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City

analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action

ISSN: 1360-4813 (Print) 1470-3629 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccit20

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Islam and the temporalities of contemporary urbanization

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To cite this article: AbdouMaliq Simone (2020) The shift, City, 24:1-2, 255-262, DOI: 10.1080/13604813.2020.1739929

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2020.1739929

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Islam and the temporalities of contemporary urbanization

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Whereas religious practice has conventionally been associated with the stabilization of urban processes through social anchorage and the mobilization of common identity, it does also entail a sense of continuously shifting perspectives. Urbanity is seen and experienced through multiple prisms and possibilities, something that Islamic concepts related to circulation, displacement and intersection have long emphasized. Currently a politics of mobilizing religious practices is key to understanding how the social fabric of cities is remade, and this essay discusses its limits and possibilities.

For many years in both my personal and professional life I have grappled with the uncertain relationships between sustaining a radical, transformative analysis of urbanization and what might be construed as an Islamic practice of urban living. Of course there is no fundamental reason for having to make these sensibilities relate. Certainly radical political traditions across a broad Left have been replete with various commitments to secularism, to biblical and quranic prophesy, and to highly individualized expressions of faith. And certainly millions of Muslim professionals pursue the objectives of their work while keeping the details of their religious devotion quite separate. As the Quran has made quite clear, there is an implicit interrelatedness of all things without the need for that interrelatedness to be conceptualized and understood in the specific vernaculars of whatever is accepted as Islamic practice in a given historical context.

Keywords **religion, politics, hijra, Indonesia, urban transformation**
URL https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2020.1739929

But I believe that continuously forging workable, and not necessarily definitive, connections between the shaping of urbanization processes and religious practice are increasingly important. In past decades, religion itself constitutes an important force in the remaking of urban life—in its organization of everyday rhythms, the mobilization of political sentiment, the shaping of household arrangements, the marking of fault lines of social conflict, and the production of social capital. While religion as urban force is certainly nothing new, I am particularly concerned with the way in which a revitalized intensity of religious discourse and preoccupation occurs at a time when the horizons of an urban modernity, significantly extended to encompass large numbers of a new middle class across the Global South, now appear to be shrinking. Most postcolonial governments had issued guarantees that a disciplined urban population would be able to concretize the worthiness of their lives through an increased capacity to consume—goods, education, services, and opportunity.

States once availed stable civil service employment and subsidized entrepreneurship, crafted behaviors and sensibilities under the auspices of respectability. What was important for individual success was to distance oneself from the visceral, rambunctious vernaculars of reciprocal trade-offs, the intermingling of household economies and affections, and displays of thuggery usually associated with low-income settlement life. Rather, affective intensity was to be traded for a more disciplined pursuit of well-mannered accumulation, playing by the rules, postponing immediate gratification for long-term visions of individual success. It was important to demonstrate increasing distance from communities of the poor and prove one's eligibility to be noticed and taken seriously by an urban elite. In this way, emerging middle class households were managed as if they were really in 'the middle of things'; that through hard work, as opposed to inherited privilege, demeaning physical labor, or trickery, they constituted the necessary moral underpinning of urban growth, cemented in the acquisition of property and propriety; that propriety was attainable through considering one's lifetime as a property to be cultivated, a value to be maximized.

But today, in cities such as Jakarta, Karachi, Kolkata, Cairo, Lagos, or Sao Paolo, there is widespread apprehensiveness about what this elaboration of the middle has actually attained. An expansion of consumption has certainly taken place—cars, motorbikes, appliances, leisure, education, suburban property, and investment assets. But, there has been growing dissatisfaction with the implications of these material attainments, a growing recognition that livelihoods will not continue to improve, that an impermeable glass ceiling now blocks any further upward trajectory.

