

Book Review: *Muslim Rap, Halal Soaps, and Revolutionary Theater: Artistic Developments in the Muslim World*, edited by Karin van Nieuwkerk (University of Texas Press, 2011)

Reviewed by Mark LeVine

In the last few years of traveling throughout the MENA region exploring popular cultural production and circulation, I have learned many things. Among them are the following truths: You haven't really experienced "revolutionary theater" till you've witnessed it being performed in Tahrir Square; the most authentic hip hop in the world today is being produced in the basements of Gaza City and Tehran; and extreme metal does actually sound better after you've inhaled some—but not too much—tear gas in Manama.

I suppose one could make a similar set of statements while substituting three or four African, Latin American or Southeast Asian locations for the ones I list above. But in the wake of the region-wide revolts, rebellions and revolutions of the last fifteen months, it's hard not to feel that the Arab world and larger Middle East are today the epicenter of global countercultural production. Reading Karin van Nieuwkerk's *Muslim Rap, Halal Soaps and Revolutionary Theater* will do little to disabuse you of such a sentiment.

This volume, edited by one of the leading scholars of cultural production in the Arab and larger Muslim worlds, is a tour de force of cultural analysis that offers innumerable insights and previously unknown artifacts to even the most seasoned cultural observer or analyst of the region. The most significant contribution of the book is its focus specifically on religiously oriented or religiously grounded cultural production. As the rather long title suggests, whatever the negative attitudes towards music and other forms of artistic production taken by conservative, or "Salafi" Muslims today, the Muslim world remains full of Islamically oriented art, of the aural, visual, spoken and written kind. Moreover, the contemporary phenomena have, in fact, deep roots, which have shaped today's Islamic aesthetics in surprising ways.

Editor Karin van Nieuwkerk has done an excellent job of both choosing and organizing the contributions to the volume, as they offer a representative sample from the wide range of artistic production historically and today that is both broad yet coherent. Her introduction on its own should become one of the standard introductory texts on popular culture in the Muslim world. In it, she deftly explores the meaning of culture as performance and its attenuation within networks of power and the many forms of resistance to it. She asks whether "performances sustain, reproduce, challenge, subvert, or critique ideologies and regimes of power." Her answer is crucial for understanding the unique approach of the broader book: Analyses based on a seeming dialectic between conformity and resistance offers a far too simple reading of culture to be useful today. Instead it is precisely the ambiguous articulations of cultural products between the two poles that offer us the best location for examining the larger dynamics of conflict and cooptation within a society.

At the same time, van Nieuwkerk's discussion reminds us how simplistic most discussions of civil society and the public sphere remain, in their inability to account for the interaction of

secular and religious, high and low, popular and elite, “Western” and “Muslim” cultural discourses. In this context, the kind of “pious art” discussed in the book is shown both to resist and enforce structures of power—sometimes at the same time. Intentionality, and in particular, the unabashed and undirected experience of fun and relaxation, are clearly major problems for more orthodox or conservative Muslim cultural activists. Yet at the same time, the intensely personal (or personal-as-political) nature of so much cultural production in the Muslim world today forces us to question the dominant religious discourses surrounding unregulated and supposedly “purposeless” art, revealing clear movement within the larger Muslim cultural spheres towards the kind of “post-Islamist” public spheres that many of the book’s chapters explore.

The body of the book is divided into three parts: “The Power of Performance,” “Motivations,” and “Staging the Body and the World Stage.” Part One includes chapters dealing with diaspora Turkish rap, heavy metal in Istanbul and Tehrangeles pop music. Thomas Solomon’s “Hardcore Muslims: Islamic Themes in Turkish Rap between Diaspora and Homeland” explores the relationship between two global cultural phenomena—Islam and rap music. Solomon demonstrates how diaspora Turkish Muslims blend together religious and secular themes and aesthetics to create a sense of shared Muslim identity and to show solidarity with Turkish and Muslim populations elsewhere in Europe. As interesting, he demonstrates how Turkish rap has spread back to Turkey, creating a two-way flow of people, recordings, and information that complicates the usual dichotomy between homeland and diaspora.

