

ENTERTAINMENT IN MUSLIM MEDIA: UNSETTLED PROBLEM?

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini akan membincangkan persoalan ‘masalah yang tidak selesai’ berkaitan perbincangan hiburan dalam media Islam. Status dan kedudukan hukum tentang muzik, nyanyian, tarian, teater, filem dan lain-lain keseronokan estatika selalunya wujud kekeliruan dalam minda khalayak Muslim disebabkan oleh perbezaan hujah yang dikemukakan oleh sarjana Muslim khususnya dalam bidang Fekah. Hujah mereka tentang halal dan haram hiburan dalam Islam, sikap orang-orang Islam terhadap hiburan dan eksperimen ke arah melaksanakan ‘hiburan Islam’, di Malaysia dan Iran, akan dibincangkan dalam artikel ini. Kekurangan dari segi usaha membangunkan hiburan Islam dan ketidakupayaan untuk memberi alternatif Islam kepada bidang keseronokan estatika adalah antara masalah utama yang dihadapi oleh komuniti Islam dalam era globalisasi kini.

Kata Kunci: *Islam dan hiburan, Media Islam, Memupuk budaya hiburan Islam*

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to examine the ‘unsettled problem’ of entertainment in the discussion of Muslim media. The status and legality of music, song, dancing, theatre, films and other aesthetic pleasures are always confused in the mind of Muslim masses due to the different arguments hold by Muslim jurists. Their argument on halal and haram (lawful and forbidden) entertainment in Islam, Muslim attitude towards entertainment and the experiments of implementing ‘Islamic entertainment’, both in Malaysia and Iran, will be discuss in this

paper. Lack of nurturing Islamic entertainment and inability to provide alternatives Islamic aesthetic pleasures are among the problems facing Muslim communities in the era of globalisation.

Keywords: *Islam and entertainment, Islamic media, nurturing Islamic popular culture*

INTRODUCTION

Is there a place for entertainment in Islam? To what extent that Muslims can enjoy it? If these two questions are raised to many Muslims, the answers will almost result in uncertainty. In fact there is a common belief among some quarter of Muslims, especially those who are committed to religious practices, that music or entertainment is a 'forbidden' pleasure which they can only participate in and enjoy with some measure of guilt. That is why Yusuf al-Qaradawi (1985), a leading contemporary Muslim jurist have to argue that,

“Islam does not require of Muslims that their speech should consist entirely of pious utterances, that their silence should be a meditation, that they should listen to nothing except the recitation of the Qur'an, nor that they should spend all their leisure time in the mosque. Rather, it recognises that Allah has created human beings with needs and desires, so that, as they need to eat and drink, they also need to relax, and enjoy themselves”.

Since the heightening of Islamic consciousness in the early 1970s, the main theme being propagated by Islamist throughout the Muslim world is the concept of Islam as *al-din*, a comprehensive way of life. The implication of this proclamation is that secularisation is not recognised by Islam because Islam teaches that the religion is not separate but integral to every facet of the Muslim's life. It has to be admitted that the most crucial problem of establishing Islamic media is to face the different opinions among Muslim scholars on entertainment's issues. The legality of music, singing, drama, film and other aesthetic pleasures is always hotly debated but without any clear conclusion. This article will be devoted to discuss this 'unsettled problem' and try to find out arguments hold by Muslim scholars.

IS ENTERTAINMENT FORBIDDEN?

Confusion regarding the status of entertainment (music, singing, dancing and related aesthetic pleasures) persists to the present day in many Muslim minds. The centuries-old controversy among Muslim scholars on '*halal*' (lawful) or '*haram*' (forbidden) entertainment in Islam has contributed to the present state of confusion among Muslim masses. This issue has never been settled

conclusively due to the different arguments held by the so-called ‘conservative’ and ‘moderate’ scholars. With regard to that discussion, Muslim scholars are divided into two groups, the first group regards these aesthetic pleasures as *halal*. On the other hand, the second group believe that they are discouraged (*makruh or haram*) in Islam.

