News from Asia

Mosques in Singapore: tapping overt and covert power

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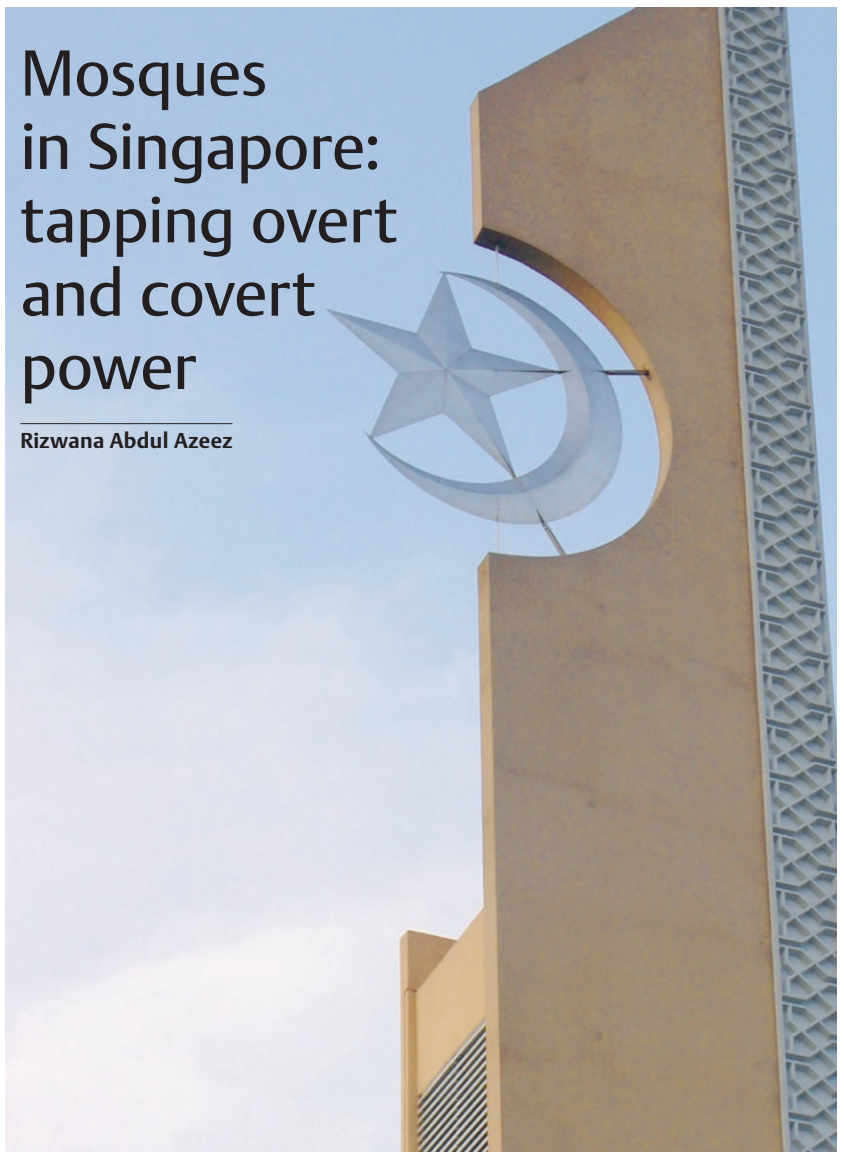

'Place' and power

Places can be sites of power contestation, exemplifying agents' power relations vis-à-vis each other, especially when contenders view sites as means to disseminate desired ideologies to target audiences. 'Place' refers to institutions that are modern in so far as agents – state representatives, for example – exert energy on amorphous, undefined spaces yet to be shaped by human agency, to transform them into specific goal-oriented places, for example, capital cities or other specialised zones of activity. In Singapore, since 2005, state-associated Muslim bureaucrats began shaping mosques to be, other than places of worship, places where Muslim youths can be socially engineered into accepting particular modern attitudes. These youths were envisioned to be state-friendly, or "productive" and "successful" members of Singapore society.

I will present anthropological observations on Singapore's Muslims' modernity-embracing strategies of power, specifically focusing on the officials associated with Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS), Singapore's highest official Islamic organisation, and their social engineering targets—youths and teachers. I argue that where these officials have approached the mosque as a place to apply modernity's overt strategies of power, they have attempted to dominate others. Such overt strategies, however, do not necessarily confer long-lasting success as the second and contrasting ethnographic account shows. Where the same moderns have turned their attention to covert spaces in mosques and their accompanying covert power, differences between modern viewpoints and those of their detractors, including traditionalists, have been smoothened.

