

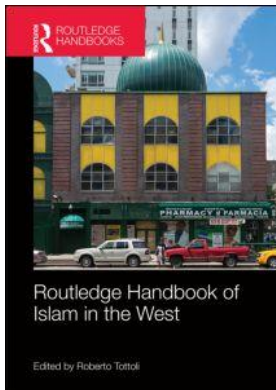
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European Muslim youth and popular culture

At the crossroads of fun and faith¹

Miriam Gazzah

Introduction

The religious is relocating itself within present-day European society. The religious is increasingly found in “unexpected” places: a Christian music festival, a Muslim dating event, a dance party in celebration of the end of Ramadan, and so on. Ever since the 1990s, the mingling of religion and popular culture has attracted quite some scholarly attention, ranging through sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists, historians, and academics from the field of cultural and media studies (see Lynch 2007: 1–4; van Nieuwkerk 2011).

Fun and faith; for some this may sound like a contradiction in terms. Reality shows otherwise. Devout believers have always been looking for ethically legitimate forms of leisure. According to Mahan, “Religion and culture have always been overlapping categories and religion’s interactions with the economical and cultural system of its day have always troubled and intrigued observers” (Mahan 2007: 48). So, what else is new?

In the case of European Muslim youth, the mixing of popular culture and religious choices appears to head in new directions. Their choice of lifestyle features new preferences, new products, new consumption patterns that differ greatly from their parents and are quite different from their non-Muslim peers. Among them are new fashionable trends in veiling, the consumption of *halal* commodities ranging from shampoo to food, downloading ringtones voicing a *sura* from the Qur’an, decorating bedrooms with Qur’anic calligraphy stickers, drinking Mecca Cola, and so on. The creating and shaping of Muslim subjectivities of European Muslim youth occur not only along the lines of Islamic practices and rituals such as praying, fasting, and going to Mecca on pilgrimage, but also along the lines of other, new popular culture repertoires. It is clear that popular culture and its Islamized manifestations, in whatever shape or form, have become more and more important in the identity formation processes of Muslims today.

The surfacing of consumer goods like *halal* (fast) food, Islamic fashion, and Islamic (pop) music is considered to be a form of commodification that is driven by economical motives, on the one hand (supply), and by the desire of consumers – i.e. Muslims – to construct new, modern, individualized forms of Muslimness (demand), on the other hand. Islamization of consumer goods and cultural and artistic productions should not merely be seen in light of a de-politicized

search for individual self-fulfillment in an age of mass – and consumer – culture. The dynamics going on behind the scenes of these new cultural productions reveal a great concern with the making of “pious subjects” and the project revolving around “an ethical production and consumption of culture and arts” (Jouili 2012: 402–3).

In the article “Hyper-Islamism,” Nabil Echchaibi links the trend of Islamization of cultural life and consumer goods to a strand of born-again Muslims (reverts) who strive for a meaningful, but individually motivated merging of modernity and their Muslimness in a rapidly changing and globalizing world. Echchaibi calls it “new Islamic revivalism” by born-again Muslims (Echchaibi 2008: 200–1, taken from Roy).

The combination of Islam and fun may seem unlikely (van Nieuwkerk 2011; Bayat 2007, 2010; Otterbeck 2008). Popular culture, especially performing arts, such as music and dance, has always raised controversy throughout Islamic history. The sensitive relationship between Islam and music, for instance, originates from the emotional effect music is deemed to have on the listener and its potential to corrupt moral behavior and instigate *haram*² activities. In these discourses, there is often fear of transgression of sexual mores and norms. Popular culture – especially music, movies, and performance arts like dance and theater – evokes images of *haram* behavior. And these associations dominate many of the discourses and debates on popular culture in many Muslim circles – in the Islamic world and its diasporas (cf. van Nieuwkerk 1995, 2008, 2011; Baig 2008: 255; Gazzah 2008: 141–88). What in the Western world might be considered youthful (innocent) fun (watching the newest video of some pop artist, or having a dance party with friends) could be considered a problematic activity within a Muslim household. Nonetheless, this does not keep young Muslims from having fun, of course. In fact, there is a growing supply of Islamized cultural productions, seemingly circumventing this *haram-halal* dichotomy.

What is accepted as “Islamic” in the context of production and consumption of popular culture prompts debates. This implies a “new thinking about Islam” (Pond 2006: 2; Gökarksel and McLarney 2010: 1–2; van Nieuwkerk 2011) and it is increasingly taking place outside of traditional realms and expected contexts. These forces of consumer capitalism and Islamized popular culture have raised new questions about authority and power. The mosque, or any other established space of Islamic authority for that matter, has lost its monopoly over Islamic knowledge and interpretations. New interlocutors, interpretations, and expressions of Islam – including new ethics and aesthetics to join them – are found in a multitude of spaces outside and beyond the scope of mosques, imams, theologians, time-honored Islamic authority figures, and other forms of institutionalized Islam. The internet, for example, is such a space where new interpretations of Islam take shape.

