

Islamic-themed Films in Contemporary Indonesia: Commodified Religion or Islamization?¹

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Much of the discussion of Islamic content in recent Indonesian films revolves around the idea of religious commodification.² Islamic content in films such as *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (literally: Love Verses, Dir. Hanung Bramantyo, 2007) is seen merely as the commodification of religion by a mass produced pop cultural form. Islam is commodified when the faith and its symbols are turned into “a commodity capable of being bought and sold for profit” (Fealy, 2007:17). Few have seen Islamic-themed films in the broader context of socio-political cultural change of Islam in Indonesia (see Heryanto, forthcoming, for example), because there was little serious academic interest in the religion-film interface until a decade ago (Wright, 2007:11).

This essay intends to show that Islamic-themed films in Indonesia involve more than merely religious commodification. The main question I pose in this essay is: Can this phenomenon be simply defined as the commodification of Islam or a result of Islamization? On one side, studies on commodification argue that religion and culture suffer in the process of turning them into sellable items in the marketplace. In this light, the market influences religion resulting in secularization such that religion loses its meaning. On the other hand, there is “religionization” wherein religion and the sacred are distributed and consumed through market mechanisms.³ In this regard, the market is seen as a necessary tool for religion in order to survive contemporary global consumer culture.

I start with observations about the Islamic content of Indonesian films during the New Order era (1966-1998) to see how Indonesian Muslims collectively revealed themselves in film in conjunction with New Order development policy. Then I continue with observations on Islamic-themed films in post-Soeharto era, following the resignation of Soeharto as president. Before examining these Islamic-themed films, I begin with a discussion on commodification and Islamization.

Commodification and Islamization

Commodification is a process whereby objects, qualities, and signs are turned into commodities whose prime purpose is for sale in the market place (Barker, 2004:28). In this regard, religion can be a quality that is sold for profit. However, according to Kitiarsa (2008:7), religious commodities are complex historical and cultural constructions, notwithstanding their obvious commercial features. Despite following hypothetical notions that commodification

“can get religion into trouble,” Kitiarsa says the “commodification process can be socially and culturally disturbing and disrupting, unless symbolic market intimacies, or extents and degrees which blend religious and economic values together, are put into consideration” (2008:7).

However, commodification might be necessary for religion to survive the onslaught of contemporary consumer culture. Consumption “serves as an important identity marker as a sign of social status and political affiliation,” particularly among the urban “new Muslim middle class” (Hasan, 2009:231). Seen from another perspective, this is how Indonesian Muslims “seek visibility and legitimacy in the national public sphere.” Islam, in this case, “is presented in a way that is sophisticated, fresh and hybrid in order to make it an appealing alternative to urban, capitalist culture” (Hasan, 2009:238).

The term “Islamization” here is borrowed and expanded from Mahmudi (2005). It means the effort to call people to adhere to Islamic teachings and acceptance of Islamic teachings as governing principles of the individual, and of social and political life. For some Muslims, Islam is not only understood as a religion of ritual but also as a philosophy and a way of life. Islam requires its adherents to embrace total Islam (*Islam Kafah*). This definition of Islamization includes re-Islamization which is a process to make nominal Muslims devout (Mahmudi, 2005:76).

Fig. 1. Diponegoro in Islamic Attire.



Mahmudi delineates two major approaches in Islamization which he calls accommodationist and purificationist. The basic idea of the accommodationist

approach is to understand the Quran and *hadith* (the Prophet's sayings and tradition) according to the Shafii *madzhab* (school). Accommodationists aspire for a substantial role of Islam in politics. The basic aim of the purificationists is to return to the Quran and *hadith* using a non-*madzhab* approach. Purificationists target legal-formal achievement in politics (Mahmudi, 2005:55-60).

Mahmudi proposes an alternative: Islamization must be seen in the context of blurring boundaries between modernist and traditionalist Muslims, as young Muslims are no longer attracted to discussions on doctrine (2005:60). This has resulted in the evolution of a pragmatic Islamic social movement and political parties that employ various less-rigid Islamic issues and outlooks to promote Islamic-teaching based on some principles that made them more adaptable to the current situation.⁴ This has made Muslim reception towards consumer culture less complicated.⁵

Islamic Content in Indonesian Films during the New Order Era

Commodification of religion was not an observable concern for Muslims during the New Order era and Muslims' main attention turned to state institutions and state developmentalism. Muslim figures and other forms of Islamic content in Indonesian films during the New Order period were overwhelmed by the discourse of development. However, depictions of Muslims and Islamic-teachings in the New Order era films were related to various societal and political issues. Muslim characters in New Order era films were portrayed as fighting the Dutch colonialists, helping the poor, supporting nationalism, and bringing rational thinking and modernism to the general public.⁶

The New Order banned "extreme ideologies" in Indonesian politics. Hence similar to what happened to communism (namely the PKI, Indonesian Communist Party), radical Islam⁷ in Indonesian films in the New Order era was demonized. A key film in this regard is *Mereka Kembali* (They Have Returned, Dir. Nawi Ismail, 1974), about the Siliwangi Division's long march from Yogyakarta to Bandung after the Renville Agreement was signed by representatives of Indonesia and the Dutch army in 1947.⁸ Some of the Islamic factions among the Indonesian freedom fighters declared an Islamic state with the name of Darul Islam in Tasikmalaya, West Java (see further in van Dijk, 1981, especially pp. 69-126 for Darul Islam in West Java).

