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De-colonizing public spaces in Malaysia: dating in Kuala Lumpur

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Abstract

This article discusses places and practices of young heterosexual Malaysian Muslims dating in non-private urban spaces. It is based on research conducted in Kuala Lumpur in two consecutive summers 2016 and 2017. Malaysian law (Khalwat law) does not allow for two unrelated people (where at least one of them is Muslim) of opposite sexes to be within ‘suspicious proximity’ of one another in public. This law significantly influences behaviors and activities in urban spaces in KL. In addition to the legal framework, the beliefs of Malaysian Muslims significantly influence the way they perceive space and how they behave in the city. The article discusses the empirical theme, beginning with the participants’ narratives of their engagement with the dominant sexual and gender order in non-private spaces of KL. Utilizing questionnaires, interviews and observations, this article draws upon a qualitative research project and questions the analytical usefulness of the notion of public space (as a Western construct) in the context of an Islamic, post-colonial, tropical, global city.

Keywords

dating, de-colonizing, Islam, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, public space

Introduction

Following Lily Kong,¹ Ayona Datta,² and several others³ suggestions concerning the ‘new’ geographies of religion, this article engages a religious studies perspective to discuss and redefine the usefulness of the concept of public space in a non-Western context. We question whether the notion of public space, as discussed and investigated in the European context, is intellectually useful in the context of a South-Asian, Islamic city. This article is the outcome of two research projects, conducted during the summers of 2016 and 2017 in Kuala Lumpur (KL).⁴ The result of the first of

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these projects was a fruitful disappointment, leading to the further investigation. In 2016, we were researching public spaces in KL (by mapping the social activities that happened in urban spaces, but also shared in social media through Twitter and Instagram), hoping to define the way in which public spaces in the city act to establish connections between different religious and ethnic groups.

The first hypothesis was that public spaces in KL work as spaces of encounter and social interaction. After a month of observations, we had to conclude that nothing like that was happening. Yes, multi-ethnic and multi-religious groups use these public spaces, but they are formed somewhere else, they are coming into public space as particular social subjects and do not interact in any way with others, apart from conventional commercial (customer–seller/service provider) interactions. As a consequence of these inconclusive findings, in 2017, we focused on a very particular way in which the urban spaces are used, investigating the dating practices of young heterosexual Muslims in non-private (public and commercial) spaces in KL. In this article, following Justin Tse's concept of 'grounded theologies' as ' . . . performative practices of place-making informed by understandings of the transcendent',⁵ we aim to evaluate discourse on urban spaces in KL (and potentially other non-Western cities) beyond Western-centric narratives. The research aims to understand non-private urban spaces as socially constructed spaces of heterosexual intimacy. Kuala Lumpur has a very diverse population, where followers of Buddhism, Hindu, different strands of Christianity, Islam and other religions live. This article refers to the experiences of the Muslim community and employs Islamic thought as the main point of reference, but we do not negate influences of other religious perspectives.

The first part of the article aims to conceptualize the Islamic notion of public space. Our main argument is that Islamic private space does not really exist because of Allah's presence and His gaze; there is always a relational space constructed between the believer and Allah, however, public space, does not exist either, because the notion of the public is virtually absent in Islamic discourses. Building upon the 'spatial turn' in social and cultural geographies of religion, this part introduces new cultural forms, subjectivities and public visibilities based on Islamic values. Focusing on moral values in non-private space, this part engages with the notion of 'visibility' in urban space as well as the Islamic notion of 'mahram' and 'na-mahram' based on Islamic doctrine. These concepts depict women's experiences of public and private spaces. Following this line of thought, the next section of the article focuses on the 'public spaces of intimacy' in a Malaysian context. To build an understanding of the current Malaysian context, the legal basis of the *Khalwat law* (Privacy law) within *Shariah* legal texts has been studied. In this part, we argue that many activities performed in the public spaces in KL, for example shopping or dining, are in fact masking the very intimate activity of dating. The final part of the article, 'Dating in KL' is divided into 2 parts (methodology and findings) focusing on the sample studied in this research, including 103 respondents in the first stage and 11 participants with whom we conducted in-depth interviews.

