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Clarifying the Misconceptions about Islamic Restrictions on Entertainment and Performing Arts in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Background: Muslims as a community have had issues and debates whether entertainment and Performing Arts are permissible in Islam. While some orthodox Muslims today totally ban any type of Performing Arts, claiming it's *haram* (forbidden) and shun themselves, others have argued that Muslims are allowed to have some entertainment with some guideline from the Holy Quran and Hadith (words from Prophet Muhammad passed down). This paper was part of a project/research to see how the Muslim community misunderstood this issue with arguments from the Quran and Hadith. It is hoped that this research will contribute to the political debate and confusion on the subject in Malaysia and the country's arts and culture policy. Whilst the study is focused on Malaysia, the study also hopes to foster a better understanding between non-Muslim and Muslim communities globally. **Objective:** The main objective of this research is to look at how Muslims misinterpreted passages from the Quran, while debating whether entertainment and Performing Arts is allowed in Islam or not. The second objective is to show examples how a moderate Muslim should assimilate with non-Muslim to foster more understanding and respect towards different religions. **Results:** In Malaysia, orthodox Muslims through the political Islamic party has managed to influence moderate Muslims to follow "their Muslim way" of practice. However, in recent years, Muslims in Malaysia through their scholars known as Ulama opened up on the discussion and debate towards this issue. In return, most of these scholars believed that Islam allows entertainment and Performing Arts as long as the guidelines in the Quran are followed. **Conclusion:** Islam allows entertainment with several historical incident were recorded in Hadith. However in Malaysia, Muslims scholars were divided into 2 different school of taught thus making them express this issue in different views. Muslim Sunnis which consist of more than 80% of the population Muslim community around the world including Malaysia are the most tolerance with many of them became scholars in various areas including entertainment business and Performing Arts.

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INTRODUCTION

Muslims have been stereotyped as an insular community who don't socialise with non-Muslims. Muslims are seen as conservative people who observe a strict puritanical lifestyle and do not know how to entertain themselves. It is generally believed that Islam disallows any form of entertainment or performing arts, whether it is music, drama or dance. Following this misconception, there have been many instances in Malaysia where radical and orthodox Muslim groups have begun to ban entertainment and performing arts. Although the Quran does not contain a direct injunction relating to the ethics of entertainment and performance arts, radical Islamist movement and Islamic puritans have often misused passages from the Quran and the Hadith on these

issues to argue that Islam forbids any form of arts that is meant for entertainment. In Malaysia, Islam as a religion became important after the Islamic revitalisation beginning in August 1979, which has resulted in the growing dominance of Islamic issues in the public sphere. With the support from many Muslim scholars and jurists, some radical Islamic political parties Pan Asean Islamic (PAS) have pledged to Islamicise Malaysia. This has also led to the rise of orthodox views on the issue of performing arts in the country, with PAS imposing a ban on many venues of arts and entertainment sector. Unlike PAS who implement such radical policies on entertainment, the Federal Government under Barisan National (BN) promotes Islam in a more moderate way investing in arts, culture and entertainment sectors in the country. However, the

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governmental policy, public discourse and arts management in this area is prone to heated debate as there is confusion about the actual teachings of Islam with regard to entertainment and performing arts.

Research Background:

Quran and Hadith:

Islam is the second biggest religion in the world after Christianity with more than a billion followers. In Arabic, the word Islam literally means peace, and Muslims greet each other with the phrase *salam-'alaikum* which means "peace be upon you" and reply with *alaihis's-salam* meaning "upon him be peace" (Lewis & Churchill, 2009, pp. 7-9). Waines (1995) describes that the central tenet of Islam as a religion is "the willing and active recognition of and the submission to the command of the One, Allah" (p. 3). Scholars such as Draz (2008), Drummond (2005) and Turner (2006) have rejected the idea that Islam was spread by the sword and argued that it has instead spread to vast regions in the world by cultural assimilation and commerce over the centuries.

In Islamic terminology, the present world is *dunya*, a temporary place before eternal life known as *dinn*. Islamic teachings emphasise that the true purpose of humankind in the present world is to worship and obey Allah unconditionally so that they may enjoy the rewards in eternal life after death. Although it may seem that Islamic teaching devalue the temporal world (*dunya*) over the eternal world (*dinn*), scholars such as Draz (2008), Drummond (2005), Lewis and Churchill (2009) and Waines (1995) have agreed that Islam demands a balance in both; the *dinn* and the *dunya* whilst at the same time asked the Muslims to embrace life with passages such as:

It is Allah who brought you out of your mother's wombs knowing nothing, and gave you hearing and sight and intelligence, so that you might be thankful (Quran, 16:78 cited in Draz, 2008).

