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The cinematic Santri : Youth culture, tradition and technology in Muslim Indonesia

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Introduction

“I have long yearned for a handy-cam”, said Rian to his friends, Huda and Syahid, as they gathered in an abandoned storage room behind their dormitory. Rian’s hands firmly held a newly purchased handy-cam his mother just delivered as his birthday present. Rian, Huda, and Syahid were pupils of *pesantren* Al-Hakim, a Javanese traditional Islamic boarding school in Yogyakarta; and the storage room was their regular hiding place where they were used to spending their off-study hours for smoking cigarettes and sharing each other’s private and secret stories. In his *pesantren* where owning a radio is deemed illegal, Rian had to keep his handy-cam out of sight of the *pesantren*’s teachers (the *kyai*). “But what will you do with it?” asked Huda after a while, indicating his unfamiliarity with the video-making technology. “I want to continue my late father’s business of making wedding videos”, answered Rian optimistically.

Rian however, (still) did not know how to operate a handy-cam. Out of curiosity, he randomly pushed a button on his handy-cam, until it suddenly buzzed like a bee. “Hey, it can sound?!” Rian almost exclaimed. He continued pushing the other buttons. “It sounds! It comes in! It comes out!” Rian was very excited. “What is this?” Huda asked Rian again, referring to a small object that looks like a mini-sized cassette, which he found in the handy-cam’s box. “Put that here, here!” told Rian, pointing at a small opening in the handy-cam in which he thought the cassette should be placed.

After the cassette was put inside, Rian directed his handy-cam to Syahid’s face. His nervous lips quickly turned into big smiles as he now was able to screen his friend’s face through a viewfinder of the handy-cam. Seconds later, he turned the camera’s lens to a little hole on a wall behind his back. Through this hole, Rian was used to taking a furtive glance at their *kyai*’s daughter. Knowing what Rian was recording, Syahid took a deep breath and yelled, “Hey... Rian, that’s sinful!”. Rian made a swing movement with his hands, and turned the camera lens into Syahid, and then into Huda, before

trying to make a video of his own face. “I can’t see my face” Rian grumbled, passing the handy-cam to Syahid who then helped him to videotape his face. As the camera lens now faced onto him, Rian pulled his cigarette and smoked it gently, and no sooner did he blow the smoke into the air than he said, almost shouting, in a Javanese-accent English, “My name is Bond, James Bond!”. When doing that, he mimicked the Bond’s typical gesture of pointing a pistol to a left side of his chest, and both of Rian’s eyes and lips were all smiles. (3 Prayers 3 Loves, Minutes, 20: 36).

The above story is an excerpt from *3 Doa 3 Cinta* (‘3 Prayers 3 Loves’, Dir. Nurman Hakim, 2008), a coming of age film describing three pesantren pupils (called *santri*), who, suffering from painful losses of their beloved ones, managed to grapple with their everyday-life difficulties by using the pesantren’s Islamic teachings as their ethical guidance. The film, released in 2008, is the first Indonesian commercial film to be directed by a *santri* filmmaker, and the first film to vividly portray a character of a *santri* with a strong desire for a film-making technology and film-making practice.¹

The film is a reflection of the rise of what I call “the cinematic *santri*”. It refers to a growing number of a younger generation of *santri*, both males and females, who have strong desire, energy, and creativity in organizing various forms of cinematic practices, such as film-making, film screening, and film workshops, in order to articulate their cultural, political and ideological differences. They emerged in post-*Reformasi* Indonesia, which was an intense period following the fall of the dictator Suharto in 1998. The political imperatives of the first decade of *Reformasi* have opened up new freedom and channels for media practices, public engagement, economic mobility, and cultural plurality (see Sen and Hill 2007).² This dissertation is aimed at studying the backgrounds, processes, and meanings of the *santri*’s ordinary and everyday uptakes of cinema to shape and comment upon what it means to be a *santri* at the intersection of today’s technological, political, social and cultural circumstances.

While this dissertation treats the cinematic *santri* as a real person, it also invokes seeing him or her as “a figure of modernity” (Barker and Linquist et al 2009). While the two, real-life persona and symbolic figure, are interrelated, they are conceptually different. A figure of modernity is a real person who “stands out against the ground of everyday lives” and “encapsulates a modern ethos” (Barker et al 2014: 1). It operates as a

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- 1) Being funded by the Ford Foundation, and catering to global audiences of international film festivals, the film was commercially screened in the country’s major cinema chains, in addition to its sold DVDs.
 - 2) The novelty of events happening in the first decade of the post-Suharto period however, should be seen in a critical way. For many of these events are a mere continuation of events originating from the few years before the end of the Suharto era (Heryanto 2014: 6). This is evidenced by the fact that the central government in Jakarta is still strongly dominated by a small circle of political elites, and not to mention the prevailing domination of anti-communist discourse.

symbol that embodies “the historical process and “structure of feelings” of a particular time and place of a society” (Ibid: 31, emphasis original). In other words, it is a category of “subject positions” that analytically symbolizes larger-scale processes of a sociocultural transformation that emerges at one particular historical moment (Barker and Lindquist et al 2009: 37).

In this way, the use of a figure is different from the sociological concept of “social type”, because it is not invoked as an instrument for classifying an individual’s roles in a society, but rather, it emphasizes the symbolic work an individual performs in a society (Barker et al 2014: 3). This in turn means that to invoke the cinematic *santri* as a modern figure draws attention to the symbolic agency that (young) groups of *santri* struggle with in defining themselves against broader processes of sociocultural transformation. These processes include religious changes, economic differences, and political conflicts, that happen in and around their society.

The advantage of recognizing the cinematic *santri* as a figure is that it allows me to draw together the field of cultural production, competition between different Muslim actors and groups and various understandings of Islam, and the particular political and historical moment, which somehow are articulated through this figure. Also, it creates a productive entry into a range of dispersed social, political, historical and religious processes, with regard to the rise of cinematic practices among the *santri* Muslims in post-Suharto Indonesia.

Most commonly, the term *santri* refers to the pesantren’s pupils. Yet, it may also be used to designate devout Muslims who practice and obey the essential teachings and rituals of Islam (Geertz 1976 [1960]: 127). Here, my use of it loosely refers to both of them. This is because many, if not most, members of *santri* communities were once a *religious* pupil in pesantren. Those who have graduated from the pesantren, when “returning” into society, would mostly be tasked to give religious services and learning in their communities. A collection of these pesantren graduates will have in turn formed a larger community of *santri* that are linked through cultural, spiritual and intellectual networks. In other words, the pesantren’s pupils are to a great extent an embryonic *santri* community.

The term ‘*santri*’, however, is never a monolithic term, but represents various Muslim groups and individuals who often vie with each other for public attention and political influence. Their variety ranges from traditionalist, to modernist, and to Islamist, among many other groups – the scope of these terms are defined below. To limit the focus of this dissertation, my use of the term *santri* strictly refers to traditional Muslim groups who are affiliated, both structurally and culturally, with *Nahdlatul Ulama* (‘The Renaissance of *Ulama*’, well known as NU), the biggest traditionalist Muslim organization in Indonesia that has strong roots in (traditionalist) pesantren.³

3) Likewise, because pesantren is as varied as the concept of *santri* itself, my use of the term refers to those who belong to traditional categories, from which the NU-*santri* are generally

In other cases, I will clearly state, for example, “the non-NU santri”.