We used three consequential research methods to conduct this project. First, we issued an online questionnaire to understand if urban spaces where people date differ from places where they meet with their family or friends. The second stage used semi-structured individual and group interviews, during which we interrogated the practicality of dating in urban spaces and discussed contextual narratives (why dating couples chose particular places, how they reason their choice of place, and what kind of stories they can tell in relationship to these particular places and to dating). Finally, we observed several places defined in the first stage to compare our observations with the findings from the interviews. The aim of the research was to investigate non-private urban spaces as socially constructed spaces of heterosexual intimacy.

We believe that the findings of this research allow us to question the analytical and theoretical usefulness of the (mainstream western) notion of public space.

The Islamic conceptualization of public space

The claim of private ownership of land, which is normally accepted as a matter of fact, is just based on delusion. The arguments given in this regard are completely baseless. In the arguments which are given by the Holy Book, already admitted that, the private ownership of land, like other assets, but it is not so. The Divine Book of Muslims definitely has recognized the ownership of houses, gardens and agricultural production etc., but not the land on which they are situated.⁶

The Islamic discussion around the issue of private and public ownership is very different to that of Western discourses. The fundamental distinction is made on 'nature' and outcomes of human activities. If nature is given by Allah and should serve all people, humans' individual activities are rewarded by granting private ownership of outcomes of human work to each particular person. It could be suggested the Islamic discourse on private–public distinction is rooted in more economic and environmental values than in politics.

On the contrary, the Western public sphere is only possible because there is a void between the private and political sphere. It could be said that the Western notion of the public sphere⁷ and public space is directly related to the concept of a void. Using the phrase 'void' or 'the empty place' implies the existence of a particular perception of space that is informed by the impossibility of occupying the empty place.⁸ This void should also be seen in the context of the Enlightenment, which began the gradual elimination of God from the political sphere. We should mention that Western feminist discourses – especially non-liberal feminisms – question private space being excluded from the political realm, therefore questioning the fundamental dichotomy of private–public. We would argue that the mainstream, especially liberal, discourses present in Western urban studies mainly accept either a binary (private–public) or triangular (political-public–private) set of coordinates in a Western discourse on space.

Building upon geographical approaches to Islam and public space in Muslim countries, and inspired by 'the spatial turn' in geography, anthropology, literary theory, history and other fields within the social science, cities themselves have the potential to be sacred spaces/places.⁹ As Justin Tse emphasized, mapping religion reveals the theological constitution of the world, which empowers geographers to describe the interaction of grounded theologies, even secular ones at various scales.¹⁰ Gokariksel and Secor argue that in many Muslim societies, the Islamic politics of the 20th century have given way to new formulations of the role of Islam in public life.¹¹ According to Bayat, these new formulations are usually associated with the political parties that bring forth the transformation of the public sphere to include Islamic values and visibilities.¹²

We would argue that in an Islamic context, we should rather see the continuum stretched between the personal (intimate) relationship between an individual and the omnipresence of Allah. In an Islamic context, the personal (intimate) relationship between the believer and Allah is a kernel of any discussion of (public) space. Therefore, Islam acquires new cultural forms, subjectivities, and public visibilities to reassemble citizens of different political convictions and national origins.¹³ Islamic culture promotes the sense of a worldwide community – *Umma* – among ordinary Muslims.¹⁴ In terms of behavior in Islamic societies, both males and females are expected to conform to Islamic norms of modesty when in non-private space. For example, according to Muslim customs of etiquette, a male passer-by in a Muslim neighborhood is expected not to look up at balconies in case he sees the woman of the house.¹⁵ According to Arjmand, '... women's lives in urban spaces are shaped by the visible and invisible boundaries created by social structures'.¹⁶ Brighenti explains that visibility refers to esthetics (the realm of perceptions) and politics (the power to represent, to recognize, to control) which emerges through urbanization. As part of urban life, it gradually becomes impolite to stare and show what should

not been seen.¹⁷ Bech emphasized that ‘modern sexuality’ is essentially urban: a ‘world of strangers’ where it is possible to flirt with ‘social prohibitions’.¹⁸ In another study on ‘Halal dating’ among young British Muslims, Ali et al. believe that many young Muslims in the United Kingdom are gaining greater control over their personal lives by reclaiming a previously taboo term – dating – by differentiating between Haram (forbidden) and Halal (permissible) forms of dating.¹⁹ Ali et al. argue that Halal dating is gendered. They believe that there was a difference between the ways in which women and men spoke about the ideals and realities of Halal dating; it was usually the men who debated the temptations of physical intimacy and their limited powers to resist these once out on a date.²⁰

