate attention on disaffected young Muslim men as potential candidates for extremism follows a pattern of the ‘securitization’ of Muslims in the West.

In Malaysia, homosexuality is overwhelmingly portrayed as deviant in mass media reports and in the pronouncements of several political and religious leaders. Nevertheless, these portrayals of homosexuality or particular Muslims as deviant do not always result in sustained moral panics, even if they have the potential to do so. Understanding these variations can give us more nuanced insights into how gay Muslims experience and negotiate environments where debates on Islam and homosexuality are especially polarised.

Sociological studies of homosexuality have been critiqued by some queer theorists for being too narrow and rigid, and for upholding Eurocentric notions of homosexuality (Ferguson 2005, pp. 53, 61–62). These criticisms do not devalue the sociological study of sexuality but rather enhance it, considering that queer theorists are also concerned with fluid and socially constructed expressions of gender and sexuality (Butler 1993, p. 21, 2008, p. 34; Jagose 2003, p. 3; Seidman 1997, pp. 11, 17). Prominent queer theorists such as Judith Butler are also influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, whose argument that modern expressions of sexuality are determined by state regulation is shared by many sociologists (Foucault 1990, p. 143, 1991, p. 95, 2003, pp. 243–245, 252, 257). Ultimately, these rejoinders from queer theorists can be taken as reminders for scholars of religion to analyse interrelated aspects of religion and sexuality more critically (Schippert 2011, p. 82).

Ethnicity and Nationalism

People sometimes unknowingly or silently assume that religious and ethnic identity are linked—at other times, these links are drawn more explicitly. The Malaysian constitution, for example, equates being Malay with being Muslim—Islam is therefore assumed as a core ingredient in the ethnic majority’s identity. In Britain, Muslims consist mostly of ethnic minorities of immigrant backgrounds—this combination of ethnic and

religious minority statuses influences the ways that British Muslims have become part of public life. The experiences of gay Muslims in both countries are therefore influenced by the ways that religious, ethnic and national identity intersect.

The term ‘identity’, however, can be used in various and often contradictory ways. As with terms such as ‘race’, ‘nation’ and ‘ethnicity’, ‘identity ... is both a category of practice and a category of analysis’—its usage thus requires analytical precision and clarity (Brubaker and Cooper 2006, p. 31). The sociologist Rogers Brubaker and historian Frederick Cooper (2006, pp. 41–48) recommend three analytical clusters to help clarify our perspectives of ‘identity’—as categorisation by self and other (including the state as a ‘powerful identifier’); as our fluid self-understandings that motivate action in particular circumstances; and as an ‘emotionally laden sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded group’. These clusters can help us discern the connections between an individual’s formation of identity and his or her surrounding social networks, institutions and belief systems.

According to this framework, there is no causal or inevitable relationship between religion, ethnicity and national identity, but they can share overlapping meanings and symbols. Additionally, Brubaker (2012, p. 3, italics in original) proposes that the specific relationship between religion and nationalism can be approached in four ways—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’.

These approaches can help us distinguish between ‘the various ways in which Islam has accommodated itself to—and been inflected by—differing national and state contexts’ (Brubaker 2012, p. 12). For instance, in Malaysia and Britain, Islam is sometimes mobilised by certain groups and individuals as a ‘politicised ethnicity’ (Brubaker 2012, p. 5). In Malaysia, however, the constitutional fusion of Malay and Muslim identity means that Islam becomes ‘so deeply imbricated or intertwined with nationalism as to be part of the phenomenon’ (Brubaker 2012, p. 9). 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, p. 13). On the other hand, Muslim activists in Britain have mobilised around religious identity to negotiate for 'economic resources, political representation, symbolic recognition [and] cultural reproduction' (Brubaker 2012, p. 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, p. 415). By doing this, '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 (Hussain and Sherif 2014, p. 420). The use of Islam by British Muslim activists is thus analogous to but not the equivalent of nationalism, whereas in Malaysia, Islam becomes part of Malay nationalism.

Nationalist trends also often influence attitudes towards sexuality. For example, the modern European nationalisms that emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were accompanied by marked changes in notions of moral respectability (Mosse 1985, p. 3). The rise of nationalism and this new 'ideal of respectability' in sex and morality also coincided with the growth of the middle class (Mosse 1985, p. 4). In this environment, the national stereotypes in Germany and England during the Napoleonic wars conceived 'manliness' as a combination of courage, manners and moral uprightness (Mosse 1985, p. 13). Other races were 'inferior' because they transgressed the ideals of respectability—'[the] black was thought feckless, while the Jew was without a soul' (Mosse 1985, p. 134). Jewish men were sometimes portrayed as weak for behaving like women, which shows how notions of sexual purity, race and homosexuality could become intertwined in these forms of nationalism (Mosse 1985, pp. 17, 140). Notions of nationhood therefore often incorporate specific notions of manhood and womanhood, in which 'gender symbols' play a particularly significant role (Yuval-Davis 1997, pp. 1, 23).

The boundaries of religion, ethnicity, sexuality and the nation can thus overlap, often through the concerted efforts of 'ethno-political entrepreneurs' (Brubaker 2006, p. 10). The entrepreneurial analogy suggests that these groups and individuals deliberately yet innovatively promote what

they think of as their core interests—ethnicity and morality, possibly infused with religious references. In this way, they share many similar characteristics with Becker’s ‘moral entrepreneurs’, discussed above. Their overlapping interests in ethnicity, religion and morality can become especially potent if they utilise particular notions of sexual ‘pollutions’ as ‘analogies for expressing a general view of the social order’ (Douglas 2002, p. 4). In such contexts, bodily symbolism—particularly the rhetoric of sexual morality—provides a powerful framework for ‘moral’ and ‘ethno-political entrepreneurs’ to maintain or defend notions of ethnic, religious and national cohesion and unity.

In Western liberal democracies, one example would be how, post-9/11, the issue of gay rights has sometimes been manipulated by political ideologues in the USA to justify military invasions of Muslim-led nation-states (Puar 2007, p. xxiv). Where homosexuals were once cast by the political establishment as potential threats (e.g., as Communist collaborators in the 1950s and carriers of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s), they are now held up by certain ideological factions as beneficiaries of liberalising laws and attitudes on gay rights (Puar 2007, p. 4). According to the queer theorist Jasbir Puar (2007, p. 51), this produces ‘homonationalism’—the belief held by certain factions of 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. These attitudes are also informed by enduring stereotypes about sexual repression in Muslim societies (Puar 2007, pp. 81, 92). This puts greater pressure on people who are queer and Muslim to justify and explain their identities and escape scapegoating in the USA (Puar 2007, p. 169).

It is vital to examine how or even if these ‘homonationalist’ trends are developing. One useful way of doing this is by investigating how gay Muslims respond to ‘homonationalism’—whether real or perceived—in different situations. Part of this approach can entail looking at 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 2000, p. 169, 2001, p. 232). In other words, by looking at how gay Muslims use Islam as a ‘cultural resource’ in their

everyday lives, we can better understand the challenges they face—whether in the form of Islamophobic ‘homonationalism’ or homophobic ‘moral’ and ‘ethno-political enterprise’.

The Impacts of Globalisation

The experiences of gay Muslims may differ according to their local or national contexts, but are there any similarities beyond national boundaries? This is where taking globalisation into account can be helpful, since it 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*’ (Robertson 1989, p. 14, italics in original). What are the universals and particulars that shape the experiences of gay Muslims in different environments?

From a global perspective, sexuality is ‘an important arena for the production of modernity, with “gay” and “lesbian” identities acting as markers for modernity’, interpreted differently in different situations (Altman 2001, p. 91). In some instances, there is ‘continuity’ between ‘precolonial forms of homosexual desire and its contemporary emergence’. In others, there is a ‘rupture’ with tradition in the emergence of gay and lesbian identities in ‘Delhi, Lima or Jakarta’ (Altman 2001, p. 88). Either way, homosexuality has become a highly visible indicator of globalisation—specifically of sexual identity. Yet the emergence of ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’ or even ‘queer’ identities in the global South suggests that this supposedly global or universal process is largely dominated by Anglo-Western trends. Comparing the experiences of gay Muslims in different countries can therefore give us a clearer picture of the contours of globalisation in relation to sexuality.

Religion, with its fluidity and diversity, is also an important factor ‘shaping the various processes leading to globalisation’ (Beckford 2000, p. 165). Many religions conceive of their influence and relevance in global terms but try to achieve this according to their own particularistic frameworks (Beckford 2000, p. 173). Some religious movements proactively address concerns that resonate globally, such as promoting peace, basic human rights and care for the environment. For the soci-

ologist of religion James Beckford (2000, p. 183), ‘religious movements, representing dissatisfaction with conventional religion and commitment to change, tend to be in the forefront of positive and negative responses to globalisation’. From this perspective, we can analyse how gay Muslims can be targeted by and still contribute to particular religious movements—within and beyond specific country contexts.

Sexuality and Religion Beyond Muslim Contexts

Homosexuality remains stigmatised or criminalised in various non-Muslim countries, too, where various religious groups and authorities also spread the notion that it is a foreign contamination. In 2013, for example, Russia passed a law that banned gay ‘propaganda’, which was supported by the Russian Orthodox Church and led to a rise in homophobic incidents (Elder 2013). Understanding the relationship between religion, sexuality and the state in these and other situations can provide meaningful comparisons with the experiences of sexual minorities in Muslim contexts.

There are different ways to make sense of the relationship between religion and state in different countries. One is by looking at constitutional provisions, but these are sometimes unreliable in representing the ‘actual relations between religion and power, even in the US’ (Demerath 2007, p. 386). A straightforward division between ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ states does not help, either, because, while many countries ‘have developed their own forms of “separation” [between religion and state], in no country ... is the separation absolute’ (Demerath 2007, p. 382). Instead, the sociologist Nicholas Jay Demerath III (2007, p. 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’.

According to this typology, Malaysia would be a religious state with religious politics—the constitution establishes Islam as the official religion and Islamic rhetoric drives many political debates. 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, pp. 388–389). A country like Russia could be considered a secular state with religious politics—while it has a secular and democratic constitution in principle, political leaders and the Russian Orthodox Church often drive religious and nationalist rhetoric (Essig 1999, p. 140).

While homosexuality was decriminalised after the collapse of the Soviet Union, numerous ‘queer’ Russians remained extremely secretive about their sexualities for a long time afterwards (Essig 1999, p. xi). According to the sociologist Laurie Essig (1999, p. 283), many of those she encountered did not primarily define their homosexual relations in terms of sexual identity but as ‘a set of signs, symbols, rituals, a “style”’. These ‘queer subjectivities’ allowed some to identify as ‘heterosexual’ yet engage in homosexual relations and ‘queer performance without identity’ (Essig 1999, p. 282). This sort of ‘queerness’ was also present on a national scale in popular music, literature and theatre, even though homosexuality was widely stigmatised by political and religious figures (Essig 1999, p. 289). This picture complicates the assumption that ‘secular’ laws or values necessarily translate into explicit acceptance of sexual diversity.

The USA can also be considered a secular state with religious politics, with its own history of anti-homosexual laws and sentiments spearheaded or supported by many religious groups. However, public opinion has shifted significantly in favour of the rights of sexual minorities, especially under the two-term administration of President Barack Obama. These developments could also be observed in the UK which, between 1967 and 2013, went from partially decriminalising homosexuality to legalising same-sex marriage. In the UK and USA, public debates on gender and sexuality do involve contestations of the religious and the secular, but within larger 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).

In the British context, it can be argued that LGB Christians make sense of their religious and sexual identities by prioritising their individual spirituality over the pronouncements of religious authorities (Yip 2003, p. 136). However, the divide between the individual and the institution is not always that clear—for example, many gay Anglican clergy have 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, p. 174). These examples can help illuminate the lived experiences of queer individuals who are also religious and find themselves caught between shifting policies and public attitudes on religion and sexuality. In the contexts of Britain and the USA, particularly, there is already robust literature on how gay adherents of conservative religious groups negotiate their identities (Hunt 2009; Moon 2004, 2012; Thumma and Gray 2005; Yip 2005; Wilcox 2005).

Perspectives from non-Muslim environments can also shed light on the shared histories between nation-states that affect current attitudes on sexuality, for example, among former territories of the British Empire. According to Human Rights Watch (2013, p. 86), of the 80 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, pp. 86–87, 96–99).

Seen in this light, Malaysia shares with many other Commonwealth countries a defence and even strengthening of colonial legislation dressed loudly 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, p. 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, p. 3). From these examples, anti-homosexual sentiments appear to be part of the post-independence political elites' justifications for their own authoritarianism.

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 countries. 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 anti-colonial rhetoric, especially when this is wielded by authoritarian governments. In this study, Chap. 4 takes these state-religion-sexuality configurations into account by systematically comparing and contrasting the management of Islam and sexuality in Britain and Malaysia.

Conclusion

Post 9/11, the increasingly politicised climate surrounding Islam has made it even more challenging to investigate the experiences of Muslim sexual minorities, especially in the light of tragedies such as the Orlando massacre. 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. A strong version of this argument is that 'gay' identity is a Western construct and that gay rights advocacy is largely a continuation of Orientalist imperialism. This notion has been increasingly challenged by newer studies on the experiences of Muslim sexual minorities in various country contexts showing that 'gay' and 'Muslim' identities are not necessarily incompatible. These accounts are accompanied by growing historical scholarship that contests the idea of an 'East/West' divide in experiences of sexuality. Together, these studies inform the efforts of some Muslim scholar-activists to promote interpretations of Islam that embrace sexual diversity, for example, in the work of the openly gay Muslim academic Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle.

These studies also inform my comparison of gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain, particularly on whether being 'gay' or 'Muslim', or both,

means the same thing in different times and places. A recurring theme in these studies, and in mine, is that Muslim sexual minorities in Western and non-Western countries have to negotiate their lives around the perception that homosexuality is exceptionally condemned in Islam—but this is not the full story.

Sociological studies of ‘deviance’ can therefore provide useful insights into how norms are drawn, broken and redrawn around people whom we regard as ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ in society. These insights are especially valuable when combined with those on ethnicity, nationalism, globalisation and the role of the state in regulating religion and sexuality.

Overall, this growing body of studies suggests that gay Muslims fashion their identities based on their individual dispositions and interactions with multiple authorities—Islamic and non-Islamic. Exactly how similar or divergent their experiences are in specific national environments is the focus of the rest of this book.

Notes

1. From his official page on the Emory University website (2010).
2. From personal communication at the fifth Imaan national conference, London, 2012, and subsequent informal conversations.
3. Islamic jurisprudence.
4. Also styled ‘Lut’ by other Muslim writers—here, I follow Kugle’s style.
5. Amreen Jamal (2001, p. 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.’

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4

Comparing Malaysia and Britain

Laws and policies on gender and sexuality in Malaysia and Britain have been shaped by the legacies of British colonialism, particularly the spread of anti-sodomy legislation. The ways in which Muslims in both countries understand and express Islam have also been affected by other trajectories of modernisation. These ‘big’ dimensions influence the everyday lives of the gay Muslims I write about in this book—their responses range from indifferent to enthusiastic, or vehement.

This chapter begins with a discussion of three key developments in the state management of Islam and sexuality in Malaysia and Britain—colonial legal and political legacies, notions of nationhood, and the growth of ethnic and religious diversity. I then compare the dynamics of Islam in both countries—how it influences people’s notions of identity, its role in marking out majority-minority boundaries and its relations with the state. After this, I discuss the dynamics of sexuality, specifically how it is regulated by the state and how gay identity is perceived by wider society and Muslim communities in particular. The role of the state in managing Islam and sexuality is a recurring theme in my comparison, especially in relation to the function of liberal democratic institutions.

From Empire to Commonwealth: Shared Histories

Malaysia consists of territories which were part of the British Empire between the late eighteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. Colonial policies that regulated religion and sexuality in vast tracts of the empire were inherited by many former colonies—now part of the Commonwealth—including Malaysia. In their colonies, the British often regulated religion and sexuality by adapting their own domestic legal frameworks.

The breakup of the empire from the mid-twentieth century resulted in the 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.

Legal and Political Legacies

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 and Ackerman 1997, p. 33). In post-independence Malaysia, successive administrations expanded upon these colonial laws and bureaucratic structures in a process some scholars refer to as ‘Islamization’ (J. C. H. Lee 2010, p. 19; Ong 1990, p. 272). By codifying various Muslim laws, the British were hoping to engineer more obedient and quietist versions of Islam that could neutralise the burgeoning anti-colonial varieties. These colonial interventions became the ‘vehicle for much subsequent “Islamization” of Malaysian society ... right up to the present day’ (Roff 1998, p. 211).

Alongside codifying Islamic laws, the British also introduced new notions of ‘race’ in their Malay colonies. 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’ (Reid 2004, p. 10). 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. 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, p. 20).

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, p. 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, p. 16).

This construction of ‘Malay’ as a race alongside the codification of Islamic law unwittingly fused Malay and Muslim identity. This is now articulated 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, p. 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, p. 86). Colonial Malaya effectively received a duplicate in 1871, subsequently inherited by independent Malaysia and Singapore.

The spread of anti-sodomy colonial legislation occurred alongside internal developments in mid-Victorian England. Out of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation grew a middle class that increasingly defined standards of respectability. Many middle-class reformers became concerned about ‘the easy-going attitudes of the working class’ and ‘adolescent sexuality’, and they linked sexual immorality with fears of instability and the downfall of the empire (Hyam 1991, p. 65). Class-based notions of respectability and morality meant that even ‘early British surveys on sexual activities focused on the working classes’ (Hall 2000, p. 6). Within this climate, trials for sodomy occurred frequently (Hall 2000, p. 20).

The attitudes of these reformers towards working-class sexualities were also affected by the influx of immigrants to the British Isles, beginning in the late eighteenth century, as a result of Britain's trade with its 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. Amid these developments, middle-class reformers and missionaries still viewed the 'un-Christianised poor as no better, and often as even worse, than the "uncivilised heathens" of the Empire' (Robinson-Dunn 2006, p. 158). Working-class radicals objected, sometimes by advocating universal equality but often by expressing outrage at being compared to foreign races.

Against this background, some reformers campaigned against 'white slavery', which initially referred to the trafficking of Circassian women in Egypt but eventually also to prostitution and vice within England. This is partly how immorality became framed as foreign and un-English (Robinson-Dunn 2006, pp. 131–132). This racialising of prostitution and vice also 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 (Robinson-Dunn 2006, p. 135). These cultural and political sensibilities were exported to the rest of the empire, resulting in frictions between what British administrators saw as proper behaviour and the behaviours of the people they ruled (Levine 2013, p. 166).

In 1861, a year after the IPC was enacted, 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, p. 515). Within the next decade or so, 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, pp. 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, p. 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 the Malay territories, these interventions meant that the British effectively created the template for post-independence state administrations to regulate ‘acceptable’ expressions of Islam, Malay-ness and sexuality—particularly among Muslims. These interconnected developments throughout the empire influenced and were influenced by other related issues, including the formation of national identity and modern state institutions.

Nationhood, Statehood and the Shaping of Islam

Between 1689 and 1815, Great Britain (subsequently the United Kingdom) was often at war and vulnerable to invasion by Catholic France. This, along with France’s close alliance with Spain, fostered a perception among many Britons that theirs was ‘a coherent and embattled Protestant nation’ (Colley 2009, p. xx). 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, p. xxii). At the closing of the nineteenth century and the height of imperial expansion, Britishness became 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, p. 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, p. 5). In fact, before the turn of the eighteenth century, the English associated Muslims primarily with the Ottoman Empire, which they grudgingly respected as a great power. Furthermore, between the mid-sixteenth and late seventeenth centuries, England’s trade with Muslims resulted in

wealth but not territorial possession—imperialist ambitions during this period were focused on America (Matar 2008, p. 13).

These precolonial 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, p. 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, p. 14).

Throughout the nineteenth century, social dynamics within Britain and throughout its empire were significantly influenced by imperial rivalry with France. For French colonialists, a revolutionary zeal combined with competitiveness with the English drove them to export the values of the Enlightenment aggressively to their colonies and integrate them into a uniform administration centred 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, p. 423).

Compared with the French, the British were also less hostile towards cultural variety in their colonies and eventually tolerated a degree of religious and ethnic diversity throughout the empire. This somewhat ‘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’ (Kumar 2006, p. 422). A prominent example is Home Secretary Roy Jenkins’ espousal of a benign, tolerant form of multiculturalism in the 1960s (Weeks 2012, p. 412). 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, p. 422).

Evolving notions of British nationhood were also accompanied by events which catalysed the formation of the modern British state. Throughout the eighteenth century, protests against the state’s surging

war-related taxation led to demands for parliamentary reform, partly spurring the development of parliamentary democracy (Harling 2001, p. 3). 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, p. 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 colonies were primarily 'markets for industrial goods [produced in Britain] and ... producers of raw materials and cash crops' (Alatas 2010, p. 18).

Political consciousness, however, was not absent in British Malaya—a culture of politics emerged among Malays partially in response to the 'administrative and ideological forces of imperialism' (Milner 2002, p. 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 Enlightenment Europe' (Milner 2002, p. 3). Furthermore, these political actors were not completely overpowered by colonialism—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, p. 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, p. 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, p. 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, p. 205).

This pro-Malay protectionism laid the framework for 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, p. 29; Mariappan 2002, p. 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, p. 208). This Malay ethno-nationalist shaping 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 Malay ethnicity, others were organising around more politicised and anti-colonial expressions of Islam, such as the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (now the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS), formed in 1951 (Roff 1998, p. 218). Successive post-independence UMNO-led governments have competed with PAS' calls for greater emphasis on Islam in the education system, media, law, and economy. In this competition, UMNO itself increasingly tries to foster more compliant expressions of Islam which contributes to the larger trend of 'Islamizing politics' in contemporary Malaysia (Roff 1998, p. 218).

This trajectory of developments highlights the significance of imperial legacies in current notions of ethnic and religious identity in many parts of the world. In particular, I have emphasised how the construction of 'Others' within the British Empire influenced 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 drive current definitions of nationhood and debates around it. In Britain, Muslims were historically part of a landscape of multiple 'Others' and continue to be involved and implicated in questions about British national identity. However, one key aspect of the development of British nationhood is the

growth of liberal democratic institutions. Although Malaysia inherited the Westminster system of government and holds regular multi-party elections, it has yet to democratise fully and still has an authoritarian government (Welsh 2013, p. 137). Against this backdrop, the experiences of gay Muslims directly and indirectly reveal how Malaysian and British ideas of nationhood have been influenced by specific notions of Islam, race and sexuality, and of the 'Other'.

Implications of Ethnic and Religious Diversity

Much of the ethnic and religious diversity of contemporary Britain and Malaysia is also connected to the legacies of the 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, p. 200).¹ In Britain, mass migrations from the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent occurred after World War II, accompanying the breakup of the empire.²

In both countries, ethnic and religious minorities have sometimes challenged notions of nationhood and the majority's cultural and political dominance. In Malaysia, Malays form this ethno-religious majority whose position and interests are constitutionally enshrined. Meanwhile, a significant but decreasing percentage of the white British majority still identifies as 'Christian'—72 per cent according to the 2001 Census and 59 per cent in 2011 (Office for National Statistics 2013). 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 and Lee 2014, p. 346; Guest et al. 2012, p. 66).

These nuances can help us clarify the ways in which ethnic and religious majorities in Malaysia and Britain are categorised and how they come to view Islam. 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

very 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 global and national events, such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the 7/7 bombings in London and the rise of ISIS/ISIL and other violent groups. 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, p. 262). In fact, definitions and debates about 'Britishness' have at times entailed insinuating that Islam is a security threat (Croft 2012, p. 16).

These politicised public debates on Islam can oversimplify or distort the complex experiences of Muslims in Britain, especially when they are driven by anti-Muslim sentiments or outright Islamophobia. This is partly why the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) campaigned for official statistics on British Muslims and initiated the move to include a question on religion in the 2001 census (Hussain and Sherif 2014, p. 415). The findings showed that Muslims were 'the most socioeconomically disadvantaged of the general religious populations described in the census', lending support to the MCB's calls for more government engagement with Muslim issues (Hussain and Sherif 2014, p. 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, pp. 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 LGBT people, Shi'ahs, Christians and other minorities as dangerous or deviant, along with concepts such as 'secularism', 'pluralism', 'feminism' and 'human rights' (Bernama 2013, 2014; Spykerman 2014; Star 2013; Sun 2012). Such rhetoric often ignores or distorts historical evidence of tolerance and pluralism in colonial and precolonial times. From the

fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, for example, *keramat* sites—or Sufi shrines—enabled ‘heterogeneous’, ‘multi-ethnic and hybrid cultural practices’ of Islam and other religions to flourish throughout the Indian Ocean and Malay Archipelago (Mandal 2012, pp. 358, 364). In many parts of Malaysia, Muslims continue to express Islam pluralistically and inclusively, albeit far less visibly because they are increasingly vulnerable to political intimidation and backlash.

Ethnic and religious diversity is a fact of life for many gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain, and their day-to-day experiences of Islam probably involve multi-layered interactions with non-Muslims and other Muslims. At the same time, they need to negotiate these networks amid strongly politicised notions of Islam. 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 system.

Managing Islam

While Islam is a common factor in the identities of gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain, it is managed by diverse authorities and institutions in the two countries. Making sense of being gay and Muslim thus also depends on whether the individual is a part of the ethnic or religious majority or a minority within a minority.

In this section, I compare how the British and Malaysian states manage Islam and how this influences its role in public policy, notions of identity, and majority-minority relations. Part of my argument is that state authorities in Malaysia and Britain directly and indirectly try to foster expressions of Islam that ostensibly match the values held by the majority in both countries. However, these officially approved interpretations of Islam often compete with those of other actors—including gay Muslims—who sometimes adopt and promote their own versions of Islam. These ‘big’ aspects of Islam in Malaysia and Britain are thus integral to the everyday experiences of the gay Muslims I write about in this book.

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. The first significant wave came immediately after World War II, consisting mostly of Pakistani and Indian refugees in the aftermath of the violent Partition of India in 1947 (Gilliat-Ray 2012b, p. 46). In the 1960s and 1970s, larger numbers of Pakistanis, Indians and Bangladeshis came as cheap labour for various industries. They eventually settled down, often bringing along kinsfolk from their countries of origin (Gilliat-Ray 2012b, p. 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, pp. 50–52). In the 1970s and 1980s, Iranians and Arabs began immigrating in larger numbers following global trends and the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Civil wars and unrest brought waves of Bosnian, Somali, Algerian, and Kurdish immigrants and refugees from the 1990s onwards.

According to some estimates, currently around 75 per cent of Britain's Muslim population are from Asian ethnic backgrounds, namely Pakistani (43 per cent), Bangladeshi (17 per cent), Indian (9 per cent) and Other Asian (6 per cent). An estimated 6 per cent of Muslims in Britain are of black African origin (mainly from Somalia, Nigeria and other North and West African countries). Some 4 per cent describe themselves as of white British origin, and a further 7 per cent from another white background (including Arabs, Turks, Cypriots and East Europeans—especially refugees from Bosnia, Albania and Kosovo) (Gilliat-Ray 2012b, p. 120).

On the whole, Muslim immigrants brought not only ethnic and linguistic diversity to Britain but also 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. In fact, intra-Muslim social ties in Britain have rarely cut across the divides of ethnicity, nationality (e.g., among Arabs from different countries of origin), and class (Ansari 2004, p. 3).

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 as a collection of distinct cultural communities (Hussain and Sherif 2014, p. 418). This was a precursor to the MCB's campaign to include a question on religion in the 2001 census. Among the reasons for these campaigns, 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 changes resulting from 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. At the time, some legal experts advocated interpreting the Act such that it would extend to Muslims and other religious minorities, too (Meer 2008, p. 70).

A succession of controversies in the 1980s complicated matters, culminating in the 1989 protests in Bradford against British Indian author Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*, which many Muslims regarded as insulting to the Prophet Muhammad. Shortly afterwards, Iran's spiritual leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, released a fatwa (legal opinion) calling for Rushdie's death. The Rushdie affair brought British Muslims into the public spotlight, with the mass media coverage effectively equating Islam with anti-democratic and anti-Western values (Hussain and Sherif 2014, p. 418).