The consumption and production of Islamized popular culture visualize new types of Muslim presence in the public sphere in European urban areas. The emergence of these new products (and subsequent consumption or demand for them) stems from an array of recent developments. An important catalyst in this development is the rise of the Islamic revival movement (Moors 2012: 274). Due to the crisis of many nation-states and their inability to form solid and uncontested national identities, space has been created for others than the state or religious institutions to produce identities and images, for example through popular culture.

Whereas the Islamic movement has always looked critically at popular culture and the arts, Moors writes that in light of the increasing forces of consumer capitalism and globalization the Islamic revival movement has loosened its critical stance towards entertainment and consumption and is actively engaged in producing *halal* (licit) forms of entertainment and consumption goods. Moors connects this development also to “a broader trend of fashioning of identities

through consumption, the commoditization of ‘things Islamic,’ and the development of an Islamic production sector, that provides the new Muslim middle classes with their own media, services and goods” (Moors 2012: 275).

Looking at the role of popular culture from a perspective of religious self-making poses the question of how to define the boundaries between secular and religious in a new light (cf. Agrama 2012; Pond 2006; Meyer 2009: xi, 21; Moors 2012: 272–9). What was once known as secular, non-religious, could turn into something religious. In light of the increasing importance of popular culture as a breeding ground for new types of Muslimness, the traditional dichotomy of the sacred versus the profane seems to become problematic when analyzing the contemporary religious practices of European Muslim youth. As a result, what can be claimed – and accepted – as religion (or not) is increasingly difficult to define. Moors (2012: 278) concludes, therefore, that it is rather useless to define certain practices, spaces, or bodies either as secular or religious since their status is permanently ambiguous and the way people engage with them is often ambivalent:

Things do not have either a religious or a secular, nonreligious, status; rather, the ways in which forms become or cease to be religious may well shift in the course of their production, circulations, and consumption, and depends on the intentions of those engaging with them. Some items are produced to enable a religious practice, such as for instance, *halal* food, but this may also be consumed by non-Muslims. Other things, such as headscarves, only become religious items of dress when they are worn in a particular way. Things may also become more, less or differently religious depending on where they circulate.

(Moors 2012: 276)

The mingling of popular culture (i.e. secular popular culture) and Islam must not be seen as a unidirectional sum total of something secular and something religious, but as a continuum along which categories of interpretations flow from one to the other in the course of their production, consumption, and circulation. Production and consumption of popular culture goods are subject to continuous changing interpretations and attributions.

Youth, popular culture, and making Islamic choices

Popular culture provides people with entertainment, distraction, and “helps” modern citizens in the pursuit of diversion and amusements outside of their working or school hours. Providing people with fun is thus a key element of popular culture. Islamic fun, however, often comes with restrictions and serves other norms and morals than average, secular entertainment.

For many young people, much of their leisure time is filled up with popular culture: listening to pop music, watching TV, playing games on the PC, chatting with friends online, buying clothes, dressing up, going out, etc. The power of popular culture lies in its ability to serve as both a symbolic boundary marker and a symbolic bridge at the same time.

Making choices is what drives consumer culture and is an essential part of popular culture. However, one can only choose when one has money: having money equals the power to buy what you choose. Matthias Zick Varul has written an interesting article about how religion and consumerism intersect. Making choices in a consumer culture often means that “Even non-choices are ascribed to individuals as if they were choices” (Varul 2008: 242). It is money that makes choices possible in a consumer-driven society. “With this freedom of choice [having money], ever more trivial decisions become identity relevant because they can be read by others as indicators of what kind of person one is or aspires to be” (Varul 2008: 242). For consumers

who consider themselves to be believers, making choices in a consumer culture becomes a complex dynamic:

Decisions and choices concerning faith may still define many of the cultural choices that follow ... but they are, in keeping with the culture of consumerism, subject to revision and reversion. The only choice that is not subject to revision is that of the principle of choice itself. One might argue that religious content remains the same, no matter whether it is upheld in a traditional, industrial or consumerist society. But even the most sincere believers cannot stop their faith being qualified by the index of reversibility that is attached to their choice. This places a higher burden upon them to constantly authenticate their religious choice – expressing it in specific practices of religiously conspicuous consumption – and to make their religious choice palatable within a promotional culture.