The excerpt of *3 Doa 3 Cinta* quoted at the beginning of the chapter refers to a number of themes that are central to my dissertation. In particular, it stages a new development in the historically-vexed relations between Islam, santri and film in Indonesia. Santri are both marginal and marginalized when it comes to the country’s film industry. In the New Order era (1966-98), cinematic representation of the Muslim santri (and of Islam in general) was not only subject to the regime’s desire to control and delimit political expressions of Islam (see Barker 2011), but it also was, and has continued to the present day, to be mainly dominated by filmmakers affiliated with the non-NU-santri groups. More importantly, less familiar with visual than textual tradition, many of the santri still regard film technology and cinema-going practices as taboo, and often associate themselves, and are associated by others, as conservative, rural and backward Muslims. Yet, the release and narrative of *3 Doa 3 Cinta* are an exception, and therefore cast a new direction in the relationship between pesantren people and cinema.

While posing in front of his handy-cam as James Bond, one of the youth’s icons of the global cultural flow, Rian speaks to us about the santri’s aspirational desires, imaginations and identities that are mediated by and through film technologies. Furthermore, the presence of Rian a video-maker in the film, a reflection of the santri director’s cinematic desires, show the will and willingness of the santri to intervene in the film arena - from the very interior of the pesantren areas to their ordinary, everyday lives. On top of that, four years after the release of *3 Doa 3 Cinta*, just as I begun conducting this fieldwork, a new generation of santri were emerging across different NU communities in Indonesia who simultaneously turned to cinematic practices as part of, to borrow Cinar’s (2005) and Bayat’s (2010) words, their “ordinary practice of everyday life”. This new situation has in turn left us with a number of questions concerning the relationships between social and political change, popular youth culture, global circuits, and technological advances, which have become interwoven as the backgrounds for this emerging cinematic santri figure.

The take up of cinematic practices by santri, however, has always involved complications. This is because, firstly, the production of religious knowledge and social structures in pesantren society has for centuries been dominated by the old generation of santri (aged above sixty), solidly on the basis of their knowledge and interpretation of traditional texts of Islam. Secondly, most of the cinematic santri are generally of young people (aged below 40), who are not only more tech-savvy than the older santri, but also expect to be at the forefront of cultural development and innovation. Thirdly, the fundamental aspect of film images is that they are “vivid and indelible” (Daston and Galison 1992: 8) and thus they may evoke an excess of meaning and influences

learn their religious knowledge. Thus, I often use the term “pesantren people”, or the NUers, to loosely refer to the traditionalist NU-santri groups.

that are hard to control (by liable authority of a society). It is largely because of the combination of these factors that an embrace of cinematic practices is often seen by the older santri, to borrow Syahid's word I mentioned above, as "sinful". That is to say that cinematic practices may appear to them as frightening, because of the ability of these practices to threaten, for example, the pesantren's century-old and male-dominated tradition of textual authority and social structure. Thus, as it will become clear later, many of the cinematic practices by the young santri were struggling to gain support from, and frequently spurred by tension against the older 'elite' generation of santri. The introduction of film practices into santri communities, thus, prompts an inquiry into how it has affected the socio-cultural conditions of pesantren as an institution of Islamic learning, or in other words: the rise of cinematic santri is a question about continuity and change.

To live as a santri, nevertheless, is to live in a particular historical and sociocultural context. They ceaselessly think and rethink the ordinary practices and interpretations which structure their religious beliefs and lives in view of the shifting currents of their political, social and technological considerations (Marranci 2008; George 2010; Schielke 2010). As the film excerpt shows, the pesantren's strict rules over the use of technological devices did not discourage Rian from owning a handy-cam, and from pursuing his dream of becoming a film-maker. While Rian has his own reason for his cinematic desire, the pesantren people I have worked with throughout my research have narrated their engagement with cinema differently. The narrative of their cinematic engagement includes an insistence of using film as a means of *dakwah* (*dāwa*), an intervention in public debates about the 'right' representation of Islam vis-à-vis the non-NU-santri groups, a concern to preserve pesantren traditions against the "irresistible changes" in and surrounding the pesantren world, and an agentive Muslim subject to live in and be part of the 'secularizing', modern societies and spheres.⁴ This way, the take up of cinematic practices by santri is more than "a shallow commercialization of Islam" (Fealy and White 2008), and involves the cultivation of ethical and political sensibilities, behaviors and modes of reasoning for living as a Muslim santri, that are honed and embedded in the pesantren's century-old (everyday-life practices and interpretations of) Islamic tradition. An uptake of cinema by the santri, thus, can be read as a negotiation over tradition, agency, and subjectivity, with regard to the quest of becoming a modern subject.

This dissertation explores the dynamic interactions and relationship between religious tradition, sociocultural changes, and image-making technologies and practices; and the ways in which Islam is daily 'lived' (Marsden 2005) among pious Muslims in pesantren Indonesia against the heterogeneity of human's modern desires

4) Indeed, in recent years, the Indonesian public space, as many scholars have hinted (Fealy and White 2008), has increasingly showed its religious faces. Yet, my use of the term 'secular' here refers to Taylor's use of 'A Secular Age': that is, in every society, signs and symbols of secularity are now irresistibly and inescapably arising (2007).

and the complexity of experience and anxieties of the ordinary lives. I focus on the connection between religious discourse used by the santri for justifying their cinematic practices, the individuals who have played (and continue to play) a key role in the rise of cinematic santri, the social life of film technologies among the pesantren people, and the sociocultural changes that become the backgrounds for the santri's engagement with cinematic practices. I show throughout this dissertation how santri have expressed and negotiated their desire, imagination, and identity of being young and modern, at the intersection of religious beliefs, pesantren history and identity, political and social marginalization, and the enchanting power of the materiality of image-making technologies. I argue, what is central to this process of negotiation between Islam and cinema among the santri, is the role of Islamic tradition as 'a modality of change' (Waldman 1989), one with which the santri are able to "get a grip on the modern world" and feel "at home in modernity" (Marshall Berman as cited in Chakrabarty 1999: 109).

This thesis begins with a discussion of the key conceptual frameworks. Firstly, I discuss how the rise of cinematic santri figure is largely linked to the emerging visibility of Islam in Indonesian public life where different Muslim groups compete with each other for political and religious influence. I then proceed to discuss how cinematic practices as a form of popular youth culture has become a rich site for young santri to express what they consider as Islam in their everyday life. Here, I address how the everyday practices of Islam are crucial to our understanding and conceptualization of "Islam as a matter of human fact in history" (Ahmed 2015: 5). In the last section, I link the notion of "everyday Islam" (Marsden 2005) to the centrality of (rethinking) "Islamic tradition" (Asad 1986) for understanding the complexity of the santri's mundane and modern desires toward image-making technologies and practices. I demonstrate the significance of recognizing the heterogeneity of ways in which santri live their religious traditions according to the diversity of experience and complexity of everyday life.

Islamic film, public sphere, and the politics of Muslim identity

The rise of cinematic santri is largely linked to the popularity of 'Islamic cinema', or 'films that breathe Islam' (*film yang bernafaskan Islam*), which have emerged since the first decade of the 2000s in Indonesia (see Hoesterey and Clark 2012; Huda 2012; van Heeren 2012; Sasono 2013; Heryanto 2014; Izharuddin 2015). Historically, Islamic-themed film took its first appearance in Indonesian cinema by the 1950s and it had been continually produced during the New Order period. Yet, it was the 2008 release of *Ayat Ayat Cinta* (Verses of Love, Dir. Hanung Bramantyo) that marks the contemporary rise of Islam in the realm of Indonesian cinema. It is a film of a polygamous love story involving young, middle-class and cosmopolitan Indonesian Muslim students of Al-Azhar University in Cairo, that was watched by the then new record audience of 3.7 million.