In fact, there is no Qur’anic passage that condemns the practice of these aesthetic pleasures directly, but antagonists have cited certain verses to support their contention. The verses are as follows:

1. Verse 59-61 of surat al-Najm: *“Do ye then wonder at this recital. And will ye laugh and not weep. Wasting your time in vanities”*.
2. Verse 64 of surat al-Isra’: *“Lead to destruction those whom thou canst among them, with thy (seductive) voice; make assault on them with thy cavalry and thy infantry; mutually share with them wealth and children; and make promises to them. But Satan promises them nothing but deceit”*.
3. Verse 6 of surat Luqman: *“But there are, among men, those whose purchase idle tales, without knowledge (or meaning) to misled (men) from the Path of God and throw ridicule (On the path): for such there will be a humiliating penalty”*.

All of the above mentioned verses are mostly cited and argued as evidence that those aesthetic pleasures are forbidden in Islam. The words that attract discussion are ‘*wa antum saamidun*’ (while you amuse yourself (proudly) in vanities) and ‘*lahw al-hadith*’ (idle talk). Many Muslim scholars (ulama’) tend to deduce the words to mean the use of musical instruments, song, dance and amusement. It is argued that Satan was permitted by God to excite mankind by using his ‘seductive voice’ through these pleasures activities and lead them to disobedience to Allah.

Since the wordings of the text are considered too general in their meaning, some scholars tend to argue that it is not unequivocal proof of the prohibition of music, song and aesthetic pleasure. Protagonists however have sought to read into other passages to support for their arguments and also cited some hadith to support their stand. For example: “according to Aishah, Allah Apostle came to my house while two girls were singing beside me the song of Bu’ath... then Abu Bakr came and spoke to me harshly saying, ‘musical instruments of Satan near the Prophet? Allah Apostle turned his faced toward him and said, ‘Leave them’ ”(al-Bukhari, vol. 2, book 15: 70). Another incident given on the authority of Aishah is the following: “On the days of Mina (11th, 12th, 13th of Dzulhijjah) Abu Bakr came to her while two young girls were beating the tamborine and the Prophet way laying covered with his clothes. Abu Bakr scolded them and the Prophet uncovered his face and said to Abu Bakr: ‘Leave them, for these days are the days of Mina”(Bukhari, vol. 5, book 58: 268)

On the whole, however, both sides look to find another authority, *hadith* (traditions of the Prophet), which they believe supports their position. As the Prophet was reported to condemn a practice on one occasion and to condone the same practice on another, both sides have sought it to substantiate their stance, and this lets the issues remain prolonged.

MUSLIM ATTITUDE TOWARDS ENTERTAINMENT

Some observers have found that Muslim commentary on entertainment is a rhetorical extravaganza, full of sound and fury (Davies 1989). Their attitude is understandable due to the state that ‘entertainment’ culture is largely dominated by Western culture while Islamic entertainment is virtually non-existence, except on a small scale. Moral decadence portrayed by ‘artists’ as major players of that culture, particularly on television through films, series, drama or variety shows, is a sphere strongly attacked by Islamists. A variety of metaphors such as ‘disease’, ‘evil’ and ‘satan’s instruments’ are sometimes used to describe the role and behaviour of entertainers. The personality, dress, glamorous style of living, and negative behaviour of artists also contribute to shaping this perception. For example in Malaysia, it was reported in a newspaper that some Muslim artists ate in public during the day in the month of Ramadhan and even drink alcohol publicly. This disapproved behaviour diminishes their image in the eyes of the public. Therefore, there are many critics raised by ‘moral defenders’ with regard to such negative behaviours, and questions highlighted about the role of entertainers and their responsibilities for the well-being of religion and society. They suggested that artists should build up their *maruah* (moral), and avoid being manipulated by any company whose aim is solely profit (Ismail Hj. Ibrahim 1993; Noritah Sulaiman 1993).

Lois Lamyā’ al-Faruqi (1986) provides an illuminating insight into the question of how music and sound arts (entertainment) have had serious consequences on the life of Muslims around the world. She argues that music, or more specifically in her preferred term’s *handasah al-sawt*, is a cultural phenomenon which can play an important role in the life of Muslims. She stresses that:

“Just as philosophical and religious writings are a verbal expression of the ideology of a people, just as social and economic institutions are determined by that basic ideology, so also music and the sound arts are “translations’ of the deepest convictions of a people. They fit into the cultural whole as pieces of a giant mosaic, each tessera reflecting the world view of that people and corresponding to the other expression of that spirit. Fulfilling this role in the culture, the arts of sound become an important, even crucial, bulwark of a people’s heritage”.

