The Rise of 'Pop Islam' in Britain
Sarah Gwilliam

Second, third, and fourth generation British Muslim youth have found themselves in a precarious situation in the wake of the first major wave of Muslim immigrants to Britain in the 1960s and 1970s.[1] In response to the challenges brought on by the struggle between various types of Islamic practices and the pressures of British popular culture, a new wave of Islam is emerging—a tendency in fashion, music, and media that I refer to as 'Pop Islam.'[2] This essay defines and traces the trajectory of an emerging Pop Islam in relation to the identity struggle facing British Muslim youth. This is an important cultural trend to recognize because it shows an adaptability that allows these youth to redefine their systems of belief while addressing twenty-first century issues about personal-religious beliefs and British national identity.

Currently, Islam is the second largest religion in Britain with an estimated two million Muslims and approximately one third of them under the age of eighteen[3]. These young people have to forge their own path and form an Islam that caters to their generation and daily life: "An Islam spoken in a familiar language, not only linguistically but in terms relevant to popular culture and capable of integrating popular British culture with Islam."[4] In order to maintain their Muslim identity, British Muslim youth make changes that their more conservatively raised Muslim parents may not encourage or endorse. When these parents attempt to impart their traditional beliefs to their children, the children struggle to live in modern pop culture-influenced British society due to what they see as a divergence of lifestyles. Islam taught by local *imams* (religious teachers) also faces this problem with an "inability of many young Muslims to relate to *imams*[5]." My conception of Pop Islam shows that these same youth are re-analyzing, rethinking

and restating the tenets of Islam. Pop Islam is simply a way for these youth to incorporate pop culture into their practiced religion through fashion, music, and media while also remaining committed to the Pillars of Islam.

Nowhere is this tension more visible to the outside world than in the realm of fashion. Fashion has always been an integral part of popular culture—it is one of the easiest ways to self-identify and is ever changing to meet new cultural demands. Historically, young Muslims (especially women) have not been able to shop for clothing in shopping malls and on street corners because "proper" modest clothing was not readily available. Additionally, clothing distributers and designers lacked a fundamental understanding of the modesty demands of the Islamic faith. As a result, young women were often restricted to the reserved clothing and scarves of their native homelands, which did not allow for subtle integration into Western society. But times are changing. British Muslim youth can now shop at trendy stores, such as H&M, Topshop, and Harrods, like their contemporaries because *Muslimah* (female Muslim) fashion is also changing to meet the times.

The idea of layering (wearing different articles of clothing on top of each other) has opened up a world of fashion, allowing youth to modify, in a conservative way, what their non-muslim counterparts wear on a daily basis. This is an example of a blending of Islamic values with pop culture. In order to address their religious and cultural needs for modesty, *Muslimahs* have altered previous beliefs about how they should dress. There is a growing tendency for *Muslimahs* to rid themselves of the *abaya* or *jilbab* (long robe). Instead, they wear long skirts or pants with long shirts or short dresses on top. Many extremely popular blogs based out of Britain provide *Muslimahs* with 'how to' columns

and weekly updates. Welovehijab.com (*hijab* is the head scarf worn by many Muslim women) is an up-to-date blog offering style advice, including how to take celebrity outfits and make them *Muslimah* appropriate.[6] They also feature young women of the month and have columns such as "Hijab Don't," most recently on avoiding clingy cotton materials. HijabStyle.blogspot.com is a blog with current news related to *Muslimah* fashion, recently featuring Pink Hijab Day, a charity day to raise money for breast cancer.[7] Caribmuslimah.wordpress.com is a website that puts together outfits for different occasions, discusses the virtues of each one, and provides information on where to buy the individual pieces.[8] I address this distribution of information through the blogosphere in a later section, but as these examples demonstrate, when blogs act as delivery mechanisms in this way, they help to shape British Muslim youth identity at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Of course, the *abaya* and *jilbab* have not disappeared; instead, many designers now choose to create *abayas* to match contemporary fashion. Designer *abayas* walked the runway last year in a London fashion show; *jilbabs* in bright colors with ruffles and pockets are abundant, and long robes with athletic apparel appearance can be purchased in many *Muslimah* boutiques in Britain. Silk Route Clothing is a London-based clothing company specializing in abayas, whose tag line is, "faith is the seed of confidence, through dress it finds expression, stay confident with Silk Route."[9] Silk Route presents itself as "provid[ing] for the 21st century Muslimah with style, fashion and confidence without compromising on modesty."[10] *Hijabs* are still popular, whether one wears a long robe or modest clothing. Many different fabrics are used, and scarves come in a variety of