As one of the symbols of modernity, the cinema's peculiar character is to create an imaginary world for its audiences (Plate 2008: 1). Following Plate's argument, films about Islam may not only present Islam in cinema, but also penetrate the daily lives of Muslim audiences and invite them to participate in public debates on issues provoked by a film. Crucially, in a setting where intervention of the state is significant over mediated expressions of religion in public spaces, the types of religious imaginaries provoked by the film and the ways they are debated in the public domain, become more complicated and dynamic (Abu-Lughod 2005).

Indonesia is the case in point. Soon after the success of *Ayat Ayat Cinta*, the realm of Indonesian cinema has witnessed the popularity of Islamic themed films, which competed to promote different representation of Islam and target different groups of potential Muslim audiences. This situation is heightened by the rise of street protests, Internet-based debates, state-backed intervention, and intellectual discussions on what a true Islamic film should look like. In its turn, Islamic cinema becomes a battle ground (Heryanto 2014), where different groups of Muslims and state-political figures run for establishing their influences in society - be they religious, political or commercial, especially in regard to representing the 'true Islam' through screen culture. The notion of public becomes crucial here.

The contours of post-Suharto Indonesia's public sphere are marked by the emerging visibility of Islam. Currently, symbols, languages, and discourses of Islam are increasingly jostled into, and widely circulated across public spaces through a collection of sights, sounds, textures and scents.⁵ Islam does not only appear as a lucrative element for commercial TV programs, radio broadcasts, popular novels, music, self-help books, cinema, food, clothing and lifestyles, but it also becomes a popular idiom through which the state, religious authorities, and lay people compete to define public morality, market economy, political authority, and lawmaking policies.

While this situation is a result of various factors, it is crucial to hint at the 1980's increase of new Muslim middle classes across Indonesian urban societies (Hefner 2000). Economically, their growth owed to the New Order's strong progress in economy during the 1980s and 1990s (Robinson 1996), and was in parallel with the rise of Asian new riches elsewhere (Robinson and Goodman 1996). Yet, politically, their characteristics in public were designated by the New Order's strict policies on expressions of political Islam, forcing them to cultivate their piety through education, popular media and other cultural practices. As the ban of political expressions of Islam was lifted following the transitional years of the Reform era, which was coincidentally marked by the explosive growth of audio-visual media industry and popular culture practices (Sen and Hill 2007), they become new collective Muslim actors who bring forward a novel form of Islamization (Heryanto 2008: 14). That is, an attempt to blend symbols of Islamic piety with materials and spaces of modernity. Unlike the middle class in a Western liberal

5) Such phenomenon also happens in other Muslim majority countries, such as Turkey (Göle 2002) and Egypt (Hirschkind 2001).

society (Robinson and Goodman 1996: 3), these new wealthy Muslims are inclined to religious dispositions (Barendregt 2006: 174), linking their Islamic piety with global practice of market and media consumption (Rakhmani 2016: 2), and exhibiting it in public spaces (Schimdt 2014: 25). The exponents of this new Muslim force, however, are identifiable, despite varying aspirations and political ideologies, within almost every group of Muslims in Indonesia, all of which are competing with each other in regard to their public expressions of Islam.

The increasing presence of Islam in Indonesian public yields an apparent reflection of Habermas' notion of public sphere (Habermas 1989). It refers to a specific domain in an eighteenth-century European society for the formation of public opinion that is cultivated through rational and critical debates. Within this domain, ideas are not legitimated by formal institutions of religious and political authorities but by rationality, and participation in it is principally equally open to all citizens. However, secular as it appears, Habermas' approach to the public sphere postulates the incompatibility of religion and modernity, as it suggests either to see the displacement of religion in the public sphere as an intrinsic character of modernity, or to regard the presence of religion in public as a sign of backwardness (Meyer and Moors 2006: 6). This has in turn encouraged scholars working on different trajectories, especially in Muslim societies, to propose the significance of investigating the presence of religion, especially Islam, in public sphere (see Eickelman and Anderson 1999; Hefner 2000; Hirschkind 2001; Göle 2002; and Salvatore 2007). In their investigations, most of them have similarly shown the rich and productive relationship between Islam and media in transforming the public sphere.

Eickelman and Anderson (1999), for example, have argued that the proliferation and easy accessibility of new media technologies in Muslim societies have triggered the emergence of a new public, in which new Muslim actors with no conventional training of Islam emerged to create alternative sites of learning about and speaking for Islam, cultivate public virtues and civil society, and stage new imaginaries of self-fashioned Muslim subjects in the globalizing and modernizing world. In this public, Islam is used as "a way of envisioning alternative political realities and, increasingly, in acting on both global and local stages, thus re-configuring established boundaries of civil and social life" (Salvatore and Eickelman 2004: xii).

When Warner (2002: 62) writes that "a public is the social space created by the reflexive *circulation* of discourse" (emphasis mine), and as far as the word "circulation" implies a plurality of space and agency involving in the public, he is implicitly saying that the public is a stronghold of political difference. That is, the public is an arena in which people of different identities and interests will compete with each other over presenting their ideas as "the common good" (Eickelman and Salvatore 2002: 94), or in the word of Meyer and Moors (2006: 12), as "the public". Yet, because the public is an egalitarian domain which allows everyone to participate, the position of those who succeed to present themselves as the public, is never stable and uninterrupted. Rather,

other groups of identities will continue to make a challenge to the public, by taking up a position of, for example, a “sub-public”, a “counter-public”, or an “alternative public”, while at the same time continuing working to become the public (see Warner 2002). This means, the public sphere is never a bounded entity, but an ongoing process of construction, negotiation, and competition (Meyer and Moors 2006: Ibid); the public, in other words, is plural and dynamic.

The presentation of Islamic discourses and practices in Indonesian public, although most of what is discussed in it ironically concerns ‘private moralities’ (Brenner 2011), has always been highly contested among Muslim groups of different political identities and ideological interests. As in since the start of the 20th century, the traditionalist and the modernist Muslims, such as NU and Muhammadiyah respectively, both organizations of which generally uphold a moderate interpretation of Islam, have been the significant players. Yet, at the turn of the 21st century, religious life in Muslim Indonesia is moving toward a ‘conservative turn’ (van Bruinessen 2014). It refers to a situation where tolerant, peaceful and open faces of Islam are diminishing in public spaces, and ‘overturned’ by the rising popularity of radical and violent groups of Islam, such as FPI (Islam Defenders Front), and Islamist political projects, such as PKS (Prosperous Justice Party) (see also Feillard 2010 and Hefner 2012). Present day Islam in Indonesia, in short, is highly contested among many different groups of political and ideological identities and interests.

However, in the last two decades or so, ‘public Islam’ (Salvatore and Eickelman 2004) in Indonesia (and in many other Southeast Asian Muslim countries such as Malaysia and Singapore) has been intensified by the emergence of ‘online public’ (Slama and Barendregt 2018), that is, a public that is built through online discourse and activism. Central in it, is the current popularity of Internet and social media spaces among different young and not so young Muslim actors in the region, who use the online spaces to strategically express and contest their Islamic practices, socialities, and ideologies. These Muslim actors upload (and share) Facebook statuses, Twitter posts, and Instagram photos to strengthen their ideological positions, while at the same time ridiculing and censoring those of the other groups. The online activities of these Muslims should not be seen as separated from, but an extension of their offline contexts, which in turn makes the online public both part of these Muslims’ everyday lives, and a highly contested arena between Muslims of different identities and ideological interests (see also Lim 2005; Ali 2011; Hew 2018).

Taking into consideration the above notions of Muslim public, this dissertation recognizes the significance of looking at the cinematic santri as an actor in the battle arena over the interpretation of “how to be a good Muslim” (Kloos 2012) in contemporary Indonesian *publics*, which do not only work in offline spaces but also consists of online activities. These theoretical approaches have in turn called for an exploration on how cinematic practices as a form of popular culture may become a rich site for the young santri people to express what they count as (an interpretation of)

Islam in their everyday life practices. Now, I will shift my discussion to the relationship between Islam, popular youth culture, and the notion of the everyday.