Based on the deliberation of the issue, several efforts have been made to introduce Islamic entertainment as an alternative. However, it is said that the most difficult task in facing that challenges is the lack of interest among Muslims, individuals or organisations, in nurturing Islamic entertainment. The domination of non-Islamic culture creates a situation of uncertainty among Muslims as to what extent they are permitted to participate in or enjoy themselves with entertainment activities in their contemporary life. Again Lois Lamya' al-Faruqi (1986) observes this state of affairs as follows:

“Some Muslims have attempted therefore to erect an “iron curtain” around themselves, to isolate their families and children from those forms of sound arts that might be instruments of de-Islamization. With the prevalence of modern communication technology in every town and village, such attempted isolation is rarely if ever successful. Others meet the challenge by trying to prohibit all the sound arts, regardless of their characteristics. In such cases, the resulting artistic vacuum is inevitably filled by non-Islamic forms of music, which invade the minds of the less thoroughly Islamized members of community – its youth.”

As noted earlier, Muslim jurists generally hold the view that entertainment has a place in Islam. It is necessary in order to relax the body and refresh the mind. As a practical religion, Islam does not float in the stratosphere of imaginary ideals but remains with the human being on the ground of realities and day-to-day concerns. Though pleasurable activities are permitted, Muslim authorities remind that the pursuit of pleasure should not become the only goal of Muslim life. It is assumed that some Muslims, because of over-addiction to aesthetic pleasures, may overlook religious obligations. Furthermore, they argue that “There is no value in entertainment if its performers have no morals; if their dress is near to nudity; and if all they do on stage and on television screen is to hug one another” (Zaini Hassan & Wan Dayang 1988). In order to look at a broader perspective of developing Islamic aesthetic products and settle the unsettled problems of Islamic entertainment, the experience of some interested parties will be discussed below.

LESSONS FROM EXPERIMENT

Iran has carried out an interesting experiment on Islamising entertainment. In an article entitled ‘The Islamisation of Iranian Television’, Hamid Mowlana notes that the major role of Iranian television today is the *tabligh*, or propagation of Islamic culture. As a result of this policy, the Islamisation of popular culture and communication is said to be obvious in the Iranian television system. News, information, and documentaries which are prepared within a framework of Islamic interest get a large segment of television time.

Meanwhile, entertainment and information are recognised as social items and not as neutral manufactured commodities. All programme contents are also checked for compatibility with Islamic tenets (Hamid Mowlana 1989). Despite all of these emphases, unintended consequences arise, particularly given a continuous dependency on imported programmes, not from Western sources but from Eastern, particularly Japanese. Imported programmes, such as a serial called 'Oshin', though from the policy standpoint in line with Islamic principles, depict an alien culture and create social problems (Majid Tehranian 1993). Why do such instances happen when one of the objectives of television, to present Islamic ideas via the arts, is clearly determined? Beside the limited technical and financial capacity for producing programmes in Iran, it can be argued that Islamic entertainment has not been properly nurtured. Even in the early period of the revolution, one observer notes, "The most crucial problem was that no one knew how Islamic precepts were going to be applied to entertainment and the arts" (Dossier 1993).

Nonetheless, gradually, due to ceaseless efforts, a new image of popular culture, different from the one existing during the preceding regime, emerges. For instance, with regard to the new image of the cinema, one commentator notes, (Hamid Naficy 1990):

"... a new cinema is emerging in Iran with its own special industrial and financial structure, and unique ideological, thematic, and production values. This cinema is not a propagandistic cinema in support of a ruling ideology. It is not monolithic. In fact, two cinemas seem to be developing side by side. The populist cinema inscribes (sic) postrevolutionary values more fully at the level of plot, theme, characterization, human relationships, portrayal of women, and mise-en-scène. The quality cinema, on the other hand, engages with those values and tends to critique (sic) the social conditions under the Islamic government".

Placed under the control of the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, Iranian films made a leap in both quantity and quality, producing 450 film features between 1983 and 1992 (Dossier 1993). These films fill many of its television programme schedules.