For presenting the spatial contact of intimate relations, Germes distinguishes the spaces of ‘I’ – defined by individual expectations, pleasure, desire, well-being linked to personal experience, representations and emotions – and the space of ‘you/I’ – defined as the space of co-production, sharing and opposition between actors created by interaction through intimate acts. Finally, he speaks of the space of ‘we/them’ defined by social norms a whole (‘them’) compared to a specific group (‘we’).²¹ Intimacy, therefore, is about relatedness and closeness. To cultivate intimacy, individuals engage in ‘practices of intimacy’, which are ‘practices which enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other’.²²

The notion of ‘visibility’ in Islam translates to the sensorial and material power of the Islamic self, fashioned into its self-presentation in urban space. In Islamic doctrine, ‘visibility’ is a form of radically provocative agency that draws public attention to the domain of culture, such as materiality of culture, dress codes, and even urban aesthetics. In public spaces, the gaze of Muslim men must itself be regulated: ‘Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them: and Allah is well aware of what they do’.²³ There are several studies that deal with women’s privacy in relation to the presence of ‘outsider’ males (that is males who have no familial relationship and are eligible for marriage). In public spaces, where they are exposed to outsider males in the course of various everyday activities, women search for personal space and territorial control, which enhances their comfort and feeling of security.²⁴ Within public spaces that do not provide privacy, women change either their behavior or their values, both of which may impact cultural continuity.²⁵

Focusing on the moral geographies of Muslim Shia youth, Deeb and Harb show in *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shi‘ite South Beirut* that ‘different conceptions of moral and spatial orders yield a variety of spatial practices’ in South Beirut.²⁶ Considering the embodied practices of devout Muslim men in Turkey, Gokariksel and Secor concluded that the embodied construction and regulation of the looking-desiring nexus tethers male sexual desire to the public performance of Islamic morality. Moreover, Gokariksel and Secor show that men’s public engagement with women is also inscribed within the set of parameters in which Islamic practices manifest.²⁷

In Islamic culture, women’s privacy encompasses the extent to which women should be physically exposed to male outsiders during their daily activities.²⁸ Hakim emphasized that values are maintained and reinforced by the predominant religion or ideological system.²⁹

It is essential to stress, that as Kadivar states,

... the terms ‘private’ and ‘public’ are not rooted in the heart of Islamic doctrine. The two terms occur neither in the Qur’an nor in the traditions conveyed from the prophet and the imams. Islamic jurisprudence does not recognize these terms either. So, it is incumbent on us, therefore, to explicate what we mean by these terms in the first place, and then to attempt to locate within the Islamic tradition what may be the closest references and rulings regarding these concepts.³⁰

According to Ibn al-Ukhuwah, public spaces may take on some characteristics of private space. For instance, when women enter the marketplace, they are treated as though they carry some of the privacy of the home with them.³¹ In the theology and practice of Islam, more attention is paid to privacy and its protection in public than to the question of publicness. In clarifying the private domain in Islamic culture, Montazeri asserted that

... a sin against Allah committed in private carries no obligation for the sinner to confess: it would be in the best interest of the religion for the sinner not to publicize his or her sin.³²

In this sense, committing a sin in the private sphere (or space) is not the government's concern. In contrast, all citizens and governmental authority jointly own the public domain. In this definition, the public space is a transparent container, but it is not an emptiness; its contents are in everyone's plain view.³³

The integration of religious ways of being within a public arena shared by others who may practice different faiths, practice the same faith differently, or be non-religious in outlook is key to Jürgen Habermas' idea of post-secularism.³⁴ In political philosophy, the question of religion's public role is often linked to the Habermasian 'public sphere'.³⁵ However, Habermas' idea of a public sphere, which exists between the private/intimate sphere and political/authoritarian one, appears to be a foreign transplant in the context of Islam, simply because, in the Islamic context, there is no 'between'.