(Varul 2008: 249)

In other words, living in a consumerist society urges people to constantly defend the religious choices attached to their consumerist and cultural choices, and vice versa. On the other hand, in order for religion to “survive” in a consumer-driven, secular, postmodern society it (religion that is, or representations of religion) increasingly needs to become more like a commodity. It has to advertise itself and promote its user value. In doing this, Christian institutions, for example, have started to promote the therapeutic value of belief, its self-empowering effect, and its benefits for building up self-confidence, and to emphasize its spiritual experience rather than its religious truth. Ramadan is also often promoted as a way to improve your mental state, as a month in which fasting symbolizes the cleansing of the soul (Varul 2008: 249–50).

The way promoters of religion make religion into something easily consumable and which fits into the performance of religious identities connects well with consumers’ and believers’ search for religious experience and meaning. Many contemporary believers want to have and are in need of relevant, spiritual experiences, which may for some be even more important than adhering to and preaching words from a certain sacred textbook. This trend thus incites religious institutions or campaigners to present eye-catching elements to attract consumers of religion, i.e. believers.

All in all, the trend described by Varul indicates that a shift is occurring, taking the focus of attention away from “religious content” to “religious experience” (cf. Roy 2005). Making choices in a consumerist society seems to conflict with being religious, but many young believers connect consumption and religion fluidly. Cross-referencing religious practices in certain consumption patterns results in a lifestyle that is based upon and draws inspiration from the religious field as well as from the popular culture field. Varul reasons that “it can be precisely the stress on its [Islam’s] inalterability that young Muslims in the West use in order to develop a confident self vis-à-vis the non-Muslim environment.” To clarify this mechanism, Varul brings up the example of *halal* food. He explains that eating *halal* food conforms to a religious obligation, but is at the same time also a “way of expressing an apparently chosen identity” (Varul 2008: 250). So, by choosing to eat *halal* food, Muslim youth express their choice for Islam. But in a non-Muslim environment, this (free) choice becomes a clear identity marker towards the outside world. Hence, commodified forms of religion or the marketization of religion serve more than only business models. They have become an intrinsic part of the processes of identity construction and performance of contemporary believers.

In the past decade many new forms of commodified religion have emerged: a wide array of artistic, cultural, and popular entertainment and consumer culture that finds inspiration in Islam has found its way to the global market. Known examples are Sami Yusuf (Pond 2006) and

Yusuf Islam and their Islamic pop music (Varul 2008: 248), Mecca Cola, Mekka Foods, the Muslim hip-hop genre (Khabeer 2011; Chan-Malik 2011), so-called “Islamic fashion” (Moors 2012), and many other cultural products from the “*halal* industry” and the “*halal* arts scene” (Jouili 2012: 402–3). It is particularly since the events of September 11, 2001 that Muslims in Europe as well as in the USA have become more involved in creating their own niches and markets, in music, fashion, food, leisure-time activities (nightlife and dating events), humor, literature, and a range of commodity goods.

Music, popular culture, and Islam in the USA and Europe

A great deal of writings on Islam, popular culture, and music at some point deal with the link between Islam and hip hop. The birth of hip hop is often described as having taken place in the USA. Hip hop is an American music genre that from its beginnings has been associated with or linked to Islamic discourses (Khabeer 2007: 126). The anthropologist Khabeer describes how different American-bred interpretations of Islam (Nation of Islam and the Five Percent Nation) have had a considerable impact upon the development of the American hip-hop genre. In addition, more mainstream Sunni interpretations also serve as an important source of inspiration from which American rappers take symbols, images, and text and incorporate them into their works (Khabeer 2007). In sum, Islam, albeit in different shapes, interpretations, and forms, has heavily influenced (American) hip hop.

The rise of the so-called Islamic hip-hop genre in the last decade or so is another trend within the hip-hop scene. In the USA, some very famous hip-hop artists are Muslim, like Lupe Fiasco and Mos Def, but their music is not categorized as Islamic hip hop, but as mainstream, since Islam is not an explicit focus of their music (Mandaville 2009: 156). Islamic hip hop or Muslim hip hop could be categorized as a sub-genre of the hip-hop genre, whereby from a musical and a lyrical perspective the music centers on Islam. Islamic hip hop is popular in the USA and in Europe. Even though the genre has existed since the 1990s, it is mainly since the aftermath of 9/11 that the genre started growing and many young Muslims in Europe and the USA found in music a way to express their anxieties, frustrations, and opinions about being Muslim in a non-Muslim environment. Islamic hip hop also very strongly promotes a positive image of Islam, trying to counter the Islamophobic tendencies reigning in Europe and the USA.

In the UK, Mecca2Medina have been active already since 1997 and female hip-hop band Poetic Pilgrimage have been taking over European stages from around the start of the new millennium (Mandaville 2009: 156–7; Chan-Malik 2011). Many British artists in the Islamic hip-hop scene are of Afro-Caribbean descent. Famous American Islamic hip-hop acts are, for instance, Native Deen, Baraka Blue, Anas Canon. The American record company Remarkable Current, founded in 2001 by Anas Canon, even specializes in the genre (www.remarkablecurrent.com).