Muslims around the world value the Quran above all else and consider it a sacred book. As "the highest book of all", Quran must be placed on the highest bookshelf, wrapped in a clean cloth and placed out of touch by "those who are impure" for example women who are menstruating (Turner, 2006, p. 43). In Islamic history, the Archangel Gabriel is said to have transmitted the word of Allah in stages to Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him, PBUH) over twenty-three years and then the Quran was completed. Muslims view the Quran as a complete doctrine that explains the cosmology of the world in its theories of science, mystery (Unseen) and life after death, and provides an understanding of human duty relating to behaviour, laws (known as the Shari'a law in Muslim) and restrictions. Devoted Muslims view the Quran as a "moral doctrine", a primary source for guidance on all issues in life (Draz, 2008, pp. 13-14; Turner, 2006, p. 43). In its passages, the Quran is put forth as the book of guidance to the faithful:

This is the Book; in it is guidance sure, without doubt, to those who fear God; who believed in

Unseen, are steadfast in prayer, and spent out what We have provided for them; and who believe in the Revelation sent thee, and sent before thy time, and (in their hearts) have the assurance of the Hereafter (Quran. 2:2-4 cited in Turner, 2006, p. 45).

As certain issues are not clearly mentioned or explained in the Quran, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) took it upon Himself to clarify these issues in practice through His own words, action and behaviour. These traditions prescribed by the Prophet are known as the *Sunna* (the tradition of the Prophet) and documented in the authoritative collections known as the Hadith (Turner, 2006 p. 9). For example, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is said to have chosen milk over wine, and since His action are regarded as the *sunna*, Muslims follow it and do not drink alcohol. There are two main authoritative collections of Hadith, the Sahih of al-Bukhari and Sahih of Muslim. Passages from the Hadiths are used for various reasons, particularly to "clarify verses in the Quran which may contain some ambiguity" (Hussain, 2004, p. 32). Draz (2008) described the Hadith as "a chain of passing words with the connotation of narrative" (pp. 26-27). As Turner (2006) puts it, the Hadith explains ethical principles of Islam in a simple easy-to-understand anecdotal form of "X said that Y said that W said that V heard the Prophet said '.....'" (p. 10).

According to Am (2008) and Azami (2004), manners, moral and ethics are the most important part of Islamic teachings. In fact, Draz (2008) finds that ethics makes up almost half of the Quran and covers a whole range of issues from personal ethics, family ethics to social ethics and religious ethics (pp. 295-344). But contrary to the modern worldview where it is believed that manners and ethics can be changed to suit modernity, Islam prohibits such changes. As Azami (2004) states, the Quran teaches that Islam and its ethics are "for everybody" and "valid for all times" (pp. 14-15).

Islamic jurists and theologians:

After Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) passed away, the teachings of Islam were carried by His four companions known as "the Caliphs" (Lewis & Churchill, 2009, p. 82). Then, Muslim scholars also began to study the religion, science and Shari'a law posited in Islam. Fadl (2005) described these people as jurists because their training focussed on Islamic ethics and how Shari'a law can be enacted to uphold Islamic principles. These jurists and scholars can hold different titles depending on their level of knowledge in Islam such as "*Mufti, Ulama, Fuqaha, Mulla, Shaykh or Imam*" (Fadl, 2005, p. 28). These scholars and jurists are given an elevated role in Muslim society as the Quran states that "the scholars are inheritance of the prophets" (Abu Dawud and Bukhari cited in Izharudeen.com. n.d) and "Those who fear of Allah are the ones who have knowledge (e.g. Ulama)" (Quran 35:28).

These jurist and scholars are also enfranchised with special authority known as *fatwa*, which they can use to issue a command to address the interests

of the Muslim community they preside over. While the *fatwa* is now generally perceived as an irrevocable command, Fadl (2005) argues that most Muslims are unaware that they can choose to either “accept or reject a fatwa” (p. 29). As these *fatwas* come from people with some religious authority who were respected by the Muslim communities, it is often followed blindly by the followers. Another problem is that anyone who has studied Islamic law can appoint himself as an *Imam* and spread a false or vicious *fatwa* for his own agenda. As Fadl (2005) explained the reason this to happen is due to the “absence of credible institution to discredit or vouch for the qualifications of fatwa issuers” (p. 29).

