



ISLAM AND POPULAR CULTURE IN INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA

Edited by Andrew N. Weintraub

Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia

Home to approximately one-fifth of the world's Muslim population, Indonesia and Malaysia are often overlooked or misrepresented in media discourses about Islam. Islam is a religion but there is also a popular culture, or popular cultures of Islam that are mass mediated, commercialized, pleasure-filled, humorous, and representative of large segments of society. During the last 40 years, popular forms of Islam, targeted largely towards urbanized youth, have played a key role in the Islamization of Indonesia and Malaysia. This book focuses on these forms and the accompanying practices of production, circulation, marketing, and consumption of Islam. Dispelling the notion that Islam is monolithic, militaristic, and primarily Middle Eastern, the book emphasizes its dynamic, contested, and performative nature in contemporary Southeast Asia. Written by leading scholars alongside media figures, such as Rhoma Irama and Ishadi S.K., the case studies although not focused on theology *per se*, illuminate how Muslims (and non-Muslims) in Indonesia and Malaysia make sense of their lives within an increasingly pervasive culture of Islamic images, texts, film, songs, and narratives.

Andrew N. Weintraub is Professor of Music at the University of Pittsburgh, USA. He is the author of *Dangdut Stories: A Social and Musical History of Indonesia's Most Popular Music*; *Power Plays: Wayang Golek Puppet Theater of West Java* and co-editor of *Music and Cultural Rights*.

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Andrew N. Weintraub; Pittsburgh
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Notes on conventions and orthography

Arabic, the language of the Qur'an and Hadiths, has been transliterated into Indonesian and Malay and written using romanized script. However, the system for romanizing the transliterated Arabic has not been standardized. Variations in romanization of transliterated words and passages from the Qur'an or Hadiths have been retained in this book to reflect these differences in romanization.

Islamic terms with an Arabic basis appear in different spellings in Indonesia and Malaysia, and within the countries themselves (e.g., hadis; hadist; hadits; hadiths). The chapters retain these variations in order to reflect the diversity of orthographic practices in Southeast Asia. Terms that have become common in the English language (e.g., fatwa, jihad, and sharia) are spelled as they appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (2010). Plural forms of Arabic words are indicated with the addition of an "s".

Ways of categorizing Muslim groups as, for example, "radical", "fundamentalist", and "liberal", among others, is also highly variable and subject to a great degree of debate and disagreement. Due to the wide variety of interpretations that accompany these terms, an effort has been made to clarify the meanings of these categories as they occur in specific chapters.

1 Introduction

The study of Islam and popular culture in Indonesia and Malaysia

Andrew N. Weintraub

Sermon-filled soap operas, veils on rock stars, Muslim magazines, newspapers, and portals, consumption of special Ramadan foods at McDonald's, Facebook "Hadiths of the Day," and the rippling effects of Prophet cartoons saturate the mediascape of the contemporary Malay world. Ideas, sounds, images, and meanings about Islam abound in contemporary popular cultural forms including film, music, television, radio, comics, fashion, magazines, and cyberculture. Mass mediated, commercialized, pleasure-filled, humorous, and speaking for large segments of a society or community, popular forms and practices are central to the contemporary definition and meaning of Islam. These forms and accompanying practices of production, circulation, marketing, and interpretations of Islam are all part of everyday lived Islam in Southeast Asia today.¹

Islam is a religion, based in the revelations of God's words in the Qur'an, the *Hadiths* of the Prophet Muhammad, and the laws (*sharia*) that guide human behavior. The case studies in this volume, while not focused on theology *per se*, illuminate how Muslims (and non-Muslims) in Indonesia and Malaysia make sense of their lives within an increasingly pervasive culture of Islamic images, texts, songs, and narratives. Popular culture and Islam have become mutually constitutive as sites for defining Muslim lives in the Malay world. Islam in popular culture is particularly powerful in Southeast Asia where localized, flexible, and widespread forms of "popular Islam" have existed for centuries.

Home to approximately one-fifth of the world's Muslim population, Indonesia and Malaysia are often overlooked or misrepresented in media discourses about Islam, especially those emanating from the U.S. and Europe.² For example, in a 2008 *New York Times Book Review* issue on the topic of Islam (January 6, 2008), there was not a single article about Islam in Asia, not to mention Islam in Indonesia, the country with the largest population of Muslims in the world. The overwhelming attention given to Islam in the Middle East often leads to a misperception that Islam does not exist elsewhere. Further, Western popular media since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the U.S. has been preoccupied with reporting on groups that support radical views of Islam in conjunction with acts of violence. Such attention to the radical minority is understandable and necessary, but it mutes the voices of the majority of Muslims throughout the world. In Indonesia and Malaysia, there are multiple interpretations about the proper ways to practice

Islam, some of them quite liberal and others fundamentalist. This collection of essays argues against notions that Islam is monolithic, militaristic, and primarily Middle Eastern. The authors view popular culture as a site of struggle over what counts as Islam in contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia.

Popular culture and popular Islam

Islam has a universal dimension, in which its teachings are understood to be applicable to all adherents at all times. On the one hand, Islam is believed to be eternal, divine, God-given, ageless, and transcendent. On the other hand, popular culture is thought to be fleeting, man-made, cheap, and worldly. Associated with pleasure, commerce, and “the West,” popular culture is often discursively produced as “bad” for Islamic communities. The narrative that places Islam in opposition to popular culture is based in reductive and essentialist ways of understanding Muslim life, in general, and processes of mass mediation in contemporary societies in particular.³ This narrative assumes a passive one-way street of communication where meaning is determined at the point of production. As Talal Asad points out in his influential essay “Toward an Anthropology of Islam,” Islam does not belong to a “fixed stage of an Islamic theater” (Asad 1986: 11). Treating Islam as “a drama of religiosity expressing power” omits indigenous discourses, and turns Islamic behavior into a *readable gesture* (italics mine, *ibid.*: 9). The essays in this collection challenge the notion of a monolithic and unchanging Islam as a blueprint for behavior by illustrating how people create multiple and sometimes conflicting meanings about ways of leading proper Muslim lives.⁴

Importantly, the modern mediated forms through which people live Islam are neither “Western” nor all that new. Even those technologies of mass-mediated popular culture that originated in “the West” do not carry technologically determinate meanings mimicked by “the rest.” Rather, people invest popular print media, music, film, and television with new cultural meanings, and these meanings change across space and over time. Mass mediations are dynamic and collaborative social processes that involve compromise and negotiation as well as resistance. The uses of mediated forms have strategic cultural, political, and economic implications, which are revealed in social practices and corresponding forms of representation and authority.

There are several ways that “the popular” can be understood in relation to Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia. All of these ways of understanding Islam and popular culture are consistent with the important notion of difference in Islam or multiple “Islams” (El-Zein 1977) in Southeast Asia. Due to the diversity of experiences, voices, and cultural identities among Muslims, to study Islam is to ask which discursive community is being addressed. Nevertheless, there is an underlying unity that informs all of these Islams: heterogeneity does not mean an absence of shared traditions (Asad 1986: 16).

First, this book highlights the notion of Islam and “the popular” as belonging to large numbers of people. Indonesia and Malaysia are the two largest majority Muslim nation-states in Southeast Asia; Indonesia (total population 243 million,

86 percent Muslim) and Malaysia (total population 26 million, 60 percent Muslim).⁵ In terms of scale, Islam has the largest number of adherents compared to other religions in Indonesia and Malaysia. However, popular Islam is not only based on scale, as I will describe below.

Second, the concepts of “popular Islam” and “scripturalist Islam” or “literalist Islam” have a dialogic relationship in contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia. Popular Islam belongs to the populace or the masses as opposed to the orthodox official forms of Islam regulated by a small group of elites (Gaffney 1992: 38). The notion of Muslim popular culture is inclusive, widely appealing, and “of the people.” In Southeast Asia, popular Islam refers to the traditions of Sufi-inspired Islam adapted to local circumstances (Geertz 1968; Woodward 1989; Bowen 1993; Howell 2001). It was through Sufism that Islam originally spread to Southeast Asia, where it blended and localized with *adat* (customary law), Hindu-Buddhist beliefs, and local mystical practices. Syncretic and mixed, popular Islam celebrates local ideas, beliefs, values, and practices. In Malaysia and Indonesia, localizing the messages of Islam involves *tafsir* (Quranic exegesis) using vernacular language, parables, metaphors, and humor (Noor 2003; see also Bowen 1993). But this volume focuses much more on a different kind of “popular Islam,” that is, mass-produced, mass-mediated, more urban than rural, and more globalized and cosmopolitan, for the most part, than rural, traditional versions of popular Islam. These modern, globally conscious forms are often localized, simultaneously influenced by Western consumer culture as well as by forms of Islamic orthodoxy and resurgence emanating from the Middle East and elsewhere in the Islamic world.

Scripturalist Islam is “scholastic, legalistic, and doctrinal” and adheres closely to the texts of the Qur’an as explicated by *ulama* (religious scholars) (Geertz 1968: 62). Literalist readings of the canonical texts (Qur’an and Hadiths) are contrary to more liberal and widespread practices including Sufism (Howell 2008: 41). In contemporary Indonesia, advocates of “radical Islam” including Laskar Jihad, Front Pembela Islam (FPI), and Jemaah Islamiah (JI), are aligned with orthodox Islam (Bruinessen 2002; Fealy *et al.* 2006). Despite their heightened use of new media, these orthodox movements do not appeal to large segments of the population (that is, they are “not popular”). However, this is not to say that “popular” always mean “widespread.” The term “popular culture” often refers to fringe forms of underground culture, even if they are not part of the mainstream commercial culture.⁶ Some forms that are not widespread can be considered part of popular Islam. For example, in Malaysia, independent films are neither commercially successful or widespread, but they use popular technology (digital), embody a cosmopolitan sensibility, and focus on the most pressing issues of the day.

In contrast to scripturalist Islam, Indonesia and Malaysia are nation-states characterized by “moderate Islam.” Moderate Islam refers to flexible interpretations of major religious and legal sources regarding scripture, law, gender, and democracy that respond to the contemporary needs of Muslims. Moderate Islam maps well onto popular culture as both are widespread, participatory, dialogic, and tolerant of diversity and debate. However, orthodox, scripturalist understandings of Islam often reach more people through mass media than the rural, syncretic versions of

Islam. In this sense, “popular Islam” does not necessarily celebrate local ideas, beliefs, and practices (and may in fact condemn them).

Third, “the popular” in Islam refers to the common everyday activities of people leading a Muslim life as prescribed by the Qur’an. Islam as a “practical” religion refers to “how ordinary people (peasants, proletarians, merchants as well as mystics and scholars) order and articulate categories, symbols and the relations between them in the pursuit of comprehending, expressing and formulating social practice and experience” (Ellen 1988: 54). Islam as “a way of life” encompasses personal, political, economic, and legal dimensions. The essays in this volume show how tightly Islam and popular culture are interwoven into the fabric of everyday life of Muslims in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Fourth, popular culture has been an integral part of Islamization (also called revival or resurgence).⁷ In the last four decades, mass-mediated forms of Islam, targeted largely to urbanized youth, have played a key role in Islamization in Indonesia and Malaysia. This is not to say that people did not have a profound sense of their Islamic identities before, or that Islam existed outside the realm of the popular (see my comments about “popular Islam” above). Since the late 1970s, “mosques have proliferated in towns and villages; religious schools and devotional programs have expanded; a vast market in Islamic books, magazines, and newspapers has developed” (Hefner 1997: 5). In Indonesia, Suharto’s New Order regime paved the way for new political parties, schools, and *sharia* banks, and expanded the role of religious courts and other Islamic institutions. During this period, Islam became more politically institutionalized, symbolically pervasive, and ideologically pluralistic.

Islamic resurgence in Malaysia (known as the *dakwah* movement, from the Arabic root *da’a*, “to call”) dates to the late 1960s or early 1970s (Peletz 1997: 233). Resurgence grew out of a criticism of secularism, disillusionment with Westernization, and rejection of materialism. Former prime minister Mahathir bin Mohamad (1981 to 2003) supported resurgence through political institution-building, economic modernization, and technology development. Most of its adherents were urban, young, and middle class (university students, teachers, civil servants, and the urban working class; see Muzaffar 1986: 8).⁸ Focused on “questions of identity and the symbols and rituals which help define it” (Muzaffar 1986: 7), resurgence was expressed in Muslim attitudes, behavior, and appearance (Funston 2006: 57).

The public presence of Islamic symbols, ideas, and texts in film, television, popular print media, music, and the Internet in Indonesia and Malaysia has been growing since the 1990s. While these media may not present a religious sermon or offer an interpretation of a Qur’anic text, they function as sites for reflecting on Muslim ideas and practice. Perhaps the most pervasive and semiotically charged image of contemporary Islam in Southeast Asia is the headscarf or veil (*jilbab*; *tudung*). The headscarf signifies different meanings about women, fashion, agency and freedom of expression. It has served as a symbol of alternative modernity (Brenner 1996); Islamization (Smith-Hefner 2007); commercial fashion (Jones 2007); urban middle class identity (Rachmah 2008), and Malay ethnicity (Khoo, Chapter 12 this volume). In chat rooms, the smiley, a graphic representation of a smiling face, may be wearing a head scarf (Bunt 2009: 11). These examples stand outside of institutionalized

religion, and they are not directly focused on presenting a specific message about Islam. But they are important for generating debates about Muslim values, images, beliefs, and practices.

The spaces where Islam and popular culture intersect in everyday life oftentimes result in conflicts over morality, freedom of expression, and cultural rights. In some Salafist communities, for example, popular music is thought to lead people away from religion to immorality and irreligiosity.⁹ Debates about music as *haram* (forbidden) relate to the use of musical instruments as well as associations with sexuality, entertainment, dance, and women's bodies. In Malaysia, popular music bands from the U.S. have been prohibited from performing because of the perceived sexualized performance of women's bodies (e.g., Beyonce, 2009) or the perceived negative effects on youth (e.g., Linkin Park, 2003).¹⁰ Black metal bands have been similarly censored for allegedly practicing satanic rituals.¹¹ However, popular music is increasingly considered a privileged medium for promoting Islamic ideas and values, as shown in this volume by Sutton, Irama, and Barendregt (Chapters 5, 11, and 14, respectively). By focusing on popular culture, the essays in this collection emphasize the dynamic, contested, and performative nature of Islam in contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia.

Mediated Islam: commodification, consumption, and collaboration

Popular Islam is part of an “emerging Muslim public sphere” that relies on using new media to link Muslims around common interests and Muslim identity politics outside institutions not controlled by nation-states (Eickelman and Anderson 1999: 1). Eickelman and Anderson describe how, as the role of media has increased, the gatekeeper role of nation-states has decreased, and, as a result, more people have gained access to redefining Muslim publics. New and increasingly accessible modes of communication regarding the symbolic language of Islam has facilitated a more fragmented production of texts, generating new and diverse styles of interpretation. New media, new people, and “reintellectualization” (presenting Islamic discourse in accessible, vernacular terms) of Islam has broad implications for what gets articulated in the public sphere (*ibid.*, 14).

The study of media and religion brings changing modes of authority and representation into sharp relief. The fall of Suharto's New Order and subsequent democratization in Indonesia gave Islamic political parties and institutions an unprecedented opportunity to gain significant power to shape public discourse. This expanded idiosphere included the most liberal voices of Islam as well as the most radical. In the 2000s, Muslim-Christian conflicts erupted in Maluku and Sulawesi; attacks on Christian churches took place on the island of Java; and militant groups *Laskar Jihad* and the Islamic Defender Front (*Front Pembela Islam*, FPI) carried out bombings in Bali (2002) and Jakarta (2009).

Suharto's resignation in May 1998 initially paved the way for a more liberal and expanded mediascape that allowed the possibility for expressing divergent ideological positions in the public sphere. For example, in 1999, then-president

Habibie ratified a new Press Law (40/1999) that removed restrictions on publishing. Deregulating the press and easing the process for creating new publications caused the number of print media publications to mushroom. Publications about Islam proliferated, including scholarly translations from Arabic, and “pamphlet Islam”: texts with an anti-American bias and larger tracts with political analysis from an Islamic perspective (Fox 2004). In addition, observers “witnessed the explosion of self-help and ‘chicken-soup for the soul’ type books written from an Islamic perspective” (Widodo 2008).

As control of media became less centralized and less regulated, a flurry of self-produced and self-distributed videos featuring charismatic preachers emerged. In West Java, the popular preacher Aa Gym changed the image of a religious authority from hierarchical and formal to familiar and relational; Aa Gym’s brand of celebrity preaching was based on self-help and entrepreneurship, and marketed to the rapidly expanding base of urban middle class Muslims (Hoesterey 2008: 98; Watson 2005).

This volume shows how social actors use commercial media to educate people about Islam. For example, Rhoma Irama, who enjoyed a successful career as a musician and film actor in the 1970s, developed a second career as a professional religious orator (*juru dakwah* or *mubaligh*) in the 1980s. Like other practitioners of the *dakwah* genre, his speeches typically blend Islamic messages with music and elements of his biography. Rhoma Irama’s chapter in this volume shows us how commodified music has the potential to entertain and to serve a religious purpose.

Numerous debates arise in relation to mass-mediated music because of the perceived relationship of antagonism between Islam and music. In conservative Islamic communities, music is thought to be inappropriate for accompanying religious practice because music is considered a secular form of expression and not a sacred one. The *azan* call to prayer, albeit mellifluous and enchantingly beautiful according to many outsiders, is not considered music, but rather, the chanting of religious texts. On the other hand, there are many cases where music is thought to be not only appropriate but integral to Islamic practice. For example, music plays a large role in Sufi practices throughout the Islamic world (Harnish and Rasmussen, forthcoming). The essays in this volume provide original data about the ways in which commercial music is being fused with religious expression, and what these fusions mean to its practitioners and audiences.

Somewhere between *dakwah* and debasement are the pervasive sounds of everyday Islam that can be heard across Muslim Southeast Asia. Muslim popular musics have been on the rise in Southeast Asia since the 1970s (Barendregt and van Zanten 2002; Frederick 1982; Lockard 1998; Sarkissian 2005). CD shops in Muslim Southeast Asia have large sections devoted to music, *dakwah*, and video (Sutton, Chapter 5 this volume). While we may not be able to determine with any certainty whether the rise in market demand for Islamic mass-mediated music corresponds to a rise in religious piety, the case studies in this volume illuminate how media practices surrounding Islam are viewed and used within consumerist societies.

How do media producers, with their own potentially diverse interests and forms of organization, make decisions about Islamic content and representation? Research on commercial television in Indonesia has shown that, except for the

holy month of Ramadhan, television stations broadcast very few programs that depict Islamic culture (Ishadi S.K., Chapter 2 this volume). This could mean that Indonesian Muslims are only concerned about Islam during Ramadhan, which is not true. It could also mean that television producers are somehow holding back from producing shows with Islamic content during the rest of the year because they believe that television has compromised Islam. This is unlikely because commercial television operates on ratings and market shares. Islamic shows with Islamic content are, in fact, rarely represented on television during the rest of the year because they fail to achieve adequate ratings and shares necessary to attract advertisers.

The implication here is that if Muslim culture were only to become *more* commercialized, then Islam might be more attractive to advertisers, and might subsequently receive more airtime. Indeed, efforts are being made to incorporate more Islamic-related content in television serials and programming during the rest of the year. But these are not questions of whether “to mediate or not to mediate,” or whether to broadcast “more or less Islam.” Rather, television producers need to ask themselves how they can be more sensitive to the desires and aspirations of their localized Muslim constituencies.

In Malaysia, television producers have been somewhat more successful at integrating Muslim themes into television programming throughout the year. First aired in June 2010, the Malaysian program entitled “Young Imam” (*Imam Muda*) is a collaborative effort between television network Astro Oasis Television and the Federal Territory Religious Affairs Department (*Jabatan Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan*, JAWI).¹² Competing for the grand prize of an all-expense paid pilgrimage to Mecca, ten young men display their integrity, compassion, lecturing skills, and knowledge of Islam as they vie to become Malaysia’s next “young Iman.” Every Friday at 9pm viewers watch the previous week’s activities which have included teaching at an orphanage, bathing and burying an unclaimed corpse, following religious enforcement officials to nab Muslims who indulge in illicit sex, and counseling illegal motorcycle racers (*mat rempit*). Dressed in business suits and ties, the contestants include a cleric, a businessman, a student, a farmer, and a banker. The soundtrack blends lite jazz, new age piano melodies, and game show background music with Qur’anic chanting (*tilawah*).

Examples from music and television demonstrate that technology is not something that happens *to* Islam. Rather, Muslim values are produced within the dynamic and collaborative space of musical and televisual mediations. Therefore, television itself is not a “problem” for Islam. On the contrary, the mediated spaces of Islam in popular culture are some of the most creative and potentially powerful arenas for education and knowledge about Islam. The case studies in this collection show how the media are popularizing Islam and new kinds of Islamic authority.

The internet presents interesting case studies for the mediation of Islam, or “Cyber-Islam.” In his book *Islam in the Digital Age*, Gary Bunt describes how religious texts are now available online; for example, what it means to take a virtual Hajj; and how Muslims can engage in e-jihad (Bunt 2003). Bunt notes that there are “Muslims who will now explain their worldview in terms of identifying

with a specific Islamic website, rather than a particular mosque or religious network” (Bunt 2009: 10). These changes in practice can be seen in Indonesia where urban middle class Muslims can search the internet for “e-fatwas” that suit their needs; these have the potential for “new and alternative interpretations of Islam” as anyone can set himself up as an authority to issue legal opinions (Hosen 2008: 165; see also Lim 2005).

Outline of chapters

The authors in this volume utilize a range of methodologies to interrogate the powerful intersection between Islam and popular culture. Each author has a unique way of approaching Islam that informs the analysis of particular kinds of social texts. Central to these questions are the analysis of: (1) commercial, educational, government, and religious institutions (see chapters by Ishadi S.K.; Raju; and Heryanto); (2) social processes of media production, circulation, and reception (Sutton; Ali; Krier); (3) Islamic perspectives on film, music, and literature (Dan; Omar; Berg; and Irama); and (4) representation, values, and meanings (Khoo; Brenner; Barendregt). These analytical categories naturally overlap, but together these groupings effectively highlight essential components of a critical approach to Islam, popular culture, and media. As the ground upon which large and diverse social groups interact, popular culture is the space where social tensions and contradictions about gender, class, and nation can be expressed. Popular culture is also a space for the potential transformation of social relations concerning gender, class, and nation.

In Chapter 2, Ishadi S.K. addresses the role of television in mediating Islam in Indonesia, particularly since the resignation of ex-President Suharto in 1998. How do the interests of media institutions intersect with Islamic interests? Ishadi S.K. notes that Islamic culture is still rarely represented on television because it fails to achieve the adequate ratings and shares necessary to attract advertisers. Television stations will only broadcast programs that depict Islamic culture during the holy month of Ramadhan. In this chapter, Ishadi S.K. describes the institutional bases of authority – the market (television producers) and politics (state) – that shape what gets disseminated in popular culture.

Economic liberalization in Asia during the 1990s–2000s was accompanied by the proliferation of consumerist lifestyles and rapid changes in its mediascape. The acceleration in the worldwide dissemination of Islamic as well as Islamist media produced what some scholars have referred to as “Muslim” Asia. In Chapter 3, Zakir Hossain Raju compares the triangulated relationship between Islam, nation, and modernity in Bangladesh and Malaysia, two majority Muslim nation-states in Asia (above 80% in Bangladesh and above 60% in Malaysia). This chapter examines the relationship between Islam and the State in the art cinema traditions of these two nation-spaces. Bengali cinema has a tendency to depict Islam as detached from the lives of Bengali Muslims, whereas Malaysian film integrates Islam and everyday life. These tendencies disrupt monolithic notions of a “Muslim Asia.” Although these countries possess different colonial histories, cultural and ethnic

makeup, the comparison is productive at sharpening our understanding of the relationship between culture, Islam and the State.

In Chapter 4, Ariel Heryanto contends that the increased presence of Islam in Indonesian popular culture in post-Suharto Indonesia cannot be easily explained by late twentieth-century global consumerist co-optation of religion, on the one hand, or Islamization, on the other. He attributes the new phenomenon of Islam in popular culture to the rise of political Islam, the expansion of media industries, and the desires of Indonesia's large and growing urban educated Muslim middle class to celebrate Islam as a symbol of wealth, modernity, and lifestyle choices. Heryanto describes the rise of a new middle class in the 1990s – urban, well-educated, and cosmopolitan – which became dominant in contemporary consumer culture. The representation and discourse about controversial issues including sexuality and polygamy in popular culture, especially commercially successful films, are tied to the politics of Islam and changes in social class relations in post-authoritarian Indonesia.

In Chapter 5, R. Anderson Sutton elucidates the dynamic inter-relations of international and local Islam, notions of musical austerity and sensuality, and the expanding role of commercial media in Indonesia. Dominating the mediated musical landscape has been Indonesia's secular popular music, but this domination is not absolute. A growing number of genres, styles, and songs identified as “Muslim” are being widely represented in popular media – audio cassettes, audio compact discs, video compact discs, national and private radio, national and private television, as well as the Internet. With reference to a broad sampling of Indonesia's Muslim music, Sutton identifies common threads shared among these diverse forms of expression – both in textual content and in musical style.

In Chapter 6, Muhamad Ali shows how the Internet in Indonesia provides an alternative to the traditional Islamic spheres of school, mosque, and literature. The digital age demonstrates the dual if not paradoxical functions of globalization: democratization/pluralization and authoritarianization/homogenization of religious discourse. Ali's article analyzes the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the rise of Islamic progressive networks, and their powers and limits in the construction of new religious discourses, with special reference to the Progressive Islam Network and Liberal Islam Network (Jaringan Liberal Islam, JIL).

In Chapter 7, Sarah Krier compares the representation of sex and sexuality in two popular women's tabloids that cater to predominantly Muslim female audiences. This chapter investigates how sex and sexuality are discussed in *Cantiq*, a popular woman's weekly tabloid, and *Nurani*, a woman-targeted Muslim weekly tabloid over a 12-month period, 2007–2008. What meanings about Islam, gender, and sexuality do audiences derive from popular women's magazines? How do discourses of sex and sexuality compare and contrast between magazines for “women” and those specifically targeting “Muslim women”? While sex most obviously sells in the popular women's weekly tabloid, discourses of sex and sexuality in the Muslim women's magazine are present, albeit subtle. Through examining these magazines as cultural texts and cultural phenomena, this investigation brings to light several

examples of the dynamic – and often competing – discourses of gender, sexuality, Islam, and capitalism at play in contemporary Indonesia. Such representations raise important questions about the nature of sexuality, gender and religious identity.

In Chapter 8, Washima Che Dan analyzes how Muslim sexuality is juxtaposed with Islamic identity in celebrated Malaysian author Dina Zaman's book entitled *I Am Muslim* (2007). In *I Am Muslim*, Dina Zaman explores her Islamic identity through a series of narrative-interviews that reveal the preoccupations (and ideological conflicts) of contemporary Malaysian Muslims. Che Dan explores how religion and sexuality are represented through Zaman's unabashed public discourses on sexuality within the modern Malay(sian) Muslim world. Using text world theory from the critical linguistic tradition, the chapter looks at how Dina Zaman defamiliarizes or "unframes" Muslim identity by exploring alternative Muslim sexual selves in her usual forthright and shocking manner in challenging taboos about talking about sexuality. The paper then argues that perhaps it is with such defamiliarization of sexual selves that Dina Zaman is most convincing and persuasive, hence the popularity of *I Am Muslim*.

In Chapter 9, Noritah Omar addresses discourses on "Islamic sexuality" in the critically acclaimed films *Sepet* (2004) and *Gubra* (2006) by the late Malay Muslim filmmaker, Yasmin Ahmad. Such discourses are usually framed within notions of *halal* and *haram* (lawful and unlawful) in Islam. Omar explores how Malaysian Muslim filmmakers use film as a space for unpacking the moral high ground held by Malaysian religious institutions regarding Islamic sexuality. The discussion is complicated by Malaysia's multiracial context. Yasmin Ahmad's films promote a more publicly agreeable definition of Islam as a multiracial non-exclusive religion. Thus, Islam is portrayed in such films as a tolerant religion, whose followers need not always be serious, dull, and disciplined.

In Chapter 10, Birgit Berg draws from fieldwork experiences among Arab-Indonesian communities in Java and North Sulawesi, Indonesia, to discuss the meaning of Islamic music (*musik islami*). Berg describes the music and performance practice of *orkes gambus*, a modern ensemble featuring the *gambus*, a lute originally from the Hadramaut region in Yemen that is played at Arab-Indonesian events. In local contexts, however, the music has come to signify a broader sense of Islamic Indonesian identity, especially for urban youth. In Manado, North Sulawesi, the concepts of Arab Indonesian identity and Islamic Indonesian identity emerge in practice through musical dialogues with other Indonesian religions (e.g., Christianity), other Indonesian urban centers (e.g., Surabaya), and other forms of Islamic music (e.g., the Middle East).

In Chapter 11, Indonesian composer and musician Rhoma Irama describes his efforts to produce commercial music to communicate religious messages (*musik dakwah*). For Rhoma Irama, religion is something pure and holy whereas popular music is considered a medium for entertainment. So how can they be blended together? *Dakwah* is a religious message communicated to people so that they can be faithful to Allah and carry out His commands while simultaneously distancing themselves from what is forbidden by God. Conventional *dakwah* are given by Islamic scholars (*ulama*) and by teachers (*ustad*) in the mosque, school

(*pesantren*), or in other religious contexts. *Dakwah* in music, as demonstrated by Rhoma Irama's work, is unconventional and controversial. Using examples from his compositional output of the last 30–40 years, he shows that music can function as a medium for information, education, social unification, and *dakwah*.

In Chapter 12, Gaik Cheng Khoo focuses on several independent short films that broach the subject of Islam and its nexus with gender and ethnicity in Malaysia. In the past decade, digital technology has democratized filmmaking in Malaysia, giving rise to a new generation of international film festival award-winning directors. Digital filmmaking is a new cultural phenomenon that is popular though not a mass movement. In 2005, the Goethe-Institut in Kuala Lumpur and the Multimedia Development Corporation initiated and sponsored a short film competition on the subject of the headscarf or *tudung*. In a country that is heavily racialized and where religion and ethnicity are intertwined, independent filmmaking provides an alternative site where cosmopolitan attitudes towards the Other can prevail and allow for exploratory cross-ethnic representations. Indeed, two of the winning submissions of the Tudung Short Film Competition were made by Chinese Malaysian directors. This chapter shows how the *tudung* signifies Islam, women, agency and freedom in these cinematic representations, both by Malay and Chinese Malaysians.

In Chapter 13, Suzanne Brenner shows how recent debates about polygamy in Indonesia represent competing notions of morality during the post-Suharto period. Long suppressed under the authoritarian Suharto regime's policy of promoting monogamy as the proper form of marriage for a modern nation – even a nation with a Muslim majority – the new openness of this discourse has been a rather unexpected byproduct of the transition towards democracy. In a close reading of a variety of popular print media, Brenner demonstrates how polygamy has been vilified, promoted, and problematized in the markedly open mediasphere of the post-Suharto period. As a symbol of Islamization, polygamy is one of those issues that marks conservative and progressive positions. These debates are especially pervasive among middle and upper classes. Different opinions about polygamy mark differences in Muslim moral communities. The debates engendered by events like the 2003 “Polygamy Awards” and the diverse media representations of polygamy center not only on questions of religion and its place in contemporary Indonesian society, but also on those of gender, social class, politics, and nation.

In Chapter 14, Bart Barendregt focuses on debates surrounding the popularity of *nasyid* in Malaysia and Indonesia, a vocal genre imported from the Middle East, and influenced by Western boy bands. The verbal art or *acappella* song genre finds its proponents particularly among Muslim youth in the religious boarding schools and mosques, but also in universities and above all among student activists affiliated with, for example, the Indonesian Justice Party (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera*, PKS). The popularity of *nasyid* in Southeast Asian countries is not due to its use of religious dogmas, but rather its ability to articulate recognizable social issues in the local Malay language. *Nasyid* music is therefore much in tune with a more fashionable and commercial Islamic pop culture that recently has been branded as “15 minutes Islam”: a combination of lifestyle politics, youth culture, and yet a very self-conscious religious message. Like its Western boy

band counterparts, *nasyid* appeals to a largely female audience. However, initiatives to form all-female *nasyid* groups or even mixed ensembles have not always been warmly welcomed. Experiments with the female voice, a *nasyid* song contest modeled on *American Idol*, and the question “is God for sale?” have further intensified discussions on what a twenty-first century Islam should sound like.

The study of Islam and popular culture

Popular culture deserves our attention because of its pervasive nature in the lives of Indonesians and Malaysians. Muslim popular culture is inclusive, widely mediated, massively appealing, and related to large segments of these societies. An understanding of popular culture brings us closer to an understanding of Islam as a lived practice rather than a split between literalist and liberal, urban and rural, pure and hybrid, or any number of other dichotomies. It is our contention that mass-mediated forms of communication, deeply situated in people’s everyday lives, shape the way that Muslims think about what constitutes a Muslim life.

Examining debates that take place in popular culture is important for understanding modernities of contemporary of Islam. What does it mean for Islam to have such a powerful and increasing presence in popular culture? Does it mean that Islamic piety has increased in the lives of its adherents? Or is Islam in popular culture just a “thin veneer” standing in superficially for “real” faith?¹³ There are no easy answers to these questions. What is a reliable measure of piety, and how can we measure the impact of mass-mediated communication on Islam and Muslim faith? The authors in this volume do not assume a deterministic relationship between symbolic texts and their corresponding meanings. Rather, as the first book of its kind, this volume presents case studies of social institutions, social practices, and ways of producing and interpreting social meanings about Islam and popular culture in contemporary Southeast Asia.

Several chapters in this volume shed light on new forms of participation, new forms of access, and new voices in Islam. Che Dan and Omar show how women as authors of Muslim identities in Malaysia enjoy increasingly public lives in the mediated sphere of Islam (see also Anwar 2001; Blackburn *et al.* 2008; Frisk 2009). Muhamad Ali shows that access to new media is a double-edged sword: the Internet is the site for the most liberal as well as the most conservative groups to communicate. In this way, popular culture reveals how Islam is translated to new generations of Muslims.

This volume emphasizes the tensions and contradictions of Islamic representation in popular culture: who is speaking for whom in the realm of religion and culture? Who claims authority to represent Islamic ideas, images, and meanings? This area of inquiry becomes salient in commodified cultures where Islam signifies profit. Although we may not readily associate religion with commodification, numerous examples point to a growing commercial culture of Islam (Ishadi S.K.; Barendregt; Krier; and Sutton).

The chapters in this book pertain to a wide range of Islamic-related issues in popular media. In several instances, the focus is not on canonical texts, Islamic

tenets, or religious practice. Rather, each chapter addresses how media connects with contemporary representations and practices of Islam in the lives of Muslims. Religion and popular culture “re-script” each other – blurring the perceived boundaries between them (Santana and Erickson 2008). Texts of popular culture have the potential to revise or recreate a sacred text. Texts that are created outside of organized institutions have the potential to reshape people’s relationship to religion, and have effects on their ideas, beliefs, and values. In these examples, the religious content is central to the narrative or structure of the mediated text but has no explicit didactic intent. But through these media, the Islamic content is commented on. For example, Malaysian film provides a space for the *tudung* (headscarf) to signify different meanings about Islam, women, agency and freedom involving both Muslims and non-Muslims.¹⁴ In Gaik Cheng Khoo’s analysis (Chapter 12), the *tudung* introduces a way to negotiate the meaning of ethnic relations in Malaysia: the *tudung* connotes not just Islam (or urban middle class fashion) but Malayness for women of different racialized identities. Examples such as this one show that diverse media representations of Islam have implications for religion and morality as well as gender, social class, and national belonging. In this potent example, the popular culture of Islam provides a space for Muslims and non-Muslims to interact across ethnic boundaries.

The circulation and networks of Islam have a spatial and temporal dimension or rhythm (Cooke and Lawrence 2005: 1). The rhythm of the *azan* five times a day orients people spatially toward Mecca. The *Hajj*, the yearly pilgrimage to Mecca, connects the *ummah*, the worldwide community of Muslims. These rhythms pace the everyday flow of Islam. But Islam does not simply act as a stage upon which fixed meanings are acted out. Rather, Islam manifests in various media in order to reveal the composition of its multiple forms, the historical and contemporary modes of its circulation, and the rhythms of its everyday practices.

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Notes

- 1 The fields of religion and popular culture and religion and media have expanded since the 1990s (see Arthur 1993; Cobb 2005; Hoover and Clark 2002; Lynch 2007; Santana and Erickson 2008). There is currently a religion and popular culture study group within the American Academy of Religion; a *Journal of Religion and Film*; and a *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*. For a good critique of the study of religion and media, see Fox 2010: 354–359.
- 2 Within the Malay or Melayu world, the modern nation-states of Indonesia and Malaysia are related in terms of language, culture, race, and ethnicity, but their different historical, political, and economic histories provide a productive comparative perspective for analyzing changing identities in a globalized world (e.g., Hefner 2001; Hamayotsu 2002).
- 3 This narrative is based on “secularization theory” or “modernization theory” of late 19th and 20th century Western political theory that (1) placed religion in opposition to

- modernity, and (2) predicted that religion would give way to modernization and nation-state formation (Hefner 1997: 18). A more productive approach is to conceptualize modernities of Islam in contemporary societies.
- 4 Anthropologists mapped orthodox and nonorthodox onto the Orientalist framework of “Great” and “Little” traditions in which social structure, religious belief, and political behavior were constellated according to the “distinction between the scripturalist, puritanical faith of the towns, and the saint-worshipping, ritualistic religion of the countryside” (Asad 1986: 6). This outdated model oversimplified the contrasts between urban and rural and assumed more uniformity within rural and urban contexts than was warranted.
 - 5 Brunei, the other majority Muslim nation in Southeast Asia, with a total population of 400,000, is 67 percent Muslim. Other regions in Southeast Asia with large Muslim populations are the Southern Philippines and Southern Thailand.
 - 6 Subcultural theory has a tendency to mark off underground youth culture (“subculture”) from the mainstream dominant culture (Hebdige 1979). This collection of essays emphasizes the dialogic relationship between them.
 - 7 On Islamization see Gade and Feener 2004; Hefner 1997; Peletz 1997.
 - 8 Studies of resurgence in Malaysia have not taken account of ordinary Malays living in rural areas (Peletz 1997: 231). Resurgence also “brought forth tensions and competing ideologies concerning what Islam and whose Islam is the right Islam,” particularly concerning the role of Muslim women in Malaysia (Anwar 2001: 227). For more on the advocacy work of Sisters of Islam and the struggle for women’s rights, see Anwar 2001.
 - 9 The Salafi movement refers to followers of the first three generations of Muslims, or “pious ancestors” (Salaf al-Salih). Salafis aim to restore purity to Islamic doctrine (Hasan 2007).
 - 10 These events received glaring over-coverage in American popular print media and the internet.
 - 11 See “In League with Satan? – The Malaysian Black Metal Ban.” Online. Available HTTP: <http://www.freemuse.org/sw35037.asp> (accessed June 23, 2010).
 - 12 see “Konsep Imam Muda.” Online. Available HTTP: <http://www.astro.com.my/imammuda> (accessed 1 December 2010); and “Young Imam Talent Show.” Online. Available HTTP: http://www.straittimes.com/BreakingNews/SEAsia/Story/STIStory_548658.html (accessed 1 December 2010).
 - 13 This formulation mirrors the way in which Islam was described as a “thin veneer” on Javanese culture in the Dutch colonial era (Hefner 1997: 11).
 - 14 Among the 60 percent of Malaysian citizens who count themselves as Muslim, nearly all of them are Malays. Chinese are primarily Buddhist or Christian whereas most Malaysian Indians are Hindu. Therefore, there is an identification of Islam with Malayness.

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Part I

Commercial, educational, government, and religious institutions

2 **Negotiating mass media interests and heterogeneous Muslim audiences in the contemporary social-political environment of Indonesia**

Ishadi S.K.

Since the day television first aired in Indonesia in 1962, Islam has never been proportionately represented on Indonesian television and radio programs. Aside from the holy month of Ramadhan, when television is saturated with Islamic-themed television series, talk shows, sermons, and music, there is very little on television the rest of the year that reflects the religious beliefs of a Muslim-majority nation.

In this chapter, I examine the intersection of media, culture, politics, and Islam in Indonesia by asking the following questions: why is Islam so disproportionately represented on television, with the exception of Ramadhan? Why has Islam failed to secure a proportional space on television and radio in the months following Ramadhan? Would it be possible to maintain the enthusiasm for Islamic themes, images, sounds, and symbols on television even after the holy month has passed?

Michael Vatikiotis's accurate description of Islam in Indonesia provides important cultural context for addressing the questions raised:

... although as many as 90 percent of Indonesia's 180 million people profess Islam as their faith, there is no easy way to describe the extent to which Indonesia actually is a Muslim country. Rigid adherence to Islamic *shariah* law is not found, and certainly not officially encouraged. Religious courts exist specifically for the determination of marital and inheritance disputes. In almost all parts of Indonesia, traditional, culturally based law, or *adat*, takes precedence over strict Islamic customs. In Java, many aspects of the preceding Hindu-Buddha era have become entangled with Islam, such as a belief in saints whose holiness in the Islamic sense bears no relation to their origin in the pre-Islamic past. Tolerance and syncretism seem to be innate to Indonesian society. (Vatikiotis 1993: 120)

Further, Lee Khon Choy, a former journalist who later spent four-and-a-half years as Ambassador of the Republic of Singapore to Indonesia, observed:

The spirit of tolerance and syncretism has made inter-marriage between persons of different religions a common affair. It is not unusual to find an

Indonesian family in which many religions exist side by side. I have a friend in a high position who is a Muslim. His wife is a Catholic and his children are either Muslims or Catholics, one of them even practices *kebatinan*—an indigenous Javanese religion movement, with a strong strain of Buddhism. In this country, nobody tries to force another to adopt his religion. There is mutual respect so that all can live in harmony.

(Choy 1977: 5)

In addition to the preceding culturalist arguments that foreground ideas of tolerance, we have to examine the historical circumstances that underpin Islamic politics in the Indonesian public sphere. A major factor in this history is that Islam has never been successful in building political strength in Indonesia, as described in the next section.

An overview of Islam and Indonesian politics

The government holds that Islam is not the religion of the state but is a belief system observed by individuals. The signing of the Jakarta Charter (which became the Preface of the 1945 Constitution) on June 22, 1945 by the nine founding fathers of the nation, including Soekarno and Muhammad Hatta, failed to gain the support of those representing the many religious beliefs that coexist in Indonesia. Representatives from the Protestant and Catholic faiths, as well as representatives from the nationalist groups, expressed their disagreement over the first principle of the *Pancasila* (Five Principles of the Nation), which read, “Belief in God with the obligation to adhere to the rules of the sharia for all of the Islamic faith.” This principle was later changed to simply “Belief in the one and only God.”¹ Consequently, the politics of Islam have never been truly accepted in the political practices of Indonesia.

As President of the Republic of Indonesia, Soekarno persistently objected to a State Constitution grounded in Islamic *sharia* law. He believed that Pancasila was the only ideology capable of uniting a nation consisting of various ethnic groups, religions and belief systems. Through astute political maneuvers, Soekarno, and the various nationalist groups, successfully averted any attempts and actions to include *sharia* law into the State Constitution. During his term of office (1945–1967), Soekarno successfully crushed the militant moves of Islamic fundamentalists in their attempt to proclaim the formation of an Islamic State of Indonesia. These groups moved outside of the formal channels of the political structure. The Soekarno government also wiped out the many rebellious armed militias of the Islamic State/Indonesian Muslim Army (*Darul Islam/Tentara Islam Indonesia*, DI/TII) and the Islamic Nation of Indonesia (*Negara Islam Indonesia*, NII) that surfaced in West Java, Central Java, South Sulawesi and Aceh between 1950 and 1965.²

Islamic political movements, however, managed to gain the upper hand when they dominated the polling in the country’s first general election of September 29, 1955. In this election, various Islam-based political parties were able to secure the

second, third, fifth and sixth positions. These groups conducted their political movement within, as well as outside, of the existing political parties, namely through Islamic organizations. The Masyumi Party (*Majelis Syuro Muslimin Indonesia*), the largest Islam-based party, took the second position, while the Nahdlatul Ulama Party (NU), the Syarikat Islam Indonesia Party (*Partai Syarikat Islam Indonesia*, PSII) and the Tarbiyah Islamiah Movement Party (*Pergerakan Tarbiyah Islamiah*, PERTI) held the third, fifth and sixth positions, respectively (Baswedan 2003: 671).

The first and fourth positions were secured by the Indonesian National Party (*Partai Nasional Indonesia*, PNI) and the Indonesian Communist Party (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*, PKI). Although collectively the Islamic parties dominated the polling with 43.7 percent of the votes, they were, however, still unable to compete with the combined votes of the nationalists (PNI), socialist and communist parties (including the PKI and parties devoted to socialism), and the supporters of the Indonesian Independence Union (*Ikatan Pendukung Kemerdekaan Indonesia*, IPKI). In 1959, Soekarno dissolved the Masyumi Party, which consequently led to a significant decline in the strength of the Islamic parties.

The Islamic fundamentalist group's antipathy toward Soekarno reached its peak on November 30, 1967. On that day, a bomb was thrown directly at Soekarno while he was attending an event at the Cikini Elementary School, the school that his children attended. This incident was later known as the Cikini Incident. Previous to that, in 1962, an attempted assault on Soekarno took place on the grounds of the Presidential Palace during the *Idul Adha* prayer service. These attacks were the work of the Islamic fundamentalist groups in their mission to replace the state constitution. The incidents intensified Soekarno's antipathy towards any movements that aspired to convert Indonesia into a nation built on *sharia* law (Baswedan 2003).

These events served as the reason behind Islam's inability to consolidate its dominant power-base to include Islamic *sharia* law into the constitution of Indonesia. There was also trepidation that the implementation of *sharia* law could potentially result in the disunity of the Republic of Indonesia. This fear has been so deeply ingrained that it has become the rationale most accepted by Indonesian political elites.

In order to accommodate the aspirations of the many dominant political movements, after the general election, Soekarno immediately proclaimed his concept of Nationalism, Religion, and Communism (*Nasionalisme, Agama, Komunisme*, NASAKOM). The concept was based on the three ideologies that dominated the polling in 1955. Soekarno tried to contain the political strengths of the Islamic parties within the confines of nationalism, religion and communism. In the years that followed, the Indonesian Communist Party released itself from Soekarno's constraints. The September 30, 1965 uprising broke out as a result of an open confrontation between the Soekarno-backed Communists and the Army, which held the political power of the time. When the PKI was finally banned by Suharto, who held the mandate of the 11 March Decree (*Surat Perintah 11 Maret*,

SUPERSEMAR), the Army began to back efforts led by Muslim leaders to hunt down the communist cadres in the regional areas. This situation led to the involvement of the Indonesian Army. The Army backed the Islamic faction, and systematically began to execute and arrest a majority of the leaders as well as suspected cadres of the Indonesian Communist Party.

The Army went a step further by exploiting the Islamic political parties to gain control of the government through Parliamentary deliberations and appointed General Suharto as the second president of Indonesia. At the time, Islamic parties and the Army embarked on a mutual effort to establish a regime that would later be known as the New Order (*Orde Baru*). However, this alliance failed to position Islam as a political power with the capability to determine the state ideology and constitution. In the 1971 general election, the *Parmusi*, a consolidation of Islamic parties formed by the Suharto government, experienced a substantial drop in the number of votes with a mere 27.12 percent, compared to the figures in the 1955 election.

President Suharto never failed to repudiate all efforts to accommodate the political strengths of the Islamic parties that have, since the very beginning of Indonesia's history, relentlessly attempted to impose Islamic *sharia* law as central to the State Constitution. President Suharto chose to develop a new political federation to replace Soekarno's NASAKOM by founding Golkar (*Golongan Karya*, Functional Work Group). Golkar relied on the strengths of the Indonesian armed forces, government employees, the Islam-based parties, the nationalist party, and the Indonesian Democratic Party (*Partai Demokrasi Indonesia*, PDI). President Suharto consistently ensured Golkar's authority as the dominant party in the legislative as well as executive levels. This move was believed to be the only viable scheme capable of guaranteeing the unity of the Republic of Indonesia, the stability of the nation, and the process of national development. It is because of these political views that during the New Order era, Islam has never been proportionately represented in media.

The two largest Islamic organizations established during the Soekarno and Suharto era are Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. Towards the end of his administration, Suharto provided the two organizations with the opportunity to establish their own political parties. As such, the Nahdathul Ulama established the National Awakening Party (*Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa*, PKB) and the Muhammadiyah established the National Mandate Party (*Partai Amanat Nasional*, PAN).

President Suharto ruled the country for 31 years before he was forced to step down through mass student rallies and the bloody riot of May 1998. The period following the May 1998 incident is known as the Reform period (*Reformasi*). In the years of *Reformasi*, when the limitations imposed on the Islamic parties were fully lifted, the decisive move to consolidate the Islam-based parties resulted in a better polling position, although percentage-wise it was still considerably lower than that of the 1955 general election.³

In the 1999 general election, the Islam-based parties – the United Development Party (*Partai Persatuan Pembangunan*, PPP), the National Awakening Party (*Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa*, PKB), the National Mandate Party (*Partai Amanat*

Nasional, PAN), the Crescent Star Party (*Partai Bulan Bintang*, PBB), and the Justice Party (*Partai Keadilan*, PK) – were only able to secure 37.53 percent of the votes. This figure is significantly lower than the 61.04 percent consolidated votes obtained by the nationalist parties, including the Indonesian Democratic Party (*Partai Demokrasi Indonesia*, PDI) and the Party of Functional Groups (*Partai Golkar*). The figure also shows a drop from the votes received in the 1997 election, which was 77.55 percent. Five years later, in the 2004 general election, Islam-based parties won 38.33 percent of the votes. Although the number seems to have increased, it was still far below the number of votes obtained in the 1955 election, which reached 46.86 percent (Setiawan 2008).

Islam and media during the New Order and Reformasi

In order to secure his own political interests, President Suharto limited the national television and radio stations (*Televisi Republik Indonesia*, TVRI, and *Radio Republik Indonesia*, RRI) to broadcast very few Islamic-themed events such as the *Nuzurul Qur'an* (the day the Qur'an was conceived, which falls on the 17th day of Ramadhan), the *Isra Miraj* (the day the prophet Muhammad was transported to meet Allah the Almighty and received the instruction to pray five times a day), and the *Maulid Nabi Muhammad SAW* (the day the prophet Muhammad was born). TVRI and RRI were also given the exclusive right to broadcast the National Qur'an Reading Competition (*Musabaqoh Tilawatil Qur'an*, MTQ), which drew the participation of contestants from the then 27 provinces of Indonesia. The finals of the competition were typically attended by President Suharto and broadcast live by TVRI and RRI.⁴

Several programs with Islamic themes were broadcast in the form of music programs that featured Islamic songs such as those performed by the group *Linggar Binangkit* from Bandung, West Java. *Linggar Binangkit* is a group consisting of 20 singers that promotes modern *qasidah* (Middle Eastern/Islamic music). In the 1980s, the music group Bimbo and singer Ebiet G. Ade became household names among television as well as radio audiences for bringing a new genre into the Indonesian music scene: pop songs with an Islamic flavor packaged in popular rhythms.⁵ Rhoma Irama and his group Soneta performed their own brand of Islamic songs. In every one of their performances, Rhoma and his group ingeniously combined Melayu music with the preaching of Islamic messages (*dakwah*) (see Chapter 11 in this volume).

Other than the music programs that featured the aforementioned groups and singers, songs of an Islamic nature were rarely broadcast on television during the Suharto regime. Songs with Islamic themes were only performed during special occasions or Islamic observances. The fortunate few that were able to perform on television were those who had managed to secure a huge fan base due to their large audience share and ability to penetrate the radio airwaves, thus making them the artist of choice in their own particular era.⁶

Following President Suharto's downfall in 1998 and the installation of a new government under BJ Habibie, the government relinquished its control over the media, including television. Control was now determined by the forces of the

market. Beginning in the *Reformasi* era, when the forces of the market started to determine the programs shown on television, programs with an Islamic theme were still rarely shown on television, as they were unable to gain the much-needed high ratings and shares of viewers.

After *Reformasi*, five new television stations were given the license to broadcast: Metro TV, Trans TV, Trans 7, Lativi, and Global TV. These five new stations were added to the five private television stations that were already operational.⁷ In order to obtain greater audience shares, specifically in the urban areas, every television station looked to the Western concept and format of broadcasting and often imitated programs that were produced by MTV, the Discovery Channel, BBC, CNN and other global television stations.

After *Reformasi* in 1998, when political barriers surrounding the efforts to establish an Islamic nation were eliminated, new pressure began to build up. However, this pressure has yet to achieve the targeted objective. What has been reached is a consolidation of forces that continues to generate strength at the grass roots level. Religious organizations including Qur'an Reading Groups quickly grew, especially among housewives.⁸ The television appearance of charismatic *ulamas*, specifically during the month of Ramadhan, has strengthened the movement at the grass roots level. In 1999, SCTV aired a show featuring K.H. Zainuddin MZ, a characteristic preacher. The program took the form of a one-hour weekly Qur'an recitation and Islamic sermon titled "*Takbir Akbar*" ("The Great Takbir," Recitation of the Greatness of Allah) that was broadcast live from various cities.⁹ The following year AA Gym became a television icon, followed by Arifin Ilham and Ustad Jefri Al Bukhori (in 2004), Yusuf Mansur (in 2006), and Mama Dede and Ustad AA Junaidi (in 2008). Every single television station competed to feature these icons for their weekly religious programs. In fact, the competition to feature the most popular Islamic preachers (both *ustad* [male] and *ustadzah* [female]) for programs to be broadcast during the month of Ramadhan in the following year begins during the final weeks of Ramadhan the previous year. The managers of these preachers intelligently use the extraordinary popularity of their preachers to secure the best deal, including the possibility of producing a year-long Islamic sermon program for television.¹⁰ The well-known, almost celebrity-like preachers exploit their popularity as television icons to give sermons in many cities across Indonesia. At the peak of his popularity, AA Gym gave approximately 40 sermons per week at various Qur'an Reading Group activities or events. He spoke at the *Maulid Nabi Muhammad SAW* (the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad) events, launchings of products or services, and the birthday celebrations of many government officials and anniversaries of public, government or private organizations. Women and housewives became his devoted audience. But when he openly announced his second marriage to Alfarini Edarini in 2006, his popularity decreased immediately. Women began to criticize him, boycotts began to spread, and television stations discontinued every program that featured him, except for the infotainment/gossip shows that fed the audience with negative reports of his character. AA Gym was no longer to be seen or heard from.¹¹

The incident surrounding AA Gym is a good example of the uniqueness of Islam within the context of Indonesia. Although the practice of polygamy is permitted in Islam, in the case of Indonesia, however, there seems to be a noticeable difference between Islam as the religion that is observed by the majority and the practice of Islam within social life, as clearly illustrated by this particular incident. Following the deterioration of AA Gym's popularity, two other Islamic preachers Jefri Al Bukhori (aka Ustad Uje) and Yusuf Mansyur, began to fill the empty media slots that were once dominated by AA Gym (Fealy 2008). Ustad Uje, who rose to fame in 2004, enjoys a high level of popularity, as he is involved in a variety of media activities. If AA Gym was popular among middle-class women, Ustad Uje was able to appeal to a wider audience, especially among the younger generation. His strength and primary traits are apparent in the extraordinary voice that he has when reciting the Qur'an and his skill at singing religious songs. His popularity reached its peak in 2006 and 2007. Every day during the month of Ramadhan, Ustad Uje would organize a series (*safari*) of mass sermons in a variety of different locations and at different times of the day in accordance with the times for prayers: *Subuh* (dawn), *Zuhur* (afternoon), *Ashar* (late afternoon), *Maghrib* (sunset), *Isya* (evening) and the *Tarawih* (evening prayers during the holy month of Ramadhan). He appeared in numerous programs such as the "Seven-Minute Sermon" (*Kuliah Tujuh Menit*, or *Kultum*) prior to the *Maghrib* call to prayers, which also coincides with the time for the breaking of the fast, and various evening and pre-dawn religious guidance programs (*tausiah*) on several television stations. An average of 5,000 followers would attend his regular Qur'an reading group. However, in 2008, he decided to scale down his activities. His activities would "only" include giving the *Subuh* sermons in several mosques, the daily evening *Kultum* on Indosiar and TV One, the evening of the *Takbir* to welcome the *Aidil Fitri* (60 minute program) on Trans TV and two appearances on the *Tukul Show*, a popular talk show aired by Trans 7. Ustad Uje also took part in three events that were especially organized for Honda off-air programs in three cities located in Sumatra, Java, and Kalimantan. His appearances at these three events managed to boost the sales of the Honda motorcycle by 25 percent, reaching a staggering 300,000 units for the month of Ramadhan alone. This success prompted Honda's management to extend his contract beyond the month of Ramadhan to include a monthly event held in different cities. Ustad Uje also signed a contract with Telkomsel, a cellular service provider, for five special television programs.

Ustad Uje has the ability to link certain products with his sermons. When he appeared at the Honda event he linked the product with his sermon by stating that if a motorcycle has brakes to reduce its speed, and rear view mirrors to look at what is in the rear, then religion also gestures mankind to have self-restraint, akin to a braking system in the heart. He urged his audience to always make use of the "rear view mirror" to prevent collisions with other "motorists." When he appeared at the Telkomsel program he talked about the direct communication link to Allah through the number set 2-4-4-3-4. The figures signify the number of *rakaat* (units of prayer rituals consisting of bows and prostrations) for the *subuh*, *zuhur*, *ashar*, *maghrib* and *isya* prayers. Unfortunately, he said, many people forget to have

their prepaid telephone cards refilled; as a result, they are no longer able to communicate with God. The telephone pulse in this case represents *shalat* (prayers). If you fulfill the obligation to perform the prayers at the five determined times, then the pulse of your heart will be satiated because you are able to maintain your communication with God every single day (pers. comm., Ustad Jefri Al Bukhori, 22 September 2008). The way he conducts his sermons is entertaining and it becomes an enjoyable experience for the audience and listeners.

In Trans TV's *Takbir* program Ustad Uje was able to compete with popular musical groups and singers by presenting a number of Islamic songs with a modern *qasidah* beat. The program titled *Takbir Cinta* (Love of the *Takbir*), which ran for 60 minutes, managed to gain the highest share of viewers as it featured prominent artists that were also teen idols including Ariel and his group Peter Pan, Afghan, Rian and his group D'Massiv, Bunga Citra Lestari and Alexa. Hundreds of audience members in the studio, mainly consisting of teenagers, cheered Ustad Uje's performance as loudly as they did for the other teen idols in the performance.

The special month of Ramadhan

The holy month of Ramadhan is imbued with divine wisdom, blessings, mercy and compassion. During this holy month, Muslims dedicate themselves to contemplation and introspection, self-purification, avoidance of sinful acts and behavior, and the intensification of their religious worship and good deeds. It is compulsory for every person of the Muslim faith to perform the fasting ritual from sunrise to sunset. For approximately 14 hours, Muslims must refrain from drinking, eating and making unacceptable comments; they must also contain their anger and avoid any sinful wrongdoings, including temptation and lust.

The Surah Al Baqarah verse 183 of the Qur'an states, "*Ya Ayuhallazi n' a'mannu kutibba allaikummusiammu ka'ma kutibba allalladzinna ming qob'likum laallakum tataqu'un*" – "O ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you that ye may (learn) self-restraint."

In Indonesia, Islam is closely entwined with existing local traditions; therefore, Ramadhan is not only seen as a month of religious observance but has also evolved to become a ritual filled with cultural underpinnings. It is the month that many look forward to. Many of the activities that are carried out may be described as an amalgamation of religious observances and cultural traditions, making it unique and festive. The tradition begins with a variety of different rituals, which includes the *Rajab* and *Sya'ban* fasting rituals that are done two months prior to the actual month of Ramadan, hair cutting, nail clipping, self-purification and visiting the resting places of the departed loved ones.¹²

Two newspapers describe the Ramadhan rituals, especially the increasing public celebrations and media saturation that began taking place during the *Reformasi* period. The first description, from the prominent *Kompas* daily, characterizes Ramadhan as a month driven by consumerism:

The festivities to welcome the 2008 Ramadhan could be felt as early as September. This is apparent in the many television programs that are produced, which includes television series, quizzes, comedy shows, sermons, news and music programs up to the latest celebrity rumors that are packed with the spirit of fasting. These types of programs will double in number during the breaking of the fast or the early morning dining ritual (*sahur*) hours. The packaging of the programs usually include common icons and symbols of Islam. The studio sets are typically designed with Arabic calligraphy and the *bedug* (large drum to summon prayers). The celebrities and talents that take part in the programs are dressed in Islamic fashions, such as the *jilbab* (headscarf worn by women) and the *koko* (Islamic prayer shirt) as well as the *peci* (black velvet rimless prayer cap) for the men. In addition to the portrayal of Islam, these shows usually include the involvement of advertisers. It is, therefore, not surprising that these Ramadhan shows, a majority of which are in the form of comedy shows or quizzes, feel like they are more of a product sales pitch rather than a show to enhance religious contemplation. Through these programs the audience is continuously lured into buying the products.¹³

In contrast to the commercial spectacle described above, the weekly *Tempo* magazine, the magazine with the largest circulation in Indonesia, characterizes Ramadhan as marked by piousness as well as mass mediation:

... the arrival of Ramadan is marked by increased piousness. The Mosques are filled to capacity with people conducting the *tarawih* (evening prayer during the month of Ramadan) and the *tadarus* (recitation of the Quran). Hotels hold special Qur'an recitations for executives. Televisions actively broadcast mass *dzikir* (chanting of the holy phrases) programs. The *ustads* (preachers) suddenly gain instant celebrity status. It would be difficult to imagine today's imagery of worship taking place 10 or 20 years ago. The *dzikir*, which was previously a silent and personal ritual, has become a ritual of the masses. Everywhere we turn, there seems to be a *Tablig Akbar* (mass sermon) taking place. The *tausiah* (religious guidance), usually given by a *Kiai* (a venerated Islamic figure), now requires the spotlight of a television studio for a nationwide broadcast.¹⁴

The differences in these two forms of reportage can be traced to the ideological differences between *Kompas* and *Tempo*. *Kompas* was formed during the New Order by powerful Catholic individuals including Peng Koen Auwjong (P.K. Ojong), Jakob Oetama, and Frans Seda. As a religious minority they argued that they needed an instrument to voice the concerns of Catholics. *Tempo* was founded by creative intellectuals and liberal Islam proponents including Goenawan Mohamad, Fikri Jufri, Salim Said, and Subhah Asa. Primarily a weekly news magazine covering political, economic and cultural issues, *Tempo* included frequent reportage on Islam.

“Welcoming triumph”

The following data illustrate the differences in shares and ratings during the regular months and the month of Ramadhan from 2006 to 2008. During the fringe and shoulder hours of 2:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. and the prime time hours of 5:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m., the data show that the audience share increased seven fold between the hours of 03:00 a.m. to 4:30 a.m. as it coincided with the time when people were getting ready for the *sahur* ritual. Audience share also increased by 30 percent during prime time hours, especially around the time of the *Adzan Maghrib* (Maghrib call to prayers), which falls around 5:50 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. (Figure 2.1).

In Figure 2.2, AC Nielsen data show a 285 percent increase in programs with an Islamic content (50 hours per week) during the month of Ramadhan (August 2006) compared to the previous month of the same year (July), which was 13 hours per week. The average duration of religious programs for the month of July was 7 percent of the total weekly duration or 13 hours per week on the five major television stations (RCTI, SCTV, Trans TV, Indosiar and TPI). The programs consisted of 16–20 30-minute episodes of a television series and a 60–120 minute FTV (*Film Televisi*, TV movies), as well as a 30-minute religious talk show/television magazine. In Ramadhan of September to October 2006, there was a 285 percent rise in the duration of programs with an Islamic theme, which reached 42 to 52 hours or about 200 to 335 programs per week. These programs consisted of

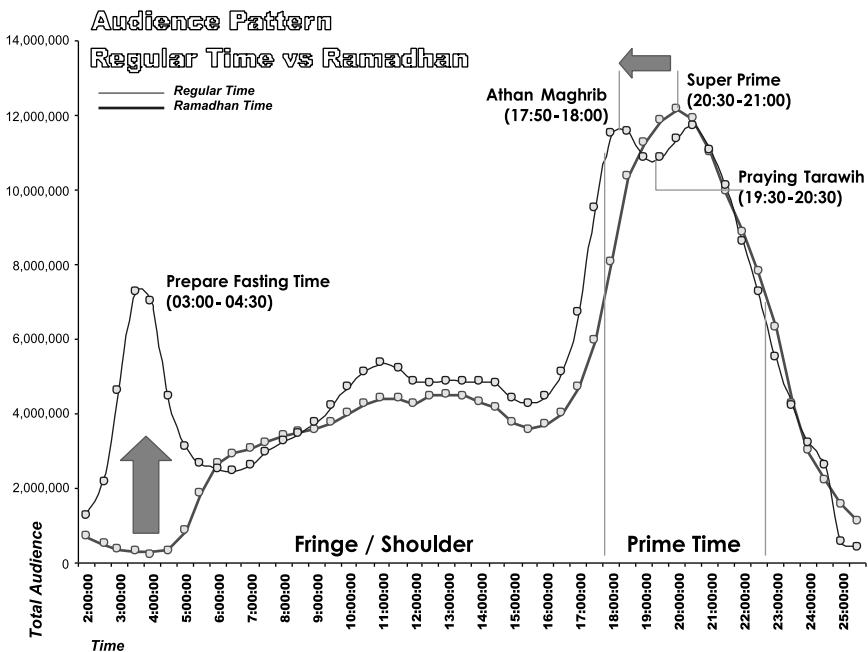


Figure 2.1 Audience shares during regular time vs Ramadhan, 2006–08.

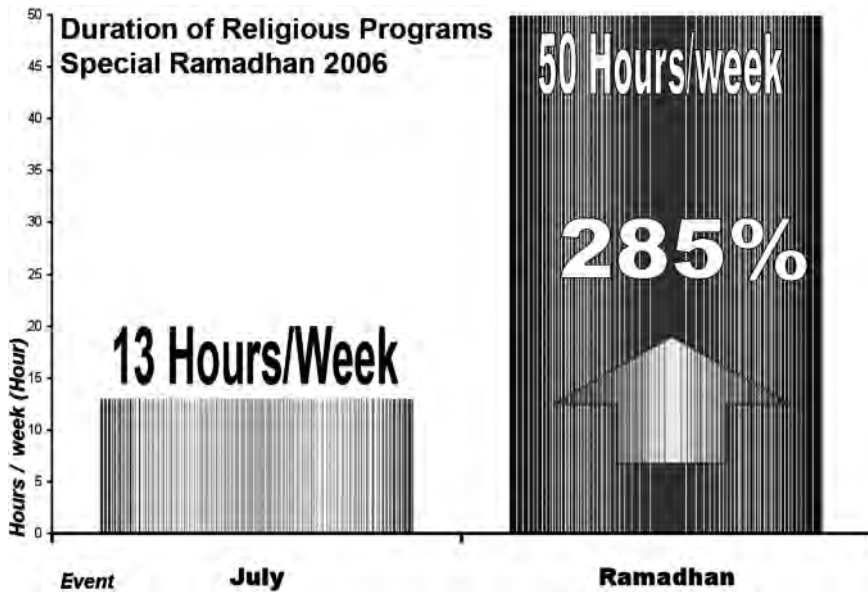


Figure 2.2 Duration of programs with Islamic themes, July/August 2006.

television series, a special variety show during the *sahur* hours, *Kultum* (the Seven-Minute Sermon) and religious talk shows/television magazines. In 2007, as shown in Figure 2.3, the number of programs with an Islamic theme dropped to 3.5 hours per week during regular programming hours compared to the previous year of 13 hours per week. In contrast, during the month of Ramadhan the increase reached a record high of 1186 percent or 45 hours per week, almost 12 times that of the regular programs. In 2008, regular programs with an Islamic theme remained at 3.5 hours per week, while during the month of Ramadhan the figure spiked to a 1100 percent increase (42 hours per week) (see Figure 2.4).

The 2007 and 2008 decline in the number of programming hours for Islamic programs on the five major television stations were caused by a significant drop in the shares and ratings of programs with an Islamic theme, specifically for the television series (compared to that of 2006) (Figure 2.5). This drop stems from the weariness of the audience, the pressures of various Islamic organizations and the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (*Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia*, KPI). Many viewed these religious programs to be full of mysticism, particularly the television series, with a tendency to disregard the morals and sanctity of religion. Trans TV pioneered the broadcast of religious programs on television with its reality show titled *Dunia Lain* (The World Beyond), which aired in 2003–2004. The show presented an encounter between a medium and supernatural beings. The medium for the encounter was a paranormal, and the process was recorded using an infrared video camera, which allowed the audience to see the shadows of the supernatural

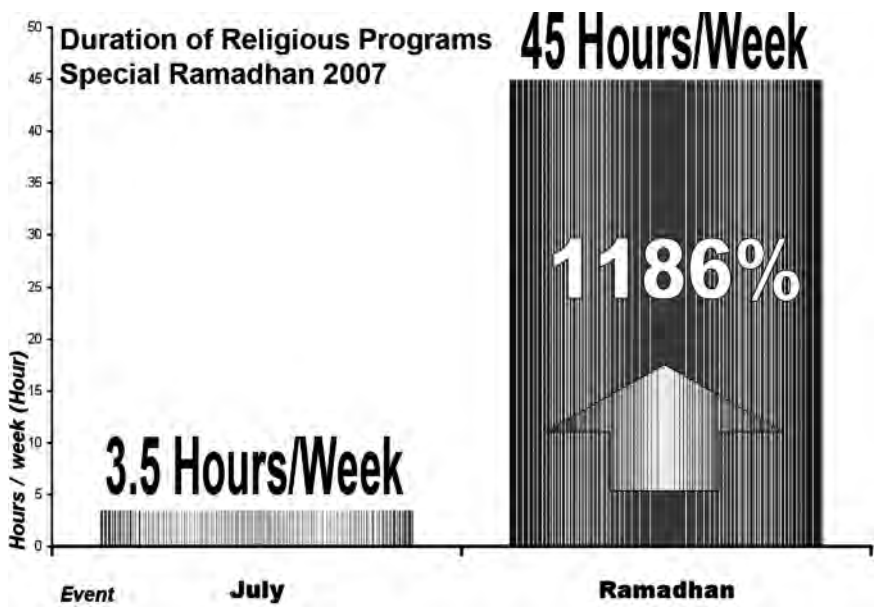


Figure 2.3 Duration of programs with Islamic themes, July/August 2007.

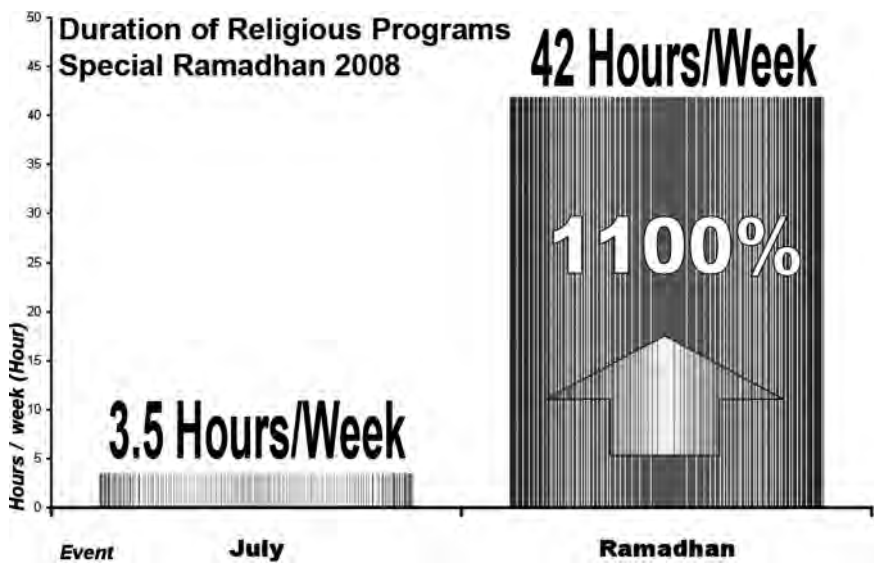


Figure 2.4 Duration of programs with Islamic themes, July/August 2008.

