

John O'Brien

Keeping It Halal: The Everyday Lives of Muslim American Teenage Boys

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In his research on Muslim American teenage boys, O'Brien deconstructs the stereotypes associated with Islam and Muslims in the United States (US). He focuses on the real experience of growing up Muslim and male, "an experience primarily centred on managing the competing cultural demands of religious Islam on the one hand and American teen life on the other" (p. ix). O'Brien aims at persuading the reader to acknowledge the inconsistency of the assumption that Islam and the West work as an oxymoron, as two irreconcilable elements that cannot exist in tandem. His approach is based on the sociological studies "of high-school aged young people in the United States [which] have situated teenagers in a social world populated by a range of competing peer cultures, each with its own associated set of styles and practices" (p. 11). However, O'Brien argues that most young teenagers in the US view themselves as locating 'in-between' social spaces and categories that cannot be simply associated with a specific style and/or practice but they overlap; sociological studies have showed that young people do not necessarily "consider themselves as fitting neatly into a defined social category" (p. 13). Through his ethnographic research, conducted in a mosque (known as the City Mosque) in an unspecified city in the US from 2007 to 2010, the author unravels the complexities of being a religious Muslim and an American teenager. These two identities could appear as conflicting with each other but they are complementary, they represent what O'Brien has defined as *cultural rubrics*, meaning that Muslim American teenage boys experience culturally contested lives: "urban American teen culture, as manifested in their schools, peer groups, and the media they consumed, and religious Islam as locally practiced in their mosque and their families" (p. 7). O'Brien focuses on a group of boys identified as the 'Legendz', a hip hop group formed of seven Muslim American teenagers and second-generation immigrants with different ethnic backgrounds.

In chapter one, O'Brien focuses on the dynamics of the Legendz in order to deconstruct the perception of young Muslim Americans to highlight how it differs from that of other American teenage boys. He challenges this perspective by suggesting that "the central concerns and preoccupations of young urban American Muslim men are profoundly similar to those of most other American teenagers, focusing largely on coolness, pop culture, and fashion; girlfriends and romance; independence and pushing limits; and social acceptance, friendship, and family" (p. 20). The only difference

lies in how these young Muslim boys have managed and experienced their daily lives in the US in order to be viewed as 'good Muslims', which entails following the rules, norms and customs of the local Islamic community and fulfilling their religious duties.

In chapter two, O'Brien discusses how young Muslim American boys engage with the urban American community of non-Muslims. Hip hop represents a way to convey their cultural American identity but developed within an "*in-group* Muslim American identity and style (p. 28, original emphasis). This chapter relies on recent studies on the role of hip hop music and culture, which is viewed as a catalyst for urban American youth of different ethnic background. However, in their performing and listening to hip hop music, culture and style, the Legendz have followed the rules and customs of their in-group Muslim identity, tailoring hip hop to their Islamic identity, aware that some behaviours could be perceived by other Muslims as un-Islamic. Muslim American teenage boys engage with hip hop music and culture in a way that can be viewed as "compatible with their in-group behavioural norms, seeking and experiencing links between their own specific identities and broader hip hop culture" (p. 49).

In chapter three, O'Brien discusses tensions experienced by the Legendz, caught between their Islamic identity on the one hand, practiced within the Islamic community, and revolving around the City Mosque, their families and their Muslim peer group, and urban American teenage culture on the other, characterised by acting autonomously and showing individual agency. Based upon the difference between agency and autonomy, the author underlines how the young Muslim American teenage boys are actively engaged with their religious Islamic duties "while emphasizing effort rather than obedience to a divine or adult authority" (p. 75) in order to express their own autonomy and reflexive capacity even in the course of fulfilling their religious duties.

In chapter four, O'Brien focuses on dating and courtship for Muslim American teenage boys. He unpacks two different modes of experiencing relationships. The first mode is defined as 'keeping it halal' (which recalls the title of the book), meaning that some of his participants combined the Islamic norms on courtship and body contact with the American dating culture. Thus, "practices associated with American teenage dating behaviour (e.g. spending time alone together) were to be enacted within and governed by an Islamic cultural framework, as locally understood (e.g. no kissing or hugging)" (p. 86). The second mode consists of 'dating while Muslim', which means that Islam is incorporated into dating, but it has a marginal role in courtship and romantic relationship. This mode entails an unspecified and unstated intimacy which has not been overtly explained by some of his participants. It leads to tensions between those young Muslims who adhere to the first and those who follow the second

mode of dating. But more than that, young Muslims seek “the subjective experience of both religious Islam and American youth dating culture while trying not to feel overly constrained or fully defined by either one” (p. 111).

How the Legendz present themselves as Muslim in public is discussed in chapter five. O’Brien identifies two strategies adopted within the local Islamic community. The first strategy is defined as ‘low-key Islam’, meaning that they presented themselves as an “identifiable Muslim self in a way that simultaneously downplayed the centrality of Islam to this identity” (p. 116), thus emphasising their agency and autonomy, and their abilities as urban young American teenagers. In their interactions with non-Muslims, the Legendz do not overtly assert their Islamic identity unless it arises in conversation, while they allow “their American teenage selves to dominate their interactions with others” (p. 117). The second strategy is promoted and adopted by the City Mosque leaders, and consists of “foregrounding one’s Islamic identity, demonstrating a noble vulnerability to discrimination, and appealing to non-Muslims for sympathy” (p. 115). These two strategies seem to conflict and demonstrate the friction existing between the local Islamic community, especially between the youth and the elder leaders of the mosque. The latter deals with the need to explain and present Islam in such a way to lead non-Muslims to empathise with young Muslims because they are subject to Islamophobia and harassment, whereas the former tend to emphasise “valued American teenage behaviours, and the expression of individual autonomy and self-sufficiency” (p. 147).

In chapter six, O’Brien focuses on how the Legendz have changed their behaviour upon reaching young adulthood. This chapter is based on two follow-up visits to the Legendz in 2013 and 2015. During these visits, he found what seemed to be a problem, that is the adherence of Muslim American teenage boys to religious, social and cultural norms of the Islamic community had become less pronounced. The teenage boys have now become young adults, attitudes have changed, and their daily lives now revolve around new places, pushing them to find a new way to perform and experience their Islamic identity. However, it does not mean that their religious background has been de-emphasised. On the contrary “despite the fact that cultural contestation seemed less important ... the practices, ideas, and discourses of religious Islam remained present in their daily lives and speech” (p. 153).

In conclusion, Muslim American teenage boys have to be seen as American teenagers, with their cultural contestations and negotiations, development of social and psychological identity embraced within the cultural American context and inscribed within an Islamic framework. This book focuses on what I could define as ‘flexible belonging’, meaning that social interactions are shaped by fluctuations between ‘preserving’ the Islamic identity and feeling part of the US context, and as such, it emphasises the role of, and

understanding of the self, as an active and participatory agent in society. However, it is not easy to switch between different contexts and situations but Muslim American teenage boys tend to contextualize their social experience by inscribing it in a specific time and place. As the author argues, the findings of the book would suggest that it could be considered as a sort of guidance for parents and community leaders “about positive ways in which young Muslims can grow up in America with minimal social or cultural strife” (p. 164).

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