The emergence of the Wahhabi and Salafi theologies as a powerful faction in the Muslim world in the last few decades is a source of great concern. Fadl (2005) describes these two theologies as the early puritans in Muslim world. Both these theologies believe that everything can be solved through Quran, Hadith and Sunna. They reject modernity and have failed to understand how Islam should be adapted in the modern world. Anything from the Western or other parts of the world is seen as evil and degenerate. Fadl (2005) explains that these two are rigid and insular theologies also reject all other theologies within Islam.

The Wahhabi school of thought was established in the eighteenth-century by a man called Muhammad bin Abd Al-Wahhabi and the theology still exists and flourishes in certain regions (Fadl, 2005). The government in Saudi Arabia is said to be influenced by Wahhabi theology and follows *Hudud* laws such as “stoning to the death to a person who commits adultery” (p. 69). Fadl (2005) further claims that the Wahhabi theology is behind the most dangerous and extremist Islamist groups such as the Taliban and Al-Qaida networks. In Wahhabi thought, “any indulgence in rationalism or frivolity such as music, arts or nonreligious poetry is a form of associating partners with gods” (Fadl, 2005, p. 49). Anyone engaging in activities they consider to be sinful is labelled as *shirk* (infidel) and Wahhabi ideology holds that such a person “could and should be killed as hypocrite” (Fadl, 2005, p. 54).

According to Fadl (2005), there are many reasons behind the continuance of the extreme Wahhabi theology in Saudi Arabia, which allow it to withstand opposition from more moderate Muslim countries across the world. First, Saudi Arabia holds a moral authority as the homeland of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the holy cities of Islam, the Mecca and Madina are situated in Saudi Arabia where millions of Muslims go for the Haj pilgrim each year. Second, Saudi Arabia continues to receive support from British and US government for their huge oil resources. Third, Saudi Arabia exerts a lot of influence in the Muslim world through its large network of Muslim organisations such as Muslim World League (Rabitat Al-‘Alam Al-Islami) and Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

Salafism is another theology that is dangerous but less so than the Wahhabis (Fadl, 2005). Unlike

the Wahhabi school, Salafi theology was founded by five Muslim reformers called Muhammad Abduh, Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani, Muhammad Rashid Rida, Muhammad Al-Shawkani and Jalal Al-San’ani. Fadl (2005) claims that Salafism is similar to Wahhabism; but it is more open and tolerant of other theologies and sects within Islam, while Wahhabis are “far less tolerant of diversity and differences of opinion” (p. 75). Salafi theology believes that Muslims should follow the precedents of the Prophet and His Companions. Unlike the ideological supremacy claimed by Wahhabis who believe that only their version of Islam is true and reject all other views, Salafis argues that Muslims should adhere more closely to the ethics and practices of the Prophet and His Companions.

Difference of opinion about the true interpretation of Islam has become the reason for such acrimony and polemical debate between these theologies. Particularly, the Wahhabis claim that they are the only real Muslims and regard Muslims of other sects as *kafir* (infidel) (Fadl 2005). Actually, the Wahhabi theology adopted by the Shi’ah sect only makes up 10 per cent of the total Muslim population in the world. The other schools of thought in Islam comprise of the *Shafi’i*, *Hanafi*, *Maliki* and *Hambali* which belong to the *Sunni* community. The *Sunni* sect is regarded as representing the majority of moderate Muslims in the world (Aly, 2007, p. 54) and 90 per cent of the Muslims in the world follow one of these theologies (Hussain, 2004, p. 34). *Sunni* theology acknowledges *fitrah* or natural human affinity towards worldly activities like entertainment, leisure, sex and socialising and issues guidelines within which these activities can be undertaken (Adil, 2012; Hussain, 2004; Opir, 2012; Osman, 2012). Under the *Shafi’i*, *Hanafi*, *Maliki* and *Hambali* sects, entertainment and performing arts are permissible within some limits. The open approach adopted by these moderate theologies is aligned with what Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said in a Hadith, “Make it easy (religion) and not hard, spread it with glad tidings and not by dire warning which would turn people away” (Al-Bukhari, Muslim and Tirmidhi cited in Am, 2007, p. 4). By far, the *Shafi’i* theology is the most tolerant theologies among all four and many moderate Muslim countries such as Malaysia follow this school of thought (Grieve, 2006).

