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Notes from the Field

Living Ethnography

by Azza Basarudin



Questions of gender in Islam, particularly of how Muslim women have been excluded from the interpretation and codification of religion has generated one of the most highly contested and controversial discourses in the contemporary moment of globalization. Across the Muslim world from Saudi Arabia to Indonesia, Islam's faithful, especially women, are calling for innovative ways to balance their religious teachings with the demands of modernity and globalization. Within this context, my dissertation research in the Women's Studies Program examines how Muslim women scholar-activists in two NGOs (non-governmental organizations) in Malaysia and in Egypt negotiate issues of gender, religion, and feminism in Islam. Through a transnational ethnography, my research examines whether the advocacy strategies of these NGOs challenge and/or accommodate conventional Islamic religious and cultural discourses in order to struggle for gender justice and reform. Furthermore, my research traces the relationship between the politicization of religion and culture and the re-fashioning of "Muslim" identity. Since the autonomous Malaysian women's movement entered the national scene in the early 1980s, a large portion of women's struggles have focused on increasing the representation of women in politics, addressing sexual harassment, eliminating violence against women, combating teen pregnancy and marital rape, and most recently with the establishment of the NGO I was researching, demanding the right to be involved in the legislation of Islamic law in the country. Although women's struggles in Malaysia can be considered feminist struggles, more often than not, they have not been labeled feminist because of the connotation and/or stereotypes that feminism carries (that is, bra-burning and man-hating females).

My interest in designing this dissertation project stems from the need to better understand the politics of possibilities in Muslim women's intervention in patriarchal religious

discourses and spaces. Furthermore, while contemporary scholarship provides important feminist, legal, theological, sociological and political insights into the intersection of gender, religion and feminism in shaping women's lives, much of this research focuses on the theoretical dimension of the process of knowledge production and of the debates on gender in Islam. The applications of these theories in Muslim societies and the possibilities and challenges that accompany gender justice and reform advocacy remain under-researched. My project grounds theories in empirical research within the everyday social practices of Muslims in two different national contexts. As for the second part of my research on the re-fashioning of Muslim identity, I am interested in explicating the processes by which women are redefining their identities through their engagement with religion and culture. As a Muslim immigrant woman in the United States, I find that being Muslim after September 11, 2001, means learning to renegotiate what it means to be Muslim in times of Islamophobia and xenophobia. It means "performing" and/or "concealing" my Muslim identity as I weave between and within spaces, religions, and cultures; thus I am conscious of how identity politics can be loaded with meanings and boundaries and can signify one of the most important sites of struggle.

I returned to Malaysia, the country of my birth, to conduct the first phase of my field research from July 2006 to March 2007. A former colony of the Portuguese (1511–1641), Dutch (1641–1785), and British (1785–1957), and occupied by Japan from 1941 to 1945, Malaysia is a multicultural and multi-racial nation in Southeastern Asia. Between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries, Arab and Indian Muslim traders brought Islam with them to what was then known as the Malay

Peninsula. Contemporary Malaysian society is made up of indigenous tribes, ethnic Malays (*Bumiputra*, sons and daughters of the earth), Chinese, Indians, and Eurasians. Since the mid 1980s, under the rule of (now former) Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's state-driven move towards becoming an industrialized nation has witnessed selective modernization that favors cutting-edge technology, free markets, and capitalism, while paying lip service to issues such as democracy, women's and human rights, and freedom of expression. Mohamad's struggle to transform his backwater nation into one of Southeast Asia's most prosperous countries was not without its share of political repression—authoritarian rule, altering legislations in his favor, cronyism, and arbitrary detentions of opposition members characterized his legacy. Despite that, under his leadership and that of current Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, Malaysia has been singled out as a model for a progressive Islamic nation where pluralism and Islamic religiosity thrive in a *demokrasi terpimpin* (guided democracy) and where moderate Malaysian Islamic practices are a shining example of the successful balance of modernity and piety.