In this changing climate, Parliament and the courts eventually upheld the distinction between race and religion for Muslims. This binary separation became especially prominent in public debates leading up to the passage of the Racial and Religious Hatred Act of 2006 (Meer 2008, p. 63). 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. In practice, however, it is often impossible to determine where 'race' ends and 'religion' begins in an individual's experience. For one thing, 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 a motivating factor. Discrimination or hate incidents against Muslims in Britain often involve this blurring of the victims' racial and religious identity.

A doctrinaire separation of race as an involuntary, ascribed aspect of identity and religion as voluntary or chosen can thus 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 (Meer 2008, p. 72).

Government decisions to define and categorise the status of ethnic and religious minorities can therefore create unanticipated challenges, which can be exacerbated when various groups vie for national representation. In the case of Muslims in Britain, at particular times, the British state has preferred or even nurtured 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, p. 156). However, this does not mean that British Muslims went on uncritically accepting Saudi Arabia's overtures. Some became bitterly disillusioned about the kingdom's overt request for European and American military assistance during the first Gulf War in 1990–1991 (Al-Rasheed 2005, p. 160).

The above are just some examples of the complex and politicised question of 'representation' among British Muslims, illustrating the decentralised patterns by which Muslim populations are organised in British society. Yet, successive British governments and Muslim activists have tried to streamline and 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. Still, 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' (Gilliat-Ray 2012b, p. 109).

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 grass-roots membership, the MCB openly criticised British foreign policy (Gilliat-Ray 2012b, pp. 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, p. 110). The government therefore appeared to be 'deliberately creating the conditions whereby Muslims from one school of thought [were] placed in opposition to, or competition with, others' (Gilliat-Ray 2012a, p. 117). With the rise of ISIS and continuing instability in the Middle East, the government's partisanship continues to be divisive. For example, there have also been calls to focus on 'homophobia' as a possible sign of 'extremism', particularly among Muslims (Trayner 2015).

This background suggests that a combination of religious and non-religious factors influence the attitudes of British Muslims on specific issues, including homosexuality. A study in which heterosexual Muslims in Scotland were interviewed between 2001 and 2002 found that they held 'disproportionately negative attitudes towards homosexuals' compared with the wider population (Siraj 2009, p. 55). Those who identified as practising Muslims said they were influenced by their religious beliefs and cultural upbringing, yet some of the 'non-practising Muslims' in the sample were equally as intolerant of homosexuality. Is it thus possible for attitudes towards homosexuality to mark religious boundaries regardless of the degree of people's religious commitment? This question deserves further investigation as existing statistical surveys do not address it and also appear contradictory. 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 per cent agreed with the statement ‘I am proud of how Britain treats gay people’ (Butt 2009; Pink News 2011). Yet, a 2015 ICM/Channel 4 poll found that only 18 per cent of Muslims agreed that homosexuality should be ‘legal’ (compared with 73 per cent of the general population)—52 per cent disagreed (Perraudin 2016).

Gay Muslims in Britain are therefore affected by the overall climate on Islam but they also have the potential to shape the ideological and political environment in different ways. Those who affirm their sexual identity can explicitly or implicitly challenge anti-homosexual interpretations of Islam. This might pit them against anti-gay Muslims, whose views would also be deemed problematic by many other sectors in British society. Those who highlight the fact that they are Muslim would be emphasising the religious rather than racial aspect of their identities and, like other Muslims, could also be critical of Britain’s policies on Islam-related issues. Those who place equal importance on their sexual and religious identities would further complicate stereotypes of Muslims as flatly anti-Western and of gay people as anti-religious.

Malaysia: An Assertive Islam?

In addition to the constitutional linking of Malay and Muslim identity, the Malaysian political arena is dominated by parties that are based on ethnicity or religion or both. 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). From 2008 to 2015, the parliamentary opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat (PR; People’s Alliance), included the multi-ethnic and multi-religious People’s Justice Party (PKR) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP) in partnership with the Islamic party, PAS. After acrimonious infighting on the status of *hudud* (Islamic criminal law), a new opposition coalition was announced in 2015—Pakatan Harapan (the Alliance of Hope), consisting of the DAP, PKR and the National Trust Party (Amanah), a splinter party of PAS (M. Goh 2015).

Meanwhile, PAS began making pro-UMNO overtures, hoping for support for its proposed amendment to expand on existing punishments for infractions of Syariah criminal provisions (Zafira 2017). Plagued by a colossal corruption scandal, the administration of Prime Minister Najib Razak also actively encouraged these developments. However, the ambivalence among UMNO's coalition partners also led PAS to explore other options—such as a possible electoral pact with the Malaysian United Indigenous Party (PPBM), an UMNO splinter party (Balaram 2017).

Ethnic and religious concerns thus dominate the political arena in dizzying ways, 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. However, successive UMNO-led governments increasingly interpreted it as affirmative action for Malays and it became the basis for the expansion of the Malay middle class (Gomez and Jomo 1999, pp. 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, p. 88).

A middle class had already surfaced in the Malay Peninsula at the beginning of the twentieth century as a result of colonial policies, but it was relatively small and mostly Chinese (Abdul Rahman 2001, pp. 82–83). The growth of a multi-ethnic middle class—incorporating the rapidly emerging Malay middle class—was largely a post-independence phenomenon directly linked with modernisation and industrialisation policies, including the NEP. The middle class was estimated to have 'edged upwards to 45.8 percent [of the Malaysian population] in the year 2000'—in fact, Malaysian society became predominantly middle class by the end of the 1990s (Saravanamuttu 2001, p. 107). Against this backdrop, a younger generation of Malaysians—especially Malays—has become increasingly upwardly mobile (Abdul Rahman 2001, p. 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, p. 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 his overall approach to the crisis, including his scathing criticisms of Western-led globalisation (Abdul Rahman 2001, p. 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. On the eve of the twenty-first century, the rise of PAS challenged the Mahathir-led government's monopoly on policies and rhetoric on Malay identity, Islam and modernisation (Hooker 2004, p. 165). Before this political crisis, both Mahathir and Anwar spearheaded the state's regulation of Islam and Malay-ness by their attempts to balance Malay communal interests and to utilise Islam as Malaysia's social glue (Hooker 2004, pp. 155–156). The crisis introduced some serious cracks in the system and led the Mahathir-led administration to become much more aggressive in fostering 'moderate' or state-supportive Muslims and repressing 'radical' or unacceptable Muslims (Hooker 2004, pp. 165–166). Mahathir was especially keen to monitor PAS and its supporters as well as 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 joined UMNO in 1982 and rose swiftly in the political ranks (Ahmad Fauzi 2008, p. 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, p. 219). ABIM became a crucial partner in the state's Islam-oriented nation-building (Ahmad Fauzi 2008, p. 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, p. 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 1000 protesters, including Anwar (Nagata 1980, p. 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. Its own intellectual and political lineage can be traced back to its founders' networks with the Muslim Brotherhood diaspora in Britain and also Abul A'la Maududi, founder of Pakistan's Jamaat-i-Islami (Ahmad Fauzi 2009, p. 145). By 1979, ABIM had a membership of 35,000 (Nagata 1980, p. 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. In response, UMNO often attacked ABIM and other groups it accused of 'attempting to import the Iranian revolutionary ideology' into Malaysia, but ABIM's fortunes changed when Mahathir came to power (Ahmad Fauzi 2009, p. 146).

This changing relationship between ABIM and UMNO 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 (tan 2012b, p. 40). Starting from the late 1990s, however, the federal state systematically started to expand Syariah legislation and began wresting jurisdiction over it from the States, a process which the Malaysian feminist scholar-activist tan beng hui³ (2012b, p. 41) refers to as 'Syariahtisation'. The federal state was and continues to be aided by what can be termed a 'Syariah lobby'—state-salaried 'religious functionaries', 'ethno-nationalists' and 'religio-nationalists' (tan 2012b, p. 53).

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 sometimes half-hearted prosecutions of Islamic offences (tan 2012b, p. 148). With homosexuality, 'the official anti-gay bark is worse than its bite' (tan 2012b, p. 158). Even UMNO's more recent grandstanding on Syariah alongside PAS has been punctuated with ambivalence and internal contradictions.

Rather, the state uses Islamic rhetoric to ground its other post-NEP development projects, even as some younger Malays have started drawing upon Islam as a resource to criticise or challenge the government. Ever since the advent of 'Syariahtisation', however, the Syariah lobby has become increasingly intolerant of alternative interpretations of Islam. It frequently dismisses, condemns, or threatens to silence more pluralistic, feminist or inclusive interpretations of Islam, a prominent example being the long-standing harassment faced by the non-governmental organisation Sisters in Islam (SIS) (Ding 2009). In fact, the Islamic Religious Council in the State of Selangor issued 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 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 1060 Malaysian Muslims aged between 15 and 25 found that 99.4 per cent disagreed with the statement, 'It's OK to be gay or lesbian' (Chiam et al. 2011, p. 20). The indicators suggest that the attitudes of young Malaysian Muslims are shaped by highly controlled print and broadcast media, religious authorities, families and, to a lesser extent, peers and other social networks. In an environment which represses many discussions and expressions of religion, they might also be wary of communicating their personal opinions truthfully on 'sensitive' topics.

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-managed capitalism and state-led modernisation have enabled them to pursue middle-class lifestyles, including with their sexuality. The gender historian John D’Emilio (1983, p. 109) suggests that the growth of modern capitalism has enabled particular expressions of homosexual identity and subcultures to thrive. I would agree that somewhat similar trends can be observed in Malaysia. Specifically, in these conditions, the rise of a Malay middle class has enabled gay Muslims to explore new lifestyles and sexual expressions amid Islamic rhetoric that increasingly demonises sexual difference. This was especially true of the middle-class gay Muslim men I encountered, whose purchasing power allowed them to enjoy their lifestyles more publicly—for example, patronising thriving gay nightclubs in central Kuala Lumpur. I did not come across a similarly vibrant nightclub culture amongst the middle-class women I encountered who identified as gay and Muslim. Their gay outings were often limited to the occasional lesbian ‘parties’.

Managing Sexuality

Analysing a history of sexuality inevitably involves investigating a history ‘without a single, clear, fixed object’ (Weeks 2012, p. 1). Sexuality is not an ‘unproblematic natural given’—our perceptions and expressions of it are shaped by multiple factors which keep transforming over time (Weeks 2012, p. x). Still, if we can understand how different societies and cultures have regulated sexual expressions throughout history, we can gain better insights into how these historical patterns affect us now. With this in mind, this section focuses on significant turning points in the state-led management of sexuality in Britain and Malaysia and how these have an impact on gay Muslims today.

Britain: From Criminalisation to Equality

Uneven industrialisation in nineteenth-century Britain catalysed rapid population growth and urbanisation and it significantly altered alignments in social class—it also disrupted traditional patterns of sexual life

(Weeks 2012, p. 15). In various ways, these developments pushed the new Victorian middle classes to adopt and display largely conservative attitudes on sex. 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 many people's awareness of cultural differences—including on sex. Many of these panics also had a class dimension. Public and voluntary initiatives in the later part of the century effectively fixated on the sex lives of the urban poor (Hall 2000, p. 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, p. 28).

In aspiring towards 'respectability', nineteenth-century middle-class reformers increasingly tried to condemn or curb sexual deviance by forming movements infused with Christian doctrines and values (Hyam 1991, pp. 66–70; Mosse 1985, p. 24; Weeks 2012, pp. 39, 100–101). They pushed for greater state intervention on sexual issues, including laws on prostitution and 'gross indecency', and focused on moral purity as a metaphor for a stable society (Hyam 1991, p. 65; Weeks 2012, p. 107).

Anti-sodomy laws, however, were already 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, p. 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. According to the sociologist Jeffrey Weeks (2012, p. 123), in 1806, 'there were more executions for sodomy than for murder, while in 1810 four out of five convicted sodomists were hanged.'

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

Also, in contrast to the visibility of male homosexuality in the nineteenth century, romantic or erotic relations between women were more possible under the broad category of friendship, which was virtually ignored by state authorities (Marcus 2011, pp. 524–525). Rather, the state regulated women primarily in terms of their relations with men through laws on reproduction, marriage and the economy. Thus, in the late nineteenth century, financially independent women were sometimes able to set up households with other women—for mutual convenience but perhaps also as a part of sexual or romantic partnerships (Hall 2000, p. 40). Some ‘literate, educated women’ were able to manoeuvre their legal rights—for example, through wills, property deeds and even alimony payments—to ‘create approximations of marriage with other women’ (Marcus 2011, pp. 525–526). The authorities ignored such women possibly because there were so few of them and they were seen as neither a distinctive type nor representing a universal tendency amongst all women.

Still, the overall trend during the nineteenth century was that homosexuality became increasingly stigmatised. As an unintended consequence, the people who were targeted began developing a more explicit sense of homosexual identity, especially among the upper and middle classes (Weeks 2012, p. 128). Newer and more explicit anti-homosexual laws sparked off greater awareness of sexuality among them, forcing them to experiment with ‘a new community of knowledge’ specifically on homosexuality.

These developments continued into the twentieth century—up to the 1950s, Britain still had ‘one of the most conservative sexual cultures in the world, with one of the most draconian penal codes’ (Weeks 2012, p. 13). Homosexual men were increasingly arrested and prosecuted for ‘gross indecency’ up to the 1950s, with 622 arrests in 1931, 2000 in 1945, 4416 in 1950 and 6357 in 1954 (Waites 2013, p. 152; Weeks 2012, p. 307). The drastic growth in arrests was partly the result of changing policing practices, as opposed to a concerted witch-hunt by politicians. Still, the ensuing press coverage of these arrests, and homosexuality more generally, sparked off greater concern among several politicians and government leaders (Waites 2013, p. 152).

This legal and political dimension was supplemented by medical and psychological opinions which overwhelmingly considered homosexuality a disorder (Hall 2000, p. 4). 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 (Cook 2007a, p. 180; Hall 2000, p. 180). For example, Alan Turing, who helped crack the Enigma code during World War II, opted for hormonal therapy rather than a prison sentence after his relationship with another man was exposed and prosecuted. Turing became depressed and 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 evaluate the regulation of homosexuality and prostitution in England, Wales and Scotland (Waites 2013, p. 150). Chaired by the educationalist 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 of this was that public expressions of homosexuality should remain banned (Waites 2013, p. 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, pp. 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 other liberalising attitudes in the 1960s, for example, on rising premarital sexual relations among youth—a trend strengthened after the introduction of the contraceptive pill (J. Lewis and Kiernan 1996, p. 373).

The changing attitudes towards homosexuality among some sectors of society were thus part of this greater 'sexual revolution'. Academics now

felt less restrained to explore homosexuality as a subject, and films such as *Victim* (1963) and *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1964) portrayed it in relatively more sympathetic terms (Hall 2000, p. 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, p. 155; Weeks 2012, p. 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 (C. Brown 2006, p. 36; Davie 1994, pp. 31–33). From the 1960s, 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. 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 (C. Brown 2006, p. 224). These developments took place amid declining church attendance and membership from the turn of the twentieth century.

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, p. 162). Furthermore, the partial nature of decriminalisation meant that prosecutions for public acts of homosexuality actually increased by 150 per cent between 1967 and 1973 (Waites 2013, p. 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 2007b, p. 180; Hall 2000, p. 180). By doing this, gay and lesbian activists effectively 'fixed' homosexual identity in place, making it almost comparable to an 'ethnic identity' (Weeks 2012, p. 365).

The increasingly assertive activism of the gay and lesbian movement prompted morally conservative activists, for example, Mary Whitehouse,

to renew and escalate moral purity campaigns. 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 (C. Brown 2006, pp. 198, 205). 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 evolved into Christian Action Research and Education (Ganiel and Jones 2012, p. 308). 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 Christ (Cook 2007a, p. 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 the Local Government Act which made it unlawful for local authorities to ‘intentionally promote homosexuality’ (Weeks 2012, p. 379).

Despite this backlash, the reforms of the 1960s remained influential—many lesbians and gays became more relaxed about integrating sexual identity as part of their everyday existence, no longer feeling compelled to live a ‘double life’ (Weeks 2012, p. 410). These reforms also facilitated profound changes in heterosexual relationships, where ‘marriage, civil partnerships, [and] various forms of cohabitation or non-cohabitation’ increasingly became choices, not ‘moral imperatives’ (Weeks 2012, p. 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, pp. 211–212; Weeks 2012, pp. 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.

From the 1960s, therefore, the British state went 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 and Weller 2012, pp. 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 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 sex therapy to same-sex couples (Hunt 2012, p. 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.

Malaysia: Politicisation of Sexuality

The UMNO-led government began politicising homosexuality at unprecedented levels after Mahathir sacked Anwar in 1998 for abuse of power and sodomy. The subsequent 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 and Jomo 1999, p. 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 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, p. 3; tan 2012, pp. 19–20). Mahathir’s anti-gay stance therefore accompanied his policies to modernise Malaysia. He went on to target Anwar particularly viciously at a time when the state was on the brink of a major structural crisis, which also brought on turmoil within UMNO. 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 its own specific political purposes.

Homosexual behaviour was already criminalised under colonially created civil and Islamic laws—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 2012a, p. 350). The state and more specifically the Syariah lobby are thus not advocating something entirely new, but rather want to strengthen and expand existing Islamic legislation. Additionally, the state is not a non-partisan arbiter of public debate—state officials and government ministers actively and deliberately manipulate public discussions 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 Shi‘ah and liberal Muslims and other so-called deviants, amid state-sanctioned rhetoric that paints ‘human rights’ as a threat to ‘Islam’ (Bernama 2014).

The government and Syariah lobby express these hostilities towards sexual and other minorities amid growing challenges by civil society groups demanding more accountable and democratic government, especially since the 2008 and 2013 elections. The 2008 elections in particular took place amid widespread discontent against the ruling coalition and Mahathir's successor, the then prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (J. C. H. Lee et al. 2010, pp. 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 and continuing anti-Indian discrimination.

Following these developments, the 2008 general election left the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition severely weakened, winning its slimmest victory since Malaya's 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, p. 293). In the light of their massive gains, the three major opposition parties—the DAP, PKR and PAS—formed the People's Alliance or 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. The government appealed and in March 2014 the Court of Appeal overturned the High Court's acquittal. Anwar challenged this decision but in 2015, the apex court rejected his appeal and upheld his sodomy conviction, sentencing him to a five-year prison term (BBC 2015).

The events of 2008 simultaneously resulted in an expansion of civil society and backlash by the BN federal government. The government's confrontations with civil society groups became intensified by the emergence of pro-regime, ultranationalist Malay groups, the most prominent being PERKASA (the Association for Indigenous Empowerment) (Welsh 2013, p. 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 Sreenivasan—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 unsuccessfully challenged in court (Sklar and 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 (Shah 2011) but has not been subjected to any subsequent legal action or vigilante persecution and still lives and works in Kuala Lumpur.⁴

In the 2013 general election, the BN lost the popular vote to the PR, by 47.4 per cent against 50.9 per cent but managed to retain government (Welsh 2013, p. 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, p. 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 lead to the undoing of Malaysian society. This position does not go uncontested by civil society actors—in fact, Muslim non-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). In turn, these progressive Muslim advocates and other activists continue to be demonised by newer components within the Syariah lobby, such as Malaysian Muslim Solidarity (ISMA) (Hanis 2014).

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 state-sanctioned anti-gay rhetoric.

Many might feel conflicted in wanting to defend their position as Malays and Muslims but also needing to protect their private sexual lives. Regardless of these individual positions, they all need to negotiate how they express their sexuality in ways that escape the state's regulation of homosexuality, often by exploiting gaps and inconsistencies in the law.

Conclusion

Gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain are affected by environments in which debates on Islam are highly politicised and contentious. However, the conditions influencing the place of Islam in their lives differ in some crucial ways, especially in relation to the legacies of colonialism and specific trajectories of modernisation in both countries. There are also gendered differences among the men and women I encountered who identified as gay and Muslim.

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, 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 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 a 'Syariah lobby'. Against this backdrop, gay Muslims have to navigate increasingly politicised condemnations of sexual minorities in the name of Islam. They must also weigh the costs and benefits of complying with state-approved versions 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 fashioned. The bulk of the British Muslim population consists of immigrants arriving after World War II 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, 7/7 and the rise of militant groups such as ISIS/ISIL.

Muslims in Britain are also relatively more socioeconomically 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 has become pivotal in expressions of identity among many Muslims in Britain.

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 under 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 widespread assumptions about 'Islam' and 'sexuality' are socially and historically contingent, and shaped by a multitude of individuals, groups and institutions. Thus, while gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain are affected by ingrained notions that Islam condemns homosexuality, they engage with these under quite different national circumstances.

Notes

1. In 2011, Muslims comprised 61.3 per cent of the Malaysian population of 28 million, while 19.8 per cent were Buddhist, 9.2 per cent Christian and 6.3 per cent Hindu. In terms of ethnicity, 67.4 per cent were 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 per cent were Chinese, 7.3 per cent Indian, and 0.7 per cent classified as 'Other' (Department of Statistics, Malaysia 2011).
2. As of 2015, the UK's population was estimated at 65.1 million, with England having a population of 54.8 million. According to the 2011 census (Office for National Statistics 2013), in England and Wales, 59 per cent identified as Christian, 25.1 per cent said they had 'no religion', 4.8 per cent were Muslim, 1.5 per cent Hindu, 0.8 per cent Sikh, 0.5 per cent Jewish and 0.8 per cent classified as following other religions. In terms of ethnicity, the proportion of white British people stood at 80.5 per cent of the population.
3. She spells her name in all lower-case letters, and I will respect this convention when citing her.
4. Personal communication, November 2011 and August 2013.

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5

Coming to Terms with Being Gay and Muslim

My research led me to seek out and focus on individuals who had reconciled being gay and being Muslim. Even amongst ‘already-reconciled’ individuals, I did not come across a single person who had *never* felt conflicted about his or her identity. However, I did hear stories about a process, or journey, of coming to terms with their religion and sexuality. There was no singular pattern or trend in these testimonies—for some, the effort was more Herculean than for others. And for many of my participants, being part of my research also appeared to contribute to this bigger journey of self-discovery—just as it did for me, too. While it is unhelpful to suggest a single trajectory of the ‘gay Muslim’ odyssey, it is possible to discern various common factors and experiences that make it easier for some people to harmonise their sexual and religious backgrounds. In this chapter, I unpack the beginnings of how these gay Muslim men and women came to make sense of their apparently incompatible religious and sexual identities.

I start with a tale of two iftaris or buka puasa—fast-breaking gatherings in the holy month of Ramadan, organised by groups of gay Muslims in London and Kuala Lumpur—to compare and analyse converging themes. This is followed by two separate sections—the first investigating

the steps that some of my participants took and continue taking to identify as Muslim, the second focusing on their pathways in identifying as gay. The final section examines how ethnicity plays a significant part in their experiences because, in forging their sexual and religious identities, gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain also complicate many unstated assumptions about the links between religion and ethnicity.

Two Iftaris

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar during which Muslims believe the Qur'an was revealed. As one of Islam's Five Pillars, Muslims are ordained to fast during this month—refraining from food, drink and sex from dawn to dusk. Ramadan is then followed by the feast of 'Id al-Fitr (Malay: Aidilfitri) in the month of Shawwal (Syawal). During my fieldwork, I spent the first half of Ramadan in London and the latter half in Kuala Lumpur. This provided me with a valuable opportunity to observe and record the lived experiences of being gay and Muslim in both countries during a period infused with much sacred symbolism and ritual.

London

In July 2013, my partner Giles and I attended an iftari in East London organised by Imaan. Imaan held regular iftaris every Ramadan, which began in London but started taking place in Manchester and Birmingham around this time. We arrived early because I had promised to help Ebrahim, a gay British Indian male in his early 20s, to co-facilitate a pre-iftar discussion based on a workshop that I designed, entitled 'Demystifying Shari'ah'.

Around ten Imaan members, from various ethnic backgrounds and doctrinal orientations, turned up. They were Rabia, a lesbian Pakistani Shi'ah in her early 40s who was 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 Salafi¹ in his late 20s; Nat, a gay

Southeast Asian convert to Islam in his early 20s; Luqman, a gay Indian convert to Shi'ah 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 was new to the group; Imtiaz, a student from Pakistan in his early 20s; and Abdul, a gay Egyptian temporarily working in London and in his mid-20s. More than half were born and raised in Britain.

I introduced the Demystifying Shari'ah workshop to Imaan in April 2012, which I adapted from a module developed by Sisters in Islam (SIS). The SIS workshops focused on how Islamic jurisprudence was historically constructed and how contemporary Muslim laws affected gender relations. Based on my work in Malaysia, I drew upon these materials and added my own input on sexual diversity. Today's workshop by Ebrahim and Rabia was a shortened version of the full-day session I piloted in 2012.

The way I designed it, Demystifying Shari'ah would usually start with a discussion on the socially constructed dimensions of 'gender' and 'sexuality', followed by a session on Qur'anic hermeneutics focusing specifically on gender and sexuality. This would be followed by separate sessions on analysing hadith and fiqh, and then a chronology of the development of shari'ah throughout Islamic history. In today's shortened version, Rabia would lead a brief discussion on the Qur'an and Ebrahim on the hadith.

This was Rabia and Ebrahim's first experience in facilitating this session so I agreed to assist in case they got stuck. In addition to discussing content, we tried to refrain from displaying bias towards particular *madhab*, or schools of jurisprudence—also a hallmark of SIS' approach. Instead, this was an opportunity to advocate for non-sectarian, egalitarian and inclusive interpretations of Islam, specifically regarding gender and sexuality.

At the end of Rabia and Ebrahim's presentations, some hands went up. Abdul and Ananta, in particular, wanted to know if we addressed what the Qur'an 'says' about homosexuality more fully. Ebrahim assured them that we did. I added that we drew quite a lot upon the work of Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle (discussed in Chap. 3).

Others were interested in whether the Qur'anic narrative of the Prophet Lot was the same as Jewish and Christian narratives of the Biblical Lot. I said unfortunately we did not have the benefit of a Jewish

presence today but invited Giles, who is an Anglican priest, to tell us how some gay Christians approached the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament. According to Giles, progressive Christians understood the story of Lot in the book of Genesis as condemning arrogance, inhospitality and male rape—not consensual and loving same-sex relationships. I said that this was similarly how Kugle and other progressive Muslims interpreted the parallel Qur'anic narratives. I added that Imaan did not, however, seek to impose this interpretation of Islam on anyone but instead advocated diverse interpretations. Ananta smirked and said, 'Oh, I fully intend to hit my parents on the head with this stuff.'

After the discussion ended, Ebrahim asked if I could lead congregational 'Asr prayers and a post-'Asr *dhikr* (devotional remembrance of Allah, often chanted) since there were still a few hours before iftar. I agreed, and before we started, we clarified to everyone that Imaan practised mixed-gender, non-sectarian prayers, which were also open to non-Muslims. We also explained that congregational prayers in Imaan were not obligatory, so those who opted not to pray could relax and chat outside. About a third of the attendees did not participate, but Giles joined in and followed all the prayer movements.

Over the next couple of hours, a steady trickle of people arrived for the fast breaking. Soon, we were all playing a guessing game in a large circle to distract ourselves from thirst and hunger. By the time iftar arrived, the table at the back of the room was laden with samosas, biryani, halal pizza, homemade Vietnamese summer rolls, chapattis, and different curries. The number of people in the room had tripled by then.

When it was time for Maghrib (sunset) prayers, Salman asked if I wanted to lead again, but I suggested it would be better for someone else to have a turn and asked Luqman if he wanted to. Luqman accepted, and some of us broke to pray in a corner of the room, while several others went on eating and chatting. Luqman led the prayers according to the Shi'ah formula that he adhered to.