In *They Have Returned*, the Darul Islam (DI) militia is portrayed as committing offences such as robbery and rape, and claiming the national army as "*kafir*" (infidel) since they support a "non-Islamic state." The members of the national army are portrayed as figures that adhere to a variety of religions, saying their prayers led by Islamic scholar or *ulama* before beginning the long march. This depiction of DI and the Indonesian national army (TNI) had three objectives: first, to portray radical Islam as traitor to the nation and therefore to the people; second, to cast aspersions on the role of Islam as a source of

anti-colonial resistance and third, to promote the TNI as the sole institution keeping Indonesian independence intact against Dutch aggression (see Said, 1991; McGregor, 2007). By contrast, moderate Muslims are portrayed as supporters of the nation-state and Islamic-inspired resistance against colonialism is only valid under the banner of the nation state.

Islam was allowed to be portrayed as a dominant force in relation to moral teachings. However, this moral teaching was sometimes broadened into a base for criticism against westernization when the Muslim figures are put in opposition to Dutch colonialists. In *Selarong Cave Hero*, Prince Diponegoro, a devout Muslim, promotes moral teachings to fight both colonialism and westernization which is symbolized through alcoholic drinks. Alcohol, which is allowed for non-Muslims, is portrayed as an evil-spirited thing for Muslims in this film.⁹

Fig. 2. Pitung, a Bandit with Kopiah and poor people he helps.

Guided by moral teaching, Muslim figures are shown committing social banditry to help the poor. Si Pitung,¹⁰ Bajing Ireng,¹¹ and Raden Mas Said¹² rob the rich to give money to the poor. They do so as an extension of their “moral obligation” to reflect their inner righteous self rather than to oppose



authority. In the context of New Order developmentalism, the depiction of Muslim figures disrupting “order” was allowed when they fought against the Dutch colonialists or the Mataram Kingdom. It would be different if the body politic that those figures resist is the nation state whose existence must be supported in tandem with its discourse.¹³ Nevertheless, the portrayal of Muslim figures opposing *de-facto* authority shows the subversive quality of Indonesian Muslims.

Stronger portrayals of Muslim figures who oppose *de-facto* author-

ity was *Tjoet Njak Dhien* (Dir. Eros Djarot, 1988), a Muslim heroine from Aceh, a province well-known for its resistance against the central Jakarta government during New Order era. Tjoet Njak Dhien fights the Dutch based on religious sentiment. She addresses the Dutch army as “*kaphé Ulanda*” (the infidel Dutch) and leads her people against the Dutch as a holy war. Tjoet Njak Dhien is one of the national heroes, but the film portrays her as an Acehnese woman who strongly opposes any “outsiders” to govern Aceh and campaigns that Aceh must be led by Acehnese. This portrayal of Tjoet Njak Dhien is a soft allusion to resistance against the central government in Jakarta by the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (Free Aceh Movement).¹⁴



Fig. 3 Hidayat Nurwahid endorsing *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* in National Newspaper.

Para Perintis Kemerdekaan (Pioneers of Independence, Dir. Asrul Sani, 1982) which was seen by Sen and Hill as seeking “regional revolutionary credentials” (2000:156), also tells a story of an anti-colonialist movement strongly influenced by Islamic teachings. In the film, a *pengajian* (Quranic teaching class) resists the Dutch authorities by publishing a periodical and conducting political enlightenment courses. The activities are carried out based on Islamic and regional sentiments which at the same time are subsumed under nation-state ideals. Muslim figures in this film are also portrayed as supportive of modernization and development consonant with the New Order’s dominant discourse.

In his other films, Asrul Sani¹⁵ in co-operation with Director Chaerul Umam offers us young Muslim figures who are in favor of progress, rational thinking, and capable of combining religious and “worldly” knowledge as heroes. In Sani-Umam films, *Al Kautsar* (name of chapter in the Quran, 1972), and *Titian Serambut Dibelah Tujuh* (literally: A Hair-width Bridge Divided by Seven, 1982), the lead character is a young *guru ngaji* (Islamic-course teacher) who is sent to a village to replace the old teacher and modify the teaching methods. Sani, a good storyteller, not only “propagated” modernity in his films but also established role models of modern Muslim figures. These figures are seen to bring progress, and to stand up against bullying and corrupt power.