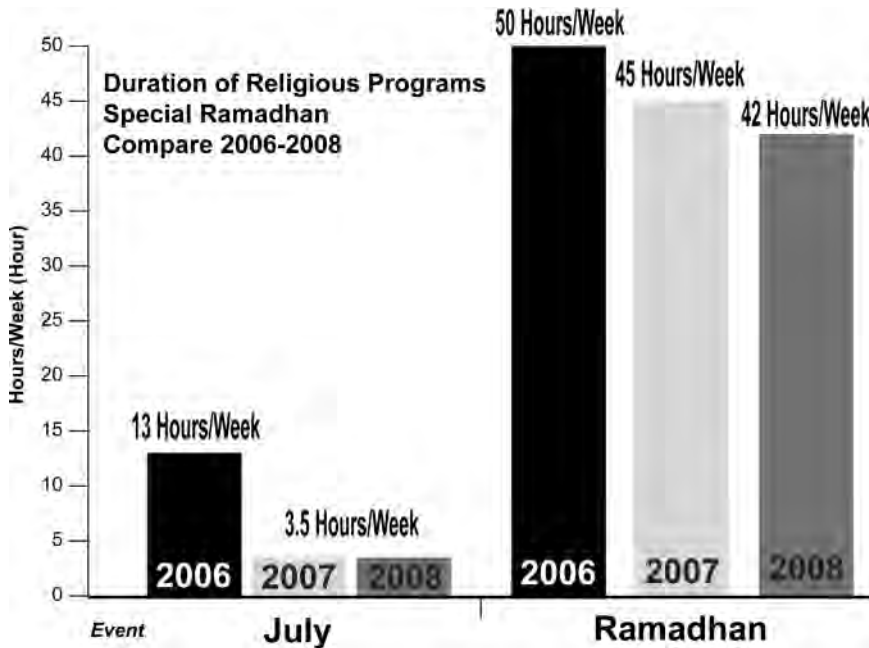


Figure 2.5 Duration of programs with Islamic themes, 2006–08.

beings that were haunting the victims. The victims usually gave up mid-way and this process was recorded via remote control cameras. The program was a huge success and gained high ratings, and other television stations began to produce similar shows, such as *Gentayangan* (Wandering Souls) on TPI. Seeing Trans TV's success, other television stations began to follow suit and created similar programs.

The *Dunia Lain* program resulted in numerous protests, specifically from Islamic leaders. Trans TV responded by offering a new and totally different program titled *Hidayah* (Guidance), that carried the theme of *azab* (punishment), God's persecution to those who do not adhere to religious teachings. The program was again a success, and other television stations began to quickly follow, including RCTI with *Pintu Hidayah* (The Gate to Guidance), Indosiar with *Misteri Illahi* (The Mysteries of God), *Titipan Illahi* (Entrusted by God) and *Maha Kuasa* (The Almighty); TPI with *Hidayahmu* (Your Guidance), *Rahasia Illahi* (God's Secret) and *Azab Illahi* (God's Persecution); as well as *Insyaf* (Realization) and *Hikayah* (The Tale) on Trans TV.

The many religious television series blatantly depict the many varieties of mysticism and the frightening signs of the sinful acts of its primary figure. The programs also had fear-provoking titles, such as *Siksa Kubur* (Torture in the Grave), *Jenazah Tertimpa Tangga* (The Ill-fated Corpse), *Azab Ditolak di Liang Kubur* (Rejected Punishment in the Tomb) and *Arwah Gentayangan* (Restless Souls). Islamic communities and organizations rejected these titles as sacrilegious.

In Ramadhan of 2007, stations introduced new themes and approaches. The programs became more subtle and free of any mysticism; for example, *Menuju Surga-MU* (Headed for God's Heaven) on Trans TV; *Maha Pengasih* (The All Giving) and *Mutiara Hati* (The Jewel of the Heart) on RCTI; *Lorong Waktu* (Time Tunnel), *Kiamat Sudah Dekat* (The End is Near) and *Para Pencari Tuhan* (The Seekers of God) on SCTV.¹⁵ In 2007, Trans TV introduced a new genre through a program titled *Taubat* (Repentant), an adaptation of the movie "Constantine," which depicts the fight against a spirit that causes demonic possessions.

The year 2008 was marked by the airing of the television series *Sajadah Cinta* (The Prayer Rug of Love). The program rode on the momentum of the highly successful movie *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (The Verses of Love) by Habib Burahman el Shirazy (see Heryanto, Chapter 4 this volume). *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* was the most successful movie in Indonesian history, attracting 3.6 million viewers in 40 days. This number even surpassed the number of viewers for the movie "Titanic," a huge box office success a few years earlier. It took the producer of the movie, Manoj Punjabi, two years to prepare the film production. The draft script for the movie was modified more than ten times. Two weeks prior to the actual shooting, the entire script was changed to give greater emphasis to the entertainment aspect rather than the religious content. Nevertheless, this movie is considered a highly effective medium for the dissemination of the teachings of Islam. The movie became recommended viewing for members of the Qur'an Reading Groups, students, as well as government employees. Six months after its initial screening the movie was still generating discussion. Although the movie was a phenomenon, other films that tried to imitate it failed to attract significant audiences. Religious films including *Kun Fayakun* (Be! Then it shall Be), *Mengaku Rasu* (Professing to be the Prophet), and *Sahabat Cinta* (Best Friends in Love) were unable to achieve the same success as that of *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*.

The movie's success can be attributed to: (1) the collaboration and chemistry among the author of the book and the cast; (2) the soundtrack; and (3) its romantic theme, which contrasted with the violent and punishment-filled religious programs on television (pers. comm., Manoj Punjabi, producer of *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, September 23, 2008).

In order to secure the best shares during the month of Ramadhan, several television stations began airing their religious television series one month prior to the actual festive month. Figure 2.6 shows the situation before and after the Ramadhan festivities: *Tasbih Cinta* (Prayer Beads of Love) on Indosiar (IVM) and *Upik Abu dan Laura* (Upik Abu and Laura) on RCTI represent the increased number of religious television series viewers during the month of Ramadhan.

In contrast, non-religious television series such as RCTI's *Cerita SMA* (High School Stories) and SCTV's *Chelsea* experienced a significant drop in viewers, as shown in Figure 2.7.

Overall, for the 2008 Ramadhan television programs, SCTV took the top position, followed by Trans TV, RCTI, TPI and Trans 7 (see Figure 2.8). SCTV ingeniously broadcast the re-runs of the television series *Lorong Waktu* (Time Tunnel) that for the last four years had achieved an extremely high rating

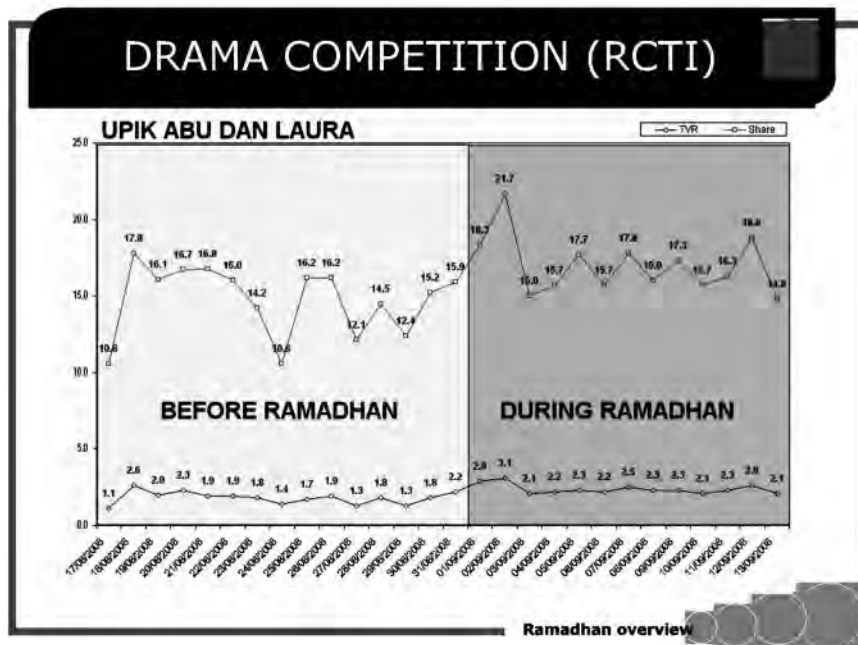
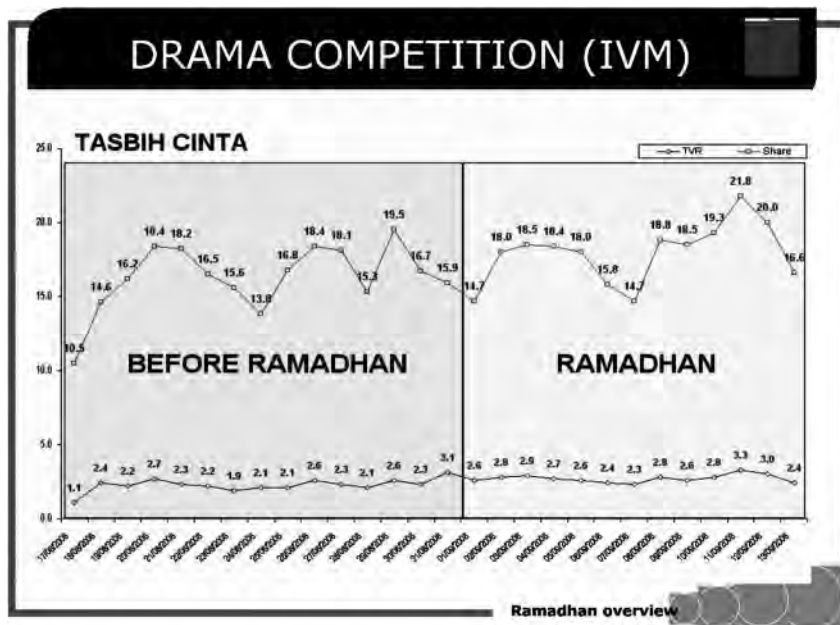


Figure 2.6 Shares of programs *Tasbih Cinta* and *Upik Abu dan Laura*, before and during Ramadhan, 2008.

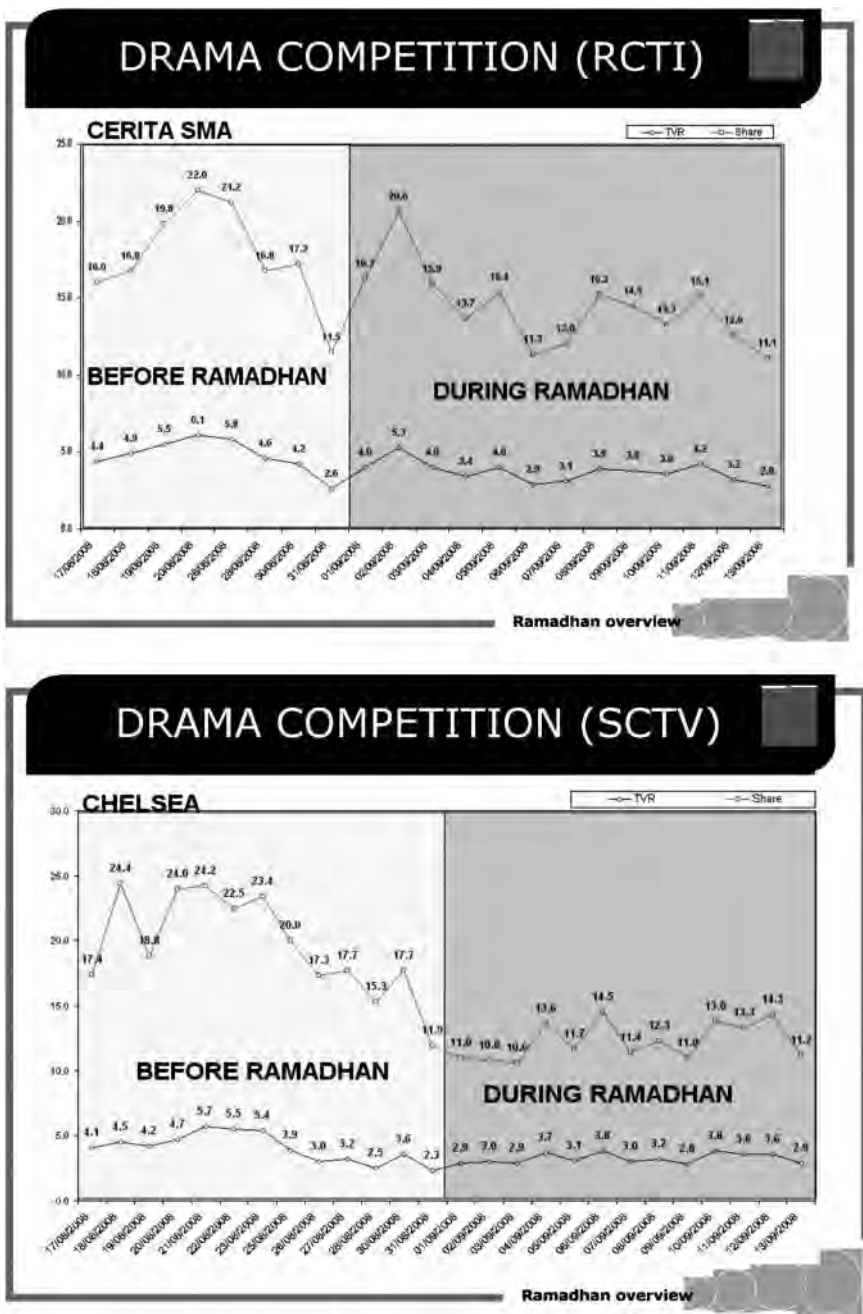


Figure 2.7 Shares of programs *Cerita SMA* and *Chelsea*, before and during Ramadhan, 2008.

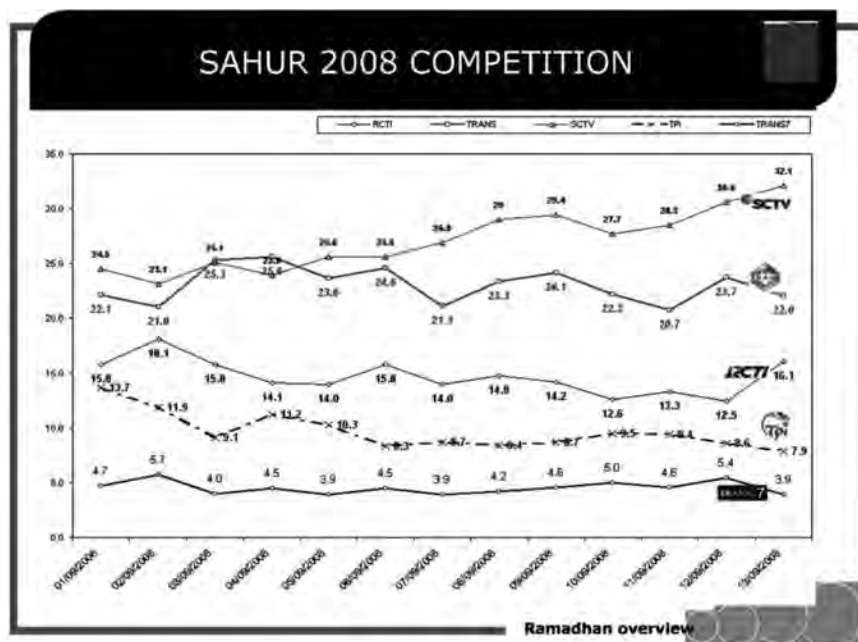


Figure 2.8 Shares among the top five television stations during Ramadhan, 2008.

and share. SCTV also broadcast the successful *Para Pencari Tuhan 2* (The Seekers of God 2), which aired twice a day at 3:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m.

The program map of every television station was totally altered after the month of Ramadhan. The promotion of SCTV's television series entitled *Cinta Maia* (Maia's Love), which carries a theme very different to that of the Islamic themes aired during Ramadhan, began with a print advertisement in the *Kompas* daily on Saturday, September 21, 2008. The half page full color advertisement was complemented by a large banner that read, "Presenting another gala series, the latest production of Dhamoo Punjabi and Manoj Punjabi's MD Entertainment. Starting tonight, daily at 8:00 p.m. on SCTV" (Figure 2.9). This television station attempted to gain a headstart in terms of grabbing the audience share, as they predicted that most viewers would have already lost interest in the religious television series broadcast during the month of Ramadhan.

There is an understanding among prominent Muslim figures regarding the importance of the media. They agree that television is the most important of all media as it has the power to influence the masses. Their position is in sync with the result of a survey carried out by the Research and Development Unit of Trans TV in September 2007. The survey involved 3000 television audience members in Jakarta and the surrounding areas. A majority of the respondents, 82.6 percent, still consider television as the main form of family entertainment, for all age groups, especially among the lower-middle-class. There is also a tendency to



Figure 2.9 Advertisement for the television series *Cinta Maia* (courtesy of MD Entertainment).

watch television for a long period of time (three to five hours per day); the intensity of the consumption is also very high. The survey also found that the average television remains turned on from morning to night even though no one is watching it.

An AGB Nielsen survey shows that only upper-class professionals, a small percentage of the audience, watches television to obtain information. Metro TV, which focuses its programs on news reports, has the lowest share of all stations, only 1.8 percent (source: Report Q1 AGB Nielsen 2008). Only the monumental and most talked about cases, such as the live broadcasts documenting the demise of former President Suharto on January 27, 2008 could attract viewers' attention.¹⁶

In general, the understanding concerning the relations between mass media (in this case, television) and Islamic culture is currently quite diverse, in particular among elites (Islamic leaders, intellectuals, political activists, *ulamas*). The views of this group range from moderate to conservative. For moderates, television media and Islamic culture have reached a stable equilibrium. There is a modern awareness that Islam as a religion does not necessarily have to appear rigid. Islam does not have to be presented in highly visible or explicit ways (through sermons, for example). The moderates have a more realistic view: Islam as a non-profit institution cannot be reconciled with Islam as a business entity. According to

moderates, Islam must be seen in cultural terms, open and tolerant towards changes taking place in the lifestyles of urban youth. This generation had become devotees of MTV culture and Hollywood movies made in Western countries. This kind of lifestyle is often considered unacceptable and is in conflict with conservative Islam.

The moderate group accepts the religious television series that bring into view mysticism and God's persecution. For Muslims who believe in mysticism this would be an appropriate way to spread the teachings of Islam, as there is still a large number of the population which consider mysticism as a part of life.

The more modern Islamic programs, rather than the traditional "Arabic" format, were encouraged by the middle class whose economic conditions began to improve in the 1970s. This middle class continued their studies at modern schools after completing their basic and middle education at Islamic boarding schools.¹⁷ This group brought new colors to the media content, in particular a more modern Islamic influence to television by placing greater emphasis on universal ethics and ways of thinking. They were also able to view matters through the symbolism of religion, although they have already been immersed in modernity. The situation could be best exemplified in the 1987 movie *Catatan Si Boy* (Boy's Diary) that portrays a young man who pursues his studies in the United States but never misses a single prayer.

The moderate group sees the Ramadhan phenomenon, with its many Islamic programs, as an example of media appreciation of Islamic culture. They regard today's media as a more stable equilibrium in comparison to other countries that do not have the Ramadhan festivities.¹⁸ This view has been expressed by Komaruddin Hidayat, Rector of the State Islamic University Syarif Hidayatullah in Jakarta:

The people of Indonesia, the television audience, need symbols that are in agreement with their culture, which includes symbols of Islam in the way they are dressed, in saying the *assalamualaikum* (greetings in the name of Allah the all blessing and graceful), in the acts of the *shalat* (prayer rituals), fasting, the mentioning of the *Rukun Islam* (the Five Pillars of Islam), *Rukun Imam* (the Pillars of the Imam) and other cultural symbols. The symbols of Islam drive the creation of many programs. All of these are positive in nature; it means there is an acceptance from the community. The month of Ramadan has become a melting pot of many different interests: the market, the audience, and Islam, at least once a year.¹⁹

The conservative group, on the other hand, sees relations between Islam and the media as far from being adequate, let alone ideal. The director of the Prosperous Justice Party (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera*, PKB) and sermon activists Tutty Alawiyah and Ustad Jefri Al Bukhori feel that television has yet to be Islamic. The current media is not yet viewed as part of Islamic culture and does not represent the substance of Islam. Programs relating to Islam are still on the

peripheral level. The conservative leaders of this community consider today's television as not providing enough intellectual information for Muslims. According to them, television does not have a clear ideology and only follows the trends of the market: "Television is extremely permissive, there is no element of a role model, and it spreads the seed of consumerism through the high number of commercials that are aired during Islamic programs" (pers. comm., Tutty Alawiyah [September 5, 2008] and Ustad Jefri Al-Bukhori [September 22, 2008]). Conservative critics do not accept the *ustad* (preachers) who present sermons in the middle of an entertainment show during the month of Ramadhan. Many preachers are given the predicate "Ustadtainment" as they, in fact, preach a shallow understanding of Islam. For example, the *shalat* (prayer) is referred to as "talking" to Allah. *Shalat* is more than just talking but is an intense form of communication, in a transcendental way with Allah. "Although these shows also include sermons, they are more often comical in nature. They lack substance" (pers. comm., Tutty Alawiyah [September 5, 2008] and Ustad Jefri Al-Bukhori [September 22, 2008]).

Santi Indra Astuti, who conducted an in-depth survey on television series, talkshows, and quizzes during the month of Ramadhan, stated:

The level of religiousness in the Ramadhan programs are limited to the use of religious symbols, for example, women wearing the *jilbab* (headscarf), men in the *koko* (prayer shirt) outfit complete with the *kopiah* (rimless prayer cap). Shooting locations are usually at a *mushalla* (small place of prayer) and in mosques. It may be correct or incorrect, but there is always friction in the discourse concerning religion and the media. The drive to gain the highest economic profit on the side of the television media during the month of Ramadhan is in conflict with the religious discourse. The attractive and artificial space of television brings the religious discourse into the realm of entertainment. But television has not been able to make the people perform the fasting ritual in a more appropriate way.²⁰

The Prosperous Justice Party (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera*, PKS) has a more positive view of the media within the context of Islam. According to this group, like it or not, television has made the Islamic atmosphere within the audience's households more festive. Materials that carry the Islamic theme serves as a "reminder" to those who had forgotten to pray: "Many people who do not perform the compulsory prayers are suddenly reminded and compelled to pray; perhaps this is more appropriate for *abangan* Muslims who do not adhere strictly to the teachings of Islam. For Islamic political activists, Islam has always been tolerant. History notes that Islam was successful in spreading its teachings because the religion utilized a cultural approach" (pers. comm., Muhammad Razikun from the *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* [the Prosperous Justice Party], September 8, 2008). There are also those who believe that Ramadhan programs tend to be shallow with greater emphasis on the infotainment side. These people are of the opinion that the television industry of Indonesia follows the "buy low sell high" concept, just as any other profit-oriented organization. Consequently, the Ramadhan programs on television do

not boost the audience's intellectuality but downgrade it. Therefore, what is taking place is the weakening of Islamic values as Islam is exploited for the sake of shares, ratings and advertising.²¹

The opposition towards Ramadhan programs that do not convey any Islamic substance and are merely entertainment in nature by utilizing the symbols of Islam, including the exploitation of the Ramadhan atmosphere, is not limited to statements in the media and various discussion forums. This resistance is also realized in the form of a series of actions by the Commission of Indonesian Broadcasting (*Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia*, KPI), an independent broadcasting commission that monitors the content of the broadcasts. After contacting the Council of Indonesian Ulama (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, MUI), the highest government organization that monitors and mediates any disputes relating to the implementation of Islamic teachings, the Commission issued a warning to all television stations that was delivered prior to the month of Ramadan. The warning requires all television stations to refrain from airing shows that feature transvestite-like acting in their reality shows and comedy shows, including slapstick humor.²² This warning proved to be effective; on the third day of Ramadhan all television stations eliminated every scene containing transvestite-like behaviors in their reality shows as well as comedy shows.

Another illustration occurred during the taping of the variety show *Takbir Cinta* (Love of the Takbir) that featured Ustad Uje and four well-known singers at Trans TV on Monday, September 22, 2008. An incident broke out because three of the seven songs that were scheduled to be performed on the show were accompanied by rather scantily clad background dancers. The dancers' backs were clearly visible and this was in conflict with the *Takbir* atmosphere that was represented in the show. Ustad Uje contacted me and put forward an ultimatum: edit the scene or he would resign from the show. The producer agreed to re-tape the three songs without the presence of the background dancers. Initially the singers refused to the re-taping without the accompaniment of the background dancers as it went against their contract and it was already past midnight. However, after they had been threatened with a lawsuit by the *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* and the KPI, they finally agreed to the re-taping. The show could be broadcast without the scenes that Ustad Uje objected to. The pressures and threats regarding scenes that do not adhere to Islamic norms were strong enough to change the production behavior of the media.

Conclusion

Islam has never been given a proportionate space on television to actualize the Islamic atmosphere that is based on Islamic *sharia*. There are cultural and economic aspects to this situation. The spread of Islam in Indonesia in the 12th century was achieved through peaceful means by utilizing a cultural approach. The *wali sanga* (the nine saints of Islam) spread the religion by enculturating people to the religion. They never attempted to replace the existing culture but they modified it to suit Islam. Even from its earliest beginnings Muslims have been very tolerant towards non-Islamic traditions and cultures.

From the political point of view, the founding fathers of the nation have always stood by the notion that the Republic of Indonesia should be built under the principle of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). The founding fathers were confident that the nation could be built on the basis of religious harmony. During Soekarno's 22-year term of office (1945 to 1967), for political reasons, he insisted on maintaining the ideologies of *Pancasila* (the five principles of the nation-state) on top of the three political and ideological pillars of *Nasakom* (Nationalism, Religion and Communism). In 1959, Soekarno went so far as to dissolve the Masyumi Party, the largest Islamic party, as it was considered to be perilous towards the political development of the Republic of Indonesia.

Suharto maintained Sukarno's basic ideology, developed a new Islamic political party, and founded *Golkar* to serve as his political instrument; he used it to ensure absolute majority. After *Reformasi* (1998), Islam, through its Islam-based parties, was never able to establish a political stronghold in order to push for *sharia*-based law that would govern the behavior of the people. Indonesian Muslims themselves feel convenient with the existing equilibrium; hence, the negotiation between the interests of the media and the interest of Muslims has only been achieved during the month of Ramadhan.

On the other hand, Islam requires a communications tool to generate awareness among its followers of what it is to be Muslim, how to have an Islamic lifestyle and how to gain a better understanding of the religion. These goals could be achieved through a variety of media, including those that exist outside of the national mainstream media, such as community television, community radio and community print media.

By making good use of these community media, Ramadhan can serve as the model towards the increased effort to develop a public discourse on an Islamic lifestyle. Another method would be through the development of creative Islamic programs on television that are not too heavily loaded with Islamic symbols and themes.

I believe that Islamic themes will continue to be aired during the month of Ramadhan, as there is a significant increase in the number of viewers as well as an increase in the revenues derived from commercials. Data received from the sales and marketing department of Trans TV and Trans 7 show that there was a 25 percent increase in the total revenue received from commercials during the *Sahur* (early morning breakfast) hour (2:30 to 4:30 a.m.) during Ramadhan in 2008 as compared to that of 2007.

Various regular shows carry the Islamic theme beyond the Ramadhan month, including *Sentuhan Qalbu* (Trans TV), the television series *Lorong Waktu* (SCTV), the weekly religious program from the Istiqlal Mosque (TV One), the daily morning talk show *Penyejuk Imani* ("Refreshing the Faith") (Indosiar) and the symbols of Islam that are portrayed on the many television programs featuring numerous celebrities. Their popularity is apparent in their shares and ratings. Therefore, there is the possibility that these Islamic programs will one day be able to secure a prime time spot just as the highly successful movie *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (The Verses of Love) was able to break the dominance of Western

movies and other Indonesian movies among upper, middle and lower class audiences.

Notes

- 1 The Jakarta Charter was formulated on June 22, 1945. After a long and arduous debate, on August 18, 1945, one day after the Proclamation of Independence of the Republic of Indonesia, the Islamic leaders agreed to discard the wordings “with the obligation to adhere to the laws of *sharia* for all of the Islamic faith” after the words “Belief in God.” The outcome of these changes is the official framing of the five principles contained in the *Pancasila*: (1) Belief in the one and only God; (2) Just and civilized humanity; (3) The unity of Indonesia; (4) Democracy guided by the inner wisdom in the unanimity arising out of deliberations amongst representatives; and (5) Social justice for all people of Indonesia.
- 2 *Darul Islam* was based in West Java; TII was based in Central Java; and NII, the second generation of the DI TII, was based in South Sulawesi.
- 3 During the New Order era, various methods and means were used to belittle the Islamic parties. For example, it was difficult for other parties to obtain the much needed campaign funds as every single entrepreneur was “forced” to provide financial support to the then-ruling Golkar Party. Numerous private enterprises, government institutions as well as the State-owned enterprises went all out to provide the necessary resources to the Golkar Party, but never to the Islamic parties nor the other non-Golkar parties. The government made it compulsory for all civil service employees and employees of State-owned enterprises to become members of the Golkar Party. Furthermore, it was during the Suharto era that the concepts of “extreme left” and “extreme right” were crystallized. The extreme left refers to the former Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), while the extreme right refers to the Islamic fundamentalist movements, including those involved in the DI/TII movement that were crushed during the Suharto era. However, it was also during the Suharto era that rumors of a plan to re-establish the DI/TII began to spread, and the government targeted indirectly the Islamic parties to crack down on the movement. Hence, during the Suharto era, the Islamic parties were seemingly given the opportunity to develop but were in actuality constantly under suspicion and their movements highly restricted. During *Reformasi*, these restrictions were lifted and the Islamic parties became more open and unimpeded; however they were never able to win in any of the democratic elections that had been held after *Reformasi*.
- 4 Since 1968, the Nuzurul Quran, Isra Miraj and Maulid Nabi Muhammad SAW were held annually at the State Palace, but after 1990 these events were held at the government built Istiqlal Mosque in the central district of Jakarta. The finals of the National MTQ were usually held in turns at the provincial capitals.
- 5 Linggar Binangkit was formed on April 20, 1963, on the anniversary of the local daily *Siapa Tahunan* in Bandung, West Java, by Boestomi and R. Ading Affandi, two well-known artists from West Java. The all-female group revolutionized *qasidah* by bringing the guitar and keyboard into its music. The inclusion of modern instruments sparked several controversies, especially among Muslim scholars. The controversy pertained to the body movements that the 20 female dancers displayed in their performances, even though they were always dressed in the fully-covered outfits of the Muslim tradition. Their first appearance on TVRI caught the audience’s attention, and due to their popularity, they were given their own show that was aired once a month in the 1970s.

The music group Bimbo was established in 1967 by Sam, Acil, Jaka and Iin Parlina, the children of a senior journalist in Bandung, West Java. Initially their songs were influenced by Latin American music and other forms of popular music. Over time,

however, they would combine their own compositions with the poetic lyrics of the famous writer Taufik Ismail, and their songs were usually full of social and political criticism. It was not until 1974 that the group began to move away from the popular song genre and became involved with more religious compositions infused with the rhythms of *qasidah*. Bimbo also played an important role in promoting the modern version of *qasidah* through many of the programs that were broadcast by TVRI. Ebiat G. Ade was a highly popular singer in the 1970s, and his popularity remains until this day. His songs reflect on life, social criticism, and religion. Ebiat's education began at the *Pendidikan Guru Agama Negeri* (Muslim State School) in Bandung. He then spent his middle and high school years in Yogyakarta, where he studied at the Muhammadiyah Middle School and High School before continuing on to college at Gajah Mada University in Yogyakarta. His strong religious background was apparent in his songs, which were mainly religious in nature. His songs were poetic and attractive, almost ballad-like, with a blend of pop music. Ebiat G. Ade became a popular figure who was highly appreciated by audiences of TVRI and RRI.

- 6 In 2007, the music group Ungu became a sensation among the younger generation. The group is known for their ability to compose songs with Islamic themes in a contemporary pop setting. Other groups, who often perform on television are Gigi and Slank, and popular singer Iwan Fals. These performers also have several songs with Islamic themes that are arranged in pop or rock rhythms.
- 7 In 1998, President Suharto allowed five privately owned television stations—RCTI, SCTV, TPI, Indosiar and Anteve, to commence broadcasting. All of these stations are owned by family members or close relations of Suharto. After *Reformasi* the government issued the license to broadcast to five privately owned national television stations, bringing the total number of stations to ten. The ten existing stations have to compete for audience share and advertisers.
- 8 For example, the strongest Qur'an Reading Group is the BKMI (*Badan Kontak Majelis Taklim Indonesia*, The Communication Board of the Indonesian Taklim Council) that was established in 1981 and chaired by Hajjah Tuty Alawiyah. She claims to have branches of her organization in 400 districts across Indonesia with five million active members.
- 9 A live broadcast from one city to another is regularly done by many television stations. The purpose of these live broadcasts is not only to promote the station but also to promote certain programs that are produced and/or broadcast by a particular station. Music shows, variety shows, Ramadhan sermons and advice (*tausiah*), product launchings for the promotions of goods and services, as well as campaigns by the many political parties have become prime programs of the ten television stations in Indonesia. These prime programs are important in order to gain the much needed high ratings and shares so that stations are able to resell them to advertisers. A majority of these live broadcasts are performed at major cities that are included in the AC Nielsen calculations. In 2004, only six cities were regularly surveyed by AC Nielsen to collect the rating and share data. Two years later the number of cities increased to eight and today it has reached 10 cities. It is from these major cities that many of the off-air programs are broadcast.
- 10 Once these preachers appear on television, they tend to follow the life cycle of other television celebrities. Preachers who are charismatic and able to choreograph their performance well on television will usually be able to maintain their popularity for approximately two to four years, while those who lack the ability to manage their popularity will be quickly forgotten and replaced by newer and more interesting preachers.
- 11 In 2002, at the height of his popularity, his afternoon program commanded 32.5 percent of all television viewers during that time slot; during the month before the story about AA Gym contracting a polygamous marriage, the show attracted only 5.8 percent of viewers.
- 12 A ritualistic visit to the cemeteries is generally done by Javanese Muslims. The visit usually involves cleaning and placing flowers on the graves, chanting holy verses of the Qur'an (*dzikir*), reciting the *Surah Yassin* and sending prayers to departed loved ones. This ritual is specific to Indonesia and cannot be found anywhere else in the world. This

unique ritual is grounded in the belief that the souls of those who have departed leave their resting places during the month of Ramadhan.

- 13 Khoiri 2008: 17.
- 14 "Sufi Kota Mencari Tuhan" 2008: 23.
- 15 *Lorong Waktu*, *Kiamat Sudah Dekat* and *Para Pencari Tuhan* are religious soap operas produced by and starring Deddy Mizwar. The shows were considered to be the only successful trilogy capable of maintaining the top position during Ramadhan (2004–2008)
- 16 The live broadcast by SCTV reached a 27.3 percent audience share (Source: Report Q1 AGB Nielsen 2008). Research by AGB Nielsen Media Research, April 2008.
- 17 During a brief visit to the Gontor Darussalam Modern Islamic Boarding School in Jombang, East Java on September 11, 2008, I found a modern boarding school that teaches Indonesian, English, and Arabic as well as computers and modern management. This is very different from the traditional Islamic boarding schools. The trend to move into modern Islamic boarding schools has increased in various regions, especially in West Java and East Java.
- 18 Personal communication: Anis Baswedan, Rector of the Paramadina University, and the Director General of Social Guidance for Isla, September 9, 2008; Prof. Dr. H. Nasaruddin, M.A., Director General of Bimas Islam; and Prof. Dr. Sasa Djuarsa, Chairperson of the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission.
- 19 Hidayat (Komaruddin) 2008.
- 20 *Pikiran Rakyat*, Bandung, September 18, 2008, p. 25.
- 21 Pers. comm., Andi Ralie, a former CEO of RCTI, now a leader of the Muslim-based United Development Party (*Partai Persatuan Perkembangan*, PPP), September 5, 2008.
- 22 Transvestite-like is defined as the behavior of artists dressed in women's clothes who imitate the styles of women or transvestites to evoke humor. According to psychologist Ratih Andjayani Ibrahim, it "... is not only insulting to those who are physically effeminate, but will also create confusion in the minds of the children with regard to gender identity, as it does not conform to their understanding of the human physical form of men and women" (quoted in Hidayat [Nur] 2008: 78). Despite these protests authorized by reputed medical experts, the most popular talk show host during the period was Dorce Gamalana, a transexual singer, actress, presenter, and comedian.

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3 Multiple Islams, multiple modernities

Art cinema in between nationhood and everyday Islam in Bangladesh and Malaysia

Zakir Hossain Raju

The transnational media migrations into, out of, and within contemporary Asia prove that we can no more talk about one-way traffic of media from the West to Asia. Alongside conversations about mediated cultural exchange and globalization, the production and dissemination of “Islamic” as well as “Islamist” media have accelerated worldwide.¹ These cultural flows have occurred within what some have (problematically) termed “Muslim Asia.”² The influx of Western screen media into “Muslim Asia,” and the supposed resistance in the form of “national” art cinemas against such flows, marked the intersection of media, culture, and religion in Asia in the early 1990s. Scholars have argued that globalization of markets and media (including the Islamic/Islamist ones) transformed understandings of nation and culture and led the national media platforms to become sites for the intercourse of the local and the global. With/in such intercourse, this chapter attempts to understand the roles of the national film industries based in two major nation-spaces of so-called “Muslim” Asia. I examine the workings of the Bangladeshi and Malaysian art cinemas: how do these nationally defined but transnational/regional, cultural institutions interact with Islam and Muslim identity in nation-spaces where Muslims are the majority (above 80% in Bangladesh and around 60% in Malaysia)?

I begin my inquiry on art cinema, Islam and nationhood in “Muslim” Asia with two interconnected questions: what roles do Islam and Muslim identity play in shaping nationhood and defining social identities in two different societal frames of South and Southeast Asia? And how do the discourses of art cinema participate with/in the identity debates in these two Asian nations? In order to answer these questions I focus on the works of some renowned film authors from both national contexts. I dissect the films of Tanvir Mokammel and Morshedul Islam from Bangladesh and the films of U-Wei Hajisaari and Yasmin Ahmad of Malaysia; all of these films received national and international awards during the 1990s and 2000s. In this way my study proposes to be an inter-Asia study: an attempt to compare analyses on South and Southeast Asian cinematic practices in a transnational frame.

Post-colonial nation formations: the experiences of Malaysia and Bangladesh

At the outset, I do understand that in the case of Bangladesh and Malaysia, the nationalist imagination, state formation, and nation-building have taken very different routes. When developing my analyses, I position the two cinemas within the different cultural geographies and historical contexts of these post-colonial Asian nations. I also recognize that the nation-state formation of the two Asian nations are not constant or naturally given: they are always in the making (Anderson 2006; Dissanayake 1994). The disjunctive nature of this process has been stated clearly by Dissanayake: “We have nations without states and states without nations” (1994: x).

The Malaysian nation is truly an “imagined community” in the sense described by Benedict Anderson (2006: 14). The imagining of this nation happened almost in an elitist manner. The birthing of this nation did not pass through bloody, populist anti-colonial struggles. Rather, it was born in 1957 with no bloodshed, only through negotiations between the British and the pro-British Western-educated leaders of major races of West Malaysia in the early-to-mid 1950s amid the threats of communist insurgencies. Similarly, through a series of meetings and talks, the geographical area and population of the nation-state was enlarged when Singapore and the states of Sabah and Sarawak (now called East Malaysia) were appended to West Malaysia in 1963, though Singapore left the arrangement in 1965. Such a pre-planned, if not painless and engineered birth of “Malaysia,” which mainly took place in meetings in London, clearly define this nation-state as an “artificial construct” (Spivak 1990: 39). Artificiality in the construction of the Malaysian nation-state becomes visible when one considers the racial, ethnic, and religious formations underlying this nationhood. The CIA world factbook finds there are 50.4% Malay, 23.7% Chinese, 11% indigenous groups, 7.1% Indians and 7.8% other ethnicities with many sub-groups within each major racial community (Balraj 2008: 301). While “virtually” all Malays are Muslims, almost all Chinese and Indians are non-Muslims: Buddhists, Christians and Hindus (Andaya and Andaya 2001: 4–6). However, the Department of Statistics of the Malaysian Government has recorded the three main racial communities in 2002 as 65% Malay, 26% Chinese, and 7.7% Indian, respectively; it also claims that there are 60% Muslims, 19% Buddhists, 9% Christians, 6% Hindus and 6% other religions (Balraj 2003: 176). Alongside this ever-changing and contested mosaic, the race riots of May 1969 and, subsequently, the State’s pro-Malay policies in engineering a harmonious (read pro-Malay) nation, all point to the fact that as a nation Malaysia is a cultural artifact.

The construction of nationhood and the project of nation-building took a bluntly pro-Malay turn after the 1969 tragedy. The race riots of May 1969 in which the Malays supposedly attacked and killed a huge number of Chinese Malaysians is certainly the most decisive incident to reshape the history and nationhood of post-colonial Malaysia. The atrocities of the race riot coupled with the perceived idea of the “genetic” backwardness of Malays, encouraged the State to initiate the National

Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971 (Loo 2003: 183). The NEP extended more privileges to the Malays or *bumiputeras* and ensured that they gain better positions in business, academia and politics in Malaysia. Tope (2001: 3–4) states, “it also meant that the other races were required to sacrifice.” Filmmaker Amir Muhammad ridiculed the outcome of the NEP during the 1970s to 1990s: “Some political leaders seemed more interested in establishing solidarity with Malay South Africans rather than non-Malay Malaysians” (Muhammad 1998: 105). This pro-*bumiputera*/Malay policy of the Malaysian nation is still in place. The highly segmented racial situation in Malaysia led the Indian-Malaysian politician Kayveas (who himself is part of the coalition in power, *Barisan Nasional*) to ask: “I go to London and I am a Malaysian; I go to China and I’m a Malaysian . . . But why is it when I come back to Malaysia, I am an Indian?” (Khoo and Tan 2007: 34).

Such contests among various races and religious communities in Malaysia requires that one takes the Malaysian nation as “a cultural space . . . with its transgressive boundaries and its ‘interruptive’ interiority” (Bhabha 1990a: 5). For these nations (and most nations in the world) that combine many races and ethnic groups, nations as unified entities cannot exist. Rather, there are hybrid communities that cannot be named easily or in positive terms (Bhabha 1990b: 291–322). Thus, Malaysian cinema scholar Gaik Cheng Khoo, drawing on Bhabha’s concept of “DissemiNation,” has renamed the Malaysian nation “Malay/sia” (2006: 56–82).

Similarly, the identity formation of Bengali-Muslims was never a linear process that is visible in the colonial and postcolonial trajectory of Bangladesh. The emergent middle-class Bengali Muslims in the early twentieth century, who were dependent on agriculture for their livelihood, indigenized Islam in their everyday lives in rural East Bengal. The Arab-looking, Urdu-speaking elite Muslims felt that the Bengali-speaking rural Muslims were not suitable as their countrymen, though they wanted to accommodate them under the umbrella of pan-Indian Muslim identity. Middle-class Bengali Muslims, while defining a modern cultural identity of/for Bengali Muslims, had to simultaneously oppose two hegemonic forces: Bengali-Hindu cultural modernity and pro-Arab pan-Indian Muslim identity. In this struggle, they utilized their strong affinity with their cultural roots, that is Bengali-ness, visibly expressed through Bengali language as well as with their religious affiliation of indigenized Islam. In this way, a category called “Bengali Muslim” identity entered the colonial-Indian public sphere in the early decades of the twentieth century.

However, for Bengali Muslims, as sociologist Tazeen M. Murshid (1997: 10) states, “the tradition of distinguishing between a Bengali and a Muslim provided ground for . . . the problems of self-perception.” The two conflicting identity discourses of Muslim-ness and Bengali-ness continued to be incompatible towards forming a viable identity for Bengali Muslims in different historical junctures of the twentieth century. In the search for a modern identity among Bengali Muslims, middle-class Bengali Muslims then used the Bengali/Muslim dichotomy differently in different times. The Muslim part inherent in Bengali Muslim identity served as constituent to the Pakistan State in 1947 when East Bengal transformed

to “East Pakistan.” In 1971, the Bengali part of Bengali Muslim identity acted as the driving force for establishing a secular, independent State called Bangladesh through a bloody liberation war against the pro-Islam Pakistani military junta.

In this process of nation-state formation in Malaysia and Bangladesh one can identify some common forces at work. The indigenization of Islam and continuous transformations of local cultural practices (e.g., “Bangaliana” among Bengali Muslims and “adat” among Malay Muslims both of which accommodate somewhat un-Islamic elements in them), and the identification as post-colonial States, were crucial in constructing specific kinds of national identities in Malaysia and in Bangladesh. While colonialism played important but different roles in the construction of nationhood for Bangladeshis and Malaysians, Muslims with different ethnic/cultural orientations (Bengalis in Bangladesh and Malays in Malaysia) became the dominant group in both the post-colonial nation-spaces and they seized the notion of a modern national identity. For example, Bengali-Muslims normalized Bangladeshi identity amid protests and resistance in various forms from non-Muslim Bangladeshis (e.g. the Hindu- and Christian-Bengalis as well as the indigenous hill peoples). Similarly, Malay-Muslims normalized Malaysian-ness on the national and global stage against non-Muslim Malaysians (e.g. the Chinese, Indians, and a range of indigenous Malaysians). Under these circumstances, I ask in this essay how the Bengali-Muslim and Malay-Muslim middle classes used art cinema discourses to propagate a certain type of national modernity and a particular notion of cultural identity (that is, Bengaliness or Malayness). In the process I demonstrate why and how Islam and Muslim identity have been debated and negotiated in and through the nation-state formations in these two contexts. In the following sections I take a look at how these art cinemas tackled issues of nation and identity formation, particularly in the discourse and representation of Islam in everyday life.

Bangladeshi art cinema: fighting Islamism on screen

The art cinema discourse in Bangladesh during the 1980s to the present day rigorously participated in identity debates among Bengali Muslims. This discourse locates Islam as an oppositional and conservative force against the modern secular Bengali identity. The major tendency in this cinematic discourse is then to narrow down Islam as Islamism only and then to construct a dichotomy between Bengali culture and Islamist forces. Here, by Islamism, I mean a traditionalist, Islamic movement that is “opposed to ‘real’ modernity or [it] is only partially modern as it disregards Enlightenment values and rationality” (Ahmad 2008: 143). Interestingly, the art cinema as it developed in Bangladesh as well as other Asian contexts, has drawn on certain aestheticist-realist idioms and thus appropriated Enlightenment values quite inherently. This discourse is avowedly modern. This cinema, by recording and representing the cultural-nationalist essence of Bangladesh using the methods of Euro-American cinematic narration, addresses the art-house audiences and critics in the West (the “global” audience) and the westernized middle-class Bengali Muslims in Bangladesh. In this way, this discourse is increasingly positioning itself as a part of global modernity.

Let me take a close look at the texts of two renowned art cinema filmmakers from Bangladesh to substantiate how the modernity – Islamism dichotomy is created on screen. *Agami* (*Towards*, 1984) by Morshedul Islam and *Hulyia* (*Wanted*, 1984) by Tanvir Mokammel, two short features on the failed expectations of the 1971 liberation war, started what has been termed as the short film movement in Bangladesh during the 1980s. The cultural-modernist leaders of this film movement, including Islam and Mokammel, received their film education by watching European, American, as well as Indian film classics. Using the Western (-derived) cinematic textual norms that have been made standard around the world, the films of Islam and Mokammel advocated for Bengali identity as the identity for Bangladeshis. The films they and their colleagues at the Bangladesh Short Film Forum made in the late 1980s and 1990s were thus severely criticized by the pro-Islam movement of the post-colonial state in Bangladesh.

Morshedul Islam's *The Rain* (*Bristi*, 1999) can be read as a key text to understand the positioning of Islam as Islamism by the cultural-modernists in contemporary Bangladesh. Based on a short story by Alauddin Al Azad written in 1950s Dhaka, this film symbolizes the conflict between Islamism and Bengali cultural modernity in the lives of Bengali Muslims in the late twentieth century. The story centers around a reverent old Muslim man, his young bride, and his adopted "son" in rural Bangladesh. The old man named *Hajishaheb* (since he performed the Hajj) has considerable holdings of land. His religious and economic achievements have made him powerful in the village. Therefore, nobody raises questions when he marries for the fourth time and brings home a young bride. However a clandestine love affair develops between the young bride and *Hajishaheb*'s adopted son, a young man who, like his father, also follows Islamic teachings. The son wears a beard, Muslim cap and long *punjabi* with pyjamas, which are understood as Islamist attire in Bangladesh. There is a drought in the village and *Hajishaheb* concludes that Batashi, a poor divorced woman who had recently become pregnant, is responsible for the long-lasting drought in the area. He puts forth the verdict that Batashi should be stoned to death for her extra-marital relationship. When the village meeting adjourns, the rain comes and *Hajishaheb* takes it as Allah's quick appraisal. He returns home happily and finds his young bride happily taking a shower under the rain. He does not realize that she has just had a sexual encounter with her lover, the adopted son of *Hajishaheb*, a message the viewers receive through parallel editing during the scene in the village court. While such a story of complexities in human relationships, especially between a married couple, is a classic element in many art films,³ the two males in this film have clearly been portrayed as Islamists. As such, the film became a critique of the state-sponsored Islamicization process in Bangladesh in the 1980s and 1990s.

In 2009, a decade after *The Rain*, Morshedul made *Priyotomeshu* (*To My Dearest*). While the two films are quite different in setting (the latter is based in an urban middle class household in Dhaka), both films agitate against a Muslim patriarchy that subordinates women. *To My Dearest*, based on a novel of the same title by the well-known author Humayun Ahmed, constructs the "normal" life of Pushpo, a young housewife who (supposedly) gets raped by her husband's friend.

Revolting against the norm of suppressing the rape in a Muslim patriarchy where women's chastity is seen as of supreme importance, Pushpo continues to pursue justice against the rapist despite the noncooperation of her own family in this difficult journey.

Tanvir Mokammel's films, similar to films by Morshedul Islam, also construct a conflict between Islam as Islamism against the notion of Bengali cultural modernity. Using different plots and narrative strategies, Mokammel's films portray Islamic forces only as Islamist in rural Bangladesh. Mokammel's *Modhumati, the Name of a River* (*Modhumati*, 1995) reveals this conflict in the form of a familial conflict between a conservative Islamic father and his modernist son. *In the Bank of Chitra* (*Chitra Nadir Pare*, 1999) portrays the migration of bitterly disillusioned Bengali Hindus of East Pakistan to West Bengal in India in the 1960s amid the increasing Islamicization attempts of the Pakistan state.

Mokammel's *A Tree without Roots* (*Lal Shalu*, 2001) is based on the highly-respected Bengali novel of the same name by Syed Waliullah. This novel was written in the late 1940s when East Bengal turned into East Pakistan. This film depicts the rise and fall of Majid, a hypocritical *Mullah* (Islamic priest) who creates a false *mazar* (shrine) of an imagined *pir* (Muslim saint) in order to collect money and gifts from the villagers. Jamila, his second wife, a playful rural girl, rejects his authority imposed in the name of Islamic wisdom. Her rebellious acts make Majid unsettled. He displays his vulnerability and powerlessness, which are normally covered up by his Islamic clout among ordinary rural Muslims. Mokammel uses many symbols in *A Tree Without Roots* that portray Islamic practices as traditional and Islamist. For example, we see the *shalu*, the red coverings on the top of the false burial site of the so-called *pir* in many shots (including some close shots). Like *The Rain*, we also see the marriage between an elderly male Islamic practitioner (Majid) and a young playful woman (Jamila) unwilling to receive Islamic pedagogy. As in *The Rain*, the Islamic court at the village level (for punishing unruly villagers) is also present in *A Tree without Roots*. While Majid is portrayed here essentially as an Islamist genie, the villagers seem to be like infants who are easily enticed by Majid using the clout of Islam. Only Jamila is able to keep herself at bay from the all-out influence of Islamic orthodoxy as preached by Majid.

The above texts by art cinema filmmakers in Bangladesh need to be read alongside a range of other cultural texts as produced by and circulated among the modernist middle class during the middle to late twentieth century. The films of Morshedul Islam and Tanvir Mokammel are intertextually connected with the modernist literary productions of Bengali Muslims. Both filmmakers rely on literary fiction as their narrative source. Moreover, they deliberately utilize the well-known modernist fictions of the 1940s and 1950s, a period when Bengali Muslims started defining their cultural modernity through various art and cultural forms.⁴ The major representational tendencies of Bangladeshi art cinema discourse through the works of these two major filmmakers prove that middle class Bengali Muslims have utilized art cinema to project Islam as an orthodoxy that opposes the "modern" identity of Bengali Muslims. This matches the view of the majority

of Islamic scholars who have identified Islamism broadly as a “revolt against modernity” (Ahmad 2008: 142–3). Cultural-modernist art cinema authors including Morshedul Islam and Tanvir Mokammel believe in this kind of straightforward separation between the Muslim and Bengali identities of Bengali Muslims. They present Islam only as Islamic fundamentalism. The character of an Islamist man who wears a beard and Islamic dress (e.g., long *punjabi* and pyjamas with cap), and who cheats the ordinary villagers in the name of Islam, is omnipresent in the films of Morshedul Islam and Tanvir Mokammel. Interestingly, the forces that are empowered to fight against Islamists in these art cinema films are no other than young subaltern females! While women are largely seen as the silent and subservient section of Bangladesh society, they have repeatedly been shown in strong positions against Islamists in Bangladesh art cinema.⁵ The trend began in the 1960s with *The River and Woman* (1964) and continued after the independence of Bangladesh. *Nayan Moni* (1975) and *The Ominous House* (1979)—two of the most well-known art cinema films, both based on well-known literary works of the 1960s—mythologized the struggle of strong subaltern women against hypocritical Islamists. While Morshedul and Tanvir follow this trend of constructing Islamism against Bengali modernity, they emphasize the playfulness and purity of the females who compete against Islamist patriarchy. Hajishaheb’s young bride (*The Rain*) and Jamila (*A Tree without Roots*) are both portrayed as youthful virgin women who wish to live their lives fulfilling their own desires. The decree of the Muslim patriarchy that the chastity of a woman’s body is the most important element of femininity has been questioned in both *The Rain* and *To My Dearest* through the physical and mental journey experienced by both Hajishaheb’s bride and Pushpo. The conflict between Islamism and women under patriarchy is not a straightforward one. In *To My Dearest*, for example, we see Pushpo repeatedly bathing after the rape as she feels dirty constantly. But she ultimately decides to come out against the rape incident.

Malaysian art cinema: a cinema of everyday Islam

Though the Malay-language cinema has been normalized as Malaysian national cinema over the years (Khoo 2006: 102–3), this cinema is and always was a hybrid cultural institution. Hamzah Hussain rightly comments, “the Malaysian film industry was founded on Chinese money, Indian imagination and Malay labour” (cited in Van Der Heide 2002: 105). However, the popular film industry almost never portrayed issues related to the minority or the marginalized in Malaysia (e.g. the non-Malay, non-Muslim population). The situation started to change in the early 1990s when a wave of new Malaysian art cinema came into being. This discourse of art cinema is linked with changes in the Malaysian mediascape and its relationship to globalization and changing markets. The Malaysian media became globalized in the 1990s through the state-sponsored Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), privatization of local television, and penetration of transnational satellite television channels. While television media became more commercialized in the 2000s, the MSC has been seen as an important part of Mahathir’s

“Vision 2020.” Some have argued that the MSC and Vision 2020 have renegotiated a multi-racial identity for Malaysia (Saloma 2005).

Under these circumstances, a new wave of Malay art cinema was initiated by Hajisaari’s *Kaki Bakar* (*The Arsonist*), the first Malaysian film screened in the prestigious Cannes film festival in 1995. In this period, with the arrival of a new generation of Western-educated Malay Muslim filmmakers including U-Wei Hajisaari, Mansur Puteh, Anuar Nor Arai, and Shuahaimi Baba, the Malaysian film industry produced art films that tackled issues hitherto not represented on cinema screens in Malaysia. These filmmakers worked towards the revival of a Malay-language “national” film industry through an art cinema discourse. Subsequently, Teck Tan, a Chinese filmmaker and Yasmin Ahmad, a Malay filmmaker, joined this trend of Malaysian art cinema. Teck Tan’s *Spinning Top* (2000) and Yasmin Ahmad’s *Slit-eyed* (*Sepet*, 2004) deal with inter-racial love affairs between Chinese and Malay people in contemporary Malaysia.

Similar to the Bengali Muslim filmmakers Tanvir Mokammel and Morshedul Islam in Bangladesh, Malaysian Malay-Muslim art cinema filmmakers are urban, Western-educated individuals with a modernist worldview. However, when making films, they mostly portray village life utilizing a semi-neorealist cinematic style. Both U-Wei and Yasmin, whose films I will analyze in this chapter, portray rural or semi-rural lifestyles of Malay Muslim families. U-Wei portrays the lives of Malay Muslims living on the margins of Malaysian society. For example, in *Kaki Bakar* (*The Arsonist*, 1994) he follows the itinerary of Kangkong, a Javanese Malay. In *Jogho* (*The Champion*, 1998) U-Wei studies the life of Mamat, a Malay Muslim who migrated from Kelantan to Patani in Southern Thailand. While Yasmin portrays the Malay Muslim family of teenage girl Orked in both *Sepet* (2004) and *Mukhsin* (2006), she sets up the family in a small town. In other words, none of these two major art cinema filmmakers deeply portrays the lives of the NEP-backed “new Malay” or the newly wealthy Malay middle class based in big cities of contemporary Malaysia. It may be said that these filmmakers are dealing with populations who are outside of or hard-to-reach for NEP programs. Zawawi Ibrahim, drawing on Wimal Dissanayake (1994), calls the films of U-Wei the “counter-narrations of the nation” (2003: 147). In the same vein, Yasmin’s films also narrate the Malaysian nation in/through a different light, and therefore may also be seen as part of the counter-discourse to Malaysian state-nationalism.

When looking at the films of U-Wei and Yasmin, it is notable how easily and comfortably Islamic practices in the everyday lives of Malay Muslims have been portrayed in these films. In *Jogho*, *Kaki Bakar* and *Mukhsin*, we see rituals of prayers in a group within the family household often headed by the male/husband. In *Kaki Bakar*, we repeatedly see Kangkong’s children reciting the Qur’an at home in the evenings. When Kangkong’s wife requests him to send their son Kusuma to school, Kangkong replies that learning to say prayers will be enough for Kusuma and he already knows how to do that. In *Jogho*, Mamat sends his son Jusuh to a *madrasa* (Islamic boarding school) in Kelantan, but not to a Westernized “national” school. When his brother Lazim is killed, Mamat writes “Allah” in Arabic on the forehead of the dead Lazim using blood (this violent event is also

not dramatized, but is portrayed in a casual manner). Lazim, who lived a dangerous life by taking bets on bullfights in southern Thailand, is shown as a soft-spoken, gentle Malay Muslim until he is killed. After his death, we are offered the elaborate rituals of his Islamic funeral including the placing of his shrouded body in the grave.

The everydayness in representing Islam and the Islamic rituals portrayed in the art films of Malaysia surprised me. Although the majority of Bengali Muslims profess the faith of Islam, they do not necessarily follow its rules and practices strictly in their everyday lives. In the Bangladeshi art films discussed above, Islam is portrayed as Islamism only: as a specialized discourse that is to be fully practiced by a small group of *madrasa*-trained Islamic activists. Moreover, these Islamists or *mullahs* are quite often seen (and shown) as lazy and deceptive, and above all, as anti-modern. In the films of T. Mokammel and M. Islam discussed above, the *mullahs* represent evil forces, often in collaboration with the political/administrative power structure in Bangladeshi villages. Though we see two village courts in *Kaki Bakar*, the village courts do not comprise a specialist role as is the case for the village courts in *A Tree without Roots* and *The Rain*. In other words, Islam as a religious doctrine receives hospitable treatment from Malaysian filmmakers while the Bangladeshi filmmakers oppose Islam's inclusion in everyday lives on the ground that it is an orthodoxy that restricts Bengali Muslims from their journey to cultural modernity.

Islam and art cinema in Bangladesh and Malaysia: multiple Islams, multiple modernities

With these differences in the depiction of Islam in Bangladeshi and Malaysian art cinemas in mind, I connect the discourses of Islam and art cinema to the construction of nation and modernity in Bangladesh and Malaysia in the final part of this chapter. For example, in Bangladesh, Islam and Muslim identity are considered “non-modern” discourses that are incompatible with the imaginations of a cultural modernity as envisaged by middle class Bengali Muslims. It is similar to the Indian context where

[C]aste and community (or religious identity) are not privileged sites for the representation or staging of modernity and nationhood. . . . The pre-modern or non-modern as well as the anti-national, is often staged *as* caste and community.

(Niranjana 2000: 139; emphasis in original)

For example, when Islamic rituals are shown in Bangladeshi art films, these usually denote some anti-modern activities. Islam is represented mostly to condemn it, not to demonstrate its everyday role in the lives of ordinary Bengali Muslims. Bangladeshi art cinema, to a large extent, locates Islam as Islamism only—as an alien culture, a foreign religion that entered Bangladesh through political-military aggression. Believing in an authentic and anti-colonial but

modern version of Bengali culture, the cultural-nationalists complain that Islam poses certain threats to the development and dissemination of a preferred notion of Bengali-ness. In other words, most art cinema films are committed to a definitive national-cultural modernity, a modernity that normalizes the Bengali identity as modern and secular, and locates the Muslim identity only as a religious, non-modern category that cannot be placed as/within everyday lives of Bengali Muslims. The dominant thrust of Bangladeshi art cinema is then to represent Islamic practices as out of date and stereotypical rituals performed by Islamists.

I have demonstrated representational tendencies as visible in some well-known films of Morshedul Islam and Tanvir Mokammel, two major art cinema authors in contemporary Bangladesh. These two filmmakers utilized the discourse of art cinema to form a contrast between Islam and Bengali culture. Their films, produced and circulated during the 1990s and 2000s and targeted to both national and global viewership, repeatedly show Islam as a singular and monolithic orthodoxy. These films theatricalize and exoticize Islamic practices as something ancient in/for contemporary Bangladesh, a rapidly modernizing and commercializing nation-state in the face of globalization.

This tendency of locating Islam as non-modern began with the absorption of a sense of modernity among Bengali Muslims in colonial Bengal. The proponents of a pro-British, anti-Bengali and anti-Hindu version of Muslim identity in colonial Bengal promoted the incompatibility of Bengali-ness and Muslim-ness and enforced pan-Indian Islamic brotherhood upon Bengali Muslims. The upper-class, non-Bengali and Urdu-speaking Muslim leaders of Calcutta dominated this process of identity formation of Bengali Muslims in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Geo-ethnic and cultural identity of Bengali Muslims as Bengali-ness became negligible in this process, especially in a bid to get rid of the hegemonic umbrella of Bengali-Hindu identity.

However, this is not the case in Malaysia as Malay Muslims went through different colonial and post-colonial predicaments. Therefore, Islam and Islamic communities in Malaysia are not bulked together as non- or pre-modern. Rather, Islam is seen as a part of the modernization process and is also deeply connected with the construction of a Malay Muslim modernity. Scholar Al-Attas states:

[T]he introduction of Islam to the Malay peninsula marked a crucial stage in the modernisation of the Malays. . . . By the infusion of new and positive universal values into the Malay community, the faith may be said to have given content or substance to the definition of "Malayness."

(cited in Mutalib 1993: 19)

In the case of Malaysian art films, Islam is shown as attached to everyday life practices; it is not something special. The attachment of Islam to everyday lives of Malay Muslims is shown in a spontaneous manner. This spontaneity and everydayness in representing and practising Islam in Malaysian art cinema is related to the place of Islam in the conception of Malay Muslim modernity. For Malay

Muslims, Islam is part of their ethnic identity, or as Shamsul A. B. (2004: 135) puts it, “since the colonial period an ‘ethnic identifier’ for the Malays.” Joel S. Kahn (2003: 157) also supports this view: “Islam has nonetheless always been a major factor distinguishing Malays from non-Malays.”

However, in contemporary Malaysia where the films of U-Wei and Yasmin were made, Islam is not only a marker between Malays and non-Malays but it has also been used to demarcate one group of Malay-Muslims from another. Islam has been included in envisioning different notions of Malay-Muslim modernity. Hooker (2004: 151–2) notes that in late 1996 and early 1997, both prime minister Dr. Mahathir and deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim stressed through various statements that Islam as a religion supports modernization. Hooker (*ibid.*: 157) draws upon Shamsul A.B.’s research to show that the Mahathir government’s Vision 2020 framework actually incorporated the position by moderate Muslim groups that “spiritual and moral foundations” are required for modernization. As a means to challenge the PAS (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party) version of Islam, Mahathir and Anwar advocated for a moderate Islam. They eventually demonstrated that there are at least two versions of Islam in Malaysia, moderate and radical/extremist, and that these have a relationship of contestation (Hooker 2004: 165). Interestingly, both the UMNO (United Malays National Organization) and PAS versions of Islam consider Islam as part of Malay modernity, if not as a component of Malaysian national modernity.

Hooker also argues that various models of Muslim modernity may be identified in Malaysia and elsewhere:

[T]he leading figures in PAS provide examples of a new blend of ‘traditional’ Islamic values with a high use of modern communication technology. . . . Their behaviour clearly indicates that Dr. Mahathir’s concept of modernity is not the only one operating in Malaysia. Muslim teachers and leaders in other parts of the world have also been showing that there are a variety of ways of being “modern.”

(2004: 165)

Therefore, the Malay Muslim modernity, or modernities, are quite ambivalent. Joel Kahn notes that the relationship between Islam and Westernization/modernization has been tempered by “a concern with the possible loss of cultural, moral and spiritual values among most ‘ethnic’ Malays” (2003: 153).

On a final note, I would like to reiterate that identities like “Bengaliness,” “Malayness,” “Bengali-Muslimness,” and “Malay-Muslimness” have been constructed, challenged, and redefined in Malaysia and Bangladesh from the 1970s onwards. There were (and are) always overlaps and fissures and these identities change over time. Historian Rafiuddin Ahmed finds that “a Bengali Muslim may have seen himself primarily as a ‘Muslim’ the other day, as a ‘Bengali’ yesterday, and a ‘Bengali Muslim’ today” (Ahmed 2001: 3–4).

Similarly, in the case of Malay identity, Shamsul A.B. demonstrates that the category of “Malay” is quite flexible. Illustrating how UMNO in the late 1980s

opened itself to non-Muslim *bumiputera* so that the UMNO-led BN (Barisan Nasional/National Front) could gain power in Sabah, he comments:

“Malayness” as defined by the Malay Nationalist movement in the 1920s and 1930s and implemented and redefined by UMNO, had to be reformulated in Sabah once again . . . It also shows that . . . the concept [of “Malayness”] can easily shift meaning, adapting itself time and again to new situations and making clear-cut statements impossible or incredible.

(Shamsul A.B. 2004: 147)

In both cases, the contemporary art cinemas in Bangladesh and Malaysia are constantly searching for the cultural boundaries and meanings lurking underneath being a Bengali Muslim or a Malay Muslim. The ambivalence in locating such boundaries of Malay identity is echoed by U-Wei Hajisaari when he states:

So I am trying to find what is a Malay. To me questions are more important than answers. I cannot give the answers. . . . As long as I can raise questions, that’s very good for me—I’ll always be searching.

(cited in Zawawi Ibrahim 2003: 153)

Characters like Majid (*A Tree without Roots*) or Mamat (*Jogho*) in Malaysian and Bangladeshi art cinema films are then cultural signifiers for the ongoing interrogation and contestation in the process of identity construction for Bengali Muslims and Malay Muslims in today’s transnational world order.

Conclusion: art cinema, Islam and identity formation in Bangladesh and Malaysia

This chapter is an effort in deconstructing how Bangladeshi and Malaysian art cinemas—the national-cultural institutions developed in the post-colonial nation-spaces in Asia and addressed to a global audience—represent and interact with the notions of Islam. Looking at the films of some renowned film-authors I examined how these filmmakers project a Bengali or Malay version of Islam and Muslim identity on the film screens while dealing with the pressures of the nation-state and the forces of cultural globalization in today’s “Muslim” Asia.

I find that both Bangladeshi and Malaysian art cinema filmmakers belonging within the cultural-nationalist middle class of Bengali Muslims and Malay Muslims, respectively, may be seen also as a part of a group that Niranjana identifies in contemporary India as the “modern citizen,” who “have laid hegemonic claim to the nation” (2000: 139). Interestingly, for these modern citizens, Islam poses different connotations with different possibilities. In Bangladesh, the idea of the national-modern is under serious challenge against the assertion of Islamist identities. Most of these films represent Islam as anti-modern and arcane using the identity question of/for Bengali Muslims as the basis.

For Malay Muslims in Malaysia, Islam is seen not as a threat to their national modernity, but is rather an integral tool in constructing modern nationhood and Malay identity. Therefore, one cannot but agree with Barendregt (2006) who, drawing on Hefner (1998), argues that “there is not one Islam, but rather a multiplicity of incarnations, based on varying interpretations of it. . . . Studies of Islam have not always reflected this diversity. Islamic scholars still tend to direct . . . less attention to the attitudes and value orientations of the Islamic public” (2006: 185). I also aspire to point to the multiplicity of Islam and its publics. This study of Islam and art cinemas in Bangladesh and Malaysia thus re-establishes the fact that we can never talk about a “Muslim Asia,” as this umbrella term always masks the inherent tensions and pluralities in Muslim societies of Asia.

Notes

- 1 Islamic media encompasses the production, circulation, and consumption of media in which Islam is prominent. Islamist media refers to the more orthodox and conservative voices within Islamic media.
- 2 The term “Muslim Asia” may innocently refer to the large number of Muslims who are citizens of nation-states in Asia. But the term essentializes both Muslims and Asia and uncritically suggests an organized and coordinated effort by all Muslims in Asia to be part of a transnational pan-Asian Islamic network.
- 3 The Italian Art Cinema and French New Wave films of the 1960s come to mind here.
- 4 See Raju (forthcoming) for details on the cultural movements of the 1950s and 1960s in shaping Bengali Muslim identity.
- 5 Leadership positions held by women at both the government and opposition levels in Bangladesh since 1991 has not changed this scenario.

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4 Upgraded piety and pleasure

The new middle class and Islam in Indonesian popular culture

Ariel Heryanto

The conspicuous presence of what can be called “pop Islam” or “Islamic chic” in the last two or three decades has been a further blow to the already discredited modernist and liberalist theories. The onward march of modernization has not pushed religions to the margin of social life, or to near to extinction. Modernity does not necessarily imply or require secularization. Religions have done more than simply survived well in many parts of the modernized world (Turner 2006, 2007), as attested to by contemporary Islam. The world has witnessed the remarkable growth of the so-called new religious movements. “Unlike the established religions, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, which spread . . . in an ad hoc fashion, the founders of new religious movements . . . adopted a world focus from the outset” (Smith 2008: 3). Contemporary Muslims’ political activities are not restricted to selected segments of trans-national networks such as revived fundamentalism and violence-oriented militancy. Islam has presented itself in many parts of the globe of late as a new set of variants of contemporary lifestyles, especially among youth. A failure to take religions and religious movements seriously for critical analysis has not only marred modernists. Ironically, the same failure can be found among their most radical critics, namely post-modernists, post-structuralists, and those in cultural studies. Until very recently, there has been a general tendency among all of the latter to avoid or dismiss religious-based movements and discourses. This is the case despite the claims they have made to privilege and celebrate the West’s others as well as the disadvantaged, subaltern, or minorities (with special reference to Asian studies, see Clammer 2000 and Stange 1991).

Melanie Wright (2007:11) notes that a serious interest “in scholarship predicated on the religion-film interface” has not been observable until the last decade or so. And this scholarship has mainly looked at American films and Christianity. The rapid development of Islamic popular cultures and lifestyles has opened up new insights and debates among members of Muslim communities as well as secular analysts. Has religious piety succumbed to and been fundamentally corrupted by the global desire for consumerist indulgence and worldly pleasures that used to be avoided if not condemned by many monotheistic religions, including Islam? Or does the new phenomenon merely signal “Islamization,” and more particularly success in winning the hearts and minds of a significantly broader range of young people who are otherwise enticed by Western, and

especially American, pop cultures? As expected, there is a wide range of opposing answers to these questions. With specific reference to the case of Indonesia, which is the focus of this chapter, observers were initially critical of the trends towards commercialization of Muslim life and commodification of Muslim religious symbols (Henschkel 1994; Murray 1991). More than a few Muslim intellectuals in Indonesia have continued to express cynicism or concern (Ivvaty 2005; *Kompas* 2008b; Muzakki 2007; Nazaruddin 2008; Nu'ad 2008; Ramadhan 2003; Suryakusuma 2008; *Tempo* 2007; Widodo 2008). Of late, observers have tended to be more ambivalent about the issue, acknowledging the diverse motivations, meanings, and intentions involved in what may appear to be a common pattern of consumerist passion and the pleasure of displaying both wealth and piety among contemporary urban-based young and educated Muslims in Indonesia (see Fealy 2008; Jones 2007; Lukens-Bull 2007; Nilan 2006; Smith-Hefner 2007).

