(Muslim) Boyz-N-The-Hood

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The words "Islam" and "Muslim"—both interpretative and associative—are no longer banal, harmless or simple givens that can be neutrally employed without some ideological content being disseminated: their mere employment conjuring and informing a myriad of different, typically negatively evaluated understandings and meanings. It is interesting therefore that in the past few months, the term Muslim has been seen to be identifying, informing, and adding a new dimension to a group in society that has been subjected to various myths and processes of stereotypification in the media over the past three decades. The social group in question is that of young black males: the new dimension being identifiable in the media's reporting and coverage associated with the "Muslim Boys" street gang.

Converts to crime

Of the Muslim Boys, little factual evidence is known although it would appear that they formed over two years ago when a "hardcore" of African-Caribbean Muslim converts began violently "taxing" the local criminal community, being initially dubbed the Taliban Terrorists. Comprising mainly ex-convicts with a history of serious crime, the gang's members began following an austere form of Islam—having embraced the religion whilst in prison—that it is alleged they sought to use to fashion a criminal network with a higher purpose on the outside. Operating primarily in south London, whilst some media reports have described the gang's numbers as being in their hundreds, those, such as the Metropolitan Police's Detective Chief Superintendent John Coles, are much more sceptical, suggesting that even a hundred might be an exaggeration. Nonetheless, he does confirm the gang's involvement in at least two execution style murders and a growing number of assaults, robberies, and firearms offences. They are also suspected of involvement in the shooting of a policeman in December 2005.[1]

That which is known about the Muslims Boys is therefore far from categorical and at times, even contradictory. Yet the increasingly sensationalist media coverage and the ever more hyperbolic discourse written about the gang prompts a number of pertinent questions about the Muslim Boys. Why, as a phenomenon, have they been able to find resonance in the media and the social spaces beyond? To answer this question, it is necessary to ask to what extent the gang is reflective of all that it is being alleged of; whether it is possible that the gang has merely tapped into the anxieties and fears about Muslims and Islam that exist in society to bolster their own stature and status; and finally, whether they are in reality little more than the media further articulating the same fears and anxieties that it has historically attributed to young black males but more contemporarily with the meanings associated with the monikers of "Muslim" and "Islam."

In considering the first of these sub-questions, one of the most recurrent news stories has been concerning the gang's alleged practice of "forced conversions," conversions that are said to be enforced at gun-point. It is further alleged that the murder of Adrian Marriott, a young student, was an unwanted consequence of such a conversion, being reported by the media in two ways: the first as a consequence of him refusing the gang's ultimatum "convert or die," the second as an example to others who might choose to refuse

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This article focuses on the rise of the "Muslim Boys" gang, from its origins in prison and the streets of south London through street crime and forced conversions to a media discourse alleging links with international terrorism and al-Qaeda. Paradoxically, the absence of reliable factual evidence only seems to have enhanced the power of discursive labelling. The author shows how the word "Muslim" is being used both by the gang and the media and how in this process stereotypes about Muslims as well as young black males are being amplified and reified.

Islam.[2] As the London *Evening Standard* explained in the words of alleged gang member Winston: "You got to be Muslim to be in our group … If you not down with Muslim, we visit your home, maybe strip you naked in front of your fucking mother, we put a gun in your mouth. We give you three days [to convert], then, if you not down with it, we fucking blow [shoot you]."[3] Whilst the claims and allegations of those such as "Winston" might be somewhat questionable, with the actuality of a murder having been committed, those same claims and allegations cannot therefore be entirely refuted.

An urban al-Qaeda?

There is actually only one concrete fact known about the Muslim Boys: that they are a street gang that has been involved in a number of violent and drug-related crimes and murders in the south London area. The gang is therefore a worrying reality but one that cannot be substantiated either way as to whether or not they are capable of, or indeed undertaking, all that is being alleged of it.

One of the recurrent themes that emerge in the media is that the Muslim Boys are a criminal vanguard of religious extremists. Reflecting the growing reputation of the gang and the media's acknowledgement that Islam can be transnational, so it has been suggested that the gang is seeking links beyond south London to potentially more dangerous organizations and networks, going beyond the realm of drugs and firearms. This view is voiced by Lee Jasper, one of the Mayor of London's senior advisors, who is concerned that the leaders of the Muslim Boys could be a criminalized front for terrorist extremists.[4] Whilst links have previously been made to criminal networks in the Caribbean, never before have black gangs in the UK been directly associated with or perceived to be involved in terrorism. Somewhat unsurprisingly, in a post-7/7 climate such suggestions have found resonance despite lacking any real substantiation. Seeking to find any justification for such an interlinkage, one local newspaper used the words of Camila Batmanghelidjh, leader of a youth charity in Camberwell, south London as categorical evidence following her remark that many of the children she dealt with—many who were likely to become part of south London's gang underclass—were similar to suicide bombers: "They get to the point where they don't care if they live or die … They don't have empathy. They've lost touch with their humanity. That's why they're so dangerous … They can't feel anything at all."[5]

Despite Detective Chief Superintendent Coles responding that "we have found no evidence whatsoever of a link to terrorism" this has failed to abate the media's pursuit of such links, one that has recently culminated in the national daily newspaper, *The Mirror*, running a front page headline "The jail run by al-Qaeda."[6] Alongside an image of Osama bin Laden, the article detailed how Belmarsh prison in south London, notorious for holding those arrested under anti-terrorism legislation since 9/11, had allegedly become the Muslim Boys' stronghold where "violent Islamic extremists are terrorizing inmates … as they trawl for al-Qaeda recruits." Once again the issue of forced conversions was recurrent where an alleged leaked report stated, "They force prisoners to accept the Muslim faith—those who refuse suffer assaults. They promise potential converts protection from other prisoners and staff …"