The victory of young modern Muslims against traditional Muslims in Sani’s films reflects how Muslims took sides in modernization which was the basis of New Order developmentalism.¹⁶ This portrayal parallels the idea promoted by prominent Islamic thinker Nurcholis Madjid in the 1970s, that

Muslims should be modern by becoming “rational” without being “Western.” Nurcholis Madjid’s proposal *modernisasi bukan westernisasi* (modernization not westernization) has encouraged devout Muslims to approve the idea of modernity and development introduced by the state without feeling guilty of being “westernized” or “betraying their adherence to Islam.”¹⁷ It is interesting to compare the Indonesian Muslim response to modernization and development with the effect of developmentalism on Malaysian ethnic politics (See Loh, 2002). Loh concluded that the process of development in Malaysia in the 1990s has brought affluence to the citizenry, and discourse on development has become entrenched and bred mass consumerism which “disaggregates the members of ethnic groups and of Malaysian society generally into individuals” (Loh, 2002:49). This individuality, in Loh’s terms, is expressed through one’s own autonomy, freedom, and identity usually related to one’s achievement perhaps in education and in one’s career. Only when social issues directly impinge on the individual’s economic well-being does some concern and intervention become evident.

There is a certain degree of similarity to Loh’s observation in Mahasin’s argument (1993) on the role of the Indonesian Muslim middle-class in identity politics. Mahasin talks about a “new devout-Muslim middle-class” that resulted from an acceptance of developmentalism. Mahasin opined that this new Muslim middle-class is pragmatic in political attitudes while in lifestyle they copy middle-class symbols and vulgar consumption patterns (Mahasin, 1993:155).

The pioneer in the representation of Muslims and this new consumption pattern is *Catatan Si Boy* (literally: Boy’s Diary, Dir. Nasri Cheppy, 1989). The film’s lead character, Si Boy, is a “perfect vehicle for consumer culture” (Sen and Hill, 2000:179). At the same time, he also adheres to Islam. Si Boy drinks Coca Cola (sponsor of the film) and smokes Bentoel cigarettes (also a sponsor) and drives the latest model of BMW car (in the sequel, it was replaced by Mazda who sponsored the film). However the most important activity of Si Boy, besides hanging out in a discotheque, is that he does not forget to perform *sholat* (praying five times each day). He displays *tasbeih* (prayer beads) in his fancy car. While *sholat* and *tasbeih* are symbols for devout Muslims, discotheques in the New Order era were perceived as temples of *maksiat* (sin).¹⁸ The character of Si Boy, who straddles both worlds, paves the way for young devout hedonistic Muslims to engage in consumer culture, which blossomed in the post-Soeharto era as never before.

Islamic Content in Indonesian Films in the Post-Soeharto Era

After Soeharto stepped down as president and the New Order collapsed, Muslims were free to re-install Islam as the foundation of political parties. They proposed to merge the famous “seven words” of the Jakarta Charter into Article 29 of the 1945 Indonesian Constitution.¹⁹ The idea failed due to almost

no support from other political parties (Hosen, 2007:4). This failure reflects a shift in Muslim political aspirations although Muslim political parties themselves are not in accordance on this issue (Nakamura, 2005:16). More importantly, the Muslim middle-class who presumably supports the idea, has become “more pragmatic and less-radical” Muslims, whose main concern is lifestyle, rather than politics or ideology (Mahasin, 1993:155).

Urban middle-class Muslims gradually participated in the consumer culture that has been growing among the Indonesian middle-class since before the 1997 economic crisis (Gerke, 2000; Ansori, 2009). They became less resistant and friendlier to consumption. Nef-Saluz’s observation on veiling practices (*pemakaian jilbab*) among Gadjah Mada University students in Yogyakarta, reflects such changes (Nef-Saluz, 2007). Nef-Saluz concludes that the growing hybrid culture that amalgamates Islam and popular culture has replaced the spirit of resistance that underpinned the wearing of the jilbab only a decade earlier (Brenner, 1996). In the early 1990s, schoolgirls were forbidden to wear the jilbab in public schools and the jilbab became a symbol of resistance for urban young Muslims against the state.²⁰

The changing relation between Islam and popular culture is observable in some Muslim groups’ protests against *Buruan Cium Gue* (Kiss Me Quick, Dir. Findo Purwono, 2004). The protest was led by a famous Muslim preacher Abdullah Gymnastiar, or Aa Gym, and secretary of the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) Din Syamsuddin. Din wanted the film withdrawn from public circulation because it “crosses the limit and promotes moral liberalism.” Aa Gym said the film promotes *zina* (unlawful sexual relation).²¹ Neither public figure had seen the film when they protested against it and this surprised many people as noted by a Muhammadiyah activist, Imam Cahyono, who calls the protest “a knee-jerk reaction to the title [since] there is no protest to *Arisan!*, for example, which contains homosexual kissing” (Cahyono, 2005:5).

