In the year 2020 Muslim futurities in Southeast Asia

Thinking of the future is hardly possible without reference being made to the role of digital information technologies or the growing impact of knowledge industries. But how relevant are these concepts outside the Northern Hemisphere? Said to be on its way by 2020, Islamic Information Society posits an alternative to both Western ideas on the Global Village, as well as the hijacking of Islamic futures by radical conservatives. Bart Barendregt examines how majority Muslim countries in Southeast Asia have increasingly become role models in Islam's quest for a digital future.

Bart Barendregt

IN HIS *IMAGINARY FUTURES* (2007), Richard Barbrook points out how the novelty of technologies lies not so much in what they can do in the here and now, but in what more advanced models may do one day in the imaginary future. Contemporary reality, he argues, is the 'beta version of a science fiction dream'. Some of our most dominant science fiction dreams have been remarkably stable and continue to haunt us today.

For over four decades the idea of Information Society has been a battleground for ideologists, a struggle whose origins can be traced to the early Cold War era. Although in those days the US outwitted the Soviets on most terrains, including economics, the USSR could always resort to the powerful rhetoric of tomorrow's communist paradise. Hence a much needed counter future was needed, which was eventually to be found in McLuhan's bestselling *Understanding Media* (1964). While the Soviet intelligentsia propagated a future cybernetic communism by means of developing a 'unified information network', American think-tanks appropriated McLuhan's technology in their drive for progress, above all his notion of the Global Village, eventually producing what we now know as the Net, one of the building blocks of today's information society.

Today our future remains largely technologically driven, encouraging blind faith in technology, bringing in its wake not only long-term conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also the rise of a global economy in which e-commerce and e-governance are not yet standard but nevertheless are a much sought after ideal by many. Does this mean that what Barbrook refers to as the 'Californian ideology', a strange contradictory mix of the Left's liberal society and the Right's liberal market place, has become the dominant dictum in information society? Towards the end of his book Barbrook mentions how lately our future has once more become contested with 'cyber jihadi' eagerly making use of information communication technology (ICT) to propagate their ideas. To this assertion, we may add the assurance that Muslim politicians and intelligentsia are certainly not willing to leave the future to radical conservatives and consequently have been forced to come up with viable counter scenarios; these ideas are widely commented on in developmental programmes for the Islamic world as well as in the domain of Muslim popular culture. The latter offers a useful starting point in this brief inventory of the contestation of information society.

Muslims in Space

Western stereotypes tend to describe Islam scathingly as a 'backward' orientation or an absence of futurity because fate seems to lie in the hands of Allah. Indeed, writings by Muslims futurists are still few and far between.[1] There is some Arabic science fiction, alternative histories and, not surprisingly, Islamic terrorists increasingly play a prominent role in Western sci-fi novels. This dearth does not imply the future and sci-fi are wholly incompatible with Muslim thinking. Nuruddin (2006) describes how science fiction is central to the ideology of various African American Islamic movements, which believe their predecessors were Black Muslim astronauts from outer space. Exotic though these readings of the past may be, they do offer an alternative interpretation of world history, colonialism and racism, and also teach present-day Muslims how technology will lead to a resurgence of their ancient Islamic civilisation in the near future. In that sense their ideal is not too far removed from what is happening in mainstream Muslim societies, in which there is a growing tendency to look at space and

technology as being the next frontier. Recently, the Malaysian Astronomy and Islamic Law Association discussed how to maintain the kneeling prayer posture while in a weightless condition, eating *halal* food and proper washing when aboard a spaceship. Malaysian scientists are even developing software named 'Muslims in Space', which should enable Islamic astronauts of the future to find how to face Mecca. Here issues of religion and technological development seem to collide with questions about the future orientation of the Muslim community worldwide. A future which is no longer associated exclusively with countries traditionally thought of as the cultural heart of the Islamic world. While not all Muslims welcome the reliance on new Information technologies with undivided joy, technology has been widely embraced by Southeast Asian Muslims, often for religious and also political purposes. When it comes to technology in Islamic futurist thinking, some of the countries in Muslim Southeast Asia have become a role model not only for the region and the developing world at large, but also for Muslim coreligionists in other parts of the world. To explain this, the focus of this article will be concentrated on two newly developing Muslim majority nations in Southeast Asia, Malaysia and Indonesia. Both countries have a near past of nation-building and developmental thinking in which an almost iconic role has been accorded information technology.