Islam, popular youth culture, and the significance of the everyday

The use of film technology and other cinematic practices for enhancing political differences is prevalent among my santri interlocutors and “the Bond image” with which I open this dissertation is a good example of it. Because of this, to demonstrate the ways by which the santri come to cinematic practices, it is necessary to understand the notion of popular culture and how it relates to daily expression of what is Islam and what being a Muslim should be among santri believers. Before delving deeper into this account, however, I need to first designate what I mean by referring to Islam as popular culture.

The term popular culture, however popular it is, is not easy to define, especially because of the complex meanings of its constituent concepts (see Storey 2001). In general, popular culture is designated to “refer to the products and effects of the mass communications industries” (Davey and Seal, as cited in Richter 2011: 165). But since the word ‘popular’ is succinctly related to ‘the people’, ‘the ordinary’, ‘the mass-mediated’, and ‘the commercial’ (Williams 2005 [1976]), popular culture is widely associated as a cultural practice subordinate to the one that is dominant in society. Despite that, it is misleading to underestimate the significance of popular culture practices for political differences, because category of the “popular” of a culture is always a question about, and a result of power relations, between what belongs to the ‘elite’ culture and the culture of the ‘periphery’ (Hall 2016 [1981]: 234). In this regard, popular culture is not just the imposed culture, but it becomes “a site of struggle between the ‘resistance’ of subordinate group, and the forces of ‘incorporation’ operating in the interests of dominant groups” (Storey 2001: 11). Based on these perspectives, I regard popular culture as a political means of symbolic communication through popular media practices by which people identify themselves vis-à-vis the others.

As an effective means for political difference, popular culture is a potential hotbed for popular expressions of Islam in public spaces. To explain this argument, I will draw on the concept of ‘popular Islam’ (Gafney 1992). Since the early periods of Islam, there has existed a category of religious piety that belongs to the laity that is often opposed to the category of “official Islam” defined by a small number of the Muslim elites (Ibid). In Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries, popular Islam is broadly inspired by Sufi tradition and is adapted to local cultures and conditions (Geertz 1960; Woodward 1989; Voll 2007). Yet, Weintraub (2011) argues that popular Islam may also take the form that is “more urban”, “more cosmopolitan”, and “more mass mediated”. In other words, popular Islam can be referred to as the daily understanding, interpretation, articulation, and practice of what count as Islam by a large number of ordinary Muslims

(rural peasants and urban masses, Sufi and non-Sufi) in everyday life circumstances.⁶ In this dissertation, nevertheless, I extend the notion of popular Islam to include, the daily expressions of Islam that are mediated through popular culture practices (Albanese 1996), and linked to global youth culture and lifestyles.⁷

In Indonesia, while Islam has always been expressed in many different ways, it is in the realm of popular culture and youth lifestyle that expressions of Islamic piety in daily lives have increasingly found their mainstream channels (Weintraub 2011). More and more young Indonesian Muslims have started to express their faith through various forms of popular culture practices, such as, by consuming ‘Islamized’ forms of the latest fashion style (Jones 2010), mobile technology (Barendregt 2009), hangouts in public spaces (Schmidt 2012) and cinema going (Heryanto 2014), marking the significant role of Muslim youth in today’s processes and features of ‘Islamization’ in Indonesia. In order to understand how young people can be related to popular Islam, the category of “Muslim youth” needs to be clarified here.

According to Herrera and Bayat (2009: 6), “youth” is never a matter of age per se, but consists of a series of dispositions in which individuals cultivate their consciousness of being young, by participating in manifold forms of youth practices, cultures and activism that fit within their “generational consciousness” (p. 8). Seen this way, not all young people are capable of claiming their “youth stage” (p. 7), unless they participate in, and have access to education, leisure activities, political movements, and other social practices around which the norms of youth consciousness are forged and constructed in society. Having this in mind, popular Islam illuminates the ways in which young people claim their agencies and identities of “being young and being Muslim” (Herrera and Bayat 2009) through their participation in ‘Islamized’ global youth culture and life styles.

As popular Islam is close to consumption practices, it is often underestimated as a shallow commodification of Islam, or a way of consuming Islam for banal and outward appearances of the faith. Many scholars of Indonesian cinema, for example, have often criticized the current rise of Islamic cinema through the lens of “religion-that-sells” strategy (Kusuma 2008; see also, Imanjaya 2009; van Heeren 2009; and Imanda 2012). While this can be true, the marriage of Islam with commodity, including film, should not be seen as black and white, but as part of one’s efforts and struggles to interpret, and

6) It is, however, a mistake to contradict popular Islam with official Islam, or to regard the latter as the authoritative and the former as the deviant forms of Islam. This is because Islam as a lived religion is never simply about a congeries of rituals and practices prescribed by the normative texts, but also about transformation, adaptation, and coherence of that rituals and practices within particularly social and historical contexts. Islam, in this regard, belong to both the elite and ordinary Muslims, and is constitutive of *not* only orthodoxy, but also beyond orthodoxy (further discussed below).

7) This phenomenon is also occurring in other Muslim-majority/minority countries (see Weintraub 2011; Khabeer 2016; and Herding 2017).

live their interpretation of Islam, according to “the vast-fields and pluralities of one’s life circumstances” (George 2010: 4).

The santri turn to cinema is a result of numerous factors. Rian’s dream of becoming a filmmaker in *3 Doa 3 Cinta*, which is partly driven by his memory of his late father’s business in making a wedding video, is only one example of how a santri becomes interested in cinematic practices. As the subsequent chapters of this dissertation show, some of the santri I worked with turned to cinematic practices because of their civic aspirations towards the politics of representation of Islam in the country’s screen culture. The others tended to assign their cinematic practices with a bevy of personal desires and collective inquiries about how to practice Islam in daily lives and amid social change. Using the words of Fealy and White (2008: 2), an act of commodifying Islam is never a single thread of reality but always contingent upon various driving factors, such as spiritual, economic, political, cultural, ethical, and technological. Our task, thus, is not to regard popular Islam as a homogeneous entity, but to consider the plurality of ways in which Islam as a lived religion has fashioned and been contextualized into the daily lives of believers at the intersection of personal desires, collective identities, politics of difference and authority, technological advances and global cultural flows.

But how is the ‘everydayness’ of popular Islam critical to our understanding and conceptualization of Islam as part of life? The notion of ‘the everyday’ thus needs to be clarified. Lefebvre (1971 [1986]) has called for the significance of never taking the everyday life for granted, and to see it instead as a socially constructed space within which all aspects of human’s historical phenomena can occur and find their concrete forms.⁸ In the words of Anthropologist Veena Das (2012: 7), the ordinary practices of everyday lives are the realm in which “the eventful” is carried out into the life of the ordinary people. This way, the everyday becomes a political domain in which ordinary people (all human beings are basically ordinary people) shape, articulate, and give meaning their life experiences.