colors and textures supplemented with yards of fabric or sarongs. In addition to fabric, the variety of ways in which one can acceptably tie a *hijab* has broadened.

Overall, modest fashion is more of an issue for *Muslimahs* than for Muslim men. In general, Muslim young men have adopted clothing that is identical to that of other British youth. For females, fashion has come a long way, enabling them to combine their religious beliefs with popular fashion to create a new practice. They have individually contemplated their religion and come to terms with a new modest style. This trend allows these youth to adapt to a noticeable pop-cultural phenomenon within their own cultural and religious comfort zone. Pop Islam in the realm of fashion needed to be created by *Muslimahs* because they were struggling with modesty regulations in a less-modest pop culture society.

Albeit less visible in modern British society than fashion, Islamic music exemplifies the adaption of British popular culture within the movement of Pop Islam. Some Muslim thinkers have criticized Islamic music and in the past this music has generally been limited to the call to prayer and *dhikr*, or Qur'anic recitation and chanting. One critique is that this music leads people away from the right path and is simply not permissible.[11] They feel that the word of Allah is too sacred to be put to something as profane as music. In Britain, Muslim youth challenge this tradition by rallying around Muslim rap and hip-hop artists. For new artists, such as Mos Def, Jurassic 5, DJ Mumin, and Mecca 2 Medina (to name a few), music is extremely pervasive and is the perfect opportunity to reach out to youth. They also believe that popular music, particularly rap, has always carried a message, whether that of inequality, drugs, or hardship, and that Islam can *become* a new message conveyed through rap. While Muslim hip-hop and rap

face criticism, they receive just as much support from a youth culture hungry for music and entertainment that speaks directly to their experience. The president of The Muslim College in London stated on a BBC Radio Special that there is a "right tune for the right people at the right time…music elevates necessary emotion… [music] has the ability to speak to kids in a way they understand."[12]

DJ Mumin explained to TX Unlimited's[13] Iyare that Muslim rap and hip-hop have their roots in music from the Zulu Nation. The Zulu Nation, an international hip-hop awareness group that works to reintroduce hip-hop in a less derogatory light while advocating youth betterment, spread to the UK in the 1980s. Such advocacy, through the Zulu Nation, DJ Mumin, and others, brought Islam to the forefront of the musical stage in Britain. Mecca 2 Medina is another rap group at the head of this movement. The group consists of four Muslim DJs who have taken traditional *nasheed* music (Islamically oriented music that is traditionally performed only with drums) and added modern concepts, such as newer age instrumentals and computer generated sound. Mecca 2 Medina believes in the aims of *nasheed* music, of praising Allah, the Prophets and in promoting good deeds, and believes it is making this praise music more acceptable to youth culture. Titles from their newest album, entitled 'Truthseekers' include 'don't dis the prophet,' 'shine your light,' and 'No boy band,' whose chorus is "here is something you must understand, Mecca 2 Medina is no boy band, here is something you must understand, we are praising Allah, the king of the land."[14]

Not only are these artists spreading the word of Islam, they are becoming role models for Muslim youth. These artists promote Islam and adhere to Muslim practices including clothing modesty. Many famous *Muslimah* artists perform while wearing

hijabs, and the men refrain from wearing offensive clothing. These artists are breaking with the Islam of their parents to find a crossroads between popular music culture and their religious beliefs. They are opening new paths of worship and spreading the word of Allah. It is important to keep in mind that not only are rap and hip-hop growing but a new wave of pop *nasheed* music is also growing, as exemplified by Sami Yusuf and the popularity of his Islamic songs. These British Muslim youth have practiced *ijtihad*[15], independent reasoning about Islam and Islamic practices, to decide that music promoting their religion can and should be allowed in the times in which they are living.

