

# The Sound of Islam

## Southeast Asian Boy Bands

BART BARENDREGT

The term *nasyid* from the Arabic *nashid* refers to the raising of one's voice and is the generic term for sung poetry traditionally found in such countries as Egypt or Yemen.<sup>1</sup> In modern times *nasyid* has often been linked to the Palestinian Intifadah and the Egyptian Da'wa movement, both of which propagate Islam as a social ideology fighting colonization and the perceived ongoing political and economic oppression by the West. Southeast Asian *nasyid* groups eagerly identify with these traditions from the Islamic heartland and use the verbal art in a similar fashion to comment on the actual situation in the Muslim world, the glory of Allah, and the teachings of His Prophet. Although an art form of long standing, *nasyid* has only become a best seller in Muslim Southeast Asia since Iranian militant cassettes were offered for sale outside mosques in Malaysia in the 1980s. Similar genres were soon imported by Malaysian students who brought cassettes with engaging yet spiritual protest music back home after their studies in countries such as Yemen, Jordan, or Kuwait.

However, the popularity of *nasyid* in Southeast Asian countries can be attributed not simply to its explicit use of religious dogma or militant themes; unquestionably it also touches upon such social issues such as drugs, dropping out of school, and other youth related issues recognizable to younger audiences. Importantly, Southeast Asian *nasyid* has been able to take off with extreme success as the lyrics are sung in the indigenous Malay language, making the contents of the songs more intimate and intelligible to a teenage audience than other religious genres such as *salawat* with their ostentatious use of the Arabic language. Since the mid-1990s *nasyid* has also become popular in Indonesia, achieving great popularity in such cities with large student communities as Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and especially Bandung, where soon scores of *nasyid* ensembles blossomed. As in Malaysia, Indonesian campus life, humming with its student ensembles, inter-university contests, and student activism, was instrumental in promoting *nasyid* music among a generation which was fed up with corrupt politicians and who were insisting on political reforms and a return to old-style moral values through their music and other popular art forms.

### **Nasyid: the best of East and West?**

Whereas proponents of this Campus Islam eagerly trace *nasyid* to its Middle Eastern roots, even as far back as the time of the Prophet Muhammad (some claim that what was supposedly the first *nasyid* song, *tala'a 'l badru 'alaina*, was sung by women who welcomed the Prophet when he arrived in Medina from Mecca), the popularity of Southeast Asian *nasyid* groups can also be explained by another rather more mundane factor: namely the huge success in Asia of such western boy bands as Boyz II Men, Backstreet Boys, or Westlife; bands which all emerged in the same 1990s. As is the case with their western counterparts, an often largely female audience worships *nasyid* singers and the close harmony singing of western boy bands in many instances seems to have served as an additional role model in the musical styling and casual appearance of most of today's *nasyid* groups. Hence *nasyid* music combines the best from the East and West and is very much in tune with a more fashionable and commercial Islamic pop culture which has been branded either Islam Lite, Market Islam, or within the Indonesian context, "15 minute Islam": a combination of life-style politics, youth culture, and yet conveying a very self-assured religious message. It is this "15 minute Islam," with its obvious reference to a Warholian short-lived claim to fame, which reveals the delicacies of re-inventing religion for twenty-first-century public life: how to add

**Since the early 1990s nasyid music has become widely popular among the Islamic youth of Indonesia and Malaysia. Imported from the Middle East, the verbal art attracts proponents particularly in universities, above all among student activists. However, the Middle East is not the sole role model; present-day nasyid music reveals the careful and often delicate mix of religion and pop that is currently so much debated throughout the Islamic world.**

enough pop to a religious message to capture the mind of a young and often restless audience while maintaining its spiritual integrity.

### **The sound of a new Islamic chic**

Since the 1980s a new Islamic middle class has been emerging throughout Southeast Asia, most notably in Malaysia and Indonesia, and in the latter country especially the Islamic resur-

gence has gained real momentum after more freedom was allowed for staging public manifestations of Islam after 1998. The rise of the new Islamic chic and its claim to a publicly visible Islam has shown that religion and capitalism are by no means incompatible. Taking *nasyid* as the soundtrack of this emergent Islamic middle class, it is probably the Malaysian group Raihan which should be regarded as one of the most successful brands in today's *nasyid* industry. Whereas there is a long tradition of Islamic pop music in the Southeast Asian region, both *dangdut* singer Rhoma Irama and the female *qasidah* groups of the 1980s spring to mind, Raihan is the first Muslim pop group to gain truly transnational celebrity status, a fame which even stretches far beyond Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup> Their 1996 *Puji-Pujian* (Songs of Praise) was Malaysia's best selling album ever, and not long after the group signed a major record deal with Warner, they were doing international tours and cooperated with such renowned artists as Yusuf Islam and lately the UK-based hip hop group Mecca 2 Medina.