Building on my initial reaction to the phenomenon back in the late 1990s (Heryanto 1999), I tend to see the current and rapid growth of Islamic pop cultures largely as an extension of the success of Islamic politics in post-authoritarian Indonesia. To appreciate this proposed interpretation, one needs to consider the broader context. Bryan Turner articulates succinctly the general observation:

In sociological terms, 20th-century political Islam is a product of the social frustrations of those social strata (unpaid civil servants, overworked teachers, underemployed engineers and marginalized college teachers) whose interests have not been well served by either the secular nationalism of Nasser, Muhammad Reza Shah, Suharto or Saddam Hussein, or the neo-liberal 'open-door' policies of Anwar Saddat or Chadli Benjedid in Algeria . . . Islamism is a product of a religious crisis of authority, the failures of authoritarian nationalist governments, and the socio-economic divisions that have been exacerbated by neo-liberal globalization.

(Turner 2006: 441)

I contend that in Indonesia in the first decade of the twenty-first century, political Islam has enjoyed an unprecedented secure position of power, despite its continually being prone to internal frictions. In part this is attributable to the religion's resilience over many decades of suffering from political repression, economic exclusion, and cultural humiliation. In part this happened by default, in the absence of Indonesia's left (following the massacres in 1965–66 and State-sponsored terrorism in the ensuing decades) and as a result of the bankruptcy of the Western-backed, ultra-rightist military rule of the New Order (1966–98) in the wake of the ending of the Cold War. Admittedly, the contemporary success of political Islam has not been achieved without problems. The fruits of this triumph are not well distributed among fellow believers. Many Muslims have continued to suffer from marginalization and frustration, especially with the economic stagnation of the post-1997 crisis, which explains the growth of militia groups engaging in violent actions for an Islamic cause, or at least using Islam as a rallying cry (see Wilson 2008). However, a growing number of urban-based and well-educated Muslims

now enjoy secure political as well as economic positions. It is unsurprising that among these privileged segments of the Muslim community there should be both a greater need and a greater ability to explore new activities in the cultural and aesthetic as well as legal and intellectual realms to justify and celebrate their newly acquired privileges, express their identities and aspirations, and/or expand and further consolidate their politico-economic positions.

In this regard the new rich among Indonesian Muslims are not different from their non-Muslim counterparts (see Heryanto 1999; Tanter and Young 1990; Yoon 1991) or, most likely, from other Muslims elsewhere (Abdel-Mageed 2008; Wallerstein 1991). In the late 1980s, Aswab Mahasin described this major transformation of the Indonesian Muslims as the embourgeoisement of the *santri* (pious and learned Muslims) (Mahasin 1990: 140). However, in contradiction to common presumptions about their disposition towards economic rationality, many members of the new bourgeoisie are inclined towards self-aristocratization and have a preoccupation with the aestheticization of their lifestyle, the display of wealth, and exuberant consumption. Otherwise, what is the point of being very wealthy “if there is no personal reward?” (Wallerstein 1991: 146), or if there is no recognition of such distinction (Bourdieu 1984)? In what follows I will focus on a few very specific examples of an Islamic pop cultural product in contemporary Indonesia, its warm public reception, and its significance for broader issues of Islamic politics and morality in the face of a deepening of pressures on Indonesian youths to consume ever-new trends dictated by a global capitalist-driven lifestyle.

The missing veil

From the 1980s onward I was intrigued as to why veiled women have been almost entirely absent from Indonesian film scenes at a time when Indonesia was swept by a “sea of jilbab” as one poet described it (Nadjib 1989). Given Indonesia’s status as the world’s largest Muslim nation, it is not surprising that the unprecedented scale of Islamization for the past two decades has included a dramatic increase in headscarfing among Muslim women. Far from expressing a massive compliance with any ruling or a submission to any systematic propaganda, this new trend has largely come voluntarily. In fact, the 1980s wave of veiling marked a break from its older practice, signifying in most cases an overt political statement of dissent against the official banning. More recently it has become a new and trendy fashion among the better-off female urbanites.

But why this development should hardly have been represented in Indonesian films – in sharp contrast to its more common representation on television and in print media – intrigued me in the next two decades. To my knowledge there has been neither a formal restriction against nor an obvious disincentive for portrayal of something that has been conspicuous in the major cities where the stories are set. Then in early 2008, the film *Ayat-ayat Cinta* was released, breaking new records commercially and ideologically. The film resonated broadly and powerfully with dominant and naturalized ways of seeing things during the period of the film’s release. Viewed by more than three million Indonesians in the first few weeks of its

release, the film surpassed any other titles previously screened in the country, regardless of country of origin, language, or genre, until it was superseded towards the end of the year by the newest domestic blockbuster, *Laskar Pelangi* (2008). *Ayat-ayat Cinta* was based on a best-selling novel with the same title by Habiburrahman El Shirazy, whose background and educational experience resemble those of the male protagonist. Popularly regarded as Indonesia's most Islamic film so far, the story is set in Egypt, with background music and scenes that are markedly Islamic throughout the film. It features Aisha, an almost fully covered-up woman, as one of the central characters. A series of questions follow. Why only at this moment and in this particular film did a strongly Islamic-looking cinematic character begin to appear so assertively, and with such a strong impact on the Indonesian public? What are the other aspects of this film, if any, that made it more successful commercially than any of the few previously produced titles with substantive Islamic content?

Preliminary observation has led me to believe that one answer to the above questions has to do with the changing configuration of and relations between social classes in Indonesia since the mid-1980s. Islam and Muslims have for a long time been very diverse. But Indonesian social transformation in the past two decades has added a new dimension or intensity to their diversity along class lines.

Until the mid-1980s Islam in Indonesia had not usually been associated with wealth, icons of modernity, urban lifestyles, or popular culture (see Heryanto 1999). This has changed remarkably since then, putting Islam at the forefront of the production and consumption of popular culture. The popularizing and stylization of headscarves among Muslim women is but one case in point. As several scholars have indicated, the new headscarfing trend marked a break from the practice of the older generation (usually rural folk), and it has been most noticeable among highly educated female urbanites (Brenner 1996; Jones 2007; Smith-Hefner 2007).¹ In a different but related development, analysts of *dangdut* music have come to a similar conclusion. Along with major gentrification *dangdut*, like headscarfing, has recently become widely popular among the better-off Indonesians who have also been casually referred to as the middle classes (David 2008; Frederick 1982; Murray 1991; Weintraub 2006).

One easy answer to the question regarding the long delayed appearance of veiled female characters in Indonesian films is the history of global tension between the United States and the Islamic world. While Islamist-based anti-American sentiments in Indonesia have not been particularly strong or widespread, more often than not Muslim leaders in Indonesia, as elsewhere, tend to have negative attitudes towards the cinema as a whole, and especially American domination in the world of cinema. While Iran has come to prominence in the contemporary world of film-making, in the 1970s the country was one of the strongest critics of cinema. In 1978 "[u]p to 180 cinemas nationwide (32 in Tehran alone) had been burned, demolished or shut down" (Naficy 2006: 30). Even during its currently glorious time, Iran film-making is subject to a series of state legislations that ensure that the ratified, if ambiguously defined, Islamic values be complied with.² In Indonesia not all Muslims agree that *Ayat-ayat Cinta* contains Islamic values or serves the interests of Muslims (Yumiyanti 2008b). Some even allege that the film is anti-Islam.

Editors of one Islamist journal consider *Ayat-ayat Cinta* as propagating pluralism that they condemned, and allege the novelist and film-makers of that film are “agents of zionism” (*Risalah Mujahidin* 2008).

Commercially produced films for entertainment are of course never meant to be a true representation of any social reality. Yet, no films can be entirely disassociated from the social dynamics that bring them into existence in the first place, and within which the films are circulated and consumed. Precisely because of their nature as statements about particular aspects of social life, films (like other narratives) can be instructive for political and cultural analysis. In particular, they raise questions about which aspects of a given society are foregrounded, which are exaggerated, distorted, overlooked or excluded, or presented under erasure (and also how and why).

As found in several other former colonies, nearly all top actors and actresses in Indonesian films have some elements of Caucasian facial features, commonly associated with wealth, progress, and secular modernity. In Indonesian films more men wear Western business suits and ties than can be found in real life off-screen. Likewise, wine drinking is a lot more common in Indonesian films than off-screen in the world’s largest Muslim nation. Until recently, a scene of a state official accepting a bribe could not be shown on screen. Going to the movies in Indonesia, as elsewhere, often means consuming a feast for the eyes, the ears, and the mind, allowing a momentary reflection on what life might look like in a different and better world than one’s own day-to-day reality. This imagined world in Indonesian films often means a modern and prosperous Indonesia in the image of the liberal West. Until recently, in such cinematic utopias, veiled women were hardly represented, much less featured on center stage.

But there is something specific about the recent developments in the cinema industry in Indonesia that helps explain not only the long delayed appearance of Muslim women characters in veils, but also the overwhelmingly warm response to the first and major cinematic appearance of these missing figures in *Ayat-ayat Cinta*. I refer to the issue of class. There are at least two distinct but related areas of relevance for examining this issue, one intellectual, the other material.

First, to consider the intellectual question, critical investigations of popular cultures have by and large been the preoccupation of the urban middle-class intelligentsia, instead of the populace that constitutes the mass consumers of pop cultures. As hinted above, and as will be elaborated below, until very recently Islam had not usually been associated with prosperity, profit making, the entertainment industry and for that matter the largely intellectual discourses. There has been no compelling reason for the blatantly biased study of popular cultures to pay serious attention to Islam in popular culture. Conversely, there was no strong reason for Islamic communities to engage with the popular culture networks. This helps explain why the recent growth of studies on intra-Asian flows of pop culture have generally been East-Asia centered (Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan). The long history and widespread flow of both Middle Eastern and Indian influences in the making of contemporary pop cultures in Southeast Asia has been largely overlooked (Heryanto 2010).

Second, in terms of the material question, a major transformation has taken place in Indonesian cities and in access to cinemas. The spread of VCDs and

DVDs (both legal and more especially pirated copies) and the growth of the television industry since the mid 1990s have made many small cinema houses across the nation no longer economically viable. While television viewing audiences have expanded significantly in size and become more diversified in several ways, the range of cinema-goers has dramatically narrowed, and their demographic profiles have become narrowly concentrated among the better-off urban youth. The few refurbished surviving cinemas, and especially the few newly built ones, commonly occupy a space inside the up-scale shopping malls in capital cities, where only those with a fairly high level of purchasing power and cultural capital have reason to visit, linger and feel comfortable. Indonesia's respected film critic Eric Sasono has even gone so far as to suggest that cinema going is no longer a family leisure activity on the weekend as it was in the 1970s. Rather, it is part of a lifestyle of hanging out in large shopping areas for young urbanites aged between 15–35 with their friends, boy/girlfriends, or colleagues (see numerical data in Sasono 2007). The cinemas usually have several screening rooms for one title, each of which is small in size, and these cinemas-in-malls stand among fancy shops full of branded items and international restaurants for the middle and upper levels of the urban population. To maximize the level of security and comfort of their targeted patrons, the mall's security guards as well as shop attendants will make anyone from the underclass immediately feel unwelcome if they dare to enter this air-conditioned, carpeted and perfumed territory.

Smartly dressed Muslims are among the expected regular patrons of these malls, the shoppers and film viewers (Nilan 2006: 103–4). But for many years these people did not find any respectable representations of Muslim characters in the films with whom they could quickly identify in religious terms. There is no doubt that these missing figures would be warmly welcomed as soon as they appeared on screen. They cannot be a representation of just any Muslims found in real life. And they surely cannot be the kind of Muslims who have dominated the public imagination for more than a century and in contemporary mass media: old, seriously pious, preachy and dogmatic. To appeal to the youths who frequent the shopping malls and regularly consume MTV Asia programs and the like, these cinematic figures must meet some of the familiar standards of globally defined attributes of being cool and trendy.

Most Indonesian film-makers in previous years appeared not to have the idea of presenting such figures in their films and/or the skill to do so. The few who tried to produce Islam-focused films in the past presented more serious types of characters and heavy didactic messages rather than a light-hearted or melodramatic story of “cool” Muslim protagonists as in *Ayat-ayat Cinta*. The great success of this film is attributable to the smooth blend of what in isolation may appear to be incompatible if not contradictory elements: indulgence in consuming a capitalist-dominated global lifestyle and a profound commitment to Islamic piety. Once *Ayat-ayat Cinta* had won the hearts and minds of the middle class who had always dominated urban space, national debates, and the mass media, it quickly attracted wider audiences, both downward and upward along class lines.³

I have neither the necessary specialist expertise in Islam to assess how “Islamic” the film *Ayat-ayat Cinta* actually is, nor any particular interest in doing so. My

interest is in raising questions about the significance of this film's success in relation to the concurrent debate on what has been conveniently described as the "Islamization" of Indonesian political life. More specifically, I am interested in looking at what message (intended or unintended) the film conveys to its immediate target audience in Indonesia on two controversial issues: sexuality and polygamy.

My close reading suggests that, more than has commonly been acknowledged, the film actually problematizes the general and largely conservative view of Islam that prevails in Indonesia. It does so subtly and moderately, and with carefully selected compromises that contradict the more liberal perspectives of Islam in Indonesia. Notwithstanding this qualification, the film clearly chooses not to simply play safe by reaffirming the status quo or by seeking to please the more conservative majority of its potential audience for political or commercial gain. Before I elaborate upon my interpretation, for the benefit of those who are unfamiliar with contemporary Indonesia, we need to step back briefly and take a broader look at Islamization in Indonesia during the past two decades or so, and the series of controversies it has provoked, particularly concerning issues of sexuality.

The broader context

The fall of the centralist state management under the militarist rule of the New Order in 1998 unleashed a plethora of formerly repressed social energies among Indonesia's profoundly diverse peoples. Rapidly transforming from a society under one of the world's longest-reigning dictators from 1966 to one of the world's most liberal democracies in the 2000s, Indonesia witnessed the euphoric and extreme centrifugal pursuit of various cultural and ideological aspirations, with the notable absence of communism.⁴ After decades of being systematically repressed, political Islam grew as never before (see Hefner 2000) and offered virtually the only available alternative model of modernity. But Islamic politics is not, and never was, one single entity. Tension and competition among the diverse Islamic groups to gain moral leadership and authority in the nation are intense, with occasional outbursts and sporadic incidents of violence. In the meantime, a wide range of secular liberal forces have also exploded in earnest, and so have the old vernacular traditions – of which syncretic variants of Hinduized Javanese mysticism is the most prominent. For obvious reasons, mainstream international media dominated by the Western bloc in their obsession with the "war on terror" have failed to see this post-authoritarian diversity and dynamics when commenting on Indonesia.⁵

It is not possible or necessary to capture the complex dynamics of Indonesian pluralism here (for more, see Ricklefs 2008). But for purposes of illustration, let me just suggest one small area as an example, namely developments in the mass media industry and the controversy over a legal proposal for regulating sexuality. Licensed presses have more than doubled in number since 1998, from fewer than 300 to more than 600. The number of commercial television networks has increased from five to more than ten in the same period. Over 200 new local networks have been established, starting from nil when the New Order rule came to an end. The media was the only industry that expanded its job market in the

wake of the 1998 crisis (Heryanto and Adi 2002), and some media businesses even doubled their revenue during this period (Hill 2007: 10) when millions of others were shedding jobs. For the first time in Indonesian history more than 100 million people now watch a wide variety of television programs on a daily basis. In personal communication with me, some top managers of the industry have suggested that this situation will not last long. Market competition will soon cut the number of national television networks by half, following the law of survival of the fittest. Recent trends vindicate such predictions, if not in full. In the meantime, in this fiercely competitive market, broadcasters and publishers have experimented and tested the boundaries of acceptable decency and newly acquired liberty, resulting in several being harshly criticized by members of the society and others being legally sued for allegedly going too far.

The recent growth in books and magazines with a special focus on Islam preceded the fall of the New Order (Hefner 1997; *Kompas* 2003). But it has gained momentum since then, acquiring the status of one of the largest categories of reading materials in the print industry, and occupying a major section in most commercial book shops (see Widodo 2008). Similar developments can be seen in television programs, with varying degrees of Islamic content. But the new market has also been supplied by at least two competing categories that do not sit well with some of the basic values of Islam, and some of them have actually provoked outrage from segments within the Muslim community.

The first is a wide range of publications that emphasize sexuality and eroticism. They range from hyper-sexualized stage performances and television shows to soft pornographic materials in men's magazines and explicit yet highly stylized detailed expositions of human sexual activity in a new genre of literary writings by a new generation of women authors. It was also during this period that the *dangdut* singer-dancer Inul Daratista made her debut and stirred up the greatest moral panic of 2003 (see Heryanto 2008b). This was followed by the launch of the Indonesian edition of *Playboy* magazine in 2006.

The second trend includes those cultural products that are concerned with supernatural forces and mysticism. New magazines that specialize in this topic have mushroomed since the early 2000s. Horror films and television programs dominated the entertainment industry for more than a decade (see Arps and Heeren 2006; Heeren 2007). This genre is particularly popular in Java, home of Indonesia's largest ethnic group, where Indonesia's major industrialization has been concentrated since colonial times.⁶ Javanese people have long been stereotypically regarded as being remarkably tolerant and syncretic, embracing Hinduism, Western secular modernity, and Islam without any obvious display of discomfort.⁷ Apparently in an attempt to gloss over fundamentally conflicting interests and to maximize profit, the general trend in television programming has been to market mystical shows and call them "religious shows" (Imanjaya 2006; Wardhana 2006). This is justified with appearances by professional religious experts or leaders and citations of holy verses at the beginning and conclusion of the shows (Heeren 2007; Nazaruddin 2008).

The rise of popular cultural products with three distinct strands of content (Islamic, liberal Western consumerist-indulgent, and mystical) is not surprising.

Along with Communism until its demise in 1965, these cultural and ideological orientations have been the major forces that shaped Indonesia from its inception. They have made some alliances along the way, but also find themselves entangled in serious conflicts (see Heryanto 2008a). Having eliminated the Communists in the mid 1960s, the New Order government suppressed these three forces that had helped the regime come to power. But the New Order did not simply repress these forces. It incorporated selected elements of each force (cultural signs of Islamic piety, Western modernity and technology, and the resources of imagined “indigenous” tradition) to build its own legitimacy for three decades.

Since the fall of the New Order the major forces of Islam, Western-styled secular liberalism, and indigenous mysticism have resurfaced and resumed their battles for dominance in post-authoritarian Indonesia. It is worth noting that before *Ayat-ayat Cinta* was produced, the two most commercially successful films shown in Indonesia were *Jelangkung* (2001) and *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?* (2002). The first is a horror film. It was not simply a continuation of the genre from previous decades, or of the longer history of mystical practices among the more devoted followers of Javanese tradition. Instead *Jelangkung* represented a new generation of horror films that are distinctively urban middle-class-based. The film tells the story of a group of very critical and competent university students who try to find out about the possible existence of ghosts, out of curiosity. *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?* is a shamelessly Americanized melodramatic love story between middle-class Jakartan youths. Both titles attracted slightly over one million viewers, outdoing the major Hollywood blockbusters that had dominated the nation’s cinema for nearly half a century. The arrival and success of *Ayat-ayat Cinta* not only brought contemporary Islam on a par with the more Western-oriented and indigenized-oriented popular cultures on the nation’s cinematic screen in terms of box office sale figures, but well surpassed them.

In 2003 the sensual performances of Inul Daratista stirred up a nation-wide controversy. Elsewhere I have argued that to a significant extent Inul’s debut represented a new cultural icon of an old tradition of non-aristocratic Javanese practice that celebrates bodily pleasure and sexuality (Heryanto 2008b). Being the single largest ethnic and cultural group, the Javanese with their resilient mysticism have for centuries been the main buffer that prevents Indonesia from becoming an Islamic state. Although Inul’s critics came from a wide variety of backgrounds, in this Muslim-majority nation at a time of an unprecedented level of Islamization, the staunchest and loudest critics have been those with an Islamic institutional basis or background. She was banned from performing in several cities (and in Malaysia), while being much lauded in others.

Partly in response to Inulmania, but partly also to the broader expansion of other related erotic-focused elements in the entertainment industry, a proposal for a new anti-pornography law was tabled before parliament in 2006.⁸ If ratified, this new law would severely restrict people’s behavior, speech and clothing. Kissing in a public place or wearing a bikini was to be liable to a heavy fine or imprisonment. The proposal galvanized the more liberal segments of the Muslim and non-Muslim communities alike. The issue constituted one of the hottest and most

decisive debates in the nation for two years. After a series of suspensions, revisions that moderated or omitted the most disputed sections in the original version, and resubmission to the parliament, it was ratified on 30 October 2008, despite the fact that a significant number of law-makers walked out of the session in protest. Its formal ratification did not deter those opposed to it. Emotional debates continued, complementing legal actions filed at the Constitutional Court by several institutions and groups who sought its annulment. Because sexuality and pornography are not the exclusive discourse of experts, nearly all segments of the nation's population took a part in the debate. For those opposing the Bill, at stake were not simply issues of morality, but the foundations of the nation-state itself. For them the Bill did not simply represent some legally flawed moral proposal for a crusade against pornography, as well as being redundant given the existing criminal law that regulates indecent behavior. More seriously, these people suspected that this was a dangerous ploy to transform Indonesia into an Islamic state.

As if this controversy was not divisive enough, the Indonesian edition of *Playboy* magazine was launched around the same period. The timing could not have been any worse, as anti-American sentiment was running high following the American-led war in Iraq. Being aware of the potential risks, the publishers of *Playboy* chose to tone down its contents with very timid images and texts, so much so that the outcome pleased no one. Readers found it disappointingly bland, while the Islamic militant group, the Islam Defender Front (*Front Pembela Islam*, FPI) attacked and destroyed the magazine's office.⁹ To continue its operations, the magazine moved its office to the Hindu-majority island of Bali (see Kitley 2008).

The above shows that even among the proponents of Islamism, there is no unified front or common strategy. Some, including the political party PKS (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera*, Justice and Prosperity Party), work through constitutional means in the top political arena with sophisticated diplomacy and a willingness to make strategic compromises. Others, like the militant FPI, mobilize the masses from the underprivileged groups to engage more in physical measures of intimidation and physical confrontation. While these various Islamist groups share some ultimate goals (a more thoroughly Islamic Indonesia in spirit if not the formal establishment of an Islamic state under *sharia* law), and are more than willing to lend occasional endorsements to each other, tensions and gaps are imminent among them. Despite the admitted fuzziness of the concept of class, it is useful to use the term guardedly and to recognize the PKS and FPI as two distinct entities in class terms.

Not all Islamist groups work by negating and attacking those they consider to be un-Islamic or anti-Islamic. Some have launched actions to assert Islamic identity in a more positive or creative fashion. The universal call for the veiling of women is one of the most successful examples. Dress codes for men are generally more lax. But for several years in the 2000s there was sporadic propagation of the notion of men marrying more than one wife. One successful businessman, Puspo Wardoyo, went on a tour in 2003 with a large entourage (including several women) across the country to propagate polygamy. He did this in preparation for the "Polygamy Award" ceremony in one of Jakarta's five-star hotels. Wardoyo made

a contribution of US\$110,000 in sponsoring the ceremony, where 37 men were given awards for their successful polygamous marriages (Nurmila 2005).

Polygamy is legal, although Indonesian law makes it extremely difficult to practice.¹⁰ The number of polygamous marriages may not be large, but they cut across class divisions. In the past polygamy raised eyebrows, but it has not prompted controversy until recently. When Indonesia's first president Sukarno took four wives, observers had mixed reactions, but most forgave him by attributing his behavior to his strongly Javanese background and cultural upbringing. Many of the male protagonists in the Hindu *Mahabharata* epic (the most fundamental cultural frame of reference for most Javanese, but also Balinese and Sundanese) have several wives, and some of these wives are married to several men.

What appears to set the current polygamous practices apart from their predecessors and makes them intensely controversial is their religious overtone, as best illustrated by Puspo Wardoyo. Far from being taken as a private affair (as in the case of Sukarno in the past), polygamy since 2000 has become a public affair, an explicitly political statement, and a source of controversy because it has been promoted by some as advocating Islamic codes of conduct, values and lifestyle. A set of holy verses are repeatedly cited to justify its recent promotion, to the extent that polygamy is occasionally presented not simply as a case where Islam conditionally endorses Muslim men (and only men) having more than one spouse, but as part of a religious call for a fuller devotion to Islam.¹¹ Not even all pious and learned Muslims agree with such a reading of the holy texts, let alone non-Muslims, women activists, and their supporters (see Brenner, Chapter 13 in this volume).

In contrast to the success of women's veiling, and similar to the fate of the Anti-Pornography Bill, the propagation of polygamy has not been smooth. While it may not be any more or less difficult for a married man to take a second wife now than in the past, it is certainly more difficult for him than for his predecessors to gain public support and respect. Even when he has taken the second wife purely for personal reasons and considered it a private family affair, the public would tend to scorn and impose serious censure against him, as attested to by the case of Aa Gym, the most admired Islamic preacher and television celebrity in Indonesia until the media disclosed that he had taken a second wife (see Hoesterey 2007, 2008).

It was against this background that two Indonesian films with a focus on polygamy were released. *Ayat-ayat Cinta* was one, and the other was Nia Dinata's *Berbagi Suami* (Sharing a Husband) (2006). The remainder of this chapter will look closely at the former, and will briefly discuss the latter as a point of comparison to highlight the former's significance to the ongoing debate on the merits of polygamy and the place of religion in post-authoritarian Indonesia.

Islamic Sleeping Beauty

In the dazzlingly disorienting moment of liberalization, with the protracted impact of the 1997 economic crisis and occasional misgivings about the prospects of the Reform movement, the appearance of *Ayat-ayat Cinta* was very timely. At least for several months it seemed a beacon for the millions of young and impressionable

Muslims at a historical moment marked by the promises of neo-liberalism and the possibilities opened up by new media (Hosen 2008; Turner 2007) as well as the fluidity and uncertainty of their consequences (Bauman 2000). The film's male protagonist (Fahri) offers an attractive and much needed middle ground or alternative between the persona of the contemporary militant Muslim and that of the traditionally pious Muslim. It displays the most attractive blend imaginable (and so far visible on the screen) of the attributes of a pious Muslim, a member of the young middle-class intelligentsia, and a post-colonial Indonesian citizen who is at ease with the world of classical Islamic texts as well as a Western-dominated global lifestyle and consumption. All these struck a chord with the identities and aspirations of many who frequented the shopping malls that house the contemporary cinemas.

Put differently, these young Muslims were drawn to *Ayat-ayat Cinta* because of the pleasure of discovering their imagined and desired selves for the first time on the big cinema screen, free from the standard portrayals of explicit sex scenes, gruesome violence, and what critics see as superstition.¹² Now for the first time, their existence was publicly recognized with respect, and authoritatively legitimized by such a powerful institution as the film industry in the grand and glittering shopping mall. This is the kind of sensation that over a million other youths felt in 2002 when the film *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?* was released, the first Indonesian film where characters (in this case urban youths, the single largest demographic segment of film viewers) spoke in a trendy mix of variants of non-formal Indonesian, just as in real life. Even for non-Muslims and the older generation, *Ayat-ayat Cinta* offered a breath of fresh air after years of watching cinema and television consisting primarily of gross violence, vulgar sexual allusions, hyper-sentimental dramas, horror-cum-superstition suspense, and talk shows with bad jokes.

What is interesting about the public response to *Ayat-ayat Cinta* is not only the size of the viewing audience. Rather, it is the *extent* to which the film has been seen and commended by several politicians as if it was primarily intended to propagate Islam as a peace-loving and tolerant religion. It was also seen as a due and apt response to the misrepresentation of Islam in international media in the wake of 9/11. These were the points that President Yudhoyono emphasized in his speech upon viewing the film during a special screening on 28 March 2008 (*Kompas* 2008a). The same point was reiterated by Junus Effendi Habibie, the Indonesian Ambassador to the Netherlands, in anticipation of the screening of the film in The Hague on 26 October 2008 (Antara 2008). In mailing-list groups many viewers expressed sympathy for the film for the same reasons. Some list members took offence when others made critical remarks about the film.

Film critics were more lukewarm in their reviews of the film's aesthetic achievements. They also questioned the film's supposedly Islamic attributes and intended messages (see Sasono 2008b; Yazid 2008). The film did not do well at the Indonesian Film Festival at the year's end. While novelist Habiburrahman El Shirazy claimed to have written the story with "a purpose—the propagation of Islam" (Hermawan 2008), nearly all those behind the work of turning the novel into a film have track records in the mainstream, non-religious film industry. None has special credentials in Islamic institutions or activities. Fans of the film

expressed disappointment when one of the leading actresses was caught smoking by a tabloid reporter who published a report with a series of images.

"Despite backdrops, costumes and certain lines in *Ayat* undoubtedly rooted in a particular religion, the film moves its story forward from being a purely love story," writes journalist Nauval Yazid (2008). But more significantly from my perspective, it is a love story where the crises, resolutions and happy ending are depicted in scenes that are not necessarily Islamic. Rather, they are reminiscent of Hollywood and Bollywood movies as well as Indonesian television dramas (*sinetron* as locals call them).¹³ Instead of following the new trend among Indonesian Muslims of wearing typical Middle Eastern dress, the male protagonist Fahri wears Western-style casual clothes and a trendy haircut. Neither does he grow a beard. His physical appearance would allow him to be almost anything in one of the mainstream films from Asia or the West. In his wedding ceremony Fahri wears a Western suit and tie. The scenes of the wedding itself are highly reminiscent of those in Bollywood movies. Near the end of the film there is a critical scene of Maria being in a coma for months because of a broken heart. A hospital nurse who attends Maria tells Maria's mother that there is little hope for the patient's recovery except the immediate arrival of the man she loves (Fahri), who has married someone else (Aisha) and is now in jail because of a false allegation of rape made by another secret admirer (Noura). By a special arrangement made by politically well-connected people, Fahri is temporarily released from prison in order to see poor Maria in the hospital. In one long scene, he gives Maria an unfailingly magic "kiss-for-the Sleeping Beauty" on the forehead. Maria regains consciousness!

The early part of *Ayat-ayat Cinta* is full of didactic scenes and dialogues. They include a message about how Muslims of the opposite sex cannot touch each other (such as shaking hands with a new acquaintance) apart from their own *muhrim* (legal spouse, children or immediate kin). In another scene there is advice about how Islam does not approve of dating. There is also a lengthy lesson about how husbands should discipline their wives when the latter make mistakes.¹⁴ But the most important message about living as Muslims that the film brought to the screen was one pertaining to polygamy.

The film-makers devoted substantial attention to issues of polygamy towards the end of the film, and added an extended sub-story that does not exist in the novel. This is one area that makes the film appear to be markedly "Islamic," involving a general tendency for simplification of the film's more complex message and an exaggeration of its mixed treatment of polygamy. My reading, however, suggests precisely the reverse. This is one area where the film departs from its initial didactic tendency. The film makes more arguments, albeit subtly, against rather than for polygamy. It is possible that these anti-polygamy messages were lost when viewers came to the cinema with strong presumptions about the film, molded by the publicity, and watched the film purely for entertainment.

The way Fahri enters into a polygamous marriage may please the pro-polygamy male audience. It is only at his wife Aisha's insistence that Fahri finally decides to take Maria as his second wife, as Maria is in a critically ill condition. Maria's recovery is, in turn, critical to her giving a testimony in court that will be

instrumental in Fahri's acquittal. The novel concludes with this polygamous marriage, which is short-lived as it is immediately followed by Maria's death. At variance with the novel, the film-makers decided to extend the story by depicting what it is like for Fahri, Aisha and Maria to live in a polygamous marriage. This turns out to be so difficult for all three that Aisha decides to go away alone for a break and self-reflection.

In exasperation at the difficult triangular relationship, Fahri consults with his close friend Shaiful: "I am confused . . . I am tired" and asks for advice. In response, Shaiful who has previously appeared as one of the most intelligent Muslims in the film, speaks with an air of authority (the camera faces him front on, making him speak to the audience in a confrontational mode): "it is nearly impossible to be just to one wife, let alone two wives." Aisha returns home and is re-united with Maria and Fahri. The film could have ended here, on a happy-ever-after note. Instead, it continues with the death of Maria, thus giving no clue as to how a polygamous marriage can be a long-lasting, happy one.

It is thus surprising to see how the film has often been regarded as pro-polygamy and therefore pro-Islam simply because its hero enters into a polygamous marriage. Andi Mallarangeng (a spokesperson for President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono) told reporters that despite his strong desire to see the film, he had not done so and could not do so because his wife did not approve of it. According to this news report, her reason was the fact that the film portrays polygamy (Damayanti 2008). Could it be that viewers only found in the film what they wanted to see? Does this have something to do with questions of class?

In an interesting interview with Putu Wijaya who has "directed and written more than 50 *sinetron* [Indonesian television dramas] titles," Amrih Widodo discussed the well-noted categories into which television managers and entertainment producers classify television audiences. I take the liberty of quoting an excerpt at length below, as it gives important details.

When an order for a *sinetron* series specifies that it is for Class B audiences, Putu Wijaya will have in mind an audience of maids, housewives, drivers, food vendors, low-level civil servants, and other blue-collar workers. Class A audiences, meanwhile, would include professionals, university students, high-ranking bureaucrats, upper-scaled entrepreneurs, and journalists. Class B viewers are considered uninterested in long dialogues or discussions of difficult concepts. Instead, they are stimulated by action, more susceptible to manipulation of emotions, and keen for black-and-white morality. According to Putu Wijaya, *sinetron* for a Class B audience often rely on straightforwardness at the expense of narrative and reflective aspects. In practice, this means linear plotting (very few flash-backs, no multiple framing); stereotypical characterizations visually demonstrated through body parts, mimics, gestures and outfits; exaggeration of events or characters to demonstrate extreme emotional expressions, and conflicts on very concrete domestic issues between family members or among individuals within a given social setting. A Class A audience, on the other hand, is imagined as more educated and receptive to longer discussions on conceptual matters, more critical of logical representation of reality, able to understand complex plotting, tolerant

of less clear-cut solutions to problems, and appreciative of artistic creations. When he receives an order for a Class A audience, Putu Wijaya feels freer to express his aesthetic creativity (Widodo 2002).

Neither Putu nor Amrih takes these categories too seriously, or takes their merits at face value. Nonetheless I share their guarded acknowledgement that these categories do have some value. Regardless of the accuracy of the categorization of Indonesian television audiences as illustrated above, such categories are an overt expression of class-based perception on the part of the producers of television programs. Such a perception may be flawed, but it is not entirely baseless.

A class-based contrast exists between the didactic scenes in the earlier section of *Ayat-ayat Cinta* and the more ambiguous scenes of polygamy towards the end that do not exist in the novel. Perhaps this distinction is so subtle that it has been lost in many people's view. A sharper distinction can be seen in the mode of narration and level of sophistication between *Ayat-ayat Cinta* and its contemporary *Berbagi Suami*.

Both films begin with Islamic-focused background sounds and scenes. Both foregrounded polygamy at a time when it was being hotly debated in public. Unlike the sinetron-styled *Ayat-ayat Cinta*, however, *Berbagi Suami* presents an example of heteroglossia. It has no heroes. While unequivocally critical towards polygamy in its overall presentation, *Berbagi Suami* contains no didactic message. Instead, it is full of ironies and understatements. Its story line is more complex than that of *Ayat-ayat Cinta*, comprising three sets of polygamy cases that find their converging point towards the end. *Ayat-ayat Cinta* ends with the death of Maria and the restoration of order in the happy monogamous marriage of Fahri and Aisha. *Berbagi Suami* tells several stories of polygamy involving people from a wide variety of ethnic, religious, and class backgrounds (of which a wealthy family of pious Muslims is only one), with no one ultimately being happy, except for a couple of co-wives of a lower-class man. These women love each other and engage in sexual activity together secretly before they run away from the polygamous family.¹⁵

Berbagi Suami's subversive message appears to have escaped both state officials and the many members of the society who are obsessed with the disciplining of citizens, particularly in matters pertaining to sexual activity and clothing. Perhaps such a message is considered, or perceived to be, too subtle to excite and stir the mass audience. As should be clear, I am biased in favor of *Berbagi Suami*. However, for the purpose of this chapter, *Ayat-ayat Cinta* is more relevant for analysis and is therefore discussed more extensively here, due to its sheer commercial and ideological success. I wish to conclude with a brief note on how the Islamic message conveyed in *Ayat-ayat Cinta* relates to the broader off-screen debate in the nation about rebuilding a post-authoritarian Indonesia.

Polygamy versus pluralism

In light of Indonesia's complex diversity and the political tensions that threaten to disintegrate the nation, *Ayat-ayat Cinta* has several benefits from having its story entirely set overseas. Set in Egypt, the film avoids the extremely sensitive reference

to or depictions of domestic conflicts which have been partly triggered by strident Islamization in Indonesia during the past decade or so. This is not to suggest that Egypt has a completely different history of Islamic politics, or that the recent fashion for veiling is any less controversial there than in Indonesia (see Abdel-Mageed 2008). Rather, for the general audience in Indonesia, the various inter-religious conflicts in their homeland remain, while those unabated in the foreign land remain little or not known.

In *Ayat-ayat Cinta* not all Muslims are portrayed as good Muslims. Following the simplistic *sinetron* formula, the division between good and bad characters is clear-cut. Significantly, all Indonesians in the film are the “good guys.” The male protagonist Fahri, an Indonesian post-graduate student, appears almost super-human. The series of conflicts in this film are mainly between good Muslims and bad Muslims, and one conflict arises from a difficult situation affecting equally good Muslims. Surely, this is by far a safer and easier story to narrate than would have been the case if the story had been set realistically in Indonesia, where conflicts involving Muslims cannot be entirely separated from, or purged of, imminent tensions with non-Muslims. By containing the story within an all-Islamic world, questions about Indonesian Muslims’ privileges as a majority, or questions about their loyalty to the secular nation-state vis-à-vis the faith can be ignored.

Ultimately, it is hard to resist seeing *Ayat-ayat Cinta* as a political allegory, whether or not this is authorially intended. At the center of the whole drama is the male protagonist Fahri, representing post-1998 Indonesia. Being the son of a fermented-cassava seller, Fahri has a very modest family background (Indonesia has barely survived the 1997 economic crisis). As a quasi super-human, he is a capable and conscientious student, with heart-throb charm and a certain naivete (official propaganda consistently circulates a self-delusion about Indonesia’s magnificent potential and natural resources that has attracted the world’s super-powers over many centuries to an overwhelming extent that goes beyond Indonesia’s capability to respond and manage). Fahri is a pious Muslim who welcomes pluralism, and globalism with a moderate stance and a Western life style. He speaks Arabic, English and a little German in addition to Indonesian. He is neither a militant *jihadi* nor a syncretic-cum-traditionalist mystic follower; neither is he Arabized in his appearance or cultural orientation. He remembers his origins, stays true to his Indonesian identity, and remains in contact with his mother in the motherland (Indonesia is proud to be seen as the world’s largest Muslim country, striving to be a respectable player in contemporary world politics, but preferring to maintain its own “authentic” identity rather than to ape the West or become Arabized. It is committed to retaining its status as a secular state.)

Fahri chooses to be friends with the American journalist Alicia at a time when fellow Muslims are showing hostility towards her (Indonesia has enjoyed long-term diplomatic relations with the US and never wishes to change this, even at a time when the American persona turns ugly and its cultural hegemony is at a low ebb). Fahri chooses to marry the nearly fully covered half-Turkish Aisha (Indonesia embraces Islamization, but in a way comparable to Turkey’s management of the Islamic agenda). Even after his marriage, Fahri cannot be fully free

from a difficult position in his relations with the Coptic Catholic neighbor Maria who is secretly in love with him (Indonesia is bound to protect minority groups as part of its commitment to pluralism, but this has proven increasingly difficult under the mounting pressures of the Islamists).

Such a reading is but one of many equally plausible interpretations of the reasons for the film's popularity. The above reading may not be accurate and highly contentious in its details, but I hope it is not entirely out of place, and is able to suggest what may have struck a chord in the minds and hearts of millions of Indonesians in this unusually fluid time of post-economic crisis, post-authoritarian euphoria of liberal democracy, and a new global cold war against religious militancy.

Conclusion

In post-Cold War Indonesia, Islam enjoys unprecedented political power. But there is no singular political Islam. It is far too simplistic to distinguish Islam (even in Java alone) as comprising mainly "liberals and moderates on the one hand and radicals and extremists on the other" (Ricklefs 2008: 123). Islamist groups have taken major steps forward, but have fallen short of turning Indonesia into a formally Islamic state, precisely because of the challenge from other segments of the Muslim community in the country. The sustained growth of the Indonesian new rich in the past three decades has included a substantial number of pious Muslims. Despite the latter's ascendancy in the political and economic spheres, only recently have they begun to have both the urge and the power to thread their way into the cultural sphere, where Western and predominantly American pop culture have held sway for nearly a century.

Ayat-ayat Cinta was successful commercially because of its ingenious combination of the various elements that appeal most to contemporary Indonesians, especially urban youth. However, as the discussion above suggests, the film's success cannot be seen in any reductionist fashion as simply a sign of Islamization of Indonesia or even of Indonesian cinema. Neither can one dismiss the religious aspect of the phenomenon and describe the film's success as the victory of capitalism over Islam. At best, what we can see in the case of *Ayat-ayat Cinta* is one moment in the long and complex history of cultural, aesthetic, ideological and intellectual contestations and compromises between forces of capital and moral outrage—sometimes with religious overtones, sometimes without—against the inequality upon which capitalism rests.

During much of the New Order rule, "Islamic themes of justice and equality were mobilized against those regimes that were corrupt, bankrupt and authoritarian, and often supported by the West in the Cold War confrontation with the Soviet empire" (Turner 2006: 442). The memory and legacies of such moral crusades still strongly overshadow contemporary Indonesia. But Muslims and non-Muslims now find themselves in a new kind of Indonesia, where state power is shared largely among old political enemies: politicians of the New Order and newcomers with Islamic credentials. The successful but difficult ratification of the strongly Islamist Pornography Law in 2008, and the continued legal challenge

that it has provoked, is one testimony to the absence of any one hegemonic group in Indonesia at the moment. Another testimony is the commercial defeat of the record breaking *Ayat-ayat Cinta* (with 3.7 million viewers) by the secular and artistically-oriented *Laskar Pelangi* (with 4.4 million viewers) near the end of the year (Ivvaty and Suwarna 2008). To complicate matters, in December 2008 *Ayat-ayat Cinta* did not do very well at the Indonesian Film Festival, while the people behind the production of *Laskar Pelangi* boycotted the festival.

Religions are not receding or fading away just because capitalism has triumphed in the Cold War. But neither do religions survive unchanged. They survive well when they have the willingness and ability to make a series of dangerous liaisons with the logic of the capitalist market. Reflecting on the history of Islam and other religions, Bryan Turner argues that “[s]yncretism has been historically the norm” (Turner 2006: 440). The statement may hold true beyond his immediate concerns, and beyond inter-religious interactions. The phenomenon has come under different labels in social and cultural analyses, of which “diversity” and “hybridity” are some of the most common ones. While many things appear to be increasingly fluid, flexible, mixed, or hybrid in the contemporary world, certain things, such as inequality and class division, appear to remain permanent and destabilizing as ever.

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Notes

- 1 To emphasize the novelty of post-1980s veiling in Indonesia, observers often draw a clear-cut distinction with the practice both among the older generation and that in the Middle East. Actually a similar change is taking place in the Middle East, where veiling as a new fashion is common, specifically among the younger generation and middle-class urbanites. Like the situation in Indonesia, this has also stirred some controversy. Asef Bayat, a professor of sociology and Middle Eastern studies, argues that even in Egypt, the *hijab* is an “invented tradition” and not an inherent part of Egyptian culture, while a Cairo-based academic observes that “[i]n the past, fewer women wore *hijab*, but people were definitely more religious than today. Ethics are the core of religion, not appearance” (Abdel-Mageed 2008). More veiling does not necessarily mean further Islamization.
- 2 What has generally been less noted is the fact that the same negative attitudes can be easily found among Christians in Indonesia, as elsewhere. “In the mid-twentieth century, American Christians figured among the harshest critics of the cinema. The morality code that regulated Hollywood film content from the 1930s to the 1960s was drafted by a Catholic priest, and first implemented by a Presbyterian Church elder” (Wright 2007: 3).
- 3 The film attracted a large number of pious and traditional Muslims who had not usually been seen in cinemas (Sasono 2008a; Yumiyanti 2008a). Just as had previously happened with the Muslim veil (Heryanto 1999) and *dangdut* (Weintraub 2006), the film’s unprecedented popularity also lured top politicians to try to enhance their own credibility in the months leading up to the 2009 parliamentary and presidential elections. To watch the film, on March 28, 2008 President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono created the well-crafted spectacle of arriving at one of the busiest cinemas in the capital city, bringing with him

a large entourage of 107 high-ranking politicians, 53 foreign diplomats, artists, and journalists. The film-makers in their turn took advantage of this unusual reception and incorporated it into their further marketing activities.

- 4 Established at the height of the Cold War in 1966, the New Order government came to power after the mass killing of approximately one million people for their real or suspected membership of the Communist Party or its affiliate organizations, or for their perceived sympathy for the communist cause. Despite their claims of reforming the New Order legacy, successive governments continued the ban on the Communist Party and any propagation of communist tenets. Ironically, euphoric celebrations of Indonesia's diversity took place at a time when multi-party politics had increasingly shunned any extreme position or agenda. All major political parties have become very opportunistic, moving towards the middle ground and seeking possible coalition (for details, see Mietzner 2008).
- 5 For instance, large images of Abu Bakar Baasyir and Bali bomber Amrozi appeared on the front page of the Australian media more frequently than in their Indonesian counterparts. Their names are much more widely known in Australia than in the province of Central Java where they come from. This is comparable to Southeast Asian media coverage of Australian politician Pauline Hanson and her anti-Asian politics.
- 6 Javanese make up the single largest ethnic group (45 percent) of Indonesia's total population (approximately 240 million). The second largest ethnic group, Sundanese, is only one third of its size (15 percent). Java is not the largest island in this archipelagic country, but it is the most important one politically and economically. Although Java covers only 7 percent of the country's total land area, more than 60 percent of Indonesia's people reside on this island.
- 7 Many Javanese claim to profess Islam, but in blatant defiance of the first article of faith in Islam (there is no God but God) they worship and make offerings to supernatural forces and spirits of their ancestors (see also Quinn 2008). They are not necessarily committed to praying five times a day or refraining from the consumption of alcohol. These facts render the statistical claim of Indonesia being the world's largest Muslim country highly problematic, if not misleading.
- 8 The bill may have a longer history in its antecedents. It was already seriously discussed in parliament in 1997, but it was not formally drafted and submitted for ratification in parliament until February 14, 2006. Since then it has provoked an unabated nation-wide controversy.
- 9 Clad in Middle Eastern clothing, this militant group has a long and notorious record of periodically assaulting people and destroying property associated with activities that they consider morally offensive to Islamic values (prostitution, gambling, the drinking of alcohol, or the sex-focused entertainment industry). With a few exceptions, they have enjoyed impunity from the law, due in part to the nearly total dysfunction of law enforcement, in part to a presumably sustained protection from factions within the top political elite. *Playboy* provoked the most serious reaction from groups such as the FPI, while many local men's magazines with more vulgar content have been left alone, most likely because of the former's status as an icon of American decadence. For more discussion on this group, see Allen (2007) and Wilson (2008).
- 10 This is a result of a compromise in the late 1970s between the New Order state that attempted to ban polygamous practice and the mounting pressures from Islamic groups demanding more authority and autonomy for the Islamic court (see Butt 2008; Cammack, Young and Heaton 2008).
- 11 In late November 2008 a commissioner from the local Commission of Human Rights in West Sumatra happened to discover that four women were being jailed in the province's capital city of Padang because each of them had a polyandrous marriage. Although he disapproved of this penalty, the officer admitted there was legally nothing he could do to address the issue, because the Marriage Law of 1974 permits polygamy but not polyandry (see Febrianti 2008).

- 12 A recent survey by a group of well-respected institutions found a negative correlation between what audiences considered to be good television programs and the ratings levels periodically reported by the dominant AGB-Nielsen Media Research. According to the former, 45.8 percent of respondents considered entertainment programs in Indonesian television very poor; 36.3 percent regarded them as moderate; and only 15.6 percent approved of them. The dissatisfied viewers made their judgments on the following grounds: too much violence (63 percent), obscene or pornographic (46.2 percent), losing touch with reality (61.3 percent), unfriendly or inappropriate for children (69.3 percent), gender-biased (57.1 percent), not in favor of the public interest (57.8 percent), and lacking good models for good behavior (61.8 percent) (*Koran Tempo* 2008).
- 13 Manoj Punjabi, producer of *Ayat-ayat Cinta*, reportedly acknowledges that converting the novel into the film involved a deliberate infusing of a significant dose of Hollywoodization and Bollywoodization (Yumiyanti 2008a).
- 14 Observers have attributed the success of the film to a significant extent to these Islamic tips and guidelines on managing everyday life, social interaction and behavior. This is an extension of the already successful book publishing industry with similar messages (see Dhume 2008, Khoiri 2008, Widodo 2008). This down-to-earth approach to Islamic life, especially pertaining to youth, and in a 'pop' style and genre, is akin to the recent popularity of television preachers such as Aa Gym, distinguishing them and *Ayat-ayat Cinta* from most other Islam-focused films in the preceding years.
- 15 In her previous and no less successful film *Arisan* (2003), director Nia Dinata tells the story of a series of sexually liberal yuppies in Jakarta. No one in this film is ultimately happy, except for a couple of male homosexuals. The film was also Indonesia's first commercial and full feature film in which two adult men are seen in close-up kissing for several seconds. Given the largely conservative character of Islamization in Indonesia during the past two decades, it is amazing that the works of Dinata could have passed the Board of Censors and public censure.

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Part II

Social processes of media production, circulation, and reception

5 Music, Islam, and the commercial media in contemporary Indonesia

R. Anderson Sutton

An enormous variety of musical expressions have been disseminated through broadcast and recording media in Indonesia. Dominating the mediated musical landscape have been the many genres of Indonesia's secular popular music, but this domination is not absolute. Some genres, notably *dangdut*, occupy an ambiguous position as often but not always secular in theme. A growing number of genres, styles, and songs identified as "Muslim" are widely represented in the popular media—audio cassettes, audio compact discs, video compact discs, public and private radio, national and private television, commercial films (such as *Ayat-ayat Cinta* [Qur'anic "Verses of Love"] and *Laskar Pelangi* ["Rainbow Warrior"]), as well as the internet.¹ Genres range from traditional *gambus* (Middle Eastern stringed instrument, 'ud) and *qasidah* (vocal music with frame drum) to recent *nasyid* (choral singing) and the more idiosyncratic music of Emha Ainun Nadjib's *Kiai Kanjeng*, which combines Javanese gamelan instruments with Western pop and Arabian percussion instruments.² In addition to genres and groups routinely associated with Islam, some basically secular groups, such as the long-standing and hugely popular rock group Gigi, are now producing songs or albums that are overtly Islamic in message and, it could be argued, in "style." This chapter offers an overview of the Muslim music and related performance (Qur'anic recitation, sermons, spoken advice) that are available in the commercial media. My intentions are to provide an idea of the variety of materials in the marketplace and to identify common threads shared among many of these diverse forms of expression—both in textual message and in musical style. Some of the questions underlying my inquiry are as follows: What topics are prevalent in the song texts of music identified as "Muslim"? What topics seem to be avoided? Is there a dominant "Muslim sound" in Indonesia, even if primarily derived from the music of other Muslim countries? Is there an "Indonesian Muslim sound" unique among Muslim musics of the world? To what extent do Indonesia's myriad regional traditions seem to color the mediated musical expressions that are marketed as "Muslim"? What of the inevitable tensions between the opposing forces of musical austerity and musical sensuality? I will also suggest that an analysis of Muslim music in Indonesia may help to elucidate the dynamic inter-relations between Islam in Indonesia and elsewhere.

Among the many types of commercial media, I choose to focus my attention on the recording industry, which now includes audio cassettes, CDs, and

VCDs (occasionally DVDs). Recordings are not only bought and sold in the marketplace—legally and illegally (with an estimated 80–90% of sales being illegal, pirated versions)—but they serve as a prominent source of material for radio and television broadcast. While I have not explored the realm of radio broadcast in search of Muslim music, recitation, and spoken word, I have paid close attention to television offerings over the last decade and was surprised recently to find no regular entertainment shows devoted to Muslim popular music, whereas I had seen such Muslim pop groups as Nasida Ria on television in the 1990s. As is convincingly demonstrated in the article in this volume (Chapter 2) by Indonesian television expert Ishadi S.K., current Indonesian television does not regularly broadcast Muslim entertainment, except during the holy month of Ramadan. Other than the brief call to prayer heard on most channels every day of the year, it is only the very early morning slots that are given to Muslim shows, most often with one or several Muslims in conservative dress explaining about Muslim values, sometimes with Qur’anic recitation or prayer. When I was in Jakarta for Ramadan in early 1998, the Muslim presence on TV ranged from somber discussions of Muslim values to Muslim writer and musician Emha Ainun Nadjib singing and sermonizing to huge crowds of Muslims in East Java. Even Sarah Sechan, then VJ for the Indonesian pop music show “MTV Ampuh,”³ dressed in modest clothing (no *jilbab*, however) and urged viewers to keep the fast and watch MTV all day to avoid getting too hungry or thirsty before sunset. VJ Peggy Melati Sukma wore a *jilbab* and talked about the moral value of fasting as she introduced *dangdut* hits on TPI’s “In Dangdut.” But after Idul Fitri (the joyful celebration of the end of the fasting month), television reverts to being a nearly totally secular medium. Arriving just before the end of Ramadan in 2009, I found a similar range of television offerings geared towards Islam, with various shows featuring Islamic pop groups, from well-known professionals to amateurs.

What, then, does one find in a music and media store—that is, a store selling CDs, cassettes, VCDs and DVDs?⁴ I have combed through the legal offerings at many stores, large and small, and illegal stalls selling cassettes, CDs, and VCDs. Here I will report on the largest such store in Yogyakarta, Toko Popeye, just one block east of Malioboro Mall. On either side, stretching for several hundred meters in both directions, there have usually been sidewalk stalls selling pirated CDs, VCDs, and cassettes, and a walk-in store selling pirated DVDs. But during my visit to Yogyakarta in summer 2008, they were all closed by a police sweep on June 19, and they had not reopened by the time I left in mid-July. Arriving only one day before, I briefly glanced through the Islamic offerings at several of these—an enormous array of VCDs and CDs of Muslim music, Qur’anic recitation, sermons in Indonesian and Javanese. But I was unable to conduct an accurate count. The price per VCD or CD was in the neighborhood of Rp. 5,000 (about 65 cents in US currency, a fraction of the cost of legal items).

At Toko Popeye itself, Muslim pop CDs by current stars such as Bimbo, Haddad Alwi (sometimes spelled “Hadad Alwi”), Opick, Snada, Debu, and Malaysia’s Raihan, were interspersed among the pop Indonesia CDs. Here I also found Muslim CDs by other artists. The special importance of Ramadan is

reflected not only in TV offerings, but in the release of recordings. In recent years, groups whose normal output would be considered mainstream or alternative pop, such as Gigi,⁵ Cokelat, and Padi,⁶ have put out special albums for the Ramadan market, offering songs whose lyrics are explicitly about Muslim faith and whose sound is sometimes more similar to *nasyid* (choral singing with simple harmonies and texts explicitly indexing Islam) than to their usual output.

Among the VCDs and cassettes, however, there were separate sections for Muslim products: two shelves of Muslim VCDs and two large cabinets of Muslim cassettes, one devoted to various kinds of Muslim pop, the other to Muslim sermons, Qur'anic recitation, prayer, and the like. One of the cassette cabinets was labeled "Qasidah" – apparently serving as a catch-all for a range of popular and hybrid Muslim musical genres, or perhaps a relic of previous decades. It consisted of 14 shelves, each with 11 titles, hence 154 titles in all. On the upper shelves were cassette versions of most of the Muslim pop also available on CD, including the same array of musicians whose music is always identified as Muslim (Opick, Debu, Bimbo, Tompi, Haddad Alwi, Snada, Raihan, and Emha Ainun Nadjib) and the musicians who have in the last few years been making albums that include at least some Muslim songs. Below these were shelves with compilation albums, such as *Dua Belas Lagu Islami Terbaik* ("Twelve Best Islamic Songs"), with songs by the well-known Muslim pop singers as well as a few rock and *dangdut* singers (Ikke Nurjanah, Iis Sugianto, Fadli from the group Padi) and Javanese Muslim pop by artists such as Sonny Josz and the genre-jumping Didi Kempot, who gained fame in the 1990s for his secular hit song "Stasiun Balapan" ("Balapan Station" [the main railroad station in Surakarta, Central Java]) and others that represented a mix of Javanese pop and the gamelan-pop hybrid known as *campursari*.⁷ Still lower were the shelves of cassettes identified as "Qasidah Moderen," including a few cassettes by the famous Semarang-based group Nasida Ria, along with items by Wafiz Azizah, Mayada, Kiamat, and others. On the lowest shelf were cassettes of "Gambus Moderen" and "Orkes Gambus," named after the lead instrument of the ensemble, the *gambus*, a lute closely modeled on the Middle Eastern *'ud* (*oud*), usually featuring electric keyboard and a mix of drums (sounding very similar to *qasidah moderen*), often with violin and/or flute (see Capwell 1995). Liner notes on some of these were given in Arabic (usually in both Arabic script and Romanized alphabet), or a combination of Arabic and Indonesian. The artists depicted on the cover appeared either to be Arab or of Arab descent.

The other cabinet, though not labeled, was clearly devoted exclusively to Islamic religious expression and, with 12 titles on most of its 14 shelves, held more than 160 titles. The uppermost shelves contained readings from the Qur'an (identified primarily as "Pengajian Al Qur'an" or "Murattal Tilawatil Qur'an" ["Reciting the Qur'an"]), with liner notes in Indonesian or a combination of Arabic and Indonesian. Most were identified by the section (or "juz") of the Qur'an, the most popular being "Juz 'Amma."⁸ A variety of performers were represented, but several were dominant, with more than 10 titles on display: two women (Dra. H. Siti Marlina and H. Maria Ulfa, M.A.) and one man (H. Muammar ZA, whose readings of each of the 30 *juz* of the Qur'an were represented in a series). Below these were cassettes

whose titles included the word “da’wah” (also spelled “daqwah” and *dakwah*), referring to Islamic proselytizing. Most were in Indonesian, though a few were in Javanese. On the same shelves and closely related were cassettes labeled “Nada dan Da’wah”, which present an alternation between *qasidah*-like music (“nada” meaning “tone” or “note”) and speaking about the virtues of leading an Islamic life (*da’wah*). Again certain star performers dominated the offerings: K.H. Zainuddin, MZ with more than 10 “Da’wah” cassettes and H. Ma’ruf Isalmuddin with more than 10 “Nada dan Da’wah” cassettes. Other categories on display were identified as follows: “Shalawat Rebana,” a kind of musical invocation of the Prophet Mohammad, involving the frame drum known as *rebana*, and often a keyboard and other pop instruments in addition; “Zikir” (dzikir), a kind of exuberant singing in praise of Allah, to be performed after prayer; “Barzanji,” a kind of hymn of praise about the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, and one entitled *Khadrah*, a kind of chant of praise to Allah, involving solo and heterophonic group singing, using Middle Eastern scales and accompanied only by *rebana* and hand clapping. With the exception of the *Khadrah* album, these often included preaching and a mix of instrumental and vocal music, the latter sounding very similar in style to the *gambus moderen* or even *dangdut*.

In the VCD section, offerings ranged from current Muslim pop stars (such as Snada and others) with the pastiche of visual images typical of secular music videos, to Qur’anic recitation (by H. Muammar ZA and others) with the visual track alternating between scenes of pious Muslim worshippers and scenes of the reciter reading and even pointing with his or her finger to the Arabic lines of the Qur’anic passage being recited. Subtitles appear in almost all the VCDs, as a guide to karaoke singing in the pop VCDs and as an educational device, often appearing in both Arabic script and Indonesian translation, in the Qur’anic recitation VCDs.

In addition to providing recorded music, the item for sale (cassette, CD, or VCD) sometimes included directions for purchasing Muslim ringtones, to be downloaded to one’s cellphone for a small fee (about Rp. 900 or US\$0.10 in 2009). On a cassette entitled *Dzikir dan Munajat*, featuring H. Muammar ZA, the liner notes say nothing of the contents, but offer: (1) ringtone downloads; and (2) a cellphone texting (SMS) service whereby the customer types in certain key Islamic terms (*hadis*, *tausiya*, *sholat*,⁹ etc.) and receives in response periodic “Tips Muslim” – SMS text message advice on how to live one’s daily life as a good Muslim. The liner notes for H. Muammar’s *Maulid Al Barzanji* cassette, along with downloads of Muslim pop tunes, such as “Tombo Hati” (“Medicine/Remedy for the Heart” [lit. “for the Liver” – the body organ where emotion is said to reside]) also offer ways to download computer and cellphone wallpapers with Muslim designs and themes. Even the cassette itself is the emblematic Muslim green in color, with calligraphy-inspired abstract Muslim designs in gold. How widely these download services are used is difficult to judge, but the ringtone industry in Indonesia, as elsewhere in Asia, has become a major – perhaps the major – source of revenue in the current music media landscape (see Barendregt and Zanten 2002).

No doubt there are still more titles and even genres on the market in Java, not to mention other areas around Indonesia. In Makassar, South Sulawesi in 2007 I found the full range of Muslim pop, along with *qasidah* and *gambus* in local languages (Bugis, primarily) as well as Indonesian and Arabic, and a few items in Javanese (presumably for the growing number of Javanese migrants now living in South Sulawesi).

What patterns emerge from this array of commercial offerings? Returning now to the questions posed in my introduction, we can begin with the topics of songs. Beyond the Qur'anic recitation and spoken proselytizing, nearly all song texts either praise Allah and the Prophet explicitly (usually in Arabic) or urge their audiences to embrace and hold fast to a moral code based in Islam (usually in Indonesian or regional language) – to be chaste before marriage, to be faithful, to avoid all that is *haram*, such as gambling and drinking, to believe that no matter what one suffers, faith in Allah will enable one to endure. Some songs deal with specific catastrophic events, such as the monetary crisis of 1998, the uprisings and violence of May 1998 in Jakarta and elsewhere, the tsunami of 2004 in Aceh, the earthquake of 2006 in Yogyakarta. Without accusing specific individuals, many songs (and spoken passages) empathize with the poor and criticize the corrupt and wealthy. What topics seem to be avoided? I did not find songs aimed explicitly at galvanizing audiences into political action – no “protest” songs and no songs advocating a specific political party or politician. A few songs deal with current issues: for example, the financial crisis of 1998 in the song “Krisis Moneter” (lit. “Monetary Crisis”), by Zen Rahman and Santoso HE, which, instead of putting blame on Indonesian government corruption or international mismanagement, interprets the crisis as a test from Allah for Indonesia’s poor Muslims (*Krisis Moneter* 1999). Indeed, songs almost always address personal religious faith and practice, sometimes reflecting on one’s own adherence to Islam, and other times urging the listeners to become more devout in their habits and beliefs.

The texts excerpted in Figures 5.1 and 5.2 contain typical Islamic messages, though they contrast in language and in musical style: “Rukun Islam dan Imam” (Islamic Solidarity and Faith), sung in Indonesian by an early pop star, Ernie Djohan; and “Ngalah” (Give In/Surrender), sung in Javanese (mixed here and there with Indonesian) by a younger star, Safitri. The harmonic progressions are given in chord symbols above the text.

While those who purchase and listen to Islamic pop no doubt range from conservative Muslims to progressive, moderate Muslims, their Islamic orientation would appear to be a very minor factor in their consumer decision-making, as the messages contained in the song texts vary rather little. Why might someone choose to buy a Safitri cassette or VCD instead of an Ernie Djohan one? This kind of choice is clearly based on language (Safitri’s Javanese vs Ernie Djohan’s Indonesian) and musical style (Safitri’s based on regional pop, vs Ernie Djohan’s on the more typical features of Indonesian pop, discussed below), not textual content.

Let us turn now to the matter of musical style. Is there a dominant “Muslim sound” in Indonesia? While no single “Muslim” musical trait turns up in every

E min		
Kusebut kalimat syahadat		I say the Muslim confession of faith
	B7	
Kedua kukerjakan sholat		Second, I carry out (my) prayers
A min		
Berpuasa juga berzakat		(I) fast and also give alms to the poor
	B7	E min
Berhaji bila kita mampu		(I/we) make the pilgrimage to Mecca if we are wealthy
E min		
Ya Allah Engkaulah Tuhanku		Yes, Allah, You are my God
	B7	
Nabi Muhammad Utusan-Mu		The prophet Muhammad is your messenger
A min		
Al-Qur'an itulah imanku		The Holy Qur'an is my creed
	B7	E min
Di Ka'bah itulah kiblatku		The <i>ka'bah</i> is the direction I face for praying
E min	A min	
Islam agamaku		Islam is my religion
	D	G C B7
Muhammad Nabiku		Muhammad is my prophet
E min	B7	
Shalat lima waktu		Praying five times a day
	C	B7
Itulah wajibku		That is my obligation
E min		
Ya Allah...		

Figure 5.1 Ernie Djohan singing “Rukun Islam dan Iman” (Islamic Solidarity and Faith), excerpt from VCD special edition *pop Muslim: Hikmah Insyah Allah*.

song in every genre, there are several that are widespread and almost sure indicators of Muslim pop, summarized in Figure 5.3.

First on this list is the use of minor tonality, which is not typical of most Indonesian songs that use Western harmony, other than in *dangdut* songs, which Weintraub (pers. comm. 2009) estimates to be more than 50% in minor tonality; but is the preferred tonality in Muslim songs. Second is the use of slow tempo – both in the unfolding of the melody and in the progression of the harmony. The first example above is typical in both harmony and tempo. The song is in E minor,

E		
Bondo sithik, jare kurang		[You have] few possessions, [you] say, not enough
C# min	E	
Nanging ora tau sembayang		But [you] never pray
F# min		
Bondo akeh, pingin tambah maneh		[You have] many possessions, want to have more
B7	E	
Soyo murko, trus dadi srakah		[You] get more and more selfish, becoming greedy
E		
Luwih-becik yen nrimo ngalah		It's better if you accept you are wrong/can give in
C# min	E	
Gusti mesti paring dalan gampang		God will surely give an easy path
F# min		
Daripada hidup mewah-mewah		Rather than living extravagantly
B7	E	
Sampai melupakan aqidah		To the point that [you] forget [your] faith.

Figure 5.2 Safitri singing “Ngalah” (Give in/Surrender), excerpt from VCD *Visoke: Edisi Sholawat bersama*.

remaining solidly in minor tonality except for the brief progression through D and G major chords before returning to E minor. And both the harmonic rhythm (tempo of the chord changes) and the tempo of the beat itself is quite slow, allowing the listener to focus on the words and the serious mood intended. For the many Indonesian listeners well accustomed to the musical vocabulary of the West, these traits no doubt evoke a somber, reflective mood, appropriate for a moralizing song text. Yet the minor harmonies sometimes also support melodic motion whose scale structure, while not a direct borrowing from Middle Eastern scales, suggest these scales in ways similar to pop music from the Middle East and other parts of Muslim Asia.

1. minor tonality
2. slow tempo and slow harmonic rhythm/chord changes
3. florid vocal ornamentation and scale structures derived from Arabic music
4. indexical Muslim instruments *rebana* (frame drums) and *gambus* (lute), usually heard in combination with electronic keyboard and often with flute, violin, and electric instruments (guitar and bass) as well as other drum and percussion.

Figure 5.3 Prominent musical stylistic elements in Indonesia's Muslim pop.

Though slow tempo songs abound, one also finds some with medium or even fast tempos, usually incorporating musical stylistic elements (including characteristic rhythms) that typify other genres. Tempos and rhythms now identified as *dangdut* style (but recalling older *orkes Melayu* and *irama Deli* styles) are widely evident in *gambus* and especially *qasidah moderen*. Sundanese *jaipongan* and Javanese *kroncong* (*langgam*) rhythms, sometimes in hybrid combination with these *dangdut* rhythms, are found in many of the Javanese Muslim songs, such as those sung by Didi Kempot, Safitri, and Sonny Jozs, among others. The second example above (Safitri's "Ngalah") draws for its musical style on *kroncong* (and its Javanese regional variant, known as *langgam Jawa*) to give a distinctively Javanese feel, using major tonality and a somewhat faster tempo than that of the first example, but nevertheless quite slow in chord changes.¹⁰

Another widespread trait in Indonesian Muslim music is the florid vocal ornamentation that typifies popular music in much of the Muslim world, from Egyptian pop (e.g., Umm Kulthum), to Indian film music and Indonesian *dangdut*. Some songs involve the melismatic delivery of text (almost always in Arabic) in free rhythm, often unaccompanied, as can be heard in the middle section of a remarkable remake of a Javanese children's song, sung by Emha Ainun Nadjib, with a first section presenting the secular Javanese song text, its melody modified and supported by the typical minor harmonies of Muslim pop, a middle section in melismatic Arabic, and a third section returning to the Javanese melody and minor harmonies, but with text now in Arabic (see Figure 5.4).

This medley exhibits some distinctively Javanese features (in language, instruments, and melodic contour), but not in vocal style or scale. However, on some Javanese Muslim recordings (e.g., by H. Ma'ruf, Ki Sudrun, and the famous shadow puppeteer Ki Manteb Sudarsono), the singer sometimes opts for the distinctively Javanese vocal style used in the singing of traditional Javanese *tembang/macapat*, using Javanese ornaments and Javanese *slendro* and *pelog* scales, rather than Western or Middle Eastern ones. Other groups, such as the popular *nasyid* group Snada, adhere very closely to the Western tempered chromatic scale, singing in rich, Western-derived harmonies, with almost no vocal ornamentation at all¹¹ (see Figure 5.5).

No single instrument or instrumental combination dominates, but the *rebana* (frame drums) and *gambus* (lute) are sure markers of Muslim music, usually heard in combination with electronic keyboard and often with flute, violin, and electric instruments (guitar and bass) as well as other drum and percussion. Initiated by Emha Ainun Nadjib and dovetailing with the explosively popular combination of Javanese gamelan instruments with electronic keyboard and other pop instruments known as *campursari*, a growing number of Javanese Muslim pop sounds stylistically similar to *campursari* and is even labeled as such (e.g., *Album Islami Campursari*, *The Best Sholawat Campursari*, Vols. 1–3). Nevertheless, one finds on some of the Muslim pop compilation albums various lavish combinations of Western orchestral instruments, along with melodies, rhythms, and harmonies deriving from the vocabulary of Western mainstream pop—such as works by fusion keyboardist and composer Dwiki Dharmawan—which are “Muslim” in

I. Text of traditional Javanese children's song (*lagu dolanan*: "Ilir-Ilir"):

Lir-ilir lir-ilir	Fan/spin, fan/spin
tandure wis sumilir	The rice harvest is already blowing softly in the wind
Tak ijo royo-royo	I take the leaf-green [offering?]
Tak senggah temanten anyar.	I offer it to the newlyweds
Bocah angon, bocah angon,	Herder child, herder child
Penekno blimbing kuwi	Wrap that star fruit
Lunyu-lunyu penekno	Slippery, slippery wrap it
Kanggo mbasuh dodotiro	To wash your <i>dodot</i> (batik cloth)
Dodotiro, dodotiro,	Your <i>dodot</i> , your <i>dodot</i>
Kumitir bedahing pinggir	It is fluttering, torn on the edge
Dondomono jumatono	Sew it, mend it
Kanggo sebo mengko sore...etc/.	To make a formal appearance/supplication...etc.