Different than the protests against other films with blatant sexual content, which are easily categorized as “*haram*” (forbidden),²² protests against *Kiss Me Quick* are based on the articulation of Islamic principles in the consumption of popular culture products in general. Aa Gym did not see *Kiss Me Quick* as a product of a non-Islamic venture, but as a misrepresentation of Muslim youth in Indonesia. He then challenged the filmmakers to make films that “make all of us proud”²³ which means incorporating Islamic values in the portrayal of (Muslim) youth lifestyle. The protest against *Kiss Me Quick* presaged further cases of Muslims seeking what they consider as a correct representation of Muslims on the screen which has subsequently encouraged Islamic-themed films. Rather than focusing on the contribution of Muslims to particular social and political issues as could be seen in New Order era films, Islamic-themed films in the post-Soeharto era mostly deal with an individual’s lifestyle such as finding a life partner, self-identification, and personal achievement.

a) Finding a Life Partner

The two popular Islamic-themed films, *Love Verses* and *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* (literally: When Love Glorifies God, Dir. Chaerul Umam, 2009), revolves around the idea of finding the ideal life partner according to the lead character's faith and beliefs. The theme of finding an ideal life partner is already prominent in the romantic genre which targets a young urban audience.²⁴ In Islamizing this theme, these two films "introduced" two important concepts: *taaruf* and polygamous life.

Taaruf, which literally means "make acquaintance," replaces the idea of *pacaran* (dating). In taaruf, heterosexual couples (since homosexuality is unquestionably forbidden in Islam) make acquaintances only in the event that they are planning to marry each other in the near future (regardless of whether the plan would be canceled later due to whatever reasons) under direct surveillance of the female's closest kin. Many young urban Muslims have been struggling with the suitability of *pacaran* as evidenced by the numbers who have been consulting Islamic preachers, especially during Ramadan on radio talk shows. Most of the preachers provide unsatisfactory answers because they forbid *pacaran* as a form of *ikhtilah* (unlawful seclusion). Taaruf thus introduces an appropriate alternative to *pacaran*.

Polygamy, which is already a widely known-concept, was re-introduced to the Indonesian public in a totally different way. In New Order era Indonesian film, a man who wanted to take a second wife was always frowned upon since the deed is considered as a betrayal to the concept of the modern nuclear family that was being promoted by the New Order regime. In *Love Verses*, polygamy regardless of the fact that circumstances force the film's lead character Fahri into making this decision is seen as a heroic action taken in order to save his loved ones.

In a polemic with a journalist of *Tempo* newspaper, I learned that this issue of finding the ideal life partner according to one's faith and belief has been a big issue among young Indonesian urban middle-class Muslims. There are many young urban middle-class Muslims who perceived the films as a kind of moral guide to help them solve their real life problems, especially dealing with the urge to find their ideal life partner (as well as employment after finishing higher education). This, I believe, is the main reason why the audience watches these films and hails them as "Islamic films."

b) Self-identification

Self-identification plays a significant role in Islamic consumer culture since it relates Muslim identity directly to the consumption process and it indicates how far a product provides "symbolic market intimacy" (Kitiarsa, 2008). The lead character of *Love Verses*, Fahri, in the novel which the film is based on, is a Muslim confident of his decisions, but in the film version, he is indecisive.²⁵ The transformation of Fahri's character from novel to the film, made the film more attractive to a wider audience who can identify with

him more with greater ease effortlessly. Audiences feel sympathetic to Fahri's dilemmas. This would be different if, for example, Fahri had justified taking a second wife by confidently quoting verses from the Quran (i.e. "the love verses"), as it is portrayed in the novel. If this had been depicted, Fahri would be perceived as having manipulated religion for personal benefit, which is to live a bigamous life.

The decision to create Fahri as an indecisive character was considered as a failure by some avid fans of the novel.²⁶ The novel's author, Habiburrahman El Shirazy, who was not supportive of the idea of changing Fahri's character, tried to "right the wrong" in the adaptation of his other novel, *When Love Glorifies God*. If Fahri in *Love Verses* is an indecisive character, the lead character of *When Love Glorifies God*, Azzam, is portrayed as an exemplary Muslim whose strength is his decisiveness derived from his piety.

Fig. 4. Egypt as setting of *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih*.

c) Personal Achievement

Personal achievement is the theme that interfaces with Islam the most in contemporary Indonesian Islamic-themed films. Almost all Islamic-themed films in Post-Soeharto era consider personal achievement as a manifestation of piety. This personal achievement in some films means individual economic well-being, while in others it is higher education (which is a means to greater economic well-being). The lead characters are sometimes portrayed as having



strong collective bond and friendship, yet his or her ultimate objective is to obtain higher education or to get rich.