As in many countries, this consumption has been fueled through cheap debt, even when incomes have not grown. Increasingly the lives of residents are mined as sources of continuous income streams as households never seem to be able to completely pay off what they accrue. Everyone must try to do better and will have to incur more debt in order to do so. Many might hope that in some way, religious performance becomes a currency, a means of expenditure where the obligations are clear, as well as the horizons and objective of indebtedness. But every time such currency is 'spent', it still remains unclear and contested as to its authenticity and even purpose.

The poor and the oppressed have long sought refuge in the mosque, church, shrine, or temple, both as a venue of aspiration away from precarious life and as a means of collective empowerment. The intensification of religious affiliation on the part of a nascent middle class seems rather to seek out forms of solidarity that have diminished in the past decades of livelihoods and socialities that have become intensely individualized. This intensification seeks to establish an alternative language of everyday negotiation, access, and advancement. The intense competition for opportunity and jobs, the increased costs of failure, the exigencies for effective means of self-promotion, the widespread use of social media as a means of disseminating stories of success, and the accelerated turnover of the trappings of well-being all combine to heighten the search for accessible ways of demonstrating self-worth.

For some, the constant need to demonstrate such self-worthiness is increasingly experienced as a trap. Instead, the concern is to what extent is a life worth living necessarily found in the cultivation of being a proper citizen or a proper devotee. What does it mean to always have to possess oneself, to bring one's practices, desires, and proclivities within the confines of a proper life? After all, this is a world where dispossession—often without accumulation—is an all too frequent tool of governance. Large numbers of residents are not only dispossessed of their land, homes, and capacities to make a life, but also dispossessed of the ability to forge a coherent story about what is happening to them.

Rather than consolidating a fixed position, an identifiable character or story, or a clearly readable life trajectory, some younger residents are asking, what is wrong with making lives on the run, of having many different versions of oneself, of being dispossessed of the consent to be a single being? This is not to romanticize the position of incessant mobility, of being different things at different times. After all, the embrace of the discipline of Pentecostalism on the part of former gang members in Salvador or Honduras who have spent most of their lives in prison, or the attendance at all night prayer meetings by Congolese young women who otherwise face a life a constant sexual exploitation, or pursuit of truncated, distorted ideas of jihad by young men in the bidonvilles of Casablanca who face a life without work or marriage are attempts to possess something, to hold on to the most minimal capacities to feel themselves as something.

Still, as Neferti Tadiar (2020) points out the predominant condition of our age is the war between those who are attempting to remain human at all costs and those who will probably never attain such a status, and who simply fight to retain a semblance of a life worth living—something that is rarely construed as a 'human project'. While the poor, too, have often been concerned with escaping impoverishment by doing the right thing, of adhering to standards they are materially ill equipped for, there are increasing claims from a younger generation that they are living in a situation of post-poverty. For, what they experience is less destitution than simply a refusal to have their lives judged as marginality or inadequacy. The so-called slum, instead of becoming a dumping ground or a reserve, is rather a platform from some residents propel themselves outward into the larger world, knowing that there may be no place for them there but who, nevertheless, take what they can from these excursions even if they must retreat into seemingly unliveable conditions. Precarity and anxiety may

run rampant, but residents in many Southern cities are actively constructing themselves as users of urban spaces in ways that cannot be readily computed (de Souza 2014). They distribute their lives across many games and sites, always something askew, perhaps not oppositional, perhaps sometimes complicit with entrapments. But, they also set their own traps, and compel the forcefulness of development brutalities into time-consuming digressions. With dissimulation, stealth, compassion, and a dedication to making something *passable* for now, conviction prevails that movement is possible when all the indicative signs of it have been taken away.

In Jakarta, it was precisely the relinquishing of sexual jocularity, the rough hewed manners of getting over, of solidarities based not on consensus but continuous low-grade, frequently good-humored 'warfare' that has left the middle class penned-in to a diminishing horizon of aspirations. For, the levers of power largely remain in the hands of an exhausted political elite-remaking themselves so quickly and so often that their sheer vacuity becomes proof of their right to rule.

