

TRUTH AND ARTIFICE:

MUSLIM YOUTH INTERPRETATIONS OF A MISUNDERSTOOD LEADERSHIP

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In the Ramadan of 2006, Sheik Al Hilaly al Din al Hilaly—the controversial then Mufti of Australia—spoke to a small congregation of Muslims at Lakemba mosque. Each evening in Ramadan, Muslims would pray the Tarawih prayer in Lakemba after breaking fast in their homes. As part of their spiritual devotions, a smaller number of usually more elderly and devout Muslims would stay on and listen to a short talk later in the evening, often delivered by Sheik Al Hilaly. On this evening he expounded on the Quranic verses that had been cited during the evening prayers, specifically related to the significance of the different order of the same words in two verses. Unknown to Sheik Al Hilaly his talk was taped, translated, and supplied to journalists some months later, in a successful attempt to discredit him.

The ensuing controversy over what became infamously known as “the cat and meat sermon” divided the Muslim community and brought further unwarranted notoriety to its religious leadership. Embedded in traditional conservative ideas, the talk was interpreted by media and politicians as evidence that Muslim values and aspects of Islamic leadership were a threat to the Australian way of life. In response Sheik Al Hilaly demonstrated aspects of charismatic leadership and performed a particular type of ‘protest masculinity’ that empowered his marginalised followers in response to their perceived ‘hidden injuries’ of racism. His defiant response entrenched young Muslims’ belief in a hostile media, increased their sense of marginalisation, and brought into sharp relief issues of identity and citizenship. This paper analyses the artful interpretation of the controversy by both the media and the charismatic Sheik Al Hilaly and its effect on Muslim youth in South Western Sydney, based on interviews with male Muslims of an Arabic background aged 18-25.

Sheik Al Hilaly arrived in Australia in 1982 to take up the position of Imam at Lakemba mosque. His position has been plagued with controversy ever since. In 1986, the Labor Immigration Minister, Chris Hurford, tried to deport him for inciting “hatred” (Kerbaj “I’m Misunderstood”), although, in 1988, his successor Robert Ray agreed not to deport him despite comments about Jews being the “underlying cause of all wars” (O’Brian). In 1999 Sheik Al Hilaly was charged in Egypt with allegedly exporting

antiquities, charges that were later dropped (O'Brien). He is also alleged to have been a member of the Ikhwan, or Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt (Hope). Even his appointment as Mufti by the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils in 1989 is shrouded in controversy, and at times disputed by various sections of the Muslim community (O'Brien). However, he has continued to exercise considerable influence, particularly in the Sydney Muslim community, in part due to his extensive scholarship (O'Brien) as well as his charismatic leadership (Kerbaj "Muslim leader faces calls to step down"). His influence was recognised by the Howard government, which appointed him to the Muslim Community Reference Group, a committee that he mostly boycotted. To many Australians both inside and outside of the Muslim community Sheik Al Hilaly has been seen as "a thorn between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians" due to a recurring history of "extremist comments, clashes with the law and other inflammatory rhetoric" (Stewart). However, to his followers, the treatment of Sheik Al Hilaly is seen as linked to the marginalisation and disrespect that they commonly encounter as members of the Muslim community.

The Ramadan talk was in fact not a sermon and lasted less than 20 minutes. His argument was essentially a grammatical and theological interpretation of two verses in the Quran utilising his knowledge of Hadith and Arabic scholarship to highlight the linguistic importance of certain words, as well as their order in each of the passages. During the talk he engaged in some light-hearted comments about greedy women whose husbands committed theft in order to keep up with their demands (Hilali). He then quoted the words of a medieval novelist, Al Rafi, in support of his statement that adultery was 90 percent the responsibility of the woman, as she "possessed the weapon of seduction" which could lead to "a meeting, then a crime, then Long Bay Jail, then comes a merciless judge" (Hilali). This was clearly a reference to recent gang rape trials. Quoting Al Rafi, Sheik Al Hilaly then used his metaphor of uncovered meat which was not stored away "in the fridge, or in the pot, or in the kitchen" and ultimately is eaten by the neighbour's cat (Hilali). This comparison of women to meat and the seductive power of women elicited a torrent of condemnation from all sections of the media, members of the Muslim community and prominent Australians. Over the 10 days following the initial publication of his speech on 27th October more than 250 news and opinion articles, editorials, cartoons and letters to the Editor were published in six newspapers alone, variously referring to Sheik Al Hilaly as a buffoon, appalling, deranged, disgusting, divisive, explosive, hateful, repugnant, sickening and vile amongst many other epithets.