**Research Issue:
Islamist movement, cultural influence and policy issues in Malaysia:**

In his study, Naipaul believed that four countries including Malaysia have adopted Islam as a “complete way of life” (p. 11). In a different study, Nash (cited in eletz, 1997) point out that many Malays start to referring themselves as “Musli rather than Malay” (p. 259) after the Islamicisation of the country in the late 1970s. From this period on, the political class and government began to appease the rising Islamic sentiment of the masses and Islam began to influence the direction of debate in the

political sphere. There were even questions about whether Malaysia is a fully Islamic country, and the ex-Prime Minister Mahathir declared his commitment to Islam and announced that "Malaysia is an Islamic state" (Martinez, 2004, p. 27). Prime Ministers Mahathir, Badawi and Najib have constantly solicited the acknowledgement and affirmation of Muslim leaders and jurists from other Muslim countries particularly Saudi Arabia. Mayer (cited in Akbarzadeh & MacQueen, 2008) states that Islamic political parties have now begun to canvass for people's support by using "Islamist slogan and programs" (p. 19). Gomez and Jomo (1999) view this situation quite cynically and argue that it is more of a strategic tactic by political leaders to win the support of the majority Muslim Malay community especially during elections.

In the last ten-fifteen years, many young Muslims in Malaysia have gone to further their Islamic studies in the Middle East, particularly in Saudi Arabia and Jordan. As the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), many Muslims see Saudi Arabia as the best country to study Islam. They are often unaware of the fact that the form of Islam that is taught there is not necessarily a true reflection of the faith but is very much influenced by the Wahhabi and Salafi theologies (Fadl, 2005, pp. 71-72). These students not only assimilate the religious teachings they receive there but also the cultural practices in these countries. As Hussain (2004) points out, "culture has influenced the practice in Islam" (p. 6) and the borders between the merely contingent cultural practices and religious beliefs can become blurry. When these students come back to Malaysia, they begin to view the world from the cultural perspective they assimilated in those countries. In orthodox Muslim communities in Malaysia, Muslim scholars are highly respected as holy and wise men, more so when they come back with titles of an *Ulama* or *Ustaz* after being trained in the Middle East.

In Malaysia, Kelantan is considered to be a staunchly Islamic state and many Kelantanese Muslims have gone to the Middle East to study Islam. Kapila (2000) claims that, "Islamist fundamentalism first appeared in the province of Kelantan" in Malaysia (p. 2). Returning from these conservative Muslim countries, they perceive everything in Malaysia to be un-Islamic and secular. Many of them tried to change this policy to suit their expectations by joining Islamist movements or radical Islamic political parties. One such political party is PAS, which claims that Malaysia has been unable to live up to the standards of a Muslim country. PAS has managed to gain the support of the predominantly orthodox Muslim community in Kelantan and has ruled the state since the independent of Malaysia in 1957. As such, PAS's ultimate goal is to overthrow the Federal Government led by the BN coalition and rule Malaysia by adapting Shari'ah law in administrative and legislative matters.

Some of the intolerance espoused by Wahhabis towards other beliefs or faiths can be seen in PAS. The public is continually warned of the sin and wrath of Allah and the state government has publically banned any performing arts in the state. PAS does not allow any religious statues to be built in their states and in the past they have demolished sculptures (Fadl, 2005). Entertainment facilities such as musical venues, theatre auditoriums or dance studios are denied permits in Kelantan. They have also rejected entertainment especially from the Western world believing that it would corrupt Muslim ethics.

The controversy over entertainment and performing arts in Malaysia actually entered public debate in 1990s in Kelantan, when the state government represented by the President of the ruling party and Minister, Nik Aziz Nik Mat publicly banned the traditional performing art of *Wayang Kulit* calling it un-Islamic. Several other traditional performances such as *Mak Yong* and *Menora* were also banned later as such ritualistic performances were considered *syirk* (outside the fold of Islam). Even though a ban on traditional performing arts was effective in the 90s, PAS still allowed these traditional entertainment arts in some rural states such as *Tumpat* and *Bachok*. As these places were considered to be a hub for traditional performances in Kelantan and attracted local and foreign tourists, Gomez and Jomo (1999) argue that PAS chose to adopt a lenient approach here to retain the tourism business and support of the locals. In fact, Isa (2012) claims that PAS has even given financial support to these traditional performances for the purpose of tourist entertainment, for example, the special traditional arts performances at *Gelanggang Seni*, in Kota Bharu. In their study of PAS policies over the years, Gomez and Jomo (1999) argue that PAS policies are constantly changing according to the benefit they have for the ruling government.

Apart from these restrictions, lack of promotion and financial support has also led to the slow demise of these traditional performing arts. According to Yusouf (2012), currently there are not more than ten active troupes of *Wayang Kulit*, *Menora* and *Mak Yong*. Many of these practitioners were forced to retire except for a fortunate few who were given a chance to teach these traditional performances in private institutions, such as Yusoff (2012) in *Akedemi Seni Warisan Kebangsaan* (ASWARA) in Kuala Lumpur.