II. Text in Arabic, with different melody ("Shalawatan Badar"). The Arabic given in romanization here is exactly as written in the karaoke subtitles on the VCD. A transliteration into Arabic script is provided in Appendix I, courtesy of Dustin Cowell, Professor of Arabic in the Department of African Languages and Literature, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Allahummaghfir lanaa	O God, forgive us!
Ya ghoffaar ya ghoffaar Allahumjmaftahlana	O Most Forgiving, O Most Forgiving, O God, open for us
Abbwabarrohmah Allahummaftahlana	The gates of mercy, O God open for us
Abbwabalbarok Abwaabanni'mah Abbwabalkuwwah Abwaabalafiyah	The gates of blessing and the gates of grace The gates of strength and the gates of vitality (wellness)
Wa abbwabalkhoirot Wa abwaabalkhoirot	And the gates of blessings, and the gates of blessings
III. Text in Arabic, with return to "Ilir-Ilir" melody:	
Shalaatullah salaamullah 'Alaa thaahaa Rasuulillaah	The Grace of God, the Peace of God, upon the Taha of God's Messenger
Shalaatullah salaamullah "Alaa yaasiin habibillaah	The Grace of God, the Peace of God, upon the Yasin of God's Messenger
Tawassalna bibismillaah wabilhaadi Rasuulillaah	We seek intercession by the invocation of God's name and the guide, God's Messenger
Wakulli mjaahidil lillaah Bi 'ahlilbadriyaa Allah Illaahii sallimil ummah Minal aafaati wanniqmah	And ever struggling (in the path) of God, by those [who fought in the Battle] of Badr Oh my God, preserve the Ummah from harm and malice
Wamin hammiw wamin ghummah Bi ahlilbadriyaa Allah...etc.	And from distress and sadness. By those [who fought in the Battle] of Badr...etc.

Figure 5.4 Emha Ainun Nadjib's "Ilir-Ilir – Shalawat Badar" (Fan/Spin – Invocation/ Prayer of [the Battle of] Badr), excerpt from VCD *Best of the Best Emha Ainun Nadjib*.

Chorus/Refrain:

Ya Robbi, Ya Robbi, Ya Robbi, Ya Robbi
 Tuhan kami ya Robbi

Oh God, Oh God, Oh God, Oh God
 Our God, Oh God

Verse 1

Segala puji hanya pada Mu Allah
 Tuhan bagi semesta alam
 Yang maha pengasih dan maha penyayang
 Penguasa hari pembalasan

All praise only to You, Allah
 God of all nature
 Who is all-merciful and all-loving
 Lord of the day of judgment/reckoning

Chorus/Refrain

Ya Robbi, etc.

Verse 2

Hanya kepadaMu kami kan menyembah
 Dan memohon pertolongan Mu
 Tunjuk[k]kanlah kami jalan Mu yang lurus
 Jalan yang engkau anugrahi.

Only to You will we pray
 And ask for Your help
 Show us your straight path
 The path that you bestow [upon us].

Figure 5.5 Snada singing “Hanya Pada-Mu” (Only to You), excerpt from VCD Neo Shalawat.

verbal message, but not in musical style. And one of the most popular genres of Muslim music, *nasyid*, is often sung *a capella*, with only sparse percussion or no instrumental accompaniment at all.

Is there, then, an “Indonesian Muslim sound” unique among Muslim musics of the world? Aside from obvious markers such as language, it would be hazardous to posit a distinctive Indonesian Muslim sound—though the regional elements in some of Indonesia’s Muslim music clearly set them off from the music of other Muslim countries. The clearest example is Emha Ainun Nadjib’s use of gamelan instruments in his Kiai Kanjeng ensemble, a practice now imitated by some other Javanese Muslim musicians in the wake of the *campursari* craze (Sonny Jozs, Safitri, and Didi Kempot). Indeed, it would seem natural that local musical features find their way into Muslim musical expression in Indonesia. My impression, however, is that this is less common than one might expect. Countless “traditional” genres have developed over the centuries, combining regional and imported elements, but commercial Muslim music, whether modern pop (such as the music of Snada and Opick) or *gambus* and *qasidah moderen*, often seem to eschew local characteristics in favor of embracing a broader stylistic base, often reaching beyond Indonesia towards a perceived globalized Muslim identity, reflected not only in the musical style, but also in their use of Arabic (even though many listeners would not understand it), and Middle Eastern-inspired dress (*busana Muslim*). Thus, to answer the question posed earlier about the extent to which Indonesia’s myriad regional traditions seem to color the nationally mediated musical expressions that are marketed as “Muslim,” the answer would have to be “sometimes, but not routinely”—Kiai Kanjeng notwithstanding. And Emha’s style over a period of two decades or so has actually moved away from a Javanese

sound towards something less local and more “Muslim,” particularly when he sings in Arabic, thereby reaching beyond his Javanese audience to go national (and to do so by drawing on the international language and vocal style of Middle Eastern Islam).

Conclusion

What can we learn from this cursory overview of Muslim offerings in the realm of commercial recordings? No one would deny that Islam in Indonesia, and particularly its place in public culture, has been changing over recent decades and rapidly so since 1998. The ever greater number of women choosing to cover their heads in public, the explosion of books pertaining to Islam, the construction of new mosques and the rise of multiple Islamic political parties attest to the changing nature of Islam. Recordings with Muslim content – from Qur’anic recitation to trendy Muslim pop – have certainly grown in number as well, but given the size of Indonesia’s Muslim population, one might expect an even greater outpouring. During an interview with the members of Snada at their studio in July 2008, several of the group members expressed to me their wonder at the very small number of groups like theirs. They were doing very well financially, not only from album sales, ringtone downloads, and live appearances, but also from commercial advertising jingles and television station theme songs. Why were there not at least twenty or thirty other groups competing with them? I suggested that very few groups could sing in such perfect harmony as they could and they politely laughed. But the question bears further consideration. For all the public posturing about being a good Muslim, there would seem to be a low saturation point among Indonesian consumers for music that often sounds similar from one song to the next, both in the conservative musical style and in the moralizing messages. As Ishadi notes in Chapter 2 in this volume, for Indonesian television, viewers seem eager for a feast of Islamic-related entertainment during Ramadan, but are satisfied with its almost complete absence during the rest of the year.

Another issue, even more basic, is the ambiguous stance within Islam on the status of music as dangerously sensual and tolerated only with some provisions on style and content of presentation. Clearly some stricter interpretations of Islamic law would forbid most of the Muslim pop and *qasidah* modern music so widely available throughout Indonesia. As we know, commercial appeal for media products in a competitive marketplace often involves a sensual, if not openly erotic, dimension. This poses a dilemma for those marketing Muslim albums, and the frequent compromise is to present female performers with attractive figures fully covered by *busana Muslim* and carefully made-up faces beaming out from demure headcovers, swaying gently as they perform (e.g., Safitri, Nasida Ria).

A set of nagging questions that clearly need to be addressed concern the reception dimension – who buys, watches, listens? Why? And what changes are evident in the patterns of consumption? Some colleagues have already begun work on these important issues (including contributors to this volume, Barendregt and Weintraub). My attempts at asking store clerks and owners these questions met

with a combination of disinterest and claims of ignorance. Even questions about which items sold most copies yielded only a vague response that the big-name pop stars, such as Opick, Snada, and Emha, sold more than the *gambus moderen* or Qur’anic recitation albums, and that sales of Islamic albums increased during the holy month of Ramadan. Of perhaps greater interest, however, are questions requiring more than simple factual answers from those involved—as musicians, as distributors, as consumers. The changing landscape of Muslim recordings also, I think, has much to tell us about the changing senses of community and social solidarity experienced by Muslims in Indonesia – locally (within Indonesia’s individual ethno-linguistic groups), nationally (across these groups), and internationally (encompassing a larger Muslim aesthetic world, stretching from Egypt and Saudi Arabia to parts of eastern Indonesia and the southern Philippines). Islam in Indonesia is certainly not monolithic, but the social institutions encouraging wider Islamic solidarity, such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, are perhaps being bolstered by an increased production of Muslim music whose styles and messages, in the commercial media at least, are not so widely divergent as might be expected in a nation whose cultures are so famously diverse. Of course, some individual listeners will be more conservative and others more progressive, but the Muslim content of their songs and their stage presentation do not differ much from one to another. *Nasyid* groups such as Snada face criticism from conservatives for their emphasis on Western harmonies, the very basis of their musical style. And rock groups who release Muslim albums just in time for Ramadan face criticism for a lack of sincerity, their musical choices being governed by profit-motive rather than religious conviction. Such controversy notwithstanding, Muslim music has clearly won a firm presence in the Indonesian marketplace and demands the close and sustained attention of cultural scholars who wish to understand Indonesia in the twenty-first century.

Appendix: Arabic text of Emha Ainun Nadjib’s “*Ilir-Ilir—Shalawat Badar*”

<i>Allahummaghfirlanaa</i>	O God, forgive us!	اللهم اغفر لنا
<i>Ya ghoffaar ya ghoffaar Allahumjmaftahlana</i>	O Most Forgiving, O Most Forgiving, O God, open for us	يا غفار يا غفار, اللهم افتح لنا
<i>Abbwabarrohmah Allahummaftahlana</i>	The gates of mercy, O God open for us	أبواب الرحمة، اللهم افتح لنا
<i>Abbwabalbarok Abwaabanni'mah</i>	The gates of blessing and the gates of grace	أبواب البركة أبواب النعمة
<i>Abbwabalkuwwah Abwaabalafiyah</i>	The gates of strength and the gates of vitality (wellness)	أبواب القوة، أبواب العافية

<i>Wa abbwabalkhoirot</i> <i>Wa abwaabalkhoirot</i>	And the gates of blessings, and the gates of blessings	و أبواب الخيرات، وأبواب الخيرات
Return To "Ilir-Ilir" melody:		
<i>Shalaatullah</i> <i>salaamullah 'Alaa</i> <i>thaahaa Rasuulillaah</i>	The Grace of God, the Peace of God, upon the Taha of God's Messenger	صلاة الله سلام الله على طه رسول الله
<i>Shalaatullah</i> <i>salaamullah "Alaa</i> <i>yaasiin habibillaah</i>	The Grace of God, the Peace of God, upon the Yasin of God's Messenger	صلاة الله سلام الله على ياسين حبيب الله
<i>Tawassalna</i> <i>bibismillaah</i> <i>wabilhaadi</i> <i>Rasuulillaah</i>	We seek intercession by the invocation of God's name and the guide, God's Messenger	توصلنا بـ "بسم الله" وبالهادي رسول الله
<i>Wakulli mjaahidil</i> <i>lillaah Bi</i> <i>'ahlibadriyaa Allah</i>	And ever struggling (in the path) of God, by those [who fought in the Battle] of Badr	وكل مجاهد لله بأهل البدرية، الله
<i>Iliaahii sallimil</i> <i>ummah Minal aafaati</i> <i>wanniqmah</i>	Oh my God, preserve the Ummah from harm and malice	إلهي سلم الأمة من الأفات والنقمة
<i>Wamin hammiw</i> <i>wamin ghummah Bi</i> <i>ahlibadriyaa Allah</i>	And from distress and sadness. By those [who fought in the Battle] of Badr	ومن هم ومن غمّة بأهل بدرية الله

Notes

- 1 Most writers on music in Indonesia, myself included, have focused their research on music outside the sphere of Islam. Only a few scholars have devoted even brief attention to Indonesia's Muslim music and related forms of expression in their publications. Craig Lockard's chapter on Indonesia in his survey of popular music in Southeast Asia (1998) cites Rhoma Irama's incorporation of Muslim issues in his *dangdut* music and films, but mentions no other Muslim musicians or genres. Krishna Sen and David T. Hall's chapter on music in their book on the media in Indonesia (2000) does not even mention Muslim music, other than the occasional connection between Islam and *dangdut*, again citing Rhoma Irama. Charles Capwell's important 1995 study of the connection between such Indonesian genres as *gambus* and their Yemeni roots is informative, but brief, and it appeared well before the explosion in commercial releases. More recent and noteworthy is the article by Bart Barendregt and Wim van Zanten (2002), but this lengthy and ambitious article covers a wide range of popular music genres, devoting only five pages to Muslim popular music (pp. 76–80). Even so, the description remains largely accurate with respect to the current Muslim music scene in

2008. In a more popular vein, the chapter on “Indonesia” in *World Music: The Rough Guide* enthuses over the pulsating rhythms and demure stage presence of famous *qasidah moderen* group Nasida Ria and describes the direct Arabic inspiration for *gambus* (pp. 136–137) but devotes most of its pages to secular music, pop and traditional (Heaton and Steptoe 2001). Already familiar with Muslim musical expression elsewhere prior to her research in Indonesia in the late 1990s, Anne Rasmussen has contributed important insights into the role and aesthetics of Qur’an recitation there (e.g., 2001), but has not focused on the popular music dimension of Islam in Indonesia. Rasmussen and David Harnish are underway on an edited volume on music and Islam in Indonesia, a timely and much anticipated project. On the Islamic nature of *dangdut* music, see the article by Rhoma Irama (Chapter 11 in this volume) and Weintraub’s forthcoming article in the Harnish and Rasmussen volume.

- 2 See Sarkissian 2005 on *nasyid*, and see Betts’ copiously illustrated book on Emha (2006, esp. pp. 47–56).
- 3 Broadcast on MTV Southeast Asia’s cable channel, and on ANteve. For Indonesian television’s engagement with local, national, and international popular music, see Sutton 2003.
- 4 This music-store-ethnography approach to gaining an overall view of commercial musical offerings in Indonesia has been fruitfully employed in other scholarly writings: by Marc Perlman for Surakarta, Central Java (1999); by Jeremy Wallach for Jakarta (2008: 67–90); and by myself for Central and East Java (1985) and for Makassar, South Sulawesi (2002b: 216–221).
- 5 The recent album by Gigi, *Pintu Sorga* (“The Gate to Heaven”) is devoted entirely to newly composed Muslim songs, including two by Djaka Bimbo, a member of Indonesia’s well-known *nasyid* group Bimbo. While exhibiting some typical Muslim musical traits (see below), most tracks on this CD also maintain at least some of Gigi’s trademark hard rock sound.
- 6 The members of these groups certainly do not exhibit a strong Muslim identity in their normal public appearances and media images. Indeed, some members of these groups are not even Muslim.
- 7 *Campursari* (lit. “mixed essence”) combines gamelan with pop instruments, especially keyboard synthesizer, and has been an enormously popular development in central Java since the early 1990s. See further Mrazek 1999, Sutton 2002a, Supanggah 2003, and Laronga 2008.
- 8 Bookstores, from the large chains such as Gramedia to the myriad used and new book-stalls, carry an enormous number of books containing words and translations into Indonesian, and sometimes even into English, of the Qur’an, as well as books of prayers, e.g. Mahfan 2005, Rahman 2006. In addition, during the last decade or so (since the fall of Suharto), there has been an explosion of books about Islam, or offering guidance and advice for Muslim readers (mostly in Indonesian prose). See also Widodo 2008 on the large variety of Muslim offerings in Indonesian bookstores.
- 9 *Hadis* refers to “a collection of the traditions relating to the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad” (Stevens and Schmidgall-Tellings 2004: 341). *Tausiya* simply translates as “advice,” and *sholat* is a general word for Muslim prayer, but sometimes refers specifically to the Friday prayer (Stevens and Schmidgall-Tellings 2004: 931).
- 10 In the VCD versions of these songs, both singers are dressed demurely in head scarf and long-sleeved blouse and long skirt. Safitri stands in a garden setting, gently swaying to the rhythm, whereas Ernie Djohan is seated and the video alternates scenes of the singer with scenes of Mecca and pious Muslims praying.
- 11 In a few of their songs, Snada’s skillful vocalists playfully imitate different styles from Indonesia’s vast arsenal of local and minority musical styles, including not only Javanese and Sundanese, but also Minangkabau and Chinese (e.g., the song “Neo Shalawat”).

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6 The Internet, cyber-religion, and authority

The case of the Indonesian Liberal Islam Network

Muhamad Ali

Gary R. Bunt's recent notion of "iMuslims: rewiring the House of Islam" suggests a new type of Muslim who regularly uses the Internet for a wide variety of purposes that complement or alternate with offline networks (Bunt 2009: 34–5). But his cases focus on the Wahhabi and Salafi networks and marginalize the liberal networks. The case of the Liberal Islam Network (Jaringan Liberal Islam, JIL), whose base is in Indonesia, shows that Muslim discourses are imagined both within and beyond the traditional space of "the House of Islam." This chapter seeks to analyze the extent to which the Internet has shaped Islamic discourse and Muslim networking, particularly among those viewing themselves as liberal Muslims. It investigates how liberals play an increasing role in constructing and disseminating their views in competition and in coexistence with the "fundamentalist" Muslims in cyberspace as well as through the printed media and face-to-face communities.¹ It offers a case of a network community rather than a strict organization, of contestation of religious authorities, of diverse views within the liberal Islam category, and of the limits of cyberspace in terms of determining tolerant and ideological attitudes.

The websites, online discussion forums, online editorials, blogs, and friendship networks such as Friendster and Facebook, serve as cross-cultural, cross-boundary modes of communication and interactions, but at the same time function as a difference marker of particular religious orientations, often a simple extension of the offline ideological orientations. The permeable boundaries of cyberspace have helped to create new forms of religious alliances, but online activities have also reinforced older forms of religious community. A new sense of public has now emerged not only in "the Muslim world," but in the worlds of other religious and non-religious communities.² The new media, and its associated networks of new people and new forms of community, has created a sense of a new Muslim public, but the extent of newness and effectiveness varies according to different networks and contextual situations.³ This may imply more openness and tolerance among online activists. However, traditional pre-existing ideological attitudes remain and in many cases become reinforced in cyberspace.

iMuslims and cyber-Islams

Cyberspace, originally the imaginary spaces where computer stimulations occurred, is now used more generally for the “place” where the electronic network links a global community of users. The Internet, an international computer network that links other computer networks and even personal computers, has many features: e-mail, newsgroups which post messages about topics and get discussions going, and the World Wide Web, a system that provides rapid access to news and information. If the Internet enables the interconnection of contacts, the Web enables the interconnection of content (Kerckhove 1998: 80). With such functions, the Internet widens Muslim contacts and discourses of Islam. More interpretations of Islamic texts have emerged within changing virtual and non-virtual contexts. Before the Internet, Muslim thinkers and activists could only meet face-to-face to express and discuss their views. Muslim scholars (*ulama*) and lay people (*awwam*) are now able to express and share their views and experiences with others more freely from their computer desks or laptops anywhere in the world.

The Web can transform the minds and feelings of an increasing number of people who are otherwise ignorant, misinformed, passive, or reactive about particular religious issues. Websites can give firsthand information about the principles and messages of particular Muslim groups. Islam has become increasingly pluralistic and complex, so it is in cyberspace that “religious literacy” is hoped to increase.⁴ Websites and newsgroups may reduce the intellectual gap between the so-called traditionalists and the modernists, between the elites and the popular, between *santri* (devout Muslims) and *abangan* (nominal Muslims), between the specialists and the generalists, between the liberals and the conservatives, and so forth. The spectrums are not necessarily binary, but for the purpose of simplification of a complex reality, categories become even more fluid via the Internet. While Islam has become diverse offline, it has become even more diverse online. The Internet has shaped Islam into something more complex.

No single movement—traditionalist, modernist, radical, fundamentalist, moderate, or liberal—rejects the use of the Internet. Groups affiliated with these movements use media to serve their purposes. Using these media, many of the fundamentalists can be anti-Western in their discourse, content, and objectives, but they are computer literate and use the Internet to further their anti-Western views. Internet use among these various movements is not necessarily different and the content of what users browse can be very similar. A wide range of information about Islam has enabled the traditionalist, the modernist, the Islamist, and the liberal to become more personalized and more highly contextualized via the Internet.

The Internet is one of many modes for producing and disseminating discourses about Islam. Muslim groups use various media: bulletins, journals, magazines, newspapers, books, sermons, workshops, banners, radio programs, TV programs, as well as the Internet. With the help of all types of media, everyone struggles to win the minds and hearts of people across Indonesia and beyond. Offline

competition confined to particular localities among Muslim groups has turned now into a cyberspace struggle. One issue in one small area can become national and global in a matter of minutes. For example, programs put forward by the local regency in Bulu Kumba, South Sulawesi, advocating for female students to wear headscarves and for civil servants to read the Qur'an correctly in 2003, quickly became a national issue, inciting responses from multiple Muslim orientations, including liberal activists located in Jakarta. Although there is still a regional and social gap concerning the use of the Internet in big cities compared to villages and mountainous areas, the increased number and quality of internet cafés side by side with mosques and schools, mostly in big cities, have resulted in new developments: Islamic information has become less centralized, widespread, and popular, and people have felt freer to contest and accept or reject particular religious interpretations and ideologies.

Those iMuslims who have regular access to the Internet are able to view other Muslim worlds and the wider world in a different way from previous generations, and they have more options to diverse patterns of life and more choices to live accordingly. Many iMuslims maintain and reinforce online affiliations and networks at the expense of traditional networks. The impact of the Internet is complex and cannot be generalized for all persons and all cases. As Gary Bunt has pointed out, whether iMuslims believe that their religiosity and "iMuslimness" is intensified by online activities demands further research (Bunt 2009: 280–1). The impact of the Internet, however, can be clearly seen in the ways it has shaped the Muslim community in terms of its organization and networks, as I will describe in this chapter.

The rise of network communities and JIL

Scholars define the Islamic community, or the *ummah*, as an idealized identity across classes, ethnicities, nationalities, and gender. With cyber networks, a sense of Islamic community is not necessarily present across such boundaries when particular communities adhere strongly to particular religious or ideological orientations. The Islamic community in cyberspace can become even more divided into smaller and finite communities of membership. There is the potential for greater fragmentation of the idealized Islamic community.

The rise of JIL cannot be separated from the impact of the Internet. Founded in March 2001, JIL served partly as a counter-movement to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism within the more open political circumstances made possible by President Suharto's fall in 1998. Six young people, namely, Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, Luthfi Assyaukani, Hamid Basyaib, Ihsan Ali Fauzi, Nong Darol Mahmada, and Ahmad Sahal, met with senior journalist and founding editor of news magazine *Tempo*, Goenawan Mohamad, in January 2001. In this meeting, they discussed the possibility of establishing a network that would link different intellectuals and activists concerned with liberal interpretations of Islamic teachings to counter the fundamentalist movement. Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, who became JIL's chief coordinator, contended that while radical Islam grows militant, systematic, and

organized, “liberal Islam” has been unorganized, weak, not militant, not resistant, and unassertive in giving voice to its perspective (Ali 2005: 1–6).

The founders considered their alliance to be a network, so that individuals could have multiple memberships as well as temporary and limited involvement. These young intellectual-activists decided not to create a rigid organization; instead, they established a network, or *jaringan*, because they viewed it as loose, fluid, and virtual.⁵ The creation of a collective identity occurred in the midst of tensions created by the inadequacy of those means available to achieve personal and collective goals. From these tensions, as well as from close face-to-face interaction, a heavy emotional investment developed that encouraged individuals to share in the collective identity. From the outset, there was a debate about the nature of such a network.

The concept of “submerged networks” in social movement studies describes the ways in which networks function as “cultural laboratories” submerged within civil society (Melucci 1996: 144). From the “submerged network” perspective, the reason for choosing a network may be explained in the following way: more members are expected to be recruited because their new JIL membership does not require them to leave their original organizational affiliation. Further, people tend to have multiple memberships. Muslims and non-Muslims who are concerned about Islamic liberalism are welcome to join the ranks of JIL’s activists, members, contributors, or supporters. A strict organization limits the range of movement of its activists, who have emerged from among those young intellectuals, students, professionals, and others, whose access to the Internet enables them to be in constant communication without leaving their own offices. To put it another way, a network makes it possible for activists to be involved in the discourses and activities regardless of time and place constraints (Ali 2005: 7–8).

Thus, with both offline meetings and the Internet, a sense of difference has often become reinforced, although network membership is voluntary and fluid. The Internet is an important tool, but it becomes effective only with young intellectuals and activists who have courage, self-confidence, creative imagination, and religious knowledge. The emergence of these young elites is also attributed to higher education, greater access to new media, more frequent travel, contact and reading. Here the Internet provides more efficient and immediate virtual interaction between dispersed makers of Islamic discourse and Muslim audiences, and provides new types of networking opportunities.

The concept of community among “liberal” Muslims is not global if “global” encompasses every Muslim. Their *ummah* was and still is the *ummah* of “liberal” Muslims. At the same time, the *ummah* of JIL continues to be intellectually linked to other like-minded individuals who have bases all over the world. JIL is linked to the Community of *Utan Kayu*, *Journal Kalam*, and Radio 68H, located in the same complex in Jakarta, but it continues to develop itself into an epistemic community of contributors, followers, sympathizers, and critics, non-Muslims, and non-native Indonesians.⁶ The moderator of the JIL mailing list states that the website is for anyone interested in disseminating critical, progressive, and pluralist interpretations of Islam. At the same time, one may have multiple organizational

affiliations; for example, a member of JIL can be a member of NU, Muhammadiyah, the Freedom Institute, the International Conference for Religion and Peace, the Interfaith forums (Interfidei and MADIA), an Islamic State University, and so forth. Anyone can also be non-affiliated to any network or institution.

The sense of “we-ness” (Dawson 2004: 77) becomes reinforced not by material fraternity or educational common grounds, but by a common concern and vision: liberal Islam is to a significant extent, shaped by a common “enemy” constructed in the struggle to interpret Islam, that is, fundamentalist Islam. The fundamentalist groups have continued to use the Internet to pursue their missions and objectives. For example, Laskar Jihad (now dissolved), the Sabili magazine, the Justice and Prosperity Party (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera*, PKS), are active users of the Internet. Discourses of anti-Americanism and religious extremism take online forms as well (Lim 2005: 2–10).

The Internet shapes the way in which such discourses spread across religious and national boundaries. The sense of “we-ness,” as members of a group or of an imagined Islamic community, become stronger when the Internet helps connect virtually and immediately peoples from anywhere who share the same ideological orientation. The sense of self versus others can remain strong and even become reinforced when people see the Internet as the battlefield.

Online “we-ness” can be more fluid and loose, and the degree of a sense of belonging to a particular community varies from person to person and operates according to changing contexts. The liberal Islam network defined their objectives in terms of the competition between the “progressives” and the “conservatives,” thus the “dialectic of movement and countermovement” emerges endlessly in the struggle for winning the hearts and minds of the moderate Muslim majority and the public at large (Cowan 2004: 255). This sense of competition serves at the same time as one of the driving factors for a greater need to improve the use of the Internet in disseminating Islamic progressivism and liberalism on the one hand, and its use among conservatives, on the other.

Online discussion and JIL websites

The greater sense of competition for the hearts and minds of Muslims continues to be expressed and reinforced in JIL’s discussion/yahoo newsgroup. The news/discussion group continues to develop liberal Islamic interpretations according to their set principles, and to disseminate them to their members, to create dialogical spaces which are open and free from traditional religious authority’s pressures, to create a healthy debate and a just, democratic, and human social and political superstructure. The founders see democracy as the best system in pursuing and supporting these aims. Its membership is open, increasing from about ten in March 2001, to 1204 in October 2008, mostly residing in Indonesia, but now scattered throughout the United States, Great Britain, Australia, France, Germany, and Egypt, among other countries. The number of messages, from 2001 to 2008, ranged from 30 to 577 per month, indicating the high degree of activity.⁷

Individuals become interested in joining the Discussion Group for different reasons. For example, Mohamad Guntur Romli, a graduate from Al-Azhar University in Islamic philosophy, stated that he was driven to join the Network because of his support for Islamic reform, which had been previously advocated by senior Indonesian Muslim scholars including Harun Nasution, Nurcholish Madjid, and Abdurrahman Wahid (Romli 2007: ix). Others, such as Catholic priests and scholars, Protestant scholars, and Ahmadiyya leaders and members, became participants of the Discussion Group because they share with JIL the fight for freedom of religion. Some occasional voices of “outsiders,” including members of Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia or the PKS have participated in JIL’s newsgroup, but such voices did not last. Few ideas of fundamentalist Muslims are posted in the discussion, but these have often become an “imagined rivalry” on the JIL’s members’ discussion of various issues.

JIL’s website, <http://islamlib.com/>, is open to everyone. The website states its motto on the homepage: “In the name of Allah, God of Mercy, God of Compassion, God of all religions” (*Dengan nama Allah, Tuhan Pengasih, Tuhan Penyayang, Tuhan Segala Agama*), suggesting the way in which the Network promotes their interpretation of the Qur’an and religious pluralism, despite a variety of meanings expressed by members. Some argue that Islam has its own concept of God, different from that of other religions, but others say that God is essentially one although it has many names and manifestations. As a virtual network, JIL has chosen its own particular interpretation, but allows other possible interpretations of the Qur’an as well.

The website seeks to be accessible to an English-speaking or international audience, with a variety of rubrics.⁸ JIL attempts to maintain its position as the most vocal countermovement against religious conservatism. The Internet enables this dialectic and it provides a space for more dialogical, and sometimes emotional conversations through readers’ comments. The online readers of the website are from diverse localities and orientations, demonstrating a relatively more democratic and inclusive nature of cyber-religion to the extent that everyone’s voices may be posted and heard. However, the webmaster may sometimes censor some language and comments deemed ethically inappropriate. For example, a post on Islam and pornography by a JIL contributor received a wide variety of responses from readers. One of the readers commented, “You do not understand true Islam. You study Islam from countries that are enemies of Islam; You are disgusting (*najis*) and friends of Satan” (translated from Indonesian). The JIL webmaster responded: “Dear readers, you all are smart enough to see the danger of monopolizing truth in front of our eyes” (translated from Indonesian).⁹

Changing features of cyberspace have further changed the mode of interaction among Internet users. Thus, since 2005, all articles posted on the JIL website have spaces for comments by visitors. The comments are either supportive or dismissive of the issues raised or approaches used. Although there is no feedback from the writer in response to the comments by the visitor, the space at least serves as a tool for relating one another with the topics and with the writer, and both the writer and the audience become part of a virtual network of relationships.

As the Internet has changed, blogging has become an important communication tool for iMuslims. Unlike the websites that are often organizational and communal, blogging shows how Islam can be personal as well as communal despite particular social affiliations and networks.

Blogging: personalization of religiosity and secularity

Blogging has created an even more fragmented sense of religious authority and discourse. The personal character of blogging shapes the self-assertiveness of particular religious beliefs and interpretations. Blogs serve as another tool for creating a personal network of discourse, often complementary to the communal networks such as JIL and others. Among JIL members, Ulil Abdalla (hereafter Ulil), who is currently pursuing a doctorate in religion at Harvard University in the United States, is the most active blogger. His personal blog <http://ulil.net> has the motto (translated from Indonesian): “A strong faith will not fear doubts. A weak and dogmatic faith is always worried about questioning and doubts.” Ulil expresses his attitude toward the relationship between faith and reason. The self-portrait, a feature in the blog, contains his short autobiography, as follows (translated from Indonesian):

I was born in a very traditional *santri* family. My grandfather was a village religious teacher who had a flexible understanding of religion, in some respects, but his beliefs could also be rigid and “hard.” He, for example, did not allow a woman to go to school, perhaps in accordance with a fatwa [religious edict] issued by Ibn Hajjar al-Haitami (d.1566) in his work “*Al-Fatawa al-Hadithiyya*” (Contemporary Edicts). Therefore none of his daughters went to school. However, my father disagreed with that fatwa and chose to bring his daughters to school. My mother said, “Times have changed so girls should go to school.” Although my mother was formally uneducated, she was able to consider the issue contextually. This experience has had an impact on my thinking and shaped my way of understanding the next phase of Islam.

In response to this self-portrait, readers expressed comments according to their own religious perspectives, as indicated below (translated from Indonesian):

*Assalamu’alaikum Mas*¹⁰ Ulil, maybe I am one of the fans of your writings. I own almost all the books that you published (although mostly only photocopies). Your writings have really opened my horizons about Islam, giving me enlightenment. *Mas*, please don’t stop producing. Thank you.

Mas Ulil, I doubt that you are Muslim, I want to see your picture praying at a Friday congregation.

Assalamu’alaikum. I hope that by studying in a country full of violence [a reference to the United States], you return to a straight path.

I can accept some of your opinions, but do not accept others. I am confused.

I am a non-Muslim. I am sad to see Islam today, especially in Indonesia. [Motivational author] Steven Covey has explained that everything begins with perception, and perception is formed by context. The idea of freedom that you are promoting has a positive impact on my understanding of Islam which has deteriorated into a negative stigma in the world today. In your hands, Islam will be a blessing, not a disaster for humanity.

Here is Ulil, one of the Muslim thinkers who have become victims of character assassination by the media of the extremist puritans. I do not side with any Islamic group, I accept what is good and reject what is harmful. Good luck, *Mas Ulil*.

Ulil's postings in his blogs have sparked supportive, critical, and ambivalent comments. In his blogposts, he represents himself rather than the JIL network. Personalization of views has now become more common through blogging, unlike the websites and online group discussions. For example, in her personal blog, Nong Darol Mahmada, another JIL activist, writes:

I was born and raised in a *santri* (religiously devout) family. I have studied Islam since childhood. After elementary school, I attended Pesantren Cipasung in Tasikmalaya for junior and senior high school. Then I attended the State Institute of Islamic Studies (IAIN) Jakarta, but I gained more knowledge at the study club called *Formaci* (a Forum for Ciputat students), conferences, discussions and street activities. I have worked as a journalist for Interactive *Tempo* and the Institute for Information Studies (ISAI) in Jakarta. In March 2001, together with *Mas Ulil*, *Mas Luthfi*, *Mas Goen* [Goenawan Mohamad], and others, we founded an Islamic Liberal Network and up to now have we maintained it regardless of the risks of being beaten to the point of shedding blood and tears. This is a true struggle in creating a healthy public debate about Islam. Nowadays I have spent much more time helping *Mas Rizal* at the Freedom Institute (<http://www.freedom-institute.org>) and have been enjoying life being a mother of Andrea.¹¹

Nong Mahmada's blog expresses the importance of being an activist and being a mother. Her blogs also contain her poems, writings by others, and pictures of her wearing both Muslim dress and Western attire. Nong also writes about being terrorized by unknown authors through the Internet. As Gary Bunt points out, many elements of the mundane and trivial are also located in blogs and these offer insights into popular culture and ethics, including people's personal interpretations of Islam (Bunt 2009: 133). The religious and the secular, the private and the public, can be blurred in blogs when iMuslims use them without fear and without limits. They can respond to concerns, questions, and criticisms posed by readers throughout the world.

Blogging provides a space for JIL activists to express their voices in more open ways, to be read by not only like-minded audiences, but critics as well. Blogs can also be used to promote more openness for debate and criticism. In one of his posts, Ulil wrote on whether pluralism discourages discussion and criticism. In this blog, he made reference to an imaginary critic:

If you are democrat, liberal, or pluralist, who respects difference, why do you criticize others whose views are different from yours? Why don't you just let those views exist? If you criticize them, you are not a true pluralist. This is a comment I often receive when I criticize other ideologies, doctrines, and the views of fundamentalist and radical groups. If I were a true liberal Muslim who promotes respect of religious views among Muslims, why did I criticize them? Aren't these attitudes contradictory, reflecting a double-standard? At the surface, these opinions seem right, but if I closely look at these, I understand that this is just a misunderstanding of pluralism, democracy, liberalism, and other similar concepts. Pluralism cannot be separated from the basic principle of democracy whose spirit is that every individual and group is given full and equal rights to expression according to their beliefs. No one should be excluded from expressing their views, whether they disagree or not with political or religious authorities. But respecting other views does not mean stopping criticism and investigation of their views. In democracy, there is the right to criticize. From there, a public debate is conducted to test the views.¹²

Here Ulil as a representative of JIL is promoting a respectful but critical attitude toward the views of others. He not only promotes tolerance of other views, but he does this through means that allow him to express this position without fear. However, this does not mean that everyone will agree with him. One reader responded to the abovementioned post as follows:

Don't use a double-standard, *Mas*. I often read your criticisms against the Front of Islamic Defenders (*Front Pembela Islam*, FPI) and the like, but I have never read your criticisms against Ahmadiyya. Or criticisms against the legality of homosexuality promoted by Musdah Mulia. Or against Christian hard-liners.¹³

This example shows how blogs can provide dialogic communication among bloggers without face-to-face meetings where criticisms are less possible and people tend to be reluctant about expressing their views. Criticisms in the physical absence of the criticized are made possible by online communication. The advantage of this is that people can understand the views of others without waiting for meetings and this can prevent prejudices or reduce tensions that may arise in face-to-face contacts.

In another post, Ulil thanked his readers for their comments and explained why he was not able to respond to some of them. He also reminded his readers of the ethics of dialogue, especially in terms of the use of address and language (translated from Indonesian):

Ma lam yashkur al-nas, lam yashkur al-Lah, “those who do not thank other human beings are not thankful to God.” This is a *hadith* that we often hear from religious preachers and teachers. In this letter, I would like to thank all readers. There is no greater satisfaction than when what we write is read by the public. Thanks to anyone who has spent their time writing their comments, either criticism or praise and support, which are very useful for me. The comments show me that the readers care about the issues I discuss. However, I do not post some comments that I consider too harsh and unethical in the use of language. I respect disagreement, but I want it to operate in an ethical manner. I do not include the comments that are supportive to what I write; I include those which disagree with me. I apologize if I do not respond to your comments, for different reasons; I do not think I should respond to every comment because the comment is not serious, or because it simply supports what I write, or because it balances what I write so that readers can make their judgment, or because I am not able to respond to certain issues that I do not know about. I am not a super human who can answer all questions. Even Imam Malik ibn Anas, the founder of the Maliki school of thought, when asked about many things, often replied, “*la adri*”; “I do not know.” Oftentimes I simply do not have time to respond to comments.¹⁴

The responses in Ulil’s blog show how interactions between bloggers and their audiences go beyond simple questions and answers. Some of his readers have accepted his views while others believe that he has made mistakes in relation to God and Islam, as shown in the following posts:

Mas, as a human being, I am obliged to forgive someone who asks forgiveness. So I forgive you, *Mas* Ulil. But *Mas* Ulil should ask forgiveness to Allah first because my forgiveness will be useless if He remains mad at you.

Thanks also to *Mas* Ulil, who has spent his time and knowledge with his writings. Regarding swearing or harsh words by the commentators in your blog, I see them as normal in our society with such a low degree of intellectuality. In other forums and blogs concerning sports or entertainment, swearing is common, let alone concerning belief! If we like what we read, we read; if we don’t like what we read, we don’t read.¹⁵

Again, these posts show that Ulil’s interpretations of religion in his blog are more personal than his views in the Discussion Group and websites. In his blog, he shows his own self-categorization of his views and reflections. His readers, including Muslims as well as non-Muslims, read his stories and articles directly from their personal perspectives.

In blogs, personal experiences and religiosity can intersect, and this intersection will become public immediately. Ulil, for example, has written some light stories, such as about his first day of fasting during Ramadhan in Boston. He told the readers how his wife and he invited their non-Muslim neighbors to break the fast

together at their apartment; and how his Christian friend often discussed with him Islamic and Christian topics, such as the concept of justice according to both religions, and respect between faiths. In this story, Ulil was surprised to know that his Christian friend also performed the fast one day because “I want to know what it feels like to be a Muslim.” Ulil concluded his story: “The lesson I have taken from this: building a path of dialogue with other religions is possible if we are willing to be open and do not develop a mentality of distrust of other religions.”¹⁶

In other postings, Ulil Abdallah reflects on a variety of issues, from “Looking at the Islamic World after the Olympics in Beijing,” “Understanding Holy Scriptures non-apologetically,” “About Utopia and Slow Democracy,” “A ‘Muslim’ Note on John Shelby Spong,” and “Karate, Family and Cultural Relativism.” As can be seen from the titles of the postings, personal interpretations of Islam and the mundane aspects of life are mixed. In a post entitled “A Muslim Note on John Shelby Spong” (in English), he wrote:

John Shelby Spong is one of my favorite theologians. All of his works stuff my private library, including my favorite, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*. Irrespective of the fact that the message contained in the book is addressed toward Christians, it speaks very well to the very problem faced by Muslims nowadays. Islam and Christianity are faced with the same problem, i.e. the problem of literalistic readings of the Scripture. Spong wrote that there are myriad doctrines both in Islam and Christianity that we who live in the twenty-first century can no longer believe in without being subject to reinterpretation. Let me end by quoting some lines from Spong as follows: *Institutional Christianity seems fearful of inquiry, fearful of freedom, fearful of knowledge – indeed, fearful of anything except its own repetitious propaganda, which has its own origins in a world that none of us any longer inhabits . . .* You can replace “Christianity” here with “Islam,” and yet the whole sentence still makes sense.¹⁷

This particular posting tells us about language usage among Indonesian liberal bloggers. The Islamic blogosphere that Gary Bunt has explored is in Arabic and English. But among many Indonesian Muslims, local bloggers use local languages due to lack of proficiency in Arabic and English and due to the fact that the targeted audience is predominantly Indonesian. Ulil’s blog readers are mostly Indonesian; only a few times does he write in English. One of his English postings is left without comment, perhaps suggesting his unpopularity among English readers. The crucial thing, however, as Ulil himself realizes, is that blogging gives him more freedom to express his personal faith and views without fear.¹⁸ This is in line with Zizi Papacharissi’s observation: “blogs present a personalized, self-referential, and self-serving use of the Internet, a medium first introduced as informational and then established on the social communication avenues it provided” (Papacharissi 2007: 37). The use of blogs and their impact seems to have competed with other more widespread and comprehensive tools of social networking, especially Facebook. Among Indonesians, including Indonesian Muslims, Facebook

has, at the time of writing this chapter (June 2010), become the most popular online medium of social networking. All cell phone companies, including the Blackberry, include Facebook as a feature to attract customers. Among my Facebook friends, for example, there are leaders of Islamic organizations, members of the Council of Islamic Clerics (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, MUI), politicians, businessmen, academics, artists, and so forth. The following is an attempt to see the extent to which Facebook has so far shaped Islamic liberal views among Indonesians in Indonesia and elsewhere.

Facebook: new social networking for iMuslims

Facebook puts religion in the social context of a wide network of people, who may or may not share the same religion and ideology, but still are regarded as “friends.” Within this larger network of “friends,” religion is just one of many activities that people participate in. Some of them practice religion on a daily basis, while others do not at all. Religious identity goes hand in hand with other forms of identity: parenting, political activism, music-making, cooking, etc. This kind of presentation of identity is different from face-to-face interaction, at the *mesjid* (mosque) for example, or at the *pesantren* (religious school). As such, Facebook gives people many ways to articulate religion with these other identities. The quality and texture of these interactions are different, as I will discuss in the following section.

Ulil and many JIL members now use Facebook. Ulil continues to invite others in the Discussion Board to consider joining Facebook for what he sees as its numerous benefits. Many Facebook members have also requested to be his “friend.” Like his blog, Facebook is personal to him, but Facebook has more features and is more controlled and managed than his blog. Publishing one’s identity on cyberspace is voluntary, but one can choose to publicize parts of his or her identity: name, date of birth, relationship status, religious views, political views, networks, and so forth.

With Facebook, Ulil is now more assertive about his self-identity: his locality (Boston, MA), sex (male), birthday, relationship status (married), political views (“liberal”), and religious views (*Islam-Sunni-Ash’ari-Sufi-Shafi’i* or liberal-progressive). What is new about his self-identification is that he juxtaposes multiple identities. His family and educational tradition of *pesantren* has been Islam and Sunni, rather than Shi’a or Ahmady. The jurisprudence school of thought is the well-established Shafi’i school in Southeast Asia. For Ulil Abdalla, being a follower of Sunni and Shafi’i represents his early upbringing and religious background. He is comfortable with and is proud of carrying these identities: being a member of a community of Indonesian Muslims, rather than, for example, a community of Iranian Shi’ite Muslims, or American Muslims. In one of his posts, Ulil considers himself as someone who is in the process of “becoming a Muslim liberal” (*menjadi Muslim liberal*), because he believes there is no final stage of being Muslim.

On the Internet, as stated above, one of the benefits of living in cyberspace is the provision of freedom of expression and freedom from fear. When Ulil wrote

an article in the newspaper *Kompas* in 2003, he received a death *fatwa* from the Forum of Religious Scholars (*Forum Umat Islam Indonesia*) led by cleric Mr. Athian Ali. But Ulil's views on the Internet through the Discussion Group and now Facebook have been even more confrontational toward fundamentalists. The Discussion Group, Facebook, and blogs gave Ulil and others more freedom and less direct physical relationship with outsiders. The Internet's borderless quality makes it difficult for traditional religious authorities to control and for hardliners to take action in face-to-face confrontations.

Freedom to express one's personal information is one of Facebook's features that Ulil feels comfortable with. Facebook also gives freedom to make information available for people. Ulil shows that he has a wide variety of interests, as indicated on his Profile page (translated from Indonesian):

Interests: Academic interests: Islamic philosophy and theology, Islamic law, Arabic literature, contemporary Islamic thought.

General interest: writing, reading novels (I like those by Borges, Orhan Pamuk, Gabriel G. Marquez, and V.S. Naipaul), watching movie (I like movies by Abbas Kiarostami and Akira Kurosawa), eating out (my favorite is Korean, Japanese, and, of course, Indonesian food), listening to music (my favorite is Louis Armstrong, Omar Faruk Tekbilek, Umm Kulthum, Sarah Brightman).

Favorite Music: Jazz and classic

Favorite Movies: Seven Samurai, Rashomon, Throne of Blood (all by Akira Kurosawa), Taste of Cherry, Godfather, Gandhi (starring Ben Kingsley), all series of Willis' Die Hard and Sly's Rocky. But I also like "sexy" Angelina Jolie in "Original Sin."

Ulil's list of memberships includes: Muhammadiyah; Reject the Anti-Pornography Bill; Paramadina; Tareqa Bani Alawi; Abdolkarim Soroush; *Rumah Film*; Indonesian Progressive Radio Network; Indonesian Muslim; *Pecinta Buku*; Komunitas NU AS-Canada; Islamic-World-Studies; Muslims, Christians, & Jews Unity; and Love For All Hatred for None. People who read this personal information may now be more aware of his diverse and seemingly conflicting affiliations and networks along with diverse hobbies and interests. The picture of Ulil, along with his being an icon of the JIL network, is more complete than ever before. All this information may not be relevant to many of his friends, but Ulil's publicity can shape the way in which others see him as having multiple identities and activities.

What is striking about this list is that he can be simultaneously a member of Muhammadiyah and NU, two competing and collaborating religious organizations in Indonesia. This is striking for Indonesians, and this is noteworthy particularly because traditional offline organizations require membership cards. The Internet provides looseness instead of strict membership and affiliation. There is no legal implication of personal claims to membership in NU, Muhammadiyah, or other

organizations. Ulil has listed his affiliation with some NGOs working on interfaith dialogue and cooperation, such as an open group called Christians, Jews, and Muslims. In short, Facebook allows an individual to freely express his or her own identity, which may have been traditionally contradictory and disconnected. Juxtaposition of categories and identities has now become more possible in cyberspace due to the freedom that the Internet has provided and the accessibility and popularity of the Internet among an increased number of Indonesians. Multiplicity of Islamic and other religious identities on Facebook is also more acceptable because of the absence of censorship by traditional religious authorities (such as the MUI and other groups claiming religious authority). This reveals the unique and important potentiality of the Internet in shaping Muslims' personal freedom.

Facebook also offers other features, such as sharing messages, pictures, and invitations, which can make religious interaction not only more active and colorful, but can blur the distinction between the private and the public, the personal and the academic. The private aspects of one's life become public, and public lives have become located in private and personal rooms. Thus Ulil has a few academic and more non-academic pictures with family and friends. One of the interesting pictures is that of him serving as a leader of a Ramadhan evening prayer (*tarawi*). The other posts exchange words of praise and wishes (e.g. *Wish you A Happy Ied*). One of his posts was on the birthday celebration of his son (translated from Indonesian):

Greetings. My first son, Ektada Bennabi Mohamad (meaning: following Prophet Muhammad), whom we call Ben, was invited to birthday parties by his classmates. This morning, he was invited to a birthday party. What is special about a birthday party? Isn't it a trivial or normal thing? Isn't it a forbidden act of religious innovation (*bid'a*) that was never existent during the Prophet Muhammad's time? Isn't it a Western tradition? But the invitation is psychologically very important for our family. This means that the community where we live has accepted us. It means a process of inclusion or an acceptance of a foreigner, not exclusion, has operated in the community. Of course, accepting here is symbolic, but in social interaction, aren't symbolic things meaningful?¹⁹

This post attracted the following comments:

A birthday can become a medium of *silaturahmi* (also the tradition of the Prophet), a medium of introspection and learning about life and death, but it can also become a tool of excessiveness (thus forbidden) and arrogance (also forbidden). Everything depends on intention. We, humans, are given freedom to choose.²⁰

I am a member of a *zikir* (spiritual) community, which has received attacks of *bid'a* from other groups. We often receive provocative words in mosques, but we keep smiling.²¹

Ulil replied to the above comments as follows:

Thank you for your comments. One of the religious understandings that liberal Islam advocates is that Muslims should respect the ways of worship of other groups, either of different religions or of different sects within one religion. To accuse others of being religious innovators or heretic (*bid'a*), according to an Islamic liberal point of view, is inappropriate, because such an act triggers social tension and conflict. I respect any type of worship of other religions and other Islamic groups. Having said this, I do not say that we have to modify our own ways of worship as we please. In the context of Islam, worship (*ibadah*) in general has its exact and rigid regulation, such as prayer five times a day, fasting, and pilgrimage. Although in some details, there is a difference in interpretation, the general and basic rules are fixed.²²

To Ulil and other JIL activists, Facebook has thus become a space to exchange ideas, views, and experiences. People can request and be requested to become “friends,” suggesting a more equal, or less hierarchical, mode of relationship and interaction. A network of friendship, across different forms of boundaries, has been made possible in cyberspace. This element of egalitarianism in the social network is in line with the dispersion of religious authority traditionally at the hand of the clerics labeled as the *ulama*.

Religious authorities and discourses

With the Internet, religious authority is not entirely lost. It has been transformed. Muslims still need religious authority, but its form and characteristics have changed. In a less hierarchical relationship, such as among JIL members, the traditional religious authority, represented by the MUI, from 1975 to date, has often been challenged, but the Internet allows a more active struggle between the supporters and the challengers of the MUI.

Religious authority and its acceptance and contestation have become part of cyber-Islam in different forms. Although the MUI has its official website spreading information about its executive boards, mission and *fatwas*, individual Muslims have their own ways of consulting on these issues. A Muslim may simply consult his or her peers deemed “more learned” in particular Islamic problems. The religious views online may not be called *fatwa* by the traditional standard, but they may influence people’s views on particular issues. Ulil and his colleagues hardly regard their ideas as *fatwa* in the sense of the term used by the institutional *ulama* such as those who are members of the MUI.

In some cases, liberal Muslims view their peer’s interpretations of Islam as *fatwas*. A personal opinion of a Muslim thinker can be regarded as a *fatwa*, depending on the view of the person or group that requests it, or the receiving audience. Some members in the JIL Discussion Group use the term *fatwa* for some of Ulil’s ideas on certain issues, but the term has not become popular among members. This indicates that a traditional religious authority as attached to MUI

or other independent *ulama* has consulted Ulil and his friends despite the sophistication of their religious discourse. In terms of forms of address, liberal Muslims may still use labels such as *kiai*, *ustad*, *syaikh*, *kanjeng sunan*, and the like for particular individuals recognized as being better versed in the discourse of Islam. A sense of religious authority is seen as necessary and is recognized by JIL members. In opposition to the MUI *fatwas* that often resist criticism or dissent, liberal Muslims are ready to accept resistance and further discussion. For liberal Muslims, there is no such thing as a final religious interpretation. Ulil realizes that his online writings are largely exploratory, and his messages are fluid and receptive to immediate feedback.

The fluid religious interpretations of Ulil's messages sometimes create contradictory responses. Ulil's article on "becoming a liberal Muslim" (posted first on the discussion group, then on the website), which elaborates how he differentiates between the non-rational aspect of Islam related to worship (*ibadah*) and the rational aspect of Islam (*muamalah*), attracted varying responses from readers (translated from Indonesian, with dates posted):

I agree with Ulil; it is my view of Islam. (11/25/2008)

That's right, *Mas* Ulil, although we are obliged to obey God, we cannot just obey without reservation and without rationalization. (11/10/2008)

JIL? Do not proclaim you are Muslim; it is clear that you are promoting the same anti-Muslim message as Abu Jahal during the time of Muhammad . . . remember that!²³ (06/28/2008)

I am sorry, brothers, JIL and friends, to interpret the Qur'an, one has to have particular knowledge; I often read articles written by JIL activists which I find are strange (*nyeleneh*), rather foolish (*agak konyol*) and deviant (*sesat*). (09/5/2008)

The wide range of responses by the audience suggests that the religious authority of Ulil in interpreting Islam is both recognized and contested. Agreement, support, criticism, harsh charges, and sometimes hatred demonstrated by viewers toward him and JIL in general indicate a discursive clash, but it also demonstrates the fluid, dynamic, and democratic character of cyber-religion.

In terms of struggles over the meaning of Islam, in cyberspace, Islamic discourse is discussed in more accessible, vernacular terms with some basic reconfigurations of doctrine and practice (Eickelman and Anderson 2003: 12). Perspectives are increasingly diverse among the participants, ranging from popular to academic. The definition of what is liberal, what is Islamic, what is legal, what is ethical, what is heretical, and so forth, has varied. Among JIL members themselves, debate takes place on some key issues such as what Islam means and what Islam should mean.

The online discourse may or may not reflect the offline discourse, depending on the actors and the selections they make. In general, there is no limit to which

Islamic discourses can be expressed online. The discourse is located within the increasingly cross-cultural contexts of its users and audiences. Religious discourse, particularly on the JIL's Discussion Group, concerns a wide variety of topics, including the Qur'an and the *Hadiths*, Islamic jurisprudence and its fundamentals, the stories of saints, prophets and Jesus, conversion to and from Islam, *jihad*, caliphate, terrorism, sexuality and homosexuality, pornography, the arts, and sensual dances. This liberal Islamic discourse allows examination and analysis of a wide variety of "texts," from different genres, different geographical settings, different cultural backgrounds and different historical periods (Karaflogka 2007: 9). Ulil has written about different topics referring to the seventh century Qur'an and the *Hadiths*, medieval *fikh* works, twentieth-century Samuel Huntington (American philosopher and political theorist) and Nasr Abu Zaid (an Egyptian theologian based in Holland). The plurality of topics, issues, and problems and the relatively egalitarian attitudes towards other's views circulating in liberal Islamic cyberspace is an indication of how the Internet has shaped the ways in which religious authority has undergone some degree of decentralization.

Decentralization of religious authority, however, does not mean that cyberspace has the power to change every discourse simultaneously. Those who still see the MUI as their supreme religious authority, for example, would not want to consult their peers online in religious matters. They consult books and printed *fatwa* collections. For these people, the MUI remains authoritative through both offline and online media, and Islam online has very little impact in transforming their religious views. For many, there are limits to the cyberspace and online authorities.

Some limits to the cyberspace

The cyber conditions of gender, class, education, and religious orientations, albeit potentially more equal, still reflect the offline conditions of imbalance and inequality. Space and distance barriers are made closer, but cultural, gender, educational, class, and religious barriers are not always dissolved. In many cases, mutual recognition takes place only within particular communities, rather than across communities. Not unlike face-to-face encounters, online encounters are either democratizing or homogenizing. In modern societies, the creation of a common consensus about matters of shared concern, however, does not necessarily operate beyond communal barriers and boundaries. The activities and experiences on the Internet do not operate in a vacuum; social, political, cultural conditions work hand in hand with the vast technological potential of the Internet (Jacobs 2006: 240). The participants and audience of the JIL Discussion Group is widely open but it is still limited to interested or like-minded individuals. Like-mindedness remains a crucial dimension of online interaction when online affiliations and activities are simply an extension of offline organizations and activities. Reinforcement of identity and ideology has resulted from a greater sense of competition between ideologies in the market. The online religious market remains seen as an open market and everyone has the freedom to play in it.

This explains why the Internet cannot completely replace or challenge offline production and transmission of Islamic knowledge. Some of the e-mails on the Discussion Group and blogs have been reproduced and published as printed books (including Ghazali 2005 and Abdalla 2007) with the purpose of obtaining a wider public. Although limited to local or regional community of participants, traditional modes of transmission, from mosque sermons, religious study circles (*halaqah*), classroom education, printed media such as bulletins, magazines, and books serve functions that online modes of transmission do not. Offline spaces have long prevailed and continue to prevail despite the increased usage of the Internet and cyberspace.

Sometimes there are unexpected negative consequences of non-face-to-face communication, such as the spread of rumors, misperceptions, and prejudices toward particular personalities or views that are hard to deal with. Ulil realized these consequences, for example, when his messages were disseminated in print by his critics. These messages were full of distortions and spread *fitnah* (lies and unfounded charges) about himself and the JIL network.²⁴ In order to avoid misperceptions, Ulil had to write longer essays on the meaning and nature of liberal Muslims and how he understands Islam, published online and offline (Abdalla 2007: 163–232). He is aware that blogs and discussion groups are not sufficient spaces for his more elaborate writing about such serious issues regarding his faith and his views on Islam and liberalism.

Books are more elaborate and more scholarly than blogs or e-mails. For example, Ulil's epilog on how he understands Islam systematically explains the following points: the foundational basis of his beliefs (that "I believe Islam is true"); his ideas about Islamic perfection; the crisis of modern Islam vis-à-vis Western hegemony; the gradualism and historicity of revelation; the unlimited reality and limited text; moral ideas; historical constraint and negotiation; moral inspiration from the Prophet and his companions and Medinan experience; and lastly, on Islam as an open revelation. In a long essay in the book, he quotes and interprets Quranic verses and the *Hadiths*, as well as classical and medieval scholarship by Al-Suyuthi, Al-Ghazali, and Ibn Taimiyya. He cites modern sources by Abduh, Rashid Rida, Sayyid Qutb, Khomeini, Ernest Renan, Yusuf Qardhawi, Fazlur Rahman, Nasr Abu Zaid, Mohammed Arkoun, Sayyid Hussein Nasr, Huston Smith, as well as Indonesian authors Nurcholish Madjid and A. Hassan. Unlike the writing in this book, Ulil Abdalla's writings in cyberspace are more dispersed pieces that are less elaborate and less comprehensive, without full quotations and footnotes. Discussion Group conversations and discussions are in different forms, but mostly incorporate casual responses, immediate responses to issues, and answers to questions rather than in-depth analyses and systematic or well-structured arguments such as those found in his academic books, chapters, and scholarly articles.

It may well be argued that the Web allows "a world-wide hearing of every voice" (Karaflogka 2007: 33), even those marginalized by the dominant religious traditions, but websites and discussion groups serve as media for conserving and disseminating certain perspectives which are not necessarily open, inclusive, and

pluralist. Pluralization of voices paradoxically contains homogenizing and un-democratizing views as well as heterogenizing and democratizing ones. The image of the Inter-Communication Technology as an open, free, and wholly accessible forum of information exchange is far from reality (Karaflogka 2007: 85). It may be true that cyberspace could undermine hatred of others, fear of others, or xenophobia, minimizing “interreligious hate” among some people, but it could equally increase competition and conflict between groups (Karaflogka 2007: 36).

In cyberspace, one can encounter voices of hatred, ignorance, indifference, and dislike of religious difference and diversity. What is unique about JIL’s website, Ulil’s blog and Facebook is that such voices are allowed, as long as they are rendered in manners deemed respectful and ethical. On the Internet, one can disseminate attitudes against other views deemed heretical, *kafir* (infidel, disbeliever), *shirk* (associating God with anything else), irreligious, secular, and so forth. A site is monitored by a webmaster affiliated with the network, but the criteria for inclusion depends on the vision and mission of the website. The JIL website is managed by a number of liberal Islam-minded webmasters who play an important role in including and excluding particular content.

Modern attitudes about the acceptance of modern technology that exists across religious and ideological spectrums of Muslims do not necessarily lead one to accept modernist or reformist interpretations of Islam. One can be technologically modern, but remain religiously conservative or even radical. In this case, perhaps, technology is seen simply as part of the *dunia* (this world), having nothing to do with the principles of the *akhirat* (the hereafter). For many liberal Muslims, including members of JIL, Muslims are encouraged to have open and liberal attitudes toward Islam, toward the sacred as well as the profane. Rationality among JIL’s members has to be used for critically understanding religion. Cyberspace may be regarded as a “sacred space” (O’Leary 1996: 781–808) alongside mosques or religious schools, but reason and revelation can intersect, and JIL members promote this desirable intersection.

I have argued that the Internet has changed in the amount of participation in relation to Islam in the mode of interaction between Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims. However, little has changed in terms of the content of Islamic knowledge and in the intellectual attitudes about Islam among participants. The Internet serves not as a determinant factor for tolerance and pluralism, as expected by its advocates, but it allows more access to diverse views and practices that may potentially shape one’s thoughts and behavior. Cyberspace remains essentially a human space, and it is human agency that shapes its direction.

Conclusion

The JIL in cyberspace tells us about fluidity of religious space, religious discourse, religious authority and religious social networking. The Internet plays a pivotal role in creating a fluid network across spatial boundaries, but, depending on human agency and socio-cultural-technological contexts, it operates within a

confine of values, ideas, and ethics shared by its members, particularly in the cases of limited discussion groups. In cyberspace, participants, both active and passive, are able to express and share their ideas with each other without fear of state control and punishment or of conventional religious authorities. But many still view the traditional religious authorities as important. The online interactions among Internet users are bound to rules of interaction set by webmasters or moderators, and remain limited to this date. The Internet allows dissemination of information and ideas and diversification of religious voices and authorities, but has its limits as well. Technology transforms religion, but will resist any form of technological determinism.

The Internet has provided a sense of public religion with new social realities, new religious players and new alliances. But this public religion creates and reinforces a politics of difference where in-group and out-group identities occur among increasingly diverse networks.

There is now a greater possibility of online networks, such as JIL, to introduce and promote multiple and fluid identities, but the existing identities tend to be reinforced. iMuslims use the Internet regularly and their religious orientations are shaped by it. But for many others, the Internet is not necessarily a replacement of the traditional and the offline affiliations, such as mosques, schools, and organizations, whether fundamentalist, moderate, or liberal. The social location of JIL is not on the mainstream of Indonesia's public sphere, but its attempt in creating and nurturing a space where people can interact with each other less hierarchically is their significant contribution to the study of religion and the public sphere.

Gary R. Bunt has argued that cyber Islamic environments have the potential to transform aspects of religious understanding and expression, and have the power to enable elements within the population to discuss aspects of religious interpretation and authority with each other, and to consult with authorities both from traditional and non-traditional centers, in some cases subverting what were conventional channels for opinions on religious issues (Bunt 2003: 201–202). However, the extent of such transformative power cannot be generalized to everyone, every place, and everything. There are limits to the power of cyberspace.

The extent of participation in the discussion about particular issues is potentially wide and inclusive, but does not in reality include all possible and existing voices on that issue, because of its mission and vision of promoting liberal interpretations of Islam. The democratic and inclusive nature of a website, discussion group, blog, or Facebook is still within the limits of an individual's or a group's vision and mission given the increasing number of competing and often conflicting identities and ideas made possible by the very nature of cyberspace and because of the view that communication technology serves merely as a means for dissemination and furthering one's ideas.

In other words, the informative and transformative function of the Internet does not necessarily lead people to be more tolerant of other views. Factors shaping one's religious identities, views and attitudes may be found elsewhere: reading of religious and other texts, persistence of state and conventional religious authorities, formal and informal modes of education, the continued role of traditional

modes of transmission and interaction, and the dynamics of social, political, and cultural contexts.

Notes

- 1 Fundamentalist Muslims as defined by the Liberal Islam Network are those Muslim individuals and groups whose main focus is preserving the fundamental teachings of Islam in a literal, textual manner, often intolerant of other interpretations. The Liberal Islam Network would agree with Youssef M. Choueiri who defines fundamentalism as an ideology for a return to the "classical" form of Islam, to the golden age of Islam, to the past, and to the text (see Choueiri 1997: 1–5).
- 2 See Eickelman and Anderson 2003: 1; see also Meyer and Moords 2006.
- 3 See Eickelman and Anderson 2003: 1–16.
- 4 See Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, "Kenapa Saya Berpendapat Islam harus Dikritik," *Islamliberal@yahoogroups.com*, October 24, 2005.
- 5 JIL in Arabic also means "generation." Abdalla, editorial, *www.islamlib.com*, 25/8/2008. See also Ali 2005.
- 6 Utan Kayu, located on Utan Kayu Street in East Jakarta, is a community of artists and intellectuals whose projects promote freedom of expression, experimentation, creativity, and tolerance of opposing social, political, and religious beliefs. The experimental Utan Kayu theater company hosts performances of theater, music, and dance. *Jurnal Kalam* is a cultural journal of progressive writing in a variety of literary genres. Radio 68 H News Agency is the radio news network affiliated with Utan Kayu.
- 7 <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Islamliberal/>.
- 8 The website has a number of features: mission, programs, syndicates of liberal Islam writers, radio talk-show, book and booklet publication information, website posting, public advertisement, discussion, contacts, and other rubrics, consisting of press releases, ideas, books, liberal scholars, clippings, op-ed columns, discussions, interviews, and editorials, all with available spaces for comments by readers (<http://islamlib.com>).
- 9 <http://islamlib.com/id/komentar/islam-dan-pornografi/>; (accessed on November 22, 2009).
- 10 *Mas* is a Javanese term of respect for a male.
- 11 <http://nongmahmada.blogspot.com/>
- 12 Ulil Abdalla (2008) "Apakah Pluralisme Menghalangi Diskusi dan Kritik." Online posting. *Ulil.net*, posted (September 12, 2008).
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- 14 *Ulil.net*, posted on September 15, 2008.
- 15 Readers' comments to a post on September 15, 2008.
- 16 *Ulil.net*, posted on September 2, 2008.
- 17 *Ulil.net.*, posted July 11, 2008.
- 18 The correlation here is not between writing in English and the expression of faith without fear, but rather between blogging (in Indonesian or in English) and expression without fear.
- 19 Ulil Abdalla, "Ben, Billy, dan Pesta Ulang Tahun di Amerika," Facebook, posted on June 20, 2008.
- 20 Reader, to the post "Ben, Billy, and Pesta Ulang Tahun di Amerika," Facebook, posted on August 30, 2008.
- 21 Reader, to the post "Ben, Billy, and Pesta Ulang Tahun di Amerika," Facebook, posted on August 30, 2008.
- 22 Ulil Abdalla, Facebook, posted on September 7, 2008.
- 23 Abu Jahal (d. 624) was a religious leader opposed to Muslims.
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7 “Sex sells, or does it?”

Discourses of sex and sexuality in popular women’s magazines in contemporary Indonesia

Sarah E. Krier

From street banners advertising upcoming club events like “blow-job Friday” and “Hardcore: be ready for extreme fantasy,” complete with “sexy dancers,” “naughty girls” and “condom *fiesta*”; venders selling the Indonesian version of *Playboy* at stoplights; cell-phone pornography scandals starring high school and university students; the booming popularity of sex comedies; to commercials for herbal medicines to spice up your sex life, signs of sex and sexuality are seemingly everywhere in contemporary urban Indonesian popular culture.¹ These open discourses seem contradictory against the backdrop of an increasingly conservative Islamic and political culture, where a dynamic battle is taking place about how closely public morality and conduct should follow the teachings of Islam, and where pornography laws are debated and sex education in schools is protested because of fears that such discourse would promote sexual lasciviousness.

As the most populous Muslim-majority country in the world, with over 200 million people professing the faith of Islam, Indonesia has long been regarded as home to an extremely moderate Islam in which local practices and beliefs combine with Arab-Islamic teachings. While waves of radical Islamic fundamentalism have appeared over the last 200 years in western Indonesia (Eliraz 2004), the prevalent notion of a moderate Indonesian Islam was aided by the state’s de-politicization of Islam, particularly under the country’s second president, Suharto. The downfall of Suharto’s 32 year regime in 1998, however, made possible the public expression of fundamentalist and progressive Islamic voices, women’s voices, and voices calling for a broad spectrum of social change in post-Suharto Indonesia. While it is perhaps too early to describe Indonesia’s contemporary condition as democratic, freer elections, relaxation of press censorship and an increasingly visual political Islam point to an “emergent” democracy.²

The ever-increasing media and market freedoms of post-Suharto Indonesia offer new forums for the discussion and study of gender and sexuality. While reading the *Jawa Pos* (*Java Post*), a mainstream widely circulated daily newspaper published in East Java, I noticed the weekly advertisements for the two women’s tabloids that will be discussed in this chapter: *Cantiq*, a popular woman’s weekly tabloid and *Nurani*, a specifically Muslim woman-targeted weekly tabloid. The weekly ads in the *Jawa Pos* consisted of each week’s cover page in black and white, sized large enough to read clearly (five by eight inches).

At first glance, *Cantiq*'s highly sexualized cover-line of "[If you're] Pregnant, [you] Don't Have to Fast from Sex," with the cover-girl posing seductively in a sleeveless dress contrasts strongly with *Nurani*'s Islamic cover-line of "Tips for Friendship like [in the manner of] Muhammad the Prophet," with an image of a more modestly dressed *jilbab*-wearing cover-girl.³ As Suzanne Brenner (1999: 17) asserts in her study of popular print media of the New Order:

Photographic and textual images of women, more than those of men, serve as symbolic representations of a burgeoning consumer culture; of the growing Islamic movement; or of the moral deficits of modern society. Women not only participate fully in the processes of social change that Indonesia is undergoing, they also signify those processes.

The diverse processes of social change in post-Suharto Indonesia create multiple constructions of women based on religion, nation, ethnicity and liberal capitalism. As a result, women's social values are marred by ambivalence and as Julia Suryakusuma (2006: 19) asserts, even "tainted by schizophrenia." At the same time, "openness regarding sexual issues is increasing, but simultaneously tolerance about them is decreasing," (ibid.).⁴ The key to understanding Indonesia today, therefore, is in investigating its fragmentation (ibid.). The rapidly expanding mass media capitalizes upon and contributes to this fragmentation, a phenomenon which takes many popular culture forms, including popular women's magazines and tabloids.

In this chapter I interrogate Indonesia's contemporary condition as it relates to issues of sexuality, Islam and gender by investigating how sex and sexuality are represented in *Cantiq* and *Nurani* over a 12-month period, 2007–2008. Examination of the texts and images of these media as symbolic representations of the contradictory, dissident, political and cultural aspirations and anxieties of contemporary post-Suharto Indonesia, allows these questions to be asked: (1) What meanings about Islam, gender, and sexuality do audiences derive from popular women's tabloids? (2) How do discourses of sex and sexuality compare and contrast between tabloids for "women" and those specifically targeting "Muslim women"?

Through an examination of these tabloids as cultural texts and cultural phenomena, this chapter brings to light several examples of the dynamic – and often competing – discourses of gender, sexuality, Islam and capitalism at play in contemporary Indonesia. While sex most obviously sells in the popular women's weekly tabloid, discourses of sex and sexuality in the Muslim women's tabloid are present but subtle and moralistic. I find that women's bodies have and continue to serve as stages for dominant discourses of power and piety at play in contemporary Indonesia. The public representations of sexuality presented in media-saturated contemporary Indonesia raise important questions about the nature of sexuality and important questions about gender and religious identity in conjunction with sex. In addition, understanding how issues of gender, sex and sexuality are talked about and addressed in contemporary Indonesia will offer new

possibilities in addressing the highly stigmatized sexual and reproductive health needs in these communities.

Cantiq and Nurani

While the Indonesian contemporary mediascape offers multitudes of choices in terms of women's magazines and tabloids, the focus is on these two weekly tabloids because of their visibility and affordability. In terms of visibility, weekly advertisements of these two tabloids in the *Java Post* daily newspaper point to the fact that these images—usually smaller versions of the tabloid cover—reach not only consumers of these tabloids but also readers of the *Java Post*. In terms of affordability, each tabloid costs between 5,000–7,000 rupiah (less than US\$1) in comparison to monthly women's magazines which cost at least three times as much.⁵ Second-hand magazines and tabloids are also for sale at cheaper prices on the street. For people who might not be able to afford to purchase them, these popular media are often available for enjoyment at salons, cafes and motorbike/car garages. While it is hard to calculate the extent to which these texts filter throughout the archipelago, the boom in print media in post-Suharto Indonesia points to higher consumption and higher literacy, especially among middle and upper class urban Javanese women.⁶

Published in Surabaya, East Java, *Cantiq* prints 93,000 copies each week and is distributed throughout the archipelago, with greatest popularity in East Java and



Figure 7.1 A magazine and newspaper stand in Yogyakarta. Author's photo.