When it was time for Giles and me to leave, I lost track of the number of Imaan members I hugged and exchanged salam with. These goodbyes were especially long because I told them I was going back to Malaysia in a few days and would be spending Aidilfitri there with my family. Several people said they would make *du'a* (supplications) for me and my family and wished me a wonderful trip.

Kuala Lumpur

Two Saturdays later, I was strolling 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, based on my MA dissertation, which examined the impact of LGBT activism within the Church of England. We 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 and asked him to tell me more about it. He said it was organised by a group of ‘bears’ in Kuala Lumpur. After checking with the organiser, fondly referred to as the Bear King, Dax told me I had been given the green light. I was pleasantly surprised by this because Dax and Zainal were not bears, and neither was I—the Bear King’s parties were obviously intended to be inclusive.

We were now walking in the grounds of the Bear King’s condominium complex. Dax and Zainal were not fasting, but I was. On our way, we bumped into three Malay men getting out of a car and carrying several bags of food. Dax and Zainal recognised two of them, hugging them and giving salam. I exchanged salam, clasping hands with all three men and introduced myself. They had all also come for the Bear King’s buka puasa.

The Bear King hosted at least one buka puasa gathering at his house every year. He also held other parties, for example, during the birthdays of some people within the circle of bears and their friends. It was usually a very mixed crowd in terms of ethnic and religious background, but Dax said that tonight might be more predominantly Malay and Muslim because it was Ramadan. These buka puasa parties were mostly attended by gay and bisexual men but sometimes their heterosexual male and female friends would come, too.

When we finally entered the Bear King’s condominium, the dining table—shifted to the middle of the hallway—was laden with food. I was embarrassed because I had no time to bring anything special but the Bear King greeted me warmly and said not to worry—there would be plenty.

The house was a stylish duplex that the Bear King shared with his live-in partner, Goh, a heavy-set, polite and soft-spoken Chinese Malaysian man. Dax, Zainal and I made our way to the plush living room area, where some men were already lounging on the huge sofa, or the soft rug, or among scattered, giant cushions.

Soon, one of the Malay men announced, 'It's time to *berbuka!*' A few people asked, 'Are you sure? It's not 7.30 pm yet, is it?' The Malay guy said, 'Yes, because we're in Petaling Jaya, we're breaking at 7.28 pm, not 7.30 pm.' A white Canadian man rolled his eyes and whispered to me with a sneer, 'What, so is it a different time in the Johor then?' Rightly or wrongly, I sensed a bit of irritation and smugness on his part—Johor is the southernmost State in the Peninsula, but it certainly is not in a different time zone. Still, the minor differences in buka puasa times in the different regions of Malaysia are displayed daily and prominently in the broadcast and print media—down to the precise minute. I've often found this a bit tedious myself but I replied slightly more gruffly than I intended to, 'Yes, it's different.'

In time, different conversation circles formed and I found myself in one with the Bear King. I told him about my research topic. He nodded vigorously and said, '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 continued, 'Why should it be a big deal? You can be Muslim and you can be gay. Why should people be so judgemental?' He proudly added that on his bookshelf, there was an entire section on theology.

At around 10 pm, I was in another circle in the plush living room. Surrounding me were Harun, a funny, loud Malay man in his 40s, wearing a traditional *baju Melayu*; Walt, his Australian partner, also in his 40s and wearing *baju Melayu* and a *songkok* (traditional headgear); 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 and the Bear King; and Zainal.

Harun was recounting the names of the gay venues that began mushrooming in Kuala Lumpur from the 1980s, with others jumping in and trying to remember exactly what had happened when, and where. Harun recalled that when Crooked Corner (not the venue's actual name) opened

in the mid-1990s, they were very ‘radical’ and pushed for ‘gay rights’—he corrected himself and said ‘not gay rights, but gay lifestyle’. They even held a striptease performance once where he said the first performer stripped to complete nudity. But when the second performer had just taken his clothes off, the music stopped and the lights came on—a signal that 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.

Harun said, in Malay, ‘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, “Why didn’t that towel come off!”’ The rest of us burst into laughter.

Comparing the Iftaris

What can these iftaris tell us about the ways that gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain cope with perceptions that Islam unequivocally condemns homosexuality?

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, with much of the prior organising happening online. The London-based Imaan iftaris were usually held in the home of Ehsan, a senior Imaan trustee. I had 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 a couple of other Imaan trustees had organised an alternative space. The proposal to conduct a Demystifying Shari’ah session at this iftari was also

a first. Although Imaan publicised its iftaris via Facebook, Twitter and its online forum, it would only disclose a public meeting point from which an Imaan trustee or volunteer would lead the attendees to the actual venue. Similarly, the Bear King initially forwarded his buka puasa invitation to a closed list of contacts on the social networking site Facebook.

The existence of these urban spaces allowed Imaan and the Bear King to design these iftaris as social events and also for attendees to share specific, otherwise confidential, 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 talked about religion and the gay scene in Kuala Lumpur—but more informally. Furthermore, these iftaris were opportunities for gay Muslims and other 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 criticising religious and non-religious anti-homosexual attitudes. In Kuala Lumpur, this was rather indirect and playful despite moral policing being sanctioned and encouraged by the state, while the Demystifying Shari'ah 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.

Lastly, these iftaris provided those who attended an opportunity to encounter people of diverse backgrounds, including gay non-Muslims. At the Imaan iftari, this even led to a meaningful conversation about how Christian and Muslim sexual minorities shared 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 individuals or agencies. They are examples of how gay Muslims can avoid or bypass formal and informal Islamic authorities by making use of urban spaces to gather safely and 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 to gather and invest the iftaris with these meanings?

Finding a Place to Belong

If Islam does forbid homosexuality, then it must be impossible to be gay *and* Muslim—this is the premise that all the gay Muslims I met constantly struggled with. Many of them described feeling ‘out of place’ or neither-here-nor-there—in other words, they were conscious of being seen as anomalies or even moral pollutants by others. According to the anthropologist Mary Douglas (2002, p. 48), 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 is accepted as part of the surroundings. These iftaris that I have described can therefore be seen as positive attempts by gay Muslims to create a ‘new pattern of reality’ in which they have a place to belong. What are the building blocks of this alternative reality?

We can identify and understand these building blocks if we focus on the step-by-step processes that enable people to make seemingly improbable or dramatically unexpected choices (Becker 1998, pp. 26–27). These iftaris were useful glimpses into the adaptations that some people make—or do not make—to come to identify as gay and Muslim. They show that forging an identity as a gay Muslim does not only entail challenge and constraint but choice and opportunity, too. They are good-natured examples of how some gay Muslims take advantage of available spaces and networks to challenge, modify, or subvert institutional authority.

This idea of examining the small steps that people take to arrive at larger, unexpected decisions is related to another idea—that our beliefs about what we consider permissible and impermissible, legitimate and illegitimate, or ‘purity’ and ‘dirt’, are socially constructed (Douglas 2002, p. 44). Specifically, we often apply our conceptions of ‘dirt’ to that which we are unable to classify or order into a coherent system, or ‘matter out of place’. These ideas of purity and pollution can be conceived in concrete

or symbolic terms—for example, imagining society as a body to be defended against real and symbolic defilement. Sexual relations are particularly potent symbols for determining the internal ‘purity’ of a particular social body (Douglas 2002, p. 194). By examining the boundary between the pure and impure, we can better understand how hierarchies and relationships are formed between *and* within different 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. In relation to gay Muslims, we can examine the specific ‘role adjustments’ they make to negotiate ‘acceptable modes of achieving ... culturally defined goals, purposes and interests’ (Merton 1968, pp. 672–73). Again, these iftaris provide a snapshot of such ‘role adjustments’.

We can also ask if the perception of gay Muslims as ‘out of place’ symbolises other assumptions about the ways that societies are divided, for example, between the so-called West and Islam. Who exactly creates and polices these boundaries and can they shift or dissolve? There is the argument that Western LGBT activists inadvertently strengthen the Islam-against-the-West divide by regarding Muslim sexual minorities as victims needing to be saved from an inherently homophobic religion (Massad 2002, p. 362). Part of this argument is also that ‘LGBT’ is Eurocentric terminology imposed by Western governments, activists, academics and journalists upon non-Westerners.

This argument is useful to the extent that it reminds us that the binary division between the ‘West’ and ‘Islam’ is a social construct, not an unchanging existential fact. And this division is actively upheld by many Western and Muslim ideologues who often use gender and sexuality as ammunition for their mutual antagonisms. However, this is not the only picture that emerges out of my story of the two iftaris. Instead, my story also illustrates how gay Muslims adapt, transplant and use local and imported, or ‘Islamic’ and ‘Western’, concepts in ways they find personally meaningful. The gender historian Afsaneh Najmabadi (2011, p. 550) proposes that it might thus be more fruitful to investigate ‘what the borrowing, appropriation, and embracing [of sexual concepts and practices] means for the importers’.

Finally, the notion that gay Muslims are social anomalies or moral pollutants par excellence is a relatively modern one. What my story about the two iftaris addresses implicitly is that the diverse conceptions and expressions of gender and sexuality among Muslims are rooted in history. In fact, in the Malaysian case particularly, there was arguably a certain degree of ‘gender pluralism’ in Muslim Southeast Asia before the advent of Western colonialism (Peletz 2011, p. 661). Later in the chapter, however, I show that while this may be true, the gay Muslims I met rarely drew upon this history consciously when forming their present-day identities. Rather, they adapted and experimented with other aspects of religion and sexuality, with some conforming to conventional society’s expectations more than others.

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. I first met Rohana around 2009 through mutual friends and we often bantered with each other at social gatherings since then. In 2011, I met her again and told her about my intended doctoral research—she said she was happy to participate. When I first got to know her, I could not be certain if she identified as lesbian or transgender. We never actually said anything explicit to each other about our identities—somehow, we just *knew*. It was only after I introduced Rohana to another friend in 2011—who initially mistook her for a man—that I decided to check this during our interview. Rohana revealed that in the past year or so, she had begun to think of herself more as a ‘trans man’ than a lesbian. I asked her how she wanted to be referred to—she replied that she was still comfortable with feminine pronouns. Her experiences demonstrate that the boundary between gender identity and sexual orientation is sometimes porous. She was also still happy to participate in my study because she wished to respond to Muslim attitudes towards both homosexuality and transgenderism.

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. I met

them through my involvement with Imaan—soon, I also became friends with Ebrahim. In the course of our friendship, I learnt that Ebrahim does not have a preferred gender pronoun. Burly and bearded Ebrahim is theoretically as comfortable with ‘he/him/his’ as he is with ‘she/her/hers’. Out of convention, however, Ebrahim is a ‘he’. In this section, I share these stories from Rohana, Ebrahim and Rasheed to understand how they have fashioned their individual understandings of Islam, drawing upon Robert Merton’s typology of our ‘role adjustments’ in different circumstances.

Rohana’s Story

Thursday night, 8 pm. 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 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, stroking her hair, in full view of everyone. 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, many of whom 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 pengkinds 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. As she told me in our interview, in Malay:

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.²

Rohana is comfortable with these Muslim feminist friends knowing about her gender identity and sexual preference.

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 translations [of the Qur'an] bit by bit, what I understand, the Qur'an, 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 Qur'an and constantly reflecting on what she read. 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 interac-

tions with friends and her own individual initiative that led Rohana to develop an understanding of Islam that affirmed her gender identity and sexuality. But would all gay Muslims respond to this combination of external and internal factors in the same way?

Adaptations of Faith

Rohana's story allows us to glimpse how some people develop specific self-understandings based on external social pressures and their own internal aspirations, and how these inform their actions. Merton (1968, pp. 672–73) 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'.

According to Merton (1968, pp. 677–78), 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 both the goals and norms; and *rebels* want to overturn existing structures and introduce a 'new social order' altogether. This typology is not intended to freeze people into personality types but to categorise 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 practice or other extra-curricular activities.

At home, Rohana's late father would read and memorise the Qur'an 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 have never pressured her to wear it. When Rohana started cutting her hair very short at the age of 13—like a boy, she said—her mother never scolded her or asked her to stop. Rohana said, 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 practice 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.

Merton's scheme of 'role adjustments' can help illuminate the ways in which someone like Rohana responds to the cultural goals and socially regulated norms of Islam in Malaysia. Her father and teachers could be seen as conformists but, as she was growing up, Rohana alternated between innovating sometimes and making a show of obeying the rules ('ritualism') at other times. For example, she once reluctantly agreed with 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.

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 developed a new perception of Islam as an inclusive religion, and 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 *madrasah* (mosque school) every day after school. Ebrahim said:

So, we learned how to ... read the Qur'an in Arabic. We read *kitab*s or books on, you know, how to pray *namaz*, how to do *wudu'* (ritual ablutions), learn prayers, you know, about burial, quite a variety of things ... 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*³ way.

In Ebrahim's Indian Muslim neighbourhood, parents sent their children to the mosque to instil in them the community's overall goal to live as Muslims in Britain. The mosque teachers thus helped socialise the neighbourhood's children into becoming 'good' British Indian Muslims. Nevertheless, Ebrahim said he was dissatisfied with the lack of intellectual content in his *madrasah* 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 Qur'an it says this. It's just, 'We do this.'

In his account, Ebrahim was not reacting against the content of the Qur'an per se but rather the authoritarianism of his mosque teachers. Rasheed experienced something 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* ... 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 Qur'an fluently. He said:

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 explained 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, where they contemplated renouncing Islam altogether—both its goals and norms. Like Rohana, however, Rasheed and Ebrahim had found what they described as a community that accepted them—Imaan. This meant that Imaan provided them a safe space from the anti-gay attitudes they associated with their Indian Muslim community's version of Islam and the anti-Muslim attitudes they experienced sometimes among certain sectors of British society, including the gay scene.

Coming into contact with Imaan 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 valued this aspect of Imaan, regarding it as their 'community'. Ebrahim said:

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 yes, the queer Muslim community I think are my community.

Even so, Ebrahim and Rasheed innovated and rebelled differently from each other. For example, Rasheed still steadfastly kept halal in terms of food and drink, while Ebrahim was 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 surrounding cultural 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 eventually 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 with or disaffiliating from Islam. In Malaysia, where there are heavy legal, political and social penalties for renouncing Islam, retreatism might often take the guise of ritualism, or rejecting the goals of Islam but keeping up the appearance of adhering to its norms. 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 did 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. They then agreed to participate.

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.

Naming Romantic and Erotic Desires

When people decide to adopt particular labels for themselves, they are not merely describing what they are. They are also announcing certain preferences which allow them to associate with others who share these

preferences. A person's preferred label for sexual identity therefore indicates his or her social inclinations, too. For example, a 'queer' woman and 'bisexual' man might use 'queer' and 'bisexual' to describe their sexual attraction to both men and women. Yet these labels might also signify their preference in belonging to a specific community of 'queers' or 'bisexuals', or the politics of being 'queer' rather than 'bisexual' and vice versa.

This section looks at how the gay Muslims I met constructed logics of sexuality for themselves. In particular, I address 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, the gay Muslims I encountered 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'.

The Logic of Sexual Attraction

Years before moving to London, I knew Amin, a Malay man in his mid-20s. Amin was born and raised in a small town in the northern region of Peninsula Malaysia near the Thai border—not far from where I grew up. He was a promising teenage athlete and represented Malaysia at several regional sporting events. During this time, he alternated between schooling in his village and training at a sports complex in Kuala Lumpur. When I interviewed him, Amin was in a sexual and romantic relationship with Ebry—a man who was ten years older and my childhood friend—for more than nine years. They lived together with Ebry's mother and siblings.

Amin did not identify as gay and said he was 'straight'—he used the English word even though our interview was in northwestern Malay patois. When I asked him what he understood about being 'gay', he confessed that it did not make complete sense to him:

Is it like, I *apom*⁴ 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 suggested that it might have stemmed from his particular understanding of what it meant 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 [*grunts like a gorilla*], it's over. I'll automatically go limp.

Amin understood 'gay' as referring to masculine men who were attracted to other masculine men. As a masculine man who was attracted to feminine men *and* women, Amin concluded that he was not 'gay' but 'straight'. In fact, he also confessed being sexually active with girls since his early teens, although this never involved penetrative vaginal or anal sex.

I asked, 'So is Ebry the woman, then?'

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

Ebry and I giggled at this.

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

'Insha Allah (God willing). If God permits us to be together forever, then yes.'

Amin's experiences and the way he articulated his sexuality seem to fly in the face of popularly understood gender and sex categories, especially in the English-speaking West. Should we refer to him as 'gay'? He said he was not, and based on Eurocentric understandings of 'gay' some people might accuse him of being in denial or in the closet. It is clear, however, that Amin was not trying to deny or conceal his desire for Ebry. He saw his relationship with Ebry as homosexual in appearance but heterosexual in essence—he was, as he said, attracted to the feminine.

This means that he would also be attracted to feminine women, but did this make him bisexual? He did not think so—he felt and presented himself as a masculine man and was attracted only to feminine men or women. By his logic, this still made him 'straight'.

I have no reason to doubt Amin's reasons for identifying as 'straight', his qualification that he was not anti-gay, or his love for Ebry. In fact, Amin has defended himself when some of his colleagues and friends questioned his relationship with Ebry. He said he lost many friends in this way and only stayed in touch with the very few who were non-judgemental:

But my friends, most of them have said nasty things. Like they say Amin, what's this, going with a *darai*⁵? You were once a playboy, Amin! You liked p*ssy. You can still get some of that, why go for [Ebry]?

Amin stood up to these friends but, at the same time, did not want to be too confrontational. He still wanted to fit in with his village community and with society in general. He therefore balanced being open to his village community about his relationship with Ebry and maintaining his identity as a 'straight' man. This was possible in his village because it included some individuals who did not conform to dominant norms of gender and sexuality, as he elaborated when I asked for examples:

Amin: Couples, like, a man with another man, no, there weren't any. But there's like this *ponen*,⁶ what's his name, it's Haih, I think—

Shanon: 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 craving mangoes—could you get some for me?' And his mother went along with it! She said, 'Sure, I'll get some mangoes for you.' She then 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. The rest are OK, no problems with them.

Ebry often followed Amin back to his village and slept in Amin's parents' house, calling the mother 'mum' and the father 'dad'. When I asked Amin how the other villagers reacted to Ebry's presence, Ebry interrupted and said in Malay, 'A beautiful woman is visiting their village, dear, what do *you* think?' Amin confirmed that Ebry got along well with the villagers.

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

I think the best word for me is I'm a *pondan*⁷ 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 [still need to] respect [the custom by not cross-dressing].

In Merton's terms, Ebry could be described as a 'ritualist'—even though he felt like a woman, he dressed as a man to conform to what he experienced as social and cultural pressure. However, there is no clear-cut separation between Ebry's inner disposition and his rejection of external conventions. When I asked if he identified as transsexual, he said:

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 rejected the idea that he was a 'woman in a man's body' and went on to employ multiple terms to describe his gender and sexuality. These seemed to share a certain family resemblance—'pondan', 'transvestite' and 'gay'—but contained subtle differences in meaning. He implied that they were context specific—when he cross-dressed he was a transvestite and when he did not he was gay. Yet, he also felt like a woman 'on the inside' which is why he thought the best of all possible words to describe himself was pondan. At the same time, he rejected 'transsexual' because he did not want to modify his genitalia.

By playing with these labels, Ebry was ensuring that he could be different and still be part of his surrounding society. The region that he and Amin were from is not as urbanised as Kuala Lumpur—there are no gay nightclubs or an established gay subculture there. Instead, there are spaces, such as Amin's village and Ebry's family home, where certain kinds of gender and sexual diversity are tolerated but within traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity. In this context, it was more appealing for Ebry to be 'neither here nor there' or 'betwixt and between' than to fix his identity as 'gay' or 'transsexual'. It was similarly 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') enabled them to enjoy a relative degree of personal security and freedom in their intimate relationship.

Sexual Consciousness: Imposed or Indigenous?

The experiences of Amin and Ebry indicate 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, the political scientist Joseph Massad (2002, p. 372) argues that terms such as 'gay', 'LGBT', 'homosexual' and '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, p. 373).

According to Massad (2002, p. 362), these 'Westernised' gay Arab 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 ‘anti-homosexual’ programmes to oppose the ‘deviant’ and ‘debauched’ West (Massad 2002, p. 379).

Massad’s argument is potentially useful inasmuch 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.

Ebry articulated a similar rationale when he justified his opposition to the Kuala Lumpur-based LGBTQ initiative, *Seksualiti Merdeka* (Independent Sexuality):

Malaysia is not like London, or Malaysia is not like US Malaysia is half Iran, and half US, that’s what it’s like. 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 saw Malaysia as polarised between the liberal, or what he glossed as the ‘US’, and the conservative or fundamentalist, or ‘Iran’ as he put it. In his estimation, conservatives hold the balance of power. He therefore did not oppose gay rights activism because he believed that sexual minorities deserved to be persecuted, but because he felt that Malaysian LGBT activists were out of touch with the reality outside Kuala Lumpur. Still, he did not resign himself to the dictates of state-sanctioned Islamic authorities—in fact he called them ‘stupid’. Amin was similarly critical of the Islamic bureaucracy.

This is why it is problematic to assume that ‘gay’ Muslims only consist of middle-class 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 made Ebry uncomfortable with gay rights activism in Malaysia, not with his own personal playfulness in using the term ‘gay’ as a self-descriptor. It might thus be more fruitful to ask how terms like ‘gay’ or ‘homosexual’ acquire new layers of meaning for someone like Ebry in his own local context. How does someone like him adapt and intertwine it with other local or indigenous concepts once it has been ‘transplanted’ in this way (Najmabadi 2011, p. 550)?

Gender Pluralism and Sexual Autonomy

Pre-modern and early modern Muslim societies in Southeast Asia tolerated a certain level of ‘gender pluralism’ (Peletz 2011, p. 661). The anthropologist Michael Peletz (2011, p. 663) argues that in the pre-modern era, Southeast Asian women were less socially inferior to men compared to women in Europe, East Asia, South Asia and Melanesia. In this context, homosexual relations were ‘legitimate (even imbued with sanctity)’ as long as they were ‘heterogender’ (Peletz 2011, p. 665). It was therefore permissible 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 did 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.

During both of my research visits, my fieldwork involved short trips to Kedah in the peninsula's northwest. Kedah is one of nine monarchical States in Malaysia—the other four are governorates. On 17 August 2013, I visited the Kedah State Museum, which contains a row of 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 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 [namely 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 sacred beliefs from the Indian subcontinent. After the coming of Islam and then Western colonialism, religious and political adminis-

trators and reformers began to view heterogender homosexuality and transgenderism as synonymous with pre-Islamic syncretism and became increasingly hostile towards them (Peletz 2011, pp. 667–68).

Peletz (2011, pp. 676–77) argues, however, that despite the increasing stigma against homosexuality and transgenderism, such gender pluralism remains ‘robust’. 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’ (Peletz 2011, p. 673). These villages were known to the inhabitants of other villages, 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*, a Malay-Thai genre of courtly dance-music-drama. In fact, the exhibit at the Kedah State Museum suggests that the Kedahan *mek mulung* shares many similarities with *mak yong*.

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 heterogender norms (Phillips and Reay 2011, p. 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 and Reay, 2011, p. 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.

Peletz stresses, however, that ‘heterogender’ same-sex relationships were not merely tolerated on a practical level in Southeast Asia but were part of a wider cosmological scheme. Overall, diverse sexual expressions were accepted in varying degrees but 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 ‘imported categories and practices’ and intertwine these with local concepts and practices (Najmabadi 2011, p. 550). To take another example, Razak, a gay Malay man in his late 20s, playfully mixed and matched different labels for himself. As he explained during our interview, in which we code-switched between English and Malay:

I’m a *gay-boy*. Considered *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 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 said he identifies—or could be identified by others—as *adik-adik* or *kakak-kakak* depending on the situation. When I asked him to explain this fluidity, he said:

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 your [full] self, you will never know, because that [label] is [also] 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.

These terms thus refer as much to the roles that other people 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 'kakang-kakang', '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 identified status distinctions between various expressions of sexual identity, but these were constantly negotiated and renegotiated by all those who identify with 'gay' as an umbrella category.

When Razak used these terms, he was 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 was picking and mixing from the potpourri of 'imported' and 'local' terms which he felt best described him. This indirectly involved negotiating liberal assumptions about sexual autonomy (implied in the label 'gay'), traditional conceptualisations of a sexual hierarchy (implied in the labels 'adik-adik', 'kakang-kakang' and 'abang-abang') and observance of Islam, as he explained, in Malay:

I don't want to be called ... *murtad* [an apostate] 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* [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 wanted to belong to the wider fold of Islam but thought being gay was impure and therefore an obstacle to being 'properly' Muslim—it hindered his observance of Islamic rituals. Because of this, he appeared to struggle between expressing his individuality as a gay person and his loyalty to the larger community of Muslims. By grap-

pling with these questions, however, people like Razak complicate the boundaries not only between sexual identity and religion but also between religion, ethnicity and culture.

Ethnicity: The Implicit Challenge

During several interviews and informal chats, there were moments when my participants would spontaneously start discussing ethnicity in response to questions about religion. Gay Muslims in Britain joked about being ‘coconuts’—‘brown on the outside, white on the inside’, as Ebrahim put it—while in Malaysia several were quite critical of the notion of the ‘typical Malay’. The terms ‘coconut’ and ‘typical Malay’ are also used playfully or more pejoratively by other Muslims in both countries, but this section looks at how they were used specifically by the gay Muslims I met. I investigate how notions of ethnic and national identity are implicated when gay Muslims construct and claim their religious and sexual identities.

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 of England 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. ‘Really?’ I asked. 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 Manchester, 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, of course—because I promised to cook a Malaysian feast for him and a few other Imaan members.

During our interview, when he told me that he identified as gay and *liked* the label, I asked, ‘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?’ At this point, I was still digesting postcolonial critiques of LGBT activism such as Massad’s, which might explain the way I framed the question.

Osman replied, ‘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 said he was a ‘coconut’—‘Brown on the outside, white on the inside’, he elaborated, with a chuckle. I prodded further, ‘White in terms of what?’ Ebrahim replied:

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 wanted more examples because I needed to know exactly what Ebrahim was getting at. ‘So, for example, is Beyoncé coconut music?’ I asked.

‘No, Beyoncé is fine,’ said 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.’

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 was a ‘coconut’, too. Still, I needed to understand better and went on to ask Ebrahim about television shows:

Shanon: So if you watch *Modern Family*, 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* is white people stuff.

- Shanon: *The Big Bang Theory* is white people stuff?
 Ebrahim: *The Big Bang Theory* is kind of OK.
 Shanon: Because there's a brown person in it? [Dr Rajesh Koothrappali, played by Kunal Nayyar.]
 Ebrahim: Yes, exactly.
 Ebrahim: Stuff like *Miranda* is OK.
 Shanon: Really?
 Ebrahim: Yes, *Miranda's* fine.
 Shanon: How come?
 Ebrahim: It's on BBC1. It's OK. [*Chuckles.*]

Thus, while Ebrahim used the word 'coconut' to describe himself and explain some of his preferences, he also admitted he could not define it consistently or coherently. The example of *Miranda* demonstrated this—an English sitcom with an all-white cast was suddenly alright by non-'coconut' Asians because it was broadcasted on BBC1, which was 'popular' and therefore acceptable. 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 skin-nies [or jeans], I'm the one that would straighten his hair, have long hair, you know. I'm the one that doesn't have a [local] accent, that 'innit bruv'⁸ 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*,⁹ I'm the white one, you know ... hangs around with white people, black people, what the hell is he doing? And then like [where I go to university now], 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 did not use 'coconut' pejoratively, even though they acknowledged that it had negative connotations among many British Asians. Rather, they partially reclaimed it for themselves and used it light-heartedly, with funny examples and lots of laughter.

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 felt and was perceived as ‘white on the inside’ when he was among the Asian community in his hometown, but suddenly became ‘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 appeared 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 identified as British, too.

These cultural and ethnic dimensions created a further level of complexity for the gay *white* British Muslims I came across. For example, Nadia, a white English convert in her late 20s—she used the term ‘revert’—was in a relationship with Carmen, who is also white but non-religious. Nadia eschewed all sexual labels and said she found 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 Jumu’ah [Friday prayers] ... I read two *raka’at* [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 *salat* [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' whiteness. 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 were victims of 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.