Furthermore, in related field, it is interesting to note that two famous international films which deal with Islamic subjects, 'The Message' and 'Lion of the Desert', which were produced by Mustafa 'Aqqad, an Arab film producer in Hollywood, are greatly admired by Muslims, especially those involved in Islamic movements (Maureen Abdallah 1981). The former, however, was strongly opposed when it was first released because of the issue of portraying the image of the Prophet (S. Abdullah Schleifer 1987). In actual fact, the 'image'

of the Prophet was brought about by using camera techniques, without casting an actor as the Prophet. To produce 'The Message', Mustafa 'Aqqad took two years to come up with a script acceptable to leading Islamic scholars and a further two to raise funds to start shooting. Though facing several constraints, the film was then released and was full of cinematic excitements. This type of film however is very rare. Production houses for Islamic television programmes at the international level are limited, among other things due to the inability of Muslims to understand the importance of films, television or entertainment and then nurture them according to their belief.

In the Malaysian milieu, another case of nurturing Islamic entertainment is concerning on the establishment of *nashid* (religious) song. In order to contribute positively in providing an alternative entertainment, particularly to serve Muslim audiences, some efforts have been done by concerned Islamists through the establishment of *nashid* groups. "What we wish for is to make *nashid* superior and hopefully God will bless us with what we are doing now. Our intention is to disseminate the message of *da'wah* (propagation) through this mean as we think this is the best way to approach those who are reluctant to go to mosque to hear a speech (*ceramah*) or read the Qur'an. We think that music is a 'universal language', easy to be conveyed and understood by many people", says Zarie Ahmad, leader of Raihan (Jamilah Aini Mohd. Rafiei 1998).

Raihan was established in October 1996 under the auspices of Warner Music (M) Sdn. Bhd., consists of five talented young men. Raihan's first album entitles *Puji-pujian* (the Highest Praise) shocked the Malaysian music industry when they won four awards of the Malaysian Music Industry Awards (MMIS) in 1998. Their first album has been sold for more than 600,000 units, surpassed all popular Western-style music to top the charts in Malaysia. The emergence and the succesful of Raihan in promoting *nashid* songs have encouraged more groups to be formed such as Rabbani, Hijjaz, Brothers, Saujana, Jauhari, Diwani, In-Team, Nowseeheart, The Zikr, Suara Firdaus, Usrah al-Soff, Al-Anwar Group, Solehah and Qatrunnada.

Nashid's groups acknowledge that their participation in conveying Islamic messages through *nashid* songs is to fulfill an obligation laid by Islam upon its followers. This is because the Qur'an teaches Muslims that they should present Islamic messages either to Muslims or non-Muslims with wisdom. Hijjaz, the group who declared that their first album *Cahaya Ilahi* (Light of Allah) has been sold for more than 90,000 copies, for example, argues that *nashid* songs are among the best medium in educating young Muslims today as they can affect the soul, stir the emotion and excite the fear and hope of people. In an interview with the magazine *Muslimah*, they conveyed that the name 'Hijjaz' was opted for the group because Hijjaz (means Mecca and Medina)

was the center for Islamic culture and civilisation. For Hijjaz, the obligation of presenting dakwah, coupled with the capability of media of reaching multitudes of people, indicated why nashid songs have become an urgent necessity. Therefore, they emphasize that their group should be managed as commercial entity in order to compete and survive. They formed a company known as 'Hijjaz Music Entertainment' to organise shows, hire audio-visual equipments, distribute their albums, and provide consultations for *nashid's* artists. Through their efforts, new group In-Team emerged in 1998 with their first album entitles *Kasih-Kekasih* (Love-Lovers). In-Team consists of four members from International Islamic University Malaysia who have a background of religious studies. For In-Team, what they want is to be a role-model for young Malaysian generations who will become excellent in their studies as well as in the fields of entertainment industry (Zaila Muhammad Ali 2001). Likewise, Rabbani, the group who won three awards of the MMIS 2001, established their own company known as Rabbani Productions (Norzehan Ngadiron 2001).