Unlike the PAS, Federal Government under BN promotes entertainment and performing arts with millions of Malaysian Ringgits have been invested to build different performing arts venues in different states, such as the *Istana Budaya* in Kuala Lumpur, *Teater Diraja* (Royal Theatre) in Shah Alam, Selangor and *Panggung Seri* in Melaka. Due to this situation, it is not strange there are more entertainment venues and performance artists in the states governed by BN, such as Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Penang and Johor. Private entrepreneurs who are interested in the performing arts and creative

industries can also easily obtain permits and licenses to open their own theatrical companies or entertainment venues. For example, the husband/wife duo Joe Hafsham and Faridah Marican opened venues such as KL Pac, Penang Pac and The Actor Studio in different locations throughout Malaysia.

The taboo on music, entertainment and performing arts:

This misconception that Islam restricts entertainment and performance is not something new and has been repeatedly made by many non-Muslims. But as Nasr (1976) suggests, some fundamentalist Muslims have also advocated this and misinterpreted passages from the Quran and Hadiths to support their view. Some examples can be seen in Afghanistan where the Taliban banned all forms of music, claiming that music can “distract them (the Muslims) from their real duties to pray and praise Allah” (Bailey cited in Korpe, Reitov & Cloonan, 2006, p. 247). Extremist Islamic countries such as Sudan have also persecuted artists and musicians and in one case, a popular singer called Khogali Osman was stabbed to death in 1994 (Korpe, Reitov & Cloonan, 2006, p. 247).

The Prophet is said to have claimed that, “Singing and music are enchantment for adultery” (As-Sayyid al-Khu’l and al-Masa’ilu ‘sh-Shar’iyya cited in Hussain, 2005, p. 2). As such, there are some passages from the Quran and Hadith are often used to argue that Islam rejects all forms of entertainment and performing arts, for example:

And of mankind is he who purchases idle talks (e.g. music, singing) to mislead (men) from the path of Allah (Quran, 31:6).

Merriment will be made for them through the playing of musical instruments and the singing of lady singers. Allah will cleave the earth under them and turn others into apes and swine (Ibn Maajah cited in Hussain, 2005, p. 2).

Apart from singing, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is also said to have issued a restriction on the use of musical instruments. The Prophet is said to have specified a restriction on musical instruments in two separate Hadiths; the first one by Abu Daawood, Al-Bayhaqee and Ahmad (cited in Hussain, 2005), “Indeed Allah has prohibited; wine, gambling, *al-koobah* (drum) and every type of intoxicant” (p. 2); the second one from Mustadrakul Wasael (cited in Hussain, 2005), “The Almighty Allah has sent me as a mercy to the worlds, to guide the people. And He ordered me to eradicate the playing of flute and other instruments of music, all game of vice, idol (worship) and all practises of the days of ignorance” (p. 2). The quotes from the Quran supporting this injunction are:

There will be a people from my Ummah (Muslim community) who will seek to make lawful; fornication, the wearing of silk (for men), the drinking of wine and the use of musical instruments (Al-Bukhari cited in Hussain, 2005, p. 1).

Dance is another art form that is considered to be against Islamic teachings by conservative

Muslims. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) has supposedly mentioned a restriction in a Hadith against dance in the following words, “I prohibit for you dancing and playing flute, drums and *tabla*” (Al-Kahfi cited by Hussain, 2005, p. 5). At the same time, Hussain (2005) claimed that the Quran and Hadith did not mention any restriction on theatre at all.

Reading the passages:

This section will demonstrate how these misconceptions about Islamic outlook on the arts can arise and revisit some of the passages quoted above to show how these injunctions actually define the ethical boundaries within which the arts can be practised by Muslims. It will show that the Quran and Hadith do not outrightly reject entertainment or performing arts, but impose some regulations about how these can be practiced to uphold ethical behaviour, moral uprightness and religious purity. From their careful scrutiny of the contents of the Quran and its history, many scholars such as Drummond (2005), Lewis and Churchill (2009) and Waines (1995) have come to the general agreement that some of these restrictions have been introduced later during the period of the completion of the Quran. Drummond (2005) demonstrates that the restriction on drinking alcohol entered the Quran during the long period of its completion. Although Drummond (2005) does not state the actual source of these restrictions, the taboo against alcohol can be seen as a practical measure to help Muslims guard themselves against sinful behaviour. In Islamic history, there was a man whom intoxicated by alcohol, loses his self-control and then raped and killed an innocent woman thus resulting in the ban of alcohol.