The two accounts below, of the attempts by MUIS to instil modern attitudes and practices amongst Muslims, are a part of the Singapore Muslim Identity (SMI) programme launched in 2003. The state wishes to educate Muslims to accept 'correct' readings of Islam – to be 'progressive', and 'rid[e] the modernisation wave', amongst other imperatives.[1]

In 2001, Singapore's Internal Security Department arrested Singaporean Muslims involved in the regional terrorist organisation, Jemaah Islamiyah, which state politicians considered a very serious threat to the country's security and its multicultural orientations.[2] The SMI project followed thereafter.

Overt institutions and overt power: mosques as youth development agencies

Here, I discuss how MUIS officials executed power successfully, but not without limitations, in their role as mosque administrators working to shape mosques into youth development agencies. Youths have been targeted for change because they comprise a large base amongst Singapore Malays, a community which the state considers to present challenges to its nation-building and economic development programmes.[3] Most Muslims in Singapore are Malays. MUIS has turned to the Young Muslim Wings in mosques to implement its vision for youths. Through these avenues, which are themselves overt "fixed and official jurisdictional areas"[4] within the larger mosque structure, MUIS reported the need to craft various detailed programmes to shape young people. It outlined various "Roles and Responsibilities of Youth Workers":[5]
To plan, coordinate and conduct outreach programmes to out-of-mosque youths, e.g., connecting with and befriending youths found at neighbourhood street soccer courts, in void decks, coffee shops and other areas in the vicinity of the mosques. To manage, and where necessary, conduct training and development programmes for in-mosque youths to produce the multiplier effect so that more could be involved in youth outreach work. These include leadership, management and organizational skills development training.

MUIS defined 'out-of-mosque' youths as those who do not wish to attend mosque programmes and those, such as delinquents, who need 'intervention programmes'. 'In-mosque Muslims', however, are 'mosque customers' or those already tapping mosque facilities and participating in their programmes, volunteers and activists.[6] Thus, MUIS officers were in effect presenting mosque officials with a set of labels to sort young Malays into different overt categories, introducing a differentiated hierarchy to be applied depending on the attitudes and actions that the targets for change displayed. Foucault has argued that those who create (modern) definitions entrench their power position as experts.[7]

Indeed, MUIS earned itself a measure of success in teaching young Muslims state-friendly behaviour. In 2010, the Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs revealed that mosques have evolved from being places of worship into places that offer social programmes and services. Dr Yaacob Ibrahim announced that "[w]ith MUIS' assistance, 31 mosques have created family prayer rooms and special spaces for youth activities." He thanked mosque leaders and volunteers "for sharing MUIS's vision of mosques ... [to] benefit Singapore as a whole".[8] However, this assessment of success was not shared by all Muslim community leaders. One influential teacher warned, first in 2008 and then in 2009, that mosques are "borrowing heavily from corporate culture" and that "they resemble ... community centres or social clubs... ." He also alleged that "[some Muslims] even dare to compromise [principles of Islam], just to be accepted as being 'progressive & modern'",[9] alluding to the SMI project. He re-introduced these comments on his Facebook page in 2013. Thus, MUIS's strategies of bureaucratising mosques have seen only a partial success. Modernity's power, exercised through overt means, privileges domination, goal-orientedness and a quantitative assessment of success that invites opposition from those with different visions. Overt strategies of power can limit success.

Covert power: exercising a more balanced power distribution

In the contrasting ethnographic presentation below, I illustrate how moderns can still operate within modern institutions like mosques, but draw covert power from them. They are then better able to accommodate their detractors and to work towards consensus. Dewi, a MUIS-appointed educator, accommodated the traditional orientations of her trainee teachers, but without sacrificing her modern goal of implementing English as the new medium of instruction in MUIS administered part-time Islamic schools.