In a post-September 11 world, research on the media and Islam is usually solely restricted to the negative bias that the media is said to have against Islam. It rarely focuses on the positive effects of mass media, especially in regards to Islamic issues. Today, media and the easy transfer of information help Muslim youth in Britain stay connected and accept their dual Islamic and European identities. Mass media is a forum in which popular culture can meet Islam in this new wave of Pop Islam while at the same time spreading Islam's message. While satellite television plays a major role in the spread of Islam, local television in Britain tends to reflect more immediate issues to British Muslim youth.

Local British broadcasting stations have recently started showing Islam-related television to both appease their Muslim viewers and to capitalize on the large number of Muslim youth of viewing age. The most obvious example of Muslim local television is Islam Channel: it is an English language TV station broadcast in London for the UK, and aims to

provid[e] alternative news, current affairs and entertainment programming from an Islamic perspective…since its launch in 2004 Islam Channel has developed into a platform for ingenious and practical television…to appeal to both Muslims and non-Muslims…ultimately conveying Islam in its true form to curious non-Muslims and to further educate Muslims. [16]

The channel provides an Islamic addition to popular media with over thirty programs including, 'Pillars of Islam,' which discusses the modern need for these fundamentals, 'Muslimah Dilemma,' which focuses on social women's issues, 'Politics and Beyond,' a political news hour,[17] and most recently, 'Faith Off,' an interfaith game show.[18] Not only does this type of media allow for religious identity to meet with popular culture, it does so in a way that spreads this movement throughout the UK.

Amr Khalid is an Egyptian preacher based out of England who speaks on empowering youth of the new generation. He preaches on the flexibility of Islam and its ability to adapt to the society in which it it finds itself. According to an article on German website Qantara.de, one young girl says, "We follow him on TV…the whole family is convinced by what he says. We hope he'll make more appearances…for the young generation above all."[19] The media provides Amr with the outlet he needs, be it television, the internet or podcasts, to expand his message for the issues Muslim youth face in Britain. Another example of the use of local television is the Canadian produced children's show *Adam's World,* often thought of as the Islamic Sesame Street. This show caters to younger children and is crucial to introducing them to Islamic ideals while teaching them how to handle secular world issues in an Islamic fashion. One review of *Adam's World* says, "With the media bombarding our children with sex and violence, we need to communicate Islam to this next generation of Muslims in a way that is both

educational and appealing to them."[20] It is this idea of a personalized Islam that is explicit in Pop Islam.

The internet is obviously the most widely used, easiest to access, and most influential media source available to people today, allowing people to network, shop, publish, search databases and blog, all at the tips of their fingers. In fact, a vast majority of the fashion advice I analyze comes from blogs by female Muslim youth, sharing their cultural understandings of fashion and Islam with an online audience. Listserves and online magazines of all subjects have also increased in number. The Platform Magazine[21] is "Your Original Muslim Hip Hop Source," and can be subscribed to online. iMuslimah "is an online magazine and social network site for Muslim women. Create a profile; discuss hot topics, seek advice, or just vent in your personal journal; read and comment on articles about love, life, faith, and more…"[22] The internet helps people with similar interests connect with each other while simultaneously spreading Pop Islam to larger, more diverse audiences. It helps those who are interested in Pop Islam (or even those within the movement) to find each other, get advice, and learn from each other's experiences.