Before Raihan and other groups come into sight, it should be noted that Islam has some influences in the traditional Malay music. Mohd. Ghouse Nasuruddin, Director of the Centre of Arts at University Sains Malaysia, notes that Islam introduces the zapin dance and various forms of groups singing praising Allah, prophet Muhammad and Islamic warriors. These types of entertainments today are known as *hadrah*, *rodat*, *dabus*, *dikir* and *rebana* (Mohd. Ghaouse Nasuruddin 1992). In the tradisional Malay community, there were many types of musical expressions associated with religious observances such as the celebration of the Prophet's birthday, commemoration of the ascension of the Prophet (*isra' and mi'raj*), id festivals, the ceremony of cutting the first lock of the child's hair and the circumcision of child. In such occasions, verses of the Qur'an or verses in the Arabic language which have religious connotations were chanted. Suffice to say that the tradition of chanting religious verses to the rhythm of the drum or *kompang*, (i.e. a drum with the face made of cattle or goat skin over a circular rim which is usually made out of a piece of wood), is widespread throughout the Malay community. However, such performing arts are limited to a particular occasion. Nowadays, with the continuation of the above discussed groups' activities and their new approaches in managing Islamic popular culture, it can be said that there has been a recent revival of interest in *nashid* songs in the form which are packaged and marketed as a popular music form.

Nurturing Islamic entertainment like *nashid* song has to face several challenges. Generally, many Muslims are still of the opinion that music, singing and dancing are religiously 'unworthy' pleasures. Because of that situation, the nashid groups seem very careful in selecting musical instruments, lyrics, melodies and also when performing at stage shows. Raihan, for example, has been criticised because of their association with female singer

on one of the stage shows and performing slow stepping dance. They defend themselves by arguing that the accusations are untrue because they always take into considerations the unlawful practices and they will always adhere to the teachings of Islam. Further, they argue that slow stepping dance like the movement of the body from left to the right is allowable as Muslims have always practiced during the *zikr* (rememberance of God). Likewise, in order to avoid controversy on nashid songs, Hijjaz emphasises that musical instruments used in their songs consist of percussion instruments like *kompang*, gongs, *rebana* (single-headed drum) and drums, and they stay away from string and *serunai* instruments such as flutes, trumpets, saxaphones, guitars and violins. In fact, some Muslim scholars in Malaysia have provided general views that *kesenian* (art) is *halal*, but subject to several conditions such as the objectives and performances must not be directed towards the achievement of 'art for the art's sake', but to produce a well-rounded individual who is intellectually, morally, and spiritually developed; no free mixing between unmarried men and women may be allowed in terms of performance or audience; the lyrics of songs must be pure and innocent, and must keep within the moral bounds set by Islamic teachings (such as no erotic or licentious lyrics); artists or performers must be 'properly' clothes; and no temptation is allowed in whatever circumstances (Abd Kadir Hassan 1984; Md Hashim Hj. Yahya 1992; Wan Salim Wan Mohd. Nor 1992). Furthermore, as far as the lyrics of the nashid songs are concerned, they strive to adhere to the lyrics which heighten spiritual consciousness and encouraging for the pious practices as can be seen from the titles of the nashid albums such as Raihan's *Puji-Pujian* (The Highest Praise), *Syukur* (Thankful), and *Senyum* (Smile). Part of the lyrics of Raihan's song *Rayuan Rindu* as follows:

My heart is loving You My heart is just for You* Knowing
you Allah* I Will try to get close to You* Let us find the way to
know our God* Feel the tortures of hellfire* Think of pleasures
of paradise* Find the way to get Allah's.*

In short, the lyrics of nashid songs represent a reflection of what some called it 'edutainment', i.e. education and entertainment in conveying Islamic messages.

The discourses of legality and participating in Islamic entertainment are believed to remain prolonged among Muslim masses. In order to develop Muslim community to a degree of sivil society, this kind of issue must be resolved conclusively. Therefore, Muslim scholars should play their important roles to resolve this 'unsettled problem' by utilised academic and political channel, and be agreed on particular key issues.

CONCLUSION

The challenge facing contemporary Muslim society is not only that of disparaging 'corruptive entertainments', but also of ensuring that Islamic alternative entertainments are available to the Muslim masses. Some efforts have been done by concerned parties, for example through the establishment of *nashid* songs in Malaysia and the development of films and other Islamic aesthetic products in Iran. Based on these experiments, the fact to be acknowledged is that to produce 'Islamic entertainment' products, a high degree of commitment and professionalism are required.

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