To put it in another way, we are not talking about 'just words' when we unpack categories of gender and sexuality—in this case concepts such as 'gay' (Najmabadi 2011, p. 550). For these gay British Muslims, identifying as 'gay' was related to reclaiming the concept of 'coconut' which was not 'just' a word they joked about. Rather, it enabled them to bridge their gay, Asian, Muslim and British identities and to negotiate multifaceted roles within society.

In Afsaneh Najmabadi's (2011, p. 534) research 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.

The Enduring Myth of the 'Typical Malay'

On 7 November 2012, I listened to Mohamad Abu Bakar, a historian at Universiti Malaya, who was wearing a *songkok* (male headgear) and a *batik* shirt. He delivered the keynote lecture at a seminar on the uplifting of Malaysia's Islamic laws, organised by the Syariah Section of the attorney general's chambers. In it he speculated on the origins and evolution of Islam in Malaysia—one of his propositions was that 'Malaysia is an evolving Islamic state.' The audience consisted of around a hundred rank-and-file and senior civil servants from Malaysia's many state-backed Islamic institutions. As a full-time doctoral candidate, I was able to register for this event and pay a concessionary fee.

Towards the end of his lecture, Mohamad started criticising what he alleged as uncritical Muslim or Malay support for President Barack Obama of the USA. 'Yes, we worship Obama, Obama's skin is black,' he said in Malay. But, he continued, 'Obama is an embodiment of American values.' He was still a Democrat, some argued, which distinguished him from the Republicans. But after being in power for a while, many then realised, 'Oh, looks like Obama's the same as the rest [in his attitude

towards the Muslim world].’ Mohamad questioned why Malays fell for Obama in the first place and answered, this time in English, ‘Because Malays are naïve and gullible.’

In the question-and-answer session, Mohamad provided a few more clues as to what constituted this naïveté and gullibility. In the 1950s, he said, Malays were obsessed with Bollywood movies, memorising every single song and line of dialogue. Now they were obsessed with American and Latin soap operas like *Ugly Betty* or *Yo Soy Betty, La Fea*. Also, he said, the Malay newspapers were only good for finding out which cat was road-kill for the day. The picture he painted suggested that Malays were not only naïve and gullible but also capricious and shallow.

He addressed a room that was more than 90 per cent Malay and was meant to be supporting the Malaysian state’s elevation of the position of Islam, and by extension Malay privileges. How, then, could he get away with stereotyping and essentialising ‘the Malays’ in this way? More to the point, what did this have to do with my gay Muslim participants?

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:

I think it’s associated with all this bad ... herd mentality ... in my opinion. I mean, I’m not being PC [politically correct] at all. But this is what I need to express. The fact that Melayu, it’s a bad brand here lah,¹⁰ for me lah, personally. Because the establishment of this Bumiputera 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 Malayness, which he understood as simultaneously supremacist and disempowering (e.g., in his reference to ‘herd mentality’). For clarification, I asked if he agreed with Mohamad the Historian’s characterisation of Malays as ‘naïve and gullible’ and he snapped back, ‘Of course not!’

On the other end of the ideological divide was Ebry—a Malay (albeit with immigrant ancestry) who believed that Malays generally *are* 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. He said, in Malay:

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 told me about how he did not really feel comfortable hanging out with his old friends anymore:

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 in English.*] Typical Malay Malaysians!

In both these instances, Ebry seemed to draw 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. One piece of damning proof, according to Ebry, was that 'typical Malays' were in the habit of practising black 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'. For example, see Frazer's (2009, pp. 41, 42, 193, 213) discussion on Malay charms and Malay magical beliefs about weather and kingship.

According to the anthropologist Robert Winzeler (1983, p. 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, which they assumed to be antithetical to ‘orthodox’ Islam. Winzeler (1983, pp. 438–39) 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.’ Many colonial writers and post-independence scholars went on to link 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 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 simultaneously more scientific and Islamic (Jamin 2011).

This narrative of Malays needing to abandon being naïve, gullible and superstitious in order to succeed as rational leaders of post-independence Malaysia has been bolstered by various policies. For instance, the Malaysian government and other government-linked corporations historically provided and continue to allocate 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, USA, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. 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 71 Internet users per 100 people, the highest penetration in Southeast Asia only after Singapore with 82 users per 100 people (World Bank 2016). 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, the 1980s saw efforts by a new Malay middle class to revive 'traditional Malay culture' (Kahn 1992, pp. 158–78). Civil servants and new entrepreneurs packaged and promoted symbols of Malay culture for an audience of Western tourists and local Malay consumers. This unwittingly politicised Malaysia's cultural arena even further.

During the same period, Malay intellectuals were providing the ideological spine for the state's attempts to purify Islam from Western influence and local superstition (Peletz 2005, pp. 240–72). Even from 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 1976, pp. 106–7). This period also saw the flourishing of new Muslim movements—consisting of students, young professionals and academics—seeking to transform the social order by uplifting Islam in social, political and economic life (Regan 1989, pp. 138–40).

Thus, despite the dichotomous conceptions of Malay 'folk religion' and 'orthodox' Islam inherited from the colonial era, from the 1980s there have been parallel state-approved efforts to uphold both Malay-ness and Islam. On occasion, the attempts by state and non-state actors to bolster Malay-ness have contradicted attempts to promote Islam and vice versa, for example, when Mahathir rebuked Malay makers of horror cinema.

Given this background, what did these various Malays—such as the Malay historian, Mahathir and some of my participants—mean when they dismissed or put down the 'typical Malay'? To begin with, all of them shared the assumption that the 'typical Malay' is downtrodden and an obstacle to rationality, intelligence and progress. Yet, they all had different ideas of what counted as an obstacle—for Ebry, 'typical Malays' were homophobic, for Mahathir they were superstitious, and for the Malay historian, they were blindly pro-USA just because President Obama was not white. They all turned the 'typical Malay' into a subcategory of 'deviant' or 'Other' Malay while implying that *they* were non-typical. Whether they intended to or not, this insinuated that they were much closer to being 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 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 was openly gay in public, was scathing about ‘typical Malays’ and insisted he was not one, saying in English:

They read *Utusan Malaysia*, yes, they watch TV3, they watch *Melodi*, they watch, they read *Harian Metro*, they regard *Harian Metro* as a newspaper ... You don’t see them at the Chinese vegetarian restaurants, because they don’t go there, and ... they don’t read that much. They still believe ... whatever the *ustaz* [Islamic teachers] are saying are true, they think they have to obey whatever they are saying. Those [are] typical Malays.

Wahid dismissed the ‘typical Malay’ as insular, conformist and uninterested in exploring other aspects of the world while building himself up as a non-typical Malay. He implied that ‘typical Malays’ swallowed government propaganda via UMNO-owned or UMNO-linked newspapers such as *Utusan Malaysia* and *Harian Metro* and television channels such as TV3. Their idea of culture or entertainment was informed by *Melodi*, the popular TV3 entertainment programme. And they held overly dogmatic and irrational notions of halal. Halal regulations for food generally apply to the slaughter of meat—by this logic, vegetarian food should be halal by default. Wahid alluded, however, that because ‘typical Malays’ strongly associate the Chinese with pork-eating, they would not even set foot in a vegetarian Chinese restaurant.

By cataloguing these alleged flaws, Wahid reproduced stereotypes about the naïve, gullible Malay which were nearly identical to those produced by the Malay historian. The difference is that the Malay historian admonished ‘typical Malays’ for not keeping up with the state’s nation-building objectives, while Wahid chastised them for being too conformist.

When different groups of Malays dismiss the ‘typical Malay’, they draw upon common motifs from the same rhetorical repertoire—but they are not necessarily referring to the same thing. Some, like Zainal, struggle to resist dominant stereotypes about Malay-ness or ‘typical Malays’ without counter-stereotyping others. Others, like Ebry and Wahid, are much readier to denigrate the ‘typical Malay’ as a self-defence tactic. Yet Zainal, Wahid and Ebry all have to grapple with conflicting notions of being ‘Malay’ amid the strong state regulation of religion and ethnicity, 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.

Conclusion

In Malaysia and Britain, the gay Muslims I met came to form their own versions of sexual and religious identity by internalising and interpreting significant life events or relationships. The trajectory of their identity-making often included being socialised into particular versions of Islam, later growing uncomfortable with these expressions, and eventually being exposed to alternative interpretations. Their identity-making also involved different levels of tension with their families, peers, and communities. The deeper their connection with other Muslims in their lives, the more they refrained from outright rebellion against the strictures of Islam imposed on them. Instead, they adjusted their roles according to the situation—rebellious in some circumstances, innovating and conforming in others. If, for any reason, they no longer valued these close interpersonal connections, they might rebel more intensely and counter-demonise the entire group—such as ‘Muslims’ or ‘Malays’ en masse—which they would also try to dissociate from. For them, self-identifying as *gay and Muslim* entailed ‘role adjustments’ in specific situations to negotiate ways of belonging in wider society and achieving ‘culturally defined goals, purposes and interests’ (Merton 1968, pp. 672–73).

By adapting to these roles, my participants—and most probably many other gay Muslims—also redraw the boundaries between religion and sexuality, intentionally or unintentionally. They challenge or subvert

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' (2002, p. 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, many 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 of my participants reclaimed the term 'coconut', which pejoratively refers to Asians with tastes and preferences normally associated with white Britons. They did 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', several gay Muslims I met tried to distance themselves from 'typical Malays' whom they saw as too traditional and intolerant of sexual diversity. Within this context, there were also local traditions of tolerance towards sexual diversity which remain robust to this day. This 'gender pluralism' was hierarchical, however, and sexual minorities were accommodated by the rest of society as long as they knew their 'place' and did not upset the status quo (Peletz 2011, pp. 676–77). This contrasts with contemporary liberal ideals of sexual liberty based upon notions of individual autonomy. Within this context, the gay Muslims I met in Malaysia did not self-consciously draw upon historical traditions to construct their identities but still blended local expressions of gender and sexuality with 'imported' concepts. In this way, they too combined seemingly contradictory notions of the liberal and the traditional which also shaped their religious and ethnic identities.

There is an argument, however, that ideologues in Western and Muslim-majority societies often manipulate notions of sexual liberty to construct and polarise the divide between the 'West' and 'Islam' (Massad 2007, p. 5). In this sense, several of my gay Muslim participants did sometimes struggle between 'liberal' and 'traditional' expressions of their

religious and sexual identities, whether in Malaysia or Britain. Still, this does not necessarily mean that gay identity has been ‘imposed’ upon them. Rather, I observed them finding various 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, the people I encountered 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 of religion, ethnicity, and sexuality. These observations suggest that when societies modernise, they inadvertently allow people to create and nurture these spaces, which fall outside the reach of institutional authorities. In the next chapter, I pursue this analysis by focusing on the collective and individual dimensions of Islamic socialisation in forging a specifically ‘gay Muslim’ identity.

Notes

1. A contested term referring to movements within Islam often stereotyped as fanatically anti-liberal and anti-rational.
2. For example, the Syariah lobby’s constant demonisation of the Muslim feminist organisation Sisters in Islam in various media channels.
3. In other words, as practised by the Prophet Muhammad.
4. Literally, ‘pancake’—a euphemism for penetrative anal sex.
5. Derogatory term for ‘effeminate man’ in northwestern Malay patois.
6. The occasional pronunciation of ‘pondan’ in northwestern Malay patois.
7. 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.
8. Working-class slang—literally, ‘Isn’t it, brother?’ but basically meaning, ‘Yes, friend.’
9. Urdu/Hindi for ‘white’.
10. A Malay suffix that many Malaysians also use when speaking English to emphasise certain words or phrases.

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6

Gay Expressions of Islam

How do gay Muslims relate specifically to Islam? What exactly is the place of religion in the forging of distinctively ‘gay Muslim’ identities? These questions are all the more important when much common-sense wisdom holds that we can choose our religion but not our sexuality. Yet reality is not as clear-cut as this. Many of the gay Muslims I encountered in this study felt strongly connected to Islam and saw this connection as a natural, permanent or inextricable part of their existence.

It is perhaps easier to understand this feeling of ‘natural’-ness regarding our sexual orientations or preferences. Still, while many of us might consider sexuality as something beyond our control, we express (or repress) it based on social norms which are significantly influenced by cultural or religious expectations, or both. In other words, our religious and sexual choices are governed by complex possibilities and constraints depending upon our surroundings.

Sometimes, choice and constraint combine in unexpected ways. During my second research visit to Malaysia, in 2013, I was joined by my partner Giles at the end of Ramadan. We celebrated the first couple of days of Aidilfitri with family and friends. On the third day, I decided to kill two birds with one stone. I told Giles I wanted to enjoy a night out

in the gay-friendly Bukit Bintang district of Kuala Lumpur, while also conducting participant observation. An incredulous Giles quipped, 'You call *this* fieldwork?'

We wandered around, locating the various gay nightspots in the area and decided to enter one in which a drag performance was starting shortly. It was slightly past midnight. The bar area was quite small but was filled with maybe 50 patrons, with more streaming in as the night progressed. The whole area was decorated with Malaysian flags. A waiter came to take our drinks order—a beer for Giles and Coke for me. I thought to myself, if this place is raided by Syariah officers tonight, at least in my defence I can say this is non-alcoholic. The adjacent table was taken by a group of young Malay men—I could not tell if they were gay. They were certainly not shy about sharing a bottle of whisky, though.

At a neighbouring table, some beautiful Malay women were chatting affectionately with their white boyfriends. Giles assumed they were cis-gender women but I thought they were mak nyah. 'How can you tell?' asked Giles. I was at a loss to answer—I really could not say for certain, but just sensed it. I also wondered if this was cultural difference at work—was it less obvious to Giles that the women might be mak nyah because he is posh and English? Or was I making too many assumptions, supposedly as the local expert?

Then three young Malays walked in and went to the large long table at the centre, just in front of the DJ's booth. They had spiked hair and wore baggy jeans and flannel shirts. 'Are those "gay-boys"?' asked Giles. I stared at him in disbelief. 'No, they're "tomboys",' I answered. Giles was dumbfounded. 'You're serious? They're butch women?' he asked. 'Well, they might be women or they might be trans men, but yes, I'm pretty sure they're "tomboys", or "pengkids",' I said. 'I really thought they were gay men,' said Giles.

At this point, the pengkids were joined by their girlfriends. Giles' confusion made me doubt myself, too. Were they pengkids or gay-boys? No, I was sure the pengkids were pengkids and the mak nyahs were mak nyahs. Then the drag performance started. The first act was someone in a gorgeous sari dancing sensuously to a Bollywood number. 'Is that a mak nyah?' Giles asked. 'I don't know anymore,' I replied. What I know now

is that this episode illustrates how Giles and I—probably like so many other people—habitually think about gender and sexuality through our ingrained assumptions about people’s physical appearance and mannerisms.

The repertoire was a mix of dancing and lip-syncing to Western and Bollywood hits and a stand-up comedy act by a drag queen. For the show’s climax, we were treated to a medley of evergreen Malay *Aidilfitri* songs accompanied by a comedy-dance routine. A troupe of Malay drag queens—some donning the *tudung*—playfully sashayed onstage to songs that rejoiced at the end of Ramadan and extolled the virtues of forgiveness. They were irreverent but not malicious or insulting. The mostly Malay audience laughed and applauded approvingly, some in between chugging down pints of beer. Later, on our way out, Giles said he had never seen anything like it in his life. As I glimpsed a glowing review of the venue from a government-owned English-language daily tabloid—laminated and pasted at the entrance/exit—I admitted that this was a first for me, too. Again, Giles looked surprised. ‘I’ve been to gay clubs in this part of town before,’ I clarified. ‘But this was my first ever queer *Aidilfitri* outing—complete with *tudung* drag.’

While most of the encounters I analyse in this chapter were not as quirky as this one, they are collectively about gay expressions of Islam. This chapter looks at how the gay Muslims I studied navigate various dimensions within their everyday lives to create a sense of belonging within the larger fold of Islam. I explore how their religious expressions are shaped by their surroundings and whether *they* are reshaping dominant interpretations of Islam by expressing their individual identities. I do not merely focus on their engagement with religious texts and doctrines but on their wider lived experiences, too.

Making Sense of Identity

Investigating the ways in which gay Muslims express Islam entails understanding the religious and sexual dimensions of their identity. Yet the word ‘identity’ can be employed in multiple and contradictory

ways. The sociologist Rogers Brubaker and historian Frederick Cooper (2006, p. 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.

The term 'identity' is therefore 'made to do a great deal of work' often leading to vague analysis (Brubaker and Cooper 2006, p. 35). Instead, we could use '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 and 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 and Cooper 2006, p. 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 we could consider their 'self-understanding and social location' (Brubaker and Cooper 2006, p. 44). 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 soli-

parity or oneness with fellow group members and a felt difference from or even antipathy to specified outsiders' (Brubaker and Cooper 2006, p. 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 and Cooper 2006, p. 47).

These caveats are useful to clarify the facets of 'identity' I am looking at but I do not discard or replace all references to it. Rather, I incorporate the tripartite suggestion by Brubaker and Cooper to investigate various layers of identity in action.

I begin my analysis with a section on the interplay between external categorisations of Islam and the self-identifications of the gay Muslims I met. I compare how they 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.

The next section looks at aspects of identity related to my participants' 'self-understanding and social location' which did and can fluctuate depending on particular circumstances in the two countries. The section after this inquires whether they express 'gay Muslim' as a distinctive, collective identity within and beyond their local contexts—in other words, if there is a strong 'feeling of belonging together' as gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain.

I found that my participants 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 experiences.

These observations lead to the last section which probes the ways in which some gay Muslims might use urban or virtual spaces to interact and thus reinforce their religious or sexual identity or both. Here, I suggest that they use Islam as a resource to fashion intentionally or unintentionally eclectic self-understandings and self-expressions. I contend that gay expressions of Islam are not simply a case of gay Muslims clashing with a supposedly oppressive and monolithic religious structure. Instead,

the people I studied negotiate the opportunities and constraints provided by multiple Islamic and non-Islamic authorities, spaces, and networks to fashion their own religious understandings.

My argument in this chapter is partly that gay Muslims are not very different from other Muslims who also use Islam as a resource to fashion eclectic self-expressions. However, my participants feel the need to innovate on their interpretations of Islam primarily because of their experiences of sexuality. Moral entrepreneurs—such as Syariah lobby, with their efforts to control expressions of Islam—heighten their religious identification and unwittingly drive them to this sort of religious experimentation. This is why I find it useful more broadly to analyse religion as a ‘cultural resource’, as proposed by the sociologist of religion James Beckford (2001, p. 233), than as a ‘social institution’. This approach enables us to understand the experiences of gay Muslim men and women as indicators of how dominant, global images of Islam and sexuality are becoming refracted in new ways at national and local levels (Beckford 2000, p. 183).

Identifying and Being Identified as Muslim

To identify as Muslim and gay, a person needs to develop specific understandings of what it *means* to be Muslim and gay. In the previous chapter, I showed how my participants came to terms with their religious and sexual identity by navigating the dominant assumptions about Islam, sexuality and ethnicity that surround them. In this section, I develop this narrative and explore further how self-identifying as Muslim depends on people’s interactions with family, school, peers, and state regulation—or lack of regulation—of Islam. Particularly, state regulation results in different contests among Muslims—as the religious majority in Malaysia and a minority in Britain—regarding what constitutes authoritative, ‘ideal’ Islam.

In the previous chapter, I also showed that some of my participants developed and continue developing informal understandings of Islam alongside what they are formally told to adhere to. In this section, I explore further how they—probably like many other Muslims—supple-

ment 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.

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 imparted can vary from family to family, or from time to time within the same family.

Some of my Malaysian participants said when their parents were younger, they were not overly strict about Islamic observance but became more religious over time. These parents even started pressuring their adult children to do ‘Islamic’ things, such as performing obligatory prayers. When I asked Zulkifli, in his late 30s, whether his parents were strict about his childhood Islamic education, we had the following exchange in Malay:

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 Makkah (for the *haj* pilgrimage) and everything?

Zulkifli: Yes, they’ve been to Makkah 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 Bangladeshi population in the northwest of England, described his family as religiously observant for as long as he could remember.

When he and his brothers were younger, his father used to drag them by the ear 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 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 ... obviously with political changes and climate, things are a bit more politically charged, as well [and now there are] a lot more spiritual elements.

Osman noted 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.

Zulkifli said he personally rebelled and ended up identifying as Muslim on a very basic level only. He neither prayed nor fasted regularly—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, he came to see his sexuality as congruent with his religious convictions. However, he did not think the rest of his

family shared this perspective and was not open with them about his sexuality. Zulkifli, on the other hand, had a laxer 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. For these reasons, he also was not open with his family about his sexuality.

Families are therefore a crucial source of exposure to Islam—gay Muslims are shaped by and often react against how their families understand the religion. 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.

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 in madrasahs, or mosque schools. Some enjoyed the experience but quite a number openly characterised it 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. 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, in Malay:

I was, you could say I was the smart kid at religious school Alhamdulillah [thanks be to Allah] 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* [female religious instructor]. 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 do I as a Muslim have to do all this? Why don't other people need to do this? Because my *ustazah* and *ustaz* [male

religious instructors] used to say, if you don't wear the tudung, you will be dragged by your hair through the fires of hell, right¹? 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 branded 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.

For a few of my other participants, encountering alternative authority figures 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 madrasah, she discovered an alternative source of Islamic knowledge. This was through an Englishman 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 explained his inner faith confidentially because, according to her, she came from a respected lineage of Sufi saints² 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 still found it challenging. From her narrative, her negotiation of religious and sexual identity is significantly informed by her family's religious legacy in

Somalia, her normative and alternative Islamic education in Britain, and the various Muslim groups she joined and left.

Transmitting Islam: Peers

What roles do peers play in the transmission of Islam from family or school authorities? From the stories I heard and interactions I observed, some peers can transform an individual's existing understandings of Islam through the forging of close relationships in which new ideas are introduced and debated.

For example, as discussed in the previous chapter, 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. In 2005, for example, Wadud made the headlines and created much controversy when she delivered the khutbah (sermon) and led a mixed-gender Friday congregational prayer in New York (BBC 2005). She was subsequently condemned by several Islamic leaders and *ulama* (religious scholars). Her actions provoked panic in Malaysia, where one writer accused her of 'belittling' Islamic teachings and trying to 'undermine the intellectual discipline observed by the *fuqaha*' (jurists) and "*ulama*" (Ghafani 2017). Rohana had only heard about Wadud vaguely before she met these friends, but her curiosity was piqued and she decided to do more of her own research. What she found provoked much shock and discomfort, as she told me, in Malay:

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 her friends interpreted Islam inclusively and welcomed her into their circle. This 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 Qur'an on her own—even downloading a translation onto her phone—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 only come across one type of Muslim usually, you know, your Sunni, Deobandi, whatever. 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 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.

Transmitting Islam: The State

So far, I have depicted 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 people 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. How did my gay Muslim participants in both countries respond to these state-driven dynamics and report their experiences?

According to Nonny, one key event that strengthened her objection to state-imposed Islam Malaysia was a Syariah enforcers' raid on a next-door neighbour in her condominium complex in Kuala Lumpur. She said, in Malay:

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.³ 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 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 ...? No wonder all these kids plunge to their deaths from all these buildings.⁴ 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 abhorrence at 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, early in my study, three men in Derbyshire were convicted in 2012 for distributing leaflets advocating the death sentence for homosexuality (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, for example:

I think [religiously motivated policing is] completely wrong 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. (Rasheed, early 20s)

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 moral or 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 shari'ah, 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 Islamophobia and racism they sometimes encountered. Some of them deeply opposed dominant stereotypes of Muslims as particularly prone to terrorism or radicalism. They felt that these attitudes 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 consider 'deviant' or 'dangerous'. During my two research visits, spokespersons for the Islamic bureaucracy and cabinet ministers decried 'threats' from Shi'ahs, Christians, and liberal Muslims (Awang 2012; Bernama 2013; Mohamad and Yatim 2012; Star 2013). The Islamic authorities also demonise groups calling for greater democratic freedoms and

upholding 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 LGBT rights or sympathise with LGBT people.

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 (code-switching in Malay and English):

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. For her, it rightfully upheld 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 conformity to near-rebellion. In Britain, although the state does not impose particular expressions of Islam among Muslims, Islam was still a core component of 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 institutions, relationships, and viewpoints—within families, among peers, and in response to providers of religious education. State

management of Islam is also a crucial factor, but we should identify and clarify exactly how different institutional impositions are experienced and negotiated by various individuals.

Other Expressions of Islam?

In Malaysia and Britain, I often encountered accounts or talk of phenomena such as spirit possessions, sorcery, witchcraft and magic when I least expected. It has always fascinated me that these expressions are woven into the primary understandings of Islam among many Muslims, even though the majority of formal Islamic authorities discourage or condemn these beliefs. This does not mean that these notions are peculiar to Muslims—some Evangelical Christians, for example, believe that demonic possession can cause illness (Dein and Illaiee 2013, p. 290).

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 what drove this transformation but did not anticipate the following turn in the conversation, during which we code-switched in Malay and English:

Shanon: What changed?

Isma: Ah, well. Wow. [*Pause.*] I don't know ... this is quite personal, and not many people would believe in it. You believe, you know this thing called *saka*?

Shanon: Yes. Is it like an inherited spirit?

Isma: Yes. 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 Makkah [for haj].' So before she passed away last year, her kind of *saka*, she had to skip one generation. 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 going to 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 ask about the other circumstances that might have informed this episode:

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.

So, 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. (I also asked if she became celibate—she laughed and said no.)

In Isma's view, Islam forbids homosexuality but it was not within her power to change her sexual orientation. 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 a Muslim.

After this exchange with Isma, I wanted to know whether other Muslims in Malaysia had similar stories or experiences. I found numerous newspaper and magazine articles featuring similar topics, including one that condemned *mak nyah* who used black magic to seduce men (Mastika 2012, pp. 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 (who both know I am gay and were aware of my research)—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:

- Shanon: What is 'saka' actually? It's not just *hantu raya* (a supreme male demon that can be tamed by a black magic practitioner), is it?
- Deanna: (Smiling, and eyes wide open.) 'Saka' comes from the word '*pusaka*', meaning it's something inherited. 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* (spirit, demon or ghost) can become saka.
- Iskandar: Something that will do something for you, that can perform a task.
- Deanna: Like *toyol* (a malevolent child spirit).

From this single question about 'saka', I continued receiving an in-depth tutorial on the Malay pantheon of spirits and demons, which I annotated with relish. Iskandar and Deanna also educated me about the various hexes still at work in contemporary Malay society. Apparently, some restaurant owners place ensorcelled human faeces in cooking pots to ensure their patrons keep returning. Among some Malays, this explains why some restaurants enjoy 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, p. 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 (Winzeler 1983, pp. 438–39).

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 (Fatwa Committee of the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs Malaysia 1993). The

authorities actively try to marginalise these expressions of Islam to regulate the ‘proper’ beliefs and practices of the larger population. Still, 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 2017).

In Britain, one of my encounters with magical beliefs happened after one of Imaan’s Demystifying Shari‘ah workshops in the northwest of England. After the workshop, Waqqas, Haniya (a British Pakistani bisexual woman 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 expressions, and Waqqas quietly joked that we might get ‘gay-bashed’. We made Waqqas order everything, since he was the most fluent in Urdu—everything was fine after that.

Once we settled into our meal, I was surprised that the conversation quickly turned to black magic, spirit possession, and the occult:

The conversation turns to *jinn* (invisible, capricious beings mentioned in the Qur’an). They talk about something called *tahwiz*, which sounds to me like an amulet (filled with Qur’anic verses to ward off evil), worn as a bracelet or necklace. 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 (prayers) 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 I thought only Malays believed in this kind of stuff.’ He says ‘No, it’s big among South Asians too.’