Notice the return of the Suharto family, so often disgraced in the past two decades that it would seem inconceivable that they could return to being the object of nostalgic admiration. In majority Muslim cities, the interpretation of religious responsibility frequently consigns women, often with advanced education, to the home, from which they manage small and seldom profit-making enterprises. The rough and tumble worlds of improvised distributions of space and resources, of co-residents weaving their lives through each other's distinctive initiatives and angles on things have long been foregone. Instead, there is an ever more strict adherence to popular versions of Islamic mores more restrictive in terms of bodily comportment, secular plurality, and individual experimentation.

In Jakarta, residents sometimes talk about the need for a 'maximum exposure' to Islam. Events such as recent tsunamis in Indonesia are explained by the over-exposure of women's bodies to *the dunya* (earthly concerns rather than that of God). Some chicken farms are known to play recorded quranic verses 24/7 in the coops so that every moment of their production is maximally exposed to God. Rather than unfolding a problematic that considers how particular things and facets of life are *related* to changing vectors of Islamic practice, much of the desire involved in the current demand for an Islamicization of Indonesian society centers on a total subsumption of particularities, where there is a collapse of distinctions and thus of the very acts of having to make relations in general.

Perhaps like the so-called 'white man's burden', the middle class of today's big metropolitan regions of Brazil, Philippines, India, and Thailand, to name a few, see themselves as doubling down on their positions, not so much through a confident knowing of who they are, but in marshaling an intensifying vitriol for the backwardness and immorality of the poor, many of which are not so poor anymore, but are begrudgingly viewed as having more fun, more scope in their everyday itineraries, less tied down by debt and obligation (Bhan 2017; Sopranzetti 2018; Warburg and Jensen 2018; Tadiar 2020)

What is crucial here is the increased visibility then of a lower middle class, barely crossing a threshold of verification, that can no longer be regarded as strictly poor, that manage, even with limited assets to perform many of the

same 'rituals' conventionally associated with being middle class, but without the moral and behavioral constraints. For now, regardless of the veracity of such anxieties and perceptions, there is an emerging sense in these middle classes that another orientation is necessary. For, the urban region of Jakarta is expanding so massively and chaotically that the scope for failure is narrowing and its implications are made more debilitating.

For some, particularly lower middle class residents, obsessions with propriety are being cushioned, even digressed, with tentative explorations with 'impropriety', with the unfolding of multiple itineraries entailing more experimental relationships between the need to have a place to reside, an occupation, a household economy, and a generative social network. Inhabiting a place becomes less important than the unfolding multiple possible configurations of concretizing shelter and income streams, fulfilling household and extended family obligations, and distinctive ways of imagining the future. These itineraries entail assessments about where and how opportunities are moving across the urban region, under what conditions, and what, then, are various routes available to access them. It is a strategy based on mobility, of generating spaces of inhabitation through movement—a practice that has long been the purview of the poor.

What I believe to be the trap is a fixed relationship between piety and propriety, the belief that faithfulness to the *din* can only be expressed as a matter of the public performance of compliance. Must everything be subsumed within the terms of a single explanatory framework? It is clear that the complexities of urban life make it difficult for individuals to know what to pay attention to; when there are so many variables at work that actually or potentially impact upon one's life, how does one know which are the most important? The problems of urban life often seem intractable, with rampant anxieties as to what courses of action could really have some kind of positive effect. Given these needs for simplification, for being able to do something, religion becomes an accessible methodology that has applicability not simply to this life, but to a hereafter. Regardless of the position one assumes now, this position is reversible somewhere else, that it can be shifted, turned around, outside the judgment of others.

