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WORKING PAPERS

Creating a Modern Singapore
Muslim Community:
A Tale of Language Dissonances

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Introduction

In 2003, Singapore officials initiated the Singapore Muslim Identity (SMI) project to disseminate modern state-centric Islamic ideals to Singapore Muslims. These officials' styles of thinking, writing and speaking, however, have proven to be obstacles impeding the state's attempts to modernise Muslims according to its visions. In this paper, I argue that there is a disconnection between two of such styles—state officials' factual, logically coherent ways versus some of their constituents' norm-based, socially coherent approaches to thinking and discourse. Logical coherence and social coherence, concepts which are explained below, are a study in contrasts, with only the former being associated with modernity. Logically coherent ideas have on occasions reinforced state power and earned successes for the SMI project, but they do not sit comfortably with traditional Muslim worldviews. Singapore Muslims' orientation towards Islam is traditional overall (Azhar 2008; Noor Aisha 2008). The two parties' different epistemological orientations towards understanding and experiencing the world are explored in this paper on language-use to account for some of the roadblocks state officials encountered when persuading Singapore Muslims to accept one of the principles of the SMI project: that they should embrace pluralism and multiculturalism as citizens of multiethnic and multireligious Singapore.[1]

Singapore Muslims: A Problematic Community?

Many states, for example, the United States and Germany, today feel the need to pay attention to Islam and Muslims for these communities' influences on their countries' political and social complexions. In a number of these jurisdictions, Muslims are also viewed as home and international security concerns. The 11 September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington decisively defined Muslims as targets of state scrutiny. On this date, Muslim terrorists hijacked four planes and crashed them into various locations, including the Twin Towers in New York, killing over 6000 Americans together with citizens of other states (*The Business Times*, 12 September 2001; Goh 2001). Besides government officials, ordinary people too have expressed a range of opinion on Islam, its relationship with pluralism and multiculturalism, and more broadly, the compatibility between Islam and modernity. These people include Muslims and non-Muslims.

In Singapore, the relationship between the state and Muslims has not been free of difficulties. In 2001, government officials discovered a Singapore link to the regional Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terrorist network (Mohamed Ali 2009). This was deemed a risk to the state's "survival"

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1 The core concern in this paper relates to the different styles of thinking and writing that moderns and traditionalists employ and as such studies speakers' and writers' ideological orientations for their power consequences. Sociological variables such as socioeconomic class, age and educational qualifications can be examined to understand their alignments with ideological underpinnings but this will call for a fuller exposition that space does not permit here. Instead, speakers' socioeconomic variables are discussed in a general way in the concluding pages. Additionally, it needs to be noted that while state officials can employ traditional ways of thinking and speaking in selected contexts, the concern here is with the occasions at which they have preferred logically coherent language styles, which dominates their discourse.

(Chan 1971) and its "multiracialism" and secularism ethos.[2] The Internal Security Department arrested a first batch of fifteen people, of whom thirteen were "members of a radical, regional Islamic group called *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI or "Islamic community")".[3] This group had allegedly been preparing bomb attacks at the time of the arrest. A White Paper on the episode stated that the JI was one of the radical militant groups active in Southeast Asia and that "(m)any of these groups, which claim to act in the name of Islam have close ties with Al-Qaeda, the global terrorist organisation responsible for the attack on the US in September 2001" (Singapore Parliament 2003, p. 1). The JI presence in Singapore was viewed very seriously by the government, which stated that the arrests "exposed the most serious direct threat posed by any terrorist organisation to Singapore's security since the days of the Communist Party of Malaya" and that "any acts of violence that they perpetrate will inevitably undermine inter-ethnic trust and unravel the general communal harmony and peace that Singaporeans enjoy today" (Singapore Parliament 2003: 2). From January 2002 to early 2013, 64 people have been detained under the Internal Security Act for being involved in terrorism-related activities, of which more than two-thirds have been released (*The Straits Times*, 8 March 2013).