In other words, many of my participants incorporated these sorts of beliefs within their everyday understandings of Islam. In fact, 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, p. 291). Possession appears to be experienced more commonly by women and marginalised groups and ‘may be a vehicle through which they can express their complaints in

a context in which they can be heard' (Dein and Illaiee 2013, p. 290). Yet 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*' (A. Lim et al. 2015, p. 21). 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 (A. Lim et al. 2015, p. 25).

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 (which I recorded in my field notes):

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 effect, these families were resorting to what the authorities saw as 'deviant' Islam to cure 'deviant' expressions of gender and sexuality. Many of 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 non-conformists themselves, seemed to be that sex/gender ‘deviants’ cannot be cured by religious ‘deviants’.

I include these stories because they are reminders to look beyond the textual or doctrinal when we want to understand 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. Based on my observations, these beliefs can provide a temporary safety valve for them to escape the pressures of being gay and Muslim. These beliefs also inspire their everyday strategies to assert ‘belonging’ within the wider fold of Islam.

Fluid or Stable Self-Understandings?

In this section, I move from discussing the impacts of external categorisations or impositions of Islam on my participants to investigating their more fluid negotiations of being gay and Muslim. To reiterate, 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 (Brubaker and Cooper 2006, p. 35). 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 if we want to understand how gay Muslims might develop their self-understandings of religion and sexuality over time and in different social conditions.

I came across a range of attitudes among the gay Muslims I met about the nature of sexuality which intersected with specific aspects of their religious beliefs. Many believed they were ‘born this way’, meaning that their sexuality was involuntary, but others believed that it was possible to ‘change’ by the will of Allah. I found that these differing self-understandings were informed by their larger beliefs about being Muslim. I begin here by looking at those among my participants who were willing to see their sexuality as impermanent.

Can Sexual Identity Change?

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 (in Malay):

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.

Ayie suggests that ‘changing’ her sexuality from homosexual to heterosexual could be a future option and assumes that this would be desirable. Yet, she complicates the notion of ‘change’ with several terms and conditions.

She imagines that ‘change’ might manifest as her finally conforming to expectations about women’s dressing—wearing the tudung, as she says. 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. The anthropologist

Tom Boellstorff (2005, p. 575) describes a similar phenomenon among gay Muslims in Indonesia, where there are also strong expectations for Muslims to practise their religion visibly and the public sees homosexuality as incompatible with Islam. In this scenario, he observes that gay Muslims find ways of ‘inhabiting incommensurability’ to hold onto to their religious and sexual identities.

‘Inhabiting incommensurability’ also enables Ayie to accept the premise of moral enterprise since 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 somewhat to resolve her own ‘sinful’ existence (as someone who feels inherently lesbian) with her belief in Allah as the only legitimate authority that could ‘change’ her.

I also noticed that this idea of ‘change’ was sometimes used as a weapon by gay Muslims against other gay Muslims who were contemplating ‘reforming’ and living a heterosexual life. For example, in this conversation between Isma and her butch lesbian friend Kal about lesbians who want to ‘change’:

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 (in Malay), ‘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—even if sexuality is mutable, only God has the power to change someone. 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. Later in the conversation, Kal juxtaposes the idea of a pengkid who prays and fasts

faithfully with an ex-pengkid who still does not pray 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 ambivalent about state-sanctioned punishments for homosexuality. Nonny, of a similar background to Isma and Ayie—in other words, from a ‘traditional’ family but now living and working in the capital—used similar sentiments but to embrace gender and sexual diversity. She said (in Malay):

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 conception of God and sexual diversity has much in common with Ayie’s, Isma’s and Kal’s—namely, in her belief that inner intentions matter more than outward appearances—but with some crucial differences in emphasis. Unlike Ayie, Isma, and Kal, Nonny places even greater importance 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 recasts the agency of human actors in relation to the Divine. 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.

‘Created’ Gay?

Many of my participants also believed that they were born gay, or that Allah created them gay and that they could not change this. Such conceptions of a stable sexuality can also lead to varying responses depending on whether the person believes that 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. During our interview, in which we code-switched in English and Malay, he said:

For me, I guess, it’s just me. I can’t be someone else But 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 rationale, same-sex desires are inherent but homosexual conduct is still forbidden in Islam. So, 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, which is akin to a work-based view of salvation. Within this framework, Sulaiman reasons that the sin of having gay sex can be offset by doing good deeds. This

belief 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, 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].

According to this logic, the only ‘change’ that would be possible would be superficial—Sulaiman could only hide his homosexuality and get married to a woman. And even if he were in a heterosexual marriage, he probably would not stop 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 Qur’an condemning me? Well, if it is, then, you know, maybe the Qur’an 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 Qur’an says and think about it in a different way, you know, through reading books like *Homosexuality in Islam* by Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, 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 in the Qur’an 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 Qur’an.

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. A pivotal Qur’anic passage for him is the story of the Prophet Lot, which corresponds with the Biblical Lot (discussed at length in Chap. 3). 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 Christian denominations, this passage has been interpreted as a clear denunciation of homosexuality but pro-gay Christians argue that it is not anti-homosexual per se. Rather, it denounces rape, violence and other kinds of exploitation and injustice. Progressive Christians apply similar hermeneutical analyses to other verses in the Old and New Testaments (Goddard 2008, pp. 112–17). The story of Lot is repeated episodically albeit very briefly in different Qur’anic chapters or *surahs*, and pro-gay Muslim scholars—and here Ebrahim mentions Kugle—adopt very similar interpretive strategies as pro-gay Christians.

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 the Publication and Qur’anic Texts Control Division of the Home Ministry. At the time of writing

(March 2017), there were 1626 banned titles listed on the Home Ministry's website, with banning dates going back to 1971. These included *Allah, Liberty and Love* and *The Trouble with Islam Today* 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 2017). Surprisingly, Kugle's book was not on the banned list, but throughout my research and during subsequent visits I never spotted it in any of the major bookshops in Malaysia. It is available and sometimes prominently displayed in major bookshops in Britain. Still, Malaysians are able to access alternative views on Islam via the Internet which is still largely uncensored.

On the whole, however, people like Sulaiman would need to work very hard to bridge their beliefs about religion and sexuality within the climate of censorship in Malaysia. Someone like 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. Their differing views are actually intriguing given what they have in common. They both received higher education and have middle-class jobs now. Both are faced with barriers in gaining access to alternative interpretations of Islam—Sulaiman more than Ebrahim—but, technically, both could overcome these barriers with some effort. Indeed, what are the factors—other than class, education and alternative interpretations of Islam—that enable some gay Muslims and inhibit others to negotiate their identities in certain ways?

Individual Autonomy and Identifying as Gay

Regardless of the ways in which the gay Muslims I met tried to harmonise the religious and sexual aspects of their lives, many still faced considerable family pressure to marry heterosexually. This was stressful for the majority of them, who felt unable to be open about their sexuality among family. Still, even without having to 'come out', this pressure subsided as some of them developed greater individual autonomy from their families and communities. They built this autonomy with two key

components—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 pressured him to marry, but this had decreased over the years. In our interview, where we code-switched in English and Malay, he said:

- 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.

When Razak was growing up, his parents had working-class occupations—they were both factory workers and although his mother was now retired, his father occasionally still worked as a security guard. Razak's elder siblings were in lower 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 going to 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 Fauziah, her girlfriend at the time. She did not know if they were aware of the precise nature of the relationship but they did not pry.

Some of my participants achieved either financial independence or physical separation from their families but not both, which exposed them to greater pressures to marry. Ammar, a gay British Pakistani, said his mother constantly tried to arrange *rishta* (marriage proposal) meetings for him, even though he told her he did not want to get married. Ammar's father recently found out he was gay—and this remains their 'secret'—and therefore now keeps quiet when Ammar refuses 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? 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*].

Ammar was describing 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 before. They all lived within driving distance of each other in the north 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.

My findings suggest that 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. But can or do these self-understandings and social networks combine to produce a collective ‘gay Muslim’ identity?

Gay Muslims and Group Belonging

By and large, my participants engaged deeply with what it meant to be gay and Muslim on a personal, individual level. But did the idea of being a ‘gay Muslim’ create ‘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’ (Brubaker and Cooper 2006, p. 46)? I explore this by looking at the case of Imaan in Britain and then move on to analyse the Malaysian context.

Imaan: The Making of a Gay *Ummah*?

Imaan often utilised spaces offered by other organisations within the British LGBTQI charity sector to hold regular meetings and other activities. I observed that these non-religious spaces often became temporarily ‘Islamised’ when Imaan events were held. For example, the agenda for the Imaan Annual General Meeting in 2013—attended by around 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* (muezzins to recite the call to prayer, or adhan) and imams (prayer leaders) for the 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 wudu’ (ablutions) to do it.

After wudu’, 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!’ I rush downstairs. A group of

around 15 to 20 Imaan members—men and women interspersed—is standing in rows facing the Qiblat (prayer direction facing the Ka‘abah in Makkah), which in this case is towards the bottom right-hand corner of the room. They are barefoot on rows upon rows of prayer mats. Azeez has done the adhan, and yes, they’re all waiting for me. I take my place at the front of the congregation, Naved does the *iqamat* (secondary call to prayer) and we start praying.

These congregational prayers were not merely guided by conventional religious obligation but grounded in Imaan’s organisational ethos—members took it for granted that Imaan events would set aside time and space for collective worship. The style of worship blended tradition and innovation. I observed that many Imaan prayers employed conventional Sunni-centric verbal formulae and physical movements, but sometimes Shi‘ah imams would lead using Shi‘ah formulae. In fact, Imaan’s leadership at the time encouraged Sunnis and Shi‘ahs to pray together, forging a non-sectarian ethos within the organisation.

Also, the congregation was usually mixed gender—those uncomfortable with this could opt not to join the congregation and pray on their own afterwards. Furthermore, different members were encouraged to lead at different prayer times or to recite the adhan. Thus, during congregational worship within Imaan, members embodied 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 condensed and expressed the organisation’s vision of what it meant to be a ‘gay Muslim’. As an organisation for LGBTQI Muslims, Imaan made room for these Islamic activities based on the needs and preferences of many of its members. Through their participation, members explored and consolidated their self-understandings and self-representations as LGBTQI *Muslims* individually and collectively. These rituals provided, as Brubaker and Cooper (2006, p. 59) put it, the ‘performative, constitutive dimension’ in the making of group identity.

Some Imaan members therefore saw it as not only a ‘gay’ organisation that addressed their concerns about sexual identity but also a valid Muslim organisation that fulfilled their religious needs. When I asked

Rasheed whether he ‘fitted 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 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 provided people like Rasheed the means for expressing themselves comfortably and confidently as ‘gay Muslims’. For them, the combination of religious rituals and social networking created a sense of community or belonging to a cohesive group. Imaan therefore produced rhetoric and activities that enabled someone like Rasheed to develop, within the group, a ‘sense of overriding oneness vis-à-vis some constitutive “other”’ (Brubaker and Cooper 2006, p. 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 joined after having been a part of other Muslim movements or communities and for some of them it became 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, my previous experience [of] 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 [Tablighi] Jamaat days and things.

According to Osman, Imaan was a relatively new and fluid social entity, perhaps reflecting that a ‘gay Muslim’ identity is also fluid and new. This was also reflected in the numerous debates that some Imaan

members had, which sometimes implied that the organisation was too rigidly Islamic or not Islamic enough for their liking. These debates illustrate that, as Brubaker and Cooper (2006, p. 59) observe, ‘groupness’ does not reflect pre-existing social boundaries but is ‘ambiguous and contested’ and constantly being made and remade.

Boundary Work Within Imaan

The ‘performative’ dimensions of identity in Imaan sometimes resulted in intra-group tensions, especially with the various communication platforms within the organisation. In addition to its face-to-face meetings, Imaan provided numerous digital platforms for its members to interact at various levels of anonymity. There was a blog, an online discussion forum, a closed Facebook group and a Twitter account. Individual Imaan members also participated informally—and sometimes even more actively—in numerous WhatsApp chat groups.

The discussions on these different forums were saturated with questions about Islam, gender, and sexuality, as well as other casual, non-religious exchanges. There was never any doctrinal consensus, simply because Imaan’s organisational structure and ethos was such that it did not institute ‘acceptable’ or ‘unacceptable’ doctrines for gay Muslims. During my research, the then chair of Imaan even stressed that the organisation was open to anyone who self-identified as Muslim, even ‘atheist Muslims’.

Despite this, I noted that when Imaan members socialised, initial conversations were often preoccupied with various religious matters, such as whether the food and drink was halal. There were numerous occasions when I did not bother 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.

Bilan—who had attended the same gathering—also told me she was deeply offended by this and other aspects of Imaan:

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 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 did appear to come from South Asian backgrounds. This did not indicate homogeneity, however—the South Asians included Pakistanis, Indians, Bengalis, and East Africans of South Asian background. Besides, I also interacted with people of Arab, Turkish, Iranian, Southeast Asian, White British, and West and East African backgrounds at many Imaan meetings. Historically, however, Imaan's leadership has been Pakistani-dominated.

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 and Nadia distanced themselves from Imaan completely, although Nadia maintained contact with those members she considered her friends. In other scenarios, these tensions were also exacerbated by acrimonious personal clashes—especially between more established and newer members.

The boundaries of belonging within Imaan were therefore constantly being challenged and reworked by existing and potential members. On one level, Imaan fostered 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.

Not Needing to Belong?

Despite Bilan's criticisms of Imaan, she still identified as 'gay' and 'Muslim'. 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, ranging from conservative Salafi to more liberal Sufi groups. 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. She added that she did not fit into the gay community either. 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, yes?

Bilan therefore retained a sense of being ‘gay’ and ‘Muslim’ while feeling alienated from Imaan and the larger gay community in Britain. While being ‘gay’ and ‘Muslim’ were integral parts of Bilan’s self-understanding, she identified with them on an abstract level and 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 was a clear contrast to someone like Rasheed, for whom ‘gay Muslim’ was a cohesive identity tied very strongly to his community. Brubaker and Cooper (2006, p. 46) suggest that in analysing collective formations of identity, we should

distinguish between ‘more loosely affiliative forms of self-understanding’—or those 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’ was much less ‘groupist’ and ‘more loosely affiliative’ than Rasheed’s.

In the absence of involvement with an organised collective, then, it is still possible for people to arrive at a ‘gay Muslim’ identity. I found many instances of this in Malaysia, where there was 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 (in a mix of English and Malay):

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 reluctance to entertain the idea that gay Muslims might provide valid resources on Islam might have stemmed from his underlying belief that Islam forbids homosexuality. Strong state regulation of Islam, Malay ethnicity, and homosexuality probably also made him assign very low priority to expressing his sexual identity, especially if he had other ways of managing the stress of being gay and Muslim.

Yet even though there was no direct equivalent of Imaan in Malaysia, groups such as SIS sometimes acted as proxy gay-friendly Muslim spaces. When I asked Dax—who playfully described himself as a ‘post-Muslim’ gay man in his early 30s—if he had a community he identified with, we had the following exchange, code-switching in Malay and English:

Dax: Religiously or ...?

Shanon: Any kind of community.

Dax: Anything, like how? What about SIS?

- Shanon: SIS, perhaps, or the Annexe [an art gallery in Kuala Lumpur that hosted the sexuality rights festival Seksualiti Merdeka from 2008 to 2010, discussed in Chap. 4]?
- 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 attended SIS events regularly, even the ones that did not explicitly address gender or sexuality, despite personally not identifying as Muslim anymore.

Some of my participants did therefore have access to alternative Muslim spaces, albeit with several limitations. Even though there was no explicit 'gay Muslim' collective, they were able to express their sexual and religious leanings relatively safely among groups such as SIS. They also had limited access to groups like Seksualiti Merdeka, but these spaces did not address Islam specifically. This led not so much to them claiming a strong 'gay Muslim' identity as it did to them adopting looser, alternative, or more inclusive Muslim identities. This contrasted with the British gay Muslims I met who felt at home in Imaan and felt a strong sense of group belonging with other British gay Muslims.

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 some 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 my participants in both countries expressed their religious and sexual identities in tangible spaces.

The Space to Be Gay and Muslim

Up to now, I have shown how the gay Muslims I studied negotiate three interrelated 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 fluctuate 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 sexual offences inhibit their desire or ability—or both—to forge a bounded group identity.

Ultimately in both countries, the individuals I encountered were increasingly expressing their religious and sexual identities in ways that avoided, subverted or challenged the control of normative Islamic authorities. For them, Islam was now less a ‘sacred canopy’ permanently providing identity, meaning, inspiration, and consolation than a resource which they actively drew upon to fashion individual and collective identity.

In this section, I take up James Beckford’s (2001, p. 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 particular physical locations and at specific instances. I begin with how Imaan members negotiated 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.

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 previously marched alongside Sikhs and Jews. During the London Pride march in 2013, however, I had a chance to witness gay Muslim pride and solidarity spontaneously spring into action:

I'm just chilling out with the other Imaanners and holding Scott Kugle's book, *Homosexuality 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 before. Around 30 Imaanners 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, '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 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 Imaanners have gathered around me. Ebrahim starts telling them to go away, while Salleh comes and ushers them sternly to the pavement. He exaggerates his own 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 appreciate the 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. I assumed that while they would defend freedom of speech, they would not tolerate anti-homosexual attacks. The two men must have sensed this as well and left us alone, lest they attracted unwanted attention from security staff. 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 and there was very little they could do about it.

From Imaan's perspective, Pride was an event which, although occurring in a public, 'secular' space, allowed for collective rituals and practices—for example, making and carrying banners, chanting slogans, marching together, taking pictures—that bound members together. Unlike Imaan's congregational prayer sessions, there were also tangible external dynamics that could reinforce a sense of intra-group connectedness and commonality, for example, my brush with the two confrontational men. This incident was an example of Brubaker and Cooper's (2006, p. 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 were also external actors who helped foster in-group feelings of solidarity within Imaan. Large sections cheered loudly when they saw the Imaan banner and rushed to take pictures with Imaan members. Some Imaan members responded by ululating, chanting Islamic slogans in Arabic, or high-fiving supportive people amongst the spectators. In my subsequent marches with Imaan, a few of us became even more creative, especially when Pride fell during Ramadan. Huge sections of spectators would laugh good-naturedly at our improvised slogans, for example: 'We're here, we're queer, we don't drink beer!' 'We're here! We're queer! We're really, really hungry!' 'What do we want? Food! When do we want it? At sunset!' 'Two! Four! Six! Eight! Is

that imam really straight?’ By interacting with the crowd in this way, Imaan members used Islam, ethnicity and a good dose of humour as cultural resources to construct public images of a gay Muslim collective. They made 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, p. 173).

It might thus seem paradoxical that many Imaan members who turned up to march during Pride employed various tactics to tone down details that might have made them identifiable on a personal level. They wore dark sunglasses, hijabs or *niqabs* (face veils), which became not only fashion statements or religious symbols but a means of protecting anonymity in public.⁵ This was partly because many Imaan members needed to balance their desire for social acceptability and the fear of being ostracised by their families and local communities if they were ‘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 earlier). Ayie argued further (in a mix of English and Malay):

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 goodness-knows-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 said ‘gay rights rallies’ could potentially draw unwanted attention to people like her and her girlfriend. In Malaysia, she argued, they had 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 felt that attempting to be more visible with her sexuality and demanding equal rights as part of a distinct sexual minority would upset this delicate balance. A publicly visible rally would invite danger as opposed to the relative safety which she now enjoyed.

Ayie's reasoning implied that there was 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 locality. According to her, it was possible to avoid state-led rhetoric by living semi-openly as a gay Muslim but not explicitly declaring or labelling what she was. To what extent is this true? Can this partial invisibility actually work for gay Muslims and would it also involve treating Islam as a 'cultural resource'?

Balancing Acts

Malaysia's Syariah provisions enable Islamic 'enforcement officers' to patrol public and private spaces for various state-defined moral and religious infractions (Malaysia 1997, pp. 13–17). 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 or imprisoned (or both) under the Syariah Criminal Offences Act (SCOA). Also, under the SCOA, zina (illicit heterosexual sex), liwat (sodomy) and musahaqah (female homosexual behaviour) are punishable by imprisonment, whipping, or a fine, or any combination of the three. Similar provisions exist under the Syariah Criminal Offences Enactments (SCOE) of the other States. However, it is practically impossible for Syariah enforcers to assign the same level of priority to every type of infraction and to police them constantly and comprehensively. In practise, therefore, enforcers often act on tip-offs from members of the public or pressure from political leaders—a phenomenon investigated in greater detail in the next chapter.

Still, there are venues where gay Muslims can be semi-public about their sexual identities without being targeted by these enforcers. During my fieldwork, I became aware of two 24-hour open-air restaurants in two different Kuala Lumpur suburbs—one popular primarily among Malay pengkinds and their girlfriends, the other among gay Malay men and mak nyah. After clubbing one night, at around 3 am, Razak, Dax, and Ikhwan—in his late 20s—and I visited the restaurant popular with gay men and mak nyah:

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 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, drag queens and mak nyah 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 remark on the waiters' indifference, and Razak says, in Malay, 'Maybe they are *pasrah* [resigned to their fate].'

This restaurant is not hidden or 'underground' by any means. It is in a square beside the main traffic light junction of this suburb and surrounded by a 7-Eleven and other convenience stores, office premises, more 24-hour eateries, and rows of cars parked under glaring neon lights. This square itself 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.⁶ To my knowledge, 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). This ruling was denounced by the Syariah lobby, including the minister in the prime minister's department in charge of religion (A. Azim and Lingan 2014; Azril and Aidil 2014).

In most circumstances, the gay Muslims I met in Malaysia were 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* and drag queens there, too. Also targeted were *mak nyah* hired by families to perform at traditional Malay weddings in villages and small towns. I asked Ebry and Amin (in Malay) why they thought the religious enforcers focused so much on drag shows and wedding performances:

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].

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 despite strong anti-homosexual rhetoric from the Syariah lobby, the available evidence suggests that the relevant Syariah provisions are seldom applied (tan 2012, p. 158). 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 2012, p. 130). Most of the prosecutions for sodomy have been

under civil legislation, specifically Section 377 of the Penal Code (tan 2012, p. 131). The Syariah provisions against musahaqah (lesbian sex) 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 2012, p. 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 2012, p. 146).

Ebry’s account was thus plausible and also significant in that he offered non-religious explanations for 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, physical injuries and even death (Mohd Fadly 2013; Wan Noor Hayati 2013).

Despite knowing about these actual and potential abuses, the majority of my Malaysian participants were cautious about criticising the Islamic authorities too publicly. Often, they also did not feel the need to oppose things openly since the occasional and arbitrary nature of moral policing did not make life completely unbearable. Some of them even tried to beat the system, as Ebry put it (in Malay):

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 *only* catch pondan. When it’s alcohol season, they’ll *only* 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.

According to Ebry, many gay Muslims tried to beat the system by lying low during ‘hunting season’ and coming out of hiding when they thought the coast was clear. For some of my other participants, the very idea of hunting seasons was 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 want to drink?

Fauziah: Hmm, 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: Yes! 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 did 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 and address state regulation of Islam and sexuality. They all held Islam sacred but were critical of its administration and politicisation by the state, 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, p. 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.

Indications of Wider Change

In Britain, state 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 by Stonewall, the British LGBT charity, found that in 2013, eight in ten LGBs reported experiencing harassment, insults and intimidation (Guasp et al. 2013, p. 4). Statistics like these go some way to explain why, despite being comfortable marching as a 'gay Muslim' collective during Pride, the Imaan members I observed still felt the need to mask their personal identity. They knew their rights were protected by the state but remained concerned about the potential consequences of being exposed to their families, friends and local communities.

Yet sometimes, the gay Muslims I encountered 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 north-west 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, because 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.

Conclusion

The people I studied in Malaysia and Britain felt a strong sense of connection to their religious and sexual identities yet expressed Islam in ways that avoided, subverted, or resisted control by normative Islamic authorities. By systematically analysing three interrelated facets of identity—external and internal categorisation, fluctuating self-understandings, and group belonging—I examined the conditions that made 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. The gay Muslims I met here took it for granted that they were Muslim and that their behaviour was seen as immoral and criminal. At the same time, state authorities could not fully dictate how they lived their lives as Muslims. In this context, they still negotiated and engaged with multiple social networks, authorities and perspectives of Islam and developed their own self-understandings. Some even vehemently objected to state-imposed Islam, albeit mostly in private. This does not mean that they necessarily disaffiliated from Islam or that Islam ceased to hold personal importance for them but rather that they constantly engaged in personal reinterpretations of it. However, the strong state regulation of Islam and Malay ethnicity, with sanctions for violations, inhibited the formation of a bounded, 'strongly groupist' (Brubaker and Cooper 2006, p. 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 espe-

cially in light of controversies and issues involving Islam. In this scenario, Islam also became a primary component of the identity of the gay British Muslims I met. At the same time, they often needed to grapple with anti-homosexual beliefs and attitudes within their families and communities. Here, too, normative Islamic authorities could not monopolise the way these gay British Muslims fashion their religious self-understandings. Instead, they formulated 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 partly enabled organisations such as Imaan to emerge and be legitimised by the state. This wider context further allowed 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, most of the people I met drew upon what they imagined to be 'true', 'correct' ideals of Islam from external sources, but they adapted these to their local or individual circumstances. They still wanted to belong within the wider community of Muslims, but they also revised and refined 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'. At the same time, the ability of my participants to formulate certain understandings of Islam was significantly influenced by their access to alternative religious interpretations which, in turn, was easier for those with higher education. This did not necessarily translate into a uniform willingness amongst all of them to engage with more inclusive religious approaches. They would have been hindered or encouraged chiefly by whether the people who were closest to them or the most influential—including family, friends, colleagues or informal mentors—were also open to these ideas.

Furthermore, the gay Muslims I studied might not be that different from other Muslims who also use Islam 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 interrelated transnational and national dimensions of ‘Islam’ and ‘sexuality’ affect the regulation and expression of gay Muslim identity in Malaysia and

Notes

1. Although this teaching is widespread in Malaysia, it has no basis in the Qur’an—it appears as a hadith reported in *Al Kabair (The Major Sins)*, a work by the fourteenth-century historian from the Shafi‘i school, Adz-Dzahabi (2007, pp. 299–300). The former Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia dismissed it as a fabrication (The Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Ifta’ 2017).
2. Sufism is ‘long established and well developed’ in Somalia, where the majority of Muslims adhere to the Shafi‘i school of jurisprudence in Sunni Islam (I. M. Lewis 1998, p. 8). According to Ioan Lewis (1998, p. 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, with many apparently honouring ‘pre-Islamic figures who have been assimilated in Islam’ (I. M. Lewis 1998, p. 15).
3. 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* (illicit proximity) by the Syariah court. Ako paid the fine but successfully appealed against the jail term (Star 2011).
4. 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 (Mohd Fadly 2013).
5. For many Imaan members, putting on the hijab or niqab was also a strong endorsement of religious diversity in a ‘gay’ space.
6. 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 [equivalent to approximately £200 or US\$230] or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding one year or to both' (Malaysia 1997, p. 17). Similar provisions exist in the SCOE in the other States.

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7

The Wider Politics of Halal and Haram

Gay Muslims in Malaysia or Britain may draw upon Islam as a ‘cultural resource’ to fashion their identities, but they do so within particular ‘regulatory contexts’ of religion (Beckford 2008, p. 211). They encounter context-specific obstacles as well as opportunities when negotiating the notion that ‘proper’ Islam condemns homosexuality as haram, or forbidden. Yet the major concerns within their larger context of Islam are not always about gender or sexuality. Throughout my fieldwork in Malaysia and Britain, for example, I did not discern a trend in Friday khutbahs explicitly denouncing homosexuality or transgenderism. There were occasional mentions of the dangers of ‘sexual deviance’, but the majority of khutbahs I heard appeared to be concerned with more general pieties and guidance on the halal, or permissible, and haram. In Malaysia, however, I would occasionally come across sermons that were more condemnatory—but not necessarily of homosexuality.