In relation to the political significance of the everyday, Islam as ‘it is practiced’ finds its extensive manifestations among the Muslim believers in the realm of the everyday lives. Here, the film excerpt from *3 Doa 3 Cinta* with which I opened this Introduction is worth revealing again. Rian’s excitement and his ‘James Bond’ aspiration toward film camera, Syahid’s concern about its misuse, Huda’s ignorance about its function, and their hiding of the camera from the pesantren authorities, all of these different reactions and attitudes toward film-making technologies are telling that it is not just about Muslims. Rather, it is about things that are connected to an everyday that is larger than Islam and is inflected in the lives of Muslim santri. Their attitudes, in other words, are strongly related to their varying social backgrounds and the kinds of everyday

8) He writes, “Yet people are born, live and die. They live well or ill; but they live in everyday life, where they make or fail to make a living either in the wider sense of surviving or not surviving, or just surviving or living their lives to the full. It is everyday life that they rejoice and suffer; here and now” (Lefebvre 1971 [1968]: 21).

difficulties, struggles, and experiences that the three different santri are facing in their lives. Thus, it is not surprising that in later parts of the film, both Huda and Syahid were seen to have secretly used the camera to record their own aspirational objects. Moral ambiguities and negotiations are just part of the art of how to live our everyday lives.

In anthropology, Muslims cannot be reduced to their religion, not only because Islam can never exist unless through interpretations, but also because being Muslim is necessarily about “being a human being” (Marranci 2008). This means, being Muslim is not simply about engaging in pious acts, such as doing daily prayers, fasting and the pilgrimage to Mecca, but more about making choices on how and to what extent Islam should play a role in one’s everyday life situations (Masquelier 2010; Schielke 2010). Hence, Muslims may participate in the ordinary practices of everyday lives, such as playing soccer (Schielke 2009), going to the cinema (Larkin 2008), daily chatting (Marsden 2005), and practice of grieving (Samuels 2012), while at the same time using these mundane practices as a site where they perform their Islamic moral values, and are subject to Islamic moral judgments (Marsden 2005). The everyday Islam, in other words, is not simply about “what is Islam”, but also about “how and what does it mean to be a Muslim” in particular social and historical contexts.

That being said, an investigation into the everyday practices of Islam, thus, is constituted as an effort to revisit our academic inquiries that Muslims are studied not for their exception in comparison with other human beings, but for the ways they have variously “articulated” Islamic tradition along with the concerns, difficulties, and experiences of the everyday situations (Marsden and Retsikas 2013: 1). A brief discussion on the concept of Islamic tradition, and how it has affected my approaches to study the cinematic santri is outlined below.

Islamic tradition, modernity and image-making technologies

During my fieldwork, I came to recognize the centrality of Islamic tradition in the santri’s engagement with image-making technologies and cinematic practices. Among the santri, modernity is perceived and experienced as technological progress. As the Bond image in *3 Doa 3 Cinta* encapsulates, film, Internet and mobile phone technologies are often objectified by the santri to hook up with modernity, i.e. to create an image of ‘being modern’ while at the same time disassociating themselves with their stereotype of ‘being backward’. While the perceived dangers of the secular and modern association of these technologies often triggered a sense of anxiety among the conservative majority of santri communities, the cinematic santri are able to translate their cinematic engagements in terms of Islam, in particular by making specific references to notions of Islamic tradition. This way, film-related technologies and practices can be seen as a rich site for the santri to continually negotiate and articulate their particular voices of being modern and being stick to Islamic tradition. This dissertation, therefore, is partly aimed at revisiting the centuries old, but still widespread dichotomy between tradition and

modernity, in which Islam is seen as incompatible with the modern world (see Warraq 1995; Lewis 2002).⁹ And in doing so, I specifically follow the steps of scholars who argue that there is modernity in Islamic tradition (Masud, Salvatore and van Bruinessen 2009), and that one of the best ways to prove it is by starting from re-conceptualizing our definition of tradition (Salvatore 2009).

The anthropology of Islam has long been concerned with an effort to conceptualize Islam as a tradition of meanings, established upon the translations of Islamic texts “within particular social contexts and through particular cultural understandings” (Bowen 2014: 6; see also Geertz 1968; El Zein 1977; Gellner 1981; and Gilsenan 1982). Yet, it is Asad’s groundbreaking idea to see Islam as “a discursive tradition” (1986) that has become a major turning point. Drawing his concept from Foucault and MacIntyre, Asad frames Islamic tradition as the specific ways in which Muslims refer to, interpret, and debate their interpretation about the sacred texts of Islam across different contexts of time and space, in order to form a categorization of correct doctrine and practices (1986: 14). Seen this way, tradition for Asad is not inimical to rationality and argumentation, thus it is compatible with modernity.¹⁰

Strengthened by the publication of his later works on religion and the secular (1993 and 2003), Asad’s intervention has inspired a later generation of anthropologists to study Islam through the notions of tradition, ethics and piety, in juxtaposition with secular and liberal powers (Schielke 2010). While these innovative studies are far from being unified, most of them tend to focus on connections between pious activities and the cultivation of ethical Muslim self-hood (Mahmood 2005; Deeb 2006; Hirschkind 2006). More recently, and in response to such a tendency, some anthropologists began to shift their attentions to the ways in which Islam is lived among the ordinary Muslims (Osella and Soares 2010; Marsden and Retsikas 2013). From their works, we learn how ordinary Muslims in Northern Pakistan (Marsden 2005); or young Muslims in Egypt (Schielke 2009), or Muslim entrepreneurs in Indonesia (Rudnyckij 2009), or ordinary Muslim villagers in Aceh (Kloos 2013), have in different ways cultivated another kind of ethical self-improvement, one that goes beyond pious activities, through the complexity, struggles, failures and ambivalence of the ordinary practices of their everyday lives.

The potential of Asad’s approach, however, are not yet exhausted (Anjum 2017). In this regard, I join those who, for one reason or the other, are critical of Asad’s desire

9) The question about the compatibility between Islam and modernity has particularly gained new currencies in recent public debates, following the rise of terrorist attacks by a group of Muslim radicals, misleadingly attributed to Muslims in general (see Asfaruddin 2015; Rashid 2016; and Culver 2017).

10) Asad (1986) writes that any Islamic tradition consists of “argument and conflict over the form and significance of practices”, and “the variety of traditional Islamic practices in different times, places, and populations indicates the different Islamic reasonings that different social and historical conditions can or cannot sustain” (p. 14). Thus, “...although Islamic traditions are not homogeneous, they aspire to coherence... (p. 16).

towards orthodoxy (Lukens-Bull 1999; Marranci 2008; Schielke 2010; Ahmed 2015). Asad writes, “Orthodoxy is crucial to all Islamic tradition. But... orthodoxy is not a mere body of opinion... (it is) a relation of power” (1986: 15). Implicit in his argument is that orthodoxy that is existent in Muslim societies, seen from an anthropological way of understanding, is not simply theological but political, because its construction is dependent upon the exercise of power to claim over correct practices and to replace incorrect ones. The consequence of this approach is that the assumed hierarchy between proper and popular religion, between the ‘great’ and ‘little’ tradition, becomes irrelevant and dissolved, because what is proper and popular, and little and great about religion is similarly a result of relations of power, a construction in and by society (see Schielke and Debecvec 2007). Although his approach to orthodoxy is fruitful, nevertheless, I choose to explore its extended meanings. That is, as long as orthodoxy is a political category, I argue, there should be more than one orthodoxy that co-exists in Islam, and that, by extension, orthodoxy must not be the only ‘theory of truth’ that has long-been operative in Islamic tradition.

The problem in Asad’s discursive tradition is that he exclusively assigns his concept of authority towards the prescription of exclusive truth - “a practice is Islamic because it is authorized by the discursive Islamic tradition” (Asad 1986: 15). In light of this problem, the late historian, Shahab Ahmed pointed out that the authority that is operative in Islam is not only “*prescriptive*”, but also “*explorative*” (2015: 282, italics original). That is, while the prescriptive authority gives to its proponent “a license to prescribe”, the exploratory authority grants its bearer “a license to explore (by) himself” a range of possible ways and meanings of being Muslim (Ibid.). Muslim philosophers and Sufi saints, for example, “arrogate to themselves the highest epistemological authority to interpret the God’s words”, yet at the same time they do not prescribe “a single correct truth of Islam on the basis of their authority” (Ibid.: 283).