In Islamic doctrine, all apparent obligations and prohibitions are subject to the principle of *al 'amr bi-l ma'rūf wa-n nahy 'an al munkar* (commending good and prohibiting evil). This principle governs the public sphere in an Islamic community. According to Michael Cook the *muhtasib*, the inspector of public spaces and behaviors in some pre-modern Muslim communities, gave Islamic law an immediate presence in public space and was an important source of the law in society.³⁶ However, the *muhtasib* was not permitted to investigate a sin committed at home behind closed doors. In this interpretation, a Muslim's home is still his castle so long as she/he keeps her or his sins quiet and hidden. So, it is worth clarifying that a person carries her or his privacy with her or him, and the *muhtasib* can judge only on prima facie appearance.³⁷ In Ibn al-Ukhuwah's instruction,

If the *muhtasib* sees a young man talking to a woman outside the context of a commercial transaction, or even just gazing at a woman, then the *muhtasib* should punish him and forbid him from standing in that place.³⁸

In a sense, urban space only attains status as private or public through relations between individuals – Asad clarified that the distinction between the public and private seems to hinge on the criteria of 'visibility' or 'accessibility' to 'outsiders'.³⁹

Likewise, Mottahedeh and Stilt stress the relational character of 'the private', which emphasizes that instead of speaking of the 'public-private' dichotomy as though it were self-evident, the different configurations of behavior such as legally mandatory, approved, legally indifferent, disapproved, or legally prohibited needs to be redefined.⁴⁰

The Islamic notion of *mahram* and *na-mahram* mediates women's experiences of public and private spaces. In this definition, a woman's *mahram* refers to a specific category of people of the opposite sex whom she is permanently forbidden to marry, because of blood ties, breastfeeding, or ties through marriage, such as her father, son, or brother. However, the *na-mahram* includes the rest of the members of the opposite sex with whom sharing spaces is problematic.⁴¹ In traditional Islamic families, a woman wishing to go out of the home is required to conform to a number of protective norms designed to minimize contact with *na-mahram* males. One protective norm is the provision of a chaperone to accompany her when in public space.⁴²

Public spaces of intimacy in Malaysia

Kuala Lumpur began as a shop. On the banks of the river, connected and connecting, the city began as a shop. (. . .) My primal image of this city is its primal essence, for my experience of Kuala Lumpur began with the Mall. Mallng, as I named the act of wandering aimlessly around the innumerable shopping centers that sprout up everywhere like secondary jungle undergrowth, has taught me an open my eyes too much of what I know about the city.⁴³

According to Beaumont, cities are 'hot spots', or sites for the negotiation of multiple identities, which need to include both religious and secular dimensions.⁴⁴ In Islamic doctrine, Muslims are positioned to contribute toward new cosmopolitan potentialities for a renewed pluralistic global order.⁴⁵

Malaysian Islam was embedded within two colonial systems (Dutch and British) and three major civilizations (Indian, Chinese, and European) that were present in Malaysia before and after Islam came to the shores of the Malay world.⁴⁶ However, the process of Islamization has accelerated over the last 40 years, despite a large minority population of non-Muslims (approximately 35%).⁴⁷ More than any other Muslim Country, Malaysia as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society has the economic and social fundamentals to show how a modern society can be developed under Islamic values.⁴⁸ The Malaysian experience following independence of dealing with issues of religion in public space is rather unique, since a national leadership that is largely Muslim has managed its ethnic and religious pluralism. The Malaysian religion can be considered as a state matter that is under the supervision of the Federal Constitution. The Islamic policies of successive administrations, beginning with Tunku Abdul Rahman (Malaya's first Prime Minister after independence in 1957) have helped to elevate Islam's public profile to new heights.

In the 1990s, Malaysia experienced a major growth in population and wealth (expressed as GDP), resulting in the construction of new shopping malls and the destruction of old urban fabric. In this period, Malaysia's Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad (PM from 1981 to 2003 and again since 2018), introduced neoliberal economic policies leading to the massive privatization of the Malaysian economy.⁴⁹

In contemporary western architectural discourse, influenced by Oscar Newman's theory of Defensible Space, public space is publicly owned and publicly controlled. Contemporary movements against privatization of public space in Western cities are directly aimed against the change of ownership. Transferred to an Islamic context, it is worth mentioning that

Islam emphasises individual initiative and property ownership and management (. . .). In an Islamic state, not all resources can be owned individually. The society collectively is responsible for maintaining and managing environmental (natural) resources (. . .). All members of the society who are living in peace in a Muslim state are entitled to the benefits to be derived from these natural resources.⁵⁰

Therefore, the idea of 'publicly owned space' seems to be rather an expansion of 'privately owned space' but 'given' to others to use. The ownership of land (natural resources) is questionable in Islam, but it is acceptable (and supported) to own anything created by humans existing on the land. However, what is owned privately should benefit not only the owner themselves but should contribute to the well-being of the whole community. Therefore, there is a pressure to share wealth and redistribute benefits, but not necessarily to question private ownership – this does not seem to be an issue at all.