Such an extreme reaction to Sheik Al Hilaly occurred despite an apology (which was labelled as half baked ("Sick rape remarks can't be forgiven")), his well known support for Muslim women's rights (Coomba), and the support of the Muslim Women's Association, which he had helped to establish. His comments were characterised as a "head-on collision between two entrenched Australian values – the rights of women and the right to religious self-expression" (Stewart) despite similar attitudes existing throughout the Australian legal system in the prosecution of rape and sexual assault cases, characterised by the research of Dr. Caroline Taylor (Taylor). Dr. Taylor's recognition in rape and sexual assault cases of an assumption by the judiciary and legal fraternity that the

victim had in fact been consenting or encouraged the crime resulted in her writing a manual for victims on negotiating the legal process.

Pru Goward, former Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner, accused Sheik Al Hilaly of encouraging young men to commit violent crime against women (Leys). Sheik Al Hilaly's views were labelled as primitive and unacceptable in a modern society that is sexually liberated and grants equal rights to men and women, bringing to a head "the titanic collision between conservative Islam and modernity" in Australia (Hope). His metaphor of the unprotected meat was seen as encouraging women who did not wear the hijab to be devoured by sex-crazed men, for which the women would bear responsibility (Saeed). He was condemned by the Prime Minister John Howard, the Deputy Prime Minister and Kim Beazley, amongst others (Yamine).

In attacking the Mufti—the nominal religious leader of Australia's (or more specifically Sydney's) Muslims—the community's sacred cultural values were being violated, which is one of the material targets of racism discussed by Werbner (Werbner & Anwar). Although Sheik Al Hilaly's response to the outcry and his ability to withstand and ultimately benefit from such a damaging onslaught can be explained in terms of charismatic leadership, his portrayal of himself as victim and leader of a victimised religion increased the marginalisation already being felt by the Muslim community. By artfully interpreting the outcry over his Ramadan talk as an attack on Islam and its chosen leader, Sheik Al Hilaly constructed his position of power and dominance on his defiant response to the suffering of his community, and delivered a powerful Quranic discourse based on the cultural mythology of conspiracy theories and victimhood of the Muslim community in his interpretation of the unfolding events.

Despite being told by the Lebanese Muslim Association to keep a low profile, Sheik Al Hilaly gave a defiant sermon the following Friday, invoking "images of conspiracy and martyrdom" (Sheehan). This was partially provoked by the large and intimidating police presence outside the mosque, which included a dog squad, overhead helicopters and a corralled media contingent. Sheik Al Hilaly's sermon, and subsequent combative statements made to the press, demonstrated a form of 'protest masculinity' against the community's victimisation by asserting a symbolic power—supported by the religious authority of his position as Mufti—behind which the community could achieve solidarity. Connell has used the term 'protest masculinity' in terms of socio-economic disadvantage and a class consciousness that results in often violent forms of masculinity that serve to compensate for the experience of powerlessness undermining traditional masculinity. The concept was further developed by Poynting, Noble and Tabar's study of Australian Lebanese youth in relation to a gendered, masculine response to perceived racism. Although Sheik Al Hilaly did not directly engage in the violence depicted in Connell's or Collins' studies (Collins, Noble & Tabar), he demonstrated the same masculine defiance in the face of racist disrespect as the youth of his community, who recognize such behaviour as central to their masculine identity. This effectively encouraged solidarity amongst large sections of his local Arabic community while

simultaneously dividing the wider Australian Muslim community, many of whom did not identify with his unwillingness to be accountable, preferring an appropriate explanation or for him not to speak at all. Young Muslims, many of whom speak only slang Arabic and have difficulty understanding Sheik Al Hilaly, were faced with two radically different interpretations of the event, and forced to take sides.