Techno nationalism and digital development

Observers from Anderson to Mrázek have noted how from the outset nation-building in the newly developing Southeast Asian states has been characterised by a profound obsession with things modern, especially iconic technologies. Such iconic technologies have evolved from the early days of print nationalism to national cars and lately national phones. The realisation of ICT infrastructure and innovative e-governance applications especially have become a hallmark of Southeast Asian modernity. Such projects include Indonesia's successful launching of its own satellite system in 1976, creating a modern day variant of Anderson's national audience, and boosting New Order techno-political visions (Barker 2005). However, in the 1990s when a new Internet era evolved Southeast Asian politicians began focusing on prestigious state-run campaigns to develop the needed ICT infrastructure. The best known of these projects is Malaysia's Vision2020, which comes with the Malaysian answer to Silicon Valley, Cyberjaya, and its associated Multimedia Super Corridor. In 1991 Prime Minister Mahatir Mohammad chose a year nearly three decades into the future as a target for his country's national, political, economic, and social development. By that magical year (and 2020 would frequently appear as ultimate target), Malaysia would be ready to participate as a regional, if not world power. Similar information technology infrastructural projects have been envisaged in other parts of Southeast Asia, albeit not all of them equally successful. These projects have all been devised to make the great leap forward, preparing Southeast Asia for the challenges of the 21st century. Lately the belief in a technologically driven future has been transformed into what is now known as information technology for development. This ICT4D discourse has resulted locally in the formation of an e-ASEAN group focusing on the potential of both e-commerce and e-governance applications, echoing the hopes of a digital revolution in the near future, very similar to the imagined futures fostered by the Cold War elites. As a (not always intended) consequence, the Southeast Asian region has become a much sought after market for media and telecom conglomerates from both the West and East Asia, but there are other future collaborations on the horizon. Examples of such alliances include the marketing of such by now extremely popular 'Made in the Middle East' Muslim gadgets as the Islamic Phone or the Ipod-like 'Pocket Muslim'.

Indonesian telecommunications provider Telekom recently launched its *Telekom Ibadah* service, targeting Southeast Asian mobile phone users on the pilgrimage to Mecca. And in early 2007, as another even more exciting example of such new post-national projects, Malay newspapers reported on a new hi-tech city being developed in Medina with Malaysian support. The Medina Knowledge Economic City (KEC), expected to be completed by 2020, is to be a landmark providing opportunities to such twin programmes as Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor with what will be happening in Saudi Arabia in a few years. One newspaper quoted the Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister as saying that: 'It shows how two Muslim countries can co-operate and collaborate in the interest of the *ummah* (Muslim community) and can indeed transform the Muslim world' (Habib 2007). The Deputy Prime Minster states it was no more than fitting that Medina, the holy city which saw the beginning of the Islamic acquisition of knowledge, was chosen to transform the Muslims and bring about a true revival. It is this newly gained Islamic techno pride which brings us back to the future and how this is currently imagined among Southeast Asian Muslim intelligentsia.

Back to the future and back to Islam!

From a Western perspective, the Islamic world has failed to modernise, secularise, and innovate. Recognising the gap between Western and Muslim civilisation at the outset of the 21st century, many Muslims blame this lack of development in Muslim societies on the experience of colonisation and subsequently the ongoing political and economic repression by the same West. It is this feeling of injustice which at present serves to unite Muslims. Scholars of Islam have argued how the same political and cultural repression has led Islam to be developed as a social philosophy comparable to socialism, communism, and capitalism. This rise of Islam as an ideological system is heralded by the overt use of new media technologies throughout the Muslim world now enabling a new Muslim middle class to discuss their religion easily without necessarily looking to classically trained authorities. As one of the basic tenets of Islam is to acquire knowledge, an interest in information technology seems to have become an end in itself among many believers, with technology and spirituality now reinforcing each other strikingly. The interest Southeast Asian Muslims take in a future determined by ICT therefore accords very well with the nationalist development ideologies mentioned above and with broader trends discernible throughout the Muslim world. One of the consequences of this new techno-savvy Islam has been the overt use of information technology by transnational Ikhwan and Salafi groups which propagate the ideal of the *cyber Caliphate*. The problem with their 'retro futurism' is that by means of modern ICT they resort to a seventh century 'near perfect past', leaving the Islamic world little room for progress.