There were other scrutinies on the Singapore Muslim community, both before and after the 2001 arrests described above that have helped initiate the SMI project. It did not escape the government's notice, for example, that more Muslims were beginning to send their children to full-time Islamic schools, or *madrasah*s. State leaders, including Lee Kuan Yew, opined that the *madrasah*s were not preparing their students adequately to earn a living 'in a fast-changing society like Singapore' (Hussin 2005: 61-62). In 2002, the issue dubbed the *tudung* controversy was another occasion for disagreements between segments of the Muslim community and the government. In February 2002, three Primary One Muslim girls enrolled in national schools were suspended for breaking school rules when they attended classes wearing the *tudung*, which they had been doing since the previous month. A fourth student, who also wore the headscarf, was removed from her national school by her parents after she too was said to be flouting school rules. The Ministry of Education stated that schools are places where students are reminded daily that they interact with other Singaporeans despite "race", religious or social status differences, even if such differences exist elsewhere in Singapore. The *tudung* issue resurfaced in 2013, this time with segments of Singapore Muslims asking that Muslim women in certain government domains, who are disallowed from wearing the *tudung* while at work, be allowed to do so. These petitioners wish to see Muslim female nurses and Muslim women working in other uniformed services to be allowed to wear the headscarf. One of the arguments they put forth was that Muslim women who wish to wear the *tudung* were being discriminated against unconstitutionally because of their religious beliefs on feminine modesty.

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2 Sociologists, amongst others, have shown 'race' to be without empirical foundation, preferring 'multiculturalism', which refers to the acceptance and celebration of differences on the basis of ethnicity, religion, language or other cultural markers within a larger common civic space. Nonetheless, the idea of race is a founding myth of the Singapore state, a British inheritance that has been institutionalised as a primary variable in ordering Singapore society to create an efficient state.

3 One of the JI members was a Malaysian Muslim while another was a Christian Singaporean who had converted to Islam (Singapore Parliament 2003, pp. 44-45).

Following the occasionally tension-fraught relationship between the Singapore state and Muslims, in 2003, Singapore officials introduced a programme to educate Muslims on the "correct" kind of Islam they should embrace. The SMI project was born, the existence of which continues to date. It is administered by the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS), a statutory body and the highest official Islamic body in Singapore. The programme aims to engineer the religious attitudes and practices of Singapore's Muslim community and to build a Singapore Muslim Community of Excellence in the process. The SMI's ten tenets (see Appendix A) have been recorded and explained in a MUIS publication called the *Risalah*. The ten core values identified as important to being a Singaporean Muslim can be summarised as: inclusiveness, and thus embracing pluralism and multiculturalism in a secular state; showing adaptiveness while living in the modern society that Singapore is; acting as members contributing to the community; and being progressive. MUIS operationalises the SMI principles in the weekly Friday sermons delivered in mosques throughout the country. The ten points have also been used to craft programmes such as the Singapore Islamic Education System, a national education template for young children, youths and adults. The SMI project is the first attempt by MUIS, or the government, to craft an intensive and broad-based vision of state-centric Muslim identity for Singapore Muslims.

Logical Coherence And Social Coherence

Whether today's agents of change have been Singapore state officials or Muslim academics,[4] they have adopted prescriptive approaches. More importantly, these social engineers have tended to proffer their readings of Islam from their standpoints without necessarily understanding that their messages of reform can easily bypass their target audiences. Standing between their calls and their audience's receptivity towards their messages is, amongst other factors, a failure to craft messages in such a way that they adopt the same language styles as those they wish to transform, *even if* they speak the same language, be it English, Malay or any other language. In other words, the reformers' call for change in Islamic norms and behaviour may not be delivered in speech or written styles that their audience members routinely adopt, have access to or value. Thus, fundamentally, creating dissonances are different worldviews that both groups hold to be important; these dissonances are reflected in the ways the parties concerned speak and write.

While one party—MUIS officials as considered in the case studies discussed below—adopts referentially or logically coherent worldviews, some of the very Muslims at which messages of pluralism are targeted at create and exist in socially coherent worlds. When accepting logically coherent viewpoints, the individual has to submit to facts and observable reality. Gellner (1988) observed that in modernity, where logical coherence is prized, people elect to use language referentially, where language is used to talk about things. Referential language is language that is used

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4 *Muslim intellectuals too have offered their interpretations of Islam to effect reform. For example, the American* imam*, Feisal Abdul Rauf, has called for a reading of Islam that seeks out commonalities between what are referred to as the Abrahamic faiths—Islam, Judaism and Christianity. In this and other cases, the authors have attempted to offer Muslims a path to practise their faith in an authentic manner and at the same time exist comfortably as minority Muslims in plural and democratic societies.*

literally, to talk about things that have an external ontological existence and that can be referred to unambiguously. Language that is used referentially is language that is 'related to an independent reality', or related to nature, or about facts, that is, a reality independent of social and cultural norms. Social norms are not allowed to override the commitment to referential facts. Facts do not come under our control. They are what happen to us whereas norms are subjective social cultural values that can overturn facts because of loyalty to agents and the cultures of social life. Gellner gave the example of traditional societies, where social coherence is routine, the facts of nature can be overridden by social norms when the two are not in congruence. A priest may assert that it is raining when it is not, choosing to apply the relevant norms related to ritualistic hunting, and therefore declare that it is not a propitious time for the event (Gellner 1988: 42-78). Had 'rain' been used referentially, it would have referred to the factual absence of moisture, leading to a different outcome on whether the hunting ritual should proceed.