Eastern Indonesia. Originally named *Ibunda*, the tabloid now known as *Cantiq* began publishing in 2005.⁷ The *Cantiq* name has been in use for the last year and is a play on “cantik,” a word that translates to “pretty, attractive, beautiful” but also “lustful, lascivious.” As we will see, this word alone speaks much to the conundrum of “woman” in a patriarchal world, of which Indonesia is very much a part. During 2007–08, *Cantiq* was seemingly struggling with an identity crisis, changing its description three times. Initially a “Magazine for Mothers and Adult Women” (October 2007 through May 2008), it changed to a “Magazine for Adult Women” (May 2008 to mid-August 2008), and in late 2008 to a “Weekly Beauty, Health and Fitness Tabloid” (third week of August 2008 to October 2008). Despite these changes, the content of this tabloid has remained consistent throughout the year and targets working women and female students between the ages of 25 and 40. Besides its weekly content on sex and sexuality, regular features include beauty tips like weight-loss and cosmetic procedures, career advice, a diverse array of consultation options (e.g., numerology, hands/palm readings, makeovers, family psychology), and true stories detailing struggles with drugs, eating disorders, children with learning disabilities and marriage problems. The only irregular content revolves around the Islamic fasting month of Ramadan when at least one cover-line each week refers to issues related to Islam. For example: “How to fast and diet at the same time”; “Care for *jilbabed* hair,” and “Look fresh even if fasting.”⁸ This is the only time articles appear specifically discussing Islam. The images in *Cantiq* consistently resemble mainstream American women’s magazine with models and celebrities wearing trendy and often revealing clothes (by Indonesian standards). Again, the only exception to this occurred during the last week of the fasting month of Ramadan with the cover model wearing a *jilbab* and long blouse (*Cantiq* 64 (V), Sept 2008).

Nurani prints twice as many copies as *Cantiq*, with around 156,000 regular subscribers and 180,000 total printed copies per week. While the bulk of *Nurani*’s readers are located in Central and East Java, it boasts a readership spanning the archipelago and even reaching as far as Singapore and Malaysia. *Nurani* was first published in November 2000 and like *Cantiq* is published in Surabaya, East Java. *Nurani* means “bright, shining” and also refers to *batin*, a concept referring to the inner workings of one’s emotional feelings and spiritual self. A term “borrowed from the Sufi tradition of Muslim mysticism” but locally and popularly reworked, one strives to achieve refinement of *batin* through religious discipline (Geertz 1984: 61). In line with this *batin* orientation, *Nurani*’s vision states:

righteousness exists in the *nurani* inner self. Not all humans are capable of behaving in agreement with and achieving a *nurani* inner self. The task of *Nurani Tabloid* is to develop the sensitivity of our reader’s *nurani* inner self, so that they can see, hear and feel everything that has happened.⁹

Nurani points to the growing popularity of Islamization and to the increasingly marketable and consumptive nature of Islam in popular culture (Brenner 1999; Hefner 1997). Almost every woman photographed in *Nurani* is pictured wearing

a *jilbab*, even if she does not usually wear one in everyday life. *Nurani* engages a diverse community of religious leaders, politicians (political advertisements are also present), community activists, scholars, celebrities and ordinary people in discussing issues including pornography, abortion, divorce, and finances. Although *Nurani* is described as “the largest Muslim family tabloid,” its cover photographs are always of women and the majority of its content is aimed at a female audience. Young women between the ages of 25 and 35 compose over 80% of *Nurani*’s audience.¹⁰ Regular sections of the tabloid discuss beauty tips, children, teenagers, taking the *hajj*, *pesantren* (Muslim boarding school), convert stories, prayers, women’s health, true stories and consultations on *fikh* (science of Islamic law), marriage, and family. Unlike *Cantiq*, *Nurani* is somewhat of a community institution, regularly hosting workshops at its *Nurani Muslim Gallery* in Surabaya. These events train *Nurani* readers how to memorize and conduct prayers, wear and accessorize *jilbabs*, how to sign up for trips to Mecca (*hajj* and *umrah*) and how to model. According to the tabloid, many of these sessions sell out, with more activities planned and announced in the tabloid to meet community demand. *Nurani* also sponsors a website (<http://www.tabloidnurani.com>) that highlights that week’s articles, invites advertisers and explains their vision/mission.

The definition of “Muslim women’s tabloid” in post-Suharto Indonesia is complex. Technically, *Cantiq* and *Nurani* are “Muslim women’s tabloids” as they are published and consumed in a country where nearly 90 per cent of the population professes to follow Islam. While *Cantiq*’s articles specifically focusing on Islam are limited to the fasting month of Ramadan, Islam is the only religion to have a presence in its content throughout the year.¹¹ These two tabloids represent two different interpretations of “Muslim women’s tabloid”: *Nurani* is an Islamic woman’s tabloid whereas *Cantiq* is a woman’s tabloid in a Muslim-majority community. In line with Susan Blackburn’s work with Indonesian women and political Islam (2008) and Nilufer Gole’s work with public Islam, “Muslim” refers to religious identity and in contrast, “Islamic”/“Islamist” refers to “social movements through which Muslim identity is collectively re-appropriated as a basis for an alternative social and political project” (Gole 2002: 173). As we will see, *Nurani*’s “Islamic” women’s tabloid is part of larger social movement which signifies a critique and an “other-ing” from secular public culture, of which *Cantiq* is one example. During my weekly purchase of these magazines at road-side stands in Yogyakarta, each seller expressed surprise when I asked to buy *Nurani* for the first time. My interest in *Cantiq* made sense – but for me, a white foreigner, to purchase the “Muslim women’s magazine” was somehow remarkable. After returning for the second time to buy *Nurani*, one of the sellers commented “you must be a Muslim.”

The language of sex and sexuality in popular culture

Cantiq achieves a remarkably open, visible and straightforward heterosexual discourse about sex and sexuality, both humorous and educative. Such a discourse allows for an interesting and important kind of “sex therapy.” Letters to the editor

echo this view, with one woman complimenting the tabloid: “I like your discussions about sex. The language you use isn’t vulgar. But you succeed in offering education about sex for husband–wife couples. I have experienced the benefits myself” (*Cantiq* 48 (II), June 2008: 1).¹²

The humorous aspect of this discourse refers to the cartoons accompanying almost every article, introducing the reader to “Miss. V” and “Mr. Happy,” cartoon illustrations playfully representing female and male sexual organs, as seen in Figure 7.2.¹³ Miss V. is in the shape of a plump pink woman’s symbol, and Mr. Happy is in the shape of a blue male symbol, with the “arrow” of the symbol appearing “erect” or “limp” reflective of the article being illustrated. One example of these characters “at work” can be seen in Figure 7.2, an illustration that accompanies an article entitled “Oops! Stalled in the middle of the game,” referring to when one of the two partners loses sexual passion/steam before the other reaches climax. In this illustration “Mr. Happy” says, “I’m really tired, hon, oooh!” and Miss. V replies, “What? Just a little more! You know . . . How can you be like that?” (*Cantiq* 49 (III), June 2008: 10).

The visibility of this discourse sets *Cantiq* apart from *Nurani*. Every cover of *Cantiq* I analyzed had at least one cover-line highlighting a story about sex (*seks*). For example, “When your husband loses his sex drive”; “Enjoy quickie sex”; “Do condoms really make sex less enjoyable?”; “Make love well even after giving birth.” While the majority of this discourse is in Bahasa Indonesia, the “Indonesian”



Figure 7.2 “Oops, stalled in the game again” (2008). *Cantiq*, 49(III), p. 10. Illustration by Doni. Courtesy of *Cantiq*.

versions of words like *seks* (sex) and *klimaks* (climax), in addition to terms like "woman on top" and "quickie sex" point to the imported English nature of popular discourse about sex and sexuality. While this fits nicely with common conceptions of the West as an immoral sex-crazed culture, *Cantiq* brings this discourse of sex closer to Muslim Indonesia, naturalizing Miss. V, Mr. Happy, *seks*, and *klimax* by bringing them into everyday practice and usage. Similar to many mainstream women's magazines in the U.S., sex sells *Cantiq* in Indonesia.¹⁴

Discourses of sex and sexuality found in *Nurani* contrast greatly with those found in *Cantiq*. Terms like *bermesraan* (to be romantic), *hubungan suami-istri* (husband-wife relations), *hubungan badan* (bodily relations) and *berhubungan intim* (intimate relations) are all discreet and "proper" ways of referring to sex among Indonesians. Even these indirect types of sex therapy discourse are rare in *Nurani*. In fact, most of these terms were first used in letters written to the tabloid, not originating from it. The predominant discourse about sex produced by this tabloid refers to sex in terms of morality and impurity. Sex and sexuality are referenced in terms like *zina* (adultery; commercial sex work; sex outside marriage); in discussions of virginity ("is it proper for a bachelor to marry a divorcee?"); as *haram* (forbidden by Islam depending on the state of a woman's body); as *nafsu* (desire that must be overcome through self-discipline and prayer); as homosexuality (causing psychopathic killing sprees or as something to monitor in "tomboy" daughters);¹⁵ as violence (in describing sexual abuse as a form of domestic abuse); and even as *setan* (Satan's causing the birth of a child outside of wedlock). The term "sexy" is used to refer to women who wear revealing clothes, a practice that is seen to incite pornography and heavily discouraged in the tabloid. The only exception to these negative representations of sex and sexuality can be found in tiny advertisements selling herbal aphrodisiacs, vaginal treatments and "sexy beauty" to make a woman more appealing to her husband—examples of the power of consumer capitalism that can be found in both tabloids. The following discussion investigates how these very different discourses of sex and sexuality frame gender, sex and Islam in contemporary Indonesia.

The post-Suharto woman: ambivalent sexual subjects

In her essay "The Fragmentation of Gender Constructions and Nationality in Reformation Era Indonesia," Julia Suryakusuma (2006) analyzes the rapidly expanding world of post-Suharto Indonesian literature and points to the popularity of women writers whose work is identified with "brave" themes of sexuality.¹⁶ They use material, style and language that is shocking because it departs from the general public consensus that women are the guardians of morality and are not comfortable at talking about sex in a straightforward manner. Traditionally, sex is believed to be a man's domain and most narratives portray men as the subjects, women the objects. These women writers reverse this trend, even talking about women's pleasure in sex. Suryakusuma believes that these women writers use sex and sexuality as tools for overthrowing patriarchal constructions about women and that, "if gender constructions and nationality are undergoing closely fitting processes of

fragmentation and democratization, the world of literature is experiencing true pluralism where every kind has a right to live” (Suryakusuma 2006: 22).¹⁷

Discourses of sex and sexuality in popular women’s tabloids similarly challenge patriarchal constructions about women. *Cantiq*’s article “Enjoyment when women hold the reins” discusses the sexual position, “woman on top,” asserting that not only women feel pleasure in this position (*Cantiq* 54 (IV), July 2008: 8).¹⁸ This article cites research conducted among married women that estimates around 10 percent of women have never experienced an orgasm and 50 percent of women have difficulties in being sexually excited. The article describes the positive attributes of this position for women and for men, calling on a medical doctor in Surabaya to legitimate their claims. In the illustration accompanying this article (see Figure 7.3), Miss.V says, “Like this ya? It’s difficult ya?” and Mr. Happy replies: “They say it feels good, but turns out it’s heavy!” While the article focuses on women’s enjoyment—and, of course, how her husband can also experience pleasure—this illustration depicts Miss. V and Mr. Happy as trying to figure out this “new” position together.

In two different articles discussing loss of the husband’s sexual drive, additional gendered lessons are communicated. In the illustration accompanying this article,



Figure 7.3 “Enjoyment when women hold the reins” (2008). *Cantiq*, 54(IV), p. 8. Illustration by Doni. Courtesy of *Cantiq*.

the woman is tugging on the man's shirt, saying: "Come on! I'm in the mood!". Her husband replies that he is tired. One cause of a husband's lack of sexual drive is described as when, "he sees his wife's body that is no longer slim, making her less sexy" (*Cantiq* 47 (I), June 2008: 8).¹⁹ Another cause of a husband losing his sexual drive while having sex is explained to be a third party: "For example, when you are making love, the husband feels like the reaction from his wife isn't as good and comforting as his mistresses. As a result, the husband's sexual drive instantly drops" (*Cantiq* 49 (III), June 2008: 10).²⁰ In reaction, the wife must "correct herself": "If your husband doesn't want to be a better person and end his affair, it will definitely be difficult. The wife has to correct herself. Minimally, she has to be 'more' than the mistress" (*Cantiq* 49 (III), June 2008: 10).²¹ Javanese women have long been taught to preserve their attractiveness sexually in order to retain their husband's interest and to engage their own "special knowledge" of sexually satisfying their husband. In these examples, women are seen as at fault – failing in their roles as wives. No moral discussion revolves around the husband's infidelity, let alone his appearance and performance in bed. Both tabloids discuss infidelity frequently, most often alluding to the above advice that wives should try harder and persevere. In sharp contrast, a "true life account" in *Nurani* tells the story of a woman who left her husband for another man. There is no forgiveness in this version of adultery, with the husband refusing her once she came to her senses, only for her to be sent to Jakarta to grow old alone.

In *Cantiq*'s only article about sex that specifically mentions Islam, the complex constructions of women and sex as they relate to religious piety are made explicit. Appearing during the first week of the fasting month of Ramadan, the article "The Enjoyment of Quickie Sex" states:

The month of Ramadan or the fasting month is definitely the time to increase your devotion to God's commandments so that you receive the most rewards possible. But this doesn't mean that "serving your husband" can be forgotten. Because serving your husband is also considered as obeying God's commandments. Now, so that your obligation to "serve" your husband is handled without interrupting the other activities you do to obey God's commandments during the holy month, making love quickly or *quickie sex*, may be used as an alternative. But, even if it is liked by men, *quickie sex* activities are definitely not as desirable for women. How can you make *quickie sex* fulfilling for both parties?

(*Cantiq* 60 (I), September 2008: 24)²²

In this article, women are reminded of their devotion to Islam *and* to their husbands. Women must be pious but also sexually available and satisfying to their husbands.²³ The gender role of *melayani* (serving) one's husband in order to be a "good Muslim wife" is believed by many to have roots in the Qur'an and remains incredibly powerful today.²⁴ According to Islamic marriage law, a woman's inability to "serve" her husband sexually is grounds for divorce or polygamy.²⁵ In the only example of sex therapy found in 24 editions of *Nurani*, a similar message

is conveyed. The article entitled “Tips for being romantic while menstruating,” offers tips to avoid frustrating the husband when he asks for sex, as sexual relations are forbidden while menstruating according to Islamic law (*Nurani* 389 (VII, III), June 2008). Both *Cantiq* and *Nurani* relay sad stories from women who made “fatal” mistakes of not sexually serving their husbands or not maintaining their attractiveness, only to be left for another woman. The mixed messages women receive in these tales are confusing: don’t be passive but don’t be too aggressive; be sexually skilled but controlled.

In asking how “quickie sex” can be made enjoyable for both a man and a woman, however, there seems to be an emerging discourse of sexual pleasure and entitlement to pleasure, for women. Similar to Suryakusuma’s interpretation of post-Suharto women’s literature, the illustrations accompanying these articles depict women’s desire for sex as natural, moving beyond the idea that in heterosexual sex, men are the subjects who “enjoy” sex and women the objects who “serve” through sex. While on one hand the recognition of a woman’s right to sexual pleasure and her right to engage in straightforward discourse about sex is surprising in a context of gender inequality, on the other hand the most prominent emphasis is always on the husband’s enjoyment. These discourses of sex and sexuality do not “knock down patriarchy” but reinforce it.

Islamic public intimacy

In her essay “On the Public Intimacy of the New Order: Images of Women in the Popular Indonesian Print Media,” Suzanne Brenner explores how representations of women and the family in the popular print media of New Order Indonesia were used in New Order nation-building:

What distinguished the New Order from the preceding era, though, was the extent to which the concern with the intimate sphere of the family came to replace an active politics of the public sphere. The affairs of the family, moreover, were increasingly redefined as public rather than private matters, making the family itself the ground upon which ideological contests over the nation’s future were waged.

(Brenner 1999: 16)

The public intimacy of the New Order was grounded in ideological control of the soft feminine woman and the harmonious, prosperous, moral, apolitical middle-class family. But as Brenner concluded nearly ten years ago, with the demise of the New Order, “it remains to be seen whether the world of public intimacy that the regime created will disintegrate as well or continue into the future as a legacy of the New Order” (1999: 37).

The resolutely apolitical tone of *Cantiq* seems in line with New Order images of women, promoting predominately conservative gender ideologies, strengthening patriarchy in Indonesian society and reinforcing the idea that a woman’s primary roles are domestic and sexual. *Cantiq* takes the legacy of New Order

public intimacy a step further by highlighting the intimate sphere of marital sex. Post-Suharto women are “soft and feminine” and entitled to sexual knowledge and pleasure, if, of course the husband is satisfied, too.

Nurani, on the other hand, seems to be carrying on a different legacy. In one of Brenner’s examples of Old Order print media, she quotes a 1959 issue of the magazine *Trisula*:

The revolutionary spirit that pervades all of society should also touch the affairs of the household, which must be improved in a revolutionary manner as well. In this way we will be able to take steps toward improving family life and achieving the goals of the People, to have a Nation that is just and prosperous.

(Brenner 1999: 13)

While obviously referring to the revolutionary spirit of the young nation, this call for action resembles the contemporary Islamic spirit encompassed in *Nurani*’s mission:

- 1 To educate society to think more modern and Islami [according to the ideas and practices of Islam].
- 2 To motivate society to work harder and be more pious.
- 3 To remind society to side with righteousness.²⁶

Complete with political propaganda advertising Muslim politicians, *Nurani* calls for women to improve family life through the “Islamic way.” From making sure your make-up is *halal*, thoroughly understanding the complicated rules of purity surrounding vaginal blood and fluids, to understanding “the Islamic interpretation” of current issues and events, *Nurani*’s readers are asked to consider and incorporate the Islamic spirit into every aspect of their lives.

Nurani does not completely escape the legacy of the New Order, however, presenting an Islamic public intimacy that highlights morality. Open unstigmatized discussions about sex as found in *Cantiq* are not found in *Nurani*. If sex is discussed in *Nurani* it is overtly subtle, or overtly political, and always framed in terms of Islamic law and morality. One example of *Nurani*’s sensationalist discourse of sex is found in the article “Oh God, 62% of middle school students are no longer virgins” (*Nurani* 396 (VII, I), August 2008).²⁷ Citing “survey results from several large cities in Indonesia,” this article asks what the future of the country will be like if the morality of the young generation no longer holds premarital sex and homosexuality to be taboo. Blaming the national school system for teaching science but not morality, Muslim parents are called on to closely monitor their children and keep them away from “dangerous” Western influences like pornography.

In *Nurani*’s Islamic public intimacy, women’s bodies are not framed in terms of sex but in terms of menstruation. In every edition of *Nurani* analyzed, there was at least one article specifically about menstruation, mainly according to *fikh*

(Islamic law) and occasionally in terms of health. The most hotly debated discussion surrounds the trend for women to take hormone pills (usually the birth control pill) to stop themselves from menstruating before and during the fasting month of Ramadan and/or when going to Mecca in order to fully participate in the rituals, as menstruating women are seen as impure and prohibited from praying, fasting or reading the Qur'an. *Nurani*'s almost entirely male religious leader consensus is that if the woman is "rejecting" her period for religious reasons, and not career-based ones, it is allowed by Islam. Another article explains how to schedule the use of hormones so as not to bleed. Whereas in Brenner's discussion of New Order public intimacy "career women" were always reminded of their primary and more important domestic family roles, the *Nurani*'s Islamic public intimacy grounds "career women" in their piety (Brenner 1999: 25). This makes for an interesting example of women's agency, allowing her to be "as holy as men" in terms of fasting and taking part in rituals.

In *Nurani*'s Islamic public intimacy, pious Muslim women's bodies (*not* the bodies sensationalized earlier) are framed in terms of overtly subtle discourses of sex and sexuality. In line with women's roles as mothers and guardians of families, articles about pregnancy and childbirth abound in both tabloids. The articles, "Toxoplasma parasite causes birth defects" and "Genital infection causes infertility" discuss "causes" of infertility and birth defects.²⁸ One refers to the toxoplasma parasite, with the majority of the article discussing the ways cats spread this parasite to humans. Complete with a photo of a cute little kitten, this article offers tips on preventing toxoplasma infection. The other article discusses gonorrhea, interestingly the only article focusing on a sexually transmitted infection in either tabloid. Different from the previous article, transmission is almost completely ignored, with the focus being on the effects of infertility, the asymptomatic nature of the infection and how to treat it. The only mention of cause is summed up in these words: "this illness is spread by sexual contact with someone who suffers from the infection" (*Nurani* 387 (VII, I), June 2008).²⁹ In line with the cute little kitten "carrier" of toxoplasma, why isn't there a cute little photo of a man (or his mistress for that matter) accompanying the gonorrhea article? Even sexually transmitted infections are de-sexualized in *Nurani*'s Islamic public intimacy so as not to upset the patriarchal order of women's role in serving her husband sexually and providing offspring.

Sex sells, does Islam?

While overt sex sells for *Cantiq*, how marketable is Islamic public intimacy for *Nurani* in Indonesia? While many forms of popular culture including film, television and magazines attract criticism from Islamic groups for their tendency to adopt a Westernized way of life, a lifestyle which many believe is materialistic, self-indulgent, and lacking morality and religious faith, Islam in Indonesia today is proving itself to be quite a consumable "lifestyle" (Brenner 1996: 678). The unprecedented success of the Islamic popular film *Ayat-ayat cinta* (*Verses of Love*) points in this direction.³⁰ The director of a *pesantren*, a rural Muslim

boarding school, in East Java is quoted as saying, "Going to the movie theater is taboo for *pesantren*, but when there is such an advantageous film like *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, we booked the entire movie theatre" (PARAS 55 (V), May 2008).³¹

Islamic public intimacy promotes the soft, feminine and moral Muslim woman by supporting typical beauty ideals and consumer capitalism. *Nurani*'s annual "Miss *Jilbab Nurani*" and "The Face of *Nurani*" competitions, in addition to trainings sessions on modeling and accessorizing one's *jilbab*, speak to this trend. Islamic fashion is also an expanding industry, with weekly sections featuring different fashion styles and even attractive praying veils (Jones 2007). Islam is accommodated within these "materialistic, self-indulgent" discourses with quotes like, "Allah is beauty and loves beauty." *Nurani*'s interpretation of Islamic beauty includes the following titles of articles: "Be careful! Your beauty soap might contain pig fat," "Halal-Haram Skin Whiteners," and "How to be pure for prayer while wearing nail polish."³² Women's "need" for these discourses is based on the following interpretation offered in a section focusing on knowledge about Islamic law for women:

One matter that differentiates men and women are the activities of putting on makeup and getting dressed up, from wearing beautiful clothes made from fine fabrics to adorning your face and body with make-up. This is allowed in Islam as long as it does not lead to immoral behavior. For example, adorning yourself for your own and your husband's satisfaction is acceptable. Also, adorning oneself to show that Muslim women can always appear interesting and attractive is also allowed in Islam. There are ways of adornment that are not allowed in Islam, however, including adorning oneself with the intention of attracting the attention of the opposite sex.³³

(*Nurani* 390 (VII, IV), June 2008)

While it seems that the theological justification for the Islamic beauty industry is resting on shaky ground – who exactly are those "attractive" prayer veils for? – the well-known capitalistic fires that run the powerful female beauty industry have succeeded in legitimizing the consumption of these "adornments" in a woman's quest for piety and femininity, both essential in maintaining a husband's interest and, thus, achieving a harmonious marriage. Islamic beauty is also legitimate in order to "produce the image," to prove that "Muslim women can always appear interesting and attractive."

Perhaps the most obvious display of the power of the Islamic market in Indonesia can be seen in the presence of celebrities as a major focus in every edition of *Nurani*. Celebrity women are photographed with elaborate *jilbabs*, even if they do not usually wear them, and are always situated in terms of her womanhood, family, and piety. For example, in the article "Annisa Trihapsari: Ready to Wear *Jilbab* After Doing Night Prayer," the actress explains how since she decided to wear a *jilbab* her husband praises her, pays more attention to her and is more romantic (*Nurani* 391 (VII, I), July 2008).³⁴ Wearing a *jilbab* also increased her female fan base; previously, her style was considered "sexy" and she was often

described as being conceited with the public. Similarly, after taking the *hajj*, actress Diah Permatasari feels she can better take care of herself: “I received criticism from Allah. It turns out that sexy clothes are not accepted in Islam”³⁵ (*Nurani* 388 (VII, II), June 2008). Younger women celebrities also appear regularly, speaking of their trips to Mecca, their commitment to *pacaran Islami* – Muslim dating (i.e., no sex) – and their aspirations to become pious Muslim wives.

While women dominate the pages of both of these tabloids, occasionally male celebrities are featured. One such celebrity, Baim Wong, was featured in both *Cantiq* and *Nurani* with very similar themes: his life is more religious since acting in Islamic *sinetron*, or prime-time television dramas/soap operas. Interestingly, in both magazines, he is quoted as saying that since he began acting in Islamic *sinetron*, he is committed to marrying a woman who wears a *jilbab* because “I personally feel more peaceful in finding a woman who wears a *jilbab* because if I leave her to go to work, she will be protected by her *jilbab*” (*Cantiq* 47 (I), June 2008).³⁶ Several of the celebrities featured in *Nurani* claim to have become more religious while shooting Islamic films or *sinetron*, while others view their activity as opportunities to teach Islam. This relationship appears to be symbiotic, with *Nurani* selling celebrity and with celebrities promoting themselves to the crucial female Muslim community. This is most apparent in the case of Zaskia Adya Mecca, a young actress who received sharp criticism when photos of her smoking appeared online. According to *Nurani*: “Since deciding to wear a *jilbab* in January 2005, Zaskia’s career has taken off. She landed several film roles and religious *sinetron*. Zaskia became known as the icon of teenage Muslims” (*Nurani* 392 (VII, II), July 2008).³⁷ The harsh criticism is blatantly gendered, as her male co-stars are also shown with cigarettes in hand. According to her critics, it is smoking and wearing a *jilbab* that do not go together. Because she identified herself as a virtuous and pious Muslim woman, her Muslim fans feel she has let them down, and some feel that she has affected the reputation of Muslim women in Indonesia.³⁸ As a result, Zaskia has reportedly been turned down for roles in several religious *sinetron* since this controversy began.

Celebrity is harnessed by *Nurani* in the promotion of the “Islamic way” and it appears *Nurani*’s Islamic public intimacy is harnessed to promote one’s career. Islamic public intimacy uses female celebrity to position the pious feminine Islamic woman as having seen the light in terms of her once “sexy” appearance. Islamic public intimacy is consumable, grounding women’s lives and bodies in patriarchal family roles, beauty ideals and public morality. While sex sells *Cantiq*, *Nurani*’s Islamic public intimacy sells the anti-sexy in post-Suharto Indonesia.

When the moral order arrives

Nurani’s commitment to framing sex and sexuality in terms of morality is part of a larger battle that has been taking place over the last several years about how closely public morality and conduct should follow the teachings of Islam. This debate has thus far involved discussions, legislation, violence and organized protest about what the public should be exposed to in the media, what kind of

clothing women should wear, and how much affection couples should display in public. Such debates point to how in post-Suharto Indonesia, sexuality seems to be more visible, more sharply contested and more overtly politicized. According to feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin in her article "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" (1984), contemporary conflicts over sexual values and erotic conduct have much in common with religious disputes of earlier centuries. Rubin uses rich historical data to illustrate periods of "sex panic" – periods when "the state, the institutions of medicine, and the popular media have mobilized to attack and oppress all whose sexual tastes differ from those allowed by the currently dominative model of sexual correctness" (Rubin 1984: 3). Similarly, Indonesia's emergent democracy is young, unstable and fragile, leading to a strong concern with matters of sexual purity. In reaction to the "euphoria" of the 1998 reformation, post-Suharto morality crusaders believe that immoral behavior is on the rise because of increased media freedoms, globalization, urbanization and modernity (Soebagijo 2008). While seen as causing immorality, in reality, these forces of media and modernity have simultaneously allowed for Islamic public morality to gain a stronger voice in contemporary public discourse. This can be seen in the well-publicized and politicized debates about Inul Daratista, the RUU-APP/Pornography bill, *Playboy*, Miss Indonesia posing in her bikini at the Miss Universe contest, and the recent controversy over Rian, the serial killer whose homosexuality was spun in the media as causing his "psychopathic killing spree."

These debates show that in human culture, sexual behavior is about more than reproduction and pleasure, but also about forms of power and dominance. As Carole Vance asserts:

Sexuality is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression and danger, as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure and agency. To focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women's expression of sexual agency and choice.

(Vance 1984:1)

Cantiq's emerging discourses of women's rights to pleasure, while situated in terms of her patriarchal role to sexually satisfy her husband, is an instance in which both the danger and repression of sexuality are articulated equally and at the same time as the pursuit of pleasure and gratification.

Such open discourses of sex and sexuality are accommodated within contemporary Indonesian Islam and the debates on public morality as we saw in *Cantiq's* Ramadan issue: sex is a woman's marital duty and a form of religious devotion as a wife. Such open discourse of sex and sexuality is acceptable because we are constantly reminded that this sex is marital – except, of course, in cases where the sex is shared by the husband and his mistress – and it is heterosexual. Only heterosexual sex is allowed within the discourse of sex and sexuality. Marriage exists as an imperative of tradition, religion and nation, with the meanings of marriage

circulating in Indonesian popular culture strongly shaped by the state and mass media. This straightforward discourse of heterosexual sex and sexuality, this sex therapy for women, is framed as “essential” in helping a woman create a harmonious marital relationship. Marital sex is even supported by the Pornography Bill, which allows pornography for marital sex/harmonious husband/wife relations, as prescribed by a doctor for “sexual health disturbances.” As activist/author Ayu Utami asserts: “This is the only article [of the bill] that admits that humans need eroticism in life, that fantasy is part of human health” (Utami 2008: 117). For those outside of this heterosexual marital configuration, “pornography” is seen as immoral, as promoting sexual exploration, lasciviousness, homosexuality and sodomy (Soebagijo 2008). In his study of gay and lesbian Indonesians, Tom Boellstorff (2005: 158) asserts that “restricting the family model to the heterosexual couple has been a key means by which the idea of the Indonesian nation has been promulgated and sustained.” Since marriage is the central concept organizing sexuality, sex that falls outside this organization challenges the family principle that is so central to the idea of the nation.

Popular culture, sex, and possibility

Even though no one likes to admit it—and although subordinated in mainstream print and electronic media—pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relationships are commonplace in contemporary urban Indonesia. The diverse array of popular culture discourses explicitly speaks to this reality. *Nurani*’s Islamic public intimacy that dodges discussions of sex unless in terms of immorality, is selling twice as many tabloids as *Cantiq*. At the same time, teenagers and college students are brave and explorative, taking risks to create what they imagine through popular culture. Cell-phone pornography clips depict high school and college girls in school uniforms, wearing *jilbabs*, engaging in sexual acts with males—who are usually behind the camera. Perhaps most unnerving to the nation is the relatively free movement of popular culture through diverse media networks. Nothing stops people from subverting these texts and images and using them for purposes outside the heterosexual marital paradigm.

From a public health perspective, the most worrying aspect of Indonesia’s contemporary condition is that sexual education and services for unmarried Indonesians are confronted with tremendous social stigma and believed to promote sexual lasciviousness. As a result, women, both unmarried and married, are sexually active *and* uneducated in terms of their reproductive and sexual health. *Nurani*’s focus on menstruation is not surprising to those who work with reproductive/sexual health issues in Indonesia. Responding to the extent to which Indonesian women understand reproductive and sexual health, the former director of one of the most influential Indonesian nongovernmental reproductive/sexual health organizations asserts:

What she understands is her menstrual cycle and even if her cycle is irregular, to them it is not a problem. Honestly from what I see, women still know very

little because promotion is extremely limited, which contrasts greatly with knowledge about the health of skin, face, and weight loss. This is because contraception and reproductive organs are considered private, an area that in my opinion is still stigmatized. But the weird thing is that this area is still exploited. If something is going to be taboo, then let it be truly taboo—don't talk about it. But for sexuality these areas are exploited. For example commercials for slimming tea, breast enhancers, and male stimulants. That is sexuality, but why aren't people educated about reproductive organs in the process?³⁹

(Interview with BW, Yogyakarta, 27 May 2008)

Public health activists find that women continue to lack basic information about their reproductive organs, about the contraceptive devices they have been pushed to use, and about sexual pleasure. What women know is that they must "serve" their husbands through sex and their appearance. Such thick gendered expectations present great challenges when addressing contemporary public health issues like marital rape, HIV transmission, adolescent marriage and infant mortality.

The increasingly visible and female-targeted discourses of sex and sexuality hold much potential in terms of sexual and reproductive health advocacy by simply creating a language by which women can communicate about their most intimate health needs. Mr. Happy and Miss. V are not only fun and humorous but informative. Interestingly, in three interviews conducted for dissertation research, women referred to these terms when talking about their bodies. *Cantiq* tackles stereotypically taboo topics, framing infertility as not *only* a female problem, discussing the pros *and* cons of condoms, and debunking common myths about sex. These are issues that health workers and activists committed to reproductive and sexual health advocacy struggle with in their work. It is the power of the mass media and popular culture to spread this discourse of sex therapy and education to those sexually active, both married and unmarried. Sexuality is very intimately linked to power, and intentionally or not, the sex therapy of *Cantiq* involves the manipulation of structured power relations, such as marriage, to reach their audience and sell through sex. *Nurani*, on the other hand, in its overtly subtle and overtly political discourse, stigmatize and sensationalize the sexual realities of contemporary urban Indonesia, placing the pious *Nurani* reader against the sexually deviant "other."

Conclusion

Discourses of sex and sexuality in popular Indonesian culture show very clearly both the increasingly open discourse and the increasing intolerance defining post-Suharto Indonesia, in addition to the "schizophrenic" expectations for Indonesian women. The stakes are high for women, their bodies and their futures. The ambivalence of women's roles in post-Suharto Indonesia is due in large part to the multiple ways women's bodies are worked and reworked in diverse popular culture arenas. Women's bodies exist as "simultaneously a physical and symbolic

artifact, as both naturally and culturally produced and securely anchored in a particular historical moment” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987: 6). *Nurani*’s menstruating bodies, wearing *jilbabs* and guarding their communities from moral degradation exist in the same popular culture space as *Cantiq*’s sexed bodies in revealing clothes, educating themselves on how to experience pleasure during “quickie sex.” As Judith Butler asserts:

Women itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end . . . generating itself in a repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to reduce the appearance of substance, of natural sort of being.

(Butler 2004: 33)

The patriarchal “natural roles of women” remain strongly rooted in post-Suharto Indonesia, reinforced in new ways through consumer capitalism and popular culture. In both tabloids, women’s bodies are framed similarly in terms of attractiveness, but in *Cantiq* her sexual duties are highlighted whereas in *Nurani*, her religious duties are the focus. In *Cantiq*, sex and sexuality are constructed in terms of marriage and are focused on as issues of less moral than biological nature. Women are taught to “master” sex so that their husbands will love them. In *Nurani*, however, sex and sexuality are crucial topics of moral action and political importance. Islamic public moralities construct feminine and soft, morally-engaged *jilbab*-wearing women whose husbands love them for their piety. While both frame morality and sex differently, the power of patriarchy and the role of women in “serving” their husband remains the same.

Throughout Indonesia’s history, women’s bodies have been primary sites through which “national identity was articulated, intra-national divisions were stated or smoothed, and international conflicts were defined and waged” (Dwyer 2000: 18). Andrew Weintraub’s study of Inul Daratista, a performer of *dangdut* music whose signature dance move created a national frenzy in the post-Suharto era for being too sexy, points to the power of women’s bodies in symbolizing particular historical moments. The popular culture phenomenon of Inul:

. . . enabled people from a variety of subject positions to grapple with some of these issues and to form their own opinions about them. Inul’s body acts as a potent site for analyzing these rehearsals for democracy, as well as debates within Islam over censorship, pornography and violence against women.

(Weintraub 2008: 40–41)

While there is only one true “fenom-Inul,” I find that through the women’s bodies featured in popular magazines like *Nurani* and *Cantiq*, similar rehearsals of democracy are enacted. While popular culture and mass media offer new and exciting channels for the development of these discourses, the greatest challenge is in educating the masses about their bodies regardless of the moral/political

meanings placed on them. Contemporary Indonesia is a space composed of media freedoms, of cosmopolitan discourses about Western “immorality,” and of world Islamic movements. At the same time, women’s lives and bodies are being swept up in the competing discourses on morality. These are precisely the sites where symbolic struggles over meanings take place. Contemporary Indonesia is a body politic of possibility and danger, where debates about sex and sexuality have become increasingly public affairs.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is based on the analysis of these weekly tabloids over a 12-month period in 2007–2008 and is informed by four years of public health work and one year of fieldwork focusing on women’s health issues in Yogyakarta, Central Java beginning in 2000.
- 2 The increased media freedoms of post-Suharto Indonesia include a new press law (1999), the granting of four new television licenses (2001–02), the legalization of cable television, and the expansion of radio and the internet. Media expansion does not necessarily translate into a democratic society, however, as ownership of television stations was largely in the hands of the state, the Suharto family and their associates (Weintraub 2008).
- 3 *Jilbab* refers to the wide variety of head coverings worn by Muslim women in Indonesia. Brenner (1996) offers an insightful discussion of the burgeoning popularity of the *jilbab*.
- 4 “Keterbukaan terhadap masalah seksualpun semakin besar, tetapi pada saat yang sama toleransi terhadapnya semakin menyempit.”
- 5 By definition, a tabloid refers to a “newspaper of small format giving the news in condensed form, often with sensational material.” My experience with these two tabloids is very different from the content of, for example, the always sensational *National Enquirer* “I gave birth to a watermelon” tabloid. Instead, these tabloids consist of almost exactly the same material found in glossy expensive versions.
- 6 Literacy rates have been increasing steadily since the end of the New Order, with the percentage of Indonesians aged fifteen and older who could read and write in 2004 at 90.4% (Central Intelligence Agency, The World Factbook 2008). The percentage of the Indonesian population age ten years and older who read newspapers and or magazines in 1997 was 23.46%. 40.26% listen to the radio and 85.86% watch television (*Badan Pusat Statistik* Home Page, <http://www.bps.go.id/indexshtml>, statistical information on “Accessibility to Mass media”).
- 7 Data received through telephone discussion with the Editorial Department of *Cantiq*, September 1, 2008.
- 8 “Cara benar puasa sekaligus diet”; “Merawat rambut berjilbab”; “Tetap bugar saat puasa.”
- 9 “Kebenaran sejati ada pada hati nurani. Namun tak semua manusia mampu berbuat dan bersikap sesuai hati nurani. Adalah tugas *Tabloid Nurani* untuk mengasah kepekaan hati nurani semua pembacanya.”
- 10 Data received through telephone discussions with the Editorial Department of *Nurani*, September 1, 2008.
- 11 For example, there are no articles about Christmas in December.
- 12 “. . . aku suka lho dengan bahasa seks yang kamu sajikan. Soalnya, bahasanya tidak vulgar. Tapi, memberikan pendidikan seks buat pasangan suami-istri. Aku merasakan sendiri manfaatnya.”
- 13 I have heard that these terms originate in an imported popular women’s magazine, similar to *Cosmopolitan*, although I have not found data to legitimize this.

- 14 “Ketika Gairah seks suami menghilang”; “Tetap nikmat dengan seks kilat”; “Kondom, bikin seks jadi tak nikmat?”; “Bercinta tetap Oke Pasca Melahirkan.”
- 15 The former revolves around the East Javanese mass-murderer known as “Rian” whose homosexuality was more sensationalized in the media than his violent actions.
- 16 Suryakusuma 2006.
- 17 See also Wasono 2006 for an interesting discussion of short stories that depict women in sexual subject positions.
- 18 “Nikmatnya bila Wanita Pegang Kendali.”
- 19 “. . . ia melihat tubuh istrinya yang tidak lagi ramping sehingga tampak kurang seksi.”
- 20 “Misalnya, saat bercinta, suami merasa reaksi dari istrinya kurang bagus dan menyenangkankan bila dibanding dengan wanita selingkuhannya. Sehingga, gairah suami bisa langsung turun.”
- 21 “Jika suami tak mau memperbaiki diri dengan menghentikan perselingkuhannya, tentu akan susah. Demikian juga istri. Harus koreksi diri. Minimal, harus bisa ‘lebih’ dari WIL suaminya.”
- 22 “Bulan Ramadan atau bulan puasa memang momen tepat untuk memperbanyak beribadah agar mendapat pahala sebanyak-banyaknya. Tapi, bukan berarti ‘melayani’ suami boleh ditinggalkan. Sebab, melayani suami juga termasuk ibadah bagi seorang istri. Nah, agar kewajiban ‘melayani’ suami tetap bisa dijalankan tanpa mengganggu ibadah yang lain, bercinta secara cepat atau *quickie sex*, mungkin bisa dijadikan alternatif. Tapi, meski disukai pria, aktivitas seks kilat memang kurang begitu dinikmati wanita. Bagaimana caranya agar masing-masing pihak terpuaskan?”
- 23 As explained in *Nurani*, the essence of fasting according to Islamic law is in the control of the desire to eat/drink (*nafsu perut*) and in the control of sexual desire (*nafsu bawah perut*). If you masturbate or are “romantic” with your husband/wife between sunrise and sunset, you have broken your fast, must make up your fast and are fined by having to give food to the poor. The need for “quickie sex” refers to the limited amount of time (sundown to sunrise) one has during the fasting month to satisfy your desire for food/drink and sex.
- 24 However, studies of Javanese court histories from the later nineteenth century show that, in a supposed attempt to change the sexual image of Indonesian women as sexual partners to their Dutch colonizers, the gender roles of Indonesian women as “good” wives and mothers who “serve” their husbands began to take hold (see Anderson 1983; Pemberton 1994; Stoler 1992; Florida 1996).
- 25 Interview, MM, 15 August 2008, Yogyakarta.
- 26 “Mendidik masyarakat agar berfikir modern dan Islami; Memotivasi masyarakat agar giat bekerja dan beribadah; Mengingatkan masyarakat agar memihak pada kebenaran.”
- 27 “Astagfirullah, 62 Persen Siswi SMP Tidak Perawan.”
- 28 “Parasit Toksoplasma Sebabkan Janin Cacat.” “Infeksi Kelamin Sebabkan Kemandulan.”
- 29 “penyakit ini ditularkan melalui hubungan seksual dengan penderita.”
- 30 The film officially recorded the highest ticket sales for a local film since 2000 (*Jakarta Post* 2008).
- 31 “Ke bioskop tabu untuk pesantren, tapi ada film bermanfaat seperti *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, kami booking bioskop. Selama kegiatan itu banyak positifnya, ya tidak apa-apa.”
- 32 “Waspada! sabun kecantikan berlemak babi”; “Halal-haram pemutih wajah”; “Carah bersuci saat berkuteks.”
- 33 “Salah satu pembeda antara pria dan wanita adalah aktivitas bersolek atau berhias. Mulai dari menggunakan busana dari bahan halus dan khusus hingga menghiasi wajah dan tubuh. Hal itu diperbolehkan dalam Islam asalkan tidak menimbulkan keburukan. Misalnya, berhias untuk menyengankan diri dan suami, serta berhias agar mencirikan wanita muslimah tetap bisa tampil menarik. Ada juga berhias yang dilarang dalam Islam, misalnya niat bersolek untuk menarik perhatian lawan jenis dan sebagainya.”
- 34 “Annisa Trihapsari: Mantap Berjilbab Setelah Tahajud.”
- 35 “Aku mendapat teguran Allah. Baju seksi ternyata tidak dibenarkan Islam.”

- 36 "Aku pribadi merasa lebih tenang bisa mendapatkan wanita berjilbab karena saat aku tinggal kerja, wanita itu dijaga oleh jilbabnya."
- 37 "Zaskia Merokok, Simbol Muslimah Runtuh?" "Karena keputusannya berjilbab pada Januari 2005, karir Zaskia sebagai artis makin laris. Beberapa peran film ataupun sine-tron religi berdatangan padanya. Zaskia pun disebut-sebut sebagai ikon remaja Muslim."
- 38 "Kau muslimah prihatin. Ini karena Zaskia sudah terlanjur didentikkan sosok muslimah yang alim dan salehah. Benarkah karena hobi Zaskia itu akan menurunkan pamor muslimah di Indonesia?"
- 39 "Yang dia tahu hanya siklus menstruasi bahkan jika siklus tidak teraturpun bagi mereka tidak masalah, terus terang kalau saya melihat masih sangat sedikit karena memang promisnya gak banyak, beda sekali dengan kesehatan kulit, muka, langsing beda sekali. Karena alkon itu kan dianggap private, area yang dianggap private, area yang menu-turku masih hitam tapi anehnya masih tetap tereksploitasi, kalau memang ditabukan benar-benar gak usah diomongin, ditabukan tapi untuk seksualitas di eksploitasi, misalnya iklan mengenai sliming tea, pembesar payudara, jamu kuat, itu kan seksua-litas ada disitu tapi kenapa organ reproduksi tidak pernah terungkap dengan baik, itu yang saya rasakan."

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Part III

Islamic perspectives on film, music, and literature

8 (Un)framing Muslim sexuality in Dina Zaman's *I Am Muslim*

Washima Che Dan

This is not a discourse or religious book about Islam. It is a very selfish series of articles by a writer exploring her religion and people. I see it as an adventure of meeting strange, new and wonderful people who call themselves Muslims.
(Dina Zaman, *I Am Muslim*, p. 11)

Author Dina Zaman's disclaimer above can be seen as a typical cautionary statement made by many Muslims when dealing with Islam, or when talking about Islam. While Islam may arguably be the most talked-about religion, both by believers and non-believers, practitioners and non-practitioners, scholars and non-scholars, there is nevertheless a sense of wariness among Muslims themselves in talking about their own religion. This phenomenon exists, paradoxically, despite overt religiosity among today's Malay(sian) Muslims which is particularly visible in their mode of dress and forms of public religious practices.

Such reluctance to talk about their religion among Malaysian Muslims was observed by Dina Zaman in her book *I am Muslim*. She noted that in talking about our religion "we have become experts in leading double lives," because "[a]t work, at school, even with peers, we are advised not to ever discuss politics, race and religion" (p. 60) and that even though "[w]e have issues that need to be aired, . . . we can't, because we could get into serious trouble, and there with it would go our rice bowls" (p. 60, emphasis in original).

It is this reluctance which created a space for Dina Zaman to write *I Am Muslim*, to talk about issues that have not been talked about openly, or only in "hushed tones," for as Dina asks, "if we are not open to discussions and agreeing to disagree with each other, how are we to know anything about our faith?" (p. 60). Such openness in the way that Dina talks about Islam and Muslim identity in modern day Malaysia, in a language (English) that reaches a mainly middle class multicultural audience of Malaysia, has meant that the book has attracted much media attention. The book was a bestseller after a few weeks of its publication, and was on sale in all major bookstores in Malaysia. Its popularity lies in Dina's open and engaging style in talking about Islam as a modern Malay Muslim woman herself, and as a representative of the majority of her audience: urban, educated and middle class Malaysians. Thus Dina Zaman proves that Islam indeed sells, and when sex is

thrown in as an essential ingredient in a book that discusses Islam and being Muslim, the popularity of the book was perhaps not surprising. The book's appeal lies in Dina's forthright manner and simplicity of writing, sharing her innermost thoughts with a no-holds-barred style reminiscent of the popular 1990s British chick lit *Bridget Jones's Diaries* (later adapted into a huge box-office film) or even the popular TV series *Sex and the City* (also successfully adapted to become two huge box-office films *Sex and the City: the Movie* and *Sex and the City 2*).

In explaining Muslim identity through the book, Dina addresses (pp. 10–11) an audience much like herself:

[b]eing a Muslim in Malaysia can be complex and confusing. In school and religious classes held after school, a young child is taught to read the Quran and conduct his life as a good Muslim. He or she may go home and face a different world altogether: MTV, parents who drink socially and yet pray, and cannot put two and two together.

She therefore addresses that segment of Muslim society in Malaysia in her musings, and asks (p. 11):

Are we Muslim Malaysians lost? . . . What makes us Muslim when we wear the hijab [headcover] but consort with shamans, drink and hold discourses on Cuban cigars while attending Friday prayers diligently?

I Am Muslim, comprising articles originally published in her column of the same title in the online newspaper Malaysiakini.com, is divided into four parts: Part 1 – “Travels in Faith”; Part 2 – “Sex within Islam”; Part 3 – “Soul Searching”; and Part 4 – “Portraits.”

In Part 1 (“Travels in Faith”), Dina captures the diversity of Muslim identities by relating different Muslim characters she has met – from Malays who have confused their Malayness with Muslimness, to those who still (in this day and age) have difficulty in shedding their animistic beliefs. She also tells of her experiences as a Muslim overseas (Jakarta, Lancaster, Berlin), each experience in its own way ironically reinforcing her own conviction and Islamic identity, even more so than at home in Malaysia.

Part 2, which is the focus of this paper (“Sex within Islam”), relates the sexual lives of modern Muslim men and women who struggle with their religious identities and their baser needs. Dina Zaman unveils the seedy world of Malaysia's transvestites and homosexuals, and criticizes the hypocrisy of the married men who have relationships with them. She explores the surprising obsession with virginity in contemporary Malaysia, the judgmental attitude towards *janda* (divorcees), the continuing contention over polygamy or polygyny, and open discourse about the issues of *halal* and *haram* (lawfulness and unlawfulness) pertaining to sex outside marriage, masturbation, and homosexuality – in general, how Muslims cope with their sexuality while holding on to their faith.

In Part 3 ("Soul Searching"), Dina reflects on her own religious practices and ponders on the state of the so-called multicultural nation which seems to have driven people apart rather than bringing them together. She worries about the obsession with labels: Muslim, non-Muslim, "practising/liberal/confused/orthodox Muslim or an apostate" (p. 146). She questions the chauvinistic tendencies of today's Malaysian Muslims and asks (p. 149):

Does this mean I can't be a Muslim and have Catholic/Hindu/Buddhist friends too? And that I can't visit the homes of those who own dogs? Hang on a mo—my uncle's late father was the mufti of Terengganu and, bless his soul, but he kept dogs.

In Part 4 ("Portraits") Dina tells of the natural human inclination towards spirituality and God as people become older, regardless of how "wild" they had been in their younger years, to the extent of going to the other extreme, of rejecting all that is "worldly." She also reveals the trendiness of religious practices among upper middle class Malays, whereby the over-inflated prices of the *tudung* (headscarf), the *telekung* (prayer shroud), and the *umrah* package seem to be the opposite of modesty and piety as promoted by religion. On the leaf of the book cover of *I Am Muslim*, Dr. Adeeba Kamarulzaman, the president of the Malaysian AIDS Council and the chairperson of the Malaysian AIDS Foundation states:

[i]n a country where thoughts on Islamic issues and discussions on these subjects are seen to be almost the sole purview of Ulama (and therefore exclusively males) it is indeed pleasing to see Dina break this mould. Her writings have attempted to demystify Islam and shown the religion for what it is—a religion for all times that somehow over the last few years has been made complicated and in the process completely misunderstood.

Even before the further complications brought about by September 11, 2001, Akbar S. Ahmed in his book *Living Islam: from Samarkand to Stornoway* observed how negative images of Muslims abound in the media:

The controversy regarding The Satanic Verses, the Gulf War and the collapse of the BCCI [bank] are three examples of the media focusing attention on Muslims and causing heated argument. Through the drama that surrounded the author and the novel, the way the Gulf War developed and was fought, and the story of the bank, Muslims all over the world were forced to engage in a debate with non-Muslims and indeed with other Muslims. With media descriptions of a 'criminal culture', to many in the West Islam appeared to be a force of anarchy and disorder.

(Ahmed 1993: 225)

It may be argued that Dina Zaman's collection of essays with its bold title declaring *I Am Muslim*, continues efforts made by Muslim writers who write in English to

respond to Ahmed's claim that "[i]n the age of the media, of the sound bite, of television images, Muslims have not yet found a way of expressing themselves adequately" (p. 225) and that "Muslims have yet to discover how to use the media to project ideas and images of their own culture and civilization" (p. 226).

Part 2 ("Sex within Islam") has captured significant media attention for Dina Zaman's book. For example, two of the articles in this section won the DaimlerChrysler Red Ribbon Media (New Age) Award in 2006. The two articles, entitled "It's a Muslim issue: How gay are you?" and "It's a Muslim issue: like a virgin" are provocative at daring to foreground two taboo issues within Malay Muslim discourse—homosexuality and virginity. This chapter will focus on these two articles in order to show how religion and sexuality are (un)framed through Dina's unabashed public discourses on sexuality within the modern Malay(sian) Muslim world. Using text world theory from the critical linguistic tradition, this chapter looks at how Dina defamiliarizes Muslim identity by exploring alternative Muslim sexual selves. As always, frank and shocking in challenging taboos about talking about sexuality, it is with such defamiliarization of the said topic that Dina is most successful and persuasive.

Defamiliarization, which is a technique used by writers to force the audience to see common things in an unfamiliar or strange way in order to enhance perception of the familiar or to resist habitualization, is explained succinctly by Boris Tomashevsky, a Russian Formalist:

The old and habitual must be spoken of as if it were new and unusual. One must speak of the ordinary as if it were unfamiliar.

(Tomashevsky 1965: 85)

Dina Zaman, through *I Am Muslim*, uses defamiliarization to talk about Muslims in order to show that Muslims are human, with human weaknesses and foibles, an important part of which is their sexuality. She forces the audience to see Muslims in a different light, not as a group of people who think they are "holier than thou" but as normal people who themselves struggle with their own understanding of their identities as Muslims. At another level, Dina also defamiliarizes sexuality from the Muslim perspective by foregrounding homosexuality and virginity as topics open for discussion and thus open to further interpretation and evaluation.

Although *I Am Muslim* is Dina's first non-fiction work (she is better known for her short stories), her unflinching treatment of sex and sexuality is not new. Her short stories are raw depictions of sexual realities, most of them "reflect[ing] earthiness or bawdiness and the characters' constant self-awareness of female libidinal desires" (Khoo 2006: 150). Part 2 of *I Am Muslim* ("Sex within Islam") therefore fulfills the reader's expectations of Dina Zaman's writings—that she minces no words at describing the "Malay Muslim dilemma" in handling their sexual identities which may be at odds with their Muslim selves. Thus Dina in her non-fiction work continues in the vein of her short stories, using, as postulated by Khoo, a "confrontational writing style [which] is a calculated move against

Islamic repression of sexual discourse and the clampdown on female (and gay) sexualities" (ibid.: 151).

The tendency to juxtapose our religiosity with sexuality is not new. In another essay entitled "Between Religiosity and Sexuality: The 'Religious Malay' in Malay Text Worlds," I have looked at this tendency which "gives rise to questions of how religiosity is defined within the Malay Muslim world, and the role that sexuality, often surprisingly explicitly expressed in Malay fictive discourses, plays in contributing to definitions of 'Malay Muslimness'" (Che Dan 2007: 221). In reading Shahnun Ahmad, Karim Raslan, and Che Husna Azhari, I found that "in spite of the different languages they used to write in, . . . Malay religiosity has been consistently juxtaposed with their sexuality, revealing a preoccupation with both" (ibid.: 230). Moreover, "[i]n these Malay text worlds, the fulfillment of the earthly desires of the Malay Muslims may create potential conflicts with their desires to attain heavenly ones" (ibid.).

Farish A. Noor (2002: 268) has also highlighted the issue of how "religion and sex seem to be the most popular topics in the Malaysian media." This, he says ironically, despite our being "an Asian country with the purest of Asian values" and where sex "is regarded as taboo" (ibid.: 270). On the contrary, however, I would say that this scenario is changing. Sex is no longer such a taboo, as long as it is described within the legal bond of marriage. A quick glance at topics in Malay and English popular magazines on sale in Malaysia reveals that sex continues to sell, and has become a staple ingredient in such magazines.

Text world theory and the two "world-building elements"

The framework of the late Paul Werth's "text world theory" posits that as we read, "we build up mental constructs called *text worlds*" (Werth 1999: 7, emphasis in original), which are explained simply as "conceptual scenarios containing just enough information to make sense of the particular utterance they correspond to" (ibid.). Werth, whose "main thesis is that all of semantics and pragmatics operates within a set of stacked cognitive spaces, termed 'mental worlds,'" asserts that "[c]onnections with 'reality' are stipulated rather than built in, and indeed the very notion of reality itself is an assumption, which we readily accept, but have no direct access to" (ibid.: 17). Werth further explains that the text world is "a total construct, so therefore negotiated by the participants through the medium of the discourse, again backed up by relevant knowledge. Since it is a construct, it is dependent on resources of memory and imagination, rather than direct perception" (ibid.). Thus, in order for authors to successfully create such worlds, they need to draw upon "resources of memory and imagination" which are shared with the reader.

In reading *I Am Muslim*, I find that Dina defamiliarizes Muslim identity in relation to the sexual self through the use of two "world-building elements" introduced by Werth: "common ground," and "protagonist." "Common ground" refers to "the totality of information which the speaker(s) and hearer(s) have agreed to accept as relevant for their discourse" (Werth 1999: 119). "Protagonist" refers to

“the general term for sentient entities who are involved in one way or another with discourse. Thus they can be creating it – either producing or interpreting it – or they can figure in it in some way” (ibid.: 189). These two world-building elements will be considered in each article selected in order to (un)frame Muslim sexuality as constructed by Dina Zaman. I use the term “(un)frame” to reflect the dichotomy of Dina’s way of representing Muslim sexuality. On the one hand, she is framing her discussion of sexuality within the context of a Muslim world: how do Malay Muslims reconcile (if at all) their Islamic identity with their sexual desires? On the other hand, the “framing” seems to be an unravelling of a complex identity in which Muslims are simply human. The book, which appears to be about a specific community as represented by its title *I Am Muslim*, paradoxically asks the reader to dismiss such categorization.

“It’s a Muslim issue: How gay are you?”

Perhaps it is not surprising that “It’s a Muslim issue: How gay are you?” and “It’s a Muslim issue: like a virgin” were the award-winning articles out of the whole collection. The issues addressed are significant as Muslims try to reconcile with their religious and modern/postmodern identities. By labelling these two topics “It’s a Muslim issue,” Dina defies Muslims who would dismiss homosexuality and virginity as topics that do not belong in the public discourse of the Muslim world.

In “How gay are you?”, Dina narrates the stories of four “gay or wannabe gay Muslim” protagonists who struggle (or not) with their alternative sexual preferences and their Muslim identities. Starting with the not so common, or perhaps rarely discussed world of Muslim homosexuals, Dina creates protagonists who represent Muslims in conflict with their religious and sexual identities, and shows how they resist or reconcile with this said conflict.

She begins with X, who “has been on the Hajj twice” but is also a lesbian. “She is in a dilemma: if she chooses the right path, she knows she may find a place in paradise, but her life will be without companionship and sex” (p. 106). X’s “solution” is to pray hard, seeking “solace in zikirs and prayers, while yearning for that one thing.” Here, by using X as an example, Dina constructs the common ground shared by Muslims, that homosexuality is forbidden (*haram*) in Islam, and therefore there are no compromises. The message is one familiar to Muslims: choose the right path and try to overcome your “deviant” inclinations. Such straightforward understanding of Islam’s stand on homosexuality as represented by the protagonist X has been foregrounded by Dina to show the stronghold that Islam has on Malay identities, thus creating an unstable or ambivalent state of being for the Muslim self.

In contrast, her next protagonist is Haji Zainal Abidin, a 35-year-old “manly” accountant who does not see himself “in conflict with God” (p. 107). Rather, he is “very comfortable being a Muslim who happens to be gay” (ibid.), and, therefore, has reconciled with his identity as a gay Muslim. He does this by rationalizing that (p. 107):

The Book [the Qur'an] talks about how God creates perfection. So if you're born handicapped—without an arm or leg, or you're blind; that in God's eyes is perfection itself. My homosexuality as far as I am concerned, is perfection in God's eyes. I didn't ask to be gay. I was born gay. I never knew anything else.

It is however not clear if Haji Zainal Abidin is out of the closet, or admits openly of his homosexuality, despite his frankness with Dina. The construction of two homosexuals who are religious (both X and Haji Zainal have taken the *haji*) creates a defamiliarization of homosexuality different from the accepted common ground of homosexuals as deviant and who are also non-practitioners of the religion (in other words, bad Muslims).

In fact, it is the heterosexual (straight) Muslim man who is attacked by Dina as the bad Muslim. The next protagonist constructed by Dina is the figure of the straight man (including married ones) who sleep with gay men. Dina warns the securely married woman of their husbands, by stating that (p. 109):

what is becoming a more visible phenomenon is husbands or boyfriends who have sex with men. These men do not see themselves as cheating on their partners, for these reasons:

Receiving fellatio or having sex from a male/female/transsexual sex worker is just considered "services rendered."

Receiving said sex act or having sex with a man does not constitute an affair because the third party is a man, not a woman.

Indeed, it would appear that to Dina, the hypocrisy of the straight Muslim man who seeks sexual favours from gay men is worse; this point is continuously driven home by Dina to the reader through the representation of protagonists who reiterate this state of affairs. Therefore, the common notion that homosexuality is unIslamic has been overturned, or defamiliarized, to allow for a different common ground to emerge, one that paints a more sympathetic picture towards Muslim homosexuals.

Finally, and perhaps most controversially, Dina reveals the world of what she labels as the "*tudung* lesbians" (lesbians who wear the headscarf), and includes an e-mail interview with one. Dina voices her perplexity when confronted with such a phenomenon, "*You're wearing a tudung, for crying out loud, you have taken a divine oath to be a good Muslim, you can't be a lesbian*" (p. 110, emphasis in original). This perplexity is derived from the common ground of Malay Muslim community, that girls who wear the *tudung* are perceived as models of propriety, and therefore are pious and "good Muslims." Again, the construction of protagonists who challenge Malay Muslim common ground allows for Dina to reflect that "what you wear and practise has no bearing on the person you really are" (p. 110). Dina thus is able to end this article by posing the question: "does sexuality choose you or who you want to be?" (p. 115).

In the article “How gay are you?”, Dina’s discourse is persuasive in reflecting on the confusion of the Muslim who believes that she/he is gay. Her text world, which is a mixture of her own personal reflections and narration, and quotes from her protagonists, or dialogues with them, is interspersed with common or accepted Islamic understandings of sexuality, supported by well-known translated verses from the Qur’an (verses 80–81 of Surah Al-A’raf):

And (remember) Lut, when he said to his people: “Do you commit the worst sin such as none preceding you has committed in the ‘Alamin’ (mankind and djinn)? Verily, you practise your lusts on men instead of women. Nay, but you are a people transgressing beyond bounds (by committing great sins).”

The use of the Qur’an above works as a powerful affirmation of the internal conflict faced by her Muslim protagonists (except for Haji Zainal Abidin, the protagonist referred to earlier who is at peace with his identity as both gay and Muslim) as they cannot deny God’s words. For example, one interviewee admits to believing that she is a lesbian but non-practising in that she has not done anything about it. Her decision “not to do anything about it” is due to her strong belief in Islam and its stand on homosexuality.

Even when prodded by Dina that lesbianism is not mentioned in the Qur’an, she asserts that “homosexuality is homosexuality. It may refer to gay men, but that may just be translation and the use of the male nouns and verbs; I think it still applies to women” (p. 115). While admitting jokingly that “if there is a loophole somewhere . . . I am all ears!” (ibid.), this protagonist’s unquestioning acceptance of Islamic rule on homosexuality proves how Islamic identity continues to be a strong regulator of identity for contemporary Malay Muslims.

In boldly addressing homosexuality in this article, Dina has highlighted that “[h]omosexuality is a lifestyle we must accept exists, whether we like it or not” (p. 108). Furthermore, her rendition of the issue has created a defamiliarized Muslim take whereby the common ground of homosexuality as negative and un-Islamic has been challenged and replaced with one that is grounded in Islam, yet is more sympathetic towards alternative sexualities.

“It’s a Muslim issue: like a virgin”

Dina’s “It’s a Muslim issue: like a virgin” also juxtaposes religiosity with sexuality, specifically the issue of keeping your virginity until marriage and the growing importance of sex education within a generally conservative society such as Malaysia. Dina begins her narration with a headline from the magazine *Forum Perdana* which caught her attention: “*Pulih dara guna chopstick*,” or as Dina translates loosely, “it meant that you could become a virgin again, using chopsticks, and only Bomoh Cha had the gift to *re-virginise* you” (p. 136).

For Dina, the article reflects Malaysian society’s obsession with virginity despite it being no longer a common asset in this modern world. She disrupts

romantic notions from the common ground that Muslims do not have sex before marriage by asserting that (p.137):

I don't have the statistics on deflowered young Muslims who aren't married in other countries, and neither do I have the numbers for the said group in Malaysia, but these days, it's getting harder to find virgins. If the loss of virginity at a young age was an urban phenomenon at one time, it is now fast becoming the norm via premarital sex, coerced sex, incest and rape in rural areas.

She continues by expanding on the common ground of different expectations of virginity from men and women:

Perhaps among young and unmarried Muslim women, virginity and celibacy is expected; whereas for young virile men it is seen as if there is something wrong with him. He is either homosexual, tied to his mother's titties, as they say, or impotent. Social expectations are high, to prove that you are a man. Even among female virgins, the age factor plays a role in perception: you're 38 and you're not married? How do you *tahan* [resist]? Why are you so fussy?

Dina here draws upon common ground that if one is a virgin and celibate by the age of 38, "*there must be something wrong with you*" (p. 137) as a contradictory message for a society which puts so much value on virginity.

Dina also argues for a more open attitude towards sex among Muslims as the Qur'an "talks very clearly about sex, but procreation is to be enjoyed within the boundaries of a lawful marriage" (p. 138). Again she cites well-known translated verses of the Qur'an on sex such as Surah Al Baqarah, verse 223:

Your wives are a tilth for you, so go to your tilth, when or how you will, and send (good deeds, or ask Allah to bestow upon you pious offspring) for your own selves beforehand. And fear Allah, and know that you are to meet Him and give good tidings to the believers, o Muhammad (Peace Be upon Him).

And Surah Al Qiyamah, verses 37–39:

Was he not a Nutfahn (mixed male and female sexual discharge) or semen emitted? Then he became an 'Alaqah (a clot); then Allah shaped and fashioned in due proportion. And made of him two sexes, male and female.

The use of Qur'anic verses to explain sexuality from a Muslim perspective reinforces the importance of sex education, and also the naturalness of sexual intercourse as part of human nature which has to be handled properly and lawfully (through marriage). In other words, Muslims are generally aware that while sex is a part of human nature, to have sex outside the legal bond of marriage is to commit

sin, and marriage is the natural solution for such physical desires, and therefore, is to be encouraged.

This is confirmed in *I am Muslim* by the protagonist Dr. Harlina Halizah, a lecturer and gynaecological specialist, who advocates sex education and promotes matched and early marriages as a solution to dealing with young people's sexuality. To Dr. Harlina, "Islam recognises sexual urge and regulates it through marriage" . . . "and Islam forbids adultery as well as celibacy" (p. 139).

While generally arguing for sex education in line with the government's efforts, Dina is sceptical (p. 140) of the too neat guidelines for sex education approved by the Cabinet as expressed by Dr. Harlina.

Much as I respect her opinions, I find the solution a tad too simplistic for me. Matched marriages do not necessarily mean matrimonial happiness and at the age of 18 or 22, what on earth would a kid know about life and marriage? He or she has to get a job to survive, and is probably too green to realise that love takes a lot of work for it to bloom and survive. And if you're unlucky enough to be single for a long while (!), what the hell do you do? Invest in inflatable dolls and vibrators?

Further, Dina argues, "where do you put people like the *hijab* clad lesbians? They're gay but otherwise they're observant Muslims. How do you 'counsel' them?" (p. 140). In doing so, Dina also wonders whether sex education will truly work in Malaysia when we are not really ready to face the reality of the complexity of sexual identities in today's day and age.

Conclusion

I Am Muslim can be seen to be yet another defence of Islam which has suffered much at the hands of Muslims themselves, due to "[t]he interpretation of Islam in modern time [which] has made the religion seem anti-social, anti-human rights and against progress" (p. 17). With such negative press, Dina asks ". . . how do you go about being a Muslim?" (ibid.)

It is perhaps easy to see why the two articles "It's a Muslim issue: How gay are you?" and "It's a Muslim issue: like a virgin" received the 2006 DaimlerChrysler Red Ribbon Media (New Age) Award. Focusing on issues previously not talked about by Muslims in such a forthright and blunt manner, Dina manages to convincingly create a vivid picture of the messiness of contemporary identity(ies) and the confusion faced by (especially) young modern Malaysian Muslims in coming to terms with their religious and sexual identities. As a result, the picture that is created is a complex one that strikes a chord with most modern Muslims. Depending on a common ground of Islamic upbringing as the basis for presenting the multitude of identities and realities of the modern Muslim world, Dina draws upon Muslims' religious experience, the Qur'an, and common understandings and misconceptions to tackle what has hitherto been simplistically reported. It may be concluded that Dina Zaman's success in the persuasiveness and

believability of her writing is due especially to her technique of defamiliarization of common or familiar stories which circulate among modern Muslims in relation to their identity, thus inadvertently confirming previously unvoiced suspicions.

Through *I Am Muslim*, Dina Zaman has reflected on her own search for God, and has painted sympathetic “portraits” of people searching for God around her. Dina ends her book with a pensive, yet optimistic, reflection on the innocence of humanity as each (Muslim) baby is born and ponders its uncertain future. While the book is about being a Muslim, the reader is left with a strong message of the vulnerability of humanity and of our dependence on God, regardless of our religious beliefs.

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9 Sexing Islam

Religion and contemporary Malaysian cinema

Noritah Omar

On April 23, 2006, a local Malaysian television show entitled “Contemporary Issues in the Arts” (*Fenomena Seni*) broadcast a panel discussion alleging that two films by award-winning filmmaker Yasmin Ahmad had corrupted the image of Malay culture and exhibited no sense of respect for sensitive religious issues.¹ Broadcast on the Malaysian government-owned television station RTM 1, the panel discussion was hosted by Malaysia’s most popular Malay actor, Rosyam Nor, and included film critic Akmal Abdullah and film directors Hasan Mutalib and Raja Azmi Raja Abdullah. Yasmin’s films had dared to highlight perceived taboo issues, such as the interracial relationship between a Malay-Muslim girl and a non-Muslim Chinese boy in *Sepet* (without any indication of the boy wanting to convert to Islam). The films were also seen to have “approved” of sinful acts in Islam such as prostitution (with the representation of a noble prostitute in *Gubra*) and extramarital affairs (e.g., the wife in *Gubra*, who retaliates against her husband’s extramarital affair by having one herself).

Yasmin Ahmad’s films, along with a new wave of Malaysian filmmakers, had received critical acclaim both at home and abroad.² She had also generated public criticism for her representation of Islam, sexuality, and women’s bodies. This chapter explores issues of “Islamic sexuality” in Yasmin Ahmad’s films *Sepet* (2004) and *Gubra* (2006). I combine a postcolonial feminist reading with an interpretive framework that draws from discourses about Islam in Malaysia. My reading looks especially at the construction of intimacy in representing sexuality in relations between a husband and wife or between a man and a woman. This construction of intimacy has led to the success of Yasmin’s films, on the one hand, and Muslim public resistance to her films on the other.

Constructing public–private notions of intimacy

In thinking about “Malay Muslimness” and notions of intimacy and sexuality in the discourse created by Yasmin’s films, I would like to consider the notions of *halal* (permissible) and *haram* (forbidden) within the context of film. *Halal* (*halaal*) refers to “the name of a legal category of things which are permissible. It includes things which are classified *wajib* (compulsory), *mustahabb* (recommended), *mubaah* (allowed) and *makrooh* (disliked)” while *haram* refers to “the

name given to the legal category of things which are forbidden in Islam” (Philips 1996: 147). For the purposes of comparison, I will discuss briefly the notions of *halal* and *haram* in Iranian films. In Iran, for example, the guidelines on depictions of sexuality within the framework of *halal* and *haram* in cinema are clearly regulated. In the Iranian film industry, filmmakers are subjected to strict censorship laws regarding Islam to an extent that censorship has even been imposed on portraying women dressed like men (Shakil 2009).