One sermon was particularly fiery. On 6 September 2013, I attended prayers at Masjid Ar-Rahman, the mosque beside the University of Malaya—the country’s oldest university. The congregation was filled with young men in blue polo shirts—part of a week-long orientation for new students, I assumed. I entered towards the end of a pre-prayer lecture

being given by a smartly dressed man in his early to mid-20s. The language was informal and jocular. Men, he said, will always be overcome by the wiles of women. Just as the Prophet Adam was foiled by Hawa (Eve), getting cast out of Paradise as a result. Also, just as the handsome Prophet Yusuf (Joseph) was nearly tempted by the lustful Zulaikha, the wife of the chief minister of Egypt (known in the Bible as Potiphar's wife). 'This is not to blame women,' he said, 'but men will always fall for their charms.' I could not really make sense of his main argument, partly because I arrived at the end of the talk.

When he finished, the congregation—2000-strong at that point and growing—performed their pre-khutbah prayers individually and awaited the khutbah proper. This was delivered by the *khatib* (khutbah speaker), another man in his late 40s or early 50s. Unlike the previous speaker, he read from a prepared text and the language was more formal and serious. In fact, Friday khutbahs in Malaysia are written and regulated by the various Islamic departments. This particular mosque was in the jurisdiction of the Federal Territories Islamic Religious Department which had set the khutbah's focus on 'The Dangers of the Shi'ah' (*Bahaya Syiah*). In neighbouring Selangor State, the khutbah on this same Friday was on 'Repentance and Remorse' (*Tuntut Taubat dan Keinsafan*) (Selangor Islamic Religious Department [JAIS] 2017).

The khatib said that Shi'ahs cannot be considered Muslim for the following reasons—they are too fanatical about their imams; they reject the Sunnah (Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad) as the prime source of Islamic guidance; they practise *taqiyyah* (precautionary denial of faith); they distort Islamic statutes; and they pervert the *shahadah* (declaration of faith) by adding a phrase that reveres Ali (the Prophet's cousin/son-in-law) (Federal Territories Islamic Religious Department [JAWI] 2013, pp. 3–5). The moral of the khutbah was that 'proper' Muslims had to stay away from Shi'ahs—anyone suspected of spreading Shi'ah teachings had to be reported to the authorities immediately. According to the khutbah, the Shi'ah had the potential to destroy the very fabric of society—for example, in the ongoing Syrian civil war.

The regulatory context of Friday khutbahs in Malaysia is such that these overtly condemnatory messages turn up only sporadically, usually in response to local political developments or other current affairs. In the

past, I also came across strident sermons on the alleged dangers of feminism, Christian proselytising and the so-called evil Jews.

In Britain, the spotlight on Islam—especially in relation to radicalisation and terrorism—produces other complications. For example, after the gruesome murder of fusilier Lee Rigby in Woolwich, southeast London, by two young Muslim men in May 2013, community relations deteriorated and mosques were attacked in retaliation (Dodd and Halliday 2013). On 31 May, just over a week after the killing, I went to a mosque in southeast London with a Nigerian-majority congregation. Police officers patrolled outside—probably to defend the mosque from attacks, I thought. But the sermon and prayer proceeded without incident and the building was bursting with worshippers.

The khutbah was the liveliest and longest I had ever heard in any mosque. The khatib spoke flowery, Nigerian-accented English and peppered his points with humour. Islam is a religion of moderation, or a ‘path of rapprochement between extremes’, as he put it. We do not have complicated or burdensome rules for accepting Islam. ‘All a person is required to do to become a Muslim is recite the shahadah—something eminently simple,’ he said. When we are asked to give alms, the required contribution is moderate—we need neither be ‘niggardly’ nor excessive in our giving. ‘It is better to give £1 to Allah in consistency than to wait until we earn £1 million to give at once,’ he said, teasingly. The congregation—at least in the corner where I sat—chuckled softly. ‘And if you can only pray two raka‘at [units of prayer], nobody will demand 1000 raka‘at,’ he continued, to more laughter.

The gentleness of this Nigerian congregation would not necessarily translate into acceptance or even tolerance of homosexuality. Yet these stories about the dynamics of Friday prayers in both countries provide crucial context to the issues I explore and compare in the rest of the chapter. The chapter’s themes revolve around my participants’ lived experiences of homophobia, nationalism, Islamophobia (in Britain) and state authoritarianism (in Malaysia). The next section sketches my approach in analysing these themes and is followed by a comparison of how understandings of Islamic prohibitions of homosexuality are presented in the British and Malaysian mass media. This leads to a comparison of the impacts of state-led monitoring and regulation of Islam and sexuality on

gay Muslims in the two countries. The chapter ends by discussing a key strategy some of my participants employed to reclaim social acceptability in both countries—developing alliances with sympathetic Muslims who uphold inclusive interpretations of Islam.

Constructing and Responding to ‘Deviance’

I opened the chapter with an example of an anti-Shi‘ah khutbah in Malaysia to illustrate that the climate of Islam there is not merely anti-homosexual. What Shi‘ahs, LGBT groups and Christians have in common is that they are minorities in which certain factions or spokespersons are increasingly demanding equality and freedom from discrimination. As a consequence, they become demonised by state authorities and the Syariah lobby. Regarding LGBT groups, the Syariah lobby’s response—in Friday khutbahs and elsewhere—is usually framed around the notions of haram and halal and the ‘ills’ of Westernisation. In Britain, the notions of righteous conduct carry different implications in a context where Muslims are a much-publicised and often-stigmatised minority.

My khutbah examples also illustrate that the notion of homosexuality as haram is explicitly stated only rarely, but fits into a larger framework about ‘proper’ belief and conduct. The question is, how do state and non-state actors go about construing particular kinds of behaviour as unacceptable and conflating these with particular groups of people—in this case, ‘homosexuals’? Before going further, however, the term shari‘ah and popular understandings about how it drives rigid or even draconian legislation on homosexuality need clarification.

The conception of shari‘ah as something codified and imposed by Muslim nation-states is a relatively modern development in how Islamic law is conceived. To be even more precise, there is a distinction between shari‘ah, understood as a moral and ethical code, and fiqh, or Islamic jurisprudence. And in the Sunnah (recorded traditions of the Prophet Muhammad), the words shari‘ah and fiqh do not carry the same legalistic meanings that they are commonly associated with now (Kamali 2006, p. 4). The notion of the shari‘ah as the ‘principal criterion of an Islamic state’ only gained prominence in the twentieth century through Muslim

thinkers and activists such as Sayyid Qutb, Abul-A'la Mawdudi and Yusuf al-Qaradawi (Kamali 2006, p. 6). The usage of the term 'Syariah' in many of Malaysia's Muslim laws needs to be understood in the light of this. Historically, in *fiqh*, jurists from different schools of thought debated and often revised their interpretations of the degrees of permissible and prohibited 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 punishable (discussed in depth in Chap. 3). It is thus more appropriate to refer to contested and diverse Islamic rulings forbidding particular sex acts, whether involving individuals 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 (as explained in Chap. 4).

To understand the everyday implications of these understandings on gay Muslims, this chapter draws upon insights from sociological studies of deviance, specifically regarding 'moral enterprise'. I engage with the sociologist Howard Becker's (1991, p. 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 often, it is the moral entrepreneurs who create 'moral panics' to whip up anxiety or hatred towards 'deviants' or 'folk devils' (Cohen 2011, p. 8). 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 the sociologist Stanley Cohen (2011, p. 226) describes as 'deviancy amplification'.

According to these theoretical approaches, society's perceptions of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' can and do change with time. Also, 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 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, this results in some state and non-state actors bolstering British identity by singling Muslims out as potential security threats—a process the political scientist Stuart Croft (2012, p. 16) refers to as the ‘securitization of Islam’. In the USA, stereotypes of Muslims as violent, misogynistic and homophobic feed into pro-war, nationalist ideologies of ‘America’ as exceptionally tolerant and gay-friendly—what the queer theorist Jasbir Puar (2007, pp. 4, 51) refers to as ‘homonationalism’. These perspectives highlight the geopolitical dimensions that affect policies and attitudes towards Muslim minorities in Western liberal democracies. I draw upon these insights in this chapter when comparing how my participants in Malaysia and Britain respond to notions of halal and haram amid highly politicised representations of ‘true’ Islam and ‘homosexuality’.

My analysis suggests that perceptions of deviance and social reactions to it take on different complexions in the two countries. In Malaysia, beliefs about moral, ethnic and religious purity overlap in the anti-homosexual rhetoric used by the Syariah lobby to defend the cohesiveness of society. In Britain, on the other hand, there is growing advocacy tackling homophobia as part of wider concerns about the ‘social suffering’ of marginalised groups in what Cohen (2011, p. xiii) describes as ‘good’ expressions of moral panics. However, some versions of gay activism can end up targeting religion, including Islam, as a monolithic ‘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.

The gay Muslims I studied in both countries therefore often needed to negotiate their sexual and religious self-expressions based on their assessments of the wider public mood on Islam and homosexuality. But

growing media channels and fragmented state bureaucracies unwittingly provided spaces for them and their allies to fight back, challenging moral enterprise and claiming greater social acceptance.

'Homosexuality in Islam': Mass Media Images

Through various mass media channels, 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. Based on my observations, *Harian Metro* (*The Daily Metro*)—then the highest circulated Malay-language tabloid (Audit Bureau of Circulations 2012)—often carried reports and commentaries condemning homosexuality from what was represented as 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 LGBT people is clearly opposed to the principles and foundations of Islam, which has never condoned freedom without restrictions. (Fathul Bari 2012)

This view pits the supposedly pro-LGBT and thus misguided 'West' against an anti-LGBT and therefore upright 'Islam'. 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’ created 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 closed 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.

The closing line reinforces the notion that sexuality is a fault line in the *Mail’s* conception 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. Papers like *Harian Metro* claim that homosexuality comes from the West and thus construct homosexuals as folk devils. Outlets like the *Daily Mail* insinuate 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, p. 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, pp. 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.

Both papers also use these ideas about Islam and sexuality to drive particular ideological agendas about national identity. *Harian Metro* and other UMNO-owned or UMNO-linked publications portray gay rights as a Western value to justify Malay-Muslim nationalism. The *Daily Mail* and other right-leaning outlets in Britain focus on allegedly exceptional Muslim homophobia to defend the sanctity of the British nation. These Malaysian and British news channels therefore represent two sides of the same coin of 'homonationalism', as conceived by Puar. As I continue to show in the rest of this section, however, this constitutes only part of the picture in both countries.

Negative Experiences with the Media

On a basic level in Malaysia and Britain, the mass media's images of the irreconcilability between 'Islam' and 'homosexuality' affected the overall self-esteem and well-being of many of my participants. This negativity was reinforced when they also came across other items that portrayed homosexuality disapprovingly. Ammar, a gay Pakistani in his early 30s—born, raised, and still living in the north 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':

I took that on board and thought I'm not going to stick to a label It was only when I got to 20, then my teenage years had ended and I thought, oh, it's not going to change And that's when I had to struggle with religion and sexuality.

Ammar continued to say that even though the agony aunt's advice was neither overtly hostile towards homosexuality nor religiously framed, it was based on the assumption that being gay was undesirable at the very least. This was partly what informed his eventual 'struggle' between his sexuality and adherence to Islam.

This internal struggle was 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:

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* (religious instructor), 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. Based on some textual sources of early Islam, there is evidence to suggest that the first 'punishment' of a known homosexual occurred only after Muhammad's death (Kugle 2010, p. 99). 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 were other instances in which the gay Muslims I met attributed the hostility against them to negative media coverage on Islam and homosexuality. Rohana, introduced in Chap. 5, said she felt threatened in her own neighbourhood after the sensationalistic and disapproving television

coverage on pengkid in late 2012. 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 (in Malay) one particular 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 motorcyclist yelled at me, 'Oi, 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.

Other Everyday Reminders

The gay Muslims I met said they often encountered everyday talk and banter reminding them that being gay was strange or sinful in Islam. Apart from family interactions and mass media reports, this kind of talk also happened at the workplace or among particular acquaintances. Ayie, a lesbian Malaysian civil servant in her early 30s, told me (in Malay) that her Muslim colleagues often engaged in negative talk about LGBT people whenever the issue made the headlines:

Ayie: Yes, they talk about LGBT [issues], including all the bosses ... in meetings—

Shanon: In the civil service?

Ayie: Yes, in the civil service They feel that LGBT [is] one of the issues that heavily affects youngsters. I just keep quiet, I pretend I don't know what's going on.

People like Ayie feel they have limited ways of responding to these negative discussions and often have to feign ignorance. Their inability to comment partly also stems from the various restrictions on freedom of expression in Malaysia, specifically in relation to Islam. For example, the Syariah Criminal Offences Act (SCOA), which is applicable to all Muslims in the Federal Territories, criminalises ‘insulting, or bringing into contempt ... the religion of Islam’ and acting in ‘contempt or defiance of religious authorities’ (Malaysia 1997, pp. 11–12). Similar provisions exist in the Syariah Criminal Offences Enactments in the other States.

Ayie continued and said the most she could do sometimes was ask her anti-LGBT colleagues if they had ever heard the point of view of any LGBT people. 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, the people I studied also encountered everyday conversations that framed Islam and homosexuality as irreconcilable, but within a context where the law protects the rights of religious and sexual minorities. Despite these protections, everyday jokes and comments about the supposed impossibility of being Muslim and gay left many of them feeling awkward and annoyed. Salleh, a British Arab in his late 20s who worked 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 Jumu’ah [prayers]. And my [English] manager will let me go off, but 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 the supposed incongruity between Salleh’s religious and sexual dispositions. This explicitness is in contrast with several of the other situations I have discussed, where the idea of homosexuality being haram was

taken for granted and not mentioned directly. Despite the attempt at humour, Salleh was perplexed at the use of 'haram' to refer not to particular actions but to his very 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:

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—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 some gay Muslims and those sympathetic to them to access and construct alternative images of Islam and homosexuality.

Alternative Discussions in the News Media

In Malaysia and Britain, I also came across news reports or portrayals that subverted or challenged the idea that being gay and Muslim is incompatible. In Britain, multi-layered discussions of Islam's position on

homosexuality were more likely to be explored in liberal or left-leaning outlets, since British media outfits tend to cluster around particular political ideologies (BBC 2009). However, progressive media channels here generally attract a smaller audience, suggesting that there might still be a lack of overall critical balance in public discussions of 'Islam' and 'homosexuality'.

In its news coverage, the left-leaning British broadsheet *The Guardian* gave prominence to virtually the same events as *The Mail* albeit with less sensationalist 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 allowed for subtler discussions on Islam and homosexuality. In 2012, for example, a series of articles on racism included a piece that highlighted the mass media's disproportionate emphasis on homophobia among religious or ethnic minorities. The writer, Rob Berkeley (2012), gave the example of reactions to British Muslim journalist Mehdi Hasan:

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.' Some months afterwards, Hasan (2013) reiterated his opposition to homophobia while confessing that he still struggled with 'the idea of homosexuality' as a heterosexual Muslim.

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 greater restrictions on freedom of expression and might sometimes be a strategy to escape

scrutiny, especially for the government-owned media. For example, an analytical piece in the highly circulated government-owned English daily, *The Star*, 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, I observed that these views were more likely to appear in the English- rather than Malay-language news media.

On the whole, such nuanced coverage in both countries did not appear to have the power to completely undo the dominant image of Islam as inherently anti-homosexual. Instead, I found that the fiction media—including film, television, and novels—contained far more multi-dimensional portrayals of 'Islam' and 'homosexuality'.

Mass Media Beyond the News

Several of my Malaysian participants told me about Malay-language big-screen films and television dramas that portrayed 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 the 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 voice-over, 'God must have had a reason for making me like this.' 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 film-makers 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, pp. 8–15). Against this background, *Sutun* still proved extremely popular and well-reviewed. It was even nominated for Best Television Drama at the state-sponsored Seri Angkasa Television Awards (Abd Aziz 2006).

Alongside *Sutun*, my participants 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 subplot. Thus, despite the government-controlled media's 'hard' ideological work in painting homosexuality as unacceptable in Islam and overall restrictions on freedom of expression, more nuanced representations of sexual minorities do exist

and persist. Furthermore, as evidenced from the popularity of *Sutun, Istanbul Aku Datang!*, and other films, Malaysia's Muslim audiences 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.

Anti-LGBT censorship in Malaysian cinema is also selective and arbitrary. In March 2017, for example, the censorship board initially insisted on removing a 'gay moment' from the Disney remake of *Beauty and the Beast*. After backlash from the public—including Disney's decision to pull the film from Malaysian cinemas and scorching criticism by Tourism and Culture Minister Nazri Aziz—the Board backed down (Sivanandam 2017). The film was eventually released without cuts but with a 13-plus age rating (Mumford 2017).

In Britain, many Muslims might also have trouble balancing tolerance for LGBT people and actually condoning homosexuality or transgenderism. As religious and ethnic minorities, however, their attitudes would carry different repercussions. For example, 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. (Muslim News 2013)

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 (Davies 2013). In the case of *The Muslim News*, the opposition to gay marriage appeared to be echoed along communitarian lines by its readership. For example, the following issue 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 (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 in favour of 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 was reading. According to the *Daily Mail*, Khan was an embattled Muslim politician fearing for his life but according to *The Muslim News*, he was celebrated albeit with caveats for Muslims about his pro-gay stance. Khan went on to win the London mayoral election by a landslide in 2016.

In Britain, it appears that people would get a very different picture of Islam and homosexuality depending on which news source they rely on. The various publications constantly seem to seek a 'representative' Muslim point of view, but their efforts show the difficulty in ascertaining what this 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. This could be seen when, 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)

In Bokhari's preference for *EastEnders* to help the British public embrace 'normal friendly' Muslims, does the term 'normal' signify socially conservative and heterosexual? Did he mean, by implication, that the gay Muslim in *EastEnders* was not a 'normal' Muslim? Either way, by giving prominence to Bokhari's view, the news article suggested that this represents the 'mainstream' or 'official' British Muslim perspective.

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.' This BBC article thus allows us to glimpse how various Muslims contest Islam in Britain, but pits 'normative' and 'alternative' Muslim voices against each other as polar opposites. This structuring makes it difficult to gauge the range of other views amongst Muslims which might complicate what many people assume is 'representative' Muslim public opinion on homosexuality.

This discussion about *EastEnders* further shows that the fiction media have considerable influence in shaping public debate about Islam and homosexuality. Exactly how the *EastEnders* storyline affected gay Muslims, other British Muslims and the British public more generally deserves greater scrutiny. The Imaan chair told me that registrations on the organisation's anonymous online forum doubled from approximately 1500 to 3000 after the storyline premiered. For him, the reasons for this and its impacts need to be analysed further. Overall, however, 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 to steer it in a particular direction.

In summary, the dominant image that Islam unquestionably condemns homosexuality is firmly established by the news media in Malaysia

and Britain, albeit with differing political implications. In Malaysia, the government-controlled media construe homosexuality as foreign and undesirable, while in Britain, some ideologically driven media outlets portray conservative expressions of Islam as un-British and dangerous. Despite these narratives, there are also multi-dimensional discussions on Islam and sexuality in both countries in less 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.

Morality, National Security and Gay Muslims

In different places and moments in history, campaigns to protect religion and morality have often targeted homosexual behaviour. Britain once outlawed homosexuality, while Malaysia inherited colonial era penalties for sodomy and, after independence, expanded its Syariah provisions criminalising homosexual behaviour (as discussed in Chap. 4). But how exactly do these laws gain or lose social currency and what impacts do they have on gay Muslims?

According to the sociologist Howard Becker (1991, p. 147), 'moral enterprise' consists of two seemingly complementary, functional units—'rule creators' and 'rule enforcers'. However, the ideological zeal of the rule creators sometimes puts them at odds with the bureaucratic pragmatism of the rule enforcers. Additionally, according to the sociologist Stanley Cohen (2011, pp. 8, 226), moral panics involve 'deviance amplification'—those who try to control morality often provoke further defiance through their definition and policing of 'unacceptable' behaviour.

Ethnic and religious entrepreneurs can sometimes take on the role of moral entrepreneurs, too. Just as 'moral entrepreneurs' want society to be structured around particular definitions of morality, 'ethno-political entrepreneurs'—as described by the sociologist Rogers Brubaker (2006, p. 10)—want it structured around what they claim as 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, the same groups of people often equate the defence of morality with the defence of ethnicity or religion or both. In Britain, however, changing sexual attitudes 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 they consider conservative, including Muslims.

So, how do various groups or agencies produce and pursue overlapping moral, ethnic, and religious concerns in Malaysia that result in homosexuality being perceived as foreign, deviant or immoral? To what extent is the Malaysian context different to the security-laden rhetoric on Islamic radicalism in Britain, which influences the state's regulation of Muslim minorities? The rest of this section answers these two questions by looking at how the gay Muslims I met in both countries related their experiences.

Malaysia: 'Foreign'-ness, Islam and Morality

Who exactly constitute the Syariah lobby, which portrays LGBT human rights as a 'Western', 'liberal' imposition, and how exactly do they make their case? I had a glimpse 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'¹ (Syariah Section of the Attorney-General's Chambers Malaysia 2012).

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. There were around 70 participants in total, male and female, the vast majority of whom were Muslim. 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.

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, more precisely a Syariah entrepreneur—his goal was not merely to rid society of ‘immorality’ but to ensure that it complied with his particular vision of shari’ah. 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:

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 also subscribe to other, unofficial religions besides Islam—if this were the case, we would be committing idolatry. The audience murmurs and nods in agreement.

He continues [in Malay], ‘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 did not merely want to merge religion and state—he was nearly claiming that Islam is the primordial religion of the Malaysian nation. Yet although the Federal Constitution establishes Islam as the religion of the federation (in Article 3), it does not designate shari’ah or Syariah as the supreme law of the land. The constitution does define Malays as Muslims (in Article 160) but also recognises religious diversity by guaranteeing freedom of religion for all Malaysians (in Article 11).

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. He appeared to take for granted that people would equate the need for moral uprightness with demands for ethnic and religious purity.

Naser's views were repeated by most of the other panel speakers who could similarly be referred to 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 seemed insecure and was being more openly challenged by various minorities. For example, the Mufti of Perak State complained the following day (in Malay):

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 February they'll think it's Buddhist. They go to Batu Caves and they'll see a huge shrine.

First, in this quote, the Mufti was 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 practise Hinduism (Nadaraja 2017). The February celebration he referred 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. The Mufti's point was clear, however—greater recognition of the rights of religious minorities is tantamount to threatening the special position of Islam.

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 fiddling with their phones, 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 zealotry.

According to Becker (1991, p. 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. On the final point, 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*, or ‘illicit proximity’ (where one Malaysian Ringgit is approximately 0.20 British Pounds) (Wan Noor Hayati 2013).

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 was 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 impose Islamic legislation, unlike the various State Islamic departments that had enforcement powers.

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, p. 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 lobbyists that were more prominent in the past now appeared lacking in cohesion and enthusiasm.

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. 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 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 Qur'an's prohibition on spying.² Therefore, according to Naser (in Malay):

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 united 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. Yet 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 moments, turning these terms into code for ‘foreign’ and, by association, ‘enemies of Islam’. The boundaries of their vision of the nation therefore coincided with the boundaries of their particular interpretation of Islam.

Britain: Islam, National Security and Gay Muslims

From the nineteenth century until the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967, Britain had its share of influential movements advocating moral purity. With incremental changes in the law in the decades after 1967, British state policies now enable the growth of movements, campaigns and public debates that challenge anti-LGBT attitudes. In the meantime, newer ‘folk devils’ have emerged among some sectors of society. In particular, Muslims in Britain remain potential targets of ideologues who equate the supposed foreign-ness of Islam with its undesirability, or who at least construe the increasing presence of Muslims as problematic.

One potent stereotype of the allegedly uncivilised Muslim is that of the terrorist, which often instigates panics about radicalisation or extremism framed around security concerns rather than morality. The political scientist Stuart Croft (2012, p. 16) argues that this is occurring to the extent that some state and non-state actors now construct ‘British’ identity by ‘securitizing’ 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. Consequently, young Muslims—especially males—often rebel by developing even more defensive religious identities and attitudes (Shterin and Spalek 2011, p. 148).

Furthermore, right-wing anti-immigration campaigners often co-opt 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 Britain First, which purports to defend white British purity and Christian identity (Golding 2015). 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. These ideological links that defend white British identity against a supposedly barbaric, homophobic, Islamic Other exemplify what the queer theorist Jasbir Puar refers to as ‘homonationalism’.

Some British Muslims counter these examples of homonationalism by appealing to democratic ideals on the fair treatment of ethnic and religious minorities. This 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. Instead, I found instances of how security concerns affected the gay Muslims I met. 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 *chador* (cloak) and niqab³ as a joke. When they got to the Tube station, Waqqas dared Salleh to put the entire outfit on. Although reluctant initially, Salleh relented and they got on the train. Salleh then started playing pranks on the passengers in niqab drag, using Waqqas as an intermediary to flirt with a white man and reciting Qur’anic verses loudly to the visible discomfort of several white women. When I asked Salleh to verify 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, yes? I’ve kept that. Because the thing is that ... 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 [dress] ... [because] I’ve been called a sand-nigger, you know, and all sorts [of names]. 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* (‘there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah’—the shahadah, or declaration of faith). And then ... the woman would start shaking and I’d go, boom! [*He makes a noise like a bomb going off and laughs.*] And you would see this person shoot out of their [seat], and I was [*he ululates*].

Salleh’s anecdote is an example—albeit a quirky one—of how some gay Muslims are affected by the security-focused debates on Muslims in Britain. On one hand, he was exercising his freedom of sexuality and religion in a country that he believed should protect them—he was in a same-sex civil partnership and went to the mosque on Fridays. From his point of view, he was being a good British citizen. He even worked for a local council. And so, when Muslims were stereotyped as ‘foreign’, ‘violent’, or ‘terrorists’ he got offended personally.

I cannot verify Salleh’s story about being stopped and searched after 7/7. Still, it is clear that he internalised the feeling that his Muslim identity was being increasingly securitised by state and non-state actors. Even if Salleh was embellishing, his story was a response to dominant attitudes towards Islam in Britain—real and imagined—which affected him personally and he expected people to find it plausible.

In retaliating, however, Salleh unwittingly reified the stereotype of the violent Muslim, for example, by ululating and mimicking bomb sounds. He also counter-stereotyped some of the people around him, like ‘the hypocritical, very working-class, white person’. He did not react directly against the police officers—the official agents of social control—but against certain bystanders whom he treated as proxies of a wider, more diffused ‘control culture’ (Cohen 2011, p. 121). However, Salleh’s actions did not provoke counter-attacks. No bystanders confronted him or reported him to the authorities. This is therefore not an example of

full-blown ‘deviancy amplification’ but it still illuminates how wider stereotypes or assumptions about Islamic symbols can affect gay British Muslims. Salleh was 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 counter-stereotype those whose views they seek to challenge.

Malaysia and Britain: Gay Muslim Responses to Moral Enterprise

In Malaysia, I came across some gay Muslims who acknowledged their sexuality and were semi-open about it, yet opposed any challenges to Syariah regulations on sexual and other offences. Ayie told me (in Malay) that although she was uncomfortable about anti-homosexual Syariah-inspired campaigns and rhetoric, she still would not oppose them because:

What other people see about Malaysia [is that] Malaysia is Muslim, [that’s] our official religion. 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 amounts to a personal sin or is it a crime against the state? Here, Ayie did not seem to differentiate between the two—homosexuality being ‘wrong’ meant it was a sin and a crime. 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'. 'Change', according to Ayie—'becoming' heterosexual—was only possible through Allah's will (as discussed in Chap. 6). 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 (in Malay):

On top of [their duties as moral enforcers], they have to 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 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 was 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.