Following the media outrage over his “cat and meat sermon”, Sheik Al Hilaly had an apparent physical collapse, but then rallied to present a confident image to both his supporters and the public at large. Such an ability to steadfastly portray a confident image in public even when discouraged or confronted by an apparent failure is portrayed by Bass as characteristic of a charismatic leader (Bass). Sheik Al Hilaly thereby was able to elevate the self-esteem of his marginalised community, consequently empowering them. By attacking his enemies, according to Shamir et al., he offered potential followers with low self-esteem someone to count on and believe in, while increasing the affection and devotion of existing followers. Sheik Al Hilaly sustained his aggressive response, stating that he would resign “when the White House was clean” and offering to be judged by an ethical court (Quigley). These statements further empowered his followers, but the net result was one of increased marginalisation and an increased distance between the position of the two parties – the followers of Sheik Al Hilaly and the Australian community.

In response, the Muslim community was told that it was disappointing that “Sheik Hilali had not yet been summarily booted out” (“Sheik’s values out of step”), and that he had escaped “serious punishment” (Stewart). This was proof that “such extreme views are tolerated, if not tacitly accepted by Muslims” (Stewart), who were “abrogating their responsibility” as community leaders (Wockner) and “[accepting] the unacceptable” (“Sheik must go). Not resolving the matter could “do lasting damage to the perceptions of that community” according to the then Prime Minister John Howard (Fife-Yeomans & Yamine).

A key element of Sheik Al Hilaly’s charismatic leadership was his ability to employ rhetoric to persuade, influence and mobilise his followers.¹ Strongly influenced by a fellow Egyptian, the blind Sheik Kishek, whose sermons Sheik Al Hilaly was known to attend and whose oratory resulted in a significant following of Muslims throughout the Arabic Muslim world, Sheik Al Hilaly employed the imagery of the Qur’an and an extensive Arabic vocabulary as part of his rhetorical tools. In his Friday sermon, he began by calling on three sources of justification for his statements—the Prophet, the Qur’an and democracy—indicating that in his vision no division existed between them.

Taj had now clearly established a conflict between ‘his enemies’, now framed as ‘the enemies of Islam’, and the true believers of Islam. Such framing was defined by

¹ BASS, B. M. (1985) *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*, New York, Free Press. BASS, B. M. (1988) Evolving perspectives on charismatic leadership. IN CONGER, J. A. & KANUNGO, R. N. (Eds.) *Charismatic leadership: The elusive factor in organizational effectiveness*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

Fairhurst and Sarr as “a quality of communication that causes others to accept one meaning over another”. In other words, he implied that criticism of his talk constituted rejection of the message of Islam. Many of the rhetorical skills identified by Conger are evident in this speech and help to explain the willingness of Sheikh Taj’s community to resist calls for his resignation, and simultaneously avert accountability for his actual message. Utilising imagery associated with war and conflict he concluded “We will tell them, our banners will remain raised high, God willing, and our voices remain heard, and may the world vanish if it doesn’t listen to ‘there is no God but Allah’” (Carswell & Yamine).

In my interviews with young people many had expressed concern about Sheik Al Hilaly’s capability of fulfilling the role of Mufti due to his English incapacity. For one interviewee, although the debacle was embarrassing, defence of the Mufti’s position was still necessary.

“I was embarrassed, it was embarrassing, but at the same time when I talk about it in front of non-Muslims I would actually defend him. I couldn’t stand against him in public, couldn’t stand against my own religion and my own community.” (Bilal Interview)

They all believed that Sheik Al Hilaly would not have condoned violence against women or rape, the substance of much of the media allegations. As Alpha stated,

“maybe he should have used a better metaphor or something, but, .. I would not tell him how to do his speech.”

Hamza explained,

“I believe in modesty for both ..I understand where he was coming from. And I know that he’s not ..like the media makes him out to be a radical, or this extremist. He’s far from it.”

According to Alpha,

“it is in the Quran and that’s the issue.” “If he had made a mistake the community should not “just come out and say all these different things and just divide the community. If he did make a mistake, you go up to him and say to him ‘you made a mistake, can you correct the mistake’” “For this, this reason. Telling him to go out and leave the country, I don’t think would really have solved anything now.”