Indeed, as Ahmed further argues, texts of Islamic revelation, ones that become the authoritative source of truth in Islamic society, are by all means heterogeneous. There is the Text of Revelation, that is the Qur’an, which is in constant dialogue with the so-called *Pre-text* of Revelation, referring to the Unseen Reality upon which the truth of the first text revelation is ontologically contingent and continuously present. The *pre-text* is the metanarrative of Islamic truth that continues to exist beyond the revelatory event of the Qur’an to Muhammad, manifest in the forms of philosophical projects, Sufi tradition, literary, art, music, paintings, and other works that are produced through Muslim’s direct/indirect engagements with the Unseen Reality only in, via and without the first text. And the last text is the so-called *Con-text* of Revelation. It refers to a collective body of discourses and practices of being Muslims that are the product and outcome of Muslim’s previous hermeneutical engagements with Islamic Revelation in all their variety and contradiction. It is “the full historical vocabulary of Islam at any given moment” (Ahmed 2015: 357), with which the hermeneutical engagement with the Text and the *Pre-text* become possible.

Considering the veritable category of Islamic revelatory texts, I contend to follow Ahmed's argument that Islamic discursive tradition should not be exclusively referred to as the production of orthodoxy, but also beyond orthodoxy, i.e. the ways in which Muslims explore possibilities of meanings over living the concerns and anxieties of the everyday mundane practices in terms of (various revelatory texts of) Islam. By broadening Islamic tradition beyond orthodoxy, I also mean that the struggle, ambivalence and complexity of living Islam through the ordinary practices of everyday lives are not only the experience of ordinary Muslims, but also of the elite, pious Muslims, such as the *ulama* (*ūlamā*). In other words, to expand Islamic discursive tradition beyond orthodoxy, is to redirect our anthropological study of Islam into the ways in which religious texts, discourses and practices are commingled with the politics of the everyday lives among both the ordinary and elite Muslims, and both the practicing and non-practicing Muslims.¹¹

My aim is therefore to revisit the binaries prevailing in our studies of Muslim societies between a tendency of associating orthodoxy with elite/pious Muslims and non-orthodoxy with ordinary/non pious Muslims. The cinematic santri will show that those who even consider themselves as pious and 'elite' Muslims, such as the santri, do not simply aspire to perfectionist ideas of pious life, but they also account for pragmatic sensibilities of living Islam in accordance to the richness and complexity of everyday life desires and circumstances (Schielke 2010). In this regard, the cinematic santri is an attempt to recognize that the santri and the everyday life of Muslim (even those in *pesantren*) are just as ordinary and multi-faceted as anyone else's. This recognition, while it is of no surprise, is crucial. For only a rigid, narrow, prejudicial and therefore inaccurate understanding of what it means to be a santri would stand in the way of such recognition.

To conclude this section, this dissertation is concerned with the projects of exploratory discourses among santri with regard to the meaningful of film-related technologies and practices in term of Islamic teachings and moral values. The cinematic santri are serious about performing their faith according to the dynamic of orthodoxy. However, they are often willing, upon their turn to cinematic practices, to cross boundaries that are set by their authorities with regard to the facts that taboos of film technology and that fears of images are still widespread among members of the santri communities. Their desires to cinematic practices, more importantly, are not always related to piety and self-discipline, but some time to freedom, public recognition, imagination of wider worlds, and not seldom to anxiety and frustration about their everyday live situations. The cinematic santri, in other words, illuminates the heterogeneity of ways in which the santri live and claim their religious traditions according to the diversity of experience and complexity of everyday life.

11) It echoes Bowen's (2012: 7) argument that in order to think about Islam, we must take seriously the relationship between religious thinking and social frameworks at its widest and most intimate sense.

In the next section I explore some of the characteristics of the santri communities.

A brief overview of the santri communities

In the past, *santri* was narrowly used to describe students of *pesantren*. Yet it was after the publication of Geertz's *The Religion of Java* (1960), which thickly describes the cultural and religious lives of Javanese practicing Muslims, that the term *santri* started to gain a broader meaning as a social category (Ricklefs 2006).¹² Within his category of *santri*, Geertz draws sharp distinction between the traditionalist and the modernist groups. Defining the latter as 'puristic' Muslims who use the Qur'an and *Hadis* (*Ḥadīṡ*) for religious guidance, he describes the traditionalists as 'syncretic' Muslims (1960: 153) who, at their extreme pole, are the least Islamic among the *santri*, and are the closest to *abangan* (p. 160), a variant of non-practicing Javanese Muslims, "fairly indifferent" to Islamic doctrines but "fascinated with ritual detail" (p. 127). This traditionalist-modernist split, Geertz claims, has primarily cut across the cultural, social and political lives of Muslim communities in Indonesia.

Geertz's description of *santri*, however, has received severe criticism from local and foreign scholars. Dhofier (2011 [1982]), in particular, criticized Geertz's likening the traditionalists' Islam with *the* Islam of *abangan*, by pointing the significance of classical texts of Islam among the traditionalists for justifying their religious practices, and the learning methods by which transmission of Islamic knowledge was carried out across generations of *santri* in traditional *pesantren*. Woodward (1999: 2 and 2011: 57-8) also writes that Geertz's study of Islam, built on Weberian thesis of religion and rationality, did not only fail to recognize the mystical dimensions of Javanese Islam as Islamic, but also unable to observe the centrality of Islam in local Indonesian culture (see also Pranowo 2009 [1991]). Other scholars, such as Barton (2002), Hefner (2000), and Kersten (2015), have pointed out the fluidity of the traditionalist-modernist dichotomy of *santri*. These critics argue that the term *santri* is not a fixed category, but one that is continuously made across different historical moments in Indonesia, and as such is always contextualized in terms of the circumstances that gave rise to them.

The central backbone of *santri* communities is the *pesantren*. It is a compound of buildings where the young *santri* live to learn and practice Islamic doctrines, ethics, and rituals. The number of students in each *pesantren* varies from one to another, the biggest of which could accommodate more than two thousand. In the past, *pesantren* were mostly established in rural villages, mainly offering traditional system of Islamic education, and largely catering to students of low-class economic backgrounds, who could not afford a more expensive education offered by both Western-inspired secular and modern-Islamic schools mostly located in urban centers.

12) According to Ricklefs (2006), by then, these practicing Muslims named themselves '*wong putiban*', lit. the white people, but were "mistakenly" called by Geertz as *santri* (quotation marks are mine).

Today's pesantren, however, are found in both urban and rural areas, open for male and female students, combining the teaching of classical Islamic texts with varying degrees of general education, and attended by students of various economic and social backgrounds. The young santri may live in their pesantren until they have reached the age of marriage, but most commonly, they would leave when they completed their high school degree, either for pursuing their college studies, or returning to their homes. While the santri who have finished their studies may work in various sectors, formal and informal, many of them are commonly assigned in religious offices, and not seldom tasked with giving religious services and learning in their communities. Subsequently, collections of these pesantren graduates will have formed a larger community of santri that is linked through cultural, spiritual and intellectual bonds.