Mahathir Mohamad has long been known for his commitment to the reconstruction of Islamic ideology to deal with the challenge of pluralism and modernization.⁵¹ This has resulted in the creation of a 'politically moderate' Islam that is different from the more fundamentalist image of Islam when compared with the Middle East. The Malaysian government aims to show the political will

and moral courage to direct the kind of Islam that must evolve in a modernizing society like Malaysia. For this purpose, there are the institutions of the Islamic *mufti* (an Islamic scholar who interprets the Islamic law), *shariah* courts, as well as Islamic Religious Council in each state:

The Islamic Religious Council was established through the provision of the state constitution as the main authority of the state on Islamic affairs second only to the state's royal patron. As long as the actions of the said Council are not in conflict with the Constitution, the State shall recognize the Council as a strategic institution that enhances the acquisition of knowledge (*farukifayah*) of the Muslim community which also functions as the crucial last bastion in the ensuring of the continuity and survival of Islam and the Islamic community and society notwithstanding the prevalent political scenario in the country.⁵²

In the Islamic state, the public interest (*maṣlaḥah*) and citizens' rights based on piety play significant roles. However, *fatwas* (legal opinions) prohibit women from becoming a *qazi* (judge), a *mufti* (law expert), or the *Ulama* (religious scholars) and discourage them from praying in public mosques.⁵³

Law in the Islamic sense is a set of value-oriented guidelines directed toward the divine purpose of Allah. Islamic law, therefore, is primarily normative rather than prescriptive and is designed for moral education as well for legal enforcement.⁵⁴ However, in the case of Shariah criminal offenses, legal texts are submitted as religious declarations (*Fatwa*) by religious authorities (the *Ulama*).⁵⁵ These *Ulama*, many of whom studied in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan, were schooled in a version of more 'traditional' Islam and they reflected this approach in their administration.⁵⁶ Family law within Shariah was first codified during the British colonial period and influenced both Malay custom and Western law.⁵⁷ The Arabic word *Khalwat* literally means empty or secluded place, which refers to an act of seclusion to increase piety.⁵⁸ Based on the Shariah Criminal Offences Enactment (SCOE) in Malaysia, the offense of *khalwat* requires the participation of at least two people (at least one of them being Muslim) of the opposite sex who are *na-mahram* to each other.⁵⁹ The enforcement of this law is in line with the responsibility of the Muslim authority to join the right and prohibit the wrong (*amr ma'ruf nahi munkar*). According to Laws of Malaysia (Act 559: Syariah Criminal Offences – Federal Territories – Act 1997, as at 1 January 2013), *Khalwat* (close proximity) Law means,

Any (a) Man who is found together with one or more women, not being his wife or *mahram*; or (b) Woman who is found together with one or more men, not being her husband or *mahram*, in any secluded place or in a house or room under circumstances which may give rise to suspicion that they were engaged in immoral acts shall be guilty of an offence and shall on conviction be liable to a fine not exceeding three thousand ringgit or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years or to both.⁶⁰

According to Manaf et al., the rate of pre-marital sexual practice (sexual intercourse) among Malaysian Muslims is low (4.9%), similar to Malaysian Buddhists (4.3%), and Christians (5.2%).⁶¹ However, the rates in another study by Zulkifli and Low are slightly higher: Muslim (11.58%), Buddhist (6.86%), others (21.50%).⁶² This difference may be influenced by a broader (unclear) definition of 'sexual practice' in the second article. In the next section, we will study dating practices in KL based on our pilot study. First, we will introduce the methodology that we used for collecting our data and then we will analyze the findings.