In 2004, MUIS introduced its new aL.I.V.E. (Learning Islamic Values Everyday) education syllabus into its Islamic schools. Controversially, English became the new and predominant medium of instruction, replacing Malay. Malay, in contrast to English, has generally shown itself to carry more traditional rather than modern worldviews in Singapore's Islamic education scene. However, most of the teachers had learnt Islam in Malay and were more comfortable teaching in it. They also found the new syllabus challenging as it was a marked departure from the old one. Singapore Muslims have a high regard for Islamic education teachers as they are regarded as moral guardians of Islam, and so MUIS made concessions to allow Malay to be used in aL.I.V.E. classrooms. Nonetheless, English remains the preferred choice. For example, aL.I.V.E. textbooks are available only in English. During a training session of aL.I.V.E. teachers held at a mosque, Dewi turned to its covert spaces of power to help turn the teachers' dissent against English, into consent. She attempted to fulfil MUIS's vision of teaching modern Islamic values while accommodating the traditional teachers' wish to teach in Malay.

Dewi and the teachers had gathered at the Ar-Rahman mosque for aL.I.V.E. content training and group work. My focus falls on the unsaid aspects of power the mosque carried and which aided in consensus-building. Being a place of worship, Dewi and the teachers had to uphold Islamic values and norms of behaviour there. The mosque setting provided constraints on how one should dress and what could be said, which everyone abided by. These norms were not spelt out, but they were covertly present. The effect was that the distance and roles between Dewi and her trainees became reduced. All the trainees, who were female, came dressed according to Islamic requirements for women: they wore long-sleeved tops and covered themselves to the ankles and also wore the headscarf. There was an orderliness, with participants not speaking anything more than was required of them. It was a serious, action-oriented environment, with everyone behaving politely and respectfully towards each other. When the *azan* (call to prayer) was made for *zohor* and *asar* (second and third prayers of the day respectively), the trainer and participants were aligned in terms of needing to perform their religious duties. Thus, the status of the trainer and the teachers as fellow Muslims were important covert bonds that downplayed any curriculum differences that existed.

Conclusion: mosques and their covert power potential

A place, which is a physical structure, can be overtly shaped to reflect desired ideologies; it can also covertly shape the thoughts and actions of people. The design of religious buildings can evoke or enhance feelings described as religious, just as the engravings, colours, orientations and shapes therein are able to do so.[10] Mosques in particular, especially in secular Singapore, still radiate covert power which can help to unify oppositional parties. Dewi allowed the covert to 'speak', helping to forge a balance between the rights and obligations of all involved. She did not discuss the rights of the parties concerned in an outright and explicit manner but turned to covertness, which as Asmah notes, is a sign of being refined amongst Malays.[11] The covert, however, is not easily visible; moderns tend to bypass its power in favour of overt, output-measuring hierarchical strategies. Where moderns have an egalitarian disposition and are perceptive enough to be aware of the potential of covert spaces for consensus-seeking, they can move towards more equitable power outcomes for contending parties, which last longer.

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Notes

1 Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura. 2006. *Risalah for Building a Singapore Muslim Community of Excellence.* 2nd Edition. Singapore: Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, p. i
2 Mohamed Ali. 2009. *Why They Became Terrorists: The Case Study of JI in Singapore;* http://tinyurl.com/ca6rsgs (accessed on 8 May 2013). See also, Singapore Parliament. *Maintenance of Religious Harmony* (White Paper).1989. Cmd. GI 21 of 1989.
3 Suriani Suratman. 2010. *Problematic Singapore Malays: Sustaining a Portrayal.* Singapore: Leftwrite Centre.
4 Weber, Max. 1958 [1922–23]. 'The Social Psychology of the World Religions', in Gerth, H. H. & C. Wright Mills (eds.) From *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology.* New York: Oxford University Press, p. 196
5 Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura. 2005. *Mosque Convention 2005. Remodelling Mosques.* Singapore: Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, p. 59
6 Ibid., p. 56-57
7 Foucault, Michel. 2001. Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason. London: Routledge Classics.
8 Yaacob Ibrahim. 2010. 'Speech by Minister for the Environment and Water Resources and Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, at the Hari Raya get-together held at the Shangri-La Hotel (17 September 2010, 8.10pm); http://tinyurl.com/c9o6pjx (accessed 8 May 2013)
9 Zhulkeflee Haji Ismail. 2008. *Masjid Dhi-raara (Mosque of Mischief & Infidelity);* http://tinyurl.com/c2s9xft (accessed 14 February 2013)
10 Kong, Lily. 1992. 'The Sacred and the Secular: Exploring Contemporary Meanings and Values for Religious Buildings in Singapore,' *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science,* Vol. 20, No. 1., pp 18–42.
11 Asmah Haji Omar. 1992. *The Linguistic Scenery in Malaysia.* Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

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