In *Love Verses* and *When Love Glorifies God*, higher education is not just an end but is perceived as a tool for social advancement. Both of the lead characters in the films come from low to middle class families and they marry women of upper-class family background. Education in this light is regarded as a tool to level-out social class, as stated by Azzam's sister in *When Love Glorifies God*, "You deserve to marry a beautiful woman from an upper-class family since you have completed your master's degree."²⁷ This "worldly agenda" is juxtaposed against the devout motivation of both characters when they consider that finding a pious life partner is essential to establishing a devout family (*keluarga sakinah*). This ultimately is a manifestation of devotion to God.

Characters in *Laskar Pelangi* (Rainbow Troops, dir. Riri Riza, 2008) also aspire for higher education as the main objective of their lives. The film portrays ten children from a poor area who are determined to have an education. Despite the film's clear depiction of class-divisions and poverty that structures the characters' lives, the film leaves those topics relatively untouched. Rather than discussing structural or economic conditions like what filmmakers during the New Order era did with their Islamic-themed films *Rainbow Troops* focuses on its characters' pursuit and achievement of "greater values" in education, which happens to be carried out in a school that is established and run by Muhammadiyah, the second largest Muslim organization in the country.²⁸ Adherence to religion in this film manifests as a personal achievement in education rather than commenting on (or criticizing or offering solutions to) their unjust social background. This message is even stronger in the sequel of this film, *The Dreamers* (dir. Riri Riza, 2010), which concentrates on Ikal, one of the *Rainbow Troops* children, and his dream of going to university at the Sorbonne in Paris.

Personal economic well-being is clearly an objective for the mirror seller in *Kun Fayaakun* (A well-known verse in Quran. Dir. Yusuf Mansyur, 2008). Actually the film plot derives from an Islamic "prosperity movement" which believes that any alms or donations made in the name of God will return to the donor in multiple amounts by divine intervention.²⁹ The poor lead character in the film prays night and day in order to get money for his family and finally gets help through divine intervention, which is manifested in a kind-hearted rich man who believes that donation to the poor, would make God grant him more wellbeing.

Another film that focused attention on personal well-being is *Doa Yang Mengancam* (A Threatening Prayer, Dir. Hanung Bramantyo, 2008), which tells the story of Madrim, a porter who gives up piety and religion when he fails to get rich after praying to God night and day. Then he is granted a supernatural power which gives him ability to work for the police and then for a mafia leader which in turn makes him rich. At the end, his wellbeing does not bring happiness to him and then he decides to look at things from a new perspective, accepting his destiny as a poor person, embracing his "worldly

life” and at the same time being moderate in religion. He stops condemning religion (and Satan) returning to his life as a common man without supernatural power or riches. Nevertheless, personal achievement remains the character’s ultimate objective; this film does not posit personal well-being as a manifestation of piety.

Restrained Political Islam in Post-Soeharto Islamic-themed Films

Islam, which in New Order era Islamic-themed films was considered one of the strongest contributors to anti-colonialist sentiment, nation building, and confronting poverty, has become a solution for lifestyle issues in post-Soeharto Indonesian films. In this regard, whenever Islam comes up against socio-political issues, there is a tendency to subsume it to a matter of lifestyle, such that Islam remains at a personal level, becoming a ground for piety, rather than a cause for social or political change, with a few exceptions as will be described below. This phenomenon is similar to what Loh (2002) observes about Malaysian ethnic politics. The growing affluence brought by development has changed communal/ethnic politics into individual achievement, which means Malaysian citizens aspire more to self-achievement, rather than displaying social and political concerns on the basis of ethnic group.

In some post-Soeharto Islamic-themed films in Indonesia, there is some degree of social concern which is shown in matter-of-fact depictions of structural disparity. In *Rainbow Troops*, the lead characters’ poverty is juxtaposed against the leisured-life of the state-owned company employees’ children. *Rainbow Troops* puts no antagonist in the storyline, thus avoiding any direct conflict between the poor and the rich (and its political background) on the screen. This means that potential human rights issues contained in the story are left untouched, while in the novel version on which the film is based, criticism against the political situation is more tangible and direct.

Mild commentary on the Indonesian political situation is made in Garin Nugroho’s *Of Love and Eggs* (2005). One of the characters, Bagja, is an *imam* (Muslim preacher) in a small mosque (*musholla*) in the middle of a market place. He makes this *musholla* his sanctuary from the outside world which is trying to get him involved in politics. Bagja’s brother, a *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) leader, is tempted to join politics and mobilizes his pupils to support a political candidate, who is considered as “selling religion for worldly interest.” This film also depicts slum eviction which has been a huge social issue in urban areas in Indonesia. One of the characters in the film is traumatized by the actions of the Public Works Department because she lived in an evicted slum area before moving to her current home. However, those depictions of social and political problems stay as chronicles to the characters’ lives, rather than act as a source for the protagonists’ actions in the film.