Similarly, with regard to issues such as the arts and entertainment, Islam imposes restrictions on such practices with a certain rationale meant to uphold ethical principles. In His own lifetime, Prophet Muhammad’s (PBUH) Companions were said to be so engrossed in music that they forgot to *shalat* (pray). In another example Hassan (a companion of Imam Jafar Sadiq alaihi-salam, a contributor in the Hadith collections) had a personal experience where he was immersed in music by his neighbour’s singing girls and forgot his duties to worship Allah. Music and singing are seen as distracting Muslims from the most important things in life, which is to remember Allah, and this is the “underlying message” of the Quran (Grieves, 2006, pp. 90; Turner, 2006, p.p 44-45). Similarly, the Hadith also has some other underlying messages about how music and such forms of entertainment must be curbed. For example the Prophet Muhammad said, “Singing and music are enchantment for adultery” and “a stepping stone or a way that leads to adultery” (As-Sayyid al-Khu’l and al-Masa’ilu ‘sh-Shar’iyya cited in Hussain, 2005, p. 2). Looking closely at the passage, they do not outlaw music but explain how Muslims must observe caution as music can lead one

to forg *et allah* and engage in morally degenerate behaviour.

Korpe, Reitov and Cloonan (2006) have said that “The Holy Quran does not, in fact, say anything at all about music or music making” (p. 248). But Korpe, Reitov and Cloonan (2006) and several others fail to see that music or dance is actually seen as a form of idle talk or amusement. The Quran states that “And of mankind is he who pursues idle talks to misled from the path of Allah” (Quran, 31:6) and another passage, “Wasting your lifetimes in past times and amusements” (Quran, 53: 59-61). Muslim scholars such as Abu Daawood, Al-Bayhaqee and Ahmad (cited in Hussain, 2005) have agreed that the term idle talks refer to the lyrics (in singing) and dialogue (in theatre) (p. 2) and the term amusement refers to music and singing (Hussain, 2005, p. 2). Idle talk also refers to talk in everyday discourse when people do not use speech for good purposes but talk nonsense, brag or abuse others. This passage is a reminder from Allah Al-Mighty of the capability of an entertainer, performer to engage in a form of idle talk that can then mislead Muslims from performing their obligations.

In fact, there are many arguments that clearly show how Islam does not reject singing completely. As Waines (1995) explains, a Hadith from Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) states, “Beautify the Qur’an with your voices, for the beautiful voice increases the beauty of the Quran” (p. 24). This Hadith clearly states that instead of reading in the normal voice, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) asks Muslims to render the reading of the Quran in melody (Adil, 2012; Opir, 2012; Osman, 2012).

Dance is another form of performance and entertainment that is generally considered to be against Islamic teachings. Again, statements from the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in the Hadith, such as “I prohibit for you dancing and playing flute, drums and *tabla*”, is used to promote such a view. Again what this view fails to understand is that this prohibition only applies to dances where people of different gender intermingle which can lead to physical contact and possible illicit sexual attraction between men and women. Dance is prohibited if it involves different genders but permissible if it involves men or women alone. For example, in Persia and Turkey, Sufis used “dance or whirling dervishes as part of the worship” (Lewis & Churchill 2009, pp. 67-68). The description of who is Sufi is “vague” (Turner, 2006, p. 144) but scholar such as Waines (1995) described the Sufis as “the friend of Allah” (p. 194). Dance is permissible within the guidelines observing gender separation and for the purpose of worship. Also, it must be noted that Islam restricts other forms of performing arts which involves religious elements or worship of gods from other faiths. Traditional devotional Indian dances such as Bharatnatyam and Kuchipudi, are restricted to the Muslims.

There is, however, a clear restriction on the use of musical instruments in Islam as the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is said to have made a clear

restriction of the use of certain musical instruments in the Hadiths, such as “Indeed Allah has prohibited; wine, gambling, al-koobah (drum) and every type of intoxicant” (Abu Daawood, Al-Bayhaqee and Ahmad cited in Hussain, 2005, p. 2) and “The Almighty Allah has sent me as a mercy to the worlds, to guide the people. And He ordered me to eradicate the playing of flute and other instruments of music, all game of vice, idol (worship) and all practises of the days of ignorance” (Mustadrakul Wasael cited in Hussain, 2005, p. 2). Although there is no rationale given for this restriction, Muslims are taught to put faith in Allah Al-Mighty for every restriction and guideline given. It’s again described in the Quran:

The true believers are the ones who have faith in Allah and His Messenger and leave all doubt behind, the ones who struggled to put their possessions and their persons at the service of Allah: they are the ones who are true (Quran, 49:15).