I illustrate the outcomes when logically and socially coherent worldviews intersected by paying attention to how state officials and some Muslims discussed the theme of time. In the following case studies, I discuss how MUIS's referentiality-based logically coherent approach to the world prompted them to ignore the basis and intricacies of the socially coherent networks of knowledge that underpinned the social cognition of segments of their Muslim constituents. Since MUIS officials do not always pay attention to the characteristics of the socially coherent ideas of time that some Muslims uphold, they have been unable to disseminate and establish the acceptance of their modern ideas, in this case, of pluralism and multi-religiosity. At such times that Muslims project non-modern ideas of time, they keep their ideas alive through networks of personalised relations. Thus, the state's logically coherent approaches to the world have not been effective tools of power to marginalise and sideline traditional ideas in all instances. Their SMI project has stumbled on these occasions.

Socially Coherent Knowledge: Time, Muslim Superiority And Metaphors

Time underpins core aspects of Islamic belief and practice. In his work on time in Islam, Meziane (1976: 215-6) notes that the Muslim is able to move through various types of time: first, between the concretised and mundane, and second, the abstract and philosophical. Singapore Muslims too, in their practice of Islam, conceptualise time in factually coherent ways. Yet these Muslims, like other Muslims elsewhere, also adopt other orientations towards time that are norm-based and which subvert the factual approach. Commenting on approaches to time that are less rooted in concrete, or referential reality, Gardet (1976: 201-2) notes that in Islam, time is tied to ideas related to the existence of a Creator, Resurrection and a Hereafter. It is tied to notions of the impermanence of this life, the discontinuity of present time and the time of decline, which will see the coming of a prophet to spread reform.

One socially coherent cultural norm that MUIS officials have been working to change as a part of their SMI strategy is the belief some Singapore Muslims hold that they are morally superior to non-Muslims. The *Risalah* contains reminders that a modern Muslim is '[i]nclusive and practices pluralism, without contradicting Islam' and '[a]ppreciates other civilizations and is self-confident to interact and learn from other communities' (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura 2006a: i). The *Risalah* authors have additionally reminded Singapore Muslims that they are to view non-Muslims as 'brothers in humanity'. The document's authors quoted the following saying by Prophet Muhammad to support their viewpoint (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura 2006a: 72):

> *Your Lord is one, and your father is one. All of you come from (Prophet) Adam,*
> *and (Prophet) Adam was created from clay.*

The messages contained in the *Risalah* were not MUIS officials' first call for universality. Earlier, in 2005, MUIS officials had issued the same message through Friday sermons. MUIS urged its mosque congregation to see other civilisations as sources of knowledge from which Muslims could learn should they aspire to constitute a Singapore Muslim Community of Excellence (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, 25 March 2005; 8 April 2005). In 2009, some three years after the publication of the *Risalah*, MUIS's then-president, Mohammad Alami Musa, warned against the practice of preaching that non-Muslims will burn in hell. He noted that such messages were confusing to Muslims, who live in a society where the majority of members are not Muslims. Alami warned that such messages could lead to Muslims hating non-Muslims and affect inter-religious ties. In other countries, such arguments can lead to violent religious conflicts, he stated (Alami 2009). In a 2013 Friday sermon, MUIS urged congregants not to be helpful only to fellow Muslims, but to be gracious and respectful towards all 'regardless of one's race or religion' (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, 22 March 2013). From the repeated calls to Muslims to adopt a more egalitarian attitude towards non-Muslims, it is clear that MUIS's message, first crafted in 2003, has not been assimilated sufficiently to satisfy the SMI project's intended results. MUIS officials have faced difficulties, partly because of two characteristics of socially coherent ideas some Singapore Muslims uphold, both of which are linked to the presence of metaphors.[5] First, I discuss how the very presence of metaphors have led MUIS officials to bypass the traditional attitudes they wish to change; metaphors, by nature, carry meanings in implicit and therefore, obscure, ways. Second, I illustrate how social coherence has the power to subvert arguments based on and supported by verifiable, empirical facts, which MUIS officials routinely employ in presenting arguments.