The Islamic hip-hop genre challenges traditional discourses on the perceived incompatibility of music and Islam. Some artists want to remain close to Islamic rulings that state that music can only be made with a capella vocals and certain percussion instruments. Others opt for a wider interpretation of those rulings and use other instruments as well. Islamic hip hop is able to overcome ethnic and racial differences which exist among the Muslim community. Moreover, because of Islam’s precarious position in the West a great deal of Islamic hip hop is easily seen as political. Preaching about the good things of Islam, supporting the Palestinians or Bosnians, speaking out against anti-Islamic politicians, and hip hop’s reputation as politically conscious associate the genre with political issues as well (Chan-Malik 2011; Mandaville 2009: 157). In

the USA, it is an important marker of Muslimness, blackness, and Americanness, since many of the artists and consumers of this genre are black Americans (from different ethnic backgrounds). In Europe, Islamic hip hop is particularly popular in the UK, where there is a lively scene of British Muslim artists.

Somewhat at the intersection of these two trends, lies Muslim Cool. Muslim Cool, a term coined by Khabeer (2011: 22), denotes young American Muslims for whom hip hop “is a site through which they negotiate what it means to be an American Muslim. These young American Muslims create and consume hip hop as a way to embrace, construct, and perform their religious identity” (Khabeer 2011: 20). Muslim Cool is a practice, a lifestyle, that takes a counter-position towards American immigrant Islam and white American normativity, i.e. mainstream American popular culture. The importance of Muslim Cool is that it operates at the intersection of race (blackness), music (hip hop), and religion (Islam) (Khabeer 2011: 22–7). In fact, it is a phenomenon that is about a way of thinking and being American and Muslim, and this practice leans heavily on the use of popular culture, and hip hop in particular. An important part of Muslim Cool is claiming a Muslim American identity, whereby proving some kind of Americanness is essential (Khabeer 2011: 27). In contrast to the global phenomenon of Islamic hip hop, Muslim Cool is concerned with American society and culture.

Besides hip hop, other forms of popular culture have also been attributed to this new field of Islamic popular culture. So-called Islamic pop music by artists such as Yusuf Islam, Sami Yusuf, and Maher Zain has attracted fans from all over the world. This genre, with its pop style music, video clips, and its laudatory songs about Islam, justice, humanity, unity, and world peace, has been able to transcend national, ethnic, and internal religious boundaries. Another popular culture production that has gained popularity is comedy. Allah Made Me Funny, three American Muslim comedians, have toured the world with their performances specifically targeting a Muslim audience (Herding 2012: 102). French comedian Samia and her Oriental Comic project (Herding 2012: 107) and Uma Lamo, a group of three Moroccan-German comedians are another few examples (Herding 2012: 87).

Finally, another eye-catching trend is the appearance of so-called Islamic fashion. Both in the branch of urban street wear (hip-hop style clothing) as well as in the branch of fashionable veiling and modest clothing, there have emerged new product lines specifically targeting a (young) Muslim market (Moors 2009; Mandaville 2009: 165; Herding 2012: 102–4).

All in all, these trends are popular among some young European and American Muslims. However, they also raise controversy despite the good intentions (*niyya*) expressed by their producers and consumers. These practices still remain far from uncontested in the Muslim community. Themes like the compatibility of music and Islam, fashion and Islam, and comedy and Islam are often heatedly debated. Islamic doctrines and discourses that suggest the un-Islamicness of these practices often point to the potential danger of corrupting morals, distraction from performing religious duties, or transgression of the boundaries of decent, ethical behavior in general. The acceptance of these new religious practices and new ways of experiencing and expressing religiosity follows a path that is full of conflicts and obstacles.

In light of all these developments in the field of popular culture, it is interesting to gain insight into the nature of the engagement of European Muslim youth with popular culture and Islam. In this chapter I take Dutch Moroccan youth and their consumption and production of popular culture as my point of departure. A leading question in this chapter is to what extent popular culture, and the entertainment industry and consumer culture in general, have become important pools from which Dutch Moroccan youth draw inspiration in fulfilling a sense of Muslimness. As indicated earlier, the combination of popular culture and religion is not a one-sided dynamic. Their intermingling and the forthcoming productions and consumption patterns

of Islamized popular culture stem from multiple endeavors, such as entrepreneurship, a personal quest for piety, musical inspiration, and political engagement. In the next sections, I will present different examples of how Dutch Moroccan youth make Islam and popular culture intersect.