The concern that the media had no right to interfere in the religious affairs of the Muslim community was most clearly stated by Abdul:

“But who are they to tell us which Sheik we should have? That’s one thing that I don’t agree with. They say that he’s got to go, we’ve got to do it.”

The media’s over-reaction to the Mufti’s statements contributed to the youth submerging their concerns about his suitability and the cultural appropriateness of his metaphors. There was no conception that Sheik Al Hilaly would ever have intended to encourage violence against women or rape, it being clearly not permissible in Islam. In their minds there was a deliberate misrepresentation of his speech, and therefore of Islam. By marginalising the Mufti—representative head of the Muslim community—the media and his critics were marginalising the whole Muslim community, something with which the young people were familiar and could identify.

The interviewees clearly felt that the Muslim community should stand together and not be divided. The defiant response of Sheik Al Hilaly was seen by many as justifiably provoked. As Alpha stated,

“I mean, how many times have you heard the comment that “Go back to your country” whatever... So, I think that (he) might have been prompted into saying that.”

When asked if he thought Sheik Al Hilaly received a lot of support in the community *because* he challenged the media, Hamza responded,

“Yeah, I think that’s very true. Like, a part of me, I was in. For me personally I can’t stand parts of the media, certain elements, certain journalists. But I like the fact that he stood up, you know, and gave it to them. But at the same time it’s a losing battle. Look, you can’t win, you can’t beat em. They’re too powerful.”

This heroic stance against the odds was described also by Mazen:

“Look, I understand that it's out of anger. I know where he is coming from that, in the sense that it’s, just out of anger. They were going to give him a heart attack. They were going to kill him. It’s not easy having a whole country against you.”

The lack of respectful treatment in fact enhanced Sheik Al Hilaly’s standing in their eyes, and allowed them to see him as equally marginalised. Mohamed C stated,

“You don’t just go up, I believe, in the middle of the town square, and bag him out. The better way to do it is in solidarity and respect.”

According to Burns, the relationship that exists between the leader and the led, where followers have faith in their leader’s capacity to overcome crises due solely to their personal capacity is known as heroic leadership. Such heroism under pressure was dramatically reinforced with Sheik Al Hilaly’s statement, “I have opted to keep silent..

enduring all these psychological pressures, media punches and political daggers and missiles which have been orchestrated by a viciously plotted campaign. I endure all that in anticipation of Allah's reward" ("It's no gag"). His apparently heroic stance meant that to most of the community the controversy of his statements became irrelevant. "It's a question of whether it is an attack on the mufti or an attack on Islam, and people are taking it as an attack on Islam," explained the President of the Lebanese Moslems Association, Tom Zreika (Morris), while one of his most strident critics, Irfan Yusef, stated that the media frenzy had turned Sheik Hilaly into a "martyr of sorts" (Morris).

By attacking their leader and the values of modesty that he espoused with such a sustained attack, young Muslims felt alienated and angry. Despite the fact that many of them already felt that their religious leadership was not able to effectively relate to the Australian culture in which they lived, due to a lack of English or a lack of familiarity with Australian cultural norms, this episode disempowered the emerging criticism of their leadership and ensured that many young Muslims automatically supported the Mufti.

Through their actions, the media, community critics and politicians had attempted to provide a "bright-line test that separated those who share (Australia's) common values from those whose views are beyond the pale" ("Sheik's views out of step"). Despite condemnation from all levels of society, vitriolic articles and public humiliation, Sheik Al Hilaly continues to preach to thousands of followers in the Lakemba mosque. Neither his followers nor the Muslim youth were ever convinced that he had intended to encourage violent crime against women, or that he espoused values that were incompatible with Australian culture. Most of the young men interviewed had either attended his talks, or avoided the whole issue by seeking simply to stay out of trouble. By isolating and humiliating their religious leader, the media had effectively allowed many in the Muslim community to identify with his marginalisation, encouraging him to demonstrate both his charismatic leadership and a form of 'protest masculinity'—an aggressive gendered response to their racism. Ultimately, the Muslim community was further divided and marginalised from the rest of society. For their part, many of the young people simply "lost interest" (Bas interview) in a media that they saw as taking events "out of context" (Mohd interview) and who would continue to cause a victimised community "to cop it while you're standing up and saying the truth" (Bilal interview).

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