The word in question that has unwittingly created difficulties for MUIS officials wanting to transform some Malays' idea of Muslim superiority is *zaman*. I focus on some Malay speakers' use of this word although there are likely to be other words which speakers use to project their ideas of superiority over others. Most Muslims in Singapore are Malays and employ Malay frequently in Islamic discourse. Literally, or based on a referential understanding of the word, *zaman* means a 'long time period', 'an age' or 'an epoch'. The word has been borrowed from Arabic into the Malay

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5 *It needs to be noted that metaphors do not necessarily constitute an inherent part of socially coherent ideas. For example, I discussed above the social cultural values related to hunting which prompted a priest to declare it was raining when it was not. In that example, the priest did not appeal to metaphors in making his decision or when conveying it to his followers. He simply dismissed observable and verifiable facts in preference over particularistic cultural needs.*

language (Kelana and Lai 1998: 1678; Wilkinson 1955: 1290). A speaker, however, may utter the word *zaman* metaphorically to project other meanings more important to her than the literal one of 'a long time', which are not immediately obvious. For instance, a speaker could use *zaman* to mean morality. Metaphors are elusive; they do not reveal the significant meanings they carry in straightforward ways, but by definition are about 'understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 5). Metaphors subvert the modern alternative of having separate concepts for each of the things or thoughts in question. Metaphors are ways of thinking about the world that show an acceptance of fused ideas where users are simply not interested in parsing the world. However, they are not metaphorical usages from the viewpoint of these users; rather, it is those who use language precisely who refer to such language behaviour as metaphorical (Gellner 1988: 40-44). MUIS officials' failure to curb traditional modes of thinking and beliefs like that of Muslim superiority has arisen *because of*, and not in spite of, them thinking, speaking and acting in factual, literal and straightforward ways. Their literal mode of thinking facilitated them to bypass, or ignore, how Malays with anti-modern views were, in fact, using the word: metaphorically, to construct a socially coherent network of norms.

Social Coherence: Literal Understandings Bypassing Metaphorical Language Usages

When the obvious, literal meanings stood out for MUIS officials, these meanings obscured the traditional viewpoints that MUIS officials were trying to change. For Malays espousing traditionalism, *zaman* offered a cover, or a mask, for their socially coherent views. MUIS's preference for using *zaman* literally is evident from its official documents. In the Malay edition of the *Risalah*, its authors used *zaman* primarily to refer to specific past times, especially in reference to particular past ages in which significant persons lived. The two separate textual examples (1 and 2 below) demonstrate this point (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura 2006b: iii; v):

(1) Sejarah Umat Islam penuh dengan contoh Ulama silam yang telah berusaha gigih untuk mengatasi cabaran dan berdepan dengan realiti kehidupan zaman mereka.

The history of Muslims is full of examples of past scholars who made a determined effort to overcome challenges and who realistically faced living in their era (*zaman*).

(2) Sejarah dan tradisi keagamaan di dalam pengalaman Umat Islam pula, dari sejak zaman Nabi Muhammad s.a.w. sehinggalah sekarang ini, menunjukkan keanjalan Islam dan bagaimana masyarakat Islam terdahulu berusaha mengharmonisasikan di antara keperluan keagamaan dan keadaan kehidupan mereka yang berubah-ubah.

From the epoch (*zaman*) of Prophet Muhammad, may peace and the blessings of God be upon him, until now, Muslims' experience, according to religious historical and traditional sources, shows Islam's resilience and how the earlier Muslims harmonised between the dictates of religion and the changing conditions of their lives.

In both examples above, *zaman* refers, referentially or literally, to particular past times—the time of past scholars and the time in which the Prophet Muhammad lived till now. In (1) above, various bits of factual information—'[t]he history of Muslims', for example—are then arranged around the concept of *zaman* to teach the readers of the *Risalah* about past Islamic scholars overcoming challenges, therefore building a logically coherent network of ideas. There is no sign of the *Risalah* authors using *zaman* as a metaphor to carry other (non-literal) meanings.

Discussing Malay ideas of time, however, McKinley (1979: 306-13) suggested that the Malays in the community he was examining referred to time in non-literal ways and that their usages were not necessarily about factual, modern 'historical time in the linear sense.' The Malays associated *masa* (time) with political consciousness and ethnic relations of specific sorts and *zaman* with religious life, especially folk religion and *adat* (customs). Hence, McKinley was pointing out how time ideas such as *masa* and *zaman* were being used in metaphorical ways. A segment of the Singapore Muslims I studied also used *zaman* in metaphorical ways to encode socially coherent norms significant to them, posing a challenge to the SMI initiative. The difficulties facing MUIS officials—their primarily referential mode distracting them from their mission—became clear from my research interviews with Muslims such as Zahir. I met Zahir several times in 2004. He practices a distinctive form of religious worship called *zikir*, during which verses are chanted in God's remembrance. His accounts of himself and of *zikir* sessions illustrate the critical role of metaphors in the persistence of non-modern Muslim values and norms. *Zaman*, which illustrates a metaphor in operation, was a natural part of conversations at *zikir* events.