It seems as though some quarters of the Syariah lobby are adjusting their responses along these lines. In 2016, for example, JAKIM published a leaflet entitled 'Understanding LGBT from a Muslim Perspective'. While the document maintains that 'same-sex attraction' is a 'test' from Allah that can be overcome through genuine repentance, it also counsels against harsh condemnations of LGBT individuals (Mohd Izwan and Saiful Azhar 2016, pp. 8–9). Rather, the authors recommend 'guidance and advice' rather than persecution or humiliation so that LGBT Muslims can achieve 'self-improvement and Allah's forgiveness' (Mohd Izwan and Saiful Azhar 2016, p. 18). The leaflet is accompanied by a three-minute animated video and was adapted from a similar document by an

Indonesian-based Islamic ex-gay group. The Malaysian authors are silent, however, on the anti-queer provisions of existing Syariah legislation and the continuing heavy-handedness of many religious enforcers.

During my fieldwork, I noticed that the moral bargaining of people like Elly sometimes involved putting on a modified version of a 'breastplate of righteousness', as referred to by the sociologist Laud Humphreys (1970, p. 135). In his study of anonymous homosexual activities in public toilets in the USA, Humphreys (1970, p. 143) found that the men involved displayed more conservative attitudes than the general population on civil rights, women's liberation 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. 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. This overall context potentially makes Humphreys' observation even more relevant to the current Malaysian situation.

The semi-openly or semi-secretly gay Muslims I encountered, however, modified their display of righteousness by not fully 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 the tudung. Ayie said on an online forum where people were posting negative comments about the 'LGBT menace' in Malaysia, she responded (in Malay):

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 all of Malaysia can see, and little kids can see and think there's nothing wrong with that. [Unmarried men and women] can sit in the same section [in 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 of my Malaysian participants. They found it powerful because 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 the Syariah lobby seems keen to perpetuate.

I also observed that my participants who did not believe homosexuality is haram criticised the Syariah establishment differently. Fauziah, who had ‘reconciled’ her religious beliefs and sexuality because she came to believe that the Qur’an respects sexual diversity, had this to say about Syariah enforcers:

Yes, [they have] 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.

For Fauziah, the religious enforcers were not only damaging the image of Islam but violating Islamic ideals, which in her view 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. And Fauziah is not alone in despairing at the aggressiveness of the Syariah police in Malaysia. Even heterosexual Muslims are now publicly mounting legal challenges against the heavy-handedness of religious enforcers (I. Lim 2017). In her frustration Fauziah wondered if perhaps the only way to challenge moral policing was by appealing to the larger goals of religious proselytising. In other words, 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 were 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.

Waqqas and some of my other British participants felt frustrated, however, because despite conforming to wider society's expectations about individual liberties and freedoms, they remain vulnerable to stereotyping and prejudice from 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 are matched in practice.

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 [says], '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 Britishness 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.

The gay Muslims I met in Malaysia and Britain therefore responded to religiously motivated moral policing by pointing out its deficiencies on practical grounds and based on their interpretations of Islam. If they agreed that homosexuality is ‘wrong’, they questioned the other ‘wrongs’ that went unnoticed by the Islamic authorities. If they interpreted ‘true’ Islam as inclusive or tolerant, they went on to recast the moral police as ‘deviant’ Muslims distorting the religion’s underlying spirit. In Britain, however, this was complicated when some of my participants, like other Muslims, needed to contend with anti-Muslim sentiments from certain media outlets or aggressive political ideologues. Within this context, they also appealed to the wider liberal, democratic principles that inform British policies to claim a legitimate sense of belonging as equals in society.

Sympathetic Straight Muslims

Difficult negotiations around the haram and halal in relation to homosexuality did not only affect the gay Muslims I met in Malaysia and Britain. From their stories, interactions and my own experiences, many heterosexual Muslims also experience continuing dilemmas about homosexuality. These quandaries shape the interpersonal relationships between the gay and straight Muslims I personally met or learnt about. In this section, I begin with the range of family experiences my participants recounted. I then show similar dimensions in the building of more organised alliances between gay and straight Muslims. Finally, I evaluate the effectiveness of these collaborations within the larger social and political contexts of Malaysia and Britain.

We Are Family: Dilemmas of Being Gay and Muslim

It is entirely possible for family members of gay Muslims to hold contradictory views, such as openly disapproving of homosexuality but tacitly accepting gay Muslim family members. 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:

The big news is that Fauziah’s mother told her younger sister one day, something to the effect of, ‘I prefer Fauziah to “*bertenet*” [explained below] 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 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 pressure her 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 [marriage introduction] meeting. The following day, I said to my mum, ‘I’m not worthy of marriage.’ *Main shaadi ke kabil nahin huun* [in Urdu]. 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: Yes. '*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 [like] 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. But Ammar kept refusing the rishta sessions 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 I met who believed being gay is 'wrong' according to Islam, yet desired empathy and a 'softer' solution.

There were 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 [so] 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 dating 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 and 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 was an imam in his local village mosque, and his mother was 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. He also said (code-switching in Malay and English) that one of his uncles was an 'ex-gay':

The family all knew that he liked this guy. That time there was no term [like] 'gay', [and] he's not [a] pondan either. So, a few times he ran away ... because the guy worked in KL [Kuala Lumpur]. 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] knew about this. They got him to see the bomoh to cure him, to forget this guy. Apparently ... the traditional cure worked, because after that he didn't run away anymore.

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, I also heard stories of acceptance. Dax, in his early 30s and who mischievously described himself as a gay ‘post-Muslim’ man, 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’. Dax told me in Malay:

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 identified privately as Muslim and saw 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 ... 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 ... quiet or he might have laughed.

As Islam and Malay ethnicity are tightly linked and regulated, many of my Malaysian participants came from families that assumed being ‘real’ Malays meant being ‘proper’ Muslims. Virtually, all my participants were given religious schooling as children and many of their parents later got more involved in their local mosques. Yet, 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 many gay Muslims. In Malaysia, some of my participants managed to negotiate a relative degree of acceptance within the family but had to conform to dominant external expectations on Islam and sexuality. In Britain, some of the gay Muslims I met similarly had little room to negotiate acceptance

within the family but could 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.

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 that engaged with the larger Muslim community. I contacted different charities, such as the Muslim Women's Network, the Muslim Institute, the City Circle, and the Islamic Society of Britain, which are respected but neither big nor seen as representative of all British Muslims. 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, less than 4 per cent of British Muslims thought that the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) represented them, while only 12 per cent thought it served their political views (Malik 2006). Around 90 per cent were unsure of who actually represented the views of Muslims in Britain, and around 80 per cent were unsure who spoke for their political views.

Snapshots of British Muslims such as this are often invisible to the wider public—even many Imaan members assumed that British Muslims were largely monolithic and therefore unanimously hostile towards gay Muslims. Several 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.'

In my involvement with Imaan until 2015, I kept in touch with these and other Muslim organisations, resulting in further collaborations such as campaigns, talks and seminars on Islam and homophobia or Islam and diversity. For example, in March 2014, the City Circle (2014) invited me as a representative of Imaan, along with presenters from the Muslim Institute⁴ and JIMAS (The Association to Revive the Way of the Messenger),⁵ 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 more constructively on the subject.⁶ In May, the Muslim Institute and Imaan (2014) 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. Speakers included activists, journalists, and academics, while the audience of approximately 100 consisted of university students, young professionals and pensioners. In fact, I joined the Muslim Institute as an Associate Fellow in 2012 and at the time of writing, I am the Deputy Editor of their flagship quarterly, *Critical Muslim*, co-published with Hurst. I also work with New Horizons in British Islam (registered in 2013) and actively contribute to other charities, including the Inclusive Mosque Initiative (registered in 2015).

These interactions demonstrate the vibrant and diverse, albeit often invisible, discussions on sexuality among some British Muslims despite what many 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 own notions of these principles, too. My findings suggest that heterosexual Muslims keen to discuss sexual diversity non-judgmentally might now have greater public space and legitimacy to do this 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, the rhetoric and practice of Syariah enforcement drove some of my participants to seek out other Muslims who objected to moral policing more generally. Some of these other Muslims, such as SIS, were also viewed by the Syariah lobby as 'deviant'. In this context, if gay Muslims were considered primary deviants by the Syariah lobby, then gay-friendly heterosexual Muslims risked being viewed as 'secondary deviants'. The same can be said of Muslims who sympathised with other 'primary deviants', such as those who had renounced Islam or whom the Sunni establishment did not recognise, including Shi'ahs and Ahmadiyyahs (a messianic nineteenth-century sect that emerged in British India).

Sometimes, primary and secondary deviants joined forces to confront moral policing as a whole—for example, when SIS criticised the banning of Seksualiti Merdeka in 2011. Such alliances made it possible for some of my participants to assign the advocacy of gay rights to a lower level of priority. Instead, they located their quest for sexual autonomy within a larger framework of freedom from religiously motivated policing. According to Zainal:

When it comes to gay rights, I feel like ... the position of women is more important than sexuality for now. [Hang on], sorry. The example that is most [urgent], you know, is freedom of religion ... because it's so fundamental.... 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 own

Muslim and Malay identities. Their counter-moral advocacy then also becomes suffused with notions of religion and ethnicity, albeit in more inclusive terms.

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 environment. 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.

These gay Muslims I met therefore did not deny the need to address anti-homosexual attitudes and actions, especially from the moral police and the mass media. Still, they felt that there was a predominant model of 'gay rights'—characterised by Fauziah as the 'in-your-face' or individualistic approach in Western gay activism—which they regarded 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 of my participants perceived the LGBT movement along similar lines and felt that it was dominated by white Britons who often misunderstood religious and ethnic minorities or, worse, were hostile towards them. Yet, some did not want to dissociate from the larger LGBT community, but wanted it to expand its notions of diversity and cultural sensitivity. According to Waqqas:

[The British LGBT 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 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 LGBT organisations] move forward, their moving forward isn't incorporating our perspectives.

Waqas 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 LGBT groupings. For the same reason, he insisted on marching every year as a gay Muslim under the Imaan banner during London Pride.

Many of the gay Muslims I met thus worked to expand the conceptual and practical ways in which society negotiates diversity and pluralism. In Malaysia, they forged indirect alliances with sympathetic heterosexual Muslims to negotiate for more autonomy in an environment where the state uses Islam to promote a strong collective identity. In Britain, they often had to navigate between a collective minority identity as Muslims who happen to be gay and wider society's emphasis on individuality and human rights. But how effective were these negotiations and strategies?

The Search for Authority and Authenticity

Like the British moral reformers in the Victorian era, those who spearhead the Malaysian Syariah lobby often equate moral purity with a stable society (as discussed in Chap. 4). 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.

Anwar and former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad—then and now—illustrate part of the definition of a charismatic leader according to

one of sociology's founding figures, Max Weber. According to Weber (2012, pp. 324–25), an individual possesses 'charisma' if he⁷ 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' attracted different kinds of followers, even though before 1998 they jointly projected 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.

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. He added that 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. Consequently, 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 visions 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'.

I had these conversations in 2012 and 2013, however. In 2016, the unthinkable happened when Mahathir and Anwar joined forces to campaign for the ouster of Prime Minister Najib Razak, who was embroiled in a colossal corruption scandal (Case 2016). At the time, when I pro-

posed 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 and Anwar. Fauziah summarised her dilemma as follows: 'UMNO is *setan*⁸ but Anwar is Iblis.⁹ So, what are you going to 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. Perhaps knowing how influential Anwar was among his supporters also had a negative effect on her. Or as Dax put it (code-switching in Malay and English):

I don't belong in the BN [Barisan Nasional, or National Front—the ruling coalition of which UMNO is a senior partner]. I don't like BN because they're like corrupt. I don't like DAP [the Democratic Action Party] because they are too Chinese. I don't really like PKR [the People's Justice Party] 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!'

The attitudes of the gay Malaysian Muslims I met towards Mahathir and Anwar were thus indicators of their concerns about social change, stability, and the cohesion of their religious and ethnic identities. Their general perception was that no existing political party would ever oppose or challenge the victimisation of sexual minorities. For many of them, this translated into a 'better-the-devil-you-know' position—they preferred backing UMNO rather than risking it with the opposition

coalition led by Anwar and including Islamists in PAS and PKR. Even those who chose to back the opposition parties were sceptical about the prospects for sexual minorities—they were motivated by concerns on the state of democracy and good governance more generally. Finally, all my Malaysian participants—from all political leanings—perceived the Malaysian government as authoritarian or not fully democratic, making it futile to demand their rights through the political process. They assumed that because of the constraints that ‘Islam’ places on various aspects of society, it was impossible to reform or change the political system. Again, I had these conversations in 2012 and 2013, before yet another monumental shift in post-2008 Malaysian politics. In 2016, the opposition People’s Pact, or Pakatan Rakyat, disintegrated over disagreements between PAS and the DAP on the status of hudud (Islamic criminal law) (Malay Mail 2016).

In this sense, the political attitudes among my participants were quite similar to other Malaysian Muslims who might be more ambivalent about state-led Islamisation than it might appear. The anthropologist Michael Peletz (1997, p. 232) argues that ‘ordinary [Malaysian] Muslims’ are often reluctant to voice their concerns publicly—or might even regard such concerns as ‘unthinkable’—for ‘political and moral reasons’. Many might be uncomfortable with the state’s expansion of punitive Islamic legislation yet want to improve their standards of living through the government’s pro-Malay wealth-generating policies (Peletz 1997, p. 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’. In 1980, an estimated 42 per cent of the Malaysian population lived in urban areas, while in 2015 this had risen to 75 per cent (World Bank 2015).

Yet the ambivalent political attitudes I observed 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 would not apply to

all of them nor did it necessarily manifest simply 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 opposition towards same-sex marriage among particular religious groups. 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, I observed that many of my participants in Britain remained uncomfortable openly debating what Islam 'says' about homosexuality.

I encountered one particularly salient example during a research trip to Greater Manchester in May 2013 to attend a full-day Demystifying Shari'ah workshop, organised by Imaan. At the beginning, the facilitators checked the participants' comfort levels on various issues through some interactive activities:

Most people are pretty comfortable with the idea that it's OK to be gay and Muslim. People are far less comfortable with statements about the validity of Islamic authority or whether shari'ah law can be questioned—many feel that Islamic authority or shari'ah should not be challenged. This makes others confused by the statements, and leads to more discussion about our different positions.

This activity crystallised two apparently conflicting orientations that many Imaan members had—that it is OK to be gay but wrong to challenge Islamic authority. Yet the nature or definition of 'true' Islamic authority was constantly debated within Imaan, whether on the group's Facebook profile, online forum, informal WhatsApp groups, or face-to-face encounters, such as during meetings or informal gatherings.

I observed several 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 tried to fashion itself not only as an organisation for gay Muslims but also as a Muslim organisation that embraced sexual diversity. As Muslim 'outsiders', however, the people attracted to Imaan did not have a focus of religious authority to bind them together. A few members had quite secular outlooks, but many more grew up in traditional Muslim environments enclosed by class and ethnic boundaries. Hence, there was often tension between how Imaan members expressed 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. According to him, this was because many harboured ill feelings about the Pakistan army's atrocities during Bangladesh's War of Independence in 1971. Muslims like Osman thus did not only grow up in traditionally Muslim environments but also in traditionally Bengali environments where collective ethno-national identity was just as important as religious identity. When gay Muslims of different ethnic or national backgrounds encountered each other in Imaan, they therefore had to confront other expressions of Islam they might not necessarily have been comfortable with. Unlike gay Muslims in Malaysia, however, they did not have to contend with state-led authorities enforcing particular interpretations of Islam enmeshed with Malay ethnicity. Instead, they experimented for themselves with what 'Islamic' authority meant.

Within this context, a small minority within Imaan—as with other British Muslims—previously joined transnational Muslim movements, often with a more conservative or fundamentalist orientation, with a presence in Britain. I once had an informal conversation with Naved, who is in his early 30s, about his teenage years as a member of 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, once explained how he became part of a Salafi movement in his teens but left eventually. They all disaffiliated quietly from these groups once they came to grapple with their sexual identity, which led them to engage with Imaan. Within Imaan, however, they retained some of the perspectives and experiences of Islam they previously acquired

through these different groups. I observed them holding sway during several group exchanges about what constituted the ‘authentic’ Islamic position on various issues.

These examples show that in Imaan, the absence of direct ‘Islamic’ authority to structure expressions of Islam did not negate the desire for, and the presence of, indirect authority. Yet the debates about what was authentically Islamic took place within a larger environment where the British state was seen as duty-bound to protect the rights of the individual and of various minorities.

Conclusion

The dominant image of Islam’s ‘position’ on homosexuality is based on the assumption that homosexuality is absolutely haram. Yet this assumption also operates within a wider regulatory context in which the haram and halal are contested or policed alongside numerous other concerns, too—from Shi’ahs (in Malaysia) to terrorism (in Britain). Even those who advocate the idea of homosexuality as haram might disagree on how to get this message across—for example, in the ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ approaches from different factions in Malaysia’s Syariah lobby.

On an everyday level, the gay Muslims I studied actively needed to negotiate such notions of haram and halal within their larger context. This was and remains a continuing process. Regardless of whether they personally believed that being gay is haram, they constantly needed to interpret, internalise, and accept or reject dominant messages about Islam and homosexuality. Some redefined notions of haram and halal for themselves to balance belonging within Islam and expressing their sexuality.

When my participants in both countries negotiated these notions of haram and halal, they also confounded dominant notions of normality in their immediate surroundings. In Malaysia, they complicated the position that Islam is absolutely anti-gay, espoused by the Syariah lobby which consists of its own ‘rule creators’ and ‘rule enforcers’ (Becker 1991, p. 147). As moral entrepreneurs, the Syariah lobby often manufacture and drive ‘moral panics’ about various ‘folk devils’ (Cohen 2011, p. 8), 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—also described by Becker (1991, pp. 161–62)—where the ‘rule creators’ accuse the ‘rule enforcers’ of being too soft or inefficient in enforcing moral rules.

Within this context, the people I encountered developed particular responses to oppose or avoid moral enterprise. Those who held that homosexuality is haram pointed out the practical or procedural flaws in moral policing, for example, highlighting other kinds of ‘immorality’ that went unnoticed or unpunished by Syariah enforcers. Those who maintained that Islam does not forbid homosexuality turned the tables and criticised the version of Islam espoused by the moral entrepreneurs as deviant or distorted. Either way, these responses involved putting on variations of a ‘breastplate of righteousness’ (Humphreys 1970, p. 135) to out-moralise the moral entrepreneurs.

In Britain, the gay Muslims I met confronted 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 were implicated by wider rhetoric and policies ‘securitising’ Muslims (Croft 2012, p. 16) or juxtaposing ‘homonationalist’ stereotypes of an inherently homophobic Islam against the exceptionally gay-friendly West (Puar 2007, p. 39). Yet my participants here were sometimes also empowered to respond by claiming their right to express their gay and Muslim identities. This occasionally involved counter-stereotyping the white, non-Muslim majority, partly resembling Cohen’s (2011, p. 89) description of ‘deviance amplification’.

In both countries, I found that these experiences were often shared by other Muslims. My participants enjoyed multi-layered relationships with family and friends, and some were 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 reflect bigger contestations 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 or nationalist agendas. In Malaysia, such agendas are explicitly pursued by the Syariah lobby, who defend ideas of national purity by employing homophobic rhetoric grounded in particular interpretations of Islam. In Britain, the situation is mitigated by the existence of laws and policies protecting religious and sexual minorities. Still, some ideologically driven commentators promote particular versions of British identity by casting Islam as exceptionally homophobic.

The bigger picture is 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, my participants did not and could not respond to notions of halal and haram in an ideological vacuum. Their negotiations of Islamic injunctions on homosexuality were often constrained by nationalist and other agendas in Malaysia and Britain. The making of a gay Muslim in either country is thus part of a larger story of the relationship between religion, sexuality, and nationalism in the creation of ideological and social boundaries.

Notes

1. My observations relate to one particular position on sexual minorities within the Malaysian Islamic bureaucracy, which is by no means homogenous. For a more comprehensive analysis of how this bureaucracy is organised and the range of views and approaches within it regarding sexuality, see tan 2012. ‘Sexuality, Islam and Politics in Malaysia: A Study of the Shifting Strategies of Regulation’. Thesis, Singapore: National University of Singapore.
2. Among the Qur’anic passages that SIS draws 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 often 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).

3. In their various renditions of this story, Waqqas and Salleh have used terms such as *niqab*, *chador* and *burqa* (enveloping outer garment) 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.
4. Represented by Ziauddin Sardar, a prominent public intellectual whom the majority of British Muslim activists I spoke to saw as progressive, including on sexuality.
5. In the 1980s and 1990s, JIMAS was strongly connected to the global *salafiyah* movement (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, p. 81).
6. There were approximately 70 attendees and around 9 out of 10 were Muslim.
7. While Weber referred to the concept of ‘charismatic leader’ with the male pronoun, his description could also apply to women depending on the context.
8. 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.
9. See preceding note.

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8

Conclusion

Since I completed this study, controversies on Islam—specifically regarding terrorism and violence—have only grown, alongside public interest on Muslim sexual minorities. These have been driven primarily by the rise of the Islamic State, or ISIS/ISIL (and its affiliates), and several gruesome attacks on civilians carried out in its name. In the Introduction to this work, I mentioned the biggest mass shooting in the US history in June 2016, when Omar Mateen, supposedly an Islamic State supporter, opened fire on patrons of the LGBT nightclub Pulse in Orlando, Florida. The tragedy prompted a flurry of Islamophobic diatribes by right-wing journalists, while several Muslim leaders in the West partially rejected homophobia even as they condemned Islamophobia more robustly.

The mass media's interest in gay Muslims has also not abated. In 2015, for example, British television network Channel 4 aired the hugely popular 'Muslim Drag Queens', with the broadcast accompanied by headlines of how its stars 'braved' death threats (Plowright 2015; Sherwin 2015). In early 2016, the network aired another documentary, 'What British Muslims Really Think', in which presenter Trevor Phillips, former chairman of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, highlighted that 52 per cent of British Muslims believe homosexuality should be illegal

(Perraudin 2016). In Malaysia, Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim was jailed for sodomy yet again in 2015. The Syariah lobby has continued its aggressive moral policing, including a highly controversial raid on a mak nyah beauty pageant in 2016 (Malaysiakini 2016).

Even as I wrote this book, I constantly encountered curiosity and occasional discomfort about my study at academic and non-academic conferences, on social media and even dinner parties. I have been invited to speak about my work by churches, synagogues and Muslim charities (but not yet mosques). Depending on their ideological orientations, sometimes people are baffled at my 'defence' of what they imagine to be Islam and sometimes they think I'm misguided for supposedly promoting homosexuality in Islam. More rarely, I am asked why I did not study something more representative and not so 'Orientalist' in the way it could be used to stereotype Muslims.

These questions are a reminder of why I wanted to study gay Muslims in the first place. I wanted to observe and learn directly from people who are often spoken about and legislated upon but rarely heard from. More importantly, their day-to-day experiences and challenges are not merely about 'sexuality' or 'Islam'. The experiences of gay Muslims can offer fresh insights on the question of how people who hold supposedly incompatible or undesirable identities cope with those who stigmatise, marginalise or persecute them. Gay Muslims make us ask how some identities or social interactions come to be seen as undesirable, abnormal or even dangerous in the first place. Also, are these notions static and monolithic or can they change?

I addressed these concerns by investigating the lived experiences of gay Muslim in Britain and Malaysia in depth. I chose these two countries to compare the impacts of Islam as a state-established majority religion (in Malaysia), and as a minority religion with few state-supported privileges (in Britain). I explored how and why the people I came across identified as 'gay' and 'Muslim' despite prevalent attitudes, religious rulings and legal consequences (in the case of Malaysia) supporting the view that Islam condemns homosexuality. I also analysed the 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. Yet their experiences are shaped by some common factors. In Britain and Malaysia, family upbringing, schooling and peer interactions made ‘Islam’ a prominent, recurring theme in the lives of the gay Muslims I studied. In Malaysia, this was strengthened considerably by policies which deliberately and explicitly impose Muslim identity and Islamic doctrines among those whom the state categorises as ‘Muslim’. Although there are no comparable state impositions of Islam in Britain, events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the 7/7 London bombings have intensified public scrutiny of Muslims and policies on so-called radicalisation. These developments have reinforced and in some cases heightened the salience of Islam as a primary referent in British Muslim identities, including among the gay Muslims I met. Regarding their sexual dispositions, most of my participants in both countries regarded ‘gay’ as a convenient umbrella category while remaining aware of cultural differences in using certain terms to describe sexual diversity or attraction.

These lived experiences constantly shaped their personal reflections and renegotiations of what ‘Islam’ or ‘gay’ identity meant. Most of my participants still drew upon what they understood as ‘true’ or ‘proper’ Islam to forge a sense of belonging within the Muslim fold. However, their own religious understandings depended on whether they accepted the view that Islam forbids homosexuality. In turn, these views were influenced by whether they had access to—and were willing to engage with—alternative interpretations of Islam on sexuality. 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 religious interpretations to claim the moral high ground and ‘out-Islamise’ anti-gay Muslims, portraying *their* beliefs as ‘deviant’.

In both countries, the gay Muslims I met engaged in ‘role adjustments’ (Merton 1968, p. 672) 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 general 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 biased against Muslims, they felt able to express opposition by appealing to overarching liberal, democratic principles. They were also relatively confident that their sexual minority status was protected by legislation that upholds equality and prohibits discrimination. While many of my Malaysian participants were uncomfortable with moral policing, most would not criticise it too openly because 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 other privileges they enjoyed from the government's many pro-Malay policies.

Still, in both countries, many of the people I encountered managed to find or create spaces where they could interact safely, away from anti-gay or anti-Muslim threats. 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 LGBTQI charity sector.

Some of my participants also tried to connect with other gay or sympathetic heterosexual Muslims for support. 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 that protect religious and sexual minorities have partly provided the platform for nascent collaborations between LGBT Muslims and some of these organisations. And despite more restrictiveness in Malaysia, an expanding civil society now includes Muslims and non-Muslims who support the rights of sexual and other minorities. Some Muslim civil society groups such as 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 therefore supported SIS and IRF, while others were less forthcoming, depending on whether they believed that homosexuality was haram.

Regardless of their religious beliefs about homosexuality, the experiences of my participants indicate that gay Muslims directly and indirectly challenge normative Islamic authorities simply by holding their religious and sexual identities. My research suggests 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 sexuality now inform criticisms from a few prominent Muslims about how Islam is being manipulated by an authoritarian government. Meanwhile, the nuances of British Muslim opinions on homosexuality can be obscured by the overemphasis on radicalism and terrorism. Yet, I have found evidence of gay and heterosexual Muslims exploring more inclusive, ‘British’ expressions of Islam and therefore stretching existing notions of liberalism and pluralism. I have also discerned examples of everyday liberal attitudes among British and Malaysian Muslims—gay and straight—which are often neither explicitly nor self-consciously political. These trends indicate that gay and other Muslims are increasingly engaging with Islam as a ‘cultural resource’ (Beckford 2001, p. 232) that they adapt to their specific, changing circumstances.

Additionally, my findings suggest that in both countries, gay Muslims challenge the majority’s 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 mounted by the Syariah lobby and ultranationalist Malays arguing that ‘liberal’ or ‘Western’ values threaten Islam and the nation. In Britain, the public increasingly regards respect for sexual diversity as a British value, yet gay Muslims still confuse several boundaries since they are part of purportedly conservative or anti-Western ethnic and religious minorities. 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 familiar notion of the ‘typical Malay’ to counter-stereotype and dismiss anti-gay Muslims as ‘backward’ and unthinking. There were also others who explored more nuanced understandings of ethnicity and culture.

Overall, this book challenges the notion that Islam inherently opposes homosexuality. Instead, it suggests that, like other religions, Islam is fluid, internally diverse and constantly being contested at various levels. In countries like 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 affects 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.

Reflecting on 'Deviance'

The word 'deviance' has unfortunate connotations—it sounds politically incorrect, especially when referring to gay Muslims. Occasionally, during my study, other academics or activists would stifle a cringe when I explained that I was drawing upon sociological studies of deviance. The tables were sometimes turned in Malaysia when I had to avoid making it sound like I was perpetuating the government's and the Syariah lobby's stance on homosexuality.