Each pesantren is led by a *kyai*, a religious male scholar required to serve as a living model of the pious Islamic life in his own pesantren. According to the pesantren culture, the *kyai* holds an absolute authority, and expects total obedience from their santri, an obedience that may extend beyond the santri's times at pesantren. In many cases, the *kyai* is often seen as "a little king", in the sense that his leadership can be bequeathed to his male descendants or relatives, signifying to a certain extent domination of patriarchal culture in pesantren and in the santri communities at large. Other examples of the pesantren patriarchal culture include the implementation of gender-segregation system. The patriarchal culture in pesantren, however, should not necessarily be seen as originating from the Islamic teachings, but as a marriage between Islamic values and Javanese and other local cultures in Indonesia (Srimulyani 2006). At present, though, a few pesantren in Indonesia are led by a *Nyai*, the female equivalent of *kyai*, breaking down the dominant power and authority of the pesantren's male leadership (Ibid).

As a learning institution, the main activity in pesantren is the transmission of Islamic knowledge. Its main curriculum is the teaching of *kitab kuning* (lit. yellow book), loosely defined as the classical Arabic-scripted texts of Islam (van Bruinessen 1990). The 'classical' here does not refer to "original texts of Islam of the Meccan and Medinan communities", but to authoritative texts of the earlier generation of Muslim scholars from "the medieval period of Islamic history, specifically from the twelfth to seventeenth centuries C.E. in which being Muslim and being Sufi were nearly synonymous" (Lukens-Bull 2005: 15).¹³ The learning methods in pesantren are structured upon a combination of time-discipline, self-patience and a strong reliance on the *kyai*'s reading of the *kitab kuning*. This signifies the salience of these classical texts of Islam both as the fundamental source of their religious knowledge, and the genealogical link of their religious tradition to the authoritative form of Islam of the

13) The number of the *kitab kuning* taught in pesantren varies, but can be classified as follows: Islamic jurisprudence and its principles, doctrine of Islam, traditional Arabic grammar, hadith collections, Qur'anic exegesis, mysticism and morality, collections of prayers, invocations, and Islamic magic, and texts in praise of the prophets and saints (Dhofier 1982; van Bruinessen: 1990).

earlier generation of Muslim scholars. Thus, despite many of today's pesantren having added a secular curriculum to their educational system for reasons of modernization (Hefner 2009; Phol 2009), the centrality of *kitab kuning* remains profound among the pesantren people as a source of Islamic rituals and identities. It is due to the santri's stickiness to tradition that I persist to call them traditionalist Muslims.

Nearly all traditionalist pesantren are closely tied, either culturally or politically, to *Nahdlatul Ulama*. It is a mass-Muslim organization, established in 1926 by a number of *kyai* in East Java pesantren, largely in response to an earlier establishment of similar organizations among modernist groups, such as Muhammadiyah and Al-Irsyad in 1912. Yet, despite the strong roots of pesantren in NU, nearly all pesantren are structurally independent from NU, partly due to the high authority of each *kyai* before his pesantren members and local communities. At the same time, as a religious community with so many interests, NU refuses any form of domination over the claim and production of religious truth in society. This is a situation that is a characteristics of Islam in general. In fact, not only is it usual among the NU people to have different opinions over religious, social, even political issues, but they also consist of various factions ranging from conservative, moderate, and to 'hybrid' forms of neo-modernist, post-traditionalist and liberal Islam.

In regard to political inclinations, the relation between NU and the Indonesian state has fluctuated across history. However, it is safe to say that the pesantren and NU people are generally loyal supporters of democratic values and nationalistic ideas (Feillard 1997), and that their political behavior in public domain is parallel to 'their renown rivalry with Muhammadiyah', that is, the rivalry that had started since at least early 20th century over the 'right' interpretation of Islam in public spaces (Bush 2009). Nevertheless, the arrival of Islamic transnational movements in the last few decades in Indonesia, which marks the "conservative turn" of Islam (van Bruinessen 2014) in the country, has challenged the traditional domination of NU and the modernist Muhammadiyah in Indonesian Muslim public sphere. The most notable examples of these movements include the Islamist political party, *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* ('Prosperous Justice Party, PKS), which are the Indonesian versions of Ikhwanul Muslimin; along with the increasing public presence of the Indonesian Hizbut Tahrir, the Salafi movement, and the Wahhabi-associated vigilante Muslim band, Islam Defender Front (FPI) in the last two decades or so. Consistent with the variety of Muslim groups in Indonesia, the kind of pesantren also varies, ranging from the traditionalist, modernist, Islamist, and Salafi pesantren (Hasan 2008; van Bruinessen 2008; Wahid 2014), all of which become the training ground for the next generation of their respective 'santri' Muslim communities.

I will now discuss my fieldwork among the santri communities, and the methods that I have used for collecting the data of this project.

Doing fieldwork in santri communities

Doing fieldwork is grounded in both the idea of ‘the field’ (Gupta and Ferguson 2007) and the subjective experience of the fieldworker (Watson 1999: 4). In this section, I explore how the idea of the “field” in my ethnography emerged across different stages of my fieldwork. I will reflect on how the idea of this research initially emerged, how I selected and framed my field, and how my own personal identities have influenced my fieldwork experiences.

How it all began

I was born and raised in a conservative santri family. My father, a strict believer, and an imam of a small mosque in a rural village located in the southern tip of Lampung, sent all his children to either modern *madrasah* (Islamic school) or traditional pesantren. He refused to have a TV in his house, and never allowed his children to watch a mobile film-screening regularly held in the village’s square.¹⁴ He would scold me and my siblings each time he found us watching a TV show at our neighbor’s house, let alone watching film. For him, not only did TV and film imply foreign influences upon our study in school, but they were also at odds with the prohibition of drawing animate creatures in Islam.¹⁵ My siblings and I, however, repeatedly broke his TV/film disciplinary rules as we kept leaving our house for watching *Drunken Fist*, our favorite Cantonese action TV series broadcasted every Wednesday evening.

Yet, there was a moment of ambiguity that caught me in a deep state of ambivalence. I vividly remember, every evening after the *isya* (ʾiṣā) prayer during the early 1990s, when the crisis between Iraq and the Western allies escalated into the Gulf war (Ashton 1995), and by then I was still in the third grade of *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* (Islamic primary school), my father would force me and all members of his family to come with him to our neighbor’s house for watching *Dunia Dalam Berita* (The World on The News). It was the state-owned TV station’s news program, starting at every 9p.m., which during the Gulf War, broadcasted a live report of the unfolding war. In my father’s eyes, the war was about the ‘heroically Islamic patriotism’ of Saddam Hussein against the ‘devilish brutality’ of the US and its Western allies. For him, following the war’s updates from TV was an expression of his emotional solidarity with his ‘Muslim brothers’ in the imagined desert of Iraq. At the time, however, I was too innocent to understand the “grown-up world” (De Saint-Exupery 1995) of politics and I found news shows too boring in general. I wanted to ask my father what was it about Saddam Hussein and the news about him, exempt from being a moral issue?

14) In between early 1980s and late 1990s, an open-air screening called *layar tancep* (literally meaning ‘screen struck in the ground’) was a common phenomenon in rural Indonesia, mostly screening cheap-production films of action and comedy genre.

15) I still vividly remember that a number of Islamic texts on this prohibition were inscribed by my father at several parts of our house, readable to anyone who entered our house’s living room.

Growing up with this experience, I have always had in my head a series of questions, concerning, for example, what was really at stake when my father was prohibiting us from watching TV and mobile film-screenings, but at the same time forcing us to watch a living image of his Iraqi Muslim hero on a TV? Why did particular Muslims like my father become very sensitive about TV/film images at one particular time, and not in different conditions? And what made my father different from many other Muslim parents in my village and elsewhere who comfortably let their children watch TV and go to the mobile film screening? It is this background and these questions that came after this, which have largely encouraged me to do ethnographic research on cinematic practices of the *pesantren* people. In the following section, I describe the methods by which I have selected the locations, structured the phases of research, and collected the data of my fieldwork.