More progressive thinkers argue that there is more to the contemporary revival of Islam than the radical views of conservative Muslims. There is the success story of Islamic economics (from *syariah*-based micro credit, to present-day Islamic mobile banking) and the more controversial call for a truly Islamic science. They argue that classical Muslim discourse is not greatly concerned with State and politics, but concentrates entirely on the issue of a community bound by faith (*ummah*). Hence, some have urged for a multicultural Islam to commence a dialogue with the West and East Asia, in which Islamic ideas on economics, politics, the environment, not to mention science and technology, will become part of a global agenda.

Fig. 1 (below) Muslim countries in Southeast Asia have increasingly become role models in Islam's quest for a digital future.

Fig. 2 (below left) 'Cyber-jihadi' are eagerly using information communication technology to propagate their ideas.

Fig. 3 (below right) 'Made in the Middle East' Muslim gadgets such as GSM phones which carry digital versions of the Holy Qur'an are extremely popular.

escape controversy and conservative and Islamists groups especially have blamed it for what is now called either Market Islam, 15 minute Islam or Islam Lite as selling out or even of being the Devil in disguise. Various Muslim groups are now battling for the Islamic future, but in all of these futures information and communication technology is playing a decisive role.

An imagined future of spiritual technology
The purpose of this contribution has been to start unravelling some of the dynamics of Muslim futurist thinking in Southeast Asia, especially where these touch the role of technology in it. While Indonesia's 15 minute Islam or Malay Muslim techno nationalism are locally particular, they are not unique in the Muslim world and there is plenty of proof that one of the unexpected outcomes of the use of information technology by a young generation of Muslims especially is the emergence of a more moderate forward looking Islam. Whereas today's Information Society was once a utopian ideal on both sides in the Cold War era, it is continuing to be an ongoing ideological battle for following generations in other parts of the world. As we speak, Muslim technocrats and intelligentsia are reinventing information society for tomorrow's *ummah*: an imagined future of fair Islamic economics, just governance and sustainable communities bound by information technology. However, part of this future has already arrived in the Muslim world, surprisingly fast, too fast even for some, considering some of the controversies surrounding the present-day use of ICTs particularly by young Southeast Asian Muslims. Explicit religious use of Internet-based technology or mobile phones has brought such new challenges for young Muslims to face as Islamic capitalism, the superstar status of mobile Muslim evangelists, but also confronts them with questions related to the form and function of what Islamic technology ought to be. Is technology religious simply because it is made and used by Muslims (what I call the 'Made in Mecca scenario') or should it come with a carefully developed spiritual etiquette which breaks with Western antecedents of science and technology? And what does technology, once used, do to religion itself? The future has yet to teach us to what extent ideas about the *cyber ummah* are so very different from now dominant views of Information Society and to what extent this utopian vision will have an impact on Muslims using information technology in the present.

Bart Barendregt
Dept. of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology
Leiden University
Barendregt@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

Notes
A version of this paper was presented at the International Conference on The Role of New Technologies in Global Societies, organized by the Department of Applied Social Sciences, of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University on the 30th to 31st July 2008. Figs. 1 & 6 are from the book *Indonesian Dreams: Reflections on society, revelations of the self* (Buku OBor, KITLV Jakarta, 2008), edited by Tino Djumini and reprinted here with permission of the author.

1. But see the World Futures Studies Federation, a global network of futurists of which both Inayattullah and Sardar, progressive Muslim intellectuals, are member, or Muslim Futures Network (http://www.wnf.org)
2. The IAS Tunis Declaration on Information Technology for Development in the Islamic World also calls for Muslim countries to extend free trade agreements with developing countries and open up their markets to software being developed in the Third world
3. http://islamic-world.net/plan.php, Last accessed June 2008
4. See http://www.cybermq.com/, Last accessed June 2008

References
Barbrook, R. 2007. *Imaginary futures: from thinking machines to the global village.* London: Pluto.
Barker, J. 2005. Engineers and political dreams – Indonesia in the satellite age. *Current Anthropology* 46:703-727
Habib, S. 2007. RM25b hi-tech city in Medina. *The Star*, Wednesday 28 February, pp3
Hefner, R. W. 1998. Multiple Modernities: Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism in a Globalizing Age. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 27:83-104.
Ibrahim, A. 1991. The Ummah and tomorrow's world. *Futures* 23:302-310
Inayatullah, S., 2005. Alternative futures for Muslims: challenges to linear and cyclical macrohistory. *Futures* 37:1195-1200
Nuruddin, Y. 2006. Ancient black astronauts and extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic science fiction as urban mythology. *Socialism and Democracy* 20:127-165
Watson, C. W. 2005. A popular Indonesian preacher: The significance of AA Gymnastiar. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11:773-792.

They envisage an alternative modernity based on a world governance system which is fair, just, and representational; which stresses the existence of self-reliant, sustainable ecological communities and, not surprisingly, the use of advanced technologies to link such communities (see Inayatullah 2005). It is such a concept of tomorrow's *ummah*, first referred to by people as Muslim intellectual Sardar, and also embraced by Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim (1991), which can compete with the crowd-pulling power of cyber fundamentalism or, for that matter, the more Western style liberal Information Society. Once again, such futures of a post-postmodern Muslim society are not all that far off.

From Malay visions to technological blessings
Malaysia has been internationally heralded as a leader in planning for the future, combining economic progress with cultural values (Islam, Malay, and later even Asian values); a reputation which is largely attributable to the tireless efforts of former prime minister Mahatir and his vision for the year 2020. Nevertheless, while generally respected as a great statesman in the Muslim world, some at home have criticised Mahatir and his UMNO party for using Islam only superficially to win votes. Consequently, it is not surprising that the post-Mahatir era has seen Muslim organisations and individuals claiming an even more religiously inspired future. In the popular domain, this thinking is signalled in the Malaysian film *Syukur21* (Blessings for the 21st century), which was released throughout Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, and Indonesia in early 2001, in the hope of drawing crowds to the cinemas at the end of the annual fasting period. The film, claimed to be the world's first-ever Islamic science fiction, offers an Islamic counter-modernity to the ambitious, recent large-scale development projects in the target markets. The year in which it is set – 2021 – is not coincidental as it follows directly on the heels of the State-run Malaysian campaign of Vision2020. And the film is not the sole counter reading of nationalist futures. Two years after the release of *Syukur21*, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), representing 57 Muslim majority countries in the UN, held its biennial congress in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The conference, aptly entitled 'Science and Technology for Socioeconomic Well-Being of the Ummah', promoted a combination of spirituality and technology as medicine to aid the newly developing post-colonial world. The Kuala Lumpur declaration of 2003, better known as *Vision 1441* (the Islamic year 1441 not coincidently equals 2020 and therefore is again a clear reference to the more secular Vision 2020, showing to what extent Malaysia has become a spiritual guide in the modernisation of the Islamic world) urged its members to focus on strengthening the knowledge-based or K-economy, but also to fight the deepening divides which threaten much of the Islamic world, large parts of which are still situated in the poor South. Some years earlier, the Tunis Forum on ICTs and Development in the Islamic world (2000) had already signalled similar dangers facing many Muslim and developing countries which were lagging behind in the area of ICT. Participants in both conferences have hence been mobilised not only to fight computer illiteracy, but also to urge Muslim governments and NGOs to think about long-term ICT policy, Islamic centres of excellence, and transnational cooperation throughout the Muslim world.[2] This project includes the creation of an Islamic ICT Fund, the strengthening of an all Islamic Broadcasting Corporation, but also enshrines the wish to establish an Islamic Portal which encompasses the entire Web. Such ideas have meanwhile been taken over by other platforms. Recently Islamic-world.net, the site of the Malaysia based Khalifah Institute, came up with its 'Web Plan'.[3] Part of this Plan is to realise the number one top Islamic web portal providing posi-

Fig. 4 (above)
Homepage of www. islamic-msn.com

Fig. 5 (above left)
The belief in a technology-driven future has led to ambitious projects across Southeast Asia such as Malaysia's answer to Silicon Valley – Cyberjaya.

Fig. 6 (above right)
See notes.

tive information about Islam and giving daily commentary on important international news events from an Islamic perspective. Other strategies in very much the same vein as the present web 2.0 hype include polls to assess the opinion of Muslims worldwide on various issues important to Islam, while there is also the promise of developmentalism when cheaply Xeroxed materials are to be provided in areas of the world with as yet still limited access to electronic information technology. However, most interesting is the proposal to develop the 'Islamic Net', separate from the Internet as we know it, and with the provision of at least one computer terminal in every mosque in the world being linked to it. Here a future vision of the Net equals the coming of a united *ummah*.

From Muslim technocrats to poster preachers
Whereas the US, Japan and South Korea are still prime examples of what modernity is supposed to look like, fellow OIC countries increasingly serve as an additional role model to Muslims in imagining the future: Turkey when it comes to an ideal political system; Iran for challenging US hegemony; Dubai for its economic successes; and Malaysia for the promise of a technological but none the less spiritual future. Indonesia, although not able to boast about considerable hi-tech successes, may provide us with an even better illustration of Islam's digital future, as many progressive thinkers here increasingly make use of a techno savvy form of Islam. After the end of the Suharto regime in 1998, Islamic politics soon flourished, gaining momentum as this coincided not only with the earlier mentioned Islamic Resurgence but also chimed in precisely with the worldwide ICT revolution. One of the most prominent examples of the combination of Islam, politics and information technology is the success story of the Prosperous Justice Party or PKS. The PKS, which emerged from parts of the students' movement which brought down Suharto, heavily emphasises the importance of modern information communication technology if it is to decolonise the proposed futures of 'the imperialistic Western world'. But not all Indonesian Muslims are equally defensive nor do they all share the anti-Western attitude of the PKS. Hefner (2003) has argued that, whereas the growth of new intellectual Muslim discourses in other countries has tended to lead to radical extremism, in Indonesia so far it has resulted predominantly in a new, more moderate Islam. To many the face of this more moderate Islam has been the self-styled Muslim preacher and TV celebrity AA Gym. Gym has proven to be a successful entrepreneur who has published scores of Muslim self-help books, comics, pop music and soap serials. He is also one of the first to have launched a Muslim content for mobile phones and his Manajemen Qolbu Foundation makes heavy use of the Internet[4] in much the same way Christian televangelists do in other parts of the world. He is not the first to do so. The history of Indonesian public Islam in the last four decades coincides strongly with developments in information and communication technologies (cf. Watson 2005). Gym has been particularly successful in blending his Sufi wisdom with global business management tactics and, although he is now on the wane, others such as Opick (a former rock star now manifesting himself as pop preacher) and Ustad Jefri Al Buchori are already lining up to become Islam's next celebrities. None of these 'poster preachers' has had a traditional religious training nor indeed either an extensive knowledge of Arab language or of the Koran. Members of the Indonesian poster preacher generation are exponents of a public Islam which has been around ever since the Iranian Revolution of 1970, but which is now reaching its zenith in the wake of the diffusion of Information Technology in the Muslim world. Not surprisingly, this new restyled techno savvy popular culture does not

'Recently, the Malaysian Astronomy and Islamic Law Association discussed how to maintain the kneeling prayer posture while in a weightless condition, eating halal food and proper washing when aboard a spaceship'