But what about this shift; does it necessarily have to take the form of a simplification of things? Islam does provide a formulation of such a shift in the here and now. It has historically demonstrated a method of fugitivity, in the movement from Makah to Medina, which is generalizable as a practice of dispossession, of transforming the terms through which a life worth living is to be considered. The Islamic notion of *hijra* addresses the importance of these shifts as both something temporary and continuous. Familiarity, with oneself, with an environment, and with Allah is attained not in the consolidation of position, not in defensive maneuvers against an 'out there.' Rather this familiarity entails a shift in position, through precipitating an event that enables the performance of new capacities as a means of reconciling oneself with what has been virtually present all along.

Often reduced to a notion about fleeing from oppression, *hijra* is rather the cultivation of a transformative event, a volitional suspension of the rules, the making temporary all that seems definitive. *Hijra* means being exposed

to the world, not as an established, pre-fixed geography, but as something in motion, just as the earth, with its tectonic shifts constantly rearranges itself. It is exposure to the movements of the world as that which is familiar defamiliarizes itself and finds new forms and venues of recognition.

Across the urban South residents are being uprooted, evicted, priced-out, or volitionally relocating themselves in more affordable and/or advantageous positions. In many instances the relocations are provisional in that they do not reflect even a medium-term commitment to specific places. Rather, they are interim platforms from which to further assess and act on possible strategic engagements with work and other opportunities, themselves usually provisional. The expansion of urban regions, the shift of populations to the peripheries and hinterlands entails the uncertain intersections of many disparate built environments, land uses, administrations and development trajectories.

A nascent middle class finds itself in the middle of a whirlwind of countervailing tendencies: land that is consolidated and parceled, industrial estates that are tended for agriculture for the time being, farms that become makeshift factories, all kinds of uses and ways of doing things that uneasily sit side by side. Some residents adamantly try to implant themselves in these situations, attempt to secure and consolidate. Others embrace the provisionality of their circumstances in elaborate maneuvers of covering the different angles, of dispersing household members to do different jobs in different contexts. Some simply are looking for a place to park, park their belongings or an aged parent, while they circulate, sometimes haphazardly through the urban region, getting a sense where opportunities might be, not committing themselves to anything for now.

In Jakarta, while many talk about maximizing their exposure to Islam, in these circumstances on the periphery especially, reference is also made to another mode of 'maximum exposure', where things and events are treated as detached from relational frameworks. To be maximally exposed to one's surrounds means deferring any tendency to tie details down to any ready explanation or practice of comparison. Grounded in a perception that multiple forces are at work in any particular situation, some Jakartans cite the importance of remaining open to the various and unanticipated ways these forces interact. This is particularly the case in the extended region of the city where the arrangement of the built environment and land uses are 'all over the place' making it difficult for residents to develop coherent narratives about where and how 'things are headed.' Characterized by confusing temporalities of development and decline, retrofit and ruin at different rhythms, exposure here entails an openness to engage one's surrounds in experimental trial and error fashion, not to place great investment of time and money into one way of doing things. This can be considered as a form of *hijra*.

The details of daily itineraries are less viewed as indicative of specifically defined futures that would suggest clear courses of action, based on what they knew from their prior residential situations. Rather these details—commuting, transacting, exchanging, witnessing–remain in motion, yet to be 'settled' within any framework. This is not only the exposure of bodies to a growing number of vulnerabilities, not only exposure in terms of the value of whatever assets an individual might have in their pockets or portfolios, not only exposure in terms

of the capacity of individual thoughts and feelings to be read, marketized and used to develop more proficient control systems. But this is also exposure to an 'out there', something beyond the familiar trappings of the human, beyond the trap of being human, beyond the entrapment of populations having been convinced that becoming properly human is something worth pursuing.

Given these different connotations of exposure, that outside to be exposed to may not strategically be some sense of flourishing over there, some image of emancipation or availing of rights to all. Rather the 'out there' may simply be something within the most banal of landscapes, within miles of faceless apartment blocks, within long stretches of mass produced storage facilities, cheap hotels, strip malls, and faded industrial zones. That 'out there' might be rather the possibility of an 'anything whatsoever', a mode of visibility where it is difficult to tell for sure what something is, what something contains or embodies. That 'out there' may best be seen as a compression of multiplicities, a capacity for anyone to read something about themselves into a particular situation.