Iranian films express intimacy between a husband and wife and simultaneously observe Islamic rules of *halal* and *haram* in male–female relationships. For example, the film *Leila* (1996), directed by Dariush Mehrjui, captures the discourse of intimacy in filmmaking according to Islamic rules of *halal* and *haram*. *Leila* is a story of a husband and wife who cannot bear children, and subsequently must struggle with cultural and familial pressures. Reza, the husband, is pressured by his mother and sisters to marry another wife in order to have a child. Leila, his wife, has to come to terms with the fact that her husband will need to marry another woman under these conditions. In a particularly poignant scene, the couple have a conversation about Reza’s visit to his mother’s house regarding the topic of children. This scene captures a moment of great pain for Leila. The scene hides the presumed nakedness of the woman’s body (which is considered *haram* to be shown in public) by covering her in a white blanket, with gestures of her hand signalling to the husband for him to switch on the light (Figure 9.1).

In this scene, the construction of intimacy between the husband and wife is seen in the symbolic materiality of her covered body and her visible hand gestures. The public is informed of the subjective element of intimacy, which is normally hidden and is often identified with female subjectivity, but is kept within the private



Figure 9.1 Leila Hatami as the title character in Darius Mehrjui’s *Leila*, seen here covering herself in a white blanket (copyright © 1996 Farabi Cinema Foundation).

sphere. By keeping the construction of intimacy within the private sphere, the scene resists the modern masculine ideal of representing intimacy in overtly sexual ways. The sense of intimacy in *Leila* is captured in the atmosphere rather than through physical contact or exposure of the human body. Leila's body is not seen at all in this very intimate scene thus highlighting her subjectivity as a Muslim woman whose body is protected and covered. The film manages to capture intimacy without compromising Islamic concepts of *halal* and *haram*.

Yasmin Ahmad's *Gubra* treats religion and sexuality much more explicitly than *Leila*. The film portrays the intimacy between the *bilal* (a muezzin), and his wife (shown by a kiss on her forehead). Another scene shows the closeness between Orked, the Malay female lead character, and her husband Arif in the bedroom – the scene ends with them bathing together but without any explicit depiction of them in the bathroom. In these scenes, religion – represented by the *bilal* and his wife, who also teaches the Qur'an – is not separated from human sexuality (as portrayed by the intimacy shown between husband and wife, namely, the *bilal* and his wife, Orked and Arif, as well as scenes portraying Orked's parents). The presence of sexual Malay Muslims in Yasmin's films reinforces the general perception of Muslims as sexual in contrast with other religious identities which keep sexuality and religion separate.

The construction of the private–public spheres within the Malay-Muslim framework may be observed through the discourse of intimacy between the religious husband and wife. In this case, *Gubra* exposes Islamic intimacy as public. The exposure of the notion of intimacy in the public sphere makes the relationship between the husband and wife no longer an example of sexuality with regards to marriage as part of Islamic belief, as stated in the *Hadith*. The exposure is a violation of the Islamic framework which guards intimacy in marriage. The notion of *halal/haram* limits the potential of the merging of public and private spheres which are promoted in Yasmin's representation of sexual relationships.

Although Yasmin's depictions of sexuality in her film *Sepet* were subject to some degree of censorship, the final cuts were much more explicit than *Leila*, as noted in the following passage by Malaysian filmmaker Amir Muhammad:

A comic-sensous dance by Atan and Mak Inom [in *Sepet*] echoes the bathing scene in *Rabun* and was similarly cut short by the censors. . . . [In *Sepet*], Pak Atan's sarong accidentally slips off to reveal his roomy underwear; they are in the living room and an amused Yam [the maid] walks in on them. Mak Inom's sarong cloth is tied above the bosom in a way known as *kemban*.³

(Muhammad 2009: 61)

Yasmin Ahmad's *Sepet* and *Gubra* reveal what is behind closed doors. Thus we see a husband and wife in intimate situations. Hugging and kissing are shown openly without consideration of the characters (or actors) being Muslim (Figure 9.2). However, Yasmin's works have stimulated continuous moral contestations in the



Figure 9.2 Orked (Sharifah Amani) lying in bed while her husband, Ariff (Adlin Aman Ramlee) attempts to get her into the shower with him. In the background, a call to prayer can be heard. (courtesy of MHZ Film).

Malaysian media and among Muslim Malay audiences. In the article “Gubra Yang Sesat lagi Menyesatkan” (“Gubra which is astray and can lead you astray”), award-winning Malay writer Faisal Tehrani described elements of pornography in *Gubra*, asserting that “there is no excuse whatsoever, for a film that is filled with acts of kissing, hugging, caressing, embracing, massaging, squeezing, etc., to represent love is a film which trivializes, in fact, is one which belittles the question of *amar makruf nahi mungkar* (good and evil deeds)” (Tehrani 2006).

In the Malaysian context, such depictions of sexuality and intimacy were not censored strictly by the censorship body in relation to Islamic concepts of *halal/haram* but they offended the sensibilities of a sizable and very vocal segment of the Malay Muslim audience. They surpassed the audience’s level of tolerance for physical or mental depictions that situated women in indecent positions. They offended established standards of decency.

Yasmin Ahmad may have been seen to transgress the boundaries of *halal* and *haram* in her representation of Malay sexuality through her depiction of Malay women in sarong (*berkemban*) and her explicit public expressions of love between a husband and wife. However, the National Film Censorship Board’s failure to specify the guidelines of *halal* and *haram* for a judgement about the film may have also given rise to audiences and filmmakers relying on both *ijmaa’* and *ijtihad*.⁴ *Ijmaa’* refers to the unanimous agreement of the companions of the Prophet, or scholars in general, on points of Islamic law, while *ijtihad* refers to the reasoning process by which Islamic laws are deduced after thorough research (Philips 1996: 147). Historically, the degree of difference made through these two means of giving opinion in terms of what is permissible and forbidden in Islam led to *‘urf* (social customs) in which

local customs were given legal weight in areas where there are no binding Islamic customs available. It was through the application of this principle that various customs found in the multiplicity of cultures within the Islamic world entered the legal system and became mistakenly classified as Islamic.

(Philips 1996: 67)

These conditions encouraged multiple and conflicting interpretations about the nature and meaning of *halal* and *haram*. What is interesting about the National Film Censorship Board is that its task is to ensure the suitability of a film more in terms of its “politically correct” form of expression rather than its “Islamically correct” or “morally correct” expression. The Board’s evaluation of a film is based on a judgement about the public’s response to the film, rather than any specific Islamic jurisprudence. This situation has led to a “culture of punishment,” as described by Yasmin Ahmad in the following quote:

. . . the culture here is a culture of punishment. Make any attempt to do things differently, however mildly, and you will run the risk of having your knuckles rapped publicly, or worse, face outright banning.

(Yasmin Ahmad 2006b)

Censorship of filmmaking in Malaysia is done according to vague generalities rather than clear guidelines. This, ironically, has led filmmakers to create their own arbitrary ideas about censorship, thus inadvertently giving the censorship body more control over products perceived to be unsuitable for the public.⁵ However, such ambiguity has stimulated a culture of paranoia and punishment rather than a culture of understanding and social justice. In a discussion of Yasmin Ahmad’s films, Benjamin McKay asserts:

[p]erhaps guidelines need to be set in place in a concrete way that determines what in a contemporary Malaysian context pornography actually is . . . [and] the Chairman of the National Film Censorship Board (LPF), Mohd Hussain Shafie, stated that the board is now moving with the times . . . ‘we don’t give too detailed guidelines because we feel that filmmakers are mature enough to know what our society will think of certain things.’

(McKay 2006)

As McKay’s quote demonstrates, the pornographic elements which may be translated as *the* moral issue in *Gubra* are not commonly talked about. The discussion on moralising filmmaking can be a starting point to understanding how pornography is interpreted by the public as well as authoritative institutions. However, without specific guidelines, the filmmakers as well as the audience are left to interpret Islam and filmmaking on their own.

Yasmin Ahmad’s discourse on sexuality has problematized Malaysian Islamic institutional definitions of the *halal* and *haram* equation in their film censorship practice.

The portrayals of intimacy in the relationships of the *bilal* and his wife, Orked and Arif, or Orked's parents, foreground rather than hide issues of religious conservatism and Malay Muslim morality. Mainstream Malay films usually do not raise much public discussion and criticism because they cater to the socio-cultural (working class) and religious (Islamic) expectations of the mainstream Malay movie audience. As a result, there is little or no contestation in relation to culture and religion. The establishment of the country as an "Islamic Malaysia" has called on creative filmmakers to ponder on the state of Malay-Muslim identity as seen through the lenses of ethnicity and religion. Malay-Muslim filmmakers such as Yasmin have responded to national declarations of Islam through their depictions of the cultural-religious conflict within Malay-Muslim communities. Yasmin Ahmad's questioning of morality challenges governmental religious departments to clarify their censorship practices in relation to extramarital relationships, women's presentation of their bodies, and the issues of *halal/haram*.⁶

Malaysian cinema, Islam and postcoloniality

The uniqueness of Yasmin Ahmad's work lies in her representation of Islam and sexuality as a means to subvert Malay subjectivity. "Colonialist discourse saw different races as different species, created at different times, and therefore forbidden to interbreed" (Shohat and Stam 1994: 41). Yasmin has envisioned a hybridized race which is promoted through mixed marriages, observed through the love affair between Orked and a Chinese boy, Jason (in *Sepet*), and later between Orked and Jason's brother (in *Gubra*). Orked, the Malay girl, is seen to be the object who creates the taboo of miscegenation reflected in the intimacy shown between her and the two Chinese brothers. These examples illustrate how Yasmin's construction of hybridized images in the cinema position Islam as anti-colonialist, thus reinventing a more multicultural Malaysian nation unhindered or complicated by Islam. The act of mixing/permutations or miscegenation "... has not only been a reality but an ideology in which sex and race have played major roles." (Shohat and Stam 1994: 43).

Reading sexuality and Islam alongside each other in Malaysian cinema may be seen as contradictory within conventional Malay-Islamic discourse. But it is apparent that Yasmin Ahmad's positioning of Islam and sexuality within film-making can also ironically perpetuate colonialist discourses. Although two of her films, *Sepet* and *Gubra*, may have contested notions of traditional/institutionalized Islam in Malaysia, these films run the risk of proliferating sexual images that may be considered orientalist and "exotic." Yasmin's films may be seen to perpetuate orientalist discourse (or self-orientalism) in the way that they portray stereotypical images of Malay women in *kemban* (exposing parts of their body) and in traditional *baju kurung* rather than more modern or progressive attire.

Within this framework, Yasmin's films may be revolting to some Malay audiences. What is interesting to observe is the way she has established film as a medium for social criticism. Yasmin has placed her works in the spatial and cultural tension of the colonizer and the colonized. She has captured the intellectual and spiritual aspects of Islam in her presentation of the religion by focusing on issues not normally

addressed in Malaysian mainstream cinema. Also, the reading of Yasmin's works from a feminist postcolonial and Islamic perspective has focused attention on pornographic elements within an Islamic *halal/haram* framework. Moreover, the openness in Yasmin's filmmaking in displaying passion on the silver screen has allowed the audience to misinterpret or to miss out on a more significant aspect of her films which is to promote humanity and to transcend borders of race and religion.

Yasmin Ahmad's works are seen to be supportive of the national Malaysian agenda in promoting multiculturalism in terms of gender and Islam. Similarly, the use of Islam and sexuality are seen "as markers of national boundaries" and this maps the formation of Malaysia as a truly "liberated or modernized" Islamic nation within the construct of Islam Hadhari or "Civilizational Islam."⁷ Yasmin's films gained attention for controversial depictions such as an Imam petting a dog on his way to prayer; characters who were sympathetic toward prostitutes; and a husband and wife dancing half-naked in their living room. Although she did not focus on typical mainstream obsessions with polygamy, women's bodies, or alternative sexualities, Yasmin's films have challenged the way Malay culture is read through the lens of Islam.

Notes

- 1 The program was entitled "*Adakah Sepet dan Gubra perosak bangsa?*" ("Are *Sepet* and *Gubra* corruptors of our culture [read: Malay culture]?"). See Surin 2006; Diani 2006.
- 2 *Sepet* (2004), for example, won the Best Film Award at the 18th Malaysian Film Festival in 2005, and it won the Best Asian Film Award at the Tokyo International Film Festival in 2005.
- 3 In response to Malaysian censors criticism of Yasmin's "excessive sensuality," Yasmin got so exasperated that she said her next film would be called "*Kemban*" (Muhammad 2009: 61).
- 4 The National Film Censorship Board is under the Home Ministry of Malaysia.
- 5 Interestingly, Yasmin's works have not been banned for her explicit portrayal of sexuality. In contrast, Amir Muhammad's *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir* (*The Last Communist*, 2006) was censored unreasonably for public viewing due to the assumption that the film promoted Communist ideology.
- 6 This moral hypocrisy is evident in the high number of arrests made by the Department of Islamic Advancement of Malaysia (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, *JAKIM*) on cases of *khalwat* (close proximity between a man and a woman without the legal bind of marriage) (see "Anti-khalwat Team" 2010) and the arrest of Malay Muslim girls who participated in a beauty contest ("Fatwa Tentang Penyertaan" 1995).
- 7 Islam Hadhari is a theory of government based in the Qur'an and the *Hadith* which was promoted by former Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

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10 Musical modernity, Islamic identity, and Arab aesthetics in Arab-Indonesian *orkes gambus*

Birgit Berg

I first encountered *orkes gambus* (“gambus orchestra”) music in Arab-Indonesian communities on the eastern island of Sulawesi.¹ In the communities I visited, friends often told me that this music was a typical (or “*khas*”) form of Arab-Indonesian music performed at important occasions within Arab-Indonesian communities. *Orkes gambus* is the term used for a small music ensemble consisting of a *gambus* lute (the Indonesian term for the ‘*ud*), which is the centerpiece of the ensemble, several small drums, an electric guitar, electric bass, electric keyboard, and vocals, performed by young men (Figure 10.1).² These ensembles most often



(a)

Figure 10.1 Images of *orkes gambus* performance and dance during a pre-wedding Arab-Indonesian party (*samrah*) in Bolaang Mongondow, North Sulawesi. Photo by the author.



(b)



(c)

Figure 10.1 Continued.

perform at boisterous Arab-Indonesian wedding parties in which men and young boys dance late into the night at the groom's home (a night known as *samrah*, or *samar*). When I asked about *orkes gambus* music, my young friend Camelia and her cousin Dachril would proudly tell me "orang Arab begitu" ("Arab-[Indonesians] are like that"); they enjoy and identify with *orkes gambus* music. This music and the *samrah* evenings in which it is performed are Arab traditions in the cities of Manado, Surabaya, Jakarta, as well as Ternate in the Moluccu Islands.³

When I watched *orkes gambus* performances, in which Dachril would sing and his brother would play keyboard, I wondered about the history of this Arab "tradition." With its use of Arabic language and Arab sound quality, it was unlike Indonesian music that I had encountered before. But where did *orkes gambus* music come from exactly? When I asked Dachril where he and the other performers learned their songs, he told me they were sung by *orkes gambus* groups in Surabaya. He then later showed me recordings by Arab-Indonesian *orkes gambus* artists. I assumed that the music had been thoroughly indigenized in style, language, and performance practice. Then, on the airline flight back from Indonesia, I tuned in to an Arab music video clip from the Middle East on the personal television located in front of my seat. I was surprised when I heard a familiar tune, a tune that I heard Dachril and his *orkes gambus* group perform just a few weeks earlier. *Orkes gambus* music was not "traditional," I thought to myself; the song I had heard was a cover of a modern Arab popular song. I wondered to what extent, if at all, the music I had heard in Indonesia could be considered part of an Arab tradition. *Orkes gambus* music uses modern instruments such as guitars, keyboards, and electric bass, and the tunes of *orkes gambus* songs are taken from modern Arab popular music. So, how was this traditional and why did Camelia and Dachril describe it as such?

As I spent more time in Indonesia, I discovered that *orkes gambus* music was not enjoyed by Arab-Indonesians alone, and that in fact this modern *orkes gambus* music, with its Middle Eastern pop music repertoire, had worked its way into the wider framework of Islamic celebratory contexts in Indonesia. Arab cultural goods brought back from Mecca during *Hajj* pilgrimages, as well as Arab goods sold in local markets in Indonesia, were accepted and adopted into certain circles of Indonesian Islamic popular culture, both within and outside of the Arab community. Long white robes (*baju gamis*) and Islamic skull caps (*topi haji*⁴), for example, were quite popular Friday attire among young men, instead of the typical Indonesian black *songkok* cap and *sarong* skirt. Youth mixed Arabic phrases into their dialect: *min hum* ("of them," referring to non-Muslims) and *jemaah* ("of our community," referring to Muslims). The Arab ethnic music I was familiar with, *orkes gambus*, was often performed at Islamic celebrations in Sulawesi, although outside the formal religious context of the mosque. I also observed similar elements of fashion, language, and music on national television, during programs such as Islamic-themed talk shows or during Ramadan entertainment shows.

Orkes gambus music performance has enabled Arab Indonesians to feel a connection with their ascribed collective ethnic identity as Arabs for generations. With its Arab-derived instruments, its sound, and even its dance traditions, it is a

badge of Arab-Indonesian tradition. However, the interest in expressing Arab ethnicity through *orkes gambus* among Arab youth in Indonesia today differs from that of previous generations of Arab Indonesians. In contemporary Indonesia, Arab-Indonesian performers have taken on a new role as Islamic performers outside of the Arab community context. When identifying themselves as *orang Arab* through public performance, Arab-Indonesian youth identify themselves with the religious/Islamic prestige that Arab culture holds among Muslims in Indonesia. The use of Arabic lyrics and Arab melodies express an imagined link with Islam.

In this essay, I assert that global popular culture and modern technology have re-energized a sense of Arab ethnicity among young Arab-Indonesian *orkes gambus* performers. These phenomena have also opened the repertoire of *orkes gambus* to larger audiences and modern Islamic popular culture. An examination of the changes in *orkes gambus* musical performance tells an important story about the cultural and religious dynamics of ethnic Arab identity and Islamic identity in Indonesia. It also shows the role of global musical choice in modern music making. *Orkes gambus* music is a site where Arab Indonesian performers put tradition and modernity, forces often thought to contradict one another, into dialogue through the use of global flows and technology. Although *orkes gambus* music lives on the fringes of “Islamic” popular music, its aesthetics can be used not only to imply ethnic and religious culture, but also to participate in the production of a more diverse, Indonesian Islamic sound.

***Orkes gambus* “Islamic” performance**

In order to illustrate *orkes gambus*’ role in Islamic culture in Indonesia, I will offer the following description of an event I attended in North Sulawesi during one of my initial trips to Manado in 2003. The event was a *halal bi halal*, an event in which Islamic communities gather to celebrate community after the Idul Fitri holiday following Ramadan. In North Sulawesi, Islamic communities typically invite members of the Christian community to a *halal bi halal* celebration. This *halal bi halal* was held in January 2003, after the Christmas and New Year’s holiday.

Typically, *halal bi halal* programs are sponsored by a mosque, an Islamic community group, or a neighborhood. In North Sulawesi, Islamic *halal bi halal* programs also incorporate a short speech by a local Christian pastor, to express inter-religious relationships within the Manado community.⁵ The *halal bi halal* was sponsored by a university alumni group that was predominately Christian, rather than by an Islamic community. The theme of the evening explicitly focused on inter-religious brotherhood and tolerance, with the theme: “With the Philosophy of Halal bi Halal, Christmas and New Years, We Strengthen Harmony and Solidarity among Religious Communities.”⁶

The evening began with a *musik bambu* (bamboo music) group, a Minahasan wind ensemble with hand-made instruments, some made of bamboo and others made from tin (Figure 10.2).⁷ The *musik bambu* ensemble that performed at this event was named *Burung Nazar Koha* (“Eagle from the town of Koha”; Koha is a



Figure 10.2 *Musik bambu* ensemble performing at a *halal bi halal* event in North Sulawesi. Photo by the author.

town in North Sulawesi). They began the program by playing local songs, typically songs performed during wedding parties in the Minahasan region. As the *musik bambu* ensemble began to play, the audience arrived and took their seats. The audience was mostly Christian, wearing fancy Western dresses and *batik* shirts, with a few women in Islamic attire (*busana Islam*) in the audience. Honored guests, such as the North Sulawesi governor and his wife, were seated in the front row in throne-like chairs.

The stage was decorated with Christian, Islamic, Indonesian, and North Sulawesi symbols (Figure 10.3). To the left, a tall Christmas tree with lights stood above pots of flowers. To the right was a small model of a mosque with an onion-shaped top (known as a *kuba*) as well as a *bedug* drum (the drum often found in mosques that sounds before the Islamic call to prayer, the *azan*). In the center of the stage was a map of the province of North Sulawesi hanging just below a golden *garuda* bird, the national symbol and seal of the Republic of Indonesia, and photos of both the President and Vice President of the country. The official event began with a performance of the Minahasan dance known as *maengket*, a North Sulawesi dance often performed during official governmental events (Figure 10.4).⁸

After the *maengket* performance, the *orkes gambus* group As-sahara, from Manado's Arab quarter, took the stage. They were introduced, incorrectly, as performers of *qasidah*, a genre of Islamic-themed songs in the Indonesian language. The young musicians and dancers wore long *gamis* gowns and Arab-style Islamic caps. As they walked onto the stage, I heard the sound of an audience



Figure 10.3 The stage decorated with Christian, Islamic, Indonesian, and North Sulawesi symbols: a Christmas tree (left), a model of a mosque (right), and a *gambus* instrument (in the center of the stage, set up for the night's performance). Photo by the author.



Figure 10.4 A *maengket* performance showing men in typical Minahasan attire and the leader of the group (*kapel*). Photo by the author.



Figure 10.5 Orkes gambus As-sahara's performance at the *halal bi halal* program. Photo by the author.

member's cell phone go off to the tune of "Jingle Bells." It was clear that, unlike *orkes gambus* groups in Islamic strongholds such as Java, these *orkes gambus* musicians were performing for a mostly Christian/Minahasan audience.

The leader of As-sahara, Rivki Jassin, offered the typical Islamic address *Assalam wa'alaikum* ("Peace be upon you") to the audience, followed by the more general Indonesian and non-denominational *Selamat Sejahtera* ("Prosperity to you"), after which the group began their two-song set. Their first song, "Ya Leila" (Night), began with an introduction played on the keyboard programmed to the timbre of a *gambus*. The *gambus* player strummed his instrument in the background (Figure 10.5).⁹ After the introduction, the entire *orkes gambus* ensemble joined in, and dancers even began to dance in the typical style of a *samrah* evening, the evening of an Arab-Indonesian wedding party, in front of the semicircle of musicians seated on the floor of the stage. The second song of their set began with the *orkes gambus* vocalist yelling *Yellah*, a typical Arab expression meaning "Come on." Children from the Arab community's *pengajian* (Qur'anic recitation) classes, dressed in Islamic attire, danced during this song. The second song "Habibi ya Mayjus" (My Dear Wife), had secular lyrics.

After As-sahara finished its set, the performance was acknowledged with a round of applause from the audience, and a middle-aged man from the region of Gorontalo was invited to the stage to recite a passage from the Qur'an. Unlike the *orkes gambus* group, he wore a black Indonesian-style *songkok* Islamic cap and a



Figure 10.6 Reciting a passage from the Qur'an. Photo by the author.

typical Indonesian suit-uniform, like that worn by civil servants (*pegawai negeri*) (Figure 10.6). He held a small-print copy of the Qur'an in his hands as he recited his passage in the vocal style often featured in Indonesian Quranic recitation competitions such as *Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an* (MTQ), followed by an Indonesian language translation by a woman standing to the side of the stage.

After a local *imam*, or Islamic religious leader, presented a brief Islamic sermon or *khotbah*, the Christian portion of the evening began. Intermixed with speeches and prayers by ministers and priests, all of whom used the term *Shaloom* to address the audience,¹⁰ a choir (*paduan suara*) from the local university was invited to sing. The choir members—dressed in typical North Sulawesi church attire (dark pants/shirts, colorful blouses, and men wearing ties)—assembled into a semicircle in front of their conductor (*dirigen* or *konduktor*). They performed two songs, “Angels We Have Heard on High” and Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus,” both in the English language and in four-part harmony (Figure 10.7).

The evening proved to be an intriguing exploration of regional and religious expression that wove together symbols of Christian, Islamic, and local Minahasan tradition. What struck me most powerfully, however, was seeing As-sahara for the first time outside of an Arab community context and on a stage, dressed in Islamic-style clothing that I had only seen musicians wear in their daily Islamic activities and not during their *orkes gambus* performances in the village. I was struck not only by *orkes gambus* music being casually “Islamicized” in the context of this *halal bi halal*, but I was also surprised how easily the *orkes gambus* performers



Figure 10.7 Choir (*paduan suara*) performance. Photo by the author.

transitioned from Arab-Indonesian community performers to Arab-Indonesian Islamic performers. How could *orkes gambus* be performed as a celebratory, boisterous, wedding party music in one context, and subsequently be performed as part of Islamic expressive culture in a different, more formal *halal bi halal* context, in which it was presented and performed as an example of Islamic music?

Changes in *orkes gambus*

Changes in *orkes gambus* music over the past decade have led the genre to move outside of the Arab-Indonesian wedding party context. One of the most striking changes in modern *orkes gambus* music is the re-adoption of Arabic lyrics, after decades of performing primarily Indonesian language texts. Although one might expect Arabic lyrics in the celebratory traditions of ethnic Arab communities, most Arab-Indonesians today are third or fourth generation descendents of immigrants from Hadramaut (Yemen), and they speak regional languages of Indonesia. Charles Capwell noted that in the 1990s most *gambus* lyrics were in the Indonesian language (Capwell 1995). The situation has changed dramatically in less than a decade; almost all *orkes gambus* songs are in Arabic, even though very few performers themselves are fluent in the Arabic language.

This shift from Indonesian language texts to Arabic texts as the dominant language of *orkes gambus* in the late 1990s and early 2000s would seem to represent a return to the use of Arabic as found in older *orkes gambus* songs. Secular

orkes gambus songs that were sung by Hadrami immigrants or first-generation-born Arab Indonesians were in the Hadrami dialect of Arabic. In the course of my ethnographic research I interviewed a number of former *orkes gambus* performers from the 1980s and I discovered that these songs were still performed in the 1980s, although by that time Indonesian lyrics set in the *pantun* verse form were the most popular.¹¹ Artists such as Segaf Assegaf included some of these Hadrami-themed songs, for example “Yadramaut Ifrahi” (Hadramaut makes me joyful) and “Falkur Hadrami,”¹² on his 1985 album *Al Kaukabissari*¹³ with music by Achmad Vad’aq. The reason that such songs fell out of favor by the 1990s is not clear, but there are a few reasonable explanations. By that time, Arab-Indonesians were mostly third generation Indonesians, and many had lost their mastery of the Hadrami language. They were also living under the New Order regime that stressed the importance of national unity and Indonesian-ness. In the late 1990s, after the New Order, *orkes gambus* groups began to use Arabic lyrics again, but they did not return to singing the older Hadrami songs. Instead, they began to use the modern Arab world as a model for *orkes gambus* performance, reinventing and reimagining Arab-Indonesian connections to the Arab world. Increasingly, the Arab world represents cultural and religious capital, prestige, and status in Indonesia (not only for Arab-Indonesians, but for Indonesian Muslims). The increase in circulation of recordings imported from the Middle East, as well as the Internet, has facilitated access to these cultural symbols. The texts of *orkes gambus* songs are often borrowed and adapted from modern Arab popular music recordings that are sold in music stores and street markets in Indonesia. Arab popular music recordings are often sold on VCDs (Video Compact Discs, currently the most popular and most affordable form of recorded music in Indonesia). Arab popular music recordings can be found year-round in bookstores owned by Arab Indonesians, especially during the month of Ramadan, when all forms of Arab music recordings are in high demand. The Internet is an important source for musical inspiration. For example, *orkes gambus* artist Nizar Ali (Nizar) told me that he looks for new music on the Internet or asks his friends returning from the Middle East to bring new popular music recordings for him.¹⁴ Nizar then arranges these songs for the *orkes gambus* ensemble. These musicians value contemporary Arab popular music, more so than they value older traditional Hadrami songs, as sources for musical inspiration.

Orkes gambus performers even use Arabic script in recent recording liner notes, suggesting a desire to publicly assert a type of “otherness” that is not defined as “Hadrami” or as “Indonesian.” Although the lyrics of commercial *orkes gambus* recordings are often written in Roman script, they are increasingly written in Arabic script. The use of Arabic script is also important in local *orkes gambus* performances. As I discovered through my work with *orkes gambus* groups in Sulawesi, performers transcribe the song lyrics using Roman script and then sometimes even transliterate the lyrics into Arabic script. They subsequently copy these Arabic transliterations into large blank white-paged notebooks and singers place these notebooks in front of them during performance. For these young performers, who do not generally speak Arabic, interacting with the Arabic language via its script is highly valued.

The literal meaning of these texts is not important. Rather their meaning comes from their foreign and general “Arab” associations. As few performers are fluent in Arabic, transcriptions of Arab popular songs are often incorrect and the meaning of the texts is not known.¹⁵ Many of my Arab Indonesian friends admitted they did not fully understand the Arabic they were singing. Arabic language was something they used in religious contexts, but not in their daily lives, and Arab popular songs rarely adopt the same classical Arabic vocabulary used in Islam.

Although modern *gambus* musicians adapt Arabic popular songs for the *gambus* repertoire, the music nevertheless retains a domestic identity as Arab-Indonesian music. Middle Eastern artists, such as the Egyptian artists Amir Diab and Hisham Abbas whose songs have been adapted by numerous *orkes gambus* groups, are not well known figures in Indonesian popular music and their names do not lend as much prestige to the music as the Arabic language does. Often it is even difficult to trace the influences on *orkes gambus* recordings, as producers do not list the sources of these songs on the recordings. *Orkes gambus* groups in North Sulawesi often create *gambus* arrangements from pirated compilation albums with nebulous titles such as “Disko Arab.” Performers informed me that the source of songs is not important; rather, they listen for songs that they like and arrange them for the *orkes gambus* ensemble. They make them their own.

Arab-Indonesian performers take the “global” and make it locally relevant. Egyptian, Algerian, Lebanese, and even Indian sources provide the source material for *orkes gambus* music. The song “Antal Wahidah” (roughly translated as “You are the one”) on Muhammad Abdullah’s album *Gambus Millennium*, for instance, is nearly a direct cover of the Egyptian singer Hisham Abbas’s song “Intil Waheeda” (“You are the one”). And the popular Indian Bollywood film song “Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham” set to an Islamic poem (*syair*) in Arabic, is featured on *orkes gambus* El Kisa Group’s album *Mahlal Liqa/Robbah-Robbah* with singer Abu Abdillah Blf.¹⁶ The most striking difference between Abu Abdillah Blf’s use of Indian Bollywood film tunes and Muhammad Abdullah’s use of Arab popular tunes, however, is that the original film source for Abu Abdillah Blf’s tune is listed on the album. Given the popularity of the film *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* in Indonesia, Abu Abdillah Blf likely listed the source to entice listeners. The Arab songs and artists that influence *orkes gambus* artists, however, are not well known or valued in popular Indonesian culture and are not typically listed in liner notes.

Orkes gambus performers also incorporate domestic musical styles. The use of domestic styles in *orkes gambus* music arrangements shows that Arab-Indonesian performers are asserting their own domestic identities within Indonesia. Domestic influence is evident in the use of Indonesian *dangdut* style in the *orkes gambus* genre called *zahefe*, a genre that fuses the Arab *orkes gambus* ensemble sound with the sound of the heavy low-pitched sound before the downbeat in *dangdut*.¹⁷ The use of this domestic fusion allows for *orkes gambus* music to be more compatible with Indonesian ears. As Nizar Ali describes it, “Indonesian ears have a hard time hearing the original drum patterns of the original versions.”¹⁸ Musicians

transform Arab pop hits into the more *dangdut*-like *zahefe* drum pattern, in order to fit with Indonesian taste. Such use of *dangdut*-like patterns has made *orkes gambus* accessible to audiences of non-Arab Muslims in Indonesia. *Orkes gambus* music is not the only music to benefit from its association with the *dangdut* sound. As Bernard Arps notes, the Islamic popular music genre *qasidah modéren* is a rock and *dangdut*-influenced version of the traditional *qasidah rebana* style (Arps 1996). Arab-Indonesian performers do not try to make *orkes gambus* music theirs alone or to make it completely foreign and inaccessible, but they allow for a certain amount of blending in order to popularize their music.

Popular Indonesian *orkes gambus* groups have more influence than Middle Eastern artists on local *orkes gambus* performance, demonstrating domestic, rather than foreign, identifications with the genre. The local *orkes gambus* community groups in Arab-Indonesian communities that I encountered did not look to Middle Eastern popular music groups for inspiration, but rather they sought inspiration from Indonesian *orkes gambus* groups based in urban centers. The city of Surabaya, on the island of Java, is one such center of *orkes gambus* creativity and production. Surabaya is the base for artists including Nizar Ali and Mustafa Abdullah, as well as the groups El Mira and Latansa. *Orkes gambus* groups in outer-island Indonesia¹⁹ often adopt new music by these groups into their own performance repertoire. Based on my experience over several years researching *orkes gambus* groups in North Sulawesi, I discovered that new cassettes released by Jakartan and Surabayan groups, such as El Mira (see above) and Latansa, were quickly adapted by local *orkes gambus* musicians and incorporated into their performances.

Indonesian *orkes gambus* artists are even household names in Arab communities in Indonesia, but the same is not the case with their Middle Eastern counterparts. Unlike Arab artists such as Hisham Abbas or Amir Diab, Indonesian artists Nizar Ali and his peer Mustafa Abdullah are well known by Arab communities throughout Eastern Indonesia. In these communities, *orkes gambus* performers from East Java are Arab-Indonesian superstars who perform for fans in Arab communities on the outer Indonesian islands. I first met Nizar when he performed at a wedding in the city of Gorontalo. Such performances by East Javanese *orkes gambus* artists are rare in outer island communities due to the great cost of hiring them. On this occasion, Nizar was hired by the governor of Gorontalo, Fadel Muhammad (who is Arab-Indonesian himself), to perform at the *samrah* evening the night before his nephew's traditional Arab-Indonesian wedding. Word of Nizar's performance spread quickly in Arab-Indonesian communities throughout North Sulawesi, reaching as far as the Sangihe islands where I was located at the time. Caravans of Arab Indonesians made the long 12- to 20-hour journey to attend the *samrah* evening in Gorontalo attesting to the popularity of these East Javanese performers.²⁰

Beyond international and national influences, *orkes gambus* music has even experienced local cross-over influence. The repatriation of *orkes gambus* music into regional dialects shows the importance of regional Indonesian identity in *orkes gambus* performance. In recent years, some *orkes gambus* groups in Madura

have been transliterating popular Arabic language *orkes gambus* songs into the Madurese language. An example of this is the recent *zahefe* recording titled “*Aeng Mata*” (“Tears”) by the group *O.G.M. El-Mira Sani*; the letters *O.G.M.* stand for *Orkes Gambus Madura* (Madurese Gambus Orchestra). During my fieldwork, *orkes gambus* groups in Manado discussed their intentions to set their *gambus* songs in the local Manado language (*bahasa Melayu Manado*). These groups share a desire to make their music locally relevant and unique.²¹

In addition to providing musical sources for new arrangements, the effects of modernization and new forms of technology have led to significant changes in *orkes gambus* music that have helped propel it into the realm of modern Islamic popular music. Over the past two decades, *orkes gambus* music has become electrified and amplified, opening up *orkes gambus* performance to new sounds, settings, and audiences. These changes, rather than signaling an end to the *orkes gambus* tradition, have allowed *orkes gambus* music to maintain tradition (with alteration) and participate in modernity at the same time. The word *funki*, an Indonesianization of “funky,” meaning “hip,” is a major part of Arab-Indonesian youth rhetoric regarding music and style. Many of my young Arab friends described to me how they wanted to be *funki* more than anything else. They did not want to be *kurang asyik* (“uncool”), by wearing older fashions of clothing. Rather they desired to wear new styles of clothing and to participate in new forms of music. To be modern, and to draw from international music styles is to be *funki*. When *orkes gambus* musicians adapt *orkes gambus* music to new international styles, *orkes gambus* music remains popular with youth and they remove the stigma of older *orkes gambus* music styles. It is not what their parents performed; it is a new youth culture created in line with current popular trends and in opposition to traditional standards. Yet, at the same time, my young Arab friends were excited about their Arab traditions, including their *orkes gambus* music tradition. They did not desire to exchange the *orkes gambus* ensemble with a rock music ensemble or a *dangdut* ensemble. They valued *orkes gambus*’ role as a traditional Arab-Indonesian genre, but one that could also be Islamic and “*funki*.”

The modernization of *orkes gambus* has opened up the genre to larger audiences and performance contexts outside of Arab-Indonesian community settings. In the *halal bi halal* event described earlier in this chapter, for instance, *orkes gambus* was performed for both a non-Arab Muslim audience and a Christian audience. Nizar described a significant change in *orkes gambus* reception at the end of the 1990s when *orkes gambus* began to be performed outside of wedding parties in the Arab quarter of Surabaya. Before 1999, according to Nizar, people outside of Arab communities often referred to *orkes gambus* as *qasidah* (a term that denotes a popular Islamic music genre in Indonesia) because they were unfamiliar with *orkes gambus*. However *orkes gambus* music then began to take on the faster *dangdut*-like *zahefe* style. This style, according to Nizar, led to an increase in the popularity of this music outside of Arab communities.

With these changes, *orkes gambus* music now has a place on the Islamic popular music stage, both in North Sulawesi and on national Indonesian media, although

arguably remaining on the fringes. I witnessed *orkes gambus* performances on national television entertainment shows during Ramadan, for instance, and on Islamic talk shows. Although using texts that are predominantly secular, *orkes gambus* works its way aesthetically into Islamic culture in sound and style.²²

The *orkes gambus* dilemma

Orkes gambus music exemplifies the interesting link between Arab style and Indonesian Islamic culture. On the one hand, *orkes gambus* music uses Arab tunes and Arabic lyrics, but on the other hand, most of these lyrics are not in proper Arabic and the texts do not carry any literal Islamic meaning; they are mostly secular love songs drawn from popular Middle Eastern commercial hits. Some Indonesians, including some Arab Indonesians, expressed to me that they, in fact, do not consider *orkes gambus* music to be Islamic; they feel it is entertainment music only.²³ But, why is *orkes gambus* sometimes considered Islamic popular music and included in Islamic contexts? When examining this phenomenon more deeply, I discovered there were a number of reasons that were tied to its history, performance practice, and aesthetics.

Historically, the *gambus* instrument had been adopted into many Melayu cultures, where it can still be found and is often used to accompany the singing of *pantun* verse forms in such places as Sumatra and the Riau Islands.²⁴ Historically and culturally, Melayu identity has strong associations with Islam. I observed this type of *gambus* performance even as far as the Sulawesi province of Gorontalo, where the instrument was used to accompany the singing of *pantun* verses in the Gorontalo language. Due to the instrument's Melayu associations, the *orkes gambus* instrument has inherited an association with Islam. The use of the instrument in Arab-Indonesian communities has also lent to its association with Islam, as Arab-Indonesians have played a historic role as teachers of Islam and prominent community Islamic figures in Indonesia.

Performance practice is also an important part of *orkes gambus*' inclusion in Islamic celebrations. Within Arab communities, it has been a male-centered music and dance genre, with women, even today, remaining segregated in seats to the side of the dance event and not participating with men in the dancing. When performed outside of Arab communities, it often remains a gender-segregated event, where men and women do not dance together. In addition, *orkes gambus* performers often wear Islamic clothing when performing outside the Arab community. *Orkes gambus* is thus attractive as an Islamic form of music because it is, as many describe it, *sopan* (polite) and it fits well into Islamic contexts.

The most appealing aspect of *orkes gambus* music, however, is the aesthetics of the music, both in instrumentation and in language. Although the participants did not speak Arabic, they were familiar with classical Arabic from their childhood religious lessons. Arab musical scales were also familiar to many Indonesian ears due to the widespread popularity of *Qur'anic* recitation in the country.²⁵ *Orkes gambus* presents Arab-Indonesians with a "win-win" situation. It has a modern amplified popular sound (with its use of the electric guitar, bass, and keyboard),

and at the same time its aesthetics offer a sense of traditional Islamic-ness that is admired in Indonesia.

Localizing the global

In Arab communities in Indonesia, global cultural flows allow Arab-Indonesian youth to pick and choose, and even combine cultural symbols for ethnic and religious identification. This adoption of foreign music and culture in Indonesian is an undeniable aspect of contemporary Indonesian culture. As William Frederick states:

Increasingly large numbers of Indonesians of all social and economic classes not only have access to world culture, but are cultural tourists in their own nation, even their own region . . . What is there to be said about *dalang* who mix *dangdut* melodies into their gamelan repertoire or use trumpets and other Western instruments in performances shortened to two or three hours not for foreigners but for Indonesian audiences? Or about *wayang orang* troupes that breakdance . . . For better or worse, the examples I have used—and there are many more where they came from, from every region and social level—constitute modern Indonesian culture, or at very least a significant and growing part of it.

(Frederick 1997: 77–78)

Arab-Indonesians reinvent and also reconstruct their identities through these global flows. In this case, they are looking to Arab culture, not as a source of emulation but rather as a source of inspiration for their traditional Arab-Indonesian *orkes gambus* repertoire, a source that carries Islamic significance in Indonesia.

As Appadurai notes, when new social forces become present in a society, they may become indigenized, or adopted, in some form (Appadurai 1996: 32). People react to flows of global culture by making them their own. Rather than alienating audiences and promoting a passive consumption of culture (Manuel 1993: 7), foreign music recordings are taken in as part of the Arab-Indonesian musical mix. R. Anderson Sutton notes that in Indonesia, foreign pop music is often presented on the Indonesian MTV network in a manner to make it seem “as if it ‘belongs’ in Indonesia” (Sutton 2003: 334). Global flows are thus taken in and made familiar rather than foreign.

This use of global sources also allows *orkes gambus* musicians to engage in the modern and global world through their own musical practice. The interaction of global and traditional sources helps the global become more accessible, while at the same time confirming the value of local genres. As Sutton notes (2003: 335):

Placing local elements amidst musical symbols of modernity simultaneously contextualizes the global, making it more possible for Indonesians to feel a part of modernity, and legitimizes “local” (regional/traditional) cultural expression as compatible with the modern.

The use of global sources, therefore, not only aids Arab-Indonesian performers in their reconstruction of domestic identity, but it also allows them to legitimize their *orkes gambus* music tradition by incorporating modern global elements into *orkes gambus* repertoire. Adopting Arab music and aesthetics to fit their needs, Arab Indonesians use global cultural symbols to define what it is to be Muslim in Indonesia today.

Notes

- 1 Arab-Indonesians (called *orang keturunan Arab*; *keturunan Arab* means ‘Arab ancestry’) trace their ancestry to the Arabian Peninsula, usually through a father, grandfather, or great grandfather who immigrated from the Southern Arabian area of Hadramaut (present-day Yemen) to Indonesia and then married and settled down in the Indonesian archipelago. *Hadramis* were famous traders and proselytizers of Islam throughout Africa, India, and Southeast Asia for centuries. Most *Hadramis* who migrated to other parts of the world left Southern Arabia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This period marked intense European imperialism in Yemen (sparking tribal wars) and improved transportation and communication, including the steamship and the telegraph. Tribal warfare, as well as tales of wealth and fortune to be found outside of Hadramaut, stimulated *Hadrami* emigration (Boxberger 2002: 40, Mobini-Kesheh 1999: 22). Today, most Arab Indonesians are third or fourth generation Indonesians that have fully assimilated into Indonesian society, but they maintain elements of their *Hadrami* Arab heritage in many of their communal traditions and in their expressive culture.
- 2 *Orkes gambus* drums include the *tamtam* (small set of two shallow drums), the *dumbuk* (also called *darbaka*, a long oblong drum), and *marwas* (small handheld double-headed drum). I have written in more depth about the history of the instruments and the genre in my dissertation (Berg 2007).
- 3 My research focused primarily on the expressive culture of Arab-Indonesian communities in the provinces of Gorontalo and North Sulawesi (including Manado, Sangihe-Talaud, and Bolaang Mongondow). During my research, I also spoke with Arab-Indonesians from communities in the Moluccan Islands (including Ternate and Halmahera) and in the cities of Jakarta and Surabaya.
- 4 *Topi haji* translates as “hat of the *Haji* pilgrim.” This style of Islamic cap, however, is worn by many Muslim males, whether or not they have completed the *Haji*. I noticed this style of Islamic cap, along with the traditional Indonesian black *songkok* hat, in most communities I encountered in Indonesia. It seems to be a popular style among both young and old.
- 5 “Torang samua basaudara” (“We are all brothers”) is the regional motto of North Sulawesi, and despite underlying religious tensions in the region, inter-religious dialogues are common in the area.
- 6 The Indonesian title was “Dengan Hikmah Halal bi Halal, Natal dan Tahun Baru Kita Mantapkan Kerukunan dan Solidaritas Antar Umat Beragama.”
- 7 *Musik bambu* (bamboo music) is found in the North Sulawesi area of Minahasa and is often performed at weddings along with the traditional Minahasan *polineis* dance (pronounced like the French word “polonaise,” a dance that takes its name, and its style, from European dance). The music and dance of the *musik bambu* are imported and adapted from the Dutch colonial period; however they have now become labeled as “traditional arts” (*seni tradisi*) in North Sulawesi and are featured in Manado’s regional museum. Local Minahasan community members typically perform in *musik bambu* ensembles. These groups perform at weddings and government events in North Sulawesi, such as the *halal bi halal* held at the governor’s residence on the evening described here.

- 8 *Maengket* is a staged Minahasan art form. Similar to *musik bambu*, it is a typical (*khas*) art form brought out and staged during official governmental events and promoted for cultural tourism purposes.
- 9 The musicians referred to this instrumental introduction as a *taksim*, just as it is called in Turkish and Arab music (*taqsīm*).
- 10 The word *Shaloom* in North Sulawesi, from the Hebrew “Shalom,” is used by Christians as the equivalent to the *Assalam wa’alaikum* greeting used by Muslims and in typical government addresses. This term is not widely used by Christians in different areas of Indonesia. My own interpretation of the use of this word is that it is an example of a Christian adoption of an Islamic practice found in North Sulawesi. Many North Sulawesi Christians, for example, also broadcast prayers and hymns over loudspeakers in the early morning, during the time the morning Muslim call to prayer is recited over loudspeakers. Just as Muslims have a foreign term to address each other, Christians in North Sulawesi adopt the Hebrew “Shalom” to address members of their religious community.
- 11 *Pantun* is a four-line poetic form used in vocal music in both Indonesia and Malaysia.
- 12 Upon examining the text of this song with a native Arab speaker, the translation of this phrase is not clear. It does however refer to Hadramaut.
- 13 A rough translation is “citizens of the world.” I am grateful to Mirena Christoff, Lecturer of Arabic at Brown University, for assistance with this translation.
- 14 Nizar’s experience validates Barendregt and van Zanten’s claim that “The Internet is likely to have a huge influence on the future of the recording music industry [in Indonesia]” (Barendregt and van Zanten 2002: 95–96).
- 15 I brought a number of *orkes gambus* liner notes and song recordings to a visiting professor of Egyptology, Mahmoud El-Hamrawi, at Brown University in the fall of 2006. The songs were based on Arabic songs from the Middle East. El-Hamrawi could not understand certain lyrics, either from reading the Romanized transcription or from listening to the recording.
- 16 *Orkes gambus* songs that use the tunes of popular Bollywood hits are far less common than songs that borrow modern pop tunes from the Arab world.
- 17 *Dangdut* is a form of Indonesian popular music that draws on influences from Malay, Indian, Middle Eastern, and rock music. It first became widely popular in the 1970s and remains popular today. *Dangdut* music incorporates a set of drums (*gendang*) similar to the Indian *tabla*, which gives the genre its signature sound (Weintraub 2010: 60–66).
- 18 *Telinga Indonesia susah dengar yang asli dari sana jenis pukulan kendangnya pertama*. Nizar Ali, interview (Surabaya, May 4, 2006).
- 19 By outer island Indonesia, I am referring to regions and provinces outside of the most populous islands of Java and Sumatra.
- 20 It is also interesting to note that typically *orkes gambus* performers do not equate themselves with Arab artists, but rather they define their music as something that is not as perfect as Arab music. When comparing their music to that found in the Arab world, some musicians refer to Arab music as more pure or authentic (*asli*) than their own. This distinction can be felt in the comment of a young Arab-Indonesian performer from the *orkes gambus* music group Al-Harist that traveled to Yemen in 2004. During this trip the group performed at a date festival (*festival korma*) in the city of Sana’a; they also performed in the city of Mukalla, at the invitation of the Yemen culture and tourism ministry. This performer noted, “Actually gambus music originated here (Hadramaut). Clearly our production is not as perfect as it would be in its place of origin.” Available at <<http://www.mediaindo.co.id/berita.asp?id=53976>> (accessed June 17, 2006).
- 21 Repatriation of foreign music is not only found in Arab-Indonesian communities, but also in Chinese-Indonesian communities, illustrating how ethnic minorities imagine their “otherness” within their local identity, thus negotiating their ethnic place-less-ness in their geographic present. The use of local language in *orkes gambus* music is a new

trend and I have only witnessed it with the Madurese language so far; however the translation of “ethnic” songs into local languages is a trend I also witnessed with the Chinese community in Manado. These communities in Manado have created a style that mixes their ethnic and local identities, known as *Pop Mamantera* (a term formed by taking the syllables from the following phrase: *Manado Mandarin Pantera*). *Pop Mamantera* takes Chinese popular music tunes, well known and loved by Chinese-Indonesian communities, and sets them to the local Manadonese language, even marketing the songs to non-Chinese audiences. If Arab and Chinese Indonesian ethnic groups become further distanced from the language of their ethnic heritage as more generations pass, further cross-over examples will surely follow as they will continue to make their foreign heritage compatible with their daily lives. Barendregt and van Zanten note, however, that Chinese songs recording sales were low during the New Order regime, but they have increased: “Sales of Mandarin recordings have been low, partly due to the restrictions on Chinese language materials initiated by ex-President Suharto’s New Order regime. In the post-Suharto era, opportunities to listen to and perform Chinese music in public seem to have increased” (Barendregt and van Zanten 2002: 70).

- 22 In fact, a YouTube search of *musik Islami* (Islamic-styled music) turns up a video of Nizar Ali performing with an *orkes gambus* ensemble. The user who posted the video gave it the comment “song with the feel of Arabic and the religion of Islam” (*lagu yang bernafaskan arabic atau keagamaan Agama Islam*). Available at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1Ye6CRD1Os>> (accessed January 10, 2009).
- 23 Haddad Alwi, an Arab Indonesian and popular chanter of *salawaat* (the ritual prayers performed five times a day) told me that “Indonesians are confused with *gambus*. Arabic language doesn’t mean it’s Islamic. Islam isn’t only Arab” (Haddad Alwi, interview, Manado, October 26, 2005). Nizar Ali, who often makes money by performing with *orkes gambus* groups during Ramadan, told me that at one performance children thought that because he was singing in Arabic, he was singing Islamic prayers, but he was not (Nizar Ali, interview, Surabaya, May 4, 2006).
- 24 Philip Yampolsky recorded a Melayu *gambus* performance on the Smithsonian Folkways recording “Music of Indonesia, Vol. 11: Melayu Music of Sumatra and the Riau Islands.”
- 25 I never heard the term *maqam* used by Arab-Indonesian performers. Rather, they would often refer to *nada Arab* (“Arab tones”) or *lagu Arab* (“Arab tune”).

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11 Music as a medium for communication, unity, education, and *dakwah*

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Religion is something pure and holy whereas popular music in Indonesia is a medium for entertainment. So how can they be blended together? I would like to answer this question by speaking about my own experiences as a singer, musician, composer, and religious spokesperson. This chapter is based on my experience creating music to communicate religious messages (*musik dakwah*).

Dakwah is a religious message communicated to people so that they can be faithful to Allah SWT and carry out His commands while simultaneously distancing themselves from what is forbidden by God. Conventional *dakwah* are given by Islamic scholars (*ulama*) and by teachers (*ustad*) in the mosque, school (*pesantren*), or in other religious contexts. *Dakwah* in music, such as what I have done, is unconventional and controversial.

Aside from being somewhat controversial, *dakwah* in music is not easy to create. To touch people's hearts and to motivate people's actions, *dakwah* lyrics must be in sync with the melody, rhythm and the arrangement of a song so that the message is unified. This is not an academic matter that can be studied and learned, but something that requires intuition.

Alhamdulillah, I have been able to make some very effective *dakwah*. This is proven by the fact that many fans have told me that their lives changed after listening to certain songs. For example, many people stopped gambling after hearing my song "Gambling," and many also stopped using drugs after hearing my song "Mira Santika" (which is about drinking and using drugs). Further, an English teacher at Airlangga University in Surabaya, whom I had never met, told me that he considered me as his teacher. I asked him what he meant by that and he said that all of his problems could be solved by listening to my music! Those are just a few experiences that show how effective *dakwah* music can be.

Introduction

Before becoming a dangdut singer I sang music by Western singers and bands including Elvis Presley, Tom Jones, and the Beatles. In 1972 I was given an award as the best pop singer in Southeast Asia in Singapore for my version of Tom Jones' song "I who have nothing."

I formed the Soneta Group on December 11, 1970 as an effort to revolutionize popular music in the transition from “Malay orchestra” music (*orkes Melayu*) to dangdut. During that era, the influence of rock music, or “rock fever,” was so strong throughout the world. If I had not made these changes, I am sure that *orkes Melayu* would have been eliminated from the Indonesian music scene. Rock music was noisy and loud and its goal was to create hysteria. It was considered eccentric and ill-mannered among religious people at that time. People did not understand rock. In order to compete with rock music we had to take the best of rock music and maintain the sense of Melayu music in dangdut.

In Jakarta, *orkes Melayu* was a form of music that was marginalized because it was music of the have-nots, and it was called backward (*kampungan*). *Orkes Melayu* was characterized by mournful and pessimistic lyrics, sung in a slow tempo. The lyrics expressed suffering, loss of hope, and despair. It lacked energy. Further, the instruments were acoustic and not electric, and performers played their instruments sitting down.

I changed the lyrics from laments to love songs and I changed the mood of the music from mournful to optimistic and constructive. I also changed the rhythmic beat from slow to dynamic and full of energy, especially by adding the drum with a persistent beat (in songs like “Darah Muda,” “Adu Domba,” “Bujangan,” and many others). I changed the guitar and bass from acoustic to electric, and I added the lead guitar to the arrangement, which was not present in *orkes Melayu*. I replaced the accordion with the electronic organ, and I added an electric rhythm guitar. The old speakers could only handle a few hundred watts whereas the new ones could handle thousands of watts, even as much as 150,000 watts of power.

Rather than performing in a seated position, as in *orkes Melayu*, we performed in a standing position and moved in more attractive ways. *Orkes Melayu* musicians looked sad when they played but we looked powerful and our audiences felt like they were watching a rock concert. Unfortunately, the revolution did not catch on with the rockers. One group called “Giant Step” insulted us by calling our music “dog shit” in the popular print media. We felt offended by that. I answered that insult by saying that rock was the voice of Satan (*terompét Setan*) and that made them angry. The war between rock musicians (rockers) and dangdut musicians (dangduters) was not only a polemic in the mass media but even resulted in physical fights. Whenever a rock concert took place the dangduters would throw rocks on stage, and when dangdut concerts took place the rockers would do things to hurt us. One time in Bandung (Giant Step’s home town) our stage was bombarded by rocks and I was hit in the face. But the show went on. These media and physical fights went on between dangdut and rock everywhere. To document this conflict I wrote the song “Musik” (“Music”):

“Musik” (1976)

Everywhere on this earth people play music,
Different kinds of music from pop to classical,
The music that we like has the Melayu beat,

If you like it, please listen, but if not, move away.
If you're anti-Melayu, you can hate us, but leave us alone,
Let us listen to our music, the Melayu music.

Finally, Yapto Soeryosumarno, the leader of the Pancasila youth group (*Pemuda Pancasila*) took the initiative to end this feud between rock and dangdut by holding a joint concert in 1979. The rockers were represented by the band "God Bless," led by musician Ahmad Albar, and the dangduters were represented by my own Soneta Group. In addition to our collaboration as performers we released a dove to the skies of Jakarta as a symbol of peace. Since then dangdut and rock have been able to exist alongside each other with respect. We've been able to get rid of class differences in the music of Indonesia. Similarly, we've done collaborations with other big rock bands in Indonesia like Slank, Jamrud, Dewa, Radja, Ada Band, and Gigi.

Since that time, dangdut, with roots in *orkes Melayu*, has not been marginalized. Dangdut exists on the same level as other kinds of Indonesian music and is even considered to be the most popular music in Indonesia. On television, which had previously banned *orkes Melayu* from the airwaves, every station has at least one dangdut program in its rotation. Now, dangdut is the dominant music in this country. *Alhamdulillah*, I have truly struggled for dangdut with my blood, sweat, and tears. I say blood because the rocks thrown by the rockers made me bleed; I say sweat because I struggled with all my heart to raise the level of dangdut; and I say tears because I am always sad to hear dangdut called "backward." *Alhamdulillah*, I have been recognized with awards throughout my career. *Asia Week* magazine named me "Southeast Asia superstar" based on a festival attended by musicians from 11 countries that was held in Kuala Lumpur in 1985.

Revolusi iman

Along with the revolution from *orkes Melayu* to dangdut I also made a moral revolution (*revolusi iman*) in music. I wanted to find a way to play music without offending Islam with drunkenness, free sex, and infidelity to the point that one neglects his responsibility to pray. These are the things I saw among musicians and in music contexts during that period and they made me very upset. I decided to gather together eight people in the Soneta Group to make a commitment to play music free from sin with an objective to transmit religious messages to the masses. As musicians we would make a contribution to the moral development of the people.

From that point on, the members of the Soneta Group never neglected their duty to pray and did not do anything forbidden by religion like getting drunk. In order for those religious messages to be effective, we had to rid ourselves of anything immoral.

On October 13, 1973, I declared the Soneta Group "The Voice of Muslims" with the goal of making music not only a form of entertainment but one that could also function as a medium for information, education, unity, and *dakwah*.

The idea to make *dakwah* songs was considered strange by recording companies and producers. They refused to record *dakwah* songs because they claimed they would not be commercially popular. They said we had to follow the taste of the people who only liked to hear love songs or party music. Indeed, the orientation of cassette producers was to find the largest profit possible. I accepted their position. So we had to make *dakwah* songs that had a commercial goal. If *dakwah* could not attract people in a commercial way then *dakwah* would not reach the people.

I decided that *dakwah* music had to satisfy four conditions: (1) the structure of the songs had to be beautiful and interesting; (2) the lyrics had to be strong, make sense, and present a good argument to touch people's hearts; (3) the melody, lyrics, and rhythm had to be harmonious; and (4) the singer and composer had to make lyrics related to everyday life in order to give the people good examples to follow. Fans will always follow the behavior of their idols. If an idol gives a positive image in his songs, the people will follow; but on the other hand, negative lyrics will produce negative attitudes among fans. An artist has a great responsibility in shaping the way his fans behave. A good artist has to be able to shape the people and not just follow the wishes of the people. I believe that music is not just a form of entertainment but is a responsibility to God and to the people.

The first step toward *dakwah* in music was to say "Assalamualaikum" ("Peace be unto you") before a performance of music. This had never been done by musicians at shows because at that time there was a sharp dividing line between music and religion. "Assalamualaikum" was only said in mosques at religious events. So when I said "Assalamualaikum" in a performance by the Soneta Group at the Ancol public square in Jakarta in 1975 many people threw sandals, mud, and other things at me because they thought I was insulting Islam. *Alhamdulillah*, now almost every singer of any kind of music always says "Assalamualaikum" to begin a performance of music.

The next step was to use religious words in songs. I read the *Hadith* entitled "LIMA." I recorded and sang a song by reading a passage from the Al-Qur'an with the title "Setetes Air Hina." The media was quick to say that Rhoma Irama had sold out the religion, and that Rhoma Irama had offended Islam. In 1975 I took the pilgrimage to Mecca (*haji*) and the mass media slandered me because at that time there was not a singer who had taken the *haji* and there was not a *haji* who sang. At that time, the only singers who took the *haji* were considered contemptible. *Alhamdulillah* now almost every singer has taken the *haji*. Finally, I was invited by the Council of Indonesian Clerics (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) to defend the stance I expressed in my songs and films. *Alhamdulillah*, after I explained my position and objectives, the MUI did not ask me to stop composing *dakwah* songs but they encouraged me to write more. Since then many lyrics have references to the Al-Qur'an and to the *Hadiths* of Nabi SAW.

Among the many *dakwah* songs there are songs that invite people not to get drunk, not to sin, not to gamble, and not to steal, such as the song "Haram" ("Forbidden"):

“Haram” (1980)

Why, oh why, is drinking forbidden?
Because, because, it confuses our thoughts.
Why, oh why, is adultery forbidden?
Because, because, it's like animals.
Why, oh why, is gambling forbidden?
Because, because, it wrecks our finances.
Why, oh why, is stealing forbidden?
Because, because, it causes people to suffer.

I also wrote songs to entertain poor people so that they did not feel frustrated given their difficult situations in life. God did not view them in terms of their wealth or status, but only in terms of their faith:

“Taqwa” (1978)

To the poor, don't feel sad, don't feel regret,
To the rich, don't feel proud, don't feel conceited.
Human ranking by God is not determined by wealth,
Human ranking by God is determined only by devotion.

I wrote songs to urge people to respect their mothers who gave birth to them because there are many cases where children are not respectful to their parents:

“Keramat” (1977)

Come on people, respect your mothers, for she gave you life and raised you,
Your blood and bones made from her milk, your soul from her love,
She is the only person who loves you without limits.
Your mother's prayers were answered by God and her curse has become real,
God bless His generosity, and anger for his anger.
If you love someone, love your mother more,
If you honor someone, honor your mother more.

For the unification of Indonesian citizens, given its diversity of languages and ethnicities and religions, I created a song entitled “135 million” (which was the population of Indonesia in 1976 when I wrote that song):

“135 Juta” (1976)

135 million Indonesians,
Made up of many different ethnicities,
Sundanese, Javanese, Acehnese, Padang, Batak and many more.
Don't offend any of the other ethnicities,
Because we're one country and we speak one language.

Unity in Diversity is the symbol of our nation,
Many paths leading to one goal.

And to motivate people to struggle for the good of the nation, I wrote the following song “Perjuangan dan Doa” (“Struggle and Prayer”):

“Perjuangan dan Doa” (1978)

Riding on a raft, swimming in the river,
We were sick, we faced hard times,
And then, we found happiness.
Struggle, struggle with all our strength,
But don’t forget that with struggle we must also pray.
Obstacles, they will be there,
Face everything with determination and commitment.
Struggle without prayer is arrogant whereas prayer without struggle does
not make sense.

In addition to *dakwah* songs, I also wrote songs that criticized government policies that did not accord with the values of democracy, humanitarianism, or religion. For example, the New Order regime was non-democratic and intimidated the people so that they would elect the ruling party in every election. To criticize this situation, I wrote the song “Hak Azasi” (“Human rights”):

“Hak Azasi” (1977)

Respect human rights because they are natural,
We are free to choose our own direction,
God does not even force us to be His servant.
Freedom of speech is a human right,
Freedom of religion is a human right.

During the New Order the government established “Porkas” (“Forecast”) a national soccer pool set up on December 28, 1985. At that time, the people who make up the majority of the Indonesian population were gambling a lot and this was causing social problems. People were becoming lazy because they had hopes of becoming rich at the lottery. But the poor were only getting poorer. Their faith was being eroded and they began visiting sorcerers (*dukun*) to help them get numbers to win the lottery. Finally, the moral fabric of the nation had been eroded to a critical point. The lottery program made things worse rather than better, so I wrote a song entitled “Gambling” (“Judi”):

“Judi” (1987)

Gambling . . . promises winning, gambling . . . promises prosperity,
Lies . . . even if you win, that’s the beginning of your loss,
Lies . . . even if you become rich, that’s the beginning of poverty.

Gambling . . . poisons life, gambling . . . poisons faith,
Indeed . . . because of gambling, people become lazy,
Indeed . . . because of gambling, sorcerers get busy at deception.
The faithful can be led astray, not to mention the masses,
Winners can become evil, not to mention the losers,
The rich can be dragged down, not to mention the poor,
The happy can suffer, not to mention those who are not.
Money from gambling is dirty money.

To criticize the corrupt practices of the government carried out by the bureaucrats at the highest level of the government I wrote the song “Indonesia”:

“Indonesia” (1982)

Green covers the earth, the blue ocean surrounds us,
That’s Indonesia, a fertile and productive land,
The wealth of the country belongs to the people,
Yet my heart always asks, “why is there not equality?”
The rich become richer while the poor become poorer.
This country is not owned by a group, and it is not owned by a person,
So don’t make yourself rich rushing about,
The wealth of this country is for the benefit of all of its people,
So I ask myself, “Why are people not equal?”
The rich become richer, the poor become poorer.
As long as we have corruption there is no hope for equality,
Get rid of corruption in every part of the bureaucracy so that life will be
more fair,
Don’t we wish to be a prosperous and peaceful country?

Because of my social criticism aimed at the government, live concerts by the Soneta Group were banned everywhere, and not allowed to be shown on television (which was the only station at that time) for about 11 years (1977–1988). Yet I enjoyed this situation as a logical consequence of the struggle. Sacrifice can be sweet when our struggles are rewarded.

Islam and terrorism

Since the terrible events of September 11, 2001, the religion of Islam has been stigmatized by terrorism. Please allow me as a member of the Islamic faith of Indonesia to clarify one issue. In Indonesia we have been attacked by terrorists several times: two times in Bali, and at the Marriot Hotel and the Australian Embassy in Jakarta. Many innocent people have been killed. To kill innocent people is not supported by the Al-Qur’an, as in chapter 5, verse 32, Allah decrees: “Whomever kills even one innocent person is the same as one who kills all of the people.”

In Islam there is an order to fight but only as a defensive tactic, not an offensive tactic, as in the Al-Qur’an chapter 2, verse 190, which states: “You are allowed to

fight for Allah if you have been attacked. But in war you must have limits because Allah does not approve of those who go too far.” This verse is implemented by Nabi Muhammad SAW in every battle. He forbade killing those not involved in a war, including women and children as well as animals, and all living things on earth.

Further, the Muslim community is instructed to respect other religions and the Gods they worship. This matter is mentioned in the Qur’an, chapter 6, verse 108 that sounds: “Do not insult the Gods they worship besides Allah because that will give them the right for them to insult your God.” In other verses Allah instructs Muslims to live with respect towards people of other religions and beliefs. In the Al-Qur’an chapter 49, verse 13: “Listen people, I made all of you from a man and a woman. Then from these two people I made you into different races and groups to respect and love each other.” This is because Allah said to Nabi Muhammad SAW in the Qur’an chapter 21, verse 107 “the main message to bring is to bring peace to all people.”

To summarize, terrorism committed by Muslims does not have any connection to Islam. Similarly, the terror committed by Hindus in India does not have a relationship to Hinduism and the terror committed by Christians in Ireland, Spain or elsewhere does not have a relationship to Christianity. Therefore, I believe terrorism is a political matter and not a religious one. I expressed these sentiments in the song “Stop”:

“Stop” (1985)

Stop . . . debating . . . stop . . . fighting,
 Stop . . . making enemies . . . stop . . . arguing,
 C’mon, let’s love each other,
 C’mon, let’s care for each other,
 Respect other people’s opinions,
 Even though they’re different,
 As long as no one suffers.

Part IV

Representations, values, and meanings

12 Taking liberties

Independent filmmakers representing the *tudung* in Malaysia

Gaik Cheng Khoo

Since 2000, digital technology has democratized filmmaking in Malaysia, giving rise to a new generation of international film festival award-winning directors. Numerous private colleges and universities began to offer film and animation courses; the *Kelab Seni Filem Malaysia* (Art Film Club) screened foreign films and also ran special screenings on Malaysian short films and documentaries several times a year; film festivals increased and there began to be overlaps between local film activists and social activism, manifested in the Freedom Film Fest offerings which focused on human rights.¹ In 2005, the Goethe-Institut in Kuala Lumpur and the Multimedia Development Corporation initiated and sponsored a short film competition on the subject of the *tudung* (headscarf).² The competition intended to highlight “creative visual attempts that lend themselves best to portraying the width of social and religious functions performed by the ‘tudung’ right up to its current status of being a fashionable designer item and an accessory.”

This chapter focuses on how independent Malaysian filmmakers took liberties in representing the *tudung* in this competition. I want to make three main points: first, that the majority of the independent filmmakers involved in the competition were non-Muslims who were making an intercultural attempt to learn about the significance of the *tudung*, thereby supporting my idea of independent filmmaking in Malaysia being a cosmopolitan endeavour (Khoo 2007). Secondly, I want to make a case that short films made using digital technology are increasingly becoming a popular cultural form due to the ease in making them. In addition, although most of these *tudung* films were not widely distributed or exhibited, they focus on issues and themes that are prevalent in public discourses about the *tudung* and utilise the digital video format, a popular technology in Malaysia. Lastly, I want to problematise the thin line between the content of some of these films with other amateur digitally shot voyeuristic videos on YouTube on the subject of “*tudung* and women”, to suggest that there might be very little that separates these competition films from products shot by peeping toms using hidden cameras (*skodeng*) and which sometimes make it onto the underground porno VCD market and YouTube. The only difference in defining the parameters of meaning may lie between text and context, since the signifier *tudung* is always already loaded with various signified connotative values such as feminine mystery, pious Muslim,

Malay woman, female sexuality, or female oppression. Let me begin by outlining the context first.

Context I: independent filmmaking in Malaysia

The rise of a new filmmaking era in Malaysia can be attributed to several factors. Digital cameras and videotapes are much cheaper and more lightweight than analog ones. Filmmakers can edit their films on their home computers rather than having to rent expensive labs for editing. The majority of these filmmakers are young and tech-savvy: born in the 1970s, they are independent because they have not relied on the government for loans or grants to make their films. Mostly self-funded, low-budget and shot on digital, their films have limited audiences due to the fact that there are only two digital screens in Malaysia. Moreover, one of the disadvantages of digital film is that while cheap to make, it costs a lot to transfer digital onto film to be exhibited in most cinemas. In Malaysia, films that are going to be shown in cinemas need to be approved by the National Censorship Board (*Lembaga Penapisan Filem*) whereas films that are shown in small “underground” avenues do not have to undergo censorship. The short films made are seldom shown at commercial venues since the popular understanding is that few cinema-goers will pay money to watch them; therefore these films do not undergo censorship by the National Censorship Board. Thus the short film format, more so than the independent feature, can provide room for critical self- and social analysis and experimentation without the need for self-censorship due to political and commercial reasons.

Numerous factors account for the burgeoning interest in filmmaking. Foremost is the government’s push for Malaysia to become a hi-tech society in the late 1990s with the Multimedia Super Corridor and establishment of the Multimedia University which, in turn, has produced several home-grown award-winning talents including Tan Chui Mui, Deepak Kumaran Menon and Liew Seng Tat (who were trained in animation rather than filmmaking). Numerous private colleges and universities also offer film and animation courses; other local universities and film academies train students in traditional and digital filmmaking; and workshops are held a few times a year by various organisations for those who might be amateur or self-taught. Groups that support film enthusiasts such as the *Kelab Seni Filem Malaysia* promote cinephilia by screening foreign films and running special screenings on Malaysian short films and documentaries several times a year. Other groups like Filmmakers Anonymous provide an uncensored arena for screening as well as critical feedback in the question and answer period and on its blog for participating filmmakers (<http://filmmakersanonymous.blogspot.com/>). Rampant piracy of international films, both commercial and art films, also stimulate interest and influence indie filmmakers who are looking for a style to call their own; one that is differentiated from the films in the local market as well as from Hollywood. The number of film festivals has grown over the years with overlaps between local film activists and social activism, manifested in the Freedom Film Fest offerings which focus on human rights. The success of some

independent filmmakers overseas may stimulate interest in their films in Malaysia; hence local cinemas may be more open to screening their films, or they may be wooed by local commercial film producers to make more mainstream films for Malaysian audiences.³ Such endeavours blur the line between independent and mainstream and create a dynamic between the two that can only be healthy for both streams.