Dating in Kuala Lumpur

We used three consequential research methods to conduct this project. First, we issued an online questionnaire to understand if urban spaces where people date differ from places where they meet with their family or friends. The second stage used semi-structured individual and group

interviews, during which we interrogated the practicality of dating in urban spaces and discussed contextual narratives (why dating couples chose particular places, what reasoning they can give and what kind of stories they could tell in relationship to these particular places and to dating, as such). Finally, we observed several places defined in the first stage of the research to compare our observations with the findings from the interviews conducted. The sample studied in this research was a little more than a 100 (103) respondents in the first stage and 11 participants with whom we conducted in-depth interviews. Recruitment for the project was carried out through academic networks, so even if some of the participants in the project graduated from conservative Muslim schools, they are all representative of people with higher than average education, and members of the urban middle class. The particular demographic representation of the research sample may have influenced the outcomes of the research.

First and foremost, young Muslims in principle should not go on a date. They are allowed to participate in strictly supervised meetings, which should lead within 3 months to marriage. The concept of 'dangerous intimacy' (Khalwat law) between unmarried and unrelated men and women in practice prohibits any physical contact (touching, holding hands, etc.). The essence of the law bans situations where such contact may take place beyond the sight of people (e.g. a dark cinema room).⁶³

As we observed, young people go on dates in such a way that the dates can be treated as a supplement to other activities. They go shopping together, they do sport, and most of all they go to restaurants. Eating seems the favorite activities for every young Malaysian we spoke to. In most cases, none of these activities are limited to the couple concerned. Predominantly (with the exception of couples in their mid-30s, financially independent professionals, and those not quite in the initial stages of acquaintance), dating happens as a social activity, in a group of friends, sometimes accompanied by a sister (often younger). In many cases, the girl is being accompanied by friends/family. Also, there is a fundamental difference between teenage or professional women who want to go on a date and students. In general, professional women usually go on dates without any accompanying person. The man should not bring his colleagues unless it is a larger group of friends (this especially applies to late teens and people in early 20s). The way in which a friend 'assists' a dating couple tries to respect that couple's privacy. If on the first date, the whole group is sitting together, then the accompanying person (or people) usually withdraws beyond the sphere where they can overhear the conversation, while retaining visual contact with the dating couple. This is not a matter of control, but instead of protection against the 'unfavorable' sight of strangers. Interestingly, younger teens seem to slip away from the restrictive law and convention. Observations (stage 3 of the research) point to a fairly common practice of holding hands by young Muslim teenagers in the center of KL. This practice is very rarely seen among older couples (including married couples). We only talked with adults in this project. Comments on the dating of minors have been expressed only in the context of the memories of the people we spoke to and observations. During interviews, some male interviewees confirmed they would be happy to 'correct' (however, this word has then been later replaced by 'to express my opinion to') a couple on the street that behave, in the interviewees' opinion, inappropriately. However, it has been acknowledged that the majority of young people in KL would not accept these kinds of comments.

It is important to note that when asked to define public space, respondents and interviewees listed almost every possible space that is not domestic space. For different people, 'public space' could be a park, square, shopping mall, sports arena or cinema. The most 'typical' public space is a restaurant. When asked to define what makes a restaurant public, the answer was 'sitting places' and '... it is not a stressful [place]' and 'people are enjoying being there' (Female interviewee 1). Some participants refer to the traditional Malay house as a private space that could easily be transformed into public space for a particular occasion like a wedding or ceremony. None of the participants (even if

some of them are practicing architects or architecture students, some of them educated in Western countries) were able to define clearly what public, private and (semi) public space is in KL. In any case, visibility seems the most fundamental aspect of space defined as public:

[Female interviewee 2]: By public I mean that a commoner like me can enter. Usually it is an open area or an enclosed area where people can see what we're doing visibly. I do not think places such as KTV or clubs are public spaces.

[Researcher]: So, you said that you want to be seen, can you explain why?

[Female interviewee 2]: Isn't that obvious? I hang out with my friends – I don't really want to go to some private space because it feels uncomfortable!

Visibility is also important as a more specific spatial organization. When dating couples sit, they tend to choose places that are not too exposed, but they definitely avoid 'intimate', hidden, dark, or obscured spaces. In addition, safety and security, especially for solo females, is seemed to be an important factor:

[Female interviewee 3]: . . . the cases that happened before such as one that kidnapped at the basement of the shopping mall – if you remember the case – are important factors. Females have to take care of themselves as Muslim women. The parks are hot and humid and without trees for shading. They are not like the parks in the UK. In Malaysia, people can hide behind the bushes or hidden places at parks. Parents with kids usually use the parks in Malaysia especially during the daylight. In some cases, if there is a restaurant or café inside the parks, people usually go there for eating!