An exception to the depiction of restrained political Islam is *Perempuan*

Berkalung Sorban (The Scarfed Woman, Dir. Hanung Bramantyo, 2008), whose main conflict is structural oppression facing the lead character. The lead character, Annisa, is a woman oppressed by the male characters in her surroundings. Annisa aspires for her freedom (meaning self-determination and obtaining higher education) which she is denied by her orthodox father and her husband.

In this film, Islam is represented in two ways: first as oppressive, as embodied in Annisa's father and her first husband. These two men who lead a *salafi pesantren* (an orthodox Islamic boarding school) forbid women to be highly-educated and believe that a woman's destiny is to be a full-time housewife and mother. The second type of Islam is a liberating Islam which is signified by Annisa and her open-minded uncle, Khudori. These characters believe that Islam gives women opportunities for higher education and self-determination. It is interesting how the filmmaker favors the second representation and provides solutions for more liberal Islam to overcome problems.

Besides the too-easy resolution given to depict the success of liberal Islam,³⁰ the film makes a strong point to critique Islam's role in oppressing women. This has garnered the film much criticism regarding its representation of Islam.³¹

Conclusion

The criticism against *The Scarfed Woman* has shown that film is also a site for cultural contestation among groups of Muslims in the Post-Soeharto era. This is even clearer when the producers of *When Love Glorifies God* promoted the film by using endorsements from Muslim public figures. Endorsement of the film from the leader of the Islamic Party, PKS (Prosperous Justice Party) Hidayat Nurwahid, was advertised in national newspapers, showing his favoritism to the film with this statement: "Support honorable national film **only**" (my emphasis).³²

Such contestation is not limited to events external to the film, but also in the film content, i.e. the story. A challenge to films with didactic Islamic teachings such as *Love Verses* and *When Love Glorifies God* comes from Mizan Productions,³³ an Islamic book publisher which now produces its own films. Mizan produced *Rainbow Troops* (2008), *Garuda di Dadaku* (Garuda in My Chest, Dir. Ifa Isfanyah, 2009), *Emak Ingin Naik Haji* (literally: Mom Wants to be a Hajj, Dir. Aditya Gumay, 2009), *Sang Pemimpi* (The Dreamers, Dir. Riri Riza, 2010), consciously to "challenge" (*melawan*) the Islamic discourse contained in *Love Verses* and *When Love Glorifies God* (Wijanarko, 2010).

Films from Mizan Productions tend to chronicle an Islamic lifestory as backdrop or setting rather than championing Muslims' actions motivated by devotion to God. They do this to showcase a more indigenous type of Islam in comparison to *Love Verses* and *When Love Glorifies God*, which are detached

from domestic issues (see Sasono, 2007, 2008, and 2009b). As a result, Mizan's films are not hailed as "Islamic films," despite their apparent Islamic symbols (Darmawan, 2008), because the Islamic teachings in the storyline more closely resemble those that govern the lives of nominal Indonesian Muslims, rather than devout or orthodox streams.³⁴ The director of Mizan Productions, Putut Wijanarko, believes that Islam has incorporated local beliefs and lifestyle which together construct multi-facets of Indonesian identity, and this type of Islam is open to moderation and multiculturalism. Wijanarko labels this as "cultural Islam," a concept that was developed by Muslim scholar, Bachtiar Effendy (1993), to explain the Islamic movement in Indonesia after the Pancasila was accepted as the sole ideology of the nation.³⁵

The varieties of Islamic content in post Soeharto era Indonesian films indicate a close relationship between Islam and popular culture, i.e. film. The medium is being utilized to propagate a wide spectrum of Islam by various groups of Muslims, notwithstanding the obvious commercial dimension. Massive consumer culture has driven commerce to include religious identity as their product leverage, but on the other hand, film narratives and institutions are also being transformed to reflect various models of piety including the ones that are unfamiliar to Indonesian Muslims a decade ago. This shows how commodification and its relation to religion is never a simple process.