Indies as cosmopolitan

I have written more comprehensively about the indie filmmaking scene in its initial phase in 2002–2003 (Khoo 2007). A core group consisting of friends who collaborate on each other's film projects has emerged out of the movement. They are Malaysians of all ethnic backgrounds who are making films across various languages spoken in Malaysia: Mandarin, Cantonese, Malay, English and Tamil.⁴ Their films are multilingual and provide a contrast to the mainstream commercial film industry which caters predominantly to Malay audiences and which is in the Malay language. But what is more interesting is that the films and their modus operandi are infused with a cosmopolitan sensibility. I use the term "cosmopolitan" to describe a commitment to commonly shared values and humanity, regardless of ethnicity, class and gender. To be cosmopolitan is to embrace the culture of others, whether within or outside of one's nation. Having a cosmopolitan sensibility does not necessarily entail travelling beyond national borders; rather, it could be having a "broad commitment to civic-democratic culture at the national level" (Anderson 1998: 279). If, as David Hollinger explains, pluralism connotes different cultures existing side by side, cosmopolitanism which assumes diversity as an "always already," requires those boundaries of race, class, and gender to be crossed. Unlike pluralism which "is more concerned to protect and perpetuate particular, existing cultures," cosmopolitanism "is willing to put the future of every culture at risk through the sympathetic but critical scrutiny of other cultures" (Hollinger 1995: 85–86). In other words, cosmopolitans are able to have "a reflective distance from [their] cultural affiliations, a broad understanding of other cultures and customs, and a belief in universal humanity" (Anderson 1998: 267). Yet, while they may share humanist ideals, they are more nuanced in their universalism: for them, diversity is an accepted fact, not a problem (Hollinger 2002).

The Malaysian independent filmmakers do not limit themselves to representing characters that reflect their own ethnic backgrounds, but instead may represent stories with Malaysian characters of ethnicities other than their own. They also collaborate across racial boundaries. This is a crucial difference in a country where racialization is entrenched through race-based political parties and policies that privilege the majority on the basis of ethnicity (*bumiputeraism*). Where race is central to the divisive power sharing politics of the nation and nation-state, having a critical cosmopolitical sensibility facilitates the dismantling of racialisation in a multicultural society and makes possible an alternative idea of nationhood that is based on citizenship rather than a constructed cultural "essence of the nation" such as having the right ethnicity or religion.

Islam plays an important role in Malaysian racialisation, in terms of yielding ethnic stereotypes. For example, as Malays are constitutionally defined as Muslims, all Malays are officially deemed to be Muslim, Malaysians of Indian origin are all considered first to be Hindus, and Chinese Malaysians are generally regarded as non-Muslims. Heightened Islamic consciousness due to missionary activities since the late 1970s into the 1980s, and under Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's leadership, also generated tension between Malays and non-Malays, and in some cases, among Malays themselves (Sharifah Zaleha 2000b: 46). As Islam is the religion of the majority of Malays, race and religion are intertwined and bound together in symbolic ways, the most visible form being the *tudung*.

It is clear from the short film entries submitted to the *tudung* competition that this sense of cosmopolitanism or what historian Sumit Mandal calls "transethnic solidarities" (2004) characterises not only the core group of indie filmmakers but also the periphery. Eight out of the eleven were made by non-Muslim ethnic Chinese and Indian Malaysians. And while most of the documentary-style films dealt earnestly with the questions raised by the competition's call for submissions, the fictional films were interesting because they attempted to broach the topic in more metaphorical and creative ways. For example, *Mirror* (dir. Chris Low Cheng Oo 2005) focused on a young Chinese woman who finds friendship with an elderly Malay *kampung* (village) woman. The Chinese protagonist is in a rocky relationship with a married Chinese man and attempts suicide by walking into the sea. She is saved by the Malay woman who takes her in, cooks for her and provides sanctuary while the young woman continues unsuccessfully to contact her lover on her mobile phone. Meanwhile, the Malay woman teaches her how to eat with her fingers and how to wear the headscarf. The Chinese woman eventually has a self-awakening moment when she confronts her image in the mirror. When her lover finally arrives from the city, she rejects him, walking away with the scarf on her head looking serene and at peace with herself. The *tudung* is crucial in changing their relationship because when he arrives and sees her wearing it, he asks, somewhat bemused, "What's this?" In the film, the *tudung* represents an idyllic pastoral image of Malay-Muslim rural society—the "makcik" or "Auntie" is simple, compassionate, honest, God-fearing and loyal to her husband even after his death. This image provides a dichotomous contrast to the Chinese woman's complicated relationship and her modern urban bourgeois lifestyle. For example, when the young Chinese woman first arrives at the peaceful beach, she wears revealing clothes and heavy make-up. During her stay there, she hardly speaks to the older Malay woman and spends most of her time smoking and using her mobile phone to contact her lover. Her lover, when he finally arrives, comes in an expensive car and is impatient with her. Note the centrality of the mobile phone in her life, her cigarette addiction, the revealing clothes and make-up she wears upon arrival at the peaceful beach, her lover's expensive car and impatience with her. The film is problematic in the way it sets up this stereotypical dichotomous ethnic difference. But what is relevant here is that the *tudung* connotes not just Islam (or fashion) but Malayness and all that this subjectivity represents. This film again promises

cosmopolitan unity as it concludes with the two women sitting together companionably in their headscarves staring out at the sea during sunset.

Context II: the *Tudung* Short Film Competition, 2005–2006

In 2005, the Goethe-Institut in Kuala Lumpur initiated and sponsored a short film competition organised by *Kelab Seni Filem Malaysia*, with the support of a non-governmental organisation Sisters in Islam on the subject of the headscarf or *tudung*.⁵ The submissions call was worded to demonstrate a balance between fulfilling an artistic expression by using the film medium to explore a topic that has multiple meanings, whether social, religious or commodified.

The reason for the theme of the competition may have been driven both by global and local agendas. The local film club wanted to discover what Malaysians had to say about the significance of the *tudung* and perhaps, demonstrate Malaysian uniqueness and multicultural pluralism towards the *tudung/hijab* in contrast to the Islamic backlash in Europe and the USA.⁶ The competition blurb begins:

Whereas some Western countries have legalised restrictions against the wearing of headscarves as a religious symbol by public servants in state institutions, headscarves have been widely accepted amongst Moslem women in Malaysia. They have even become part of a Moslem fashion industry which is gaining commercial ground overseas.

[. . .]

Looking at the issues in Malaysia and in the Philippines through the lens of a filmmaker's camera enables the different shades, backgrounds, motives and social realities to be brought to the fore. It is hoped that this in turn will stimulate reflection on the subject in the west, should these films be shown there later.⁷

The blurb subtly plays off Malaysian “happy multiculturalism” (Leeuw and Wichelen 2008; Ahmed 2007) against the contrasting religious intolerance towards Islam in Europe by suggesting that these Malaysian-made films might “stimulate reflection on the subject in the West.”⁸ Two of the films, *Uncovering the Covered* (dir. Ashok Kumar) and *The Little Tudung* (dir. Tan Gaik Lan) raise the issue of the French government's ban on schoolgirls wearing headscarves in schools in 2004. In fact, similar moves were occurring in Germany in 2003. There was a ban on teachers wearing the headscarf to school in the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg; subsequently eight out of 16 states banned teachers from wearing the headscarf for religious reasons.⁹ Pupils however were allowed to wear the headscarf.

Interestingly, neither the competition blurb nor any of the films came close to capturing the central truth and emotions about race relations and “creeping Islamization” that were occurring in Malaysia in 2005–2006.¹⁰ Before discussing the texts in detail, I want to return to the question of what the short films did not broach and why the organisers felt it would be courting trouble to screen the films

in May 2006. The more immediate causes for sensitivity in the independent film community were a series of events that began in April against independent filmmakers' films and activities supporting the indie film community. Foremost was the provocative television debate "*Sepet and Gubra: Cultural Corruptors?*" ("*Sepet dan Gubra: Pencemar Budaya?*") which attacked liberal Malay Muslim independent filmmaker Yasmin Ahmad's films in the weekly television forum, *Fenomena Seni*, on the government-run television station RTM1. Further controversy was triggered by editorials in the Malay daily, *Berita Harian*, written by Akmal Abdullah in April against the film screenings organised by *kakikino*, a group of academics and cinephiles from the National University of Malaysia (UKM) (see Akmal Abdullah 2006a–c). By early May (May 4th) Akmal Abdullah had started questioning whether indie filmmaker Amir Muhammad's documentary *The Last Communist* (*Lelaki Komunis Terakhir*) on Malayan Communist Party leader Chin Peng should have been approved by the National Censorship Board. The vocal critics in *Berita Harian* succeeded in eventually getting the film banned.

Ethno-nationalist cultural critics including Akmal Abdullah, film producer Raja Azmi Raja Sulaiman, and novelist Faizal Tehrani were all critics of Yasmin Ahmad's films. Their comments were commensurate with a democratic pluralistic free-for-all space introduced under Abdullah Badawi's Prime Ministership beginning in 2003. During this time, not only were liberal voices given relatively more space to express criticism and dissent than under the autocratic leadership of Mahathir Mohamad, but racist expressions in favour of maintaining Malay hegemony and entrenching so-called Malay rights (*ketuanan Melayu*) were also allowed to prevail and silence rational debate of issues deemed sensitive, like race and religion. For example, UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) Youth leader Hishamuddin Hussein's unsheathed keris-waving speech during the UMNO General Assembly in 2005 was read as a rallying cry to defend Malay supremacy and to oppose those who are against Malay special rights as set out in Article 153 of the Constitution of Malaysia and in the social contract. Race relations were also worsened by what liberal critics regarded as "creeping *syariah*" and its impact on non-Muslims as well as Muslims (Byrnes 2007). A series of high-profile religious conversion cases, of "body snatchings"¹¹ and Hindu temple demolitions to make way for development led to the establishment and activities of the Article 11 Coalition. This coalition aimed to educate Malaysians about their freedom to practise their religions under Article 11 of the Constitution. There was also a short-lived attempt at forming an Interfaith Commission to advise the Prime Minister's office. All of the above contributed to a feeling on the part of non-Malay Muslims that multiculturalism was mere political rhetoric and not practice. This contentious socio-political and cultural climate of brewing dissatisfaction about the state of multiculturalism led to the decision not to screen the short films. This did not mean that none of the films was screened in public. As a matter of fact, some of them participated in film festivals overseas and were also shown locally by the *Kelab Seni Filem* albeit under other titles.¹²

None made overt mention of the recent events of 2005 and 2006. Instead, those which chose the documentary form displayed an earnest desire to discover more

about the *tudung*, through interviews and research, and in effect stayed within the safe parameters of the themes posed by the competition. The films affirmed that Malaysians, irrespective of ethnic backgrounds, were tolerant and respectful of all religions (at least the ones who were located in urban areas in the greater Klang Valley). For example, the Chinese narrator of *Uncovering the Covered* rather naively claims at the end of the film, “We as Malaysians are given the rights to practise our religions. So we don’t agree with countries that restrict wearing *tudung*. The important thing is to respect other people’s religion.” This voiceover is accompanied by a visual image of the Malaysian flag blowing in the wind. One may say that the text invites an ironic reading from self-conscious audience members but the earnestness of the writerly text is palpable. Unlike Namewee’s controversial *Negaraku* (2007) rap video, selected shots from the happy multicultural images culled from the Malaysian Tourism Board commercials do not reveal the unhappy nature of Malaysian pluralism (see Wee 2008).

***Tudung* texts**

I now want to move to a discussion of the films themselves. Although these films are not widely disseminated and thus do not constitute a form of mass culture, they tap into popular discourse about the meanings of the *tudung*. They represent these issues and offer answers from various individuals to common questions about their motivations for wearing the *tudung*, whether women are pressured by school teachers, their parents, or the law; and if the *tudung* is effective in protecting women from the male gaze and male desire. Should Muslim women don the *tudung* when they go clubbing? Is the *tudung* only a fashion accessory when women wear tight jeans and tops with it? What is *aurat* (the part of the body that must be covered for the sake of decency)?

According to theologian Amina Wadud (2006: 218), “While overloaded with multiple meanings, [the *hijab*] is often the single marker used to determine community approval or disapproval. Although sometimes random and coincidental, it is also burdened with different levels of volition by Muslim women.” Interviews with Malay Muslim women in the documentaries validate this point of view. It has to be iterated that most of the people and fictional characters interviewed in the documentaries on the subject were educated middle class Malays situated in Kuala Lumpur. Indeed, in *Tudung Talk* (dirs. Kannan and Woo Ming Jin), all the interviews were carried out in English. Although less well-made, another documentary entitled *Uncovering the Covered* was more balanced in terms of representation as it also included interviewed subjects speaking in Malay. Most of the people interviewed were young: in their twenties to mid-forties. While language is connected to the class factor, age is equally telling as older Malaysians, those born in the 1940s and 1950s, have experienced the earlier period of secular modernity as well as a more Islamized present and therefore might be more critical of resurgent Islam. Ultimately, the documentaries are sympathetic to the liberal position that it is a woman’s personal choice whether to don and when to don the *tudung*. Headscarfed women confirm that while compulsory under Islam,

women have a choice in today's liberal world and should only wear it when they are ready. Wearing the *tudung* does not restrict them as women: "Zulaikha," who wears a black *hijab* complete with veil, states that "[t]his is a religious obligation, not an oppression. It doesn't take away my rights. I'm still entitled to my own opinions" (*An Afternoon with the Hijabed*, dirs. Nadia Hamzah and Wan Muhammad Tamlikha). The films also suggest Muslim women will be judged regardless of whether they wear the *tudung* or remove it when they go clubbing because the *tudung* is vested with such deep symbolic meaning: in several films individuals expressed that to wear the *tudung* at a club was to show disrespect to Islam while to remove it to go to a club was to show one's too easily divestible faith.

The documentaries take the easy route of representing vox populi rather than analysing the structures that have led to such paradoxes of the *tudung* being both religious and commodity fetish objects. Instead, *An Afternoon* and *Tudung Talk* satirise women who wear the *tudung* for reasons that are clearly not religious: because "it was the school rule so [that] all the students would look uniform" (Wawa in *An Afternoon*), or it was imposed by over-zealous Muslim teachers at school, against the wishes of the pupil and her parents (*Tudung Talk*), or because attractive stars like Wardina popularized it (Natasha in *An Afternoon*).

To understand why the *tudung* had come to accrue such symbolic properties, it is important to acknowledge the construction of the Malay Muslim subject over the past three decades. The most recent surge of Islamization since the 1970s far exceeds the forms of regimenting Malay Muslim subjectivity in the past through its sheer complexity, breadth, ties with consumption and micro-management of detail. Islamization has occurred through the mainstreamization of Islamic discourse in the 1980s, the establishment of Islamic institutions, Islamic banking and insurance systems, the pursuit of *halal*-ization in the food and restaurant industry, the introduction and popularization of Islamic fashion and music, and the creation and proliferation of Islamic spaces (mosques, prayer rooms in office buildings, schools and university departments). The practice of Islam is codified and exercised through strict regimes of regulated social behaviour, peer pressure to conform, the *syariah* court,¹³ Department of Religious Affairs, changes to laws and local ordinances, and stigmatization. Fines are levied for unmarried couples caught in public parks holding hands or being in close proximity (*khalwat*), eating in public during the fasting month, drinking alcohol in public, and cross-dressing. Thus, a Muslim in Malaysia has come to signify someone who exhibits and makes visible and public his/her Islamic identity, marking it clearly on the body (through dress) and repeated acts such as attending the Friday afternoon prayers in the mosque.¹⁴ Although Malays are defined as Muslims in the Constitution, many Malay women, for example, feel the necessity to wear the *tudung* today as an outward sign of their identity as modest Muslims. For them the act of putting on the *tudung* is voluntary (Nagata 1995). Such gendered "docile" Muslim bodies are produced through repeated performative public or social acts (Butler 1990) that discipline, self-discipline, survey and ultimately, normalise the idea of what a Muslim is. In *Free Hair* (dir. Azmad), one middle-aged Malay man questions this

act and claims that women have been “conned too much” into believing that wearing the *tudung* makes them righteous and protects them from the uncontrollable passions of men. He objects personally to the presumption that men are base creatures.

The process of Islamic rationalization which saw the reworking of “the existing syncretic religious framework into a recognizably Islamic one” by scripturalist clerics began in the 1940s and continues into the postcolonial era.¹⁵ This emphasis on a scriptural and literal interpretation of Islam entails a superficial understanding of the Muslim body and its identity as purely performative, “a surface whose permeability is politically regulated” (Butler 1990: 139). Consequently, the general belief is that Islam is not so much a matter of faith practised in the privacy of one’s home or about one’s individual relationship with God, but one that has to be made fully visible in the public eye, open to the control and subjection of what Michael Peletz calls “the Malay Panopticon” (Peletz 2002: 235) and other disciplinary apparatuses. By “the Malay Panopticon,” Peletz is referring to the way that most ordinary (and other) Malays appear to feel that they live in a Panopticon where anything they say or do can be used against them (2002: 235). The Malay Panopticon manifests in strategic uses of Islamic symbols and idioms to articulate claims to high status. For example, “Natasha,” a media executive in *An Afternoon*, explains that she started wearing the headscarf partly because she is “fashion conscious” and also at that time, she had just “returned from the umrah and if [she] didn’t wear it, what would people say?”¹⁶

Part of the contradictions of *tudung* is fashioned by UMNO’s neo-traditionalist version of Islam which supported existing social hierarchies and called for accommodation to consumerism and capitalism (Sharifah Zaleha 2000b: 46, footnote 3). Throughout many of these films, references are made to famous celebrities who have popularised particular *tudung* styles, inspiring *tudung* to be named after them: *Tudung Wardina*, *Tudung Mawi*, *Tudung Bienda*, *Tudung Waheeda*.¹⁷ Similarly, this cultural obsession about public appearance and concern for surface meaning and external form rather than content easily falls on the shoulders of Muslim women who bear the burden of visually representing the new Islamic morality.¹⁸

The mockumentary *An Afternoon with the Hijabed* (dirs. Nadia Hamzah and Wan Muhammad Tamlikha) best exemplifies this new Islamic morality that is held in tension with state capitalism and individual consumption practices. Five young women of diverse personalities sit over tea one afternoon to ponder the consequences of wearing the *tudung*. Their varied positions demonstrate the different levels of understanding the reasons for wearing the *tudung*: as a proud spiritual Muslim, a militant feminist Muslim, as an unquestioning Muslim, a fashion queen, or a general conformist. While the film provides interesting and funny insights into five individual women’s (exaggerated) perceptions and views on the subject, it is also circumscribed by questions such as “How do you feel, adorning it?” and “Are you wearing it properly?” These questions regrettably reinforce self-regulation over the Muslim female body that is in keeping with new Islamic morality (embodied by Zulaikha and Julia) and/or neo-traditionalist Islam

(Natasha). The focus on individual people's opinions about the *tudung* reduces a socio-political structural phenomenon that remains unanalysed to the level of individual agents, whose bodies bear out the late consequences of state capitalist Islamic modernity. The *tudung* as a highly visible marker of gender difference, female sexuality and Islam elides other more pressing matters that are less "sexy" such as changes to family law that will disadvantage Muslim women under growing *syariah*,¹⁹ and the ability of Muslim husbands to divorce their wives through text messaging.²⁰

The Malay Panopticon extends to moral policing carried out by volunteer corps (for example, the Ikatan Relawan Rakyat Malaysia, RELA), religious department officers, and police who periodically raid dance clubs and roam public parks on the lookout for cases of *khalwat* (unmarried couples in close proximity). In late January 2005, Federal Territory Religious Department (JAWI) enforcement officers raided and subsequently detained some 100 Muslim youths at Zouk night club in Kuala Lumpur (Kent 2005). The Muslim women were singled out for humiliation and sexual harassment. One film that harkens to the Zouk raid is *Put Your Scarf On My Head* (dir. Wee Han Wei). The scene takes place in an interrogation room. A police officer is questioning a sixteen-year-old sex worker about who gave her the *tudung* she is wearing. The police officer lectures the sex worker on her skimpy dressing, on not knowing how to pray and generally not being a good Muslim girl. It turns out that the police officer recognised her *tudung* because he is acquainted with her pimp who had given it to her so that she would be recognised and released by this officer who has been bribed by her pimp. This film cleverly touches on tangential issues such as police corruption, and the impact of digital camera technology in exposing this corruption.²¹ Shot with a grainy texture employing video technology such as split screens instead of shot-reverse-shot, and near the end, a roaming iris shot that moves from one character to the other, the technique challenges the spectator to associate the film narrative with recent social and political events. Finally, we realise that this entire scene has been captured on video when a green light "Rec" comes on at the bottom corner of the frame. The film ends with text that reveals that after the interrogation, the unnamed police officer was caught for the offence of cooperating with the prostitution syndicate.

A film that escapes from the Malay Panopticon completely is the first prize winner, *Tuesday Be My Friend* (dir. Chris Chong Chan Fui). The Sabah-born director spent nine years in Canada before returning to make this film in Peninsular Malaysia. Chong's long period of exile may account for the film's somewhat deculturalised feel. This is because no Chinese Malaysian teenager would voluntarily assume the *tudung* without realising its ethnic and religious dimensions. The story focuses on a Chinese teenage girl Shiuan who secretly steals away on Tuesday nights to a club where her favourite girl band plays. The surprise? The girl band is made up of Chinese girls wearing *tudung* and silver blue lipstick, singing Mandarin pop. Meanwhile, when she is at home alone, she irons her headscarves carefully and away from her two Chinese girlfriends, she also dresses up her dolls in headscarves while listening to a Cantonese radio station.

The story uses the *tudung* as a fetishistic marker of a subcultural youth identity, in this case it is a Chinese girl band whom Shiuan adores. The film ends with her mashing among other screaming Chinese girls, all donned in colourful *tudung*. Here, wearing the headscarf is a subversive gesture linked to the hidden pleasures of girl liberation. There are no Muslim characters in the film but clearly putting on a *tudung* for a Chinese girl connotes something bizarre and extraordinary, so much so that Shiuan has to lie to her conventional Chinese friends about what she does on Tuesday nights. The film's quirky potential, its element of surprise, relies on the audience making the common association of the *tudung* with Islam and Malay ethnic difference while at the same time repressing this cultural appropriation. Could the *tudung* in this underground fantasy also be a subversive way for them to enjoy some semblance of citizenship as *bumiputera*? Or to turn upside down the signifier of the *tudung* as repressive of female desire?

The neutralised *tudung* in this regard functions as a fetish in this film in both the Freudian and Marxist senses.²² If the Freudian fetish is “a kind of creative denial, a sort of magical thinking that helps the fetishist ward off anxiety and restores a sense of well-being, all the while producing a kind of amnesia” (Wray 1998), the *tudung* functions to assuage fears of Chinese marginalisation (lack) through its very appropriation of Malay-Muslim symbolic identity. The “subsequent act of forgetting this act of substitution” is secured through linking the *tudung* with another meaning altogether: the all-Chinese girl band.

In a Marxian sense, the fetishism of the *tudung* in the film masks and distorts the underlying and more fundamental social relations in Malaysia, those between Muslims and non-Muslims, Malays and non Malays. It removes altogether the signifier from its religious signified. The *tudung* becomes a substitute for the music of the underground girl band, one pleasurable commodity linking to another pleasurable one without the surplus discomfort of ethno-religious difference. Whether for this reason or not, the Malaysian Ambassador to Finland who watched the film at the Tampere short film festival lambasted it for not being “representative” of Malaysia,²³ proving that some liberties cannot be taken without contention when representing the cultural signifier of the Other.

Text and context

Lastly, I want to problematise the thin line between some of the content of these films with other amateur digital “*tudung* and women” videos to suggest that there might be very little that separates these competition films from products shot by peeping toms using hidden cameras (*skodeng*) and which sometimes make it onto the underground porno VCD market and YouTube. The only difference in defining the parameters of meaning may lie between text and context, since the signifier *tudung* is always already loaded with various signified connotative values. I make this statement to buttress my second main point about the broad or hugely popular appeal of digital technology and ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) practices, which by virtue of their digital format includes these

short films. Malaysia, with a population of 24.8 million people, had 16.2 million registered mobile phone users in May 2006 (Yeow, Yee and Connolly 2008: 85). Many of these phones may include cameras, so much so that it has prompted the government to ban camera phones in high-security areas in government buildings (Lee 2007). In combination with the Internet's vast reach and the growth of the YouTube generation, the camera phone signals "the power of media in the hands of millions" ("Camera Phone" 2010). In Malaysia, as the article points out, the camera phone has been a catalyst for change when a government inquiry into police practices ensued after a cell-phone video revealed a woman detainee being forced to do nude squats.²⁴

At the same time, the large-scale consumption of these technologies, while facilitating creativity, can also lead to abuses and violations of privacy and security. For example, in Zan Azlee's documentary *Tudung*, scenes of *tudung* women in jeans and T-shirts (often known as *Minah Tudung*) crossing the street, school girls hanging out with schoolboys, a young couple sitting together and sharing drinks on the roadside, a woman browsing at a magazine stand, a couple enjoying the evening and a quiet moment on a bridge could very well be the ones shot by a *skodeng* or an officer of the JAWI (Jabatan Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan), had it not been for the song "Amor de Loca Juventud" (a song from The Buena Vista Social Club soundtrack) playing in the background, and the interspersed editing of an interview with a *tudung* maker in a women's cooperative. The film takes a literal approach to the *tudung*, choosing to focus on the lost craft of weaving the traditional *tudung saji*, used to cover food. At the same time, it weaves in public scenes of women (shopping, walking around, playing pool) with the voiceover of the weaver who narrates the uses of the *tudung saji*. The seemingly random shots of *tudung*-clad women and the weaver's informative explanation dovetails into a sly sexual analogy as we see a shot of two *tudung* women playing pool with a man in a dark pool hall accompanied by the voiceover presumably demonstrating a food cover: "This kind has very minute holes. A fly can still drop its eggs inside." This shot is followed by another evening shot of a man and a *tudung* lady standing together at a bridge in a park and the words: "This one has very minute holes so it's better [than the plastic kind]. That's the difference." The innocent and prosaic remarks about "minute holes" and "a fly can still drop its eggs inside" juxtaposed with shots of the courting couple and women playing pool with a man suggest that the *tudung* is not merely a covering (to protect food and women) but a synecdoche for the sexual female body that is potentially penetrable and receptive. Moreover, the reference to "minute holes" conveys an evaluative judgment of Muslim women's chastity. The juxtaposition of sound and visuals continues as the weaver says that young people are not interested in weaving as it is not glamorous. She hopes that young people will return to the traditional arts and not let them die off. The film ends with the Cuban song crescendo-ing to its climax, articulating what crazy youthful love is like. The choice of this song which is played throughout the documentary is intentional and fits the random (or surreptitious) shots of *tudung* women glimpsed throughout the film more than the final hopes of the weaver. The song reminds viewers that more than being a

Muslim, these women are also human beings who are prone to the follies and passion of youthful love. At times, the film's unabashed voyeuristic qualities make the viewer feel like an unwitting accomplice on a scopophilic fieldtrip scrutinizing defenceless *tudung*-ed women behind a video camera in order to see them in a new moral light and to unravel the "feminine mystique" that lies behind the *tudung*.

Similar voyeurist techniques can be seen in a short clip on YouTube, *Skodeng Awak Melayu* (Peeping at Malay Girlfriend), though this one conveys malicious intent: the approaching cameraman means to punish the couple for their casual body contact (the young woman has her arm around the man's shoulder while perched behind him on a motorbike). In this brief scenario, the cameraman approaches the unsuspecting couple sitting and talking casually on their motorbike. The cameraman gets up close and greets them suddenly in Malay with "Assalamualaikum, are you married or not?" The young woman is caught off guard and looking guilty, she replies, "not yet," before quickly removing her arm from around her boyfriend's shoulder. The camera pans from her face to her boyfriend's and back to her. Here, ICT mediatises the Malay Panopticon through its culture of surveillance and the policing of Malay female subjectivity while highlighting simultaneously its male scopophilic desires and power.

Conclusion

The digital revolution and democratisation of "filmmaking" (if we want to call it that) enable moving pictures to be easily captured on the mobile phone, a far more ubiquitous gadget than the video camera. With the help of a guidebook (*Digital Photography for Dummies* comes to mind), student filmmakers, amateur home videomakers, fetishists and scopophiliacs in the name of JAWI religious officials and police officers alike can take equal liberties in representing the *tudung* and claiming ownership over particular meanings they may have of it on the Internet. Claims to art aside, all participate and share in a visual language the public discourse about what covered or free hair means. As the *untudung*-ed female narrator of *Free Hair* articulates so poetically in the film's conclusion: "Free hair. And depending on where you are, and who you are, it either stands for independence of mind and body, or it stands for unfettered freedom, permissiveness, debauchery. You will choose [which meanings]. As I'm sure God has."

This essay has broached the representation of the *tudung* and its multiple meanings in the *tudung* short film competition made by independent digital filmmakers. Unlike Indonesia which saw the emergence of hugely successful commercial Islamic films like *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (dir. Hanung Bramantyo 2008) and *Perempuan Berkabung Sorban* (dir. Hanung Bramantyo 2009), Malaysia's more circumscribed sphere of public discourse on Islam has perhaps prevented the emergence and popularity of such films. Moreover, within such a narrow religious and intellectual climate, films that adopt a liberal Muslim perspective such as *Gubra*

(dir. Yasmin Ahmad 2006) and *Muallaf* (dir. Yasmin Ahmad 2008) are instead attacked for being too liberal and not sufficiently scripturalist or prescriptive in outlining and representing proper Muslim behaviour. Thus, the *tudung* short film competition, although thematically restricted, succeeded in opening up a small space for debate on women, capitalist modernity, Islam and questions of female agency.

Notes

- 1 The Freedom Film Fest is an annual event that consists of a film contest, workshops, and screenings pertaining to issues of social justice.
- 2 A *tudung* describes the proper covering for Muslim women to safeguard their modesty. It usually refers to a headscarf and sometimes includes the veil or it can encompass a full body covering like the *burqa*. The Goethe-Institut is a German cultural institute that promotes German language and fosters international cultural cooperation overseas.
- 3 Indie filmmaker James Lee made a commercial splatter horror film *Histeria* (2008) and Amir Muhammad and Naeim Ghalili made a horror film *Susuk* (2008). Both films did well at the Malaysian box office.
- 4 In Malaysia, the term “race” is widely used to mean “ethnicity” and to differentiate between Malays, Chinese and Indians for example. For clarity, I will use “ethnicity” whenever possible.
- 5 Sisters in Islam is a liberal Muslim non-governmental organisation mostly consisting of middle-class Muslim women. According to its mission statement on its website, SIS’s objective is to “promote an awareness of the true principles of Islam” which it believes “enshrine the concept of equality between women and men.” SIS also “upholds the Islamic principles of equality, justice, freedom and dignity within a democratic state.”
- 6 *Hijab* is another term for *tudung*.
- 7 Though a similar project was planned for the Philippines, it did not manifest.
- 8 Several authors have applied the term “happy multiculturalism” to refer specifically to multicultural Western societies like the Netherlands (Leeuw and van Wichelen 2008) and Britain (Ahmed 2007). While they vary in nuance and complexity due to localised historical specificities, they all refer to a superficial limited idea of multiculturalism. In Malaysia “happy multiculturalism” is best reflected in the Malaysian Tourism Development Board advertisement slogan, “Malaysia Truly Asia.” This commercial offers up smiling ethnically diverse Malaysians performing their individual cultures for tourist consumption and spectatorship. Such forms of happy multiculturalism erase the politically enhanced tensions, racism and class/race inequalities among the groups portrayed.
- 9 “German Court Upholds Muslim Headscarf Ban in Schools,” Spiegel Online International. Online, available at <<http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,542211,00.html>> (accessed 18 March 2008).
- 10 The expression “creeping Islamisation/Islamicisation” or alternatively “creeping *syariah*” has become a common expression for secular-minded critics (especially in the Malaysian Bar Council) who are concerned that the universal values entrenched in the Malaysian Constitution are being eroded by the encroachment of *syariah* (Islamic) laws (for example, Gatsiounis 2004, Beech 2007, Byrnes 2007).
- 11 See Adrian Wong’s blog “Malaysia: Land of the Body Snatchers” (available at <<http://forums.techarp.com/adrian-wong/23682-malaysia-land-body-snatchers.html>>) for a “body snatching” case in January 2008. This phenomenon has been ongoing. See Agence France-Presse (AFP) (2008).

- 12 A selection of five from the competition was curated by Amir Muhammad for the 2006 Los Angeles Asia Pacific Film Festival (Aquino 2006). *An Afternoon With the Hijabed* was screened at a Women and Islam theme night by the Kelab Seni Filem on 30 June 2008; Zan Azlee and Liew Seng Tat's *Tudung* was selected to screen at the 2nd Singapore Indie Doc Fest in 2007 at the Substation and at the 2006 Los Angeles Asia Pacific Film Festival. Chris Chong's *Tuesday Be My Friend* was screened in March 2007 at the Short Film Festival in Tampere, Finland.
- 13 Michael Peletz shows how Islamic courts in Malaysia "help produce and legitimize modern middle-class families and subjectivities and simultaneously endeavor to assure that allegiances beyond the household be largely restricted to the global community of Muslim believers (the *ummah*) and the state" (2002: 19).
- 14 Other concerns with policing the individual and social Muslim Malay body include "being subject to more restrictive controls on [women's] bodily functions and sexuality and public debates about giving and receiving blood [from non-Muslims]" (Peletz 2002: 237).
- 15 Sharifah Zaleha (2000a: 29) calls it "scriptural Islam" but others call it Wahhabi Islam, a rigid interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence that is dominant in conservative Arab societies. It advocates the establishment of an Islamic cleric-led state, government by *sharia* law, regulation of strict dress-codes especially for women and the replication of 7th-century Medina (Rahim 2006: 3). Wahhabi-influenced radical Muslims have a very literal understanding of Islam and see the world in "black and white terms" (*ibid*).
- 16 The *umrah* is a lesser form of pilgrimage that can be performed any time of the year and is not obligatory like the *hajj*; thus it is a sign of high status since not everyone would prioritise or budget for it.
- 17 Wardina is most famous for her shampoo commercial where she kept her *tudung* on. Waheeda is a singer. Mawi is a male singer who became famous after winning a popular reality television show. He has a *tudung* named after him not because he wears one but because opportunistic marketeers wanted to capitalise on his popularity with female fans.
- 18 "Contests about women's place have been a continuing and critical feature of the core tensions within Malay politics between modernist and traditionalist Islam over the last century, with particular emphasis on issues of polygamy and covering the body. The subtext to these contests is that women have been deployed as bearers of correct religious dress and behaviour and as keepers of a hopefully revived private sphere, the 'family'" (Stevens 1998: 113).
- 19 "Is common Law Still Needed?" Online, available at <http://www.malaysianbar.org.my/legal/general_news/is_common_law_still_needed_.html> (accessed 27 August 2007).
- 20 See Taylor, Eric J., "Cellular Phone Divorces – Malaysia Permits Husbands to Divorce Their Wives Via Text Message." (n.d.) Online, available at <http://www.lawandreligion.com/new_devs/RJLR_ND_75.pdf>.
- 21 This recalled another real-life incident where cell-phone video footage revealed a naked woman detainee forced to do squats by the police, in December 2005.
- 22 First, in Freud's *Three Essays On Sexuality* (1905), the male child uses a fetish to cope with his fear of being castrated when he discovers his mother's lack of a penis. The fetish object substitutes for the missing penis, relieving his anxiety and restoring in a displaced fashion the erotic attachment to the female. This "act involves not only finding a substitute object, but also a subsequent act of forgetting the act of substitution" (Wray 1998). Second, the *tudung* also simultaneously resembles a form of Marxist commodity fetish. Commodity fetishism describes how the relationship between things (as we purchase something with money and therefore cut off any social obligations) supersedes or masks social relations in capitalist societies.

- 23 Mr. Wong Tuck Cheong, President of the Kelab Seni Filem (2008), email (22 September 2008).
- 24 Available at <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/11/14/AR2006111401312.html>> (accessed 15 June 2010).

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13 Holy matrimony?

The print politics of polygamy in Indonesia

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Marriage is often seen as a fundamentally private institution, the very bedrock of private life. Yet the highly public nature of the debates over marriage in both Indonesia and the United States in recent years clearly shows that marriage as a social entity is anything but private. Simultaneously a pillar of the family and of society more broadly; a legal institution that is regulated by civil law; and for many people, a religious union that is sanctified by God, marriage lies squarely at the intersection of public and private morality, and is repeatedly subjected to the control of the state as well as the moral scrutiny of the larger public.

In both Indonesia and the United States, marriage has been one of the main battlegrounds of the so-called “culture wars,” in which the distinction between religion and politics, like the distinction between public and private spheres, becomes blurred. Whereas in the United States, the main marital issue at the core of these recent debates has been same-sex marriage, in Indonesia, the central dispute concerns polygamy (*poligami* in Indonesian; in technical terms, polygyny). In keeping with Islamic tradition, Muslim men have been allowed to have up to four wives at once throughout Indonesia’s history, although the right to practice polygamy has been subjected to government restrictions since 1974. Nevertheless, polygamy has served as a major arena in the battle over social and religious morality that has become increasingly fierce since the fall of the repressive Suharto regime in 1998.

In this chapter, I will discuss how the debates over polygamy have been playing out in Indonesian print media since 2003. Although these debates have pervaded many forms of media—books and magazines, television, film, and the Internet, for example—I have chosen to focus on print media in part because of the important role that they have played in reaching a wide range of the population and in articulating a variety of competing views over contentious religious and social issues.¹ The sources that I will examine offer striking examples of how the positioning of the authors and the nature of the targeted audiences shape the terms of the debates. The positions taken in each of these sources can be seen as emblematic of a certain type of moral stance, in a situation where people with competing visions of morality are vying to capture the hearts and minds of the greatest share of the Indonesian population. The stakes in this quest for moral supremacy appear to be increasing, in that morality has become, to an ever-greater extent, a

profoundly political issue in Indonesia—as is evidenced, for instance, in the nationwide tempest over the passage of a hotly contested anti-pornography law in October of 2008 (see Heryanto, Chapter 4 this volume). Much as the print media played a crucial role in solidifying the idea of the Indonesian nation in the early decades of the twentieth century, as Benedict Anderson famously argued in *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1983), print has continued to be key to the formation of moral communities in contemporary Indonesia. An analysis of this mass-mediated morality reveals a great deal about the social, cultural, and political tensions and changes that have been occurring in Indonesia in recent years.

In Indonesia, debates over morality, marriage, and the family are virtually inseparable from discussions of religion, particularly Islam. Polygamy is often associated with conservative forms of Islam, even though not everyone who practices polygamy is a devout or conservative Muslim. While many people, including many practicing Muslims, believe that polygamy is unfair to women and find it personally offensive, those who defend it typically do so at least partly on religious grounds, since it is explicitly permitted by the Qur'an under certain conditions. Muslim men's right to practice polygamy has been staunchly defended by Islamic organizations throughout modern Indonesian history.² In the atmosphere of heightened religiosity in Indonesia since the 1980s, and especially since the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998, polygamy has become one of the signature issues dividing religious conservatives from more liberal Muslims as well as non-Muslims. In this sense polygamy can be compared to the wearing of the headscarf (*jilbab*) or the implementation of limited forms of *sharia* in some parts of Indonesia, in that its importance as a symbol of Islamization has taken on larger-than-life proportions. It is also clear that symbols of Islamization like polygamy are playing an increasingly visible role in various forms of middle-class popular culture, ranging from cheap tabloids to journals aimed at urban intellectuals.

Although no official statistics are kept on the number of people who engage in polygamy, it appears that the percentage of the population that actually practices it is quite small, perhaps less than 5 per cent of those whose marriages have been legally registered (Bowen 2003: 202).³ And yet, like same-sex marriage in the United States, which also directly involves only a relatively small percentage of the population, it has become a hot-button issue, the object of intense debates among different social and political factions. Many Indonesians who oppose polygamy believe that it is a form of discrimination, or even abuse, against women that cannot be justified in the modern era even though it is permitted by Islam. In contrast, most people who defend the practice of polygamy maintain that it is a religious right that should be supported by the state and accepted by the society as a whole in a nation that is nearly 90 per cent Muslim. Polygamy's most ardent advocates argue that the Indonesian state has no right to prohibit or even to restrict this practice among Muslims, as long as it does not conflict with Islamic principles.

Clearly, in neither the United States nor Indonesia are these debates “just” about marriage. In both cases, marriage serves as a symbol and a focal point in

more sweeping discussions over the role of religion in society and in shaping public morality. A further, critical issue is whether the state should foster a religiously based moral and legal order, or whether it should instead support moral and legal systems based on secular principles of justice and civil rights rather than on religious beliefs, even if those principles conflict with the religious beliefs of significant segments of the population. Issues concerning gender, marriage, and the family are often the focus of such debates over morality and the state, particularly during critical moments of social and political transformation.

It should also be emphasized that in neither the United States nor Indonesia are these arguments over marriage simply disagreements between believers and non-believers. Religious people can be found on both sides of the same-sex marriage debates in the U.S. and the polygamy debates in Indonesia. For believers, the debates are one component in an ongoing struggle over whose interpretations of the key religious texts will gain the upper hand—on a spectrum ranging from fundamentalist to liberal, with many gradations in between—in two countries where religion infuses many aspects of everyday life. Because Islamic doctrine concerning polygamy leaves considerable room for interpretation, especially regarding under what conditions polygamy is permissible, Muslims who are well versed in the Qur'an and the *Hadiths* do not always agree with each other on when, or even if, it is acceptable for a man to be married to more than one wife at a time.⁴

Debates over polygamy are not new in Indonesia. In her comprehensive book on women's movements over the course of modern Indonesian history, Susan Blackburn writes that of all the gender issues that have incited Indonesian women to take collective action, polygamy "is the one that has aroused the greatest depth of feeling among the largest number of Indonesian women" (Blackburn 2004: 111).⁵ Some of the examples that she cites include speeches against polygamy given at the first Indonesian Women's Congress in 1928; protests in the mid-1950s against President Sukarno, Indonesia's first president, taking a second wife; repeated campaigns by women's organizations from the 1940s through the 1970s for a marriage law that would protect women's rights; and the demonstrations that were launched in response to the staging of a "Polygamy Awards" ceremony in 2003 (ibid.: 111–12). At the same time, Muslim women's organizations have sometimes defended polygamy on religious grounds, especially amid discussions over whether it should be abolished in Indonesia, even though their members might privately dislike the practice (Doorn-Harder 2006; see also Bowen 2003: 224–7). Throughout the years the mass media, particularly the print media, have served as a central forum for those on all sides of these debates to air their grievances or to defend their positions.

Since 2003, the debates over polygamy have intensified. The reason for this is partly structural, having to do with the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998. In 1974 President Suharto's self-styled "New Order" regime had passed a marriage law that officially declared monogamy to be the norm for the Indonesian nation, stating, "In principle in a marriage a man shall be allowed to have one wife only."⁶ Although the state did not go so far as to ban polygamy outright due to heavy opposition by Islamic organizations, it did impose certain legal restrictions on the

practice. The 1974 law made it more difficult from a bureaucratic perspective for a man to have more than one wife at a time (for instance, by requiring that a man obtain the formal consent of his first and subsequent wives, and/or permission from a court of law, before marrying an additional wife) and also added to the stigma associated with polygamy, as the state made it plain that it considered monogamy to be the strongly preferred form of marriage. This was made even clearer when the government imposed additional restrictions on polygamy for civil servants in 1983, supposedly in response to pressure by the wives of high government officials, including Ibu Tien, President Suharto's wife.⁷ In order to circumvent the restrictions, many men simply married second wives secretly, sometimes by having a ceremony that made the marriage legitimate by Islamic law but not legal by the standards of the Indonesian state.

The demise of Suharto's New Order regime and the liberalization of Indonesian politics and the media, however, created a climate in which it was once again acceptable for polygamy's practitioners and defenders to speak and write openly about it rather than hiding it in the closet as a shameful secret (cf. Nurmila 2008: 33). Some people argued that the legal restrictions should be lifted. The rise of a public discourse on polygamy has also accompanied the growing influence of Islam in the Indonesian political scene and in the society at large, which has itself resulted partly from the loosening of the state's suppression of Islamist politics in the post-Suharto era. The renewed debates over polygamy, then, can be seen as a byproduct of the development of democracy in Indonesia, though one that some proponents of Western-style democracy might find disconcerting.⁸

In addition to these structural changes, a series of events that have taken place in recent years have further provoked public arguments over polygamy. Starting in 2001 the wealthy owner of a large chain of fried chicken restaurants, Puspo Wardoyo, launched a mass media campaign to popularize polygamy, culminating in his highly publicized Polygamy Awards ceremony in 2003, which set off a firestorm of controversy and protests, including renewed demands by some, particularly women's rights groups, that polygamy be made illegal for all Indonesians.⁹ Under the presidency of Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001–2004), Indonesia's first female head of state, her Vice President, Hamzah Haz, was known to have three wives, which seemed to send a signal that the government was becoming more tolerant of polygamy than it had been under Suharto; this may also have emboldened supporters of polygamy to express themselves more openly (Nurmila 2008: 33).

In 2006 the immensely popular Muslim preacher, self-help guru, and televangelist Abdullah Gymnastiar, better known as Aa Gym, scandalized the nation (especially women) when it was discovered that he had secretly married a second wife. His popularity plummeted after his second marriage was exposed; as James Hoesterey has proposed, his "brand image" as a devoted husband and family man only added to the disillusionment of his followers, many of whom were female, when they discovered that he, like so many other men, had given in to his lust by taking a second wife (Hoesterey 2008).¹⁰ The public uproar over this event was so strident that President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono promised to look into

extending the tight restrictions on polygamy that already existed for civil servants to all state officials, including legislators, though his proposal encountered predictably strong opposition from Muslim conservatives (see Diani 2006b).

Other polygamous marriages among celebrities and other high-profile figures have kept the issue in the public eye and even made polygamy seem fashionable in its own way, despite the disapproval of many Indonesians (see Doorn-Harder 2006: 229–30). Finally, in the world of popular literature and film, Indonesia's obsession with the topic of polygamy has been sharpened by the publication of the bestselling novel *Ayat Ayat Cinta* (The Verses of Love) in 2004, followed by the 2006 release of the film *Berbagi Suami* (Sharing Husbands, or *Love for Share*, as it has been translated into English), the latter of which cast a critical eye on polygamy. More recently, the hit film *Ayat Ayat Cinta*, based on the novel of the same title, was released in February of 2008.¹¹

I would like to turn now to the ways in which competing views of polygamy have been expressed throughout these few turbulent years in the print media, drawing examples from three very different sources. The first of these is a journal with a feminist bent, *Jurnal Perempuan* (Women's Journal), which published an issue dedicated to the topic of polygamy, with a vehemently critical stance, in response to the commotion over the Polygamy Awards. The second source is *Tabloid Poligami* (Polygamy Tabloid), the creation of Indonesia's most outspoken proponent of polygamy, the wealthy fried chicken entrepreneur and polygamist Puspo Wardoyo. Finally, I will focus on Habiburrahman El Shirazy's highly successful novel *Ayat Ayat Cinta* (The Verses of Love), which, although fictional, has also figured significantly in the debates over the place of polygamy in modern Indonesian society. Considered together, these three sources show the distinct ways in which the debates over polygamy are framed; first, by those who see polygamy as morally unacceptable under any circumstances; second, by those who maintain that it is not only morally acceptable, but is even beneficial to society; and third, by those who view it as permitted by Islam, but only under dire circumstances rather than as a norm, and only after being subjected to the most careful moral and religious scrutiny. While a substantial number of Indonesian Muslims would probably espouse views somewhere between the two extremes represented by *Jurnal Perempuan* and *Tabloid Poligami*, the types of arguments raised in these publications have become very familiar to Indonesians (particularly those of the middle and upper classes), who have heard or read them in various forms on television and radio talk shows, magazine interviews, Internet forums, and other popular media.

***Jurnal Perempuan* (Women's Journal)**

Jurnal Perempuan, or Women's Journal, is a journal that advocates gender equality and women's rights and empowerment. It is clearly the most secular of the publications that I will be looking at here, as well as the only one of the three that is aimed specifically at a politically and socially progressive, well-educated audience of both Muslims and non-Muslims. The issue that I will examine,

“Considering Polygamy” (*Menimbang Poligami*), was published in September 2003.¹² Although a few of the essays in this particular issue of the journal are written by people who approach their subject from a religious perspective, the language that is used by the authors, most of whom are intellectuals or activists, is based primarily on a secular, international discourse of human rights. The concepts put forth here are broadly shared by women’s rights groups and other progressive NGOs in Indonesia.¹³ Here, polygamy is repeatedly portrayed as a violation of women’s basic human rights (and sometimes as a violation of children’s rights as well). Some of the authors draw clear links between polygamy and discrimination or violence against women, and all of them openly question the lines of argumentation that are frequently put forth by polygamy’s defenders to assert its legitimacy.

For example, in the first article, written by Vony Reyneta, the Director of the Indonesian Legal Aid Society for Women (LBH-APIK), the author takes a strong stand against the government’s policy of continuing to allow polygamy to be legal, calling it a form of “state violence against women” (*kekerasan negara terhadap perempuan*) (Reyneta 2003: 7). She presents the definition of violence against women as outlined in the 1993 UN General Assembly’s “Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women,” which includes not only physical violence but also sexual or psychological violence based on gender. She then offers data from 107 cases involving polygamy that were brought to LBH-APIK, suggesting that many of them involved at least one of these forms of gender violence. The complaints by women included failure to provide financial support, psychological stress, physical violence, being abandoned or divorced by a husband, being forced to sleep separately from their husbands, and being terrorized by the second wife (Reyneta 2003: 10–11). Many of the cases concerned husbands who had married second or subsequent wives without obtaining their first wife’s permission, despite the fact that Indonesian law stipulates that permission must be obtained from either the first wife or a judge in order to enter legally into a polygamous marriage. Reyneta argues that the law does not adequately punish men for violating women’s fundamental rights; that polygamy is inherently discriminatory towards women; and she calls for a revision of the existing laws governing marriage.

Another accusation made by several of the *Jurnal Perempuan* authors is that polygamy both results from and reinforces a “culture of patriarchy” (*budaya patriarki*). Women are disempowered by polygamy, and women’s lack of power relative to their husbands leads their husbands to feel that they can take multiple wives at will. The authors complain that men use religion as an excuse to bolster their egos or to give in to their desires (*nafsu*). They are not marrying more than one woman in order to help out others (which according to Islamic doctrine would be the most favorable reason to engage in polygamy), but because of their egotism, their libidos, or both (e.g., Poerwandari 2003: 28). Some of the authors also take issue with those who try to justify polygamy by resorting to demographic arguments—the often-heard case that because there are more women than men, polygamy serves a useful social purpose in providing husbands for women who

would otherwise be left without the financial, social, and emotional support of a man. As one author points out, this demographic argument does not work well for Indonesia, where there are 99.8 males per 100 females (Poerwandari 2003: 19).

A few of the articles in the journal take aim at the fact that arguments in favor of polygamy not only use men's libido as an excuse but also actually seem to celebrate it. Here, they are referring to the common rationale that because men have a naturally strong sex drive, they need more than one wife to prevent them from committing the sin of adultery, which is condemned by Islam. Mariana Amiruddin charges that these arguments recognize men's so-called "biological needs" (*kebutuhan biologis*) but fail to recognize women's; it is simply taken for granted that men's sexual desire is stronger and needs outlets. She reminds the reader that many fans of President Sukarno admired his prowess (*kehebatan*) in conquering the hearts of women and in having multiple wives (Amiruddin 2003: 89–90). More bluntly, Kristi Poerwandari asks rather sarcastically whether men are truly comparable to other (male) animals in their inability to control their sexual instincts, or whether they might actually be able to exercise some self-control (Poerwandari 2003: 23). A third author, Lely Nurohmah, proposes that by keeping polygamy legal and by stipulating that it will be allowed by the courts in cases where a wife is incapable of bearing children or is unable to fulfill her "marital duties" because she is seriously ill or physically handicapped, the state sides with men in legitimating their sexuality, while reducing women's sexuality to its mere reproductive aspects as well as to women's ability to service their husbands' sexual needs (Nurohmah 2003: 41).

Indeed, the assertion that polygamy should be encouraged for men because they need a morally acceptable outlet for their inherently strong sex drive has been a recurring theme in the debates over polygamy in Indonesia. As Sonja van Wichelen remarks in a recent article on media representations of the veil (i.e., the Islamic headscarf) and polygamy in Indonesia, "Whereas theological or socio-economic arguments [for polygamy] prevailed in the more intellectual newspapers, the 'libido' argument most saliently emerged in tabloids, men's and women's magazines, and in talk shows on television or radio" (Wichelen 2007: 102). She refers to this as a "masculinist discourse of the polygamous male body" (*ibid.*: 106), in which polygamy's role in constructing Muslim masculinity, she suggests, may be compared to the role of the veil in promoting an Islamic femininity in Indonesia (*ibid.*: 102).

The notion that men have a natural need for multiple partners, while women tend to be innately chaste, is underscored by a comment made by Masdar Mas'udi, a well-known Muslim intellectual and prominent member of the Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's largest Islamic organization, who rather ironically had once been known as an avid supporter of women's rights until it was discovered that he had married a second wife. In a newspaper article that appeared shortly after the scandal over Aa Gym broke, Masdar Mas'udi was quoted as saying that every man is "polygamous by nature." "Not every man is up to being a husband, unlike women (who make good wives)," he remarked. "Therefore, polygamy is nature's way of balancing the supply of women wanting to be wives, with the demand of men who

are up to being good husbands” (Diani 2006a). Additionally, he insisted that “Islam only gives a standard of fairness, but it never prohibits [polygamy]. The perception that polygamy only benefits men is not right. Polygamous institutions actually fulfill women’s desires and reproductive rights” (ibid.). His comments on men’s polygamous nature in contrast to women’s nature resonated with a remark that Aa Gym himself is said to have made a few days earlier. When asked if he had taken a second wife, he was reported to have explained that “Women tend to be monogamous, that’s how their ‘software’ is . . . But men, you know . . . their ‘software’ is different” (Diani 2006b).

In the *Jurnal Perempuan* article that is most Islamic in its perspective, an interview with another Muslim intellectual named M. Hilaly Basya, he, like other authors in the journal, contends that polygamy is “a form of celebrating men’s libido” and virility (“Poligami” 2003). In his opinion (and contra to Masdar Mas’udi’s view), the libido argument for taking more than one wife is unacceptable according to Islamic standards of morality. It is not a secret that most acts of polygamy will hurt and humiliate women, he says (ibid.: 112). In contrast, the Prophet Muhammad, who always sided with the weak and powerless, married women who were widows with children or who had lost all sources of protection and material support. His polygamous marriages were intended to raise women’s status, not to dehumanize them (ibid.: 113). The Prophet’s enlightened reasons for polygamy have “become a boomerang” in the current era, in which polygamy is purely about sexual ecstasy, he states matter-of-factly (ibid.). He cites other evidence to support his belief that the Prophet generally frowned upon polygamy, such as the statement of one of the *Hadiths* that he forbade his own son-in-law (Ali, the husband of Fatima) from taking a second wife, as well as the Quranic verse (Surah An-Nisa 129) which warns men, “Even if you wish to behave fairly [in dealing with more than one wife], you will not be able to do so” (*Walaupun kamu ingin berbuat adil, kamu tidak akan bisa*). “The essence of this is, don’t practice polygamy” (*Intinya ya jangan berpoligami*), M. Hilaly Basya concludes (ibid.: 113). His remarks echo those of Islamic gender activists, who insist that the Qur’an, while permitting a man up to four wives at the same time, imposes the condition that he may do so only if he is capable of treating each wife absolutely fairly. They maintain that since the vast majority of men are simply not capable of treating all of their wives completely fairly and equally in all aspects of their lives—emotionally, sexually, and materially—they should refrain from practicing polygamy altogether.

The broader point that can be taken from all of these articles in *Jurnal Perempuan* is that regardless of religious arguments that may be used to justify polygamy or legal codes that claim to protect women, polygamy is morally wrong according to internationally accepted standards of human rights and should not be permitted under any circumstances. The authors broadly concur that polygamy serves to entrench a social and political system that supports men’s domination over women by glorifying patriarchy and masculine privilege. While it might have served legitimate social purposes in the era of the Prophet, they believe, it has no place in a modern, democratic society. Democracy must be understood as

a principle that governs private as well as public life, and any social institution that enables one category of people (men) to exercise their power so thoroughly over another (women) is fundamentally undemocratic in its nature. By allowing polygamy to remain legal in Indonesia, the state is undermining the supposedly democratic basis of Indonesian society in the post-Suharto era and perpetuating the inequalities inherited from earlier periods.

In targeting a well-educated, liberal audience, *Jurnal Perempuan* does not speak for the majority of Indonesians. Only a very small portion of the population would be comfortable with the feminist, mostly secularist, intellectual discourse employed by the journal. And yet, some of the views promoted here resonate with the belief of many Indonesians, well educated or not, that polygamy is unfair to women. The huge public outcry that took place against the charismatic Muslim preacher Aa Gym following the disclosure of his second marriage, even after his first wife had publicly proclaimed her acceptance of the marriage, is just one indication of how many Indonesians feel that polygamy victimizes women, not only as individuals, but as an entire category of people.

Tabloid Poligami (Polygamy Tabloid)

I turn now to a very different sort of publication that appeared on Indonesian newsstands in 2006. *Tabloid Poligami* (Polygamy Tabloid) was the creation of the Indonesian Polygamy Society (Mapolin, or Masyarakat Poligami Indonesia). Mapolin was headed by Puspo Wardoyo, the infamous fried chicken king whose chain of restaurants featured “polygamy stirfry” and “polygamy juice” (a blend of four fruits) on the menu, served by women wearing modest Islamic dress. Puspo Wardoyo himself reportedly drove a red sports car with a license plate that said “4bini” (four wives), apparently a reference to his own marital situation (Marks 2004). The purpose of the tabloid, according to the editor’s remarks in the first issue, was to foster “the broader socialization of Islamic polygamy in addition to providing a means for sharing knowledge and experience” and “to continue the spirit of the 2003 Polygamy Awards” (*Tabloid Poligami* 2006: 2–3). Puspo Wardoyo and others at Mapolin were convinced that polygamy served a centrally important role in Islam and in society, and that it needed to lose the cloud of stigma and secrecy that had been enveloping it. Interestingly, while the Polygamy Awards ceremony that Puspo had staged in 2003 had only presented awards to *men* who were deemed model polygamists, the tabloid seemed to be aimed more at women, as indicated by the phrase just beneath the tabloid’s title, which read, “The Rights and Needs of Women” (*Hak dan Kebutuhan Perempuan*). Perhaps Puspo and others at Mapolin had come to realize that the audience that really needed convincing of polygamy’s merits was predominantly female rather than male, though many of their critics would argue that polygamy is more about the “rights and needs” of men than of women.¹⁴

The tabloid made an effort to answer the charges of some of those critics, in part by featuring articles and letters written by women who claimed to be living fairly contentedly in polygamous marriages. The first letter to the editor is from a

woman labeling herself a “second wife” (*istri kedua*), who congratulates the editors on the publication of their tabloid. She remarks on the overall willingness of the mass media to give plenty of room to anti-polygamy views, but not to those endorsing polygamy. “Even media that label themselves Islamic seem to be allergic or afraid to devote even a little space to pro-polygamy perspectives,” she observes (*ibid.*: 2).

Another article in the first issue is a translation of a piece by an American attorney and journalist who lives in Utah (*Tabloid Poligami* 2006: 10). It is accompanied by a picture of a handsome young man who is flanked by three smiling, attractive young women, all of them apparently American. The woman, Elizabeth Joseph, lives in a marriage with eight other wives and calls polygamy “the ultimate feminist lifestyle” because of the freedom it gives her to pursue her career and to work late hours without having to worry about her children, husband, or home being neglected. The inclusion of this article, even though it is not written by a Muslim and does not present a view of wifehood or motherhood that fits well with conservative Islamic views, seems to be aimed at answering the charges of gender activists that polygamy is degrading to women and unsympathetic to their needs.

An opinion column by the third wife of an *ustad*, or Islamic teacher, herself a teacher and writer in Indonesia, suggests that polygamy is the most practical solution to the “old maid” (*perawan tua*) problem that results from an imbalance of men and women and an increasing number of women who devote themselves to their education and careers at the expense of family, only to find themselves too old to be “marketable” as wives in monogamous marriages (*Tabloid Poligami* 2006: 3). An article that clearly seems to support that view appears on another page of the same issue. Written by an unmarried and unhappy female physician, it is titled “Take My Diploma and My Degrees, Just Give Me a Husband!” (*Tabloid Poligami* 2006: 8). The author insists that she would gladly become a second wife rather than remain single and childless.

One of the lengthiest articles in that issue features a conversation with a woman who has a doctorate in aeronautical engineering as well as three co-wives (*Tabloid Poligami* 2006: 4). The woman, Dr. Gina Puspita, denounces those who feel that polygamy is worse than prostitution, adultery, or living in sin. She scorns what she calls “women’s lib,” which she understands as “basically urging women to become like men” (*dasarnya perempuan diajak menjadi seperti laki-laki*). Such women are prone to neglecting their husbands; “Day and night they go off to meetings, they run here and there without their husbands’ permission” (*ibid.*). Women like these are strongly against polygamy, she opines. They always hide their anti-polygamy views behind excuses like “love being defiled, violence against women, children being neglected, unfairness, and so on.” “They don’t think about the fact that a husband needs to be served” (*suami perlu layanannya*) (*ibid.*). Her advice? A woman whose husband wants to take another wife should not try to stop him. A wife who tries to prevent her husband from doing so, even though her husband can afford it, is a selfish wife (*istri egois*), because she gives in too much to her passions. If she tries to stop her husband from fulfilling his

wishes, he will become uninterested in her. He will feel that she does not understand him and does not want to help him solve his problems. But if she understands and even encourages his longings, then his love for her will grow (ibid.).

Ultimately, though, as Dr. Gina sees it, everything comes down to a woman's faith and to her willingness to reconcile herself to polygamy in order to preserve the marriage. "God approves of polygamy, and our husbands really like it, but our desire truly hates it (*Allah membenarkan poligami, dan suami kita suka sekali, tapi nafsu kita sangat membencinya*) . . . We want to tame our desire in order to accept something that feels truly bitter. How do we do that?" Dr. Gina urges women to focus on God and the afterlife rather than on worldly things and desires, "because the afterlife is far better and more beautiful than this world, and God is far greater than our husbands" (ibid.).

Interestingly, this article turns one of the main charges of anti-polygamy activists on its head: that polygamy is really just about men wanting to satisfy their desires. Instead of faulting *men* for their desires, this article makes *women's* desires the source of the problem. Not their sexual desires, but their selfish desire to be the only woman in their husband's life. Dr. Gina chastises women for this "egotistical" position and urges them to resign themselves to their husbands' need for more than one wife. It is implied here that given men's strong sexual needs, the refusal to allow them to have multiple wives might drive them into extramarital sexual liaisons, which are condemned by Islam. By accepting their husbands as they are and by focusing on God and their rewards in the afterlife, women can overcome their bitterness at being made a co-wife and continue to receive their husbands' affection and support.¹⁵

By featuring articles by both men and women from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives—all of whom readily endorse the practice of polygamy—the tabloid attempts to put polygamy into the mainstream, which seems to have been the larger goal of Puspo Wardoyo and the Indonesian Polygamy Society. As Wichelen points out, however, Puspo Wardoyo's proselytizing was aimed primarily at middle- and upper-class Indonesians, since he made clear his conviction that a man should only marry polygamously if he could financially afford to support more than one wife (Wichelen 2007: 102).¹⁶ Here, polygamy is presented as a lifestyle choice—for men who can afford it—that is not only acceptable in contemporary society, but which is, in fact, commendable, especially when it is undertaken in accordance with Islamic principles. In suggesting that polygamy can be a solution to social problems like prostitution, adultery, divorce, and unmarried women with no men to support them, polygamy is offered here as a moral alternative to immoral behavior and a remedy for a variety of maladies afflicting modern society. It is even recommended as a form of national service as well as a type of *jihad*, or Islamic struggle, as exemplified by an article in the second issue of *Tabloid Poligami*, "This Nation Needs Many Volunteers for Polygamy" (*Tabloid Poligami* n.d.: 15).¹⁷ The article explains "Conflicts, natural disasters, poverty and unmarried older women are serious problems that have befallen women in this nation. Because of that, this nation needs many volunteers for polygamy in order to overcome these national problems of women" (ibid.). An

email address is provided for those who “wish to engage in jihad” (i.e., to struggle for the cause of Islam) to sign up as “polygamy volunteers” (*relawan poligami*) (ibid.). This conflation of national service with Islamic struggle points to a larger theme in the debates over polygamy: the idea that by following a truly Islamic path, Indonesia can become a righteous nation of moral and prosperous people. *Tabloid Poligami* makes obvious its position that the state should support Islamic values and practices rather than hinder them. Of course, this standpoint directly conflicts with the approach taken by *Jurnal Perempuan*, which suggests that polygamy, in being undemocratic and discriminatory towards women, works against the best interests of the nation and violates basic standards of morality, and should therefore be banned by the state.

What *Tabloid Poligami* proffers is a popularized form of Islamic morality, wrapped up in an unambiguous and easily digestible (if undoubtedly difficult to swallow for some readers) package of stories, letters, and advice to the reader. There are no shades of gray in the tabloid’s treatment of polygamy, only black and white. While referring frequently to Islamic values, there is little effort to engage in serious theological or sociological analysis in order to support the stance that polygamy is invariably supported by Islam and that it is always beneficial to society. It is, after all, a publication that styles itself as an “edutainment tabloid” (*tabloid edutainment*), though it would be a mistake to neglect the political views that lie beneath the tabloid-style packaging. In spite of its efforts to appeal to mainstream Indonesian society, however, it seems that the tabloid never really found its audience, since it was apparently discontinued after only two issues. Still, the fact that such a tabloid could be published at all attests to the far-reaching changes that have taken place in Indonesia since the years of the Suharto regime, when polygamy was a taboo subject that few people would have dared to celebrate openly, above all in a mass-market publication.

***Ayat Ayat Cinta* (The Verses of Love)**

Finally, I wish to look at a third publication—one that has had a far greater impact than either *Tabloid Poligami* or *Jurnal Perempuan*—that deals at least in part with the topic of polygamy, the novel *Ayat Ayat Cinta* (The Verses of Love) (El Shirazy 2004). Initially published in 2004, the novel was written by a young Indonesian author, Habiburrahman El Shirazy, who was raised in a *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) environment in Central Java and who holds degrees in Islamic studies from the prestigious Al Azhar University as well as the Institute for Islamic Studies in Cairo. According to an article in *The Jakarta Post*, he stated in an interview that his novels are intended to propagate Islam, and that “one of the ways to serve God is to use art as a medium to promote virtue” (Hermawan 2008).

This strong sense of purpose comes through very clearly in the novel *Ayat Ayat Cinta*. The story is written from the perspective of a young Indonesian man, Fahri, who has just completed his Masters degree at Al Azhar University and is about to pursue a doctoral degree there. In the novel, which is set in Cairo, Fahri is portrayed as deeply devoted to his studies and to Islam. He has cultivated an

intense, almost monastic discipline, allowing himself few pleasures or indulgences as he pursues religious knowledge and shares his knowledge of both Islam and Egyptian society with the local community of Indonesian students. He spends his spare time translating Arabic texts in order to earn enough money to support himself. Although he is 28 years old, he does not believe in dating women before marriage and initially shows no interest in them from a romantic or sexual perspective, although he does have female friends. He will not touch a woman who is not a close relative, even to shake hands. He is also a strongly ethical person who respects people of other faiths and who dislikes religious or nationalist fanaticism, especially when it leads people to behave in ways that he sees as contrary to Islamic principles.

An early scene in the novel depicts him on the metro on a fiercely hot day, trying to calm down two Egyptian men who curse angrily at three Americans who board the train as well as at a fully veiled woman who offers her seat to one of the older Americans who is overcome by the heat. Shocked by the men's actions, which stem from their intense hatred of America, Fahri chastises them for their behavior, explaining calmly that as Muslims they should emulate the Prophet and respect the teachings of Islam by treating guests of their country well and honoring them rather than cursing them. After a lengthy and sometimes heated exchange the two Egyptians are eventually persuaded by his religious reasoning, even offering one of the Americans a seat and wishing God's blessing upon Fahri.

This turns out to be a key scene in the novel, not only because it establishes Fahri as a moderate, learned, and genuinely ethical Muslim who puts Islamic principles into practice, but also because it enables him to meet Aisha, the wealthy (it later turns out) German woman of Turkish descent who is covered in modest Islamic dress, including a *niqab* (face veil), on the metro. Impressed by Fahri's behavior and his knowledge of Islam, Aisha introduces herself to him and then calls him at home to ask him to meet with one of the Americans from the metro, a female reporter, to talk about Islam and its moral teachings. He agrees to a meeting with both women, which happens on another day. The American reporter wants to know about Islamic views of women. With Aisha listening, he explains to her in detail that women are honored and respected within Islam. He also agrees to answer many of the reporter's other questions in writing, which he later does. This exchange allows the reader to see Fahri as a man who holds women in high regard and who would never support any kind of abuse of a woman, which is a central point later on when the book arrives at the issue of polygamy. It also shows his open-mindedness and willingness to exchange ideas with an American, unlike the hostile and narrow-minded Egyptian men on the train. Most importantly for the plot itself, it contributes to Aisha's growing interest in Fahri, which soon leads her to ask her uncle to propose a marriage between her and Fahri, using a well-known Cairene sheikh as a go-between.

This marriage actually takes place more than halfway through the novel, though only a week after the sheikh proposes it. Upon marrying Aisha, Fahri immediately falls deeply in love with her, saying that she is the first woman who has touched his heart. As a devout (and remarkably disciplined) Muslim, it is apparently only

the sanctity of marriage that allows him to feel romantic interest and physical attraction to a woman. But there are complications. Fahri, it seems, has had women falling in love with him left and right without him being aware of it. The night before his marriage to Aisha, he finds out that another Indonesian student in Cairo, Nurul, has long been in love with him. Fahri feels some regret over this, since it turns out that he had some interest in her and probably would have chosen her over Aisha if he had been asked to choose between them, since he knew Nurul much better than Aisha. However, when Nurul later sends him a letter proposing that he take her as a second wife, he gently turns her down, stating that polygamy is not an option for him. He says, “I promised myself that I would never make my wife into a co-wife” (*aku telah berjanji pada diriku sendiri bahwa aku tidak akan memadu istriku*) (El Shirazy 2004: 289). It is not that Fahri is categorically opposed to the practice of polygamy; earlier in the book, when he is reflecting on the American reporter’s questions about Islam’s treatment of women, he clearly seems to defend polygamy, observing how many Westerners misguidedly see it as humiliating to women and worse than sleeping with hundreds of men; how they see prostitution as more honorable for a woman than living a proper family life in a polygamous marriage. Apparently he prefers monogamy for himself, though. When he marries Aisha he vows to devote himself to no other woman but her.

But this vow is put to the test towards the end of the book, when Fahri discovers that yet another woman has been secretly harboring a deep love for him for years. That woman is Maria, his Coptic Christian neighbor, a cheerful and intelligent woman whom he likes and knows well after years of living in the same apartment building. After she finds out that Fahri has married Aisha, Maria goes into a depression and soon falls into a coma because she is heartbroken and has lost the will to live. To make matters even worse, Maria is the only person who can save Fahri from being executed after he is falsely accused of rape by another Egyptian neighbor who was in love with him as well, Noura. Maria was the only witness to what actually happened during the night in question, because she spent the whole night with Noura after Noura was thrown out of her home by her father. In a last-ditch effort to save Fahri from the gallows, he is brought to the hospital from his jail cell, where he has endured abuse and despair, to try to arouse Maria from her coma. The doctor asks him to touch Maria and to tell her he loves her, but he says he cannot do so because she is not his wife. Even to save his own life as well as Maria’s he will not violate his commitment to Islam and to his wife. Maria’s mother, Mme. Boutros, begs him to help, and suggests that he marry Maria if that is the only way he can save her. But he explains to her that he had vowed to Aisha when they married that she would be his one and only wife forever. As a last resort, Mme. Boutros then begs Aisha, who has just arrived at the hospital, to take pity on her daughter. Aisha, who is now pregnant, is motivated not just by her pity for Maria but also by the fact that Maria’s testimony in court is the only thing that can save her husband and the father of her unborn child from hanging, the punishment for rape in Egypt. She pleads with Fahri to marry Maria, but Fahri resists, declaring that he simply cannot marry a woman who is not a Muslim. Still, Aisha persists, arguing that this can be their effort to convert Maria to Islam, and pointing

out that based on her reading of Maria's diary, she is convinced that Maria has already become a Muslim in spirit. She takes off her wedding ring and hands it to Fahri to offer as dowry, so that he can be wed to Maria on the spot. He very reluctantly agrees.