I attended *zikir*-based celebrations to commemorate the birthday of Prophet Muhammad, which Ustaz Deen, a friend of mine, had organised in 2004. Ustaz Deen had instructed his adult nephew, Zahir, to answer any questions I asked. Sitting on a mat at the ground floor of the block where he and his uncle lived, Zahir and I, together with a few of his close friends, ate bread and curry together. Zahir, who was at the time a food and beverages manager in a French firm, has known many of his *zikir* friends—some of whom are relatives—for a long time. Far from being strangers, they spend time together at both religious domains like the *zikir* and at non-religious events, such as the annual dinner that Ustaz Deen organises for his students. Through these associations, they have built personalised relations between themselves, which help to perpetuate the socially coherent ideas they hold. Ustaz Deen even runs a charitable fund, which brings all of his students closely together in circumstances other than religious ones. After our initial meeting, Zahir and I met subsequently during the fasting month at a hospital lobby. I found that when he was speaking of *zaman* with me, he was reproducing metaphorical language that he routinely uses within the domain of the *zikir* practice described above. He said:

Zaman ini berzikir untuk spiritual kita, bukan untuk menjadi kiyai atau pun menjadi ahli sufi. Tidak.	The practice of *zikir* during this epoch (*zaman*) is for our spiritual needs, not so that we can become a religious teacher or a sufi.

Pasal ini, akhir zaman ini sampaikan ra-sulullah sendiri mengatakan hadith ra-sulullah mengatakan zaman ini ummat Islam sebagai kelompok putih di dari lembu hitam.

The Prophet himself said that in this era (*zaman*) of the world's end, the community of Islamic believers is like white cattle among the black ones.

Jadi kita berusaha supaya kita jaga dalam golongan kelompok putih. Jangan jadi kelompok hitam. Jadi ini satu kes-edaran bagi saya.

So, we must make the effort so that we remain in the white group and not become the black group. I realise this.

Memang betul kalau kita tengok seke-liling Singapura, banyak orang Islam, Melayu Islam, born Islam, *tapi ciri-ciri Is-lam dalam kerohanian saya rasa kurang.*

It is true that if we look around Singapore, many Muslims, Malay Muslims, are born Muslims but they lack spiritual aspects of Islam.

Jadi inilah satu jalanan yang bukan senang. Ini mungkin ambek masa yang agak panjang dan kita harus memafa-mi bukan saja kita berzikir, berselawat, kita harus mengetahui hakikat dan fa-dhilat zikir. Untuk apa, kenapa dan dari mana... .

This is not an easy path. It may take some time and we must understand not just the need to *zikir*, but we must also know the reality, excellence and virtue of *zikir*. For whom, why and where... .

Kalau kita pergi laut, kita ambek mancis kita latak mancis di dalam, di atas laut, itu lah ilmu kita. Ilmu Allah ta'ala selaut itu. Jadi tidak kesudahan dia.

If we go to the sea and dip a matchstick into the sea, above the sea [the amount of seawater clinging to the matchstick], that is [represents] our knowledge. The knowledge belonging to God is the sea's entirety. We will not exhaust it.

As used above, seen especially clearly in the Malay version of the data, *zaman* was a metaphor for social norms about morality because *zaman* referred to time not primarily referentially ('a long time') but predominantly in terms of spiritual qualities. In one of his usages of *zaman*, Zahir used the word metaphorically in the context of *akhir zaman*, or the time prior to judgement day, to speak about immoral time; he thus injected a moral quality to time. *Akhir zaman* is a time when Muslims become more conscious of the distinction between the good and the evil within them and around them. There were other metaphors that supported Zahir's viewpoints about *zaman*. For example, colour symbolism in terms of the contrasting white versus black stood for, respectively, the pure and moral group versus the immoral group. According to Zahir, Muslims fall into the pure and

moral group while non-Muslims fall into the immoral group, establishing the superiority of Muslims over others. Rather than approaching time referentially, Zahir was approaching it in terms of what Gurvitch called 'social time' (Gurvitch 1990 [1964]).

