

Representing Islam: Hip-Hop of the September 11 Generation

BLOOMINGTON: INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2020.
XII+206 PAGES.

KAMALUDEEN MOHAMED NASIR

For the past decades, broad questions as to “what is Islam” and “what does it mean to be Islamic” have haunted much of the fields of sociology and anthropology of Islam, arousing vigorous conceptual and methodological dialectics in scholarship. Without centralizing the conceptual problematic in the first place, and without being confined to the preceding theoretical struggles, Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir’s *Representing Islam: Hip-Hop of the September 11 Generation*, a cultural and social hermeneutic of the synthesis between Islamic religiosity and hip-hop culture as practiced and perceived by Muslim youth around the world, nevertheless provides interesting answers, in both conceptual and empirical forms, to these primordial questions. It sheds new light on understanding and interpreting the articulation, manifestations, and implications of and about Islam in this globalized and digitalized age.

At first glance, studying the expressions and discourses on Islam through the popular art form of hip-hop music may seem to be located on the very periphery of the scholarship of Islamic studies and the conception of “Islamic civilization”, especially through the conventional

“central/peripheral” and “religious/cultural” dichotomous perspectives. Through a critical engagement of empirical data of Muslim hip-hop artists’ articulation and discourses, analysis of the historical circumstances and social experiences shared by Muslims around the world in the post-September 11 era, and some pertinent sociological perspectives including identity authenticity (as in Chapter 2), social movements and solidarities (Chapter 3), performativity and management of body (Chapter 4), and governmentality and multiculturalism (Chapter 5), Nasir productively demonstrates and argues for the opposite position: that this edgy space intersecting religiosity and pop culture is precisely one of the most discursively dynamic and far-reaching realms of Islam and one of the most fruitful grounds for studying Islamic culture in our time.

Nasir situates *Representing Islam* in constructive dialogue with pertinent bodies of literature including studies of the hip-hop generation in general in the United States and worldwide, scholarly works on the interaction between black culture and the Muslim world, and studies on Muslims and popular musical genres in both localized and cross-cultural contexts. Exemplar works of these fields include Sujatha Fernandes’s *Close to the Edge: In Search of the Global Hip-Hop Generation*, Sohail Daulatzai’s *Black Star, Crescent Moon: The Muslim International and Black Freedom beyond America*, and Hisham Aidi’s *Rebel Music: Race, Empire, and the New Muslim Youth Culture*. *Representing Islam* should also be understood as a substantial expansion of a chapter on Muslim hip-hop from the author’s earlier monograph *Globalized Muslim Youth in the Asia Pacific: Popular Culture in Singapore and Sydney* (2016). That former chapter laid the perspectival and conceptual foundation for the present book under review.

In theoretical terms, students and researchers of sociology and anthropology of Islam in general and those who specialize in Muslim popular cultures may benefit from and be inspired by three underlying theoretical perspectives that are cornerstones to the conceptual framework of *Representing Islam*: the generational perspective of identity formation, the homological imagination, and the provincialization of culture. First, despite the perpetual tension and debates in conceptualizing a generation (as in the conceptualization of any other social groupings),

it would be valid, as the present book demonstrates, to hypothesize that there is at least a degree of perceptual and discursive sharedness embedded in narratives and discourses given by people both within and outside the imagined generation, i.e. when they talk about *it* as a group. More specifically, as indicated in *Representing Islam*, there can be multiple types of markers for conceptualizing a “generation”, e.g. age group, parental and personal migration background, and major historical events. An interesting way that this hermeneutic generational perspective can inspire future ethnographic and other microsociological studies is to look beyond any “essence” shared by most or all individuals within a generation, but rather to look at how individuals perceive and deploy those generational elements (be it stage of life, personal or familial migration experiences, and/or marked historical events) to construct the self, significant others, and a coherent experience in their narratives, as well as the similarities and dissimilarities in those perceptions and narrative deployments.

Second, the concept of “homological imagination” coined by the author is precisely a penetrating lens to look at this rather ambiguous and obscure sharedness between cultural practitioners, as well as its sources, mechanism, and implications. A theoretical advancement from the more conventional concepts by which imaginative sharedness or collectivity is discerned (e.g. Saidian geographical imaginations and Andersonian national imaginations, which tend to focus on societies and communities with clearer territorial boundaries), “homological imagination” is a timely theoretical tool to portray the even more globalized, intersectional, fluid, and instant processes of culture and identity formations in this digital age characterized by the dominance of social media since the early 21st century. In this sense, the global Muslim hip-hop culture in the making, as depicted in the book under review, can be understood as a constellation of discursive and creative processes constituted by and drawing on the imagined, homological attachment and affiliation to multiple “centers” of cultural authenticity, such as the African American-rooted hip-hop tradition, the Islamic theological tradition, the sharedness of historical and social experiences between African Americans and post-9/11 Muslims, the shared experiences of Muslim

around the world, the notion of social justice as embedded in both traditions and both strands of experiences, as well as to the diverse sects and elements within each of these discursive “authenticities”. Further to the detailed analysis of social hermeneutics on the discursive and creative field of Muslim hip-hop culture, as it has been thoroughly demonstrated in *Representing Islam*, it would also be interesting for future studies to focus more on the functions of diverse “homological imaginations”, at the more idiosyncratic level, of individuals as cultural options and resources, in relation to their own unique social situatedness, self-construction, and sense-making of the world.

Third, the idea of “provincialization of culture” is closely connected to homological imagination in that they can be understood as two conceptual forces of a hierarchical relation, and towards opposite directions, in the same discursive force field. If the homological imagination is initially about the mental process (both shared and individual) of associating cultural practices and experiences with an existing form of cultural center or authenticity, provincialization of culture denotes a countercurrent and meta-process of de-centralizing and re-centralizing cultural practices and experiences, which demands a new form of homological imagination and intends to create a new type of authenticity. Nasir’s conceptualization of Muslim hip-hop culture as a discursive field, in particular, exemplifies such a meta-interpretive process where the creative and consumptive practices and experiences of Muslims in relation to both hip-hop and religious piety should *not* be simply understood as deriving either from hip-hop’s African American “core” or from the Islamic tradition’s Middle Eastern or Arabian “origin” (cf. the classical “Islamic-Islamicate”, “great-and-little-traditions”, and central-versus-peripheral views in conceptualizing Islam), or as a derivation from both traditions combined; it should be understood, rather, as something dialectical on its own, drawing on a multiplicity of elements from diverse cultural traditions, personal and collective practices and experiences, and specific economic, political, and social circumstances in the localities where the cultural products are created and consumed and the cultural activities are conducted and experienced. My only conceptual concern over provincializing culture is about the role and positionality of the sociologist

or anthropologist. By using the term *meta*-process or *meta-interpretive* process above, I pointed to the fact that, in many if not most cases, the sociologist/anthropologist, in provincializing a culture or tradition, in fact plays a role of more than just interpreting and analyzing the formation of a “new” culture or identity; rather, it is the research output, the sociological/anthropological writing itself, that has consolidated, if not created, the existence of such a new province, along with the concurrent homological imagination and authenticity associated with it. Scholars of social hermeneutics can thus explicitly discuss the discursive consequences of their own works.

From the methodological and analytical perspective, even though *Representing Islam* (unlike many of Nasir’s previous works, whose primary data are ethnographic in nature) principally makes use of existing interviews with hip-hop artists and the lyrics and music videos of hip-hop songs, the book successfully integrates both the micro-hermeneutic perspectives (i.e. the sense-making and meaning-articulating processes embedded in both interviews and content of art productions) and the macro-structural processes (i.e. more widely felt and recognized culturally or politically hegemonic power structures, such as state management and policies regulating ideologies and cultural productions, moral entrepreneurship of religious or communal elites and leaders, broader public debates and discourses on social justice issues including rights of women and ethnic minorities, etc.). A strategic and critical engagement between the micro and macro perspectives in sociology of Islam, *Representing Islam* is recommended to all students and researchers interested in Islamic religiosity, Muslim popular cultures, and research design in social hermeneutics approaches.

MARTIN JIAJUN HE
PHD STUDENT, SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY
SINGAPORE