After the ceremony is hastily performed at Maria's bedside, with Maria still in a coma, Fahri asks everyone else to leave the room. He speaks soft words of love to Maria, kissing her tenderly. He sobs when he sees her lying there, still unresponsive. His display of emotion is apparently not just an act. As was the case when he married Aisha, the religious sanctification of his marriage to Maria has suddenly, almost magically, enabled him to feel true love for her. After he begs her to awaken from her coma, she slowly regains consciousness, and is amazed to find out that they are now married, which was her deepest wish. Fahri again professes his love for her.

When Fahri goes back to Aisha, she weeps, admitting to him that she is jealous of his marriage to Maria. Fahri apologizes to her for taking a second wife, but she assures him that she still loves him and that he did not do anything wrong. Shortly thereafter, Maria, still weak, testifies in court that Noura was lying about Fahri raping her. Under pressure, Noura confesses the truth, and Fahri is released from jail. It seems that there will be a happy ending to the book. But the novel turns dark again when Maria collapses from the strain of all that she has been through and lies unconscious in the hospital. Aisha attends devotedly to her co-wife, as if she were her own sister. In her delirium Maria recites Quranic verses, even though she is a Christian. She speaks the name of Allah over and over. Then she briefly regains consciousness, describing to Maria and Fahri how she had been standing at the gates of heaven, an extraordinarily beautiful and fragrant place, but that she had been prevented from entering because she had not yet carried out the basic requirements of Islam. She is upset. She longs to go to heaven and begs Fahri to help her to ritually cleanse herself (*wudhu*) so that she can prepare to enter heaven. She promises that she will wait for him there. He and Aisha help her to cleanse herself in the manner that is done routinely before prayer. Lying on her bed, she recites the *Shahadah*, or declaration of faith, that announces her acceptance of Islam. With a radiant smile on her face, she dies peacefully, now a converted Muslim. She may have sacrificed her life for love, but she evidently gained eternal heaven in the process. Aisha prays for her, and she and Fahri cry together at the loss of their co-wife. This is where the novel ends.

Ayat Ayat Cinta has been a tremendously popular book (as of April 2008 it was in its 36th printing since its initial publication in 2004), and the film that was based on the novel has also created a sensation in Indonesia (see Heryanto, Chapter 4 this volume). As much controversy as the novel and the film have generated over the theme of polygamy, though, the novel is not really about polygamy, nor even necessarily an endorsement of polygamous marriage. Rather, it is about faith and morality and duty—specifically, how one should practice Islamic morality and ethics in a complex world. Fahri, a model of Muslim character, is portrayed as someone who would probably prefer to keep himself confined to a simple life of Islamic scholarship and an uncomplicated, happy marriage to

one woman. However, he is thrust into a world where difficult decisions must be made and where his faith is constantly being tested—a world where there is hatred and suspicion based on the identity politics of religion and nationality; false accusations and harsh treatment in jail; the adoration of multiple women whose love cannot possibly be returned; and a Christian neighbor and friend who will surely die if he will not marry her even though he is already happily married. Fahri must navigate the uncertain waters of these circumstances and yet establish himself as someone who is unwavering in his faith. To be a good Muslim means always keeping in mind the doctrine and spirit of Islam, whatever the situation, and to live according to these principles even if it means dying as a result. This is the primary message of the novel. Its popularity comes from its ability to convey this message within an engaging (if melodramatic) story that includes romance, suspense, emotional crises and catharsis, wealth, and the exoticism of a foreign locale.

The book's message about polygamy, however, is less clear. While Fahri does end up married to two women at the same time, he is practically forced into it by the circumstances and by the pleading of two women, his first wife and Maria's mother. This is not a polygamous marriage undertaken because of his own sexual desire (*nafsu*)—far from it. He makes it clear that this is the last thing that he would have wanted for his marriage, since he had no desire at all to take a second wife. While recognizing that Islam allows him to engage in polygamy, Fahri does not see it as the best choice, and he accepts it only with great reluctance. His marriage to Maria also seems to meet the most stringent conditions imposed by Islam in order to undertake polygamy; it is truly an emergency situation that is meant to help others, particularly the two women who become his wives. Furthermore, by marrying Maria, Fahri ends up helping her to convert to Islam just before her death, which in itself makes the marriage a holy cause. (Maria is actually the second woman in the book who converts to Islam because of him; the first was the American reporter, who was so impressed by what she learned from Fahri about Islam and its views on women that she decided to become a Muslim herself.)

Commenting on the subject of polygamy in the *Jakarta Post* interview cited earlier (Hermawan 2008), the novel's author, Habiburrahman El Shirazy, stated that "Islam demands justice, including in marriage," and that he believed monogamy to be "more just than polygamy." He further added "Polygamy is commanded by God as a solution, not a purpose. In the words of the majority of the ulema [Islamic scholars], polygamy is *arukhsah* (relief or dispensation), which should be carried out in a condition of emergency. We have to see this matter correctly. Sharia never intended to abuse people" (ibid.).

Where both he and the book stand on polygamy, then, is somewhere between the anti-polygamy rhetoric that we saw in *Jurnal Perempuan*, in which polygamy is never a tolerable option in a modern society, and the heavily pro-polygamy ideology of *Tabloid Poligami*, which encourages men to marry multiple wives as a religious, social, and national duty and urges women to accept polygamy no matter how bitter a pill it is to swallow. In the end, the novel's message about polygamy may be as much about the impossibility of living happily ever after in

a polygamous marriage as it is about polygamy's acceptability from a religious or moral standpoint. After all, if the author had wanted to point to polygamy as an ideal, he could have had Maria survive in the end rather than dying shortly after her marriage to Fahri, with Maria and Aisha living peacefully as co-wives. (In fact, in the film, which focuses far more on the entanglements of a polygamous marriage, and in which Maria initially recovers her health after her marriage to Fahri, this actually happens for some time; there are scenes of the three of them at home and elsewhere, with some jealousy and confusion as well as, in the end, mutual love and appreciation, followed by Maria's untimely death.) Perhaps the ability to read different views on polygamy into the novel is one factor that has made it so popular in Indonesia, although it appears that the pro-polygamy side has been inclined to stake a claim to it. Reportedly the book and film have generally been well received among followers of PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, or Islamic Justice Party), the conservative Islamic party that has become increasingly influential in recent years.

Regardless of his views on polygamy, El Shirazy has obviously tapped into an Islamic sensibility that resonates with many Indonesians in the contemporary social climate. The book provides a blueprint for a certain type of Muslim person, represented by the character of Fahri. If Fahri seems almost too good to be true, he nonetheless serves as a model for how to be a Muslim who is devout but not extremist, as well as modern, educated, and cosmopolitan without being overly Westernized or losing touch with one's modest Indonesian roots. Although an apparently dedicated son, Fahri operates not on the local scale of Javanese kinship relations but on the scale of someone who is part of the global *ummah*, or Muslim community. Moreover, we see in him a concern not only with practicing his religion properly, but also with punctuality, efficiency, self-discipline, and productivity; with ordering his life according to detailed plans and timetables; with personal frugality yet a spirit of generosity when it comes to other people; and with sublimating his own desires for the sake of Islam and the welfare of others.

In short, the book appears to be the author's own attempt to identify an ideal type of modern Muslim, someone who can serve as a paragon for a generation that is still in search of the proper ways to live in the world. Here, Islamic morality and ethics are to be sought out through a process of intellectual inquiry and personal exploration rather than through blind adherence to the pronouncements of others; the novel advocates a constant reflection on and adherence to Quranic principles in everyday life. Where polygamy fits into this picture is as a problematic but sometimes acceptable practice that should only be carried out after introspection into one's own motives and careful consideration of the circumstances as well as its likely impact upon all of those involved. The difficult conditions under which polygamy takes place in the novel, and Fahri's general resistance to it but ultimate willingness to engage in it, indicates that polygamy is not to be seen in the black-and-white terms with which it is praised in *Tabloid Poligami* or rejected in *Jurnal Perempuan*. Rather, it serves as one more sign of the complexity of discerning and applying Islamic principles in the real world.

As Ariel Heryanto (Chapter 4, this volume) suggests in analyzing the remarkable popularity of the film *Ayat Ayat Cinta*, this type of portrayal of Islam appeals to an increasing population of devout, middle-class and elite Indonesian Muslims who are seeking alternatives to the dry, didactic images of Islam that have been offered up in the popular media along with the heavily Westernized, mostly un-Islamic perspectives that have been the most common fare in media aimed at the middle classes. The novel itself is a very successful example of the growing genre of popular Indonesian Islamic literature. Amrih Widodo points out that the explosive growth of this literature over the past decade has been a response to the liberalization of the media in the post-Suharto period, which led to a flood of titillating and sensationalist tabloids and books as well as an Islamic backlash by people who felt that those media were fostering a climate of immorality and Westernization in Indonesian society (Widodo 2008). He proposes that the success of *Ayat Ayat Cinta* and other like-minded books “also means that Islamic literature is moving from the margins to the mainstream.” This literature may “serve as a defense against Western cultural hegemony and secularization,” he writes, but it may also “serve to produce consumable Islamic texts and publications that are desired commodities and symbols of education, affluence and lifestyle” (ibid.).

Other scholars have also remarked on the increasing commodification of Islamic symbols and practices in the current period and on the role of the popular media in facilitating this process. In an article on the rise of Islamic fashions in Indonesia, for instance, Carla Jones (2007) observes that since the mid-1990s, Indonesian women’s magazines have both responded to and fostered middle-class Muslim women’s demands for fashionable forms of Islamic dress, as these women have looked for guidance in their efforts to be both pious and chic. Wearing Islamic dress has become, for some women at least, a middle-class lifestyle choice rather than the critical, anti-consumerist, and marginal practice that it was in the 1980s and early 1990s. Writing about the veil as well as polygamy, Wichelen (2007) also makes the case that popular Islamic media representations in the post-Suharto era have the effect of taking these formerly marginalized symbols of Islam and normalizing them through a consumerist discourse. This normalization of Islamic symbols that were stigmatized under the Suharto regime, she argues, nevertheless reaffirms and creates continuity with the power structures of the now-defunct regime “through a perpetuation of its modernist and consumerist ideology” (Wichelen 2007: 105). We see, then, that in the current period, religion, politics, morality, and consumer culture are often complexly intertwined, revealing the shifting landscape of contemporary Indonesian society. While there is a growing market for Islamic forms of popular culture, which may include images of polygamy, polygamy’s place in that culture is still tenuous. As we saw in the case of Muslim televangelist Aa Gym, whose “brand image” was badly tarnished by his association with polygamy (Hoesterey 2008), those who engage in polygamy may also endanger their popularity among Indonesian consumers.

Conclusion

The preoccupation with polygamy in the print media, as well as in film and electronic media, has implications in the marketplaces of morality and politics as well as in the marketplace of commodities. The growing attention of the mass media to Islamic lifestyles and the liberalization of media that followed the fall of the Suharto regime have allowed for the “mainstreaming” and commodification of symbols of a reinvigorated Islam, including polygamy, which had been marginalized or discredited (though still practiced) under the previous regime. Yet this movement from the margins into the realm of popular culture also highlights the divisions among Indonesia’s Muslims, as sharp disagreements over issues like polygamy increasingly serve to differentiate Muslim moral communities. By looking at three strikingly different types of discourse on polygamy in contemporary Indonesian print media, we have seen how the authors of these media attempt to persuade their readers to see polygamy as an emblem of both a particular moral stance as well as (in the case of *Tabloid Poligami*, at least) a lifestyle option for the middle-class Indonesian in the post-authoritarian period.

While a significant number of Indonesians remain firmly opposed to polygamy, others’ assertion of the right to engage in the practice itself, as well as in public discourse on this practice, signals their insistence that the repression of Muslim rights that is often associated with the Suharto regime will no longer be tolerated in the post-Suharto era. For many Indonesians, democratization means not Westernization but, on the contrary, the right of Muslims to publicly claim the moral high ground and to engage in practices that they see as Islamic without fear of suppression or reprisal by an authoritarian regime.

The long history of debates over polygamy in Indonesia, which have raged since well before the nation achieved independence, points to the salience of marriage as a focus of Islamic identity politics in the larger Indonesian context. Today, the polygamous marriage stands primarily as a symbol of a conservative (but still modern) Muslim identity and the establishment of a particular understanding of the Muslim family, which asserts masculine privilege and the need for women’s protection by men.¹⁸ Those who defend polygamy most vigorously are conveying the message that the rules governing both morality and the family in modern society—with the two being closely linked—must be based on Islamic principles rather than secular ones, and that the state has no right to interfere with God-given law.

However, it is also quite evident that Indonesia’s Muslims do not speak with a unified voice, and that what constitutes “Islamic principles” or “Islamic morality” is open to passionate debate. For those Indonesian Muslims who see polygamy as an unwanted vestige of the past that merely shores up men’s dominance while disempowering women, its continued legality undermines Indonesia’s efforts toward achieving true democracy while reinforcing interpretations of Islam that reflect neither the true spirit of the religion nor the need to adapt its interpretation and practice to changing social circumstances.

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Notes

- 1 For more on the role of the print media in fostering discussion over emerging forms of Islamic belief and practice, see Watson (2005).
- 2 For details on Islamic organizations' defense of polygamy, see Blackburn (2004), Doorn-Harder (2006), and Robinson (2009).
- 3 Historically polygamy also seems to have been practiced by relatively few people in the Indonesian archipelago. A 1930 census that was taken in the Netherlands East Indies showed only 2.6 per cent of husbands in polygamous marriages, with some predominantly non-Muslim islands in the eastern part of the archipelago (Sumba, Flores, and Timor) showing significantly higher rates of polygamy, interestingly, than most of the more heavily Muslim regions (Jones 1994: 269).
- 4 The *Hadiths* are accounts of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad that were passed down first as oral traditions, and then eventually written down. While they play an important role in religious interpretation, the legitimacy of some *Hadiths* are disputed.
- 5 Blackburn cites one woman from West Sumatra who wrote in a weekly newspaper for women in 1913, " 'Polygamy is the poison of the world for us women. There is nothing so painful, so troublesome' " ("Bermadroe" 1913). For more on Indonesian women's protests against polygamy before and after independence, see also Wieringa (2002).
- 6 For details on the 1974 Marriage Law, see Nurmila (2008: 31–2), Blackburn (2004, esp. pp. 131–2) and Robinson (2009: 84–5).
- 7 On the 1983 marriage regulations for civil servants, see Suryakusuma (1996, esp. pp. 102–8), and Robinson (2009: 85–6).
- 8 For an elaboration of this point and discussion of the mixed effects of democratization on Indonesian women more generally, see Brenner (2006).
- 9 For more on the Polygamy Awards ceremony and the responses to it, see Nurmila (2005: 19–20) and Robinson (2009: 177–8). On Puspo Wardoyo's life and personal philosophy regarding polygamy, see the books that he apparently commissioned: Suryono (2003) and Joko (2003).
- 10 Hoesterey mentions one text message that was widely circulated among Indonesians in response to the news of his polygamous marriage, which commented that "apparently the man who preached about heart management only really cared about lust management" (Hoesterey 2008: 104).
- 11 For a discussion of the social context, messages, and reception of these films, especially *Ayat Ayat Cinta*, see Ariel Heryanto, Chapter 4 in this volume.
- 12 *Jurnal Perempuan* No. 31.
- 13 On the recent actions of women's rights organizations' criticizing national policies on marriage, including polygamy, and urging their revision, see Robinson (2006 and 2009).
- 14 They might have expected some male readers as well, judging by the Cialis ad prominently displayed at the top of the cover page, with the tagline, "For stamina and endurance of a man's body." Or perhaps, as some of my Indonesian interlocutors suggested wryly, those ads were in fact aimed at the wives of polygamous men.

- 15 The idea that a women must accept her husband's desire for polygamy as a religious duty, regardless of her personal feelings about it, seems to be commonly voiced among conservative Muslims who support the right of men to have more than one wife. Nina Nurmila cites the case of one woman she interviewed who was unhappy in her polygamous marriage but felt that she could not ask for a divorce. The woman explained, "My husband told me that for women, polygamy is like a test of their belief in their religion. I feel that this test is hard for me but I believe that I can endure it because I do not want to be judged as an unbeliever for not being able to accept polygamy which is part of *syariah*" (Nurmila 2008: 35).
- 16 I would qualify Wichelen's point somewhat by adding that while according to Puspo's beliefs only middle-class and elite *men* should undertake polygamy, he seemed to feel that almost any woman, regardless of social class, would be a good candidate for a polygamous marriage. In fact, Puspo argued that men of means had the obligation to help support women who might otherwise experience financial hardship, and that polygamy was an ideal way for financially comfortable men like himself to spread their wealth around to more than one woman (see Suryono 2003).
- 17 Cf. Wichelen (2007: 103) on Puspo Wardoyo's efforts to identify polygamy as both an Islamic and national duty for women as well as men.
- 18 Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2006) uses the term "neo-traditionalist" to refer to a conservative but modern style of Islamic discourse (and its proponents) that attempts to adapt the doctrines of classical *fikh* (Islamic jurisprudence) texts to contemporary society. In their approaches to gender issues, neo-traditionalists "share the same notion of gender rights as classical fikh," but they use a discourse that combines these classical ideas with modern, Western-derived concepts selectively drawn from psychological and sociological studies. While borrowing from Western frameworks, their stance is also "oppositional, because their concern is to resist the advance of what they see as alien 'Western' values and lifestyles" (ibid., pp. 87–88). The fervently pro-polygamy stance in Indonesia can be seen as "neo-traditionalist" in this sense; it defends certain classical Islamic understandings of gender and the family while presenting them in modern terms and with justifications that are only partly based on Islamic texts.

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14 Pop, politics and piety

Nasyid boy band music in Muslim Southeast Asia

Bart Barendregt

From 2000 to 2005, *nasyid* (pronounced na-sheed), a genre of Islamic popular music that has been around for decades, occupied a prominent position in the music and recording industries of Muslim Southeast Asia, especially in Indonesia and Malaysia. *Nasyid* continues to be tremendously popular among Islamic youth in both countries, providing a young, urban, often well-educated audience with the soundtrack for a modern Muslim Malay lifestyle. Although allegedly its roots are to be found in Middle Eastern student activism, the verbal art of the *a cappella* song genre in Muslim Southeast Asia also attracts followers in universities and colleges. Scholars, critics, and activists have suggested that “campus Islam” has been instrumental in the current celebrity status of *nasyid*.¹ However, as will be illustrated in this chapter, Middle Eastern styled activism is not the sole role model for the development of *nasyid*; at times, Western forms of popular culture have been incorporated into the genre. In fact, present-day *nasyid* music reveals the careful balance of “East and West” that is currently so much debated throughout the Islamic world.

The aim of this chapter is twofold. I commence by scrutinizing the double genealogy of the genre, taking a closer look at some of the discussions that have emerged among *nasyid* aficionados. These discussions may in fact be related to the apparent tension between East and West, activism and commercialism, religion and popular culture—tensions so typical of the genre. Then, by comparing the rise of *nasyid* in both Malaysia and Indonesia and by setting it against the background of wider societal developments, the popularity of *nasyid* is explained by associating it with prominent political processes in Muslim Southeast Asia, namely Islamic opposition in Malaysia, particularly inspired by the 1980s *dakwah* movement and the student movement in Indonesia in the late 1990s. Using some of the recent discussions among followers of the genre, this chapter concludes by illustrating how the triangulation of pop, politics, and piety has been variously articulated by musicians and their audiences in producing an ever-shifting *nasyid* sound as a response to new social movements.

From the Middle East to Malaysia’s Arqam sound

Nasyid, *nasheed* or *nashīd* refers to the raising of one’s voice and is the generic term for sung poetry originally found in such countries as Egypt or the Yemen.² In

modern times *nasyid* has particularly been linked to Egyptian *Da'wa*, movements which propagate Islam as a social ideology contesting colonization and the perceived ongoing political and economic repression by the West. Haenni and Tammam (2003) describe how the old custom of chanting, inherited from the Sufis, was taken up by Egyptian Islamist groups on university campuses in the 1970s. Inspired by the writings of the many Islamist militants then in prison, who made frequent references to *jihad*, martyrdom and heroism, they used *nasyid* music to condemn the repressive practices of their government. In the late 1980s, influenced at that time by the religious nationalist music of the first Palestinian Intifada, present-day *nasyid* became more creative musically; ensembles now began incorporating tambourines, drums, and even synthesizers into their music.³ Initially this Middle Eastern *nasyid* was highly politicized, a statement similar to the wearing of the headscarf by young students on the campuses.

In Indonesia and even more so in Malaysia, local forms of *nasyid* have similarly been an art form of long standing, especially popular among those teaching the recitation of the Koran. Matusky and Tan (2004: 264) argue that in Malaysia *nasyid* music was already the music of the masses as early as the 1950s, when it was used in interludes at state and national Qur'an reading competitions. However, in modern times Malay *nasyid* was transformed into a successful commercial form in the late 1980s. This was presumably attributable to the popularity of militant Iranian cassettes featuring martial music that were offered for sale outside mosques in Malaysia, and also by similar genres imported by Malaysian students who brought cassettes with engaged yet spiritual protest music back home after their studies in such countries as Yemen, Jordan or Kuwait. Southeast Asian activists eagerly identify with traditions from the Islamic heartland and hence they began using the verbal art *nasyid* in a fashion similar to their Middle Eastern peers: to comment on wrongs in society and corrupt politics in the Muslim world, the glory of Allah and the teachings of His Prophet.

Nagata (2004) describes how under the New Economic Policy of Prime Minister Mahathir young Malaysian intellectuals were exposed to changes in the worldwide Islamic community (*ummah*). The Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the fall of communism not only in the Soviet Union but also in Yemen, coupled with the growing influence of the oil-fueled economies of the Middle East, all contributed to an intense reconfiguration of the Islamic world. In Malaysia this new Islamic "cosmopolitanism" led young Muslims to question their own government ideology, while mainstream political parties tried to co-opt this renewed religious interest each in their own way. Besides political interests, several civil groups were also insisting on religious renewal, the most renowned of these missionary (*dakwah*) movements being Darul (later, Al) Arqam. Although initially not political in character, Arqam clearly presented an alternative to the nation-state in Malaysia, prioritizing *ummah* above national citizenship and calling for a re-universalization of Islamic ties that were no longer to be subject to bureaucratization, ethnicization or nationalization by the state. Arqam members were organized into residential communes that promoted economic independence from the state by branding their own "Islamic" products and setting up a network of

entrepreneurial communes throughout Southeast Asia. At the height of Arqam's popularity, and before the movement was eventually banned in 1994, these communes were to be found in Malaysia as well as in such neighboring countries as Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. The majority of Arqam's following were students and young intellectuals who offered their services to the movement. Arqam could therefore pride itself on having its own schools, film and computer studios not to mention running a fairly self-sufficient shadow economy (Nagata 2004: 107). Important to this chapter are meetings and tours, both national and international in character, organized by Arqam, in which the Sheikh-ul Arqam, the religious leader of the movement, was accompanied by Arqam's musical group, *Nada Murni* (Noble Rhythm). Nagata describes how *Nada Murni* and other such related *nasyid* groups as the *Zikr* (1991–1994) and *Rabbani* (which have recorded over 17 albums since 1997) acquired an almost pop-star status, making video clips and setting off on international tours. The popularity of this new style of *nasyid* cannot be attributed simply to its explicit use of religious dogma or militant themes; unquestionably, it also touches upon social issues including drugs, finishing school and other matters which occupy the minds of adults but recognizable to younger audiences. Importantly, Southeast Asian *nasyid* was able to achieve the heights of success by employing the indigenous Malay language, thereby making the contents of the songs more intimate and intelligible to a teenage audience than other religious genres such as *dzikr* or *salawat* with their sometimes explicit use of the Arabic language. Not only did the very popular Arqam sound (now often referred to as *Nasyid Melayu*, or “Malay *nasyid*”) mark the shift to a new style of a more pop-oriented *nasyid*, it also presided at the cradle of what is probably the most successful Southeast Asian ensemble up to now: Raihan (meaning “Fragrance of Heaven”).

Muslim celebrities: Raihan

Although its roots lie in Arqam activism, not all of Raihan's members were previously part of the *Nada Murni* troop. Despite the long tradition of Islamic pop music in the Southeast Asian region,⁴ Raihan was the first Muslim pop group in the late 1990s to gain truly transnational celebrity status that stretched far beyond Southeast Asia. Their first album in 1996, *Puji-Pujian* (Praises), was the best selling album ever in Malaysia.⁵ Shortly thereafter, the group signed a major record deal with Warner. They went on international tours and cooperated with such renowned artists as Yusuf Islam and more recently the UK-based hip-hop group Mecca2Medina. The song, “Iman Mutiara,” taken from the *Puji-Pujian* album, is representative of Raihan's devout lyrics. But, on account of its accompanying video clip, which shows the group in modern attire, it signals a new, very fashionable approach to *nasyid* music (Figure 14.1).

Although some seem to take Raihan's popularity as proof of the deepening Islamization of Malay society (Kahn 2003), many have praised the group for the casual attitude its members have adopted towards Islam. On their 2002 album *Gema Alam* (Echoes of the Universe) or their 2005 album *Ameen* (Amen), one

*Iman adalah mutiara
Di dalam hati manusia
Yang menyakini Allah
Maha Esa Maha Kuasa*

Faith is like a Pearl
Something that is alive in the heart
of those who believe in Allah
the True and Mighty One

*Tanpamu iman bagaimanalah
Tanpamu iman bagaimanalah
Merasa diri hamba padaNya
Menjadi hamba Allah yang bertaqwa*

Without your faith
What would you be?
So feel humble towards Allah
And be a devoted servant

*Iman tak dapat diwarisi
Dari seorang ayah yang bertaqwa
Ia tak dapat dijual beli
Ia tiada di tepian pantai*

Faith is not something you inherit
From a devout father,
It's not something to be bought
It can be found along the shores of the ocean

*Walau apapun caranya jua
Engkau mendaki gunung yang tinggi
Engkau merentas lautan api
Namun tak dapat jua dimiliki
Jika tidak kembali pada Allah*

In whatever way
You may climb the highest mountains
You may dive into the deepest of seas
It won't be something you will have
Unless you decide to come to Allah

Figure 14.1 Lyrics for “Iman Mutiara” (Raihan).

immediately hears how the group in each song almost habitually switches musical idioms, mixing gamelan-backed hymns and a children’s choir (“Mari Bersolat,” Let’s Pray), just as easily with Mandarin pop songs (“Cing Ai Ching Ai”, Love for God), *dzikir* songs performed in local Malay dialect (“Dikir Raihan Zikir”) or the DJ “scratches” and raps of UK hip hop act Mecca2Medina (“Do you know Him?”). Raihan is almost reinventing the *nasyid* genre singlehandedly by continually adding new musical flavors to its sound. So, moving the genre away from its roots in Sufi hymns and *dzikir*, the group has experimented with gospel, *qawali* (South Asian devotional songs), and world music. In spite of its popularity, but also probably part of the reason for it, Raihan is not finding it easy to sever the knot with its roots in Arqam activism. These roots have been perceived as conflicting with their subsequent collaboration with the UMNO political party (United Malays National Organization), Malaysia’s largest political party. While some have insulted the group for being coopted by UMNO⁶ and for performing at some of its rallies, the Arqam ideology is still very much present in the 2001 movie *Syukur 2001* (Blessings for the Twenty-first Century, see Barendregt 2006a). In this film, dubbed the world’s first-ever Islamic science fiction epic, the members of Raihan play a prominent role as the board of an economically self-sufficient commune that closely resembles former Arqam communities. The vision in the film is of a society adapted to fast-growing technology, yet able to hold onto basic noble values like faithfulness to God, love, and mutual respect. The year in which this future, Arqam-like, community is set—2021—is not coincidental as it follows directly on the heels of the storied, prestigious, state-run campaign in Malaysia: *Wawasan2020* (Vision2020). In 1991 Prime Minister Mahatir Mohammad chose the year nearly three decades into the future as a target for achieving Malaysia’s national, political, economic, and social goals of

development. Raihan's film obviously invokes this theme in order to stress Arqam's values in the context of modernity.

Away from an exclusive Malaysian context, in the 1990s a similar mix of political activism, and religion, as well as a call for a more publicly staged Islam, contributes to the increasing popularity of *nasyid* music in neighboring Indonesia. It is interesting to compare developments in both Southeast Asian countries, as they explain much of the debates in today's *nasyid* scene, to which we will later turn.

1998 student uprising in Indonesia and birth of the Justice Party

In Malaysia during the 1990s, most of the followers of *nasyid* were to be found in religious colleges and in universities, especially among student activists. In Malaysia it was quite common to come across inter-university *nasyid* contests being staged on a regular basis. The International Islamic University in Malaysia, for example, had a large group of *munsyid* (the name for *nasyid* aficionados) including IN-Team and Alarm Me. However, towards the end of the decade, the popularity of *nasyid* had also spread to Indonesia, where it scored huge successes in cities with large student communities including Jakarta, Yogyakarta and especially Bandung, where scores of *nasyid* ensembles blossomed.⁷ At that stage there were no official channels of distribution in Indonesia; *nasyid* music was spread via home-produced cassettes, circulated (as they often still are) among university and secondary school students, or for sale at Islamic book fairs. The Indonesian *nasyid* community still tends to cling fairly closely to this DIY ethos. Although many *nasyid* ensembles have signed up to multinational record companies, most continue to be found on the campus.

Bruinessen (2002a: 131) has noted how more radical trends have appeared among students in Indonesia since the 1980s as a consequence of the suppression of student protests and the banning of large student associations. With possibilities to resist the New Order Government severely restricted, some radical student organizations decided to go underground whereas others focused on "mental training" through secretive discussion groups in mosques or at home. These interconnected and informal discussion groups in retrospect have become known as *Tarbiyah*, a movement that both in form and content is inspired by the teachings of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. As in Malaysia, Indonesian campus life, humming with student ensembles, inter-university contests and the *Tarbiyah*-inspired student activism, was instrumental in promoting *nasyid* music among a generation which was fed up with corrupt politicians. These student groups insisted on political reforms and a return to old-style moral values through their music and other popular art forms. This story is probably best told by looking at the Indonesian group SNada that derives its name from *Senandung Nada dan Dakwah* (literally "humming a tune while spreading the message of faith").

As have so many of its counterparts, SNada has its roots in campus life and, although it began performing as early as 1991, the group only became popular

against the background of the 1998 mass rallies against the Soeharto regime. The group has since spoken out in support of the Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, PKS; later called the Prosperous Justice Party), a politically fundamentalist Islamic group which is extremely popular among student activists and more generally among urban Islamic youth. Formed in August 1998, the Justice Party was the first political party to be officially proclaimed after Suharto had been forced to step down. Many party members are recruited from former campus activists, especially those involved in the Tarbiyah Movement. Piety, academic achievement and activism were generally seen as a remedy to a corrupt regime and it was not long before the movement became very influential on state campuses. Consequently many of the student demonstrations of 1998 were Tarbiyah-backed. Since 1998, the ideas of Tarbiyah and similar transnational Islamist movements have clearly profited from the lifting of the ban on Islamic political materials; materials that now have become widely accessible to a hungry audience of young activists and students who visit Islamic book fairs and listen to Islamic music, of which *nasyid* is by far the most popular genre. It is no secret that politically most *nasyid* musicians in Indonesia show a preference for the Prosperous Justice Party or such other Islamist groups as Hizbut Tahrir. In contrast to the latter, PKS is yet another example of the careful balancing between “the East and the West”: “True to its Brotherhood-derived ideology, PKS tends to see the West as hostile to Islam [yet] many of its senior figures speak good English, have a Western tertiary education and visit the West frequently” (Fealy 2007: 38). This is also true of the Western-influenced musical sound (R&B boy band music as explained below) and performance (staging, costumes and so forth).

In its early career SNada proved to be very much in tune with PKS activism. It joined other ensembles to record the cassette-album *Keadilan* (Justice) which was sold for the 2004 elections with the official PKS campaign video, cassettes still being the most conventional media format for emerging and independently recorded *nasyid* acts.⁸ SNada has also shown its political engagement in its other releases, for instance the album *Air Mata Bosnia* (The Tears of Bosnia). The group is probably best known for its 2003 hit song “Jagalah Hati” (Take Care of Your Heart) which was written by the then famous media Muslim preacher Aa Gym (Abdullah Gymnastiar, see below), and which was later used in an adapted version as a PKS jingle (“Coblos no. 16, PKS,” “Vote no. 16, the Justice Party”) for the 2004 general elections (see Figure 14.2)

Jagalah hati
Jangan kau kotori
Bersihkan hati
Mari kita peduli

Take care of your heart
 Don't desecrate it
 Purify the heart
 Let's care (about each other)

Jagalah hati
Jangan kau nodai
Pemimpin adil
Rakyat Sejahtera pasti

Take it to the heart
 Do not sin against it
 A righteous leadership
 Results in a prosperous people

Figure 14.2 Lyrics for “Coblos no. 16, PKS” (SNada).

A new fashionable sound for an emergent Islamic chic

The very same biographies of Raihan and SNada, with their overt ties to Malaysian and Indonesian Muslim activism, also offer us a more careful balancing between East and West, activism and commercialism, religion and popular culture with which the adherents of a more popular and publicly visible Islam see themselves confronted today. Haenni (2005) has written about new forms of religiosity among the Muslim bourgeoisie and middle-class youth in Egypt, seeking to reconcile their mercantile interests with Islam. This quest has resulted very much in what he calls “Islamised neoliberalism,” exemplified by Islamic salons, Islamic charity, new age Islamic spirituality and Muslim “televangelists” such as Amr Khaled. Khaled is the first person to have had a religious chat show on Arab television and excels in combining religion with his youthful appearance and entrepreneurial spirit. Not surprisingly, Haenni compares him to Aa Gym in Indonesia, another self-styled “Muslim celebrity” who has been very successful in blending his Sufi wisdom with global business management tactics (Watson 2005). Besides publishing Muslim self-help books, comics, and even soap operas, AA Gym was one of the first to launch Muslim content for mobile phones (Barendregt 2009). His *Manajemen Qolbu* Foundation makes heavy use of the Internet, much like (and even with help of former exponents of) the religious conservative movement in the United States. Although Gym’s popularity is now on the wane,⁹ others such as Opick (a former rock star now manifesting himself as pop preacher) and Ustad Jefri Al Buchori are already lining up to become Islam’s next celebrities (Fealy 2008: 25). None of these “poster preachers” has had formal religious training, nor do they have an extensive knowledge of the Arabic language or of the Qur’an. Instead the members of the Indonesian poster preacher generation are building upon a tradition of public Islam that makes extensive use of the latest media technologies, in this case pop music, mobile and Internet technology.

Recent years have seen more surprising and sometimes uneasy combinations of pop and Islam, ranging from “sexy veiling” and new Islamic fashions (Balasescu 2003; Asmawi 2003), Heavy Metal in various Muslim contexts (Hecker 2005; Levine 2008) to Muslim teen literature and Islamic films and soaps in Indonesia (Widodo 2008). Perceived to be taking the best from the East and West, they are illustrative of a more fashionable and commercial Islamic pop culture that has variously been branded either “Islam Lite” (Howell 2008), “Market Islam” (Haenni 2005), or again within the Indonesian context and referring to the fleeting condition of being famous in today’s media-saturated world, “15 minute Islam” (Darmawan and Armando 2008). All of these terms, although at times pejorative, refer to the successful combination of lifestyle politics and youth culture, which manage to convey a very self-assured religious message that is so common to the contemporary Islamic world. It is the very same message of a new Islamic middle class that has been emerging throughout Southeast Asia since the early 1980s, most notably in Malaysia and Indonesia (see, for example, Shamsul 1999, Wong 2007, and Fischer 2008). In Indonesia, the Islamic resurgence has gained real momentum since more leeway was allowed for the staging of public

manifestations of Islam after 1998. The rise of the new Islamic chic and its claim to be a publicly visible Islam has shown that religion and capitalism are by no means incompatible. *Nasyid* music can be considered the soundtrack of this emergent Islamic middle class and the new forms of public culture for which it is striving.

Although proponents of “campus Islam” eagerly trace *nasyid* to Middle Eastern roots, even as far back as the time of the Prophet Muhammad,¹⁰ the popularity of Southeast Asian *nasyid* groups is also explicable in terms of another rather more mundane factor: namely the huge success in Asia of Western boy bands which all emerged in the late 1990s. Such bands as Backstreet Boys and Westlife marked the beginning of what historian George Lipsitz calls the “growth of prefabricated musical acts” that emerged in response to the growth of such reality television shows as *Making the Band* and *American Idol*:

Succeeding cohorts of preteen girls have shared generational experiences built around identification with all-male pop-singing groups. The boy bands sell out arenas around the world, create records that reach the top of the best-seller charts, and become important markers in the experiences of their generation. Their youthful exuberance, coordinated choreography, tight harmonies, skilled studio production, and carefully crafted public images play an important role in introducing young girls to popular music and its related practices of fandom and consumption.

(Lipsitz 2007: 3)

In interviews, members of SNada acknowledge they were inspired by the boy band Boyz II Men and admit how they tried to instill a similar sort of *acappella* singing that uses harmonized vocals in their *nasyid* music (Senja 2006: 29–30). The lyrics of the song “In the Still of the Night” by Boyz II Men were even adapted for live performances now referring to trust in Allah, and the need to pray, fast and to be a good Muslim.

Although not as prefabricated as some of the boy band ensembles, there are obvious parallels. As is the case with their Western counterparts, an often largely female audience adores *nasyid* singers and in many instances the close harmony singing of Western boy bands seems to have served as an additional role model in the musical styling and casual appearance of most *nasyid* groups. And much similar to the Western boy bands described by Lipsitz, *nasyid* ensembles are central to the development of shared generational experiences through identification, fandom, and consumption, the difference here obviously being that *nasyid* is targeted primarily at young, mostly female, university students rather than pre-teen girls.

During the early 2000s, the ensembles Raihan and SNada both demonstrated a more casual and commercial approach to Islam, with SNada, for example, having recorded several advertisements (for the Islamic Banking operations of Bank Mandiri and for travel agencies which organize annual pilgrimages to Mecca). Their album *Neo Shalawat* (2002) was the first truly commercial *nasyid* record

released by an Indonesian ensemble and sold more than 300,000 copies in Indonesia (Senja 2006: 35).¹¹ SNada, as well as other *nasyid* ensembles, also profited from the lucrative business which has sprung up in *nasyid* ring tones and the many Malay-language websites, homepages, and web-logs devoted to *nasyid* music in general. The latter are certainly a reflection of the commercial success of the genre so far and of its extensive transnational aspirations (Barendregt 2006a). The countries of Muslim Southeast Asia are no longer regarded as separate markets when it comes to Islamic pop music. For example, the SNada 2003 album was called “From Jakarta to Kuala Lumpur” (*Dari Jakarta ke Kuala Lumpur*).¹² The new transnationality of *nasyid* is reflected in pan-Southeast Asian song contests, and also in the composition of some of the ensembles that consist of multi-national members. It shows the awareness of a new cultural geography of the Muslim world in which in many aspects (Muslim entertainment, the use of ICTs and new media, and more generally progressive Muslim thinking), Southeast Asia seems to have become a role model for its Muslim compatriots around the world and the *ummah* at large. However, the two cases of Raihan and SNada prove that at present as yet there is no clear-cut definition of what *nasyid* is or ought to be. Some argue that *nasyid* is merely a fashion¹³ and, although its adherents understandably want to emphasize its long tradition and religious roots or political overtones, *nasyid* is clearly subject to an on-going process of evolution or, at least, change. As a consequence, its definition is open to discussion. Viewed in this light, *nasyid* could be taken to represent the potent mix of the pluralization that Hefner (1998: 88) thinks is inherent in present-day Islam. This competition about the interpretation of Islamic symbols can be seen in debates about:

- (1) What is true Islamic music?
- (2) What are the limits of the commercial attraction of the genre?
- (3) Whether it is possible for female *nasyid* singers to participate.

At this juncture, I shall briefly discuss each of these aspects in both the context of Malaysian and Indonesian society, before looking at one way *nasyid* musicians have recently tried to solve the apparent contradictions in the genre.

How much pop can Islam stand?

Indirectly the music of Raihan and SNada has left many *nasyid* aficionados wondering what an Islamic future should sound like and this question still remains unanswered as the *nasyid* scene is still seeking to expand and make use of virtually any sort of music around: several formats have been introduced including exclusively male; exclusively female; children’s ensembles; ethnic ensembles; and even Chinese *nasyid*.¹⁴ Groups have incorporated genres of poetry and hip-hop, as well as themes relating to militancy and romance (music for weddings). Simultaneously, this extension of the term *nasyid* has left many wondering where religion ends and pop begins: where they should boast of a long, seemingly unchanging tradition of a musical genre that adheres to Islamic etiquette and

where to give in to the “erotics” of pop, where every day brings along a new sound and a new fresh face. To explain this tension between pop and piety, a closer look will be taken at three debates that have recently come to the fore among fans of *nasyid* music: (a) the question about what a genuine Islam sounds like; (b) the fine line between spiritual commercialism and the selling out of religion; and (c) the obstacles for the participation of female *nasyid* ensembles.

How does Islam sound?

The market Islam of Raihan and SNada in the 2000s stands in stark contrast to the approaches of such other ensembles as the Indonesian group Izzatul Islam (“The Majesty of Islam”). This group, nicknamed Iziz, uses strong, rock-inspired harmony singing, repetitious lyrics, fast tempos and a preference for marching music with such titles as “Hai Mujahid Muda, Kembali” (Hey, Young Fighter, Return), a song about the war in the Moluccas, or more recently “Pewaris Negri” (Heirs of This Nation). Whereas Raihan and SNada, and indeed also the very popular Malaysian ensemble Brothers, prefer to experiment with hip hop, urban, and other forms of current popular music, the members of Iziz state that the human voice is the sole instrument allowed in religious entertainment, with an exception being made for the frame drum on account of its overt religious associations. Other performers have also wondered how to emphasize religion rather than pop. The Indonesian-born Arab singer Haddad Alwi, for example, has made extensive use of his own roots in Hadrami music, adding the Arabic language and Middle Eastern orchestration to his *nasyid* songs. But other performers explicitly deny the straightforward relationship between Arab (performing) culture and Islam as a world religion. The group Raihan is even quoted as having refrained from employing traditional Arab tunes (Inter Press Service, April 24, 1998). Instead, they have asserted “(our music) must be contemporary, first and foremost.”¹⁵ One way out of this dilemma has been to claim that the music is not considered *nasyid* or that any other religious pop music in particular is being performed; the sound they produce is merely world music with a spiritual twist, such as is the case with Malaysian singer Waheeda, the 2003 “*nasyid* sensation.” More often than not, the discussion about musical authenticity, what Islam should sound like, and what constitutes proper Islamic instruments is interrupted by those who argue that it is best to refrain from making music all together, and focus instead on prayer and contemplation. There have been fierce discussions on the *nasyid* mailing lists on this topic, including a 2006 *fatwa* regarding music by PKS preachers, but so far the conclusion is that *nasyid* spreads the message of faith, and as long as *nasyid* does not interfere in the call to prayer, there is no harm in it. In practice, how *nasyid* music is perceived and regulated is mostly reduced to the religious affiliation of its makers. Salafi-oriented youths refer to a *fatwa* by their Syaikh Nashiruddin al-Albany condemning everything musical; whereas ensembles affiliated with Hizbut Tahrir or Tarbiyah (for example, SNada and Iziz) in Indonesia or Darul Arqam in Malaysia (Raihan, and more recently such groups as Qatrunnada and Hawari) believe music is permissible as it enables the spread of Islamic

doctrine.¹⁶ However, in the context of a national recording industry in which *nasyid* participates increasingly in both Malaysia and Indonesia, there is hardly an opportunity for such nuances. There are other, often related issues at stake as well, including the often blatant commercialism of some groups which seem to focus more on entertainment than religion as such.

In between FPI and FNI, and the limits to Islamic commercialism

In recent years debates about Indonesian Islam and popular music have focused on two extremes, which I refer to here as either FPI or FNI. For many FPI has become synonymous with the often brutal attacks on popular music venues by the Front Pembela Islam (FPI). FPI is the best known of the Islamic vigilante groups in Indonesia that have acted to uphold Islamic law, being particularly active in halting such “sinful activities” as prostitution and gambling, but also what Islamic hardliners deem sexually explicit public entertainment (Fealy 2005: 13). Many deny FPI the status of a religious organization, pointing to the close coordination between FPI militias and the police and allegations by rival vigilante groups that FPI is raiding only those venues that refuse to pay protection money (Bruinessen 2002b). However, generally speaking the FPI point of view has come to represent the Salafist argument about popular culture and the performing arts mentioned above, fighting against what they see as an alarming rise in immorality and irreligious behavior. A more progressive point of view among Muslims is that which tries to reconcile religion and existing forms of popular culture and performing arts, seeing these merely as another possibility for missionary activities. Nevertheless, there is a certain limit to spreading the message as well; as expressed by the group SNada when they decided to participate in various popular TV shows, including Inul Daratista’s *Sang Bintang* in 2003.¹⁷ Their participation in these programs, their highly polished performance on stage, and their celebrity clothing style, was challenged by many conservative critics. But the group defended its stance by arguing that there was nothing wrong with performing on talk shows and trying to reach as many people as possible if this did not distract from the religious ends striven for. Similar criticisms were voiced about their sudden pop-like appearance in the 2003 video clip of “Jagalah hati” (Protect your heart), which led many observers to speak of a new subgenre, “fashionable *nasyid*” (named “*nasyid fashion*” by the Indonesian daily *Kompas*, November 29, 2002). However, in the eyes of many critics, a line was crossed with the launching of a national media spectacle, FNI, the Forum Nasyid Indonesia (FNI).¹⁸ In early 2004, FNI organized this festival which was broadcast on national television during the fasting month. The *nasyid* song contest modeled on American Idol and similar shows that are tremendously popular in Indonesia (Coutas 2006) led to a fierce debate among *nasyid* enthusiasts. Such booklets as “The Real Idol” by Alwi Alatas (2006) describe fans of boy band Westlife as an example of how not to behave, warning a young modern Muslim audience against the quick sands and perils of celebrity and claiming there is only one human being who deserves

adoration, and that is the Prophet Muhammad. In Malaysia, I came across a non-commercial Video-CD of Ustaz Aqil Havy, a rock singer turned preacher, who had no problems with Islamic hip hop performed by such Malaysian artists as Yasin but did protest about “non-Islamic entertainment” of programs like Malaysian Idol or *Akademi Fantasia* (Fantasy Academy). Understandably an Islamic variant of such shows was criticized even more severely.¹⁹ Mailing lists and websites abounded with letters from *nasyid* fans who regretted the absence of *nasyid* performers and genuine religious experts on the contest jury of FNI, with national television companies apparently paying more attention to secular aspects (outlook/attitude/outward appearance) than spiritual content or the moral message that *nasyid* songs should contain.²⁰ In sum, many condemned the sheer commercialism of the show. Taken in conjunction with the rise of “poster preachers,” commercial ring and ring back tones which have turned out to be a lucrative business, and many other forms of Islamic commercialism, FNI has prompted many young Muslims to ask if “15 minutes of Islam” should be praised or is indeed a devil in disguise. Is God up for sale nowadays? There is clearly a limit to the extent of pop in religion, as the discussion below on the participation of female *nasyid* ensembles also illustrates.

Islamic Spice Girls?

Many observers of Islamic youth culture have pointed out the crucial shift in demographics of the Muslim world today (see Levine 2008 and Stratton 2006). At the turn of the twenty-first century, one out of every five world citizens is Muslim and the composition of the Muslim world is also changing. Stratton especially refers to how the Muslim in the Middle East is young and well-educated but at the same time often frustrated by dictatorial regimes and oppression by the West. Inevitably the upshot is a rebellious youth but increasingly a youth which looks to religion as an antidote and way out of their often depressing circumstances. Stratton is especially struck by the youth culture she finds among the middle class of Beirut, Amman, Cairo, Dubai, Kuwait, and Damascus. It is full of contradictions: Arab video-clips of half-naked women, but also those young hipsters who fiercely criticize such blatant commercialism and opt for more spiritual entertainment. These apparent contradictions are embodied in what she calls the “muhajababe”: devout, *hijab*-wearing girls, who wear tight-fitting jeans, follow religious practices and yet love the stream of pop video-clips, fusing Western commercialism with Islamic spirituality. Though at first glance less extreme, many aspects of *nasyid* music present us with a similar mix of contemporary gender reinterpretations, highlighting both changing ideas about gender relations in Southeast Asia and the tensions this brings to an otherwise modern musical genre.

Like their Western equivalents, young *nasyid* singers are often adored by predominantly female audiences. During a 2003 concert of the popular group SNada at the Academic Center IAIN Raden Fatah in Palembang, a crowd of 1,000 people showed up, approximately 75% of which were young women wearing

headscarves. The newspaper *Sriwijaya Pos* (January 2, 2003) reported that the crowd regularly began to exclaim *Allahu Akbar*. Although I have never observed such enthusiastic exultations during *nasyid* concerts, the truth is that the majority of the audience consists of young women. Admittedly young women do indeed seem to be well-represented in the circles of Islamic activists in both Malaysia and Indonesia.²¹ I have written about whether there is a Muslim equivalent of a female pop singer in the West (Barendregt 2006b). For example, Siti Nurhaliza in Malaysia, who has sung with *nasyid* artists on several occasions and recorded her own *nasyid* songs, flirts with a devout Muslim identity, yet simultaneously blends it with both Western fashion and distinctive Malaysian flavors. She is seen by many in the industry as an icon of the New Malay, able to uphold cultural and religious traditions and yet be progressive. But even though Siti is a Muslim, importantly she is not a “Muslim artist”; hence she is able to switch strategically between the two personas. A similar strategy is used by Waheeda, whose success is generally attributed to her odd mix of pseudo-Arab songs, her wearing of a veil and her cute but sexy on-stage persona. Although (like Siti) she regularly performs with *nasyid* artists, she denies she sings *nasyid* songs, defining what she does as world music (*muzik dunia*) with Asian and Middle Eastern influences. Why do these female artists have such difficulties with the label of female *nasyid* artist?

Nasyid aficionados are reluctant to express an opinion when it comes to what are called *munsyid akhwat*, female *nasyid* performers. Indonesia has only a few female *nasyid* groups: Bestari (Jakarta), Nurani (Yogyakarta) and Dawai Hati (Bandung) are among the most prominent and there are other lesser known ones. Malaysia does somewhat better, with such well-known female *nasyid* groups as HAWA (Eve), Huda and Solehah. However, female groups are the exception, venues to perform are difficult to find and the possibilities to release cassettes few and far between. Further, female groups sometimes raise a storm of protest (Asma Nadia 2003). When visiting cassette shops and Islamic books shops in Indonesia, I detected a similar unease among vendors when I asked for female *nasyid* music. But why are female performances so controversial? I argue that controlling women’s behavior—especially the fear of Westernized women—has long been a central tenet of Islamic society. The issue of what is considered proper and appropriate behavior for women is one of the most visible and contested arenas of debate in new forms of public Islam, explaining the heated debates on popular performers such as female *nasyid* singers. Conservatives continue to emphasize the taboo on women singing in public, claiming that the female voice is part of the *aurat*, the parts of the body that must be concealed.²² Moreover, women are often seen as the weaker sex in need of protection from male desire; this power balance could be reversed were women to seduce men—therefore they must be restrained. However, as Hirschkind (2004) has argued, Muslim scholars have been relatively uninterested in elaborating a theory of vocal persuasion and agency; any positive or negative effect is attributed largely to the listener. As the ninth century mystic al-Darani said: “Music does not provoke in the heart that which is not there.” That is, the female voice itself does not have the persuasive power to incite a person to commit evil deeds; this can only happen if the evil already reigns in the listener’s

heart. Besides, if the origin of female *nasyid*, as its proponents claim, is the *shalawat badr* sung by those who hailed Muhammed's arrival in Medina and if claims that it was women who did the singing are true, a woman's singing voice might one day resound more as a blessing rather than a bane. But again, all of this is theory and in practice there are as many stances about female participation in *nasyid* as there are religious factions within Indonesian and Malaysian Islam. Hence, for the time being the issue of *munsyid akhwat* and their participation on the *nasyid* scene continue to be fiercely debated, again illustrating that to its proponents there is a fine line between the erotics of pop and religious piety.

Boys will be boys or the return to the activist male?

Unquestionably, *nasyid* continues to be inspired by the activist anthems of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Palestinian Intifada nationalist themes as well as by the local equivalents of such movements, for example Darul Arqam in Malaysia or Hizbut Tahrir and Tarbiyyah in neighboring Indonesia. Nevertheless, proponents of the genre were no less encouraged by the 1990s successes of such boy bands as Backstreet Boys and Boysown, which are not only Western but also commercially very slick in character. Understandably, not all are as pleased as they might be with this double genealogy. Writing of Egyptian *nasyid*, Haeni and Tammam (2003) observe that it has been "ideologically deprogrammed and adjusted to globalization." In this case, the process had already begun in the late 1980s when groups were in demand in Islamist circles to perform at Islamic marriages, leading to the launching of a new fashion. Consequently the themes of Egyptian *nashid* were modified, and love, happiness and poetry were introduced. The groups became more professional, widened their range of instruments, began to charge for performances and sold audio-cassettes. They have now left *jihad* behind them and compete with Egyptian pop stars as their music continues to fuse with non-Arab rhythms: Anglo-Saxon pop, jazz and rap. Southeast Asian *nasyid* has gone through similar phases with many enthusiasts of the first hour now calling for a much needed return to what *nasyid* was originally meant to be (Romli 2007). In mid-2005 a subscriber to the Nasyid Indonesia mailing list was still commenting on how successful Raihan was in providing a more spiritual alternative to Western pop artists who competed in the same market.²³ However, two years later in 2007, an Islamic equivalent to the Western boy band music was no longer proving satisfactory when singer Nazrey Johani left Malaysian group Raihan as he advocated a return to the activist roots of *nasyid*. He subsequently recorded an album of old time Arqam favorites (*Nasyid Nostalgia Memori The Zikr*, 2008) and also took the decision to launch a career in the processing of genuine Islamic food (Ar-Raihan Foods), again taking an initiative not too far removed from the Darul Arqam self-proclaimed lifestyle of economic independence and self governance.

The boy band image was responsible for the wider public appeal of *nasyid* in Southeast Asia, even after the Indonesian FNI contests had been criticized on the Southeast Asian scene. A few years ago Studia (2006), a popular online magazine

for Islamic youth, devoted a very critical piece to what was then the latest hype on Indonesian national television; the reality show *Ajang Boyband*, in which sixty-six boy bands competed in front of a virtually all-female audience for a record deal. The magazine condemned the idolizing of pop artists, especially the spawning of a hedonistic culture. Now, two years later, the boy band model is being criticized more broadly in mailing lists and on websites devoted to Islamic popular culture. In a posting to the Yahoo *nasyid* Indonesia mailing list of April 2008, Ridhwan Ibnu Asikin asked what was the difference between Islamic pop and secular pop, as the lyrics of many *nasyid* ensembles resembled those of the Backstreet Boys and other boy bands, often simply inspired by love of the opposite sex. Inspired by these and other comments, many *nasyid* aficionados started denying their music was merely religious boy band music, strenuously objecting to the ideas of metrosexuality, androgyny or implicit homoeroticism which often attach in negative ways to international boy bands. Not surprisingly, this coincided with a wider rejection among Muslim youth in Southeast Asia of Western (inspired) popular culture and the call for a Muslim culture that reconciles piety with a “funky but *shariah*” (cf. Wijayanto 2004) consumerist lifestyle, and moreover one that simultaneously expresses their political aspirations. As a result, many religious spokesmen aver that the hysterical audience that is attracted by Western boy bands is firmly disapproved of in Islam. To counter this, an alternative masculinity is being propagated among young Islamic males, an ideal that for some at least consists of a more militant-style *nasyid*.

In Indonesia, this more militant *nasyid* associated with such groups as Iziz and also Ar-ruhul Jadiid, I.R.A. or Shoutul Harokah, has become known as *nasyid haroki*. The subgenre is named after the *harekak*, the underground, often radical Islamist movements from which they as student activist originally derive (see Rosyad 1995). Such movements include Hizbut Tahrir, Tarbiyah, and also Ikhwan al-Muslimun (the international Muslim Brotherhood). All these movements share the opinion that Islam should permeate all rules of everyday social life. In Malaysia, the term *nasyid haroki* has not been used, but increasing numbers of *nasyid* artists also seem to be showing signs of nostalgia for the early days of the genre, as the new career of Nazrey Johani attests to. In Indonesia, according to their own statistics, such groups as Shoutul Harokah and Ar-ruhul Jadiid sell at least 30,000 copies of their albums, but in many aspects proponents of *nasyid haroki* try to strike a difference from what has now become mainstream *nasyid*. The *nasyid haroki* website formulates this as follows: “if you think *nasyid* is about harmony and smooth voices, think again! If you think *nasyid* is only being performed by young, good-looking boys who act as boy bands just to make it on television, even if only once, it means you do not know *nasyid* yet.”²⁴ Or, as the same website states, “*nasyid* is not about makeup or being a metrosexual dandy, but about sweat and dirt, not about romance but the battle of the mujahiddin.” To followers, *nasyid haroki* not only appears to represent the much awaited return to a more authentic and puritan *nasyid*, which is activist and musically less complicated; here musical experiments and crossover are ignored, and sweet harmonic voices almost detested, instead resorting to march-like drum beats and shouting

choirs. Moreover, *nasyid haroki* also expresses an alternative masculinity that is different from that propagated in what they see as decadent Western popular music. As far as I can judge from Video-CDs and live recordings of the *haroki* teams, not only do young men seem to be far better represented in the audience and in most cases are a majority at the *nasyid haroki* concerts, they also seem to flirt with such “hyper-masculine” genres as metal, skate punk and hip hop, both musically as well as in their typically male behavior. The *Pewaris Negeri* Video (2005) CD, a live production of several ensembles at the Senayan Stadium, Jakarta, shows fans and musicians indulging in moshing, crowd surfing, waving Palestinian flags and shouting militant slogans. The few young women present are seated safely away from the arena that has been completely taken over by a male audience jumping up and down. Shooting flames are screened on a video screen at the back of the stage, while musicians of such groups as Izzatul Islam and Shoutul Harokah, clad in black, sports or camouflage gear ask their audience to stand up, shake their fists in the air and shout “Allah Akbar” with them. Concerts of the *haroki* band Ar Ruhul Jadid are sometimes complemented by displays of martial arts and the performance of spectacular invulnerability techniques (*debus*), all performed by young, seemingly powerful men. In short, attendance at *haroki* concerts might well serve to promote and reproduce a new form of Muslim Malay masculinity that is more assertive in character and resists the symbolic language of reality shows and Western boy bands so popular in the mainstream media.

Moreover, judging from stickers and booklets I have come across at Islamic book fairs over the last two or three years, there seems to be a revival of a genuine interest among *nasyid haroki* fans in both the DIY ethos and the 1980s militant lifestyle of hardcore punk rockers (straight edge), shown by their almost religious abstinence from tobacco, drugs and casual sex. At concerts, audience members also indulge in stage diving and slam dancing; behavior that is ironically derived from the Western youth culture so often despised by many of the *nasyid haroki* fans. In this sense, *nasyid* music continues to be a careful balancing between East and the West, and here also the compromise is obviously not being left uncontested. Some Indonesian *nasyid* enthusiasts have asked if not all of *nasyid* music is *nasyid haroki*, as most of it is performed by people who are directly traceable to one of the Islamists movements, including such commercially successful group as SNada. Others, in postings on Muslim blogs, have wondered if too much moshing, crowd surfing and jumping do not distract from the religious message.²⁵ With its blend of straight-edge moral, with *jihad* themes and militant beats, *nasyid haroki* is yet another example of the continuing dynamics among present-day Muslim youth as its members search for a viable expression of pop, which is simultaneously pious and political in character.

Some conclusions: funky but shariah!

In fact, *nasyid* music deals with most of the challenges which confront modern Southeast Asian Muslims: how to be a Malay Muslim and yet to be modern? For now a balance between the East and West, between commercialism and

spirituality and between pop and religion has been successfully sought and sonically articulated through *nasyid* music. However, it is a balance that remains open to discussion at all times, as shown by the debates I have referred to above: what *should* Islam sound like?; how much commercialism is to be tolerated?; how much, if any, space is allowed for female participation in the now mushrooming *nasyid* industry? In this process modern day *nasyid* has flourished against an often political background of Darqam missionary activities in Malaysia and student activism in neighboring Indonesia. While incorporation of elements from Western popular culture has contributed to *nasyid* musicians' current pop star status, a surfeit of it has led some *nasyid* fans to seek nostalgically for the early activist roots of the genre, meanwhile reconfiguring the lifestyle associated with Islamic popular music. *Nasyid* is clearly an example of how the *ummah* is continuously being shaped and reshaped in the course of globalization. With the majority of Muslims being young, well-educated and aware of what is available in the world, this means a break with many traditional institutions in the Muslim world. The use of the Malay language in a genre as tremendously popular as *nasyid* has proven not only that young people are in need of a more direct and intimate way of expressing their religious thoughts, it has raised questions marks about the future of the Islamic world as such. Southeast Asian *nasyid* presents us with a young, urban and very fast changing version of present-day Islam. It is the everyday Islam of stickers, novels, blogs and new media which recently has become of interest to scholars of both Islam and Southeast Asian youth culture. As *nasyid* music illustrates, Islam has increasingly become both an ideology and a fashion for Muslim young people throughout the world. Whereas the period 2000 to 2005 may have been the heyday of Southeast Asian *nasyid*, at least in terms of output, new *nasyid* music confronts us with the search for a satisfying compromise between pop, politics and piety in the twenty-first century.

Notes

- 1 Campus Islam refers to the organization of university students into social and political movements around Islam beginning in the 1980s and intensifying in the 2000s.
- 2 The meaning of Ar. *nashīd* (pl.: *anāshīd*) is "song, hymn." The verb stem *nashada* means "to implore, to recite, to sing." Islamic studies scholar Martin van Bruinessen (personal communication) also suggested to me that Solomon's Song of Songs is called *nashīd al-anāshīd* in Arabic, and how, later, the term was also used for the International (*al-nashid al-umamī*) and even for military marches.
- 3 Matusky and Tan (2004: 264) describe how the musical restyling of *nasyid* music in Malaysia had already begun at an earlier stage, with changes in *nasyid* performances over time following developments in popular music. Hence, *nasyid* evolved from unaccompanied music to being accompanied in the 1950s by ensembles playing *ghazal* (light classical Indian love songs) and Malay *asli* (slow musical pieces performed on violin, accordion and rebana and associated with melancholy themes). Synthesizers and acoustic instruments were supposedly added as early as the 1960s and 1970s. For more on the present popularity of Malaysian *nasyid* and some of its historical background see Sarkissian (2005).
- 4 *Dangdut* singer Rhoma Irama and Indonesian and Malaysian *qasidah* groups of the 1980s spring to mind in this context. Indonesian *dangdut* makes use of Western

instrumentation and when it first emerged in the 1970s in the music of Rhoma Irama was extremely suitable to conveying Islamic messages (Frederick 1982; Irama, Chapter 11 this volume). *Qasidah*, referring to the classical Arabic poem of the same name was a hybrid genre that was especially popular in the 1980s (Arps 1996). It was mainly performed by young women and, like *nasyid*, targeted Indonesian and Malaysian Muslim youth.

- 5 *New Straits Times* of March 17, 1997.
- 6 See, for example, the thread *Raihan Boneka UMNO/Mahathir?* ("Raihan, puppet of the UMNO/Mahathir Movement"?), at the Hizbi.net mailing list, <http://www.mail-archive.com/hizb@hizbi.net/msg17261.html>. Tan (2007) describes how more recently Mawwadah, another Malaysian *nasyid* group with Arqam ties (one of the singers is the daughter of former Arqam leader, Ashaari Muhammad), has more recently supported campaigns of the leading party, UMNO, when it released its album *Islam Hadhari*. Islam Hadhari ("Islam for civilization") referred to the ten principles aimed at making Malaysia into a powerful and globally competitive Muslim society. The principles introduced by former Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, included faith and piety in Allah, a just government, and cultural and moral integrity.
- 7 While many Indonesian *nasyid* ensembles look to their Malaysian neighbors for inspiration, Indonesia, given its sheer numbers and scale, naturally offers a more promising market. Raihan's *Demi Masa* album (2001), for example, sold 150,000 copies in Indonesia compared to over 50,000 copies in their homeland Malaysia.
- 8 Although the PKS was also supported by such *nasyid* groups as Izzatul Islam and Kiswah, SNada recorded several cassettes and video clips for this party. Among these are the cassette *Menuju Indonesia Berkeadilan* (Towards a Righteous Indonesia) and the video Cd *Partai Keadilan*. Another example is the cassette *Pemimpin yang Membawa Kecerahan* (Clear-sighted Leaders, 1999). See *CyberNasyid*, .../infonasyid/profil/snada.shtml.
- 9 Aa Gym's popularity was seriously impaired when he was publicly disgraced in 2005–6 for having a second wife, while not telling his first wife about it (for a full account of the rise, fall, and re-branding of the Aa Gym emporium see Hoesterey 2008). Part of Aa Gym's popularity was built on him being a modern Muslim who defended monogamy and family values (like honesty with one's wife!).
- 10 Some popular Indonesian journals and magazines claim that what was supposedly the first *nasyid* song, now referred to as *shalawat badr*, was sung by women who welcomed the Prophet when he arrived in Medina from Mecca (see for example, *Matra* magazine of April 1998, or *Pikiran Rakyat* of November 9, 2003).
- 11 The Indonesian recording industry is not a transparent business, and numbers of sales are very unreliable, but according to Indonesian standards (as used by the Recording Industry of Indonesia) sales of 75,000 copies would already amount to a "platinum record" (see the 2008 International Certification Awards, available at <<http://www.ifpi.org/content/library/international-award-levels>> (accessed October 14, 2009).
- 12 However, in interviews members of SNada describe the somewhat different approach of *nasyid* "celebrities" in both countries (see Senja 2006: 37). When such groups as Raihan, Saujana, or Rabbani come to Indonesia they are welcomed in luxury hotels and exclusive events are arranged. Members complain, however, that "When we visited Malaysia, we only get to perform in the mosque" (Senja 2006: 99). This different approach is partly explained by the way in which the genre is perceived differently in both countries, as again the members of SNada state: "When Indonesians send a cultural mission (*misi kebudayaan*) abroad, it consists mostly of dances and traditional music. Malaysia sends such *nasyid* teams as Brothers to perform in the United States. It shows how proud they are of and how much respect they have for their *nasyid*" (Senja 2006: 99).
- 13 See, for example, *Harry Roesli: Nasyid hanya tren sementara*, www.nasyid.com, (accessed November 14, 2003); Pahrol (2001); or Kahn's analysis of *nasyid* in Malaysia (2003: 154).

- 14 The Jakarta-based group Lampion was established in 1997, but only released its first album in 2005 (*Baiknya Tuhan*, "How Good Is the Lord"). The name "Lampion," referring to a street lantern made of paper and often used as decoration at Chinese festivities, was intentionally chosen to give a new Chinese flavor to the well-established genre of *nasyid*. Available at <<http://nasyidindonesia.co.cc/index.php/index-nasyid/74-lampion.html>> (accessed June 15, 2009).
- 15 Available at: <<http://catstevens.com/articles/>> (accessed April 10, 2005). More recently a similar argument was put forward by the Malaysian Minister of Culture and Heritage, who argued that Malays are not Arabs, and should therefore refrain from the Arabification of Malay culture. Available at <<http://thestar.com.my/lifestyle>, April 18, 2004> (accessed April 24, 2004).
- 16 For a brief discussion on the topic, see the Yahoo Nasyid Indonesia mailing list which had a discussion of the topic in June 2006 (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nasyid-indonesia/message/8653>).
- 17 The fact that the show was hosted by dangdut singer Inul Daratista turned out to be embarrassing for many *nasyid* aficionados. In early 2003 Inul Daratista had caused a nation-wide controversy with her erotic drilling dance moves that by Islamic hard liners, but also fellow dangdut artists such as Rhoma Irama, were soon condemned to be corrupt and overtly sexual. Weintraub (2008) illustrates how Inul for some time became the focal point of public debates on religious authority, freedom of expression, women's rights, and the future of Indonesia's political leadership. Some blamed SNada for siding with Inul supporters in these often fierce debates (see also Wichelen 2007).
- 18 Similar developments have taken place in Malaysia where a number of Malaysian ensembles have been established including the Association for the Promotion of the Nasyid Industry (*Persatuan Penggiat Industri Nasyeed* or *PIN*) in 2002. They argue that increasing commercial success should not divide the *nasyid* community into groups based on size, glamour or fame. The association, which is based in Selangor, Malaysia, aims at instructing its audience via "educative entertainment" (*hiburan mendidik*) and by creating more and better products. PIN is also responsible for bestowing an annual "*Nasyid* Industry Award." Whereas FNI was most successful through its national televised contest, little has been heard of it over the last few years. In 2009 a new Indonesian initiative was launched, AAN, or *Assosiasi Nasyid Nusantara* (National *Nasyid* Association), which is also responsible for the annual *Festival Nasyid Pemuda Indonesia* (see their website at <<http://www.ann.or.id>>).
- 19 Ironically, members of such well-known *nasyid* ensembles as Indonesian SNada were already participating in such contests as *Cipta Pesona Bintang* and *Voice of Asia* long before even entering the world of *nasyid* (Senja 2006: 178).
- 20 See, for example, the discussions about the festival on the Yahoo *nasyid* Indonesia mailing list (*Komen lagi ttg FNI, moga bisa lebih melurus*, October 2004) in which group members, including members of *nasyid* ensemble SNada, criticized the lack of creativity of participants, the obligation to use prefabricated arrangements by outsiders (often songs that are scarcely compatible with the genre) and the composition of the jury which often consisted of celebrities who have hardly anything at all to do with religious entertainment.
- 21 Becoming an Islamic activist or becoming a fan of a boy band may fulfil social functions similar to those described above, as Lipsitz has observed: the "practices of fandom permits them to develop intimacies with other girls, which may well be more important to them than their identification with the boys in the band" (2007: 5).
- 22 The Qur'an verse most often referred to in this context is Sura—33 (Al-Ahzab) which, among others, states "O wives of the prophet, you are not the same as any other women, if you observe righteousness. (You have a greater responsibility.) Therefore, you shall not speak too softly, lest those with disease in their hearts may get the wrong ideas; you shall speak only righteousness." Women may relax this code when being with next of kin (father, brothers, sons, etc.). There is a very lively discussion of the status of the

female voice in Islamic public life to be found in both Malaysian and Indonesian *sharia* consultation blogs and websites such as *Konsultasi Islam* (Islamic Counseling). The latter site in 2007 commented upon the do's and don'ts of women raising their voice in public. See *Apakah suara wanita aurat?* (Should the female voice be concealed?), Available at <<http://konsultasi.wordpress.com/2007/01/18/apakah-suara-wanita-aurat/>> (accessed October 14, 2009). For a recent Malaysian and more conservative take on women performing in public, see Ustad Zaharuddin's blog *Zaharuddin.net*, *Bolehkah wanita bedakwah melalui nashed* (Is it allowed for women to proselytize through nasyid)? Available at <<http://www.zaharuddin.net/content/view/495/99/>> (accessed October 14, 2009).

- 23 "Raihan vs Westlife," posted in the Yahoo mailing list *Nasyid Indonesia*, on June 10, 2005.
- 24 It literally reads "Jika Anda mengira bahwa nasyid itu penuh suara kedamaian dengan nada-nada lembut penyejuk hati . . . Pikirkan lagi! [. . .]Jika Anda mengira bahwa nasyid itu hanya dilantunkan oleh pria-pria muda berwajah (dimirip-miripkan) boys band sambil mengharap bisa merekam album mereka dan memasang wajah-wajah boys band itu di TV—walaupun cuma sekali. Berarti Anda belum mengenal Nasyid." "Nasyid Haroki," from the nasyid haroki website, June 6, 2008, <http://www.nasyidharoki.blogspot.com/>.
- 25 See, for example the contribution of a former hardcore punk fan at "Mr. Noxious, The Real Deal," Available at <http://mrnoxiousishere.blogspot.com/2007/06/nasyid-haroki-dan-budaya-moshing.html> (accessed November 2008).

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