MUIS's use of *zaman*—a literal approach to language-use as seen in examples (1) and (2) above—has failed to intersect with some Malays' common usage of *zaman* as a metaphor to project other ideas, such as those of Zahir. When MUIS officials took a referential and logically coherent approach to understanding the world, they easily bypassed the presence of metaphors. Thus, there is a disconnection between MUIS officials and those they wish to socially engineer because of the disconnection surrounding the language-use of the two groups. Consequently, they have had to address the issue of Muslim superiority over several years. To decode the multiple meanings being imputed through metaphorical language usages, one needs to be an insider within the group of symbolic speech-makers and speech-coders. MUIS officials failed to take the appropriate steps to change the traditional, metaphorical usage of *zaman* and so they have not achieved some of their SMI project goals to the extent they wish. They could not be rewarded for successfully achieving progress in implementing the state's multiculturalism ideals, which state officials perceive Muslims to have flouted, as discussed earlier in this paper.

Social Coherence: Norms Subverting Referential Facts

In this section, I explore MUIS officials' logically coherent ways of using language distracting them from another characteristic of a socially coherent network of ideas—cultural norms' ability to subvert observable facts—which has made it all the more difficult for them to delegitimise non-modern ideas inimical to the SMI goals. Thus, logically coherent ways of using language cannot always displace opposition. Where social coherence exists, the commitment to the social order and the commitment to referential facts do not constitute a single unified system. In fact, arbitrary and particularistic social norms can subvert referential facts (Gellner 1988: 59-61), as discussed earlier in the case of the priest and his observations on the presence of rain.

Similar to their literal understanding of *zaman* explored above, the *Risalah* authors unsurprisingly adopted a referential framework of argument in other attempts to change ideas about Muslims' superiority over non-Muslims. In the explanation of an SMI tenet to foster inclusivity and pluralism, MUIS officials elaborated their ideas as follows (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura 2006a: 74):

> … we should not be referring to non-Muslims as kafirun/kuffar (which may have the connotation of offensive disbelievers), especially when the non-Muslims respect our faith. We have a responsibility to extend our friendship and explain to them what Islam truly means through our own good deeds and invaluable contributions towards the general well-being of mankind. Thus, it is imperative that we view and understand the position of others correctly. The concept of kinship amongst humans makes us aware that we also have responsibilities to non-Muslims, as we do towards Muslims.

The above passage privileges the referential mode of thinking. The *Risalah* authors provided various assertions based on a referential orientation: that non-Muslims respect Islam, the value of performing good deeds, and a human kinship that means that people have responsibilities towards each other, amongst others. Such arguments, however, rest on shaky ground: users of metaphorical language are not concerned with the presentation of facts and evidence as argument. As anthropologists have shown, the main aim of language in the form of metaphors or stories, for example, is to preserve one's sense of self, influence others, shape behaviour and to win over power for oneself (Basso 1984; Bruner and Gorfain 1984; Douglas 1996; Turner 1985). Facts, such as the reality that many non-Muslims respect Islam and the subsequent argument that they therefore deserve reciprocity, are easily cast aside.

One of my research interviewees, Azri, showed the difficulties MUIS officials faced when using fact-based logically coherent ideas such as those above to eliminate traditional ones. MUIS officials have not been able to argue against traditional norms because arguments such as Azri's are not openly contested on a national platform. There may not be open and detailed confrontation between opposing parties related to norms of Muslim superiority. Even if the norms can be shown to be inaccurate at the national platform, they can be kept alive at personal and group levels where referential facts cannot subvert them, as shown by Azri. I first met Azri at a family outing organised by PERDAUS (Association of Adult Religious Class Students of Singapore) to Tanjung Pinang in Indonesia's Bintan Island. At that time, Azri was a volunteer with a PERDAUS childcare centre, offering his management expertise whenever necessary. Azri has a polytechnic diploma and was working as an engineer at a government company. I learnt that he was not satisfied with working as an engineer in his company. After office hours, he was involved in organising *zikir* classes and studying Islam with a mentor by the name of Ustaz Hafiz, whom Azri had known for six years. After having talked to him on several other occasions, I visited Azri at his 5-room Housing and Development Board flat in Jurong. We enjoyed an informal friendship, having first passed a test that gave me a quasi-'insider' status: during a journey to my home in Azri's car, Azri and Ustaz Hafiz questioned me as to whether or not I believed in invisible beings, to which I replied that I did. The question helped them determine how far I should be allowed into their in-group. The Qur'an states that there are invisible beings called *jinns* in the universe, so a negative answer would have cast doubts on my status as a Muslim.[6] Having passed the test, Azri and I discussed Islam in the personal domain of his flat, when he brought up the notion of *zaman*. He reproduced the notion of *zaman* as it resided in the religious domain and in the context of his *zikir* classes, which aim to cleanse persons spiritually. Speaking in an informal variety of Singapore English known locally as Singlish, Azri explained that the 2004 Asian tsunami had destroyed the lives of non-Muslims but had spared Muslims. He said:

[It is now] [a]khir zaman; near to the end of the world. Fitnah… .	[It is now] the time of the world's final days; [We are] near to the end of the world. There is much slander now.[a]

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6 For example, the Qur'an states in Chapter 15, Verses 26-27 (Abdullah Yusuf Ali 2006: 279):
We created man from sounding clay, from mud moulded into shape; And the Jinn race, We had created before, from the fire of a scorching wind.

The Qur'an said before the big akhir zaman there will be [many] small, small [disasters]. So some sort like that [the Asian tsunami]… .	The Qur'an said before the big event of the end of the world, there will be many small disasters; small disasters like the Asian tsunami… .
When the world is more and more become, don't want to know about Islam ah, far away, run from religious.	[This will happen] when the world is less interested in Islam, running away from the religious.
Now still have people still solat [pray]. Okay, lah [laughs]... .	Now, there are still people who pray. The situation is still okay [laughs]... .
We don't know lah, but what we learn is, before the big [event], the end of the world, a bit, a bit, a bit, the sign. For us [Muslims] is a sign.	We can't know; what we learn is that before the big event of the end of the world, there will be signs. For us Muslims, these are signs that the end is near.
Don't know, maybe next time is our turn [emphasis mine]. We have to repent before [it happens]. [I] don't know, maybe next time is our turn... .	*Don't know, maybe next time, it will be our turn to be devastated* [emphasis mine]. We have to repent before it happens. [I] don't know, maybe next time is our turn... .
Sign ah, some sort [of sign to us], lah. So, when there's this kind of [event, that is, the Asian tsunami], must think ah, must [ask for] forgiveness a lot.	There are signs given to us, lah. So, when there are events like the Asian tsunami, we must reflect and ask for a lot of forgiveness.

ᵃ *Muslims consider slander as one of the signs of the end of times.*

When the Asian tsunami unleashed its power on 26 December 2004, destroying thousands of lives, to Azri, it was one of the signs that *akhir zaman*, or the end of moral-religious time, was near. According to him, God had acted in wrathful ways because of human beings' immorality. Muslims were spared the punishment because they are in the moral group, he said. This was referentially inaccurate. In terms of verifiable facts, the tsunami devastated lives and livelihoods of Muslims in, for example, the Indonesian territory of Aceh in Sumatra and yet, Azri's reasoning was that Muslims were still part of the *kelompok putih*. What is significant is that in Azri's employment of *zaman* metaphorically to create notions of moral-religious time, he overturned the commitment to referential facts. Azri wished to believe that all Muslims, including himself, are morally superior

to non-Muslims. Norms and facts did not form one conceptual system such that referential facts could be used as the dominant argument in order to question Azri's norms. In instances where the norms concerned and the referential facts being subverted have little public visibility but are created and reproduced in homes or other personal spaces, non-moderns will continue subverting referential facts with ease in order to champion their needs.

The cultural norms accompanying *zaman* allow Zahir and Azri to feel morally superior to non-Muslims, who are considered to display immoral behaviour. Moral superiority provides these Malays with psychological ballast against harsh local and international realities, giving them a sense of power. Here, applying Laclau's (1990) insights on identities of power can be illuminating. As noted by Laclau, the identity alternatives that are suppressed (suppressed from the perspective of official power holders like MUIS officials and not from the perspective of those such as Azri) are indeed social identities of power for those who choose them. For Laclau, social relations are always power relations, and so the suppressed identities, too, carry power. The conditions that give rise to and allow the perpetuation of a social identity are the very mechanisms of power (Laclau 1990: 31-32).