What is important to note is that despite the article apparently being concerned with the Muslim Boys, it is far from specific, suggesting a much wider frame of reference than merely the gang itself. So the

activities and practices of all Muslims without differentiation were being called into question, as for example when the leaked report alleged that Islamic "religious meetings" and "services" were nothing more than al-Qaeda recruitment meetings. Considering Belmarsh's notorious security, it is highly questionable—even downright nonsensical—whether "top members of al-Qaeda" are allowed to preach to Muslim inmates at Friday prayers each week. Nonetheless in codifying the problem, the newspaper quoted a member of prison staff saying: "None of the staff has a clue what they're talking about … [they] could be planning a major terrorist attack but the officers wouldn't know. We can't even tape the service and get it translated because it is against human rights. It's frightening."

The banner of Islam

The construction of the islamized discourse with regard to the Muslim Boys, has become something of a cause for concern in certain south London Muslim communities. Following the negative coverage received after "shoebomber" Richard Reid was identified as having prayed there—Reid himself a revert to Islam of African-Caribbean heritage with a criminal past—the Brixton mosque recently sought to avert any problems, potential or otherwise. Following the murder of a young black man, Solomon Martin on New Years Eve 2005, another linked to the gang, the Brixton and Stockwell mosques publicly denounced any association with any such groups or activities. Without naming the Muslim Boys specifically, the mosque declared that these "criminals masquerading as Muslims"[7] were threatening the good name of Islam, giving some credence to the possibility of the gang tapping into the anxieties and fears associated to Muslims and Islam. Despite the denouncement however, the recurrence of the Muslims Boys fails to go away: at another local mosque in Thornton Heath, gang member Marcus Archer was arrested and subsequently convicted of possession of firearms after being arrested by armed police having been seen handing a gun to a friend before entering the mosque to pray.[8]

As regards their tapping into social anxieties and fears, this would also appear to be what is being suggested by Toaha Qureshi, chair of the Lambeth Muslim Forum, who suggests that far from being sincere Muslims, the gang are instead "camouflaging themselves in the banner of Islam."[9] Such an explanation would appear to have some validity, although in recognizing this one has to make some assumptions—whether fairly or otherwise—about how sincere those gang members are in their adherence to Islam. This again cannot be substantiated from what is known and so again, this question also remains unanswerable.

"Boyz-n-the-Hood"

The gap between fact and fiction is therefore extremely difficult to identify and even more so to differentiate between. The final point about the practice of the media is potentially the most complex, namely that the myths surrounding the Muslim Boys may be nothing more than an extremely localized "story" being propelled into a globalized and hybridized spectacle. Utilizing the increasing problematization of Britain's Muslim communities since 2001,[10] intensified by both 9/11 and 7/7, it might be that this problematization is being employed to further reinforce the representations that have been associated with young black males in the media since the 1970s. It therefore seems that it is the myths about the Muslim Boys that are problematic, simultaneously reifying the contemporary problematization of Muslim communities and the historically rooted criminalization of young, black males. In this way, two separate yet equally dangerous sets of stereotypes, those of radicalism, violence, and terrorism (Muslims) and criminality, violence, and "gangsta" culture (young black males) find form and become strengthened. Whilst Stuart Hall noted three decades ago that "race" had come to signify the crises in society—the "moral panic"—it seems that now it is race, augmented by religion that is providing today's "moral panic": an "arena in which [today's] complex fears, tensions and anxieties … [are] most conveniently and explicitly [being] projected and … worked through."[11] As such, those young black males that are being identified as "Muslim"—taking into account the aforementioned

Reid and also the Jamaican-born 7/7 bomber Germaine (Jamal) Lindsey—might be merely the latest manifestation of a historical discourse that has repeatedly racialized, criminalized, and perpetually problematized myths and stereotypes about this marginalized and demonized social group.

It is therefore suggested that whilst it is highly unlikely that the Muslim Boys present the size or scale of threat that some sources are suggesting, the utilization of the Muslim tag does confirm how such words and descriptors can no longer be neutrally employed: conjuring and informing a myriad of negatively evaluated understandings that contemporarily strike fear not only into the communities within which such a gang might be operating but also in the readerships and wider socio-political spaces within which those media sources are also being disseminated. Aside from the realities or otherwise of the Muslim Boys and their foreseeable (mediatized?) future, what this episode—whether ongoing or possibly even already concluded—allows is an insight into the way in which the discourses of stereotypification and societal demonization inherent within racism and, more recently, Islamophobia are always moving: constantly maintaining a protean nature and rarely, if indeed ever, remaining static and unchanging.

PHOTO BY CHRIS ALLEN, 2006

Graffiti on a south London housing estate

Notes

1. "The rise of the 'Muslim Boys'," *Evening Standard,* 3 February 2006.
2. "Student was shot by 'Muslim Boys' gang," *South London Press*, 6 January.
3. *Evening Standard*, 3 February 2006.
4. "Captive converts," *Times Online*, 11 August 2005.
5. "God's army," *Sunday Times*, 14 August 2005.
6. 30 January 2006.
7. Ibid.
8. "Gang member jailed over mosque pistol," *South London Press*, 16 September 2005.
9. "Criminal gangs use Islam to intimidate victims," *Guardian*, 7 March 2006.
10. Chris Allen, *Fair justice: the Bradford disturbances, the sentencing and the impact* (London: FAIR, 2003).
11. Stuart Hall et al, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (London: Palgrave, 1978), 333.

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