Pop Islam has emerged within the British Muslim youth community as an alternative to the perceived mutual exclusivity of Islam and popular British culture. Pop Islam offers an alternative discourse within already established practices, helping alleviate pressures of identity. Because Pop Islam is an interpretive structure it allows these youth to make their own judgments and infer from their religion what they feel makes sense for their twenty-first century, pop culture infused British lives. As a

personalized youth movement, Pop Islam allows these youth to take what they need and want from religious practices.

Fashion, music, and media are by no means the only popular culture realms that are affected by Pop Islam, but they are among the most evident to a non-Islamic Western society. The changes in fashion, music, and media are setting the stage for other realms of popular culture to adapt as they have. Current Muslim youth will continue the trend of blending pop culture and Islam until they feel that they can be both fully integrated members of British society and religious Muslims at the same time, in this way perhaps acting as mediators for old and new versions of Islam.

For future Muslim youth, this can potentially mean that they may face less of a struggle over their dual identity, as their parents (the current generation) will have at least started the process of overcoming this dichotomy. Muslim youth in Britain are changing and therefore the overall Islam of Britain will eventually also change as the generations age. Pop Islam has allowed many British Muslim youth to embrace and participate in both their religion and British popular culture.

[1] Peter Mandaville, "Muslim Youth in Europe," *in Islam in Europe and the United States: a comparative perspective*, ed. Shireen Hunter (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002), 1.

[2] German academic Julia Gerlach has used this concept of "popular Islam" in a recent book yet to be translated into English "*Zwischen Pop und Dischihad"*, a larger version of this project will treat my conception of "Pop Islam" next to hers:

Julia Gerlach, *Zwischen Pop und Dschihad. Muslimische Jugendliche in Deutschland* (Frankfurt, Germany: Verlag Ch. Links, 2006).

[3] Barbara Franz, "Europe's Muslim Youth: An Inquiry into the Politics of Discrimination, Relative Deprivation, and Identity Formation," Mediterranean Quarterly Online 18, no. 1 (2007). http://mq.dukejournals.org/cgi/reprint/18/1/89.pdf, December 2007, 92.

[4] Mandaville, "Muslim Youth," 4.

[5] Ibid 3.

[6] "We Love Hijab," http://welovehijab.com/, Accessed November 2008-April 2009.

[7] "Hijab Style,"http://www.hijabstyle.blogspot.com/, Accessed November 2008-April 2009.

[8] "Carib Muslimah, "http://caribmuslimah.wordpress.com/, Accessed November 2008-April 2009.

[9] Homepage, "Silk Route Clothing," http://www.silkrouteclothing.com/, Accessed Nov 2008- April 2009.

[10] About, "Silk Route Clothing," http://www.silkrouteclothing.com/, Accessed Nov 2008-April 2009.

[11] BBC Radio Special 1Xtra, "Islamic Hip-Hop." http://www.bbc.co.uk/1xtra/tx/documentaries/islamichiphop.shtml, Accessed Nov 2009-April 2009

[12] Ibid.

[13] TX Unlimited is a BBC broadcaster from the aforementioned radio broadcast.

[14] "Lyrics," Mecca 2 Medina Myspace, http://www.myspace.com/mecca2medina, Accessed Nov 2008-April 2009.

[15] "Ijtihad," Oxford Islamic Studies Online, http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t243/e150?_hi=0&_pos=1, Accessed 14 November 2008.

[16] "About," Islam Channel, http://www.islamchannel.tv/aboutus.aspx, Accessed Nov 2008-April 2009.

[17] 'About Us' Islam Channel, http://www.islamchannel.tv/aboutus.aspx, Accessed Nov 2008-April 2009.

[18] "Interfaith Game Show," Bajan Global Report Blog, http://bimchat.wordpress.com/2008/06/06/muslim-tv-channel-launches-britains-first-interfaith-game-show/, 2 December 2008.

[19] Qantara.de is German a website providing 'Dialogue with the Islamic World' including many pertinent articles; including an article on Amr Khaled. While this website is outside of the UK, it is a good example of the globalizing affect the media has. http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-478/_nr-373/i.html.