Musical events

For almost all Dutch Moroccan youth Islam plays a considerable part in day-to-day life. How to dress, what music to listen to (or not to listen to music at all), what friends to have, and what TV shows to watch; upon most of these activities an Islamic discourse is projected and Islamic norms are invoked in deciding whether certain activities are *haram* or *halal*. Hence, leisure-time activities are impacted by a sense of Muslimness. Olivier Roy has indicated that for Muslim youth living in post-migration situations the *halal-haram* divide seems more significant than for Muslim youth living in Muslim majority countries (Roy 2005: 140).

The identity construction processes of second-generation Dutch Moroccan youth are a complex and ambivalent dynamic (De Koning 2009: 70; Gazzah 2008: 231–8; Mandaville 2009: 166). According to De Koning, writing about Dutch Moroccan youth, the shaping of a Muslim self is not a matter of simply following (or not) Islamic dogmas or subscribing to Islam's creed. Nor do they prefer the “traditional” and “cultural” Islam-experience of their (grand)parents as a valuable option. Rather, Dutch Moroccan youth increasingly, and in sharp contrast to their (grand)parents, create Muslimness out of a wide range of “cultural repertoires” (De Koning 2009: 64–8; Roy 2006: 129) which go beyond the boundaries of the religious field.

Many of the mainstream leisure-time activities that average Dutch youth engage in are in Muslim circles associated with *haram* behavior: nightlife (because of alcohol use, gender mixing, and late hours), fashion (too revealing or sexy, showing too much of the skin), watching MTV (obscene images and foul language). Most of the music events targeting a Dutch Moroccan audience are not Islamic by design, meaning that they are not promoted as “Islamic” in any way. But this does not mean that these events are purely secular and devoid of religion. Most of these events implement certain Islamic norms, such as the absence of alcohol (or drugs), the absence of references to sex and violence in the programming (i.e. decent acts and genres), programming parties in line with the Islamic calendar (for example on the day of *'aid al-fitr*), the implicit behavioral code regarding the interaction between men and women, sometimes segregation of the sexes, and early start and end times of events.

The Islamization of some³ of the events taking place in the Dutch Moroccan music scene must be seen in light of the unsettledness regarding music and performance in Islam. The normative discourse among the Dutch Moroccan community considers music and performance to be incompatible with an Islamic lifestyle (Gazzah 2008: 186–7). This normative discourse has an effect on the way Dutch Moroccan musical events are organized and set up. By giving an event an Islamic touch and aligning it to certain – what are perceived to be – Islamic norms, both organization and audience try to get round negative associations, making it more acceptable and legitimate, from a religious as well as a socio-cultural point of view, to be involved in this event.

As a result, these events have become ultimate meeting places for Dutch Moroccan youth and offer them the opportunity to express and construct a Dutch Moroccanness, by means of dancing, clothing, and socializing with other young Dutch Moroccans. Islam, and how consumers and artists in the Dutch Moroccan music scene perceive it and construct Islamic experiences, impacts the way they consume and produce music and musical events (Gazzah 2008: 141–86). The emergence of the Dutch Moroccan music scene indicates how the

socio-cultural and religious preferences of Dutch Moroccan youth shine through in the way they produce and consume popular culture.

The success of the Dutch Moroccan music scene depends on several factors. One important factor is providing Dutch Moroccan youth with an opportunity to listen and dance to Arab and Moroccan music – a genre that is absent in mainstream Dutch nightlife and in mainstream Dutch concert halls or pop music venues. Moreover, as already mentioned, many Dutch Moroccan youth reject regular nightlife because of its contested status, and the Dutch Moroccan music scene provides an alternative. The fact that the scene complies with certain socio-religious norms in terms of behavior and, for example, the absence of alcohol adds to its popularity. Hereby a need to spend leisure time in a *halal* environment is facilitated.

From the point of view of the producers, Islamizing events has an important commercial purpose. It is a way for organizers to erase or lessen the negative associations and ideas evoked by musical events among the Dutch Moroccan community. By implementing “Islamic” elements organizers hope to increase the Islamic legitimacy (for its audience) and to make it more acceptable for Dutch Moroccan youth (and their parents) to come (Gazzah 2008: 151), and thus to attract larger audiences.

Producing Islamized popular culture

Ahmed (aged 39, interviewed February 20, 2012) is a Dutch Moroccan self-made entrepreneur, media expert in ethno-marketing and a socially engaged professional active as chairman in numerous non-profit and welfare organizations dealing with diversity, youth, and social participation. He was also the director of a company that produced and promoted music concerts, parties, and events targeting a Dutch Moroccan audience (its heyday was 1996–2006). His company was one of the main players in the Dutch Moroccan music scene. His events always had a specific Dutch Moroccan character. I attended many of them between 1996 and 2006. Their focus was on programming Moroccan artists, particularly Moroccan *shaabi* artists like Najat Aatabou and Senhaji (Gazzah 2008: 83–4). Ahmed’s aim was always to promote Moroccan cultural and musical heritage in the Netherlands and to raise consciousness among Dutch Moroccans about their cultural inheritance. Besides, on a more general note, it was also his ambition to stimulate the participation of Dutch Moroccan youth in general in cultural and artistic activities.

The preconditions of Ahmed’s concerts and events enhanced the transformation of an undefined space into a space of Dutch Moroccanness. The design of the events, the requirements and conditions created by the organizers, such as no alcohol, the choice of venue, and the implicit and unspoken gearing of the audience towards certain behavioral codes and ethics reveals how Dutch Moroccanness and Muslimness are intertwined. In explaining this, Ahmed refers to his wish to organize an event that is in his eyes in accordance with Islamic respectability: no alcohol, drugs, and to aim for a respectful, decent interaction between men and women. Thus, Ahmed organized events that had clear traces of religiosity, albeit cast in a mold of Dutch Moroccanness. Ahmed’s self-proclaimed guidelines for how to organize an event are in line with this:

The measuring stick is that our parents should be able to walk around ... My parents have performed the *hajj* and they pray five times a day. They are just normal, liberal, so to speak. But we are not so liberal that we celebrate carnival in the middle of a bar carrying a tray of beer on our shoulder. That’s a bit too far out of line ... It’s not because I am a saint. Not at all ... I do not want people to be drunk at my party ... Well, that is the cultural and

religious standard that I want to keep. You know, with us [Dutch Moroccans] the cultural and religious are difficult to separate, they often coincide.⁴

Ahmed's wish to remain as close as possible to family values of the Dutch Moroccan community "forces" him to implement and reject certain elements. Muslimness is hence implicitly present in Ahmed's project, since it is linked to a cultural-religious Dutch Moroccan identity. This identity, in turn, is one whose elements, as Ahmed himself says, cannot be easily separated from each other. Muslimness and Moroccanness seem deeply interconnected. Ahmed's events are not promoted in any way as religious. However, his ambitions and motives are driven by religious as well as non-religious forces.

For consumers of Ahmed's events, the religious factor may be an important stimulus to visit them – or not. My research (Gazzah 2008) has shown that the (albeit implicit) Islamization of events is in tune with many of the visitors and their desire to reside in an environment that is adjusted to their socio-cultural and religious identities. Yet for others this seemed irrelevant. This demonstrates how one and the same product, a music event in this case, may have a religious connotation for the producer, but could well be a non-religious activity for the consumer (Gazzah 2008: 157–69). Depending on how people engage with these events and their specific intentions, the meaning and status of these events can shift (Moors 2012: 275).

In sum, the Dutch Moroccan music scene is a scene that pertains to the field of popular culture and is not a phenomenon that pertains or is considered to pertain to the religion field *per se*. Yet, it is a space in which processes of creating Muslimness take place. The way the events in the scene are produced and consumed may be from a religious point of view or not. Yet, many of the social dynamics going on in the scene – at concerts and parties, on stage, behind the scenes, and in the online activities surrounding the scene – indicate at least the presence and impact of Muslim subjectivities.

Popular music and Islamic inspiration: Dutch Moroccan artists' different shades of Muslimness

Salah Edin Al7amdulilah thank Allah swt for all positivity in my life!!! love⁵

Salah Edin (b. 1980), often considered to be one of the most controversial rappers in the Netherlands ever,⁶ thanks Allah in a "Tweet," a daily routine he has picked up ever since he has been "more consciously involved with Islam."⁷ Salah Edin does not publicly present himself as a Muslim artist *per se*. By this I mean that, with regard to his PR, marketing, and promotion of his music and management of his public image, his Muslim identity is mostly absent.⁸ Nevertheless, on his social media sites, like Twitter and Facebook, and in interviews he makes no secret of being Muslim. And the same goes for some of his lyrics where you can find clear references to Islam. The way Salah Edin manages his Muslim identity is subtle and careful. His musical and personal biography shows a constant involvement with Islam, but continuously in differing ways.

Fathi Otmami (b. 1987) is a former rapper from Amsterdam turned *nasheed*⁹ singer, making music in the genre of Maher Zain and Sami Yusuf – so-called Islamic pop music. This quotation is taken from his website:

My aim in making my music is to spread the beauty of Islam to all the people and show everyone that Islam is not a religion of terror and war that the media portrays it as. I hope that my efforts in making my music can bring at least a small amount of change in people's

perception of this beautiful Deen [religion]. May Allah help us stay steadfast on the path of this Deen and keep our hearts clean from Shaitan's darkness. Ameen.¹⁰

Rajae (b. 1979) has clear ideas about the audience she is targeting with her new, forthcoming album; i.e. the *umma*,¹¹ in whatever shape or form it comes:

Rajae's mission is to make music for the Ummah: Brown, white, black, golden, free spirits, conservatives, truth seekers, young and old.

(www.rajae.net)

Rajae publicly promotes herself as a (Sufi) Muslim artist/singer.¹² Her commitment to Islam has been a constant factor in her career, as well as in her personal life.

These (online) public announcements by Salah Edin, Fathi Otmani, and Rajae, all artists with Moroccan roots, immediately point to different shades of Muslimness. All have a commitment to their Muslim identity; however, management of this commitment differs. Rajae produces music for "the *ummah*," whereas Salah Edin would "never, never, never label his music 'Islamic'."¹³ Rajae advocates her music as being a product for Muslim youth, while also staging herself as a Muslim artist.¹⁴ Fathi Otmani makes Islamic pop *nasheed* songs and specifically utters his wish to improve the – what he considers to be – distorted image of Islam by means of his music.

What all three of them have in common is that they take inspiration from Islam in the production of their music. Even though their styles and genres differ greatly, their religiosity plays an important part in their artistic work. Fathi Otmani has an ambition to make music that is in line with Islamic rulings and music that also in content (lyrics) expresses an Islamic message. Rajae's music is a mix of Arab, North African, and Western musical influences, with a jazzy, pop sound. Her lyrics often implicitly or explicitly refer to her Muslim background. In a 2010 interview talking about her album *Hand of Fatima* (2010) with *Heba Magazine*¹⁵ she states:

60% of the World's Muslim population is younger than 23. They go through life without Muslim Hollywood heroes, because they are not seen as the mainstream and because Hollywood does not seem to like happy and fashionable Muslims. I could have recorded love songs, or exotic songs with modern oriental beats, but instead I decided to take a leap of faith and create songs that represent the emotions and experiences that the current Muslim youth silently go through ... The struggles of the kids of Maghreb immigrants in Europe, who face racism, loss of identity, who deal with power struggles in broken families and the cry for inclusive societies and leadership that promotes equality and peace. I also try to simplify Islamic phrases to universal phrases, to make them more understandable for non Muslims who appreciate my music from a universal point of view.

(www.hebamagazine.com)

Rajae strongly promotes the use of popular culture, music in her case, as a counterpart to the Islamophobic trends she perceives as reigning in Western Europe. Moreover, she considers popular culture and its producers and key figures to be also an important part of the identification processes of European Muslim youth.

Salah Edin has been concerned with the issue of Islam in Dutch society from his first album onwards. His first major hit, "Het land van" (The country of, 2005),¹⁶ was a reaction to a hit song by Dutch rappers Lange Frans and Baas B by the same title. This latter song was a patriotic and laudatory song about the beauty of the Netherlands and its inhabitants. Salah Edin could

not reconcile himself with that image of the Netherlands. He released the song “Het land van.” In his version of “Het land van” Salah Edin tells his (other, darker) side of the story. Salah Edin summarizes all the nasty, painful, and hidden nuisances of the Dutch, with a strong focus on racism and Islamophobia. Against the backdrop of the aftermath of 9/11, the murder of Theo van Gogh in 2004, and the rise of right-wing, anti-Islam politician Geert Wilders, this song caught the attention of press and mainstream Dutch media. Salah Edin’s commitment to Islam and Muslims in this song is mainly a religiosity that is linked to a political ambition. There are no specific references to religion in terms of propagating a certain moral code, or advocating a more Islamic lifestyle. His lyrics deal with the struggle for acceptance of Dutch Muslims, and Muslim identity (and appearance) in particular.¹⁷

The accompanying video¹⁸ shows various scenes of a dark, violent, Islamophobic, and crooked Dutch society where justice and solidarity are hard to find. Salah Edin features in the foreground, starting out as an “ordinary rapper,” but slowly transforming into a “terrorist with a bomb-belt under his orange Guantanamo Bay outfit”; a lookalike of Mohammed Bouyeri, the killer of Theo van Gogh (murdered November 2, 2004). The story suggests that the flaws of Dutch society, and more specifically its discrimination against foreigners, especially Muslims, have turned “an ordinary Dutch Moroccan” into a “terrorist.” It consists of many other references to the political climate in the Netherlands and the way Salah Edin sees the position of Muslims in Dutch society.

These three artists find inspiration in Islam, albeit in very different ways. Salah Edin’s political engagement, in combination with his own Muslim background, inspired him to write the song “Het land van.” Rajae sees in her music a way to bridge cultural and religious differences. Fathi praises his religion through his music and expresses his love for Islam also to counter negativity and stereotypes about Islam. Besides voicing a counter-message to Islamophobia, these artists and their musical productions are also significant for the identification processes of Dutch Moroccan youth. By being role models, they give Dutch Moroccan youth an example of how to be creative, cool, socially and politically engaged, *and* Muslim.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how different shades of Muslimness are watered down in a range of different popular cultural productions produced and consumed by Dutch Moroccan youth. It is interesting to note that many of the ways in which popular culture is “Islamized” relate to the implementation of what are thought to be basic Islamic codes such as the consumption of certain foods and drinks (no alcohol, no pork, *halal* food), the wearing of certain dress (Islamic fashion, and in general covering yourself decently), and gearing towards certain behavioral codes focusing on modesty and decency, specifically linked to gender relations. Certain consumption and behavioral patterns are hence labeled Islamic (or *halal*).