Although some seem to take Raihan's popularity as proof of the ongoing Islamization of Malay society, many have praised the group for the casual attitude they have adopted towards Islam. Illustrative of this stance is their experimenting with gospel and hip-hop; Raihan is almost solely reinventing the *nasyid* genre by continually adding new musical flavours to its sound (listen to their 2002 *Gema Alam* album or 2005's *Ameen* for a good introduction to their music). Raihan is also the group which starred in the 2001 movie *Syukur 2001* (Blessings for the Twenty-first Century), a film which was simultaneously released on multiple Asian markets, and was dubbed the world's first-ever Islamic science fiction epic. Islamic pop music is central to much of the film and the main theme, *I'tiraf* (Confession), has since taken its place among the major *nasyid* anthems.<sup>3</sup> Indirectly Raihan's music has many *nasyid* aficionados wondering what an Islamic future should sound like and this question still remains unanswered as the *nasyid* scene is still seeking to expand and makes use of virtually any sort of music around. From all male, female to children's ensembles, ethnic and (pseudo) Chinese *nasyid*, and from poetry, hip hop, to militant and romantic (wedding) *nasyid*, everything has been tried. Simultaneously, this extension of the term *nasyid* has many left asking where religion ends and pop begins.

### **SNada's campus Islam**

The group SNada is the Indonesian answer to Raihan. As do so many of its counterparts, this group has its roots in campus life, and started out against the background of the 1998 mass rallies against the Soeharto regime. The group has since spoken out in support of the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), a fundamentalist group which is extremely popular among student activists and urban Islamic youth more generally. SNada (derived from *Senandung Nada dan Dakwah*, literally humming a song while spreading the message of faith) joined with other ensembles to record the cassette-album *Keadilan* (Justice) which was sold for the 2004 elections with the official PKS campaign video. SNada has also shown its political engagement through its other releases, for instance in the album *Air Mata Bosnia* (The Tears of Bosnia). However, SNada is best known for its 2003 hit song *Jagalah Hati*, (Take to the heart) which was written by

the then famed media Muslim preacher Aa Gym (Abdullah Gymnastiar). In the same vein as Raihan, SNada demonstrates a more casual and commercial approach to Islam, having recorded several advertisements (e.g., for the Islamic Banking operations of Bank Mandiri and for travel agencies which organize annual pilgrimages to Mecca).

As have other Indonesian *nasyid* ensembles, SNada has also profited from the lucrative business which has sprung up in *nasyid* ringtones and the many Malay language websites, homepages, and weblogs devoted to *nasyid* music in general. The latter not only reflect the commercial success of the genre up to now, but also its extensive transnational aspirations. The countries of Muslim Southeast Asia are no longer regarded separate markets when it comes to Islamic pop music. It was no coincidence that SNada's 2003 album was called "From Jakarta to Kuala Lumpur" (*Dari Jakarta ke Kuala Lumpur*). *Nasyid's* new transnationality is reflected in pan-Southeast Asian song contests, and also in the composition of some of the ensembles which consist of multinational members. It somehow shows the awareness of a new geography of the Muslim world in which in many aspects (Muslim entertainment, the use of ICTs and new media, and more generally progressive Muslim thinking) Southeast Asia seems to have become a role model for its Muslim compatriots around the world and the ummah at large.

### Discussing the "Sound of Islam"

The market Islam of SNada and Raihan stands in stark contrast to the approaches of such other ensembles as the Indonesian group Izzatul Islam (nicknamed Iziz). Whereas the former ensembles experiment with hip hop and other forms of popular music, the members of Iziz state that the human voice is the sole instrument allowed for religious entertainment, with an exception being made for the frame drum on account of its overt religious associations. Other performers have also wondered how to emphasize religion rather than pop. The Indonesian-born Arab singer Haddad Alwi, for example, has extensively made use of his own roots in Hadrami music adding Arab language and Middle Eastern orchestration to his *nasyid* songs, but other performers explicitly deny the simple relationship between Arab (performing) culture and Islam as a world religion. The group Raihan is even quoted as refraining from employing traditional Arab tunes, instead stressing that its music foremost must be contemporary. One way out of this dilemma has been to claim that not so much *nasyid* or any religious pop music in particular is being performed; the sound they produce is merely world music with a spiritual twist, such as is the case with Malaysian singer Waheeda, the 2003 "*nasyid* sensation."