[20] Soundvision.com is an 'Islamic Information and Products' webpage including an online store and review or products, including *Adam's World,* http://www.soundvision.com/Shop/pview.asp?Item=110-051.

[21] Although their official website is down since my research (http://www.theplatformag.com/index.php), the magazine can be viewed on their Myspace page at http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendID=153887847.

[22]IMuslimah, http://imuslimah.com/, Accessed Nov 2008-April 2009.

Bibliography

"About," Silk Route Clothing, http://www.silkrouteclothing.com/, Nov 2008-April 2009.

"About Us," Islam Channel Home, http://www.islamchannel.tv/aboutus.aspx, Nov 2008-April 2009.

Ahmed, Akbar, *Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization.* Harrisonburg, VA: Brookings Institute, 2007.

"Archives: Modesty Makeover," We Love Hijab, http://welovehijab.com/, http://welovehijab.com/2008/10/28/modesty-makeover-blake-lively/, Nov 2008-   April 2009.

"Archives: Pink Hijab Day Today," Hijab Style: the UK's First Style Guide for Women, http://www.hijabstyle.blogspot.com/, Nov 2008-April 2009.

Bajan Global Report, "Muslim TV Channel Launches Britain's First Interfaith Game Show," http://bimchat.wordpress.com/2008/06/06/muslim-tv-channel-launches-britains-first-interfaith-game-show/, Nov 2008-April 2009.

BBC; The British Broadcasting Company Radio 1Xtra, "Islamic hip hop documentary," http://www.bbc.co.uk/1xtra/tx/documentaries/islamichiphop.shtml, Nov 2008-April 2009.

"Cherry Baby and Jumah Dress," Islamic Fashion: A Blog Dedicated to the Stylish Muslimah, http://caribmuslimah.wordpress.com/, Nov 2008-April 2009.

Franz, Barbara. "Europe's Muslim Youth: An Inquiry into the Politics of Discrimination, Relative Deprivation, and Identity Formation." *Mediterranean Quarterly Online.* Winter 2007, http://mq.dukejournals.org/cgi/reprint/18/1/89.pdf, December 2007.

Gerlach, Julia, *Zwischen Pop und Dschihad. Muslimische Jugendliche in Deutschland* Frankfurt, Verlag Ch. Links, 2006.

Harrold Hill Home: A People's History, "Margaret Thatcher: Reggae, Royalty and Riots," http://www.haroldhill.org/chapter-three/margaret-thatcher-reggae-royalty-riots.htm, Nov 2008-April 2009.

"Home," Silk Route Clothing, http://www.silkrouteclothing.com/, Nov 2008-April 2009.

"Home," I'm iMuslimah, http://imuslimah.com/, Nov 2008-April 2009.

"Ijtihad." In *The Islamic World: Past and Present*. Ed. John L. Esposito. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*. http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t243/e150, 3 Dec 2008.

Mandaville, Peter. "Muslim Youth in Europe." *Islam in Europe and the United States : a comparative perspective*, ed. Shireen Hunter, Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002.

MySpace.Com: A Place for Friends, "Mecca 2 Medina homepage," http://www.myspace.com/mecca2medina, Nov 2008-April 2009.

MySpace.Com: A Place for Friends, "Platform Magazine Now Available homepage," http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewProfile&friendID=124687655, Nov 2008-April 2009.

"Programmes," Islam Channel Home, http://www.islamchannel.tv/ShowMajorPrograms.aspx, Nov 2008-April 2009.

Qantara.de: Dialogue with the Islamic World, "Amr Khaled: I want to move Arabic Youth!" http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-478/_nr-373/i.html, Nov 2008-April 2009.

Soundvision.com: Islamic Information and Products, "Adam's World Description," http://www.soundvision.com/Shop/pview.asp?Item=110-051, Nov 2008-April   2009.