Pierre Hecker’s “Contesting Islamic Concepts of Morality: Heavy Metal in Istanbul” looks at how Turkish metalheads and Islamists have, in a sense, exchanged identities of victimhood in recent years, as the country’s secular public sphere and political culture have moved towards a more religious grounding. After offering a brief history of the transgressive nature of metal as a genre, and of Turkish metal, the author offers a fascinating discussion of how religious personalities have attacked the scene—much as they have in other Muslim countries—for “subverting the principles of Islam” as well as normative Turkish identity. In response, metal has come to provide various modes of symbolic resistance to the process of Islamization that has made the public sphere increasingly less friendly towards the metal community. This, even as senior religious officials have authorized Ramadan campaigns that positively depict metalheads as members of the larger community.

Farzaneh Hemmasi’s “Iranian Popular Music in Los Angeles: A Transnational Public beyond the Islamic State” offers an interesting comparison to Solomon’s discussion of Turkish diaspora rap. She shows how Los Angeles has become not just a central location for the production of contemporary Iranian popular music—particularly because of the ability to perform and record freely there in contrast to Iran—but also how the scene is helping to preserve and even canonize alternative histories of Iranian popular music of the last several decades. In the process, the artists and fan communities are helping to foster cultural and personality traits that have been rejected by Iran’s revolutionary norms, bringing together issues such as female singers, women’s issues and opposition to the policies of the Islamic republican state in unique and powerful ways.

With Part Two, “Motivations,” the book really hits its stride. Michael Frishkopf’s “Ritual as Strategic Action: The Social Logic of Musical Silence in Canadian Islam” demonstrates how the

particular aesthetic ethics of Muslims in Canada have engaged and transformed (and been transformed by) the sonically rich and socially and spiritually compelling rituals of traditional Islam. He offers a very nice summary of the role of music in the early shaping of Islamic practice, especially recitation of the Qur'an. He provides an excellent summary of the various debates over the legitimacy of music, linking it to the history of modern Islamic reforms, and then to the way in which attempts by local Muslim communities to create a viable cultural presence in Canada have led to the strategic erasure of aesthetic practice. Most important, he provides an historical context for how modern Islamic reformism has been shaped "as a strategy for a subaltern Islam" which sees the homogenizing and strict observance of ritual practice and behavior as the most important method of protecting and rejuvenating Islam (123). In so doing, he offers a quite useful example of how approaches drawn from anthropological, Islamic studies and ethnomusicological disciplines can be fruitfully combined to produce innovative and valuable research.

Joseph Alagha's "Pious Entertainment: Hizbullah's Islamic Cultural Sphere" offers a useful counterpoint to Frishkopf's analysis, as he focuses not on diaspora aesthetic production, but on how one movement has worked to transform all art in "the art of resistance" into an art form that resists not merely tyranny and oppression but "purposeless art," or "art for the sake of art" at the same time. Alagha explores the transformation between religious-political and specific cultural spheres in the Shi'a Islam of Lebanon. While Hezbollah's well-known record of violence leads many to assume the group's governing ideology to be quite constraining when it comes to culture, in fact the movement actively demarcates between orthodoxy at the ritual or theological level and a "pluralistic Islamic cultural sphere where the concept of citizenship reigns; where all people have equal rights and duties and where coexistence and mutual respect are the main norm" (151). This view is articulated within a larger need to sponsor "purposeful art" that allows Muslims to remain close to God, and politically mobilized during their leisure time as well as at work.

Van Nieuwkerk's "Of Morals, Mission and the Market: New Religiosity and 'Art with a Mission' in Egypt" continues the discussion of purposeful art within an Egyptian framework, demonstrating how the new religiosity of the last two decades did not lead to attacks on art but rather to attempts to put it more directly in the service of Islam. Nieuwkerk demonstrates how, within what Asef Bayat and others term "post-Islam," or "wassatiyya," supporting or engaging with art became a salient way to distance the modern Islamist thinking from the previous "hard-liners" intolerant Islamism. This phenomenon is then attached to the rise of the "new religiosity" among the well-to-do, whose preachers advocate a kind of "lite" or "bourgeois" Islam that instrumentalizes art for religious-cum-ideological purposes as "art with a mission" (*al-fann al-hadif*) (178-9; 183-6). Most important, she highlights the paradox purveyors of "moral art" face whether in Egypt or any other country: "The more missionizing, the less fun. Yet the less fun, the smaller the audience" (183, 186, 198-200). This has led Islamically oriented producers of culture to reshape the way they define their art, away from religious definitions and towards more generic descriptions such as "comedy."