Whilst the Quran and Hadith collections mention music (singing and types of instrument) and dance in different ways and prescribe guidelines for how they can be practiced, there are no specific passages that can be applied to theatre. As a consequence, scholars such as Sweeney (cited in Hefner and Horvatic, 1997) believe that “all traditional performing arts and shadow puppet are contrary to Islamic teachings” (p. 257). But this is only the view of orthodox factions who impose a rigid interpretation on the guidelines in the Quran. According to Hussain (2005), theatre is permissible in Islam but some general rulings must be used here as a guideline. Just like the guidelines pertaining to dance explained above, dramatic performances must adhere to the general ethical guideline of Islam about observing sexual propriety and moral purity while eschewing depiction of religious elements from other faiths. For example, in Iran men and women are allowed to act together in one space as long as they are husband and wife. Also, PAS has banned traditional performing arts in Kelantan due to the fact they contained rituals involving Hinduism, Buddhism and animism to protect the faith of the Muslim performers and audiences. According to Al-Khateeb (cited in Cassel, 2012), the Quran does not mention any restriction of the depiction of the Prophets, but Islamic scholars have agreed that portraying Allah, the Prophet and Angels in human form is to disrespect their holiness and so it is forbidden. As Al-Khateeb (cited in Cassel, 2012) explains, “Muslims believe in higher unseen principles that cannot be personified as ordinary humans” (p. 2) and “the respect of the Prophets and no person who is able to render the values and full form of the Prophets” (p. 2).

Understanding the restrictions:

As a reading of the passages above has shown, any form of performing arts or entertainment is not banned as such but some restrictions have been imposed on the form and the manner in which they can be practised. These restrictions have to be understood in the light of the ethical principles of Islam about never forgetting to worship Allah in this

temporal world, observing moral codes of sexual propriety and abstaining from other immoral behaviour. But what has happened is that cultural practices adopted by staunchly patriarchal and orthodox theologies have begun to influence the general Islamic outlook on life. For example, some of the orthodox Middle-Eastern countries impose the rule that women must wear a *burqa* (a veil that covered the whole face except the eyes) or *niqab* (a veil that covers the whole face, including the eyes). The fact is as Brown (2012) argues, “there is no passage in the holy Quran that asks females to cover their face” (p. 3). Other scholars such as Brown (2010) and Jawhar (2010) also argue that wearing *burqa* and *niqab* is more of a cultural tradition in Middle Eastern countries rather than an obligation outlined in Islamic teachings.

Islamic teachings on entertainment and performing arts do not impose a complete ban on the performing arts but advocate its practice within certain limitations and guidelines. The most important guideline is that music or dance or any form of performing art must not distract Muslims from their duty of worshipping Allah. While modern Western society defines music as “the realm of the profane, such as popular music, dance music and all wordless instrumental music” (Brown and Volgsten, 2006, p. 249), purpose of music in the Islamic view is to attract listeners to do good deeds and remember Allah. Muslim scholars such as Adil (2012), Hussain (2004), Opir (2012) and Osman (2012) agree that if “good words are used without idolizing another human being except the Prophets or God (Allah)” music is permissible in Islam. Words “which display man’s vanity and primarily furthers interest in mundane, worldly concerns” are considered sinful (Shiloah cited in Brown & Volgsten, 2006, p. 249) and are not permissible in Islamic view. As such Islamic forms of music, such as the *nasyeed* or devotional song, are permissible in Islam.

Another important ethical principle in Islam is the maintenance of gender boundaries and sexual propriety. There are many passages in the Quran where Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) speaks about observing modesty and gender boundaries to prevent moral degeneracy and illicit relations. The Quran states:

[Prophet], tell believing men to lower their gaze and master their sense: that is purer to them. Allah is well aware of everything they do. And tell believing women that they should lower their gaze, master their senses and not flaunt their charms beyond what [it is acceptable] to reveal; they should let their headscarves fall to their necklines and not reveal their charms except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands’ fathers, their sons, their husbands’ sons, their womenfolk, their slaves, such men as attend them who have no sexual desire, or children who are not yet aware of physical relations; they should not stamp their feet so as to draw attention to any hidden charms (Quran, 24:30-31).

