

The Complexity Of Malay Muslim Identity In Dina Zaman's *I Am Muslim*

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ABSTRACT

Malay identity has been an important area of research in the field of Malay studies. Many scholars have argued that Malay identity is a product of a complex interplay of various identity markers and a dynamic adoption of diverse identity strategies. While most studies have focussed on examining Malay language, culture and religion as dominant identity markers of Malays in Malaysia, there is still a need for more research on other identity markers in the production of Malay identity. This paper explores the complexity of Malay Muslim identity, particularly queer Malay Muslims who are featured in Dina Zaman's *I am Muslim*. Using the theories and research relating to ethnic, racial, and sexual identity, the paper analyses the markers and strategies employed by queer Malay Muslims in constructing their identities as well as the tensions and conflicts they experience in formulating a Malay Muslim identity marked by queerness. The results show that queer Malays in Dina's work adopt varied identity markers and strategies in formulating their own ethnic identity which include embracing both sexuality and religious faith. The results also show that the discord between religion and sexuality becomes a major obstacle to some queer Malays who wish to assert their self-identities, but are not able to do so because of their strong *iman*, *taqwa* and *ahlaq*. The paper hopes to contribute to the research on Malay identity by demonstrating that same-sex sexuality, *in addition* to normative markers of Malayness, play a pivotal role in identity creation among queer Malay Muslims.

Keywords: ethnicity; Islam; queer; Malay; Malay Muslim identity

INTRODUCTION: THE POLITICS OF MALAY IDENTITY FORMATION

The identity of people who regard themselves as Malays remains an area of interest for many scholars in the field of Malay studies. This is because there will never be a satisfactory or clear-cut answer to "Who is Malay?" and "What it means to be Malay?" The term Malay includes Malays from Malaysia and other countries in the Malay Archipelago (also known as the Malay World) such as Brunei, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The Malay World, as Benjamin (2003) asserts, encompasses "at least Isthmian Thailand, Peninsular Malaysia, Singapore, the central east-coast parts of Sumatra, and much of the coastal northern, western and southern Borneo, Brunei, parts of Malaysian Sarawak, and parts of Indonesian Kalimantan" (as cited in Milner, 2008, p. 5). Benjamin (2003) further contends that the Malay World includes "populations who speak non-Malayic but still Austronesian languages (such as Batak, Mentawai and Lahanan), just as it contains Malayic speakers (such as the Ibans)