

Young, Religious and European: A Conservative Avant-Garde Subculture

Pınar Gümüş

Abstract:

This book depicts the cultural practices of Muslim youth in the European context basing on ethnographic research conducted in France, Germany, and Britain. Mapping the manifestations and artefacts within genres such as music, comedy, fashion, and media, Herding conceptualizes the phenomenon as Islamic youth culture referring to a subcultural formation. On that score it reveals itself through recurring themes and similarities as well as a common framework informed by Islamic religious understanding. Islamic youth culture is conceptualized as a ‘conservative avant-garde’ movement including innovative and conventional aspects, concurrently, in the process of blending a hybrid cultural formation through Islam, global youth culture, and different national contexts. This research extensively contributes to the literatures on youth culture and subcultures; hybridity and globalization; and Islam in Europe.

How to cite:

Gümüş, Pınar: „Young, Religious and European: A Conservative Avant-Garde Subculture [Review on: Herding, Maruta: Inventing the Muslim Cool: Islamic Youth Culture in Western Europe. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2013.]“. In: KULT_online 39 (2014).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2014.849>

© by the authors and by KULT_online

Young, Religious and European: A Conservative Avant-Garde Subculture

Pınar Gümüş

Herding, Maruta: *Inventing the Muslim Cool: Islamic Youth Culture in Western Europe*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2013. 242 pages, Paperback, 32.99 Euro, ISBN: 978-3-8376-2511-0

Inventing the Muslim Cool: Islamic Youth Culture in Western Europe by Maruta Herding presents the results of an innovative and well-founded cultural sociology research project, which was originally the writers' PhD dissertation. Focusing on France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, this work explores the phenomenon of Islamic youth culture in Europe and discusses the ways it is experienced in everyday life as well as the main motivations of its production. Moreover, the broader implications of the practices of Muslim youth have been framed in the context of local and global dynamics, national contexts, Islam in Europe, and global youth culture.

Herding's work is based on a multilayered ethnographic field research. Firstly, a picture of the Islamic youth culture scene is provided and composed of performing arts, fashion, and media. Included in these genres are rap and hip hop songs, special design clothes, comedy shows, online platforms and youth magazines, which are all described as the products of the Islamic youth culture. These cultural practices share common themes and similarities, such as referring to some basic religious principles and playing with the coolness and the unexpected image of Islam. What is religiously permissible, that is to say halal, functions as a frame of these subcultural practices: 'Halal fun' is the youthful way of living one's religious faith.

In the second phase of the ethnographic research, the researcher visits Islamic festivals, concerts, debates, and Friday prayers as a participant-observer in order to develop an understanding of how Islamic youth culture is consumed. These settings depict that Islamic youth culture is held very strongly by the ideas concerned with religious values, morality, community awareness and social commitment. Moreover, especially considering youth work, for example by youth camps, Islamic youth culture is a way of transmitting religious knowledge as well as helping young Muslims to gain confidence and develop skills.

In-depth interviews conducted with the important figures of Islamic youth culture scene reveal the motivations of the producers of this particular youth culture. National context emerges as an important factor in terms of differing motivations. While Muslim youth culture in Britain mostly aims at contributing to the idea of coexistence of various cultures and beliefs

as well as celebrating the already existing tolerant environment, in Germany and France Islamic youth-culture producers are more concerned with offering ways to ease the tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims. As a note to the analysis of the motivations, it is stated that the individual experiences of young people with Islam did not have a significant influence on their motivations (176). The lack of a meaningful relationship between individual experience with religion and motivations may be a result of employing the data within the limits of a classification such as converted, reverted or brought up in a practicing Muslim family. However, giving a more detailed account of individual stories and reflections concerning religion may contribute to the understanding of the motivations in a deeper sense.

Herding argues that Islamic youth culture is a hybrid mix, based on an intentional process of selecting and combining elements from Islam, Europe, and global youth culture. Herding's emphasis on the active process of making choices positions youth as the subjects within the scene of cultural production, and therefore underlines the agency of young people. Regarding this, Islamic youth culture is described as a bottom-up vehicle of integration concerning Muslim youth in the European context.

By its focus on a religious and hybrid subculture, this work is a significant contribution to the youth cultural theory. Defining this subcultural movement as 'conservative avant-garde', the writer refers to the coexistence of conventional and innovative elements. Beyond the judgmental dichotomy of Islamic traditionalism vs. Western modernity, Herding underlines the possible contribution of Islamic youth culture in terms of proposing new approaches to living and teaching Islam as well as shaping the manifestations of European Islam.

Herding defines a theoretical gap, pointing out the historical absence of a concept of youth in Islam (37). The major contribution of this research to the notion of youth in the context of Islam is apparent. However, claiming the historical absence of a concept of youth in Islam deserves a more detailed discussion. An investigation of the cultural and social practices, which may be related, even if not explicitly linked, with the notion of youth in Islam may pave the way for new approaches concerning the different meanings of youth in various socio-cultural contexts. Thereby, relating the subcultural findings about Islamic youth culture to the critical discussions on the normative definition of youth as a modern Western concept would be of great interest.