These codes are perceived to be clear cut and revolve around the *halal-haram* dichotomy. These codes have, according to Roy, always been important guidelines for Muslims throughout history. It is a dichotomy that seems to become even more significant and more leading when Muslims live in a non-Muslim environment. In present-day Europe, a large portion of Muslims are migrants or descendants of migrants. For those people living in a non-Muslim country who are consciously making an effort to follow Islamic guidelines, the question whether something is *haram* or *halal* becomes ever more important (Roy 2005: 140).

The importance of these ethical codes lies in the fact that they are seen as congruent with Islam. Roy argues, in reporting on the emergence of a virtual *umma*, that, as a result of searching for a “pure, deculturalized” Islam, “special national trademarks, specific cultures and

histories move to the background and [this] is coupled with a search for a norm that can be applied in various contexts, or rather, a norm that need not be bothered with context: this explains why the ‘salafi’ message is most suitable for shaping the virtual *umma*” (Roy 2003: 162). Roy thus suggests that because of the desire to disconnect culture from religion, ethical and basic norms are reified as Islamic, since these can work in any cultural or historical context. The European minority context in which European Muslims find themselves is by definition an environment (almost) devoid of “Islamic history” and with few cultural references symbolizing Islamic history or traditions. This accelerates the prominence of these ethical codes, since they are thus “easily” implicated. It is easier to conform to ethical codes, like behaving in a modest way or eating *halal* food, than to recreate and perform Islamic rituals or traditions that require the presence of an all-Islamic environment.

To emphasize ethics which can be applied in any cultural context appeals to youth living in a post-migration, minority context who are struggling to get a grip on living a life they wish to be Islamic in form and content, with at the same time due recognition to their search for and expression of youthful popular culture. These new, innovative cultural productions pay tribute to being young, creative, cool European, *and* Muslim.

The short biographies of the three artists I presented indicate a concern with Islam that predominantly relates to its minority status in Europe. The ambition to counter Islamophobic trends reigning in Europe clearly resonates in all of their works. Their focus of interest is in creating an alternative Muslim voice in popular mainstream culture. Their way of merging Islam with popular culture stems from socio-political and religious endeavors aimed at improving the image of Islam.

Notes

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- 2 *Haram* is an Islamic concept denoting activities or things that are forbidden. *Halal* stands for permissible.
- 3 Note that not *all* events targeting a Dutch Moroccan audience are “Islamized.”
- 4 Interview with Ahmed, February 21, 2012. All interview fragments are translated from Dutch into English by the author.
- 5 Tweet translated into English by the author (accessed January 27, 2012).
- 6 www.salahedinwo2.nl/bio/ (accessed March 14, 2012).
- 7 Personal communication, Salah Edin, November 3, 2011, Amsterdam.
- 8 Besides his stage name, of course; Salah Edin’s real name is Abid Tounssi. He chose Salah Edin as a stage name because it is also the name of a famous general in Islamic history who reconquered Jerusalem from the Christian Crusaders around 1170. Furthermore, the literal meaning of Salah Edin is “the virtuousness of the faith.”
- 9 *Nasheed* (pl. *anasheed*) is a religious Islamic song, often praising Allah and the prophet. *Anasheed* are often sung a capella and only use certain percussion instruments and no melodic instruments. This is thought to be in line with Islamic rulings on music.
- 10 Taken from fathiotmani.net/bio/ (accessed October 17, 2012).
- 11 *Umma* is an Islamic concept denoting the community of (Muslim) believers.
- 12 “In November 2011, for the third year in a row, she was the only female contemporary singer to appear on the Arts and Culture section list of the 500 most influential Muslims in the world.” Taken from Rajae’s website: rajae.net/about/ (accessed October 17, 2012).
- 13 Personal communication, Salah Edin, November 3, 2011.
- 14 Interview, Rajae, with *Heeba Magazine*: www.heeba.org/featured/interview-rajae-el-mouhandiz/ (accessed March 14, 2012).

- 15 www.hebamagazine.com.
 16 Single taken from the album *Nederlands Grootste Nachtmerrie* (Holland's worst nightmare) (2007, Top Notch).
 17 See www.songteksten.nl/songteksten/73928/salah-edin/het-land-van.htm for the lyrics.
 18 www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPmwoKEPIvM (accessed October 17, 2012).

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