Ahu Yigit's chapter, "Islamic Modernity and the Re-enchanting Power of Symbols in Islamic Fantasy Serials in Turkey," adds another dimension to the discussion of popular culture in the country. Her analysis focuses on popular fantasy television serials produced by Islamic channels

and how the various meanings of the symbols that dominate these programs are used. Her discussion is grounded in the quite recent phenomenon of Islam becoming a component of everyday cultural and commercial consumption in Turkey, and how this phenomenon has continued, and yet challenged, the long-running distinction between “good”—that is, enlightened and modern—Islam, and “bad Islam” which is associated with superstition and backwardness. The fantasy serials tend to flip the coin of virtuous and unethical attitudes and behaviors, showing devout yet modern characters struggling to achieve dignity and a better life against the prejudices and power of more secular characters. At the same time, however, they reinforce existing patriarchal notions of morality, especially when it comes to the roles, positions and behaviors of “good” Muslim women.

Zeinab Stellar’s “From ‘Evil-Inciting’ Dance to Chaste ‘Rhythmic Movements’” offers a genealogy of modern Islamic dance-theater in Iran, a fascinating subject since female dancing was long understood to be outside the bounds of Islamic acceptability in the Islamic Republic. Dance comes back into the public cultural sphere through its transformation into “rhythmic movements” that are geared to “embodying the Islamic government’s religious and political ideology” (231). Once again taking up Bayat’s critique of Islamism’s problem with “fun” and unregulated leisure, Stellar shows how the very Westernized way in which modern dance was introduced to Iranian society through films made it an easy object of scorn and attack by conservatives. It was only in reaction to these negative portrayals and discursive constructions of dance that a “comparatively chaste and virtuous female dancing subject” could be constructed. Such a re-embodied female subject could then take the stage in front of Iranian society and act in theatrical productions which focus on mystical, religious and revolutionary themes, while incorporating only those movements from older Iranian/Persian dance styles that don’t reflect any hint of sexuality.

The volume’s final chapter, “Suficized Musics of Syria at the Intersection of Heritage and the War on Terror; Or a ‘Rumi with a View’,” by Jonathan Shannon, offers a fascinating account of how seemingly traditional and non-commercial cultural performance can be simultaneously commercialized, brought to the world stage, and deployed politically to help define a modern notion of political identity at the service of an authoritarian state with an image problem. In this case, Sufi music has become popular in Syria in a fairly short period of time, and Shannon argues for several reasons behind its growth.

First, it is part of the manner in which a category called “Sufi Music” has “taken on a life of its own” within the larger fields of world music, creating a kind of schizophonia—divorcing the aesthetic component of the music from its local heritage and sources that celebrate the music for its “authenticity” and “sacredness,” even as both are often lost in translation to the world stage. Shannon offers an engaging description of the differences between “fast” and “slow” music, which is akin to the difference between fast and slow food. The faster-produced, more standardized new music clearly attempts to access a spiritual heritage that defines Islam as moderate and “gentle” to the world (in direct inverse proportion to the brutality of the government, one could add), which then can literally travel across the world, via CDs, music festivals and other forms of distribution. In the process, the new music helps establish both Syria and Islam as unthreatening to the West and even an ally in the war against Islamist extremism.

Needless to say, this process is fraught with contradictions, not just standardizing what was heretofore a very individualistic and improvisatory genre, but making Sufism and through it, a certain type of Islam, “hip” and cool to a Western audience that in fact would benefit far more from being challenged by Islamic culture than coddled by a commercial simulacrum of true religious aesthetic experience.

Taken together, the contributions discussed here ensure that *Muslim Rap, Halal Soaps and Revolutionary Theater* will become a standard reference work for scholars in a variety of fields. It will further the interdisciplinary development of Islamic studies, cultural studies, ethnomusicology and even, it is hoped, the usually drier disciplines such as political science or sociology, both of which could certainly use a bit more rhythm and color in their methodological repertoires in the wake of the region-wide protests and revolutions in which culture has played a powerful and as yet poorly understood role.

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