Fieldwork sites and strategies

My fieldwork for this research, lasting 12 months in total, was carried out in three rounds. In August 2011, when my project was still in the proposal-writing stage, I conducted some preliminary fieldwork in Jakarta. In this phase, coinciding with *Ramadan*, a privileged month in which Muslims are encouraged to focus on their social, moral and pious discipline through fasting and Ramadan prayers (Möller 2007; Schielke 2009), my focus was to investigate how Muslims negotiate their religious activities with the secular characters of, for instance, going to a cinema theater. Through focusing on this, I did a lot of hanging out in shopping malls where cinema theaters in Jakarta were mostly located, and in the mosques where Muslims gathered for breaking their fast and performing *taraweh* (*tarawih*, a complimentary prayer performed during the Ramadan nights), not to mention watching religious programs on local TV stations.

I also used this occasion to talk to a few local academic figures, librarians, and cultural activists in the field of Indonesian cinema, in order to gather information with regard to my research, which at the meantime was set to mainly focus on Islamic films in mainstream Indonesian cinema. In particular, I met with Tommy Widiyanto Taslim, a cultural producer cum film activist who founded *filmpejalar.com* (film student), an online-based forum for local student filmmakers and film communities. During our talk in his office at the Jakarta Institute of Arts (Dewan Kesenian Jakarta), *Mas* Tommy informed me of a group of (female) *santri* in a *pesantren* in West Java, namely *pesantren* Kidang, who had produced a feature film. Based on his information, I went to Kidang right after leaving his office, to talk to Aisyah and Taufik, the Kidang *santri* who have played key roles in the *pesantren*'s film production. Considering their warm welcome to my interest in doing research about the cinematic programs and activities of their *pesantren*, when returning to The Netherlands, I was strongly motivated to include "film and the *pesantren* people" as one of the (possible) foci of my research.

Based on the potential of cinematic practices of *pesantren* people to be the subject of my research, I conducted the second round of my fieldwork, from January to July

2012, in a “site” that is not only central to santri communities, but also one from which I could identify and follow the linkage and spread of cinematic practices by and across the santri communities, “a multi-sited ethnography” (see Marcus 1995; Hannerz 2007). That site was the headquarters of PBNU (the central board of *Nahdlatul Ulama*) in Keramat Raya, Jakarta.

In Jakarta, I spent most of my time hanging out¹⁶ in the office of NU-Online, an NU-affiliated online media center, located in the fifth floor of the PBNU building, partly because the cinematic santri I mostly work with when in Jakarta, Sahal, was by then working in NU-Online. Yet, the most fundamental reason was because the living room of the news office has been a favorite hang-out and drop-by place for many other young santri who worked in, or just paid a regular visit to the PBNU building. It is mostly through my hanging out in the office of NU that I was able to meet the NU people, collect information, and follow the development of cinematic-related activities held by the santri in Jakarta and in other regions. Also through my fieldwork encounters with the santri I met in the NU building, I became connected with, directly or indirectly, to other cinematic santri working in various localities, such as a santri writer’s community (*Matapena*) in Yogyakarta, and santri filmmakers in a few traditional pesantren in central and East Java, sites that I also visit and observe during my fieldwork.

In February 2012, I paid a short visit to Kidang pesantren. Since then I frequently returned to the pesantren, mostly for a longer period of time, ranging from one week to three weeks, depending on the potential events for my fieldwork that happened in Kidang, Jakarta or other places. While I was in Kidang, I stayed in one of the lodgings assigned to senior santri, i.e. those who have become *ustadz pengabdian* (‘ustadz on service’). In terms of facilities, their rooms are the same as the other santri’s rooms: thin carpet, small cupboard, and shared with other occupants. Yet, living with the senior santri allowed me to have direct access to information that was often circulated only among the pesantren’s teachers, while at the same time I was still freely able to talk to the students. During my stay in Kidang, I tried to follow the santri’s disciplines and habits, such as waking up at 4a.m. for the collective *subuh* (*ṣubḥ*) prayer, sitting-in on some of their classes, playing sport with the santri during free time, joining the Qur’anic lessons at the mosque, and having my meals from the pesantren’s modest kitchen, eating along with the students. My observations, conversations, audio recordings, photographs, and field notes were organized in between these activities.

In general, my own santri background and network helped me “to establish myself in the community” (Monaghan and Just 2000), in a relatively easy way, either when in the NU headquarters, in Kidang, or elsewhere. Most of the time, I was warmly encouraged to join in and, often, be part of the cinematic-related practices organized

16) I started my hangouts in the office of NU-Online, by joining the santri who were used to sitting at the office’s veranda, talking over random topics, while sipping their cups of coffee, and smoking their cigarettes.

by the santri. In Kidang, the santri even called me *ustadz* (*ustād*, a teacher, here, in a religious sense of meaning), possibly to show a certain level of their respect to my own santri background.¹⁷ Yet, aside from doing fieldwork in the santri communities, I also researched professional filmmakers who have played a crucial role to the current rise of Islamic cinema in Indonesia. When doing it however, I repeatedly found myself deeply troubled by my lack of confidence to step into the style of sociability of these filmmakers, to the point that I realized that it would be hard for me to build a deeply engaging fieldwork relationship with them within a short span of time. Since doing fieldwork is “an art of the possible” (Hannerz 2010: 77), such lack of access eventually led me to decide to fully focus on doing research on “film and the pesantren people”, a field in which I felt more easily related and accepted.

Thus, the third round of my fieldwork, from March to August 2013, was mainly carried out in Kidang pesantren, with less travel to the headquarters of NU in Jakarta. I have to admit that the previous fieldwork in Kidang, where I lived with the santri inside the pesantren, was physically and emotionally exhausting, since it was ‘ethically’ difficult for me to have a break from the pesantren’s busy routines. Because of this experience, I decided this time to not to stay in the santri’s lodging. Instead I rented a room in a villager’s house near the pesantren. As I have been known among the Kidang members through my previous fieldwork, living outside Kidang did not trouble the construction of my relationship with the Kidang people. In fact, from a range of perspectives, it allowed me to create a closer and more open communication with a few of the students who often visited my rental room. Occasionally, their visits opened up new insights into their behavior, as I encountered them talking about and doing things they did not (or were not allowed to) normally do in front of me when we were in the pesantren area.

Hanging-out and having informal conversations were my main strategies for data collection. While the santri who engage in cinematic practices are mostly young people, I tried to talk with santri of different backgrounds, age, gender, occupation, and social class. I rarely formally interviewed the santri, but when I did it, it mostly was with the female santri groups in Kidang as I had little freedom to hang out with them, due to the pesantren’s gender segregation rules.¹⁸

I would also conduct semi-structured interviews during the later stages of my fieldwork, often either to confirm or enrich the data I had. I used tape recorder, camera and diary to record my data, and I always did the recording with the consent from the concerned. Yet, especially for an event that was open for public, such as workshop or seminar, I mostly recorded it without asking a permission. I usually wrote down my data on site, or immediately upon my return to my room. However, a few of the ethnographic materials of this thesis comes from my fieldwork experience that is unwritten. For when

17) I will discuss my own Islamic education later.

18) As I will show later, my interview with the santriwati was always conducted under the gaze of Kidang’s authorities, both in literal and metaphorical senses.

in the field, I was not always able to write all of my fieldwork experiences in view of the fact that I often lose the sense of what really matters to my research (Agar, as cited in Okely 2008: 56). Still, a few of those unwritten experiences last vividly long in my memory, and upon reflection, I find out their significance to my project.¹⁹

Online spaces were also part of my fieldwork. Most of the cinematic santri are Internet savvy. They write blogs, post video on You Tube, and photos on Instