

WINNING THE MINDS AND HEARTS OF MALAY MUSLIM YOUTH: CHIC PROSELYTISATION IN CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIA

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Abstract

In various Muslim majority countries, Muslim youth have developed a greater public presence, particularly on the *da'wa* (proselytisation) scene. Malaysia is not immune from such a trend. The Malaysian public sphere has been surrounded by diverse voices and layers of Islamic understandings in which Malay Muslim youth have been the backbone. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted between 2015 to 2017, this article examines the expressions of Islam by urban Malay Muslims, in particular the role of Muslim youth in colouring the dynamics of the urban *da'wa* stage in Malaysia. It analyses how youth in Malaysia try to make sense of their identities, being young Muslims in the contemporary globalised world. This article argues that Malaysian Muslim youth are active and vital agents in the development and distribution of Islamic understandings known by their suffixes, ranging from moderate Islam—including the stream of Sufi orders—conservative Islam to liberal Islam. The zeal of Muslim youth has been captured by elites in diverse Muslim groups, including people in *da'wa* based business, which has led to the incorporation of youthful “tastes” and youth culture within their agenda in order to cater to and channel the minds and hearts of the “coolest generation” to become a part of their *da'wa* movements.

Keywords: Muslim youth, Malay, Malaysia, *da'wa*, globalised world

Introduction

Many youths in urban Malaysia are eager to find their Islamic identity. The pressure of living as a young Muslim in a contemporary globalised world which is knitted with Western culture has caused many Muslim youth to experience a loss of identity. The rapid growth of educational institutions and massive expansion of modernity and its products, as well as the increasing role of science and technology with significant innovations and discoveries, have led to the rapid growth of well-educated middle-class Muslims, including the birth of younger generations of professionals. This is evidenced in contemporary Malaysia, where the number of young professionals and executives is growing. This condition, however, has led those from younger generations to feel a sense of emptiness. Returning to religion, Islam, has been a growing trend in the context of strengthening their identity. Indeed, scholars have also showcased a positive relationship between religion and spirituality, and identity and how they are both key resources for identity formation and development.¹

The position of Islam in Muslim-majority Malaysia, on the other hand, has often relied on the role of Muslim youth in colouring its dynamics. This can be clearly seen from the role of Muslim young people in the Islamisation race between UMNO (United Malays National Organisation),² an ethnonationalist party which has been in power in Malaysia since Independence, and popular opposition Islamist party, PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia/Pan Islamic Party of Malaysia).³ Joseph Chinyong Liow and Afif Pasuni argue that the contestation⁴ between the two parties has made “UMNO-PAS “Islamisation race”” part of the Malaysian political lexicon.⁵ The term Islamisation race refers to the effort of both parties in emphasising their Islamic credibility and Islamic ambitions to win the votes of the Malays, which are the largest ethnic group in Malaysia.⁶ Scholars focusing their work on Malaysian politics

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¹ See Pamela Ebstyn King (2003), “Religion and Identity: The Role of Ideological, Social, and Spiritual Contexts,” *Applied Developmental Science*, Vol. 7, no. 3, p. 197.; See also Carol A. Markstrom (1999), “Religious Involvement and Adolescent Psychosocial Development,” *Journal of Adolescence*, Vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 205-221.

² UMNO was formed in May 1946 by the Malay nationalist movement. Farish Ahmad Noor (2004), *Islam Embedded: The Historical Development of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party PAS (1951-2003)*, Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute.

³ PAS was founded on 24 November 1951 and was registered as a political party on 31 May 1955. Noor, *Islam Embedded*, *op. cit.*; Joseph Chinyong Liow & Afif Pasuni (2015), “Islam: The State and Politics in Malaysia,” in Meredith L. Weiss (ed), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Malaysia*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 50-9. It was initially part of UMNO but became a separate party when clerics within the PAS body started questioning the position of Islam regarding UMNO’s approach to politics and governance, which was considered by clerics at the time as secular. Liow and Pasuni, *Islam*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

⁴ In the early 1970s, however, Malaysia witnessed a close relationship between UMNO and PAS.

⁵ Liow & Pasuni, *Islam*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

⁶ Joseph Chinyong Liow (2007), “Political Islam in Malaysia: Legitimacy, Hegemony and Resistance,” in A. Reid and M. Gilsenan (eds.), *Islamic Legitimacy in a Plural Asia*, London: Routledge, p. 182.

have highlighted the Islamisation race as an important signal that Malaysian Islam has experienced a conservative turn⁷. Similar trends can be seen in various Muslim majority countries, like Indonesia.⁸ Lily Zubaidah Rahim argues that “UMNO is now commonly perceived to be almost as Islamist as the Islamist opposition party PAS—with the theological overlap between the two parties close to negligible.”⁹ Throughout the contestation, Muslim youth and youth culture have been present and utilised by both sides.

The Islamisation race was particularly evident following the global Islamic resurgence¹⁰ in the 1970s—fueled and inspired by the success of the Iranian revolution in 1979—which swept through many Muslim countries, including Malaysia. This led both PAS and UMNO to attempt to emphasise their Islamic credibility. Facing PAS, for example, Mahathir started introducing his brand of “modernist-developmental Islamic policies” through the assistance of Anwar Ibrahim, the leader of the Islamic youth movement.¹¹ In the mid-1970s Anwar Ibrahim was the leader of ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, the Assembly of Malaysian Muslim Youth), a Muslim youth movement with the objective to propagate Islamic teachings, founded in 1969 and officially approved in 1971.¹² Liow and Pasuni argue that ABIM, “played a pivotal role as a pressure group that lobbied the Malaysian government to focus more on Islamic governance”.¹³ The role of Muslim youth in Malaysia in accelerating the possible presence of an Islamic resurgence is resonant of similar trends which can be seen in neighbouring Muslim countries, including Indonesia, Singapore and Southern Thailand.¹⁴

The current trend demonstrates the strong position of Muslim youth not only as the objects or part of the agenda of party elites, but also that they have become more potent agents in the survival of the parties. Dominik M. Müller,¹⁵ for example, analysed the cultural life of PAS which has experienced a transformation in its adaptation to modern popular culture. The growing use of ‘Islamic entertainment’ (*hiburan Islami*), including the birth of a pop-Islamist PAS,¹⁶ demonstrates the importance of Muslim youth in the Islamic public sphere of Malaysia.¹⁷ Following this trajectory, this article focuses on Malay Muslim youth. However, it will not discuss youth and politics, Islamic political movements or those who wear *kopiah hitam* (a black skullcap) (UMNO) or a white cap (PAS) - as is famous in parts of Malaysia such as Sabah, in order to differentiate between the two competing parties. This article will analyse the current development of *da'wa* or *dakwah* (proselytisation) and the role of urban Muslim youth in Malaysia.

In various Muslim majority countries, Muslim youth have developed a greater public presence, particularly on the *da'wa* scene. Malaysia is not immune from such a trend. Bart Barendregt,¹⁸ for example, in his study analyses the development of nasyid, a musical style popular especially in Southeast Asia in the 1995-2005,¹⁹ by youth as *da'wa* music or “sonic dakwah” in Malaysia. The Malaysian public sphere has been surrounded by diverse voices and layers of Islamic understandings in which Malay Muslim youth have been the backbone. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted between 2015 to 2017, this article examines the expressions of Islam by urban Malay Muslims, in Kuala Lumpur, in particular the role of Muslim youth in colouring the dynamics of the urban *da'wa* stage in Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur was chosen because the growth of diverse new types of *da'wa* can be seen more clearly in the capital. The article analyses how youth in Malaysia try to make sense of their identities, being young Muslims in the contemporary globalised world. Inspired by scholars who have highlighted the chief

⁷ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid & Muhammad Takiyuddin Ismail (2014), “Islamist Conservatism and the Demise of Islam Hadhari in Malaysia,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 159-180.

⁸ See Martin Van Bruinessen (2015), “Introduction: Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam and the ‘Conservative Turn’ of the Early Twenty-first Century,” in Bruinessen, Martin van (ed.), *Contemporary Development in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the “Conservative Turn”*, Singapore: ISEAS, pp. 1-20.

⁹ Lily Zubaidah Rahim (2018), “Careful what You Wish for: *Salafi* Islamisation and Authoritarian Governance in Malaysia,” in John L. Esposito et al. (eds.), *The Politics of Islamism: Diverging Visions and Trajectories*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, p. 198.

¹⁰ See also Robert W. Hefner (2010), “Religious Resurgence in Contemporary Asia: Southeast Asian Perspectives on Capitalism, the State, and the New Piety,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 69, no. 4, p. 1032; Robert W. Hefner (2014), “Modern Muslims and the Challenge of Plurality,” *Society*, Vol. 53, no. 1, p. 136.

¹¹ Liow & Pasuni, *Islam*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

¹² See Mona Abaza (2002), *Debates on Islam and Knowledge in Malaysia and Egypt*, London & New York: Routledge.

¹³ Liow and Pasuni, *Islam*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

¹⁴ See, for example, Maszlee Malik (2017), “Salafism in Malaysia: Historical Account on Its Emergence and Motivations,” *Sociology of Islam*, Vol. 5, pp. 303-333.

¹⁵ Dominik M. Müller (2013), “Post-Islamism or Pop-Islamism? Ethnographic Observations of Muslim Youth Politics in Malaysia,” *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde*, Vol. 59, pp. 261-284; Dominik M. Müller (2015), “Islamic Politics and Popular Culture in Malaysia: Negotiating Normative Change between Shariah law and Electric Guitars,” *Indonesia and the Malay World*, Vol. 43, no. 127, pp. 318-44.

¹⁶ See Müller, *Post-Islamism or Pop-Islamism?*, *op. cit.*, p. 270; Müller, “Islamic Politics and Popular Culture in Malaysia,” *op. cit.*, p. 320.

¹⁷ For an excellent discussion of Muslim youth in Malaysia and popular culture, see also Barendregt’s study of nasyid (an Islamic music genre). Bart Barendregt (2011), “Pop, Politics and Piety: Nasyid Boy Band music in Muslim Southeast Asia,” in Weintraub, A. (ed.), *Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia*, London: Routledge, pp. 235-256.; Bart, Barendregt (2012), “Sonic Discourses on Muslim Malay Modernity: The Arqam Sound,” *Contemporary Islam*, Vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 315-340.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

role of Muslim youth in the development of Islam in Malaysia and its politics,²⁰ this article argues that urban Malaysian Muslim youth are active and vital agents in the development and distribution of Islamic understandings known by their suffixes, ranging from moderate Islam—including the stream of Sufi orders—conservative Islam to liberal Islam. Osman, for example, predicts that the turn toward conservative Islam in Malaysia can be predicted to continue in the future and contends “...there will be a growth in adherence to Islam especially amongst young Muslims in the country.”²¹ Malik and Mat, in their analysis of the growth of global Salafism²² and the use of advanced technology, similarly argue that “...the Global Salafism influence that was widely spread through the Internet since the Internet revolution before the beginning of the new millennia had contributed significantly in giving more information on all aspects of various issues to the younger generation.”²³ The zeal of Muslim youth has been captured by elites in diverse Muslim groups, including people in *da'wa* based business, which has led to the incorporation of youthful “tastes” and youth culture within their agenda in order to cater to and channel the minds and hearts of the “coolest generation” to become a part of their *da'wa* movements.

The *da'wa* scene in urban Malaysia is as diverse as its rich gastronomic landscape. Duruz and Gaik Cheng Khoo²⁴, in their study of cultures of “mixedness” and contradictions in the study of the Malaysian and Singaporean gastronomic landscape, argue that urban dwellers of both countries have been spoiled by the merging of cosmopolitan and local flavours and how the discussion of the culinary relates to broader discussions of “the politics of commensality, intercultural exchanges, and identity hybridity and belonging”.²⁵ Correspondingly, the Malaysian *da'wa* scene demonstrates a similar landscape. Urban youth are spoiled by global and national *da'wa* format choices, or “fancy *da'wa*”, as the product of “border crossing *da'wa*”. Border crossing *da'wa* is a new type of *da'wa* in Malaysia, which refers to its transnational character as well as its local border crossing elements; a *da'wa* form that tries to accommodate the *da'wa* race by claiming the platform of a middle-ground *da'wa* group.

The Race and *Da'wa*

The *da'wa* race has accompanied the Islamisation race in Malaysia. UMNO and PAS, for example, have long been competing to demonstrate their version of Islam through *da'wa*. The political interest in winning over Malaysia's ethnic Malay Muslim majority, the global Islamic resurgence, and the rising popularity of PAS, have led UMNO to attempt to accentuate their Islamic credibility by emphasising their version of “moderate” Islam.²⁶ PAS, on the other hand, have long made their hallmark as an Islamist party that utilises Islam to win the hearts of Malaysians. The nature of UMNO in demonstrating their Islamic credibility was evident during Mahathir Mohamad's era (1981-2003), particularly through the ‘officialising of Islamic discourse’.²⁷ Some products of the UMNO bureaucracy demonstrate such a tendency, such as in the domain of Islamic family law, the halal industry and Islamic finance.²⁸ Liow has boldly emphasised that UMNO made the state a “vehicle for Islamisation”.²⁹ Rahim argues, “Since the instigation of state-led Islamisation from the early 1980s, the passage of *salafi*-inspired *sharia* laws and policies in Malaysia have eroded fundamental rights and liberties guaranteed by the secular Federal constitution.”³⁰

The landscape of Malaysian *da'wa* is displayed in Mahathir's 1996 keynote address from the 10th Session of “the Coordination Committee of Joint Islamic Action in the Field of Dakwah”. He criticised the way Muslims spread *da'wa*: “Many of us are merely concerned with spreading what we interpret as the true teachings. More than that,

²⁰ See, for example, Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman (2016), “The Islamic Conservative Turn in Malaysia: Impact and Future Trajectories,” *Cont Islam*, Vol. 11, pp. 1-20.; Maszlee Malik & Hamidah Mat (2017), “The Historical Development of the ‘*Sunnah*’ Reform Ideology in the State of Perlis, Malaysia”, *SAGE Open*, Vol. 7, no. 3, pp. 1-12.

²¹ Osman, *The Islamic Conservative Turn in Malaysia*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

²² The term Salafism is usually used to describe movements that advocate a return to the teachings and examples of the *salaf* or pious forefathers of the Muslim community. Salafis uphold strict literal understandings of the foundational texts of Islam and usually each of the Salafi group claims that they are the guardian of the true Islam. They oppose any innovations (*bid'a*) which are not based on a strict interpretation of the foundational texts of Islam.

²³ Malik and Mat, *The Historical Development of the ‘Sunnah’ Reform Ideology in the State of Perlis*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

²⁴ Jean Duruz and Gaik Cheng Khoo (2015), *Eating Together: Food, Space and Identity in Malaysia and Singapore*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁶ The 6th Prime Minister Najib Razak, for example, launched the “Global Movement of Moderates”. The rhetoric of Muslim moderation by Najib, however, was questioned. See Rahim, “Careful what You Wish for,” *op. cit.*, p. 180.

²⁷ Georg Stauth (2002), *Politics and Cultures of Islamization in Southeast Asia: Indonesia and Malaysia in the Nineteen-Nineties*, Bielefeld: Transcript, p. 216.

²⁸ See, for example, Johan Fisher (2008), *Proper Islamic Consumption: Shopping among the Malays in Modern Malaysia*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press; Maznah Mohamad (2010a), “Making Majority, Undoing Family: Law, Religion and the Islamization of the State in Malaysia,” *Economy and Society*, Vol. 39, no. 3, pp. 360-384; Maznah Mohamad (2010b), “The Ascendance of Bureaucratic Islam and the Secularization of the Shariah in Malaysia,” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 83, no. 3, pp. 505-524.; Maznah Mohamad (2011), “Malaysian Sharia Reforms in Flux: The Changeable National Character of Islamic Marriage,” *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*, Vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 46-70.

²⁹ Joseph Chinyong Liow (2009), *Piety and Politics: Islamism in Contemporary Malaysia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 181.

³⁰ Rahim, “Careful what You Wish for,” *op. cit.*, p. 182.

we seem to regard fellow Muslims as being not Muslim enough. We are seldom gentle in our words of advice.”³¹ Mahathir's keynote address demonstrates a long battle for the understanding of Islam among Islamic groups. Today's Malaysia demonstrates that the dynamics are richer than this. These dynamics are particularly made possible by the increasing presence of cosmopolitan Muslim youth³² in the *da'wa* landscape.

The Da'wa Landscape of Malay Muslim Youth

During the authors' research in Malaysia, the intention was not to study Muslim youth and *da'wa*. The authors, however, were surprised by the presence of fancy conferences and conventions held in prestigious convention halls, such as Putrajaya International Conference Centre and Dewan Serbaguna Menara TM. These events were attended by thousands of youth from different states of Malaysia, as well as neighbouring countries, especially Singapore and Brunei. The atmosphere of the events is described in 24-year-old university student Zeynal's statement: “This conference is very lively which makes us, as the young generation, really feel the glory of Islam.”³³ The first conference that we attended was “Twins of Faith”, organised by a non-governmental organisation (NGO) called Mercy Mission. The format of the conference was identical with a scholarly conference. It was a two-day conference consisting of different panels or series of Islamic lectures. The participants could choose whichever panel they wished to attend during the two-day event.

This type of *da'wa* format is new in Malaysia and is particularly popular among urban Malaysians. The format was pioneered around the end of 2011 and early 2012, by two *da'wa* NGOs called Murshid through K-Fiqh and Twins of Faith through Mercy Mission. The first conference by K-fiqh was in 2012 and was attended by 3000 Muslims, most of whom were Muslim youth. In recent times, this *da'wa* format has mushroomed, particularly in urban Kuala Lumpur. Most of the participants are young Muslims, and the organisers and volunteers are also youth, especially university students, fresh graduates, and young executives. The fancy *da'wa* conferences and conventions are primarily targeted to those with middle-class to upper-middle class backgrounds. Students whose parents come from these backgrounds are the primary attendees, due to the high cost of entrance, which ranges between RM 70-350. The conferences and atmosphere, in general, are like youth festivals. Maziha, a 25-year-old university student from Singapore, says: “It's like Eid el Fitr [one of the major Islamic festivals that marks the end of the holy month Ramadan] in here. Everyone comes. I'm so excited to be here. Travelling all the way from Singapore is very worthwhile!”³⁴

In addition to flyers and banners, social media is the main marketing method for fancy *da'wa*. Organisers have actively used various social media platforms to advertise their events, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Malaysian youth have gotten used to social media as their main gateway to being informed about *da'wa* programmes around Malaysia.

In addition to the use of social media, the elites behind the new type of fancy *da'wa* format have designed programmes to suit the needs of urban Malaysian youth, namely a quick, easy, and comprehensive knowledge of Islam. In addition, since this type of *da'wa* is especially popular among well-educated middle-class Muslim youth, organisers strive to follow youthful “tastes” by providing religious talks that are systemic. This is achieved through the assistance of handouts or booklets as well as visual slides which help participants understand the content easily. Attending a two-day series of Islamic lectures with diverse topics ranging from the discussion of the purpose of life, parenting, power, money, youth, spirituality, marriage, etc., is more appealing to many Muslim youth in Malaysia compared to attending traditional religious gatherings in prayer rooms (*mushalla* and/or *surau*).³⁵ Aadil, a 24-year-old university student, says:

Religion and religious gatherings, with their *tahlilan* [an Islamic ritual in which God is repeatedly praised, usually in the collective] and prolonged recitation of *du'ā'* [invocation] and *salawat* [the recitation of specific phrases to compliment the Prophet Muhammad], which can be seen in some Muslim pockets in Malaysia, are not suitable for us. We get frustrated if we attend this kind of religious gathering because it takes too much of our time.³⁶

³¹ Hashim Makaruddin (ed.) (2004), “Islam and the Global *Dakwah* Movement,” in *Encyclopedia of Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad. Prime Minister of Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur: Darulfikri, Vol. 2, p. 205.

³² See also Zaleha Khalilur Rahman (2017), “‘I am Malaysian First’: Ethnicisation and Ethno-Religious Identities among Private University Students in Malaysia,” in Yeoh Seng-Guan (ed), *Malaysians and Their Identities*, Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, pp. 7-24; Hal Mahera Ahmad (2017), “The Popularisation of *Hijab* in Malaysia: Fashion versus Modest,” in Yeoh Seng-Guan(ed), *Malaysians and Their Identities*, Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, pp. 47-61.

³³ Interview with Zeynal, 27 December 2015, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

³⁴ Interview with Maziha, 28 December 2015, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

³⁵ See Sylva Frisk (2009), *Submitting to God: Women and Islam in Urban Malaysia*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press.

³⁶ Interview with Aadil, 25 April 2016, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Aadil, and like-minded Muslim youth, welcome different formats of fancy *da'wa*, organised by *da'wa* organisations in Malaysia, with enthusiasm. They believe that a two-day, fancy *da'wa* conference is like an oasis in the middle of an arid Muslim youth lifestyle. Many of the attendees believe that the events are a one-stop experience during which they will discover their true identity as Muslims and their religion. Zaimi, a 27-year-old Muslim male says: "What we want as the young generation is something like this. The knowledge that we can get from this kind of conference is complete. We can choose which Islamic lecture we want to attend during this sort of conference format for a *da'wa* event."³⁷ The following section will mainly focus on two fancy *da'wa* conferences: K-Fiqh and Twins of Faith.

K-Fiqh

K-Fiqh is one of the main "players" in this *da'wa* format. It is a private limited company, with ties with a *da'wa* NGO called Murshid, an organisation of Muslim teachers and preachers. Murshid was earlier known as Multaqa Asatizah and Du 'at, founded by Dr Zaharuddin in 2011. Having been inspired by approaches taken by a prominent figure of Muslim scholarship in Qatar, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Dr Zaharuddin started establishing his projects under the umbrella of Murshid—including the K-Fiqh *da'wa* conventions. In 2015, there were approximately 20-25 Malaysian '*ulamā*' (Muslim scholars) from a Shari'a (Islamic Jurisprudence) and Ushūl al-Dīn (Islamic Theology) background who were chosen by the founder to work together under the Murshid name.³⁸ K-Fiqh held its first conference in 2012. The K-Fiqh team ranges from 20 to 40-year-old Muslims, with Muslim youth always the centre of their events. In every conference, the organisation recruit young Muslims, mostly university students, to help as volunteers. Therefore, every event can be seen as a youth event,³⁹ prepared by young people and mainly attended by them. K-Fiqh is the pioneer of the fancy *da'wa* events model in the Malay language. The reason for using Malay is to cater to their target market. Fadhil says: "If we use English, it will be the same as them [Twins of Faith]. Most Malaysians do not speak English that much."⁴⁰

Murshid's position is the same as other *da'wa* NGOs in Malaysia in trying to develop *da'wa*. Although there might be times that Murshid's position on certain issues might be different from other *da'wa* NGOs in Malaysia, Dr Zaharuddin emphasises that Murshid tries to maintain a good relationship with all parties. Dr Zaharuddin argues that the difference between projects introduced by Murshid through K-Fiqh and those of other Muslim organisations can be likened to the difference between car brands. Concerning quality, he argued that their targeted market sees K-Fiqh as providing higher quality *da'wa*. He says: "In this case, we are Mercedes! Because we do not preach without clear objectives. The preachers who deliver talks in K-Fiqh conferences need to prepare papers and attendees also need to pay a certain amount of money."⁴¹

To have "Mercedes" as the brand which is associated with their identity as Muslims, is a privilege for the Malaysian youth who attend K-Fiqh conferences. Sufyan, a *da'wa* activist from Sabah, recounts his experience with K-Fiqh: "I attended all K-Fiqh conferences and Murshid's other programs nine times already. I like K-Fiqh conferences because the topics are more diverse than any other conventional religious gathering."⁴²

Dr Zaharuddin explained the aim and objective of K-Fiqh conferences:

To help the Muslim community in understanding their religion in a very nice and detailed way without any *ta'assub* [fanaticism]. From our personal observations, we can say that our Muslim community have an interest to learn more, but they do not know how. Yes, they have many, many mediums. However, they might be confused by some scholars in our country because there are scholars who argue a lot and label a lot, so that will create some confusion between Muslim communities because they love to take these scholars as their role models. However, when you see your role model fighting with other scholars and using quite harsh words, that is quite unfortunate. We are here to fill that vacuum, to be one of the alternative mediums for the Muslim community to learn [Islam] in a very nice way and very academic way.⁴³

³⁷ Interview with Zaimi, 24 April 2016, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

³⁸ He also argues that the '*ulamā*' under Murshid might be different in certain aspects, but he emphasised "... we know the boundaries. Our differences are very minor, so we can work together." Therefore, he said, he cannot recruit many '*ulamā*' because it is quite difficult to find the same voice. This is particularly relevant in relation to learning to manage differences among '*ulamā*', which he says often takes a long time. He emphasised that it is important for Murshid to not accept any '*ulamā*' who are also pure politicians. He said "we do not want a politician with us. A politician a little bit is fine, but not a pure politician." Interview with Dr Zaharuddin, 23 April 2016, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

³⁹ Murshid, as the umbrella of K-Fiqh, also organises smaller free talks and Islamic study circles, called *halaqa* and *talaqqi*, which are usually attended by the older generation. The attendees are mostly between the ages of 40-60.

⁴⁰ Interview with Brother Fadhil, 22 April 2016, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁴¹ Interview with Dr Zaharuddin, 23 April 2016, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁴² Interview with Sufyan, 22 April 2016, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁴³ Interview with Dr Zaharuddin, 23 April 2016, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The attendees of K-Fiqh echoed Dr Zaharuddin's explanation. Maziha, a 25-year-old university student, says: "K-Fiqh is very systematic. By attending this, we are also not confused with the different opinions of 'ulamā' who often accuse each other of having wrong understandings of Islam."⁴⁴

In addition, scholars under K-Fiqh and Murshid also mirror the preference of the young generation who are often mesmerised by popular religious stars. Ustadz Zaharuddin says: "Some of our colleagues in Murshid are celebrity 'ulamā'... They frequently appear on the televisions and radios."⁴⁵ Furthermore, the speakers of K-Fiqh are also reachable through different social media platforms, enabling them to be closer to the culture of Muslim youth.⁴⁶

K-Fiqh's Wasatiyya

Wasatiyya Islam (moderate Islam) is the primary hallmark of K-Fiqh fancy *da'wa* conferences. Many believe that the presence of K-Fiqh counters the growth of Salafism and/or neo-Salafism,⁴⁷ which, some argue, can be seen through the success of Twins of Faith conferences. The way Murshid and K-Fiqh understand *wasatiyya* is as follows: "Moderation is not about position, or being in the middle of two things. Two extremes. It is about concept and substance. Our content must be good. Must be evidenced by the Qur'an, the prophetic sayings, and the views of contemporary and past jurists."⁴⁸

The term *wasatiyya* has been adopted and manipulated by those who claim themselves as moderate Muslims. Through their understanding of *wasatiyya*, Murshid and K-Fiqh do not intend to be positioned between liberalists and extremists. The reference to this term, however, has very diverse meanings. Indonesian secretary general of the World Association of al-Azhar Graduates, Muchlis M. Hanafi, for example, argues that the ideological position of the majority of Indonesian Azharites, (graduates of al-Azhar University in Egypt) pertaining to the term *wasatiyya* is that it refers to their position, especially their opposition of both radicalism and liberalism.⁴⁹ In Malaysia, the reference to moderate Islam is also diverse. Therefore, it is not surprising if the K-Fiqh version of "moderate" Islam has been questioned. Indeed, as Rahim records, the former prime minister's rhetoric that Malaysia, in general, is a moderate Muslim country, was highly doubted by many civil society activists.⁵⁰

Some Malaysian Muslims argue that Murshid and K-Fiqh can be considered conservative. For example, Hanif, a 33-year-old executive, says: "I think Murshid and K-Fiqh tend to be close to the Salafi ideology. In fact, usually there are also Salafi 'ulamā' who deliver talks at their conferences. Although not all of them."⁵¹

Dr Zaharuddin clarifies the position of Murshid and K-Fiqh:

Sometimes we can be with those extremists because they are not extreme from our point of view... It might be that their view is the most accurate one at that period. Sometimes we might be seen together with those liberalists. Also, not because we are liberal but because their arguments are correct. Sometimes opinion can be changed. It is normal in Islamic law that one strong opinion at a particular time can be weak in the future. A different climate, different technology, or different context can lead to changes in position.⁵²

The K-Fiqh agenda as border crossing *da'wa*, which attempts to understand different views upheld by liberalists and extremists, has successfully attracted Muslim youth. For example, the ways in which speakers of K-Fiqh try to explain rulings related to Islamic law by adjusting it to local contexts has enabled attendees to understand how Islam works in their locality.

⁴⁴ Interview with Maziha, 28 December 2015, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁴⁵ Interview with Dr Zaharuddin, 23 April 2016, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁴⁶ During the interview, for example, Dr Zaharuddin mentioned that he has 1.3 million Facebook followers. Interview with Dr Zaharuddin, 23 April 2016, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. On a discussion of Muslim youth, *da'wa*, and social media, see also Eva F. Nisa (2018a), "Creative and Lucrative *Da'wa*: The Visual Culture of Instagram amongst Female Muslim Youth in Indonesia," *Asiascape: Digital Asia*, Vol. 5, no. pp. 1-2, 68-99; Eva F. Nisa (2018b), "Social Media and the Birth of an Islamic Social Movement: ODOJ (One Day One Juz) in Contemporary Indonesia," *Indonesia and the Malay World*, Vol. 46, no. pp. 134, 24-43.

⁴⁷ On neo-Salafism, see Osman, *The Islamic Conservative Turn in Malaysia*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ Interview with Dr Zaharuddin, 23 April 2016, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁴⁹ Muchlis M. Hanafi (2013), *Moderasi Islam: Menangkal Radikalisasi Berbasis Agama*. Ciputat: PSQ & IAAI, p. ix. On the discussion of *wasatiyya* in Indonesia, see Judith Schlehe and Eva F. Nisa (2016), "The Meanings of Moderate Islam in Indonesia: Alignments and Dealignment of Azharites," *Occasional Paper Series: Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Freiburg*, Vol. 31 (January), pp. 1- 15.

⁵⁰ Rahim, "Careful what You Wish for," *op. cit.*, pp. 179-180.

⁵¹ Interview with Hanif, 4 January 2016, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁵² Interview with Dr Zaharuddin, 23 April 2016, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Twins of Faith

Twins of Faith is the second leading player of the fancy *da'wa* platform in urban Kuala Lumpur. It is organised by a *da'wa* NGO called Mercy Mission, which was founded internationally in the United Kingdom in 2007 and in Malaysia in 2011. Mercy Mission is the umbrella of the organisation, with Twins of Faith focusing on diverse projects relating to social services, education (through Seven Skies International school), and conference projects (including Twins of Faith and Being Me).⁵³ The first Twins of Faith *da'wa* conference was held in 2012. Similarly to K-Fiqh, it can be regarded as a youth *da'wa* movement. According to Hisyam, the Deputy of Mercy Mission, in 2015, 30 young professionals worked under Mercy Mission. The nature of recruitment is also adjusted to youth culture—they announce it through social media, especially Facebook.

Many outsiders have known Mercy Mission as a Salafi NGO. In this context, Hisyam explains:

We tend to disassociate ourselves from certain connotations. That means regardless of whether they are from Shafi'i, Hanafi, Maliki, or Hanbali *madhhab* [Islamic school of law], we welcome everyone to join us. But, it is true, we call ourselves the followers of the path of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. We are calling people to go back to the Prophet's teachings and those of the Qur'an and Sunnah, so we do, in fact, fit that definition [Salafi].⁵⁴

According to Osman, Mercy Mission is one of the examples of a neo-Salafi organisations in Malaysia.⁵⁵ He defines neo-Salafism in Malaysia as "a new type of *Salafism* that has reached Malaysia from the West. In essence, neo-*Salafi* movements remain avowedly true to the core principle of *Salafism* in the religious sense, including its rejection of *Sufis* and *Shiites* as deviant."⁵⁶ The main element that makes this neo-Salafi movement different from the older form of Salafi movement is the way they repackage their *da'wa*. The topics raised during their conferences, for example, are carefully chosen to avoid clearly demonstrating strict Salafi understandings of Islam. Osman argues the difference between the old and new Salafi movements, which can be seen in today's Malaysia, is that "The neo-*Salafis* have been more adept at and successful in concealing their true beliefs. It can be argued that the need to re-package their objectives stems from the belief that overtly Salafi messaging, such as rejection of the celebrations of the Prophet's birthday, might not find resonance in societies with a strong history of association with Sufi Islam."⁵⁷ Osman's argument is resonant to the assessments of many outsiders of this neo-Salafi movement.

Twins of Faith understands that Malaysia is famous for its melting pot of cultures or the culture of mixedness, to borrow Duruz and Cheng Khoo's concept.⁵⁸ Therefore, during every event they invite border crossing cosmopolitan speakers not only from the Middle East but also from Western countries. One of the central figures or stars of Twins of Faith is Sheikh 'Alaa Elsayed, who was born in Egypt and has lived in Canada for more than 37 years. Sheikh 'Alaa Elsayed is known as a cosmopolitan transnational Muslim scholar who has travelled around the world for *da'wa*. He is the Director of Muslim Affairs for an American Muslim organisation, ISNA (Islamic Societies of North America), one of the largest Muslim mass organisations in North America. Through this conference, Sheikh 'Alaa Elsayed argued that the transnational network of '*ulamā*' is also strengthened:

This type of conference is a great opportunity for *da'wa* and for *mashayikh* [Muslim scholars] from diverse backgrounds to get to know one another to listen to one another... When you hear it from another sheikh, even if you know the stuff it affects you more. It touches you more... We are human beings. We need to be reminded too.⁵⁹

The element of border crossing cosmopolitan *da'wa* can be seen clearly from the language used as the medium of the conference, namely English. The organisers intentionally use English to target their market, the English-speaking crowd predominantly consisting of Malaysian urban youth. Hisyam explains: "We have a global presence. Therefore, the English aspect is emphasised in our programme."⁶⁰

⁵³ Being Me is Mercy Mission conference dedicated to Muslim women in which International female speakers, such as Yasmin Mujahid, are invited.

⁵⁴ Interview with Hisyam, 27 December 2015, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁵⁵ Other neo-Salafi organisations which can be seen in Malaysia are Al-Maghrib Institute and al-Kauthar Institute. Osman, *The Islamic Conservative Turn in Malaysia*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁵⁶ Osman, *The Islamic Conservative Turn in Malaysia*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁵⁸ Duruz and Khoo, *Eating Together*, *op. cit.*

⁵⁹ Interview with Sheikh 'Alaa Elsayed, 26 December 2015, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁶⁰ Interview with Hisyam, 27 December 2015, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

All of the combined elements of this type of fancy *da'wa* conference have successfully attracted young people. According to the organisers:

We targeted them because we believe that they will be the future leaders of this country. In fact, not only that, but also the leaders for this *umma* (global Muslim community). That is why we focus so much on them. We work with them so much. We want to follow the steps of the Prophet Muhammad who also focused so much on the young generation during his lifetime, precisely because they are the builders of the next generation.⁶¹

Sheikh 'Alaa Elsayed also explained the important role of youth in *da'wa*:

When I see dark hair like this in this kind of conference, I am feeling good about the *umma*. But, when I see the grey hair, well, you know what, I say, we are missing the boat! If I see the young doing the *da'wa* which I see from the volunteers here, who are mostly university students, it is amazing. I am very hopeful. This is a good healthy indicator for the *umma* itself. The youth are coming back.⁶²

Sheikh 'Alaa Elsayed emphasised the nature of young people who tend to try everything. Some of the young attendees also share their feelings by stating that they feel an empty void inside their hearts. They echoed what Sheikh 'Alaa Elsayed said. They feel compelled to find the truth of who they are: their identity. Faizal, a 26-year-old, says: "The first time I attended this cool and informative conference, I felt good about myself. I thought that I finally found where I belong." This kind of satisfaction is also shared by many of Faizal's fellow attendees. Afiqa, a 20-year-old university student says: "This Islamic conference is very cool. This is my *iman* (faith) boost! I've met very cool sisters in this event. They're awesome!"⁶³ Sufyan also shares his impression of attending Twins of Faith: "*Ini peringkat internasional. Lagi ramai yang minat karena boleh melihat da'wa secara global.* [This is an international level. There are many people interested in it because they can see global *da'wa*]."⁶⁴

Many of the Muslim youth who attend Twins of Faith are excited to have the opportunity to meet and hear the views of transnational '*ulamā*'. They are eager to learn about the development of *da'wa* internationally. Sufyan's friend, Amran, a 24-year-old university student, says: "We can know those who spread Islam in the United States, Australia, and Saudi Arabia, etc. Subhana Allah [God is perfect] by attending this cool programme we can hear their stories."⁶⁵ Noura, a 30-year-old young female executive, says: "We cannot go there [to their countries] because of our limitations. When they can come here and share the development of *da'wa* in their countries, it is a big privilege for us."⁶⁶ This positive feedback expresses not only the landscape of the popularity of *da'wa* among youth but also the dynamic of *da'wa* in Malaysia and how the young generation respond to the chic *da'wa* introduced by local and transnational *da'wa* agents. In addition, their views also demonstrate how returning to religion with the chic format introduced by Twins of Faith has helped these young Muslims to construct and strengthen their Islamic identity. The following section analyses this dynamic.

The Fancy Da'wa Platform and the Malaysian Da'wa Landscape

The fancy *da'wa* platform sparks interest for young Muslims who struggle to make sense of their identities as Muslims in urban, cosmopolitan, multicultural Malaysia. This new platform of paid *da'wa* has invited people in the *da'wa* business to expand their creativity. The atmosphere of business in *da'wa* events is evidenced in the presence of diverse programmes attached to the events, such as bazaars (book, clothes, merchandise), paid programmes for children, and paid matchmaking programmes. Therefore, the number of institutions that organise these kinds of conferences is growing and the race in *da'wa* becomes more dynamic. The dynamics present in the new type of transnational *da'wa* platform mirrors the broader dynamics of the *da'wa* landscape in Malaysia.

Discussing Islam and *da'wa* in Malaysia is not an easy task because Islam has been at the core of the political, cultural and economic life and discussions in Malaysia. Islam in Malaysia has been closely related to the condition of politics in the country. The increase in Islamic consciousness among Malaysian Muslims, especially since the early 1970s, has led a long trajectory of an Islamisation race between political actors, in particular between UMNO and PAS. The Islamisation race has positioned Muslim youth as important agents in this contestation.

⁶¹ Interview with Hisyam and Fatiha, 27 December 2015, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁶² Interview with Sheikh 'Alaa Elsayed, 26 December 2015, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁶³ Interview with Faizal, 27 December 2015, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁶⁴ Interview with Sufyan, 22 April 2016, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁶⁵ Interview with Amran, 22 April 2016, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁶⁶ Interview with Noura, 27 December 2015, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The long-standing contestation has led Malaysian urban youth to explore and/or follow different Muslim “caravans” which do not focus on the politics of the country, as can be seen in the activities of K-Fiqh and Twins of Faith.

The current development of the *da‘wa* scene in Malaysia demonstrates the phenomenon of the presence of transnational, cosmopolitan *du‘āt* (Muslim preachers) which is demonstrated in the wave of *du‘āt*, who are mostly young, brought along by Mercy Mission through Twins of Faith, as well as smaller youth NGOs which are mushrooming in urban Malaysia. Previously, numerous scholars have mentioned the phenomenon of the bureaucratisation of *da‘wa* and *du‘āt* in Malaysia.⁶⁷ The bureaucratisation is evidenced in the rule relating to the official certification for preachers in Malaysia, from the State Religious Department.⁶⁸ This rule has been implemented in order to prevent the spread of deviant Islamic teachings in the country.

The wave of young, transnational Muslim preachers in Malaysia signals the way that the Malaysian government deals with such trends. Many scholars argue that the Malaysian government has become more flexible in accepting international *‘ulamā’*. Dr Zaharuddin, for example, argues: “Compared to other Asian countries, the Malaysian government is currently very open in allowing these International scholars. In Brunei, for instance, it is very hard for them to organise this kind of event by inviting international scholars. In Singapore too, they have some restrictions.”⁶⁹ The pro-government and government-friendly clerics, however, still have a special place in the Malaysian public sphere. The growing flexibility can be seen in the Malaysian government’s position in allowing diverse *da‘wa* programmes to flourish, as organised by different Muslim groups, such as the followers of *habāib* (the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad) from Yemen, Sufi *murshid* (leaders), Saudi Arabian *‘ulamā’*, and *‘ulamā’* from Western countries. The presence of these cosmopolitan Muslim preachers has been criticised by some local clerics and Malay Muslims in general.

Critics argue that the Malaysian government is ambiguous when applying the public-preaching rules. For example, several states enforce the rules strictly, but others are quite relaxed. Dr Zaharuddin comments of this phenomenon: “Sometimes, they are only strict to a group of people that they already know. But for those who they do not know, they are just very open. Only if someone submits a report, then the state will do some work. That is how it works now.”⁷⁰ This ambiguous atmosphere of the bureaucratisation of *da‘wa* and *du‘āt* in Malaysia, in turn, has benefitted the elites behind the fancy *da‘wa* platform, which can be seen from this study, to expand their chic *da‘wa* platforms and *da‘wa* business.

Conclusion

The presence of fancy *da‘wa* conferences and conventions, such as the events organised by Twins of Faith and K-Fiqh, demonstrate the significant role young Malay Muslims play in spreading *da‘wa* in Malaysia. Young Malay Muslims are not only the targeted market for this new form of *da‘wa* platform, but also the main players. This is indicated by the large number of young members within the structure of the umbrella organisations, Mercy Mission and Murshid, as well as the young speakers within both programmes.

Fancy *da‘wa* conferences and conventions do not replace conventional methods of achieving religious knowledge in Malaysia, such as prayer rooms (*mushalla* and *surau*) between the Maghrib prayer (sunset prayer) and the Isha prayer (night prayer). It is an alternative for those who want to have more in-depth yet direct and fast knowledge of Islam. The presence of these conferences has added colour to the landscape of *da‘wa* in Malaysia. The conferences have added to the aura of the Islamic conservative turn in the second largest Muslim-majority country in Southeast Asia.

Previously, the term Islamisation race was a popular way to capture the long contestation between UMNO and PAS over Islamic credibility. Similarly, the new platform of fancy *da‘wa* offered by several *da‘wa* NGOs in Malaysia has led to the birth of the *da‘wa* race. Twins of Faith and K-Fiqh, for example, both try to win the hearts and minds of their most promising markets—Muslim youth. K-Fiqh has been consistently known as a sanctuary of “voices of local *‘ulamā’*” who understand the Malaysian context and is also known by youth attendees as

⁶⁷ See, for example, Shamsul Amri Baharuddin (1983), “A Revival in the Study of Islam in Malaysia,” *Man*, Vol. 18, no. 2, p. 402.

⁶⁸ Muhamad Shah Izad Saleh, Ahmad Zaki Salleh, Nik Salida Suhaila Nik Saleh, Azman Ab Rahman (2014), “Challenges to Implement the Syariah Law in a Malaysia as a Multiracial State,” <http://www.kuis.edu.my/mfifc2014/eprosiding/ifc016%20-%20Muhamad%20Shah%20Izad%20Saleh.pdf>, Accessed 14 November 2016.

⁶⁹ Dr Zaharuddin, who is often invited to deliver her talks in Brunei, also added that all International speakers are told to deliver a talk which is in line with one dominant Madzhab in Brunei, Shafi’i Madzhab. Interview with Dr Zaharuddin, 23 April 2016, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

“Islam with a national taste.” Twins of Faith, on the other hand, with its classy face of Salafism, has played the international card which has successfully attracted Muslim youth eager to experience the international vibes of Islam.

Despite the *da'wa* race, Muslim youth living in Western countries, as well as countries which possess significant Muslim majorities like Malaysia, have been confronted with a loss of identity as Muslims. Many are struggling to make sense of their identities as Muslims in multicultural, globalised Malaysia. The presence of fancy *da'wa* platforms has helped young people strengthen their identity and inculcate their sense of belonging to Malaysian Muslims (K-Fiqh) and transnational *umma* (Twins of Faith). As urban dwellers in multicultural Malaysia, they are not only spoiled by rich gastronomic experiences, as in the study of Duruz and Cheng Khoo, but also its *da'wa* experiences.

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