Rather than having a specific destination in mind or an idea of fulfillment or accomplishment, the urban majority is showing significant signs of opting rather for a kind of maximum exposure, not to the truth of a particular situation—even as obsessions with religiosity are growing—but rather to an absence of clarity, to a background of prolific details not yet or if ever organized into a coherent narrative of development, of what it means to be human. Here, exposure is to the possibilities of auto-construction—but not autoconstruction of a home, a community or a way of life, but more so to the viability of making up itineraries as one goes along. While such practice can be construed as a kind of flexibility, it goes beyond this as an active charting out of specific pathways in the midst of the experience of navigating—pathways that might not be apparent before the actual acts of moving.

What I seek to emphasize in these invocations of *hijra* are the possible ways in which religion, and Islam in particular, is capable of moving with contemporary urbanization processes and not simply act as defensive maneuver or compensation for those unable to fully come to grips with their implications. While many of the practices to which I am referring may not explicitly take place under overt reference to Islamic practice, we as Muslims have long been instructed to seek out the revelatory in that which is least familiar, that which on the surface would seem the least capable of embodying important truths. As such, that which appears to be the most mundane, wasted or banal might hold within it the capacities for transformations under the radar. We are well aware of the extent to which lives are scrutinized and surveyed. We are aware of the capacities to target those construed as threats, whether it is in drone strikes, police killings, or the silent, inexplicable exclusions from the possibilities of living or working somewhere. How to forge solidarities and ways of working together under the radar are all the more important.

Take the residues of old working class districts in the urban cores of Jakarta or Karachi. The grinding repetitiveness of labor across small factories and workshops conceals other rhythms made up of rash experiments and investments, sudden decisions to take up different trades temporarily, retreats into distant shrines, surges of sometimes amphetamine extended work hours, surprise visits, convivial exchanges that cannot find a ready conclusion.

The day in and day out may resound, but it provides cover for many other itineraries. Political participation often takes place behind the scenes in the everyday transactions that residents, contractors, and workers have with each other. Hierarchies are everywhere, a certain few walk away with the bulk of the proceeds of a district's overall productivity. But the back alleys are also replete with ebbs and flows of success and failure, sudden spurts of money and uneven droughts. From mosque to mosque, bureaucracy to bureaucracy, and factory to factory, there are both official and unofficial emissaries suturing predictable and unexpected outcomes. Everything shifts to the side one way or another; it is possible for residents not to get stuck. This is another instance of the shift of *hijra*.

In Surat al-Mujadillah, Allah says, '*O you who have faith, when you are told, Make room, in sittings, then make room. Allah will make room for you*.' Here, gatherings can take place anywhere, under any auspices. Like the tradition of the wild mosque that proliferated in Algeria during the 1970s and 80's, the call to prayer directed the faithful not to a specific building but to a gathering wherever people were. Such gatherings were not simply to perform the duty to prayer, but to gather up whoever was around for a quick discussion about the daily events, about the perspectives each of those gathered had about what was taking place in immediate surrounds and beyond. For Allah could make room for everyone gathered.

In the uncertain, tentative landscapes of cheap constructions, the rollout of homogenous buildings, and makeshift housing that make up the enlarged urban peripheries, there remain the possibilities of gatherings. These are peripheries that often fall in between the cracks of administrative jurisdiction. It is not always evident what, if any governmental authority is taking care of the territory being formed. Still, in all gatherings, bodies must be sustained, cared for, rested, enlivened and reproduced. But how this takes place, within increasingly uncertain conditions, may no longer coincide with conventional notions of household, neighborhood, occupational sector, or social identities. New forms of life worth living are emerging that perhaps have little to do with the social formations of human life that we are familiar with. Yet Allah will make room, and we have much to learn from these rooms.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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