Endnotes

- ¹ The author wants to thank Paul J. Dillon for proofreading this essay and the two editors of this special edition, Thomas Barker and Khoo Gaik Cheng, for their comments and corrections. Regardless, the responsibility for the thoughts and opinion expressed in this essay belong to the author.
- ² See Imanda (2008) on discussion of "independent" and "mainstream" Islamic films to examine the link between film narrative element and the filmmaker's intention, whether the films are commodification or "purer" forms of Islamic propagation. See also Kusuma (2008).
- ³ Discussion on these terms could be found in Kitiarsa (2008) and mostly in Weller (2008).
- ⁴ Mahmudi explains the principles are: **first**, in order to decide among favorable options, Jemaah Tabiyah activists must consider these formulas (1) giving priority to something definite rather than something uncertain, (2) giving priority to something that has great benefit rather than small, (3) giving priority to communal interests rather than to the individual, (4) giving priority to permanent benefit rather than temporary, (5) giving priority to essential and fundamental issues rather than the superficial and symbolic, and (6) giving priority to something that affects the future rather than the present. **Second**, in order to choose among harmful consequences, the precepts are (1) avoiding further harm, (2) eradicating all harmful actions,

- (3) not using destructive means to avoid harmful things, (4) choosing something that is less harmful, and (5) choosing something harmful that affects particular interests rather than the general good. **Lastly**, in order to choose among mixed favorable and harmful conditions, the precepts are as follows (1) giving priority to prevent destruction rather than taking benefit, (2) small destruction is tolerable in order to gain a large benefit, (3) temporary destruction is acceptable in order to gain continuous benefit, and (4) giving priority to assured benefit, regardless of uncertain negative impacts. (Mahmudi, 2005:75).
- ⁵ See Pink (2009:ix-xvii) for a discussion on consumer culture in Muslim societies. Pink sees consumer culture as a “local response” to expanding global consumerism. In regard to this response, the “identity card” is utilized to create profit from Muslims’ adherence to their religion. Nonetheless this local response sometimes means “domesticating particular global icons” as observed in the Indonesian Muslim version of Barbie doll (Budiyanto, 2009) or this could even develop into an alternative global culture in the hybrid form of, for example, “nasyid islami” (Islamic boy bands) (see Barendregt, 2008).
- ⁶ Many Muslim intellectuals during the New Order era were also involved in the discussion on defining the role of Islam and Muslims in Indonesian history. Muslim intellectuals made claim that Islam has contributed a lot to social, political and economic upheavals of modern Indonesia. See Rahardjo (1993:43-65).
- ⁷ Radical Islam in films is represented by Darul Islam (House of Islam) and Tentara Islam Indonesia (Indonesian Islamic Army).
- ⁸ This film was a remake of *Darah dan Doa* (1950). For more on *Mereka Kembali*, see McGregor (2007:147, 187).
- ⁹ Islamic moral teachings, through stereotype portrayals of heroes and villains in Indonesian historical films, were positioned in conflict with Dutch colonialism and its embedded westernization (see Sasono, 2009a on exploration of this subject). Islam becomes a moral base to fight the decadent and greedy colonialists.
- ¹⁰ In *Si Pitung*, (name of character, Dir. Nawi Ismail, 1970) and *Banteng Betawi* (Bull of Batavia, Dir. Nawi Ismail, 1971).
- ¹¹ In *Jaka Sembung dan Bajing Ireng* (name of characters, Dir. Tjut Djalil, 1983).
- ¹² In *Sunan Kalijaga* (The Holy Man of Kalijaga, Dir. Sofyan Sharna, 1983).
- ¹³ This is reflected in Peraturan Pemerintah (Government Regulation) No. 7, 1994 on censorship, especially in chapters on the objectives of censorship.
- ¹⁴ See Sjamsuddin (1985) for the Free Aceh Movement.
- ¹⁵ Asrul Sani is one of the pioneers in modern Indonesian literature. He wrote a modernist manifesto known as *Surat Kepercayaan Gelanggang*. See Sani (1999).
- ¹⁶ Debate on “modernist” versus “traditionalist” Islam has been occurring long

before the 1970s. On one side, there has been modernist Muslims who want to reform Islamic teachings to be more suitable to modern-life and on the other, Muslims who remain traditional. Modernists claim a degree of interpretative independence (ijtihad) in arriving at decisions within the (Islamic) law, whereas the traditionalists insist on taqlid, an interpretative process that relies critically on the teaching of the great Muslim scholars of the past (Fox, 2004: 5). The biggest “landmarks” of the debate lie in two biggest Muslim organizations in the country: Muhammadiyah and Nahdhatul Ulama (NU). Muhammadiyah is well-known for their position to make Islam modern, while NU is more traditionalist. However, both Muhammadiyah and NU are pro-development, regardless of their differing viewpoints on Islamic doctrines (Epley, 2004).

¹⁷ On Nurcholis Madjid, see Hassan (1980), Barton (1999), Kull (2005).

¹⁸ Zakiah Darajat, an ustadzah (Islamic teacher), opined that Si Boy *tidak mencerminkan kehidupan anak muda perkotaan masa kini* (is not a reflection of today’s urban youngsters) Zakiah pointed out that Boy’s discotheque-going habit as *mempopulerkan diskotik* (popularizing discotheques) without explaining the harms of discotheques as if the venue itself intrinsically contains wrongdoings (Harian Pelita, 1989). This criticism should be seen in the context of how traditional Islamic teachers were shocked to see the new Muslim middle class, which more than a decade later is described as “mixing piety and hedonism” (Nef-Saluz, 2007).