In some ways, these reactions underline the continuing relevance of the sociology of deviance, which helps us to analyse how societies construct 'outsider', stigmatised identities and the efforts to 'de-stigmatise' them. In Malaysia, my findings supported Howard Becker's (1991, p. 162) contention that moral enterprise creates 'deviance', not the other way around, and Stanley Cohen's (Cohen 2011, pp. 14, 219) argument that moral entrepreneurs tend to instigate moral panics when society becomes unstable. Becker's (1991, p. 147) classification of moral entrepreneurs as 'rule creators' and 'rule enforcers' was also useful to analyse the workings of Malaysia's Syariah lobby, 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 the Syariah lobby could also be conceptualised as 'ethno-political entrepreneurs' (Brubaker 2006, p. 10). These theoretical frameworks helped me identify the multiple strategies of my gay Malaysian Muslim participants to avoid, subvert or challenge these dynamics.

In Britain, my findings enhance and complicate the political scientist Stuart Croft's (2012, p. 16) argument about the 'securitization of Islam'

and constructions of 'Britishness' by illustrating how this affects gay British Muslims. I demonstrate that they, too, are affected by securitising rhetoric but they and many other Muslims innovatively try to bridge the perceived divide between being 'British' and 'Muslim'. My findings therefore also add to the queer theorist Jasbir Puar's (2007, p. 39) concern about growing 'homonationalism'—the ideology of the West as exceptionally gay-friendly and therefore deserving support in the 'War on Terror'. I show that this is only a part of the picture—the gay Muslims and other sympathetic Muslims I met in Britain challenged and subverted such rhetoric in many creative ways.

This book therefore also tells a story of how sexuality is mapped onto overlapping religious, ethnic and national boundaries in Britain and Malaysia. In particular, it illuminates how some gay Muslims are caught between larger political and ideological agendas in different social contexts, and how they respond.

My sustained comparison of gay Muslim experiences in two different countries also adds to the body of knowledge on Islam and sexuality. At the same time, this book has resisted painting Islam as exceptionally problematic or rigid on gender and sexuality. My findings actually support the gender historian Afsaneh Najmabadi's (2011, p. 551) proposal that, through complex interactions within and across cultures, we produce sexual labels and hierarchies just as we produce religious and state structures. I have also distinguished between the politicisation of 'Islam' and 'sexuality' in state rhetoric and their potential as 'cultural resources' that my participants drew upon to navigate viable and fulfilling lives.

I only found partial support for the political scientist Joseph Massad's (2002, pp. 372–73) argument that gay identity is a Western imposition and his characterisation of gay Muslims as middle-class, Westernised elites. Certainly, some of the gay Muslims and other sympathetic Muslims I encountered could be described in this way. Yet, most were from working-class backgrounds and were only recently *becoming* middle class. These observations echo the anthropologist Tom Boellstorff's (2005, pp. 118–19) contention that *gay* and *lesbi* identities in neighbouring Indonesia emerged alongside a new middle class that arose 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. The ways that my participants made ‘role adjustments’ to different circumstances indicate that they were not simply victims of draconian religious dogmas and practices. Rather, they considered and chose their responses based on the opportunities that their social networks and situations enabled, within the overall legal and political environment.

In this book, I have also engaged with the call by the sociologist Rogers Brubaker and historian Frederick Cooper (2006, pp. 41–47) for clarity on three aspects of identity—an individual’s or group’s self-identification or categorisation of or by others; the development of fluid, contextual self-understandings; and feelings of group commonality or connectedness. By paying attention to these facets, my analysis also supports the sociologist James Beckford’s (2001, p. 232) recommendation to study religion as a ‘cultural resource’ in identity construction and not merely as a ‘social institution’.

Some of the gay Muslims I met in both countries respond to dominant ideas about Islam and sexuality in ways that are slowly but steadily influencing other more ‘mainstream’ Muslims. These developments show that religion is not static and that Islam is not exceptionally homophobic. Policymakers and campaigners on human rights, gender and sexual equality and diversity, especially in the West, would benefit from my findings to challenge ideological claims that Islam is ‘inherently’ violent, anti-liberal, or anti-modern. This is especially urgent given the rise of xenophobia, racism and Islamophobia in a number of Western liberal democracies.

This book also exposes 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. 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 Syariah establishment also vilified Shi’ah, liberal and feminist Muslims. These interconnected panics about intra-Muslim diversity and dissent actually illuminate the challenges confronting institutional regulation of ‘proper’ or ‘authentic’ expressions

of Islam. This book can thus also be useful for Muslim leaders—whether of communities or of religious thought—and others interested in contemporary Muslim societies.

Other Boundaries and Bridges

By studying gay Muslims, I was also studying ‘outsiders by default’—my sample consisted of people born into Muslim families who expressed having same-sex attractions. Feeling that they had little choice in being gay and Muslim, it is understandable that many of them would try to harmonise these supposedly dissonant identities. But we can develop richer insights on religious and sexual identity—and ethnic and national identity by extension—by studying people who choose to cross supposedly unbridgeable boundaries.

The insights of gay converts to Islam, especially in the West, could help us understand why and how someone might choose to cross the boundary from a supposedly ‘liberal’ environment to a stereotypically ‘anti-liberal’ one. Along similar lines, heterosexual Muslims who have gone from rejecting to embracing sexual diversity would also have illuminating perspectives—perhaps it is time to study ‘the making of a gay-friendly straight Muslim’. And there are also Muslim sexual minorities who do not identify as ‘gay’ or other similar labels—their experiences could also clarify how these boundaries around ‘Islam’ and the ‘West’ come about.

While it was useful for me to explore the experiences of gay Muslims mostly in their 20s and 30s, there is also value in studying people of different ages. Probing the experiences of Muslim sexual minorities of a wider age range can help us discern generational shifts in attitudes about Islam and sexuality. The influence of class on religious and sexual identity as well as nationalism is another area of potential research. Class and age are also relevant considering that sex is now increasingly solicited, discussed and expressed through online social networks, which grow swiftly and messily from generation to generation and complicate our perceptions of class.

Our concerns about religion and sexuality inform laws and policies that are meant to protect the common good. But religion and sexuality

also give rise to intense and often indescribable experiences which can provoke strong actions and reactions within, between and among individuals. The defence of the common good can thus sometimes turn into aggression against difference and non-conformity. This is why it is crucial to comprehend religion and sexuality as lived experiences. In this study, I made the most of my position as an ‘insider’—a gay Muslim—immersing myself in and documenting and analysing the experiences of other gay Muslims. I embarked on this project to shed light upon a little known, under-researched, yet much discussed topic. Conducting rigorous research meant being as honest as possible about my own motives and understanding that my emotional highs and lows were an integral part of the study. This book is therefore also an argument for the ethnographic and cross-cultural study of religion and sexuality to help us understand the contemporary world.

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Glossary

<i>abang-abang</i>	elder brothers (literal), euphemism for masculine gay man/men (Malay)
ABIM	Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement)
<i>adhan</i>	ritual call to prayer (Arabic)
<i>adik-adik</i>	younger siblings (literal), euphemism for younger gay men (Malay)
BERSIH	Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil (The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections)
<i>bhangra</i>	upbeat music associated with Punjabi culture, popular in Britain
<i>bilal</i>	person who gives the call to prayer, or the muezzin (Arabic)
BN	Barisan Nasional (National Front)
<i>bomoh</i>	Malay shaman/healer
<i>buka puasa</i>	breaking the fast (Malay), see also <i>iftari</i>
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

<i>darai</i>	derogatory patois for <i>pondan</i> (Malay)
<i>dhikr</i>	remembrance (literal), also devotional litanies associated with Sufism
<i>dosa</i>	sin (Malay)
<i>du'a</i>	supplicatory prayers
<i>fatwa</i>	legal opinion
<i>fiqh</i>	Islamic jurisprudence
<i>hadith</i>	report of the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad
<i>halal</i>	lawful/permissible
<i>haram</i>	unlawful/forbidden
<i>hijab</i>	headscarf worn by some Muslim women, see also <i>tudung</i>
<i>iftari</i>	meal at the breaking of the fast (Urdu), see also <i>buka puasa</i>
<i>imam</i>	congregational prayer leader
<i>iqamat</i>	smaller call to prayer following the <i>adhan</i>
IRF	Islamic Renaissance Front
JAKIM	Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (Department of Islamic Development, Malaysia)
<i>jinn</i>	type of spirit mentioned in the Qur'an
<i>kakak-kakak</i>	elder sisters (literal), euphemism for effeminate gay men, <i>pondan</i> or <i>mak nyah</i> (Malay)
<i>kampung</i>	village (Malay)
<i>khalwat</i>	illicit proximity (as defined in Syariah law)
<i>khutbah</i>	sermon, for example, during Friday prayers
<i>lelaki lembut</i>	soft man (literal), euphemism for gay (Malay)
LGBTQI	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex
<i>liwat</i>	sexual relations between males (in Syariah law)
<i>madrasah</i>	mosque school
<i>mak nyah</i>	non-derogatory term for male-to-female transgender (Malay)
<i>mak yong</i>	traditional dance from northern Peninsula Malaysia, particularly associated with the State of Kelantan
MCB	Muslim Council of Britain
<i>musahaqah</i>	sexual relations between females (under Syariah law)
<i>namaz</i>	obligatory prayers (Urdu)
NEP	New Economic Policy

<i>niqab</i>	face veil worn by some Muslim women in addition to <i>hijab</i>
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Party)
<i>pengkid</i>	masculine women who desire feminine women (Malay)
PKR	Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party)
<i>pondan</i>	derogatory term for male-to-female transgender (Malay)
<i>ponen</i>	variation of <i>pondan</i> in northern Malay patois
PR	Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance)
Ramadan	ninth month of the Islamic calendar when fasting is required
<i>Rishta</i>	relationship (literal), or meetings for arranged marriages (Urdu)
<i>salah</i>	prayer, sometimes rendered <i>salat</i> (Arabic)
<i>salam</i>	peace (literal), an Islamic salutation
SCOA	Syariah Criminal Offences Act
SCOE	Syariah Criminal Offences Enactment
Shafi'i	school of law in Sunni Islam
<i>shahadah</i>	declaration of Islamic faith
<i>shari'ah</i>	divine law, to be distinguished from <i>fiqh</i>
SIS	Sisters in Islam
<i>sunnah</i>	established custom based on Muhammad's exemplary conduct
Syariah	Malay spelling of shari'ah, and part of the title of some state Islamic laws
<i>tudung</i>	headscarf (Malay), see <i>hijab</i>
' <i>ulama</i> '	Islamic religious scholar
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
<i>ustaz</i>	male Islamic religious instructor (Malay)
<i>ustazah</i>	female Islamic religious instructor (Malay)
<i>wudu'</i>	ritual washing or ablutions, pre-requisite for prayers
<i>zina</i>	unlawful sexual intercourse (adultery, fornication)

Appendix A: Information on Interviewees

Malaysia

Pseudonym	Age range	Sex ¹	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

(continued)

Table (continued)

Pseudonym	Age range	Sex ¹	Ethnicity	Identifies as Muslim?	Identifies as gay?	Interview date
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

Britain

Pseudonym	Age range	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

(continued)

Table (continued)

Pseudonym	Age range	Sex	Ethnicity/ National heritage	Identifies as Muslim?	Identifies as gay?	Interview date
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

Notes

1. This is in accordance with my participants' preferred gender pronouns when the interviews were conducted. I eventually learnt that some had more fluid understandings of their sexual and gender identity, with Rohana considering identifying as transgender and Ebry playing with several labels simultaneously (both cases discussed in Chap. 5).

Appendix B: Interview Question Guide for Gay Muslims

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 and so on.

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' and so on.

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 and art works that have influenced your current ideas and beliefs?

2. Everyday Practices

What do you think about bodies or governments that monitor Muslim practices, for example, whether a person prays five times a day, goes to mosque on Fridays, fasts in Ramadan, consumes alcohol, and so on?

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/romantic relationships and so on.)

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 and so on.)

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 and so on.

The gay ‘scene’—nightclubs, sex, entertainment, Internet chatrooms and so on.

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Index¹

NUMBERS AND SYMBOLS

7/7 bombings (in London), 301. *See also* 9/11
9/11 (terrorist attacks), 117, 301. *See also* 7/7 bombings

A

Abang-abang, 39, 40, 170, 171, 231.
See also adik-adik; kakak-kakak
Adik-adik, 170, 171, 231. *See also*
abang-abang; kakak-kakak
Aidilfitri, 144, 146, 189. *See also* Id
al-Fitr
Ali, Kecia, 61. *See also* Kugle, Scott
Siraj al-Haqq
Amanah, 118. *See also* PAS
Amrad, 67, 68, 75. *See also* *bissu; yan*
daudu

Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia
(ABIM) (Malaysian Muslim
Youth Movement), 120, 121
Ariff Alfian Rosli, 78
Attitudes towards homosexuality, in
Britain, 117
Attitudes towards sexuality among
Muslims in Malaysia, 122
Authoritarian rule, in Malaysia, 8, 201

B

Barisan Nasional (BN), 131, 132,
287
Bears, in Kuala Lumpur, 147
Becker, Howard, 10, 81, 82, 87, 151,
247, 262, 264–267, 291, 292,
304. *See also* Cohen, Stanley;
moral enterprise

¹Note: Page number followed by ‘n’ refers to notes.

- Beckford, James, 5, 6, 87–89, 226, 229, 234, 243, 303, 306. *See also* cultural resource, religion
- BERSIH, 131, 132, 201
- Bisexual, 1, 6, 38, 49n5, 56, 82, 144, 147, 161, 162, 165, 205, 233, 249, 251
- Bissu*, 68, 75. *See also amrad; yan daudu*
- Bomoh*, 206, 279
- Breastplate of righteousness, 82, 273, 274, 292. *See also* Humphreys, Laud
- Britain First, 268. *See also* British National Party; homonationalism
- Britain's Muslim population, 107, 114, 115, 134
- British Empire, 12, 91, 104. *See also* colonial Malaya; Commonwealth
- British National Party (BNP), 116. *See also* Britain First; homonationalism
- Britishness, 107, 269, 305
- Brubaker, Rogers, 85, 86, 190, 191, 207, 217–220, 223, 225, 228, 236, 262, 304, 306. *See also* identity
- Buka puasa*, 49n4, 147–150. *See also* Ramadan
- C**
- Carnal intercourse against the order of nature, 105
- Change' ('berubah'), of sexual orientation or gender identity, 208, 209
- Charismatic leader, 285, 294n7
- Church of England, 8, 91, 126, 127, 147, 259
- City Circle, The, 281, 282
- Coconut/coconuts, 172–177, 184, 303. *See also* typical Malay/Malays
- Cohen, Stanley, 83, 247, 248, 262, 270, 291, 292, 304. *See also* Becker, Howard; 'Folk devils'; moral panics
- Colonialism, 74, 109, 130, 133, 153, 168
- Colonial Malaya, 105. *See also* British Empire
- Commonwealth, 91, 104–113. *See also* British Empire
- Cultural resource, religion as a, 192, 238, 306
- D**
- Daily Mail, The*, 46, 249–251, 260, 269
- Darai*, 163. *See also mak nyah; pondan*
- Darul uloom*, 194
- Definition
 reportive, 6
 stipulative, 7
- Definitions of homosexuality, 65
- Democratic Action Party (DAP), 118, 131, 287, 288
- Demystifying *Shari'ah*, 144, 145, 149, 150, 205, 289
- Douglas, Mary, 87, 151, 152, 175, 184. *See also* matter out of place

E

- EastEnders*, 260, 261
 gay Muslim storyline, 260, 261
 El-Rouayheb, Khaled, 6, 64, 65
 Equality Act 2006 (UK), 282
 Equality Act 2010 (UK), 302
 essentialist, 56, 60, 82, 83. *See also*
 Social constructionism
 definition of sexuality, 56, 60,
 83
 Ethnicity, 9, 12, 80, 84–87, 93, 105,
 110, 113, 115, 118, 122, 133,
 134, 135n1, 135n2, 144, 172,
 176, 177, 182, 183, 185, 192,
 221, 224, 229, 236, 263, 265,
 280, 283, 284, 290, 303
 Ethnography/ethnographic research,
 4, 21, 22, 28, 36, 37, 47
 and friendships, 21
 Ethno-political entrepreneurs, 86,
 87. *See also* moral enterprise;
 moral entrepreneurs
 Evolution of ‘race science’ in
 Victorian England, 106

F

- Fatwa*, 78, 115, 122, 201, 204
Fiqh, 57–59, 63, 76, 145, 246, 247.
See also jurisprudence
 Folk devils, 247, 248, 250, 268, 291.
See also Cohen, Stanley
 Folk Malay religion, 180
 in colonial anthropology, 179
 Formation of Malaysia, 110, 180
 Friday prayers, 30, 175, 245. *See also*
Khutbah
 Futsal, 24, 26, 154

G

- Gay-boy*, 170
 Gay International, 72, 75. *See also*
 Massad, Joseph
 Gay Liberation Front, 127
 Gender pluralism, 2, 67, 68, 153,
 167, 169–171
 Globalisation, 12, 80, 88, 89, 93,
 120
 Gross indecency, 106, 125, 128.
See also Labouchere
 amendment
 arrests in 20th century Britain,
 125
Guardian, The, 256, 260

H

- Hadith*, 53, 57, 58, 145, 238n1
Hadrah, 168
Halal, 1, 13, 146, 159, 172, 173,
 182, 220, 243–293
Haram, 13, 69, 201, 220, 243, 301,
 302
Harian Metro, 46, 182, 249–251
 Hasan, Mehdi, 256
 Heterogender, 67, 167–169
 homosexuality in Southeast Asia,
 169
Hijab, 71, 73, 79, 205, 229. *See also*
tudung
 Hizb ut-Tahrir, 31, 34, 50n13,
 290
 Homonationalism, 87, 88, 248, 251,
 269, 305. *See also* nationalism
 Humphreys, Laud, 82, 273, 292.
See also breastplate of
 righteousness

- I
- Ibrahim, Anwar, 68, 69, 77, 133, 285, 300. *See also* Mohamad, Mahathir
- Id al-Fitr, 144
- Identity, 5–7, 9, 12, 13, 20–23, 27, 29, 35, 38, 60, 62, 68, 69, 71, 73, 75, 78, 82, 84–86, 88, 90, 92, 103, 105, 107, 110, 111, 113, 115, 116, 118, 120, 123, 125, 127, 128, 133, 134, 143, 151, 153, 155, 156, 161, 163, 165, 171, 172, 183–185, 189–192, 196, 201, 207, 208, 217–220, 223–238, 251, 265, 268–272, 279, 280, 285, 290, 293, 300–302, 305–307. *See also* Brubaker, Rogers
layers in action, 191
- Iftari/iftaris*, 31, 32, 143, 144, 149–153
- Imaan, 1, 20, 23, 30–34, 43, 44, 50n15, 93n2, 144–146, 149, 150, 154, 159, 172, 173, 176, 198, 205, 212, 216–229, 234, 235, 237, 238n5, 261, 269, 281, 282, 285, 289–291
and social networking, 35, 150, 219
- Immigration, 104, 114, 115, 268
patterns in Britain, 114, 268
- Imperial rivalry with France, 108
- Inclusive Mosque Initiative, 282
- Indonesia, 22, 68, 74, 75, 77, 105, 129, 209, 305
- Institutionalised homosexual role, 82
- Iran, 66–68, 75–77, 115, 121, 166, 177
- Islamic feminism, 32, 56
- Islamisation/Islamization, 104, 111, 121, 288
in Malaysia, 104, 111, 121, 288
- Islamophobia/Islamophobic, 47, 60, 72, 88, 112, 200, 223, 227, 245, 260, 271, 299, 306
- ISMA, 132
- Ismail, Azwan, 40, 132. *See also* Seksualiti Merdeka
- J
- JAKIM, 266, 272
- JIMAS, 282, 294n5
- Jinn*, 205, 206
- Jurisprudence, 7, 58, 60, 61, 93n3, 145, 246. *See also* *fiqh*
Shafi'i school, 7, 238n1, 238n2
- K
- kakak-kakak*, 170, 171. *See also* *abang-abang; adik-adik*
- khalwat*, 266, 267. *See also* *zina*
- Khan, Sadiq, 62, 70, 260
- Khutbah/khutbahs*, 29, 30, 34, 197, 243–246
- Kugle, Scott Siraj al-Haqq, 12, 53, 55, 92. *See also* Ali, Kecia
- L
- Labouchere amendment, 106. *See also* gross indecency
- Lelaki lembut*, 24, 231. *See also* *pengkid*

- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT)/lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI), 1, 2, 20, 23, 31, 45, 54, 217, 218, 226, 227, 252–257, 259, 263, 264, 272, 273, 284, 285, 299, 302, 303
- Lived religion, 2
- Liwat*, 10, 57–60, 63, 65, 66, 77.
See also musahaqah; sihaq; sodomy
- Lot
people of, 58, 155
Prophet, 57, 145, 213
- M**
- Madhabib*, 145. *See also fiqh*;
jurisprudence
- Madrasah/madrasahs*, 158, 195, 196
- Mak nyah*, 28, 73, 188, 203, 206,
230–233, 300. *See also darai*;
pondan
- Mak yong*, 68, 169
- Malay, 7, 73, 104, 144, 147, 188,
232, 257, 302
construction as race, 105
- Manji, Irshad, 62, 69, 214
- Massad, Joseph, 6, 56, 71, 72, 76,
152, 165, 166, 173, 176, 184,
305. *See also* ‘Gay
International’
- Masu harka*, 75. *See also* *yan daudu*
- Matter out of place, 151, 184
- Merton, Robert, 80, 81, 116, 152,
154, 156, 157, 160, 164,
183, 301. *See also* role
adjustments
- Middle class, 8, 21, 25–28, 34, 74,
86, 105, 106, 119, 120,
123–125, 133, 165, 166,
176, 181, 214, 215, 286,
302, 305
- Migrants, 7, 45, 111, 184, 231
- Model of homosexuality
gendered being, 26
sexed-being, 64
- Modernisation, 7, 8, 103, 109, 119,
120, 123, 133, 288
- Mohammad, Mahathir, 120, 121,
129–131, 177, 178, 180, 200,
285. *See also* Ibrahim, Anwar
- Moral enterprise, 209, 210, 231,
247, 249, 262, 267, 271–276,
283, 287, 292, 304
- Moral entrepreneurs, 10, 13, 81, 87,
192, 210, 247, 262, 275, 291,
292, 304
- Moral panics, 13, 71, 77, 83, 84,
107, 130, 248, 262, 273, 291,
304
- Moral policing, 150, 208, 233, 267,
272, 274, 276, 283, 287, 292,
300, 302, 304
- Multiculturalism, 71, 104, 108
in Britain, 104
- Musahaqah*, 10, 230, 233. *See also*
liwat; sihaq; sodomy
- Muslim Brotherhood, 121, 227
- Muslim Council of Britain (MCB),
112, 115, 117, 134, 281, 282
- Muslim Drag Queens, 68, 69, 299
- Muslim Institute, The, 35, 281, 282
- Muslim News, The*, 46, 259, 260, 269
- My seemingly self-evident status as
an ‘insider’, 23

N

- Najmabadi, Afsaneh, 6, 66, 67, 76,
152, 167, 170, 176, 177, 305.
See also amrad
- Nationalism, 12, 67, 80, 84–86, 93,
110, 245, 251, 293, 307
- New Economic Policy (NEP), 119, 121
- New Horizons in British Islam, 282

O

- Orientalist, 71–73, 92, 300
- Orlando
massacre at Pulse nightclub, 2, 54
responses to massacre, 55, 92
- Ottoman Empire, 65–67, 107

P

- Pakatan Harapan, 118
- Pakatan Rakyat (PR), 118, 131, 132,
288
- Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PAS), 110,
118–120, 122, 133, 287, 288
- Peletz, Michael, 67, 68, 92, 130,
153, 167–170, 181, 184, 288
- Penal code, 8, 91, 105, 125, 233
- Pengkid*, 24, 25, 28, 43, 49n6, 77,
78, 155, 188, 209, 210, 230,
253. *See also* lelaki lembut
- People's Justice Party (PKR), 118,
130, 131, 287, 288
- Pondan*, 164, 179, 185n6, 232, 233,
279. *See also* mak nyah; darai
- Pride parade in London, 226
- Puar, Jasbir, 87, 248, 251, 269, 292,
305. *See also* homonationalism

- Punishment for homosexual
behaviour throughout the
history of Islam, 59

Q

- Queer theorists, 72, 84, 87, 248,
269, 305

R

- Racial and Religious Hatred Act of
2006 (UK), 115
- Radicalisation, 83, 112, 245, 268,
301. *See also* securitisation/
securitization
- Ramadan, 31, 143, 144, 147, 187,
189, 228, 230. *See also* buka
puasa; *iftar*
- Razak, Najib, 73, 74, 119, 170–172,
215, 230, 231, 286. *See also*
Ibrahim, Anwar; Mohamad,
Mahathir
- Relationship between religion and
state, 89
- Rigby, Lee, 245
murder of, 245
- Rishta*, 216, 277, 278
- Role adjustments, 152, 154, 156,
157, 183, 301, 306. *See also*
Merton, Robert
- Romantic or erotic relations between
women in 19th century
Britain, 125
- Rushdie, Salman, 115, 134
affair, 115, 134
- Russia, 73, 89, 90

S

Saka, 202–204, 206
 Salafi, 144, 223, 290
 Same-sex marriage, 3, 8, 90, 260,
 269, 277, 282, 285, 289
 Saudi Arabia, 116, 238n1, 294n5
 Securitisation/securitization, 10, 84,
 248. *See also* radicalisation
 of Islam/Muslims in Britain, 10,
 248, 304
 Seksualiti Merdeka, 40, 41, 132,
 166, 225, 283
 Sexual identity, 12, 13, 20–22, 29,
 35, 38, 47, 70, 71, 88, 90,
 91, 118, 122, 128, 129, 143,
 150, 161, 167, 171, 172,
 185, 191, 192, 196, 209,
 218, 224–226, 230, 236,
 272, 279, 289, 290, 302,
 303, 306, 307
 preferred labels, 161
 Sexual outsiders, 3
 in other religions, 3
Shari'ah, 32
 Shi'ah, 306
Sihag, 58. *See also* *liwat*; *musahaqah*;
sodomy
 Sisters in Islam (SIS), 9, 32, 122,
 132, 145, 147, 185n2, 214,
 224, 225, 234, 267, 283, 284,
 293n2, 302
 Social constructionism, 5
 Socialisation, 13, 185, 301
 and identity construction, 306
 Sodomy, 68, 77, 105, 106, 120, 124,
 129, 131, 133, 230, 232, 262,

285, 300. *See also* *liwat*;
musahaqah; *sihag*

Star, The, 46, 257
 Sufi Islam, 196
 Sunni Islam, 7, 53, 238n2
Sutun, 257–259, 281
 Syariah Criminal Offences Act
 (SCOA) (Malaysia), 10, 230,
 238n6, 254
 Syariah lobby, 121, 122, 130–132,
 134, 185n2, 192, 232, 246,
 248, 263, 272, 274, 283, 285,
 291, 293, 300, 303, 304
 Syariahtisation, 121, 122

T

Tablighi Jamaat, 34, 194, 198, 219,
 290
 Transgender
 cisgender, 27
 and fluid identities in the field,
 185n7
 Transsexual, 27, 76, 164, 165
Tudung, 19, 24, 156, 157, 189, 193,
 195, 196, 208, 234, 265, 273,
 278. *See also* *hijab*
 Typical Malay/Malays, 172,
 177–184, 303. *See also*
 coconut/coconuts

U

United Malays National
 Organisation (UMNO), 110,
 118–122, 130, 132, 250, 287

W

Wadud, Amina, 59, 62, 79, 197, 214

Western sexual epistemology, 165–167.

See also Massad, Joseph

What British Muslims Really Think,
299

Whitehouse, Mary, 127, 128

Wolfenden Report, 126

Y

Yan daudu, 75, 76, 78. *See also*
amrad; bissu

Z

Zina, 10, 58, 66, 230. *See also* *liwat;*
khalwat