In the international scene, Muslim societies are marked by widespread human under-development. Countries with a Muslim-majority population, such as Afghanistan and Niger, are amongst the poorest in the world when the yardstick of per capita gross national income is used (The World Bank 2013). Locally, Muslims, especially Malays, are portrayed by the state as having performance indicators that, even as they are improving, are still below the numerical targets outlined by norm setters. The ideas surrounding *zaman*—morality, Muslim superiority, affirming family ties and others—provide a map for its users to make sense of the modern world that Singapore is, which marginalises those without the acceptable educational and economic credentials, again based on numerical understandings, which allow ranking to take place. The secular state puts its secular economic concerns and the associated values before religious values. Those marginalised, in defending their values, deride those of the group they cannot be a part of. As Weber explained it, members of outcast groups uphold their sense of self by helping others as an act of duty and at the same time, celebrating brotherhood (1958 [1922-23]: 270).

For those like Zahir, who have relatively less impressive educational credentials, their norms surrounding *zaman* allow them a measure of control and power since they believe that through *zikir* practices, they can remain in the moral group. These ideas give meaning to daily existence. They are powerful ideas, since they are understood to come with the backing of Prophet Muhammad. In the case of Azri, who has a polytechnic education, works as an engineer in a well-known company in Singapore and lives comfortably, *zaman* offered him what he found lacking in his successful secular life. Azri preferred life to be less controlled and to have more pleasant interpersonal relations. He revealed that the interpersonal relations between his superiors and himself at work were formal and were not conducted on the easy basis of give-and-take. This displeased him. Instead, he found peace and contentment in religious activities such as visiting the Habib Nuh shrine and Mecca. Azri revealed to me that he was laying the groundwork for immersing himself in the religious domain more fully. He eventually wanted to leave his full-time secular job even though it brought him a good income. Thus, the ideas of *zaman* offered a counterbalance to his secular lifestyle. The *zaman* epistemology confers a sense of psychic comfort and security and offers a cocoon against alienating realities. The meanings assigned to time can be the focus of

struggle (Gurevich 1976; Luke 1998; Harvey 2000), whether the struggle is about one's psychological state, one's relationship with the community or the environment at large.

Ironically, the state's ideology of "success" and progressivism are helping to perpetuate the very attitudes and acts of "underperformance" that it wishes to eradicate. Its own exclusivist values are helping to create Muslim identities of power which are exclusivist in their own ways and which challenge the values associated with modernity. Thus, the social identities of power championed by Zahir and Azri cannot be easily eradicated. As noted by Weber, modernity favours those who are already in positions of official power, whereas if the state is to serve those not in positions of power, law and justice would need to take into account substantive rationality (Weber 1958 [1922]: 216–221), or socially coherent ways of existing. For state actors to engage with individuals like Zahir and Azri, it is not censure, prescriptivism and the application of referential facts and standards that will be effective in bridging the gap. Rather, state actors, as noted by Weber above, would have to accept the ethics of morality that accompany notions like *zaman* as being at least as legitimate as their own ideologies. Until this occurs, the social identities that those like Zahir, Farish and Azri champion will exist.

CONCLUSION

MUIS officials have at times found it easy to exert control over others through modernity-supporting logically coherent knowledge. This is because such knowledge is exacting in its demands and it is the person who controls it who can easily override opposition that is not equally competent in such knowledge. Yet, MUIS officials are not always able to exert their power to eliminate non-modern ideas and practices because the very privileging of referential facts and logical coherence shifts their attention away from non-moderns' language usages. In such cases, where non-moderns employ language to construct socially coherent networks of knowledge, the traditional norms they hold escape MUIS officials' notice. One of the reasons for this is that where individuals champion social coherence, MUIS officials confront (elusive) metaphors, which help lead them on a detour away from their modernising goals. Additionally, MUIS's use of logical coherence has not allowed it to survive the capacity of norms to subvert facts. MUIS officials are left with their factual orientation of the world remaining inadequate to challenge non-modern ideas. Thus, questions about the viability of their modern SMI project cannot be ignored easily.

THE SINGAPORE MUSLIM IDENTITY (SMI) PROJECT

The SMI project to build a Singapore Muslim Community of Excellence is comprised of the following ten desired attributes to be cultivated in the Singapore Muslim community. The ideal Singaporean Muslim is expected to be someone who:

1. Holds strongly to Islamic principles while adapting to changing context
2. Is morally and spiritually strong to be on top of challenges of modern society
3. Is progressive, practices Islam beyond forms/rituals and rides the modernisation wave
4. Appreciates Islamic civilisation and history, and has a good understanding of contemporary issues
5. Appreciates other civilisations and is confident in interacting and learning from other communities
6. Believes that good Muslims are good citizens
7. Is well-adjusted as a contributing member of a multi-religious society and secular state
8. Is a blessing to all and promotes universal principles and values
9. Is inclusive and practices pluralism, without contradicting Islam
10. Is a model and inspiration to all

Source: Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura

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