In short, there is considerable debate about which direction the by now thriving *nasyid* industry should take next. Discussions are not confined to the musical accompaniment, they also focus on the status of female groups or *nasyid* song contests modelled on *American Idols*. In early 2004, the *Forum Nasyid Indonesia* (FNI) organized the first all-Indonesian *nasyid* festival which was broadcast on national television during the fasting month. The festival has led to a fierce debate among *nasyid* enthusiasts, many of them condemning the sheer commercialism of the show and claiming there is only one human being who deserves adoration as an idol, and that is the Prophet Muhammad. Many regretted the absence of *nasyid* performers and true religious experts in the contest jury, with national television companies apparently paying more attention to attitude and outward appearance than spiritual content. Other elements of "15 minute Islam" have similarly come under scrutiny from more orthodox groups. Among such commercial enterprises are religious ring and ring-back tones which are mostly the adapted melodies of *nasyid* songs. Such Indonesian groups as SNada, the Fikr or their Malaysian counterparts Raihan, Brothers, or Rabbani today presumably earn more by selling ring tones than from the regular sale of albums. Taken in conjunction with the rise of such new "poster preachers" as Jefri Al-Buchori and the pop singer turned religious teacher Opick, ring tones and other religious commercialism have prompted many young Muslims to ask if nowadays God is for sale? There is clearly a limit to how pop religion can be.

### The future of Islam in a nutshell

The questions of what Islamic music should sound like, the participation of female singers in public, and if God's message should be for sale are just a few points in the ongoing discussion about *nasyid* today. In fact, in a nutshell *nasyid* music deals with most of the challenges with which modern Southeast Asian Muslims see themselves confronted.



PHOTO BY WAN SYAHRI / © WARNER MUSIC (MALAYSIA), 2005

The use of the Malay language in a tremendously popular genre as *nasyid* has proven not only that young people are in need of a more direct and intimate way of expressing their religious thoughts, it has also added questions about the future of the Islamic world as such. Because of the ongoing popularity of such groups as Raihan and SNada, *nasyid* is slowly globalizing and finding its way into Muslim communities everywhere in the world. Interestingly, it is the Southeast Asian version of *nasyid* which among many is becoming a role model in this process, showing that Muslims are increasingly growing aware that Islam is no longer synonymous with the Arab world. *Nasyid* aficionados from the UK and the Netherlands to Morocco and South Africa increasingly are inspired by their Southeast Asian counterparts, and indirectly getting into touch with other trends and currents within Southeast Asian Islam. Southeast Asian *Nasyid* presents us with a young, urban, and very fast changing version of present-day Islam. It is the everyday Islam of stickers, novels, blogs, and new media which many have recently begun to comment upon. As *nasyid* music illustrates, Islam has increasingly become both ideology and fashion to Muslim youths throughout the world. Whereas the period 2002 to 2005 may have been the heyday of Southeast Asian *nasyid*, at least in terms of output, new *nasyid* music is still being released confronting us with the search for a satisfying compromise between religion and pop in the twenty-first century. Let us keep listening to what this compromise will sound like.

### The popular Malaysian *nasyid* group Raihan

#### Notes

1. Arabic *nashid* (pl.: *anāshid*) is "song, hymn." The verb stem *nashada* means "to implore, to recite, to sing." *Nasyid* is the standard Indonesian spelling of this term.
2. The Indonesian *dangdut* genre makes use of western instrumentation and when first emerging in the 1970s was extremely amenable to conveying Islamic messages. *Qasidah* was a hybrid genre that was especially popular in the 1980s. It was mainly performed by young women and targeted, like *nasyid*, at Indonesian and Malaysian Muslim youth.
3. On YouTube clips of many of the *nasyid* ensembles and artists discussed here may be easily found. Watch and listen for example to:
  - Raihan's *I'tiraf* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5NdwWgVC4U>);
  - SNada's *Jagalah hati* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3tyus2W3iA>);
  - Hadad Alwi's *Tholama Asyku* ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z\\_x8PmntyI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_x8PmntyI));
  - Waheeda's *Wassini* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbpVAW3mH6U>);
  - and Izzatul Islam's *Jalan Juang* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EX6siW7Qa9Y>).

Bar Barendregt is Lecturer at the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, Leiden University. Email: Barendregt@fsw.leidenuniv.nl