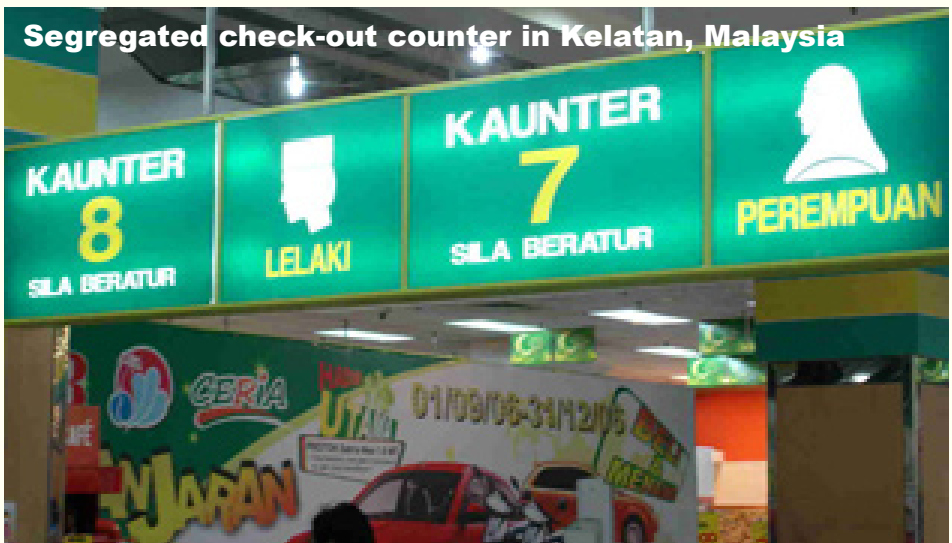
While Badawi's version of Islam *Hadhari* (civilizational Islam) has been hailed as the foundation for promoting a more liberal interpretation and legislation of Islam, I discovered during my field research that many government-sponsored Islamic institutions responsible for monitoring "proper" understanding and practices of religion and influential Muslim leaders are moving towards conventionalism by silencing progressive voices, with political Islam taking center stage on issues of freedom of religion, democracy, and women's and human rights. As a Malaysian, I am deeply concerned about



Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's symbol of progress



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Ketuanan Melayu (Malay ethno-religious supremacy) and Muslim conventionalism converging towards a dangerous intolerance of other faiths, ethnic minorities and people who dare to question the mainstream interpretation of Islam, threatening to unleash a wave of hostility upon the fragile multicultural harmony. The battle for Islam in Malaysia rages between those who believe in dogmatic understanding of religion and those who believe that Islam encourages *Tajdid* (renewal) and *Islah* (reform) according to the context of a Muslim *Ummah* (community). It is against this social and political landscape that my field research took place.

Completing a pilot study with the organization I researched in 2004, as well as continuing communication via e-mail since then, made the transition into field research much easier. I spent the first two weeks in Malaysia connecting with family and friends and re-familiarizing myself with the culture and customs of the country. By the end of July 2006 I had found an apartment close to the organization I was researching, which made my daily commute bearable, and began the immersion process into the organization. I participated in the activities of the organization, established a comfortable working relationship with many of the organization's staff and members, even becoming close friends with some of them. As a native feminist ethnographer, some of the challenges during field research were negotiating the "authenticity" question, that is, my "authenticity" not only as a Malaysian but also as a Muslim woman who has resided abroad for a number of years; my location as a Ph.D. candidate in an American University whose research is funded by American institutions and agencies, which automatically renders me suspect despite my Malaysian heritage and family ties; expectations that I

would understand cultural nuances and that I would be able to form my own conclusions and/or that my conclusions should mirror those of my respondents (that is, you are Malay, you know what it means), which also speaks to the conflict between my values and the values of my respondents; the blurred terrains between the researcher and respondents; and unequal power relations between the researcher and respondents.

As I packed up my apartment in Kuala Lumpur, visited my favorite *kopitiam* (breakfast and coffee shop) for one last time and bid farewell to my family and to the respondents and/or friends that I made during the last nine months, I was reminded of the moments I was rendered speechless again and again during personal interviews when respondents shared their most intimate hopes, secrets, and thoughts, and that no research method classes could have prepared me for a response, let alone an adequate response.¹ I have been humbled by the sincerity of my respondents in sharing their personal and professional lives, in opening up their hearts and minds, their hopes and frustrations, and most importantly, their aspirations for an Islamic society that is not only just but also one where Muslim women are able to play an integral role in the legislation of religion. The sincerity of my respondents and their trust in me are some of the key factors that have guided my ethics and accountability in carrying out field research and will no doubt continue to sustain me during the dissertation writing period.

In my final night in Kuala Lumpur, as I listened to the *azan* (call to prayer) from a nearby mosque, loud and clear in my apartment and to the rhythmic recitation of the Qur'an that followed, calling Muslims from all walks of life to pay homage to fourteen hundred years of tradition, I reflected on how grateful I am for

the opportunity to participate as a full and/or partial observer on this journey with a group of women, who, through their tireless advocacy for gender justice and reform in Islam, have given their own meaning to the word *jihad* (struggle).²

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NOTES

1. This comment is by no means a reflection on my professors, the research methods classes I have taken at UCLA, and/or the Women's Studies program. It is merely to point out one of the many unexpected dimensions of field research.

2. I am aware of the controversy with regard to the term "jihad." Jihad comes from the Arabic root word "jahada" which means "to strive for" and I utilize this meaning in the context of my research to reflect the advocacy efforts of Muslim women intellectual-activists.

Azza Basarudin (see page 12) is a PhD candidate in the Women's Studies Program at UCLA. Her research is supported by fellowships from the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the International Dissertation Research Fellowship Program of the Social Science Research Council, the Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement, National Science Foundation and the Paula Stone Dissertation Research Fellowship from the Center for the Study of Women. She is currently conducting the second phase of her field research in Cairo, Egypt.