Singers during the Prophet Muhammad’s (PBUH) era were mostly women as evident from

passages, such as: “Merriment will be made for them through the playing of musical instruments and the singing of lady singers”. Women have more persuasive and charismatic power. In a study of the relation of gender to power of persuasion, Dion and Stein (cited in Carli, 2001) found that such a differentiation starts during the middle school. In their experiment, these researchers found that girls have greater ability to persuade boys than vice versa, and they also found that “attractive children have more power to persuade than less attractive children” (p. 727). As women exercise such power over men, the teachings in Islam prohibit the use of music which can influence men to lose their self-control and engage in illicit behaviour with women. In another study of the psychobiological on the responses towards music, Berlyne (cited in North & Harreaves, 2006) found that music has a strong “arousal potential” (p. 105). From a study of music and behavioural control, Brown (cited in Brown and Volgsten, 2006) states that, “music is a communication device that serves as an important component of systems of persuasion and manipulation” (p. 4).

In these ways, the restrictions on all entertainment and performing arts are not instituted as an outright ban but must be practiced with caution in view of some fundamental ethical principles. To demonstrate this argument and clarify the misconception, the case of the famous singer Cat Stevens can be used as an example. After converting to Islam in December, 1977, Cat Stevens changed his name to Yusuf Islam in July 1978, and was seen less in the entertainment world. As Evans (1995) argues, Cat Stevens’ new-found faith in Islam was the reason behind this as he put out “Cat Stevens had difficulty coping with Yusuf Islam and Yusuf Islam found that he didn’t need Cat Stevens at all” (p. 134). According to Evans, Cat Stevens quit singing as Islam is against singing and entertainment. But this was not a completely accurate assessment of the situation. There are indications that Yusuf continued his musical career contrary to the general perception. Yusuf was still involved in music as he launched his new LP “Back to Earth” in November the same year. Two years later, Yusuf wrote a song “A for Allah” for his daughter Hasanah which he performed in front of thousands of Afghan Muslim refugees in Peshawar during his visit in 1987. Yusuf was involved in music with example in 1985, where he offered himself to perform acapella of his new song, ‘The End’ in the Live Aid charity concert in Wembley Stadium.

Yusuf himself was confused whether music is permissible in Islam or not. But during that period of break, Yusuf kept silent in the music world several years due to the fact that he was busy doing several charity works, locally and internationally as an ambassador for the United Nations, Muslim communities in United Kingdom and several other organisations around the world. For a start, in an interview by VH1, Yusuf himself explains, “until how I know how I can express myself better, until I

know how music can fit or how I can express myself in a new way, perhaps I better take a break” (VH1, 2000). In 1994, Yusuf came back into the music world with his album “The Life of The Last Prophet”. Three years after that, Yusuf collaborated with Muslim Bosnian singers such as Dino Melin, Aziz Alili and Senad Podojok to produce an album “I have no cannons that roar” (Lifeline, 1994, n.d). In the following years, Yusuf released a number of single such as ‘Indian Ocean’ (March 2005), ‘Midday (Avoid city after dark)’ (March 2007). He also released LP with 2006, ‘An Other Cup’ and 2009, ‘Road singer’. Yusuf still performs in public, but his songs and music are much different from those sung by the Cat Stevens back then (VH1, 2000).

Conclusion:

Entertainment and performing arts is still an issue of much debate in the Muslim world. This has happened due to the dominance of certain orthodox theologies such as the Wahabbi sect in the recent years, and the power exercised by orthodox Muslim jurists such as the *Ulama*. According to Turner (2006), the Quran “is not easy to read” and instead of taking its lessons in a “metaphorical sense”, some orthodox people are prone to misinterpreting it. But the majority of Muslims belonging to moderate sects agree that the performing arts are permissible as long as they adhere to the basic principles of Islam. The confusion continues as orthodox Muslim scholars who reject entertainment accuse other Muslims of being *kafir* (infidel) and there is not effort to reach a broad consensus through considered debate (Fadl, 2005).

In Malaysia, the situation has become more complex as the federal and state governments have different views on this issue. The Federal Government led by BN coalition allows entertainment and performances to some degree and financial support is also given to practitioners in performing arts. At the same time, Islamic states controlled by PAS government such as Kelantan, ban performing arts due to the un-Islamic ritual in the performances. Art Managers in Malaysia are still facing challenges especially in states governed by the PAS.

It seems that many have found solutions to promote an Islamic form of entertainment and performing arts. Opir (2012) says that art forms must incorporate Islam and its teachings rather than take stories and themes from modern Western literature. He also advocated the separation of actors of different genders, so that males can only act with male actors and females with females. He claimed that by following such rules, Islamic ethics would be upheld in entertainment and performing arts. One thing remains clear that in the majority of moderate Muslim countries around the world, entertainment and performing arts is allowed in Islam as long as it adheres to the guidelines protecting ethical behaviour and sanctity of Islam. And there needs to be a considered debate on this issue with greater

participation of the majority of moderate Muslims in the world so that such misconceptions planted by a few radical elements are alleviated.

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