¹⁹ The parties are PPP (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan or United Development Party) and PBB (Partai Bulan Bintang or Crescent Star Party). Jakarta Charter’s seven words are *menjalankan syariat Islam bagi para pemeluknya* (to carry out Islamic rules for its members) which was taken away from the 1945 Constitution because of the protests from eastern-Indonesian people who warned that they would separate from Indonesia should those words be included in the 1945 Constitution.

²⁰ The appearance of the veiled woman in *Kantata Takwa* (Cantata of Devotion, Gotot Prakosa and Eros Djarot, 2008) is a portrayal when veiling practices were still a symbol of resistance. Heryanto (forthcoming) wonders why the veiled woman never appeared in Indonesian films until *Love Verses*. *KantataTakwa* which began production in 1990 used the figure of the veiled woman as witness to the New Order’s repression of freedom of expression. In the film’s ending, the veiled woman becomes “lautan jilbab” (sea of veiled-women) symbolizing the victory of Islam in Indonesia. The film was considered dead (Wijaya, 2006:44), but was eventually released commercially in 2008, and had its premiere at the Singapore International Film Festival. See Prakosa (2006) for the film’s behind the scenes commentary and van Heeren (this edition).

²¹ See the report in *Warta Kota* (2004).

²² The most recent example of this is banning on film *Suster Keramas* (Hair-

- washing Nurse, 2010) by Samarinda Chapter of Ulama Council of Indonesia. See Surya Online (2010).
- ²³ Gatra (2004).
- ²⁴ Hanan (2008:54-69) discusses Indonesian teen movies in comparison with Thai teen movies in the context of the changing social formation in both countries.
- ²⁵ Hanung Bramantyo changed the character for the film, and this created a big argument between him and the novel's author, Habiburrahman El Shirazy, who strongly opposed the changes. See Bramantyo (2007).
- ²⁶ Asma Nadia, one of the founders of Pen Circle Forum, a writers' circle which includes Habiburrahman El Shirazy (author of Love Verses), complained in her blog about Fahri as "weepy" and "unconvincing." See Nadia (2008).
- ²⁷ "Mas Azzam pantas menikahi perempuan cantik dan kaya, karena Mas Azzam kan sudah menyelesaikan S2."
- ²⁸ On Muhammadiyah, see Nakamura (1983).
- ²⁹ For prosperity movements in the Philippines, see Katherine Wiegele (2005), and regarding Yusuf Mansyur, see Darmawan (2009).
- ³⁰ The antagonist characters are enlightened by Annisa's speech, which resolves the film's major conflict, despite their fundamental opposition to Annisa's feminist standpoint.
- ³¹ Many Islamic leaders criticized the film, even wanting the film to be corrected (Dewi, 2009). Another filmmaker felt that the film fails to communicate to the audience (Kilas Berita, 2009).
- ³² See the advertisement in *Republika* and *Kompas* daily, June 22, 2009.
- ³³ Mizan started their business in book publication to cater to the needs of Muslim intellectuals in the 1990s, then expanded their business to more popular books, including Islamic popular novels. This company then expanded to be "content provider" for various media, including film, TV, and new media (www.mizan.com). Putut Wijanarko, director of Mizan Productions, who handles its film division, said Mizan was born as a popular spearhead of "cultural Islam" (Effendy, 1993) which emerged at the end of the 1980s. They choose inclusive and moderate themes of Islam to be propagated in Indonesia, since they believe that the development of Islam in Indonesia has been inseparable from the country's culture and history. They also believe that Islamic products are based on "good content," rather than merely verbal symbolism. They do not advocate Islamizing the institutional aspects of their film productions and have worked with Christian producer Shanty Harmayn (in *Garuda in My Chest*, 2009).
- ³⁴ For more on this, see Paramaditha (this edition).
- ³⁵ During the period of 1983 to 1985, the New Order regime imposed Pancasila as the sole ideology for political party and "mass organization" (*organisasi massa*), as well as "social organization" (*organisasi kemasyarakatan*). This venture had strong opposition from political party, PPP, whose foundation

is Islam. Two Muslim organizations, HMI-MPO and PII, were disbanded after rejecting the idea of “sole ideology” (*asas tunggal*). However, five years after the formal acceptance (i.e. the Pancasila must be declared as an organization’s ideology in any organization’s statute) of *Asas Tunggal*, the New Order state showed a bigger interest to get closer to Muslim organizations. President Soeharto at that time supported the establishment of ICMI, Muslim Intellectuals Association, which became the main source for political recruitment in the first half of the 1990s. This is the period where Muslim organizations and Muslim intellectuals redefined their position vis-à-vis the state, one of which is in the concept of “cultural Islam.” See this development in Hefner (1997) and Effendy (1993).

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