



A Queer Muslim HIV-Positive Journey

We speak with global HIV activist to explore the experience of being queer & HIV-positive and traveling to Mecca on a spiritual journey

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Interview by Alex Garner

To be queer and Muslim can present immense challenges to some and intense satisfaction to others. Add living with HIV to that equation and it can have an enormous impact. We all struggle to come to terms with who we are, to freely express ourselves, and live with HIV in a way that is affirming and free of stigma. Imagine being queer and HIV-positive and traveling to Mecca for a profound religious experience. That is precisely what Acep Gates just did. Acep is queer, Muslim and lives with HIV. He's a global HIV advocate who stands out as one of few people openly living with HIV in Indonesia and the region.

Acep Gates is an unashamed and inspiring content creator who focuses on HIV and LGBT issues in Indonesia. He has been sharing his experiences as openly gay, HIV positive and Muslim in Indonesia through social media since 2018. He represents a unique voice in the region and recently went on pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. We spoke to him to share his story with others as a way to demonstrate how one can overcome barriers and live fully as a person with HIV.

MPact Global created this column as a way to explore the unique experiences of queer people living with HIV all around the globe. We strive to amplify diverse voices and explore topics that impact the daily lives of HIV-positive people, from sex, to culture, to community, to self-expression.

Acep's content can be found on [TikTok](#), [Instagram](#), and [YouTube](#),

How do you reconcile your sexuality with your religion? I studied Islam for about 16 years, as far as I know Allah (God) never said on Quran that homosexual can't be a Muslim.

Unfortunately, many Muslims has been using some of verses of Quran to against gay people.

What prompted you to go on this pilgrimage now? Many people in Indonesia told me that it is impossible for gays like me to do Umroh or Hajj because Allah (God) will punish me. I didn't believe what they said to me, so I did Umroh to prove that each Muslim regardless of their sexuality has rights and can do this kind of worship.

Why was it important for you to share in real time your experience while in Mecca and Medina? I wanted to share my real time experience while doing Umroh to break the stigma that gay people like me incapable of doing these activities.

How did people respond to you talking openly about living with HIV and going on pilgrimage? Most of them were surprised, because they thought PLHIV can't do Umroh and will face discrimination. But in fact, it was nothing different, the travel agent or even Saudi Arabia Immigration didn't ask anything related to my HIV status.

How did being gay and HIV-positive inform or influence your spiritual experience at Mecca? To be honest, the Umroh journey made me stronger and believe more that God always loves me as who I am. Because I felt such peace and accepted during my Umroh activities.

What's been your experience with the queer Muslim community in Indonesia and around the world? I found that as queer Muslims we have been always supporting each other, to make sure that we feel accepted in our religion.

Did you meet guys while in Mecca and Medina? Could you see other gay men represented there? Unfortunately, I didn't meet any one of them because my time was so limited. But I opened Grindr there and chatted with some guys, most of the guys were not originally from Saudi Arabia but from Egypt. Their distance was also so far, it was about 60 KM from Mecca and Medina.

What message would you share with other queer Muslims around the world? Just be yourself, and always remember that Allah (God) always loves us for who we are.