
BOOK REVIEW

O'Brien, John. 2017. *Keeping It Halal: The Everyday Lives of Muslim American Teenage Boys*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. xxiii + 216 pp. ISBN: 978-0-6911-6882-1 £24.00 (hbk); 978-0-6911-9711-1 £21.95 (pbk).

Reviewed by: Elena G. van Stee, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA
evanstee@sas.upenn.edu

Keywords: Islam in America; Muslim youth; identity formation; cultural rubrics; ethnography.

Since 9/11, a growing body of literature has addressed the challenges facing Muslim communities in the contemporary United States. Much of this research highlights the ways in which anti-Muslim hostility has been reified in political actions, the media, and crimes of retribution perpetrated against Muslim individuals over the past two decades. In *Keeping It Halal: The Everyday Lives of Muslim American Teenage Boys*, sociologist John O'Brien seeks to "broaden the analytical frame" by expanding the scope of this conversation beyond terrorism, radicalization, and Islamophobia (p. ix).

This book presents an ethnographic account of seven "nonthreatening, average, satisfied, and complicated" young Muslim men who are collectively known as "the Legendz" after their sometimes-active hip-hop group of that name (p. x). As O'Brien explains, many of the challenges encountered by the Legendz on a day-to-day basis centre around the negotiation of competing cultural expectations. From their parents and religious community, the Legendz face locally-defined expectations for what it meant to be a "good Muslim". And from the media and their peers, they experienced the pressure to be "normal" American teenagers.

Analysing what he conceptualizes as the "culturally contested lives" of these teens, O'Brien identifies the challenges presented by the Legendz's hyphenated identities as young Muslim-American men. Although the roots of these challenges are in many respects unique to the Legendz's religious and social context, O'Brien argues that the basic experience of negotiating competing sets of cultural expectations is actually a defining feature of adolescence in America. Situating his own findings in the context of previous research on American adolescents, particularly those from religious and immigrant communities, O'Brien demonstrates that the strategies invoked by the Legendz mirror the actions of other American teens who face competing "cultural rubrics" in their everyday lives.

O'Brien identifies four spheres of perceived cultural tension and devotes a full chapter to each: popular music, communal religious practices, romantic relationships, and the public presentation of Muslim identity. O'Brien highlights the creative strategies through which the Legendz navigate the sets of norms, expectations and codes of conduct that

constitute the cultural rubrics of their religious community and American culture. In their engagement with hip-hop music, for example, the Legendz enact what O'Brien terms "cool piety" by (1) signalling commitment to Islamic piety while demonstrating familiarity with American pop culture, (2) finding Islamic piety within hip-hop music, and (3) engaging in boundary work that avoids the label of being "too religious" (p. 42). O'Brien's discussion of communal religious practices, romantic relationships, and public presentations of identity follow a similar format; in each, O'Brien weaves together findings from the literature with his own empirical observations to conceptualize the practical strategies through which the Legendz construct and maintain their identities as Muslim American teenagers.

The ethnographic fieldwork for *Keeping it Halal* took place in the urban Muslim community connected to "City Mosque" in a large, coastal American city. According to O'Brien, this methodological choice was driven by his belief that ethnographic observation has the unique capacity to reveal "daily realities and local meanings" (p. xiv). O'Brien's aim to observe a diverse array of social interactions was accomplished by his ethnographic observation of the Legendz in both religious (e.g., Friday prayer, youth group meetings) and non-religious (e.g., restaurants, homes, neighbourhoods) settings. The multivarious nature of these observations qualifies O'Brien to speak to patterns of the Legendz's behaviour across a diverse array of social domains.

O'Brien's reflexivity is a strength of this first-person ethnography. His rapport with the Legendz was undoubtedly facilitated by his social location as a practising Muslim male, an asset he explains in the preface. O'Brien elaborates further on this shared Muslim-American experience, noting that his own recent conversion to Islam had prompted similar questions to those facing the Legendz. In this way, O'Brien's account illustrates what other sociologists of religion have observed, namely that one's own religious background can foster trust and greater understanding with religious participants. Furthermore, O'Brien's former career as a musician and familiarity with the Legendz's favourite bands provided "an important common language" that paved the way for relational bonds to be established between the Legendz and himself (p. xvii).

By holding in concert both the particular and the universal nature of the Legendz's experiences, O'Brien makes a distinctive empirical and theoretical contribution to the study of Muslims in the post-9/11 United States. O'Brien's conceptual framework holds great promise for future research into the management of culturally contested lives among American Muslims at new intersections of age, race and gender. How, for example, do young Muslim American women negotiate religious restrictions concerning American dating norms? To what extent do young African-American Muslim men enact "cool piety"? What are the implications of a "low-key Islam" approach to public identity management under the Trump administration? *Keeping It Halal* marks an important contribution to the growing body of literature on identity among Muslims in America and offers a timely critique of the prevailing depictions of young Muslim men within American media and politics. The Legendz present a living challenge to the notion that Islam and Western culture are inherently incompatible. As O'Brien explains, "these young people are constantly working to do what some insist *cannot be done*: to bring about reconciliations and workable compromises between the cultural expectations of religious Islam and those of American culture" (p. x; original emphasis).