[Researcher]: So, there should be always a secondary reason like sitting, eating or shopping? Why do you need the second reason?

[Female interviewee 3]: I need a reason to go to the park, rather than just hanging around. People will look at us suspiciously, if we do not seem reasonable. We do not date in parks!

As we mentioned earlier, when dating, people attempt to locate themselves in places where they cannot be overheard but can be seen. Focusing on shopping malls in Malaysia, there are other contributing factors that led people to choose the malls as spaces for social interactions and meetings, such as convenience, their multi-functional use, such as watching a movie and other activities, easy access to parking lots, and a lack of pedestrian routes in other civic spaces. Regarding transnational Islamic behaviors, one participant (Female interviewee 4) believes that

. . . when I am in a western country like the UK, I should be more careful about my behaviors in public because I am the representative of the Malaysian Muslim women in another country.

In another interview, one participant (Female interviewee 5) emphasized,

Segregating gender is based on the Islamic teachings to avoid physical contacts when you are unmarried and also being attached to Halal (permissible) and Haram (forbidden) concept in Islam, and as well to avoid *Fitna* [Arabic word meaning trouble]. Islamic rules are more based on avoidance – prevention is better than cure – and to avoid *Fitna* (trouble), people go to shopping malls in groups. For example, imagine that you have sexual intercourse before marriage and get pregnant – this is disastrous.

She continued that

. . . arranged marriage was the prevalent tradition for a long time until the recent times that young people decide to go on dates. However, in this process, mutual friends usually act as matchmakers.

In the case of a male that is going on a date, the conditions are not the same:

[Male interviewee 1]: To bring a girl somewhere else is ok for guys. Usually, girls do bring someone else. Cinemas and parks as quiet places where no one interrupt could be good options for dating. However, everything is about morality. Intimacy before marriage is prohibited according to religion. Technically cinemas are dark and dangerous places according to more conservative views. Sometimes a third person sits in the middle.

He added,

Before the year 2000 or so, going on a date was very shameful for the families, but in recent years it has become very common, especially among young people.

When they walk or shop, but also in restaurants, it seems to be a common practice for dating couples to occupy 'ordinary' places, not in the center of sight but also not hidden. It is acceptable when something obscures the view a little bit, but never too much. The interviews we have conducted show a moderate emotional closeness between dating couples. Perhaps, this is due to the age of the people we talked to, and maybe this is due to the very mechanics of dating, which make it very difficult to build more intimate relationships. Based on the participants' opinions, more intimate behaviors like hugging and kissing in public are not common, even in the case of married couples. Sharing meals, doing shopping, or even walking in groups helps explore the conventions and behaviors accepted by smaller or larger social groups (friends, family, or/and general public), but intimacy seems to be established elsewhere – at schools, universities, or at work. There, however, the experience of being with another person is also mediated, and could be seen only as a proxy of behaviors directly related to other activities (work, study). In this context, the relatively high proportion of divorces among Malaysian Muslims (around 20% nationwide, over 30% in KL) should not be particularly surprising.

Since a date is framed and publicly presented as the 'added activity', it is obvious that preferred meeting places should be 'ordinary', preferably diners and cafes. Very rarely do couples go to more luxurious and more expensive places for a date. This is partly due to the lack of funds among the people we talked with, but an equally important reason is to avoid highlighting the 'uniqueness' of the meeting (therefore, one can expect no gifts, no flowers, or even exquisite clothing). A date should look as 'ordinary' as possible. Parks are usually avoided as meeting places – because the couple risk being identified as 'on a date'. Aversion to meeting in the park, where couples are 'in sight' (there are of course exceptions – especially couples practicing sport together) shows us that places in a Western narrative defined as public spaces, are seen in KL as spaces of (potentially oppressive) gaze.

There is obviously a strong element of oppressive sight:

Kuala Lumpur is not the only city where stories of surveillance and harassment circulate, although the forms of the reported watching may be distinctive. (. . .) Overwhelmingly the stories referred to the religious issue and to roles of various moral guardians, both official and self-appointed, watching and occasionally harassing Muslims to ensure their conformity with imagined standards of proper behavior.⁶⁴

However, we believe there is a room for rejection of this sight based on the private, intimate relationship each believer has with Allah. In fact, we are dealing with 'two gazes' at the same time

– one is the gaze of the omnipresent Allah, the other is the gaze of other believers. Each person, therefore, needs to negotiate at the same time her or his position in relation to Allah and other people, but these relationships are always dialectical. All believers (people who are looked upon and people who are looking) are negotiating their position in relation to Allah and the position they believe Allah would expect them to take in front of other people.

Conclusion: decolonizing the notion of public space

The question that underpins our investigation of non-private urban space in an Islamic context is the question of how useful the western concept of public space in KL really is. Public space, understood as an empty space (void), providing free and inclusive access, where unplanned encounters can happen and where individuals can express themselves, simply do not exist in KL. This does not mean, however, that there is only a homogeneous magma of privatized, controlled space. To the contrary, what is visible is not always audible, and spaces and activities often have several meanings, as with dating itself – a ‘hidden activity’ obscured by shopping or eating.

Understanding of cultural and religious differences is essential in the analysis of city dwellers’ usage of space in a Malaysian context. In the context of our research, public space in KL should be considered as a malleable construct of ‘visibility’, awareness, and confrontation of differences. We believe that the findings of this research allow us to question the analytical and theoretical usefulness of the (western) notion of public space. There is a need to employ a different language and different set of references to analyze spaces in KL (and potentially other non-Western cities), and this article is intended to take few initial steps into that still unknown territory.

The aim of this article goes beyond just the question of public space in an Islamic city, because there are multiple factors that strongly influence the usage of spaces in the city such as the tropical climate, the colonial past, the historically predominant presence of the Chinese community in KL (and also other religious groups), and finally the forces of global capitalism eroding any idea of public ownership (or absence of the idea of public ownership whatsoever). Because of these different forces that influence the shape of space in KL, Islam is only one of many factors that need to be considered when asking the question of the appropriateness of the term ‘public space’. However, Islamic thought also gives us a chance to discuss possibilities of a different, non-Western (non-Christian, liberal, post-Enlightenment) discourse on urban spaces, especially on a dichotomy of public–private. We would argue that in the context of KL, Islamic thought may be the starting point (taken in the further research together with Hindu and Buddhist thought) in any attempt to decolonize discourse on urban theory and practice. This article focused on dating practices among young Muslims and we predominantly use Islamic thought as the tool to dismantle Western discourse of public spaces. The presence of Christians, Hindu, Buddhists, and followers of other religions influence the way in which spaces in KL are used – further research is needed to analyze these different religious influences in detail.

The purpose of this article is to open the discussion and sketch possible lines of future research, rather than to formulate definitive conclusions, however, we believe that findings of our research contribute to new, decolonized theoretical and practical approaches to urban spaces in KL. Urban space in KL should not be described along the lines of a private–public dichotomy. In this city, space is constructed in reaction to the perceived gaze of the omnipresent Allah. This gaze is mediated externally (by society) and internally (as a set of rules based on personal faith), but the importance of an intimate relationship between a believer and Allah should never be underestimated. We argue that there is no emptiness in KL. Space is constructed as an extension and/or mutation of personal, intimate space, put in the context of other personal spaces under the gaze of the all-seeing Allah.

Social and commercial spaces seem to ‘shield’ users (by changing their status from male/female into consumers) against the oppressive gaze of the judgmental society and only the home, personal and intimate space seems to protect (allow) human freedom. However, a simple reversal of the western liberal model to place the oppression (control) outside and the freedom inside the house (private space) seems wrong. Family relationships are also hierarchical and regulated by both religion and convention. It seems that space in KL is fundamentally constructed, with the dominant principle of controlling (and self-controlling) gaze penetrating this space. The ‘unnatural’ (artificial/constructed) essence of space (built environment ‘covering’ natural land) and visibility seem the most important aspects while discussing space in KL. Therefore, the conventional, Western liberal notion of public space does not seem to be analytically useful in KL, and we would suggest considering urban space as a kind of series of granular social spaces in which moments and spheres of intimacy are built as temporary situations (expanded, mutating, interacting privacy) rather than permanent installations. When we define spaces in KL as constructed and ‘artificial’, we mean they are multi-coded and they have layers of different meanings. The efficient usage of non-private spaces is based on an ability to construct and manipulate these meanings. It is constantly reconstructed as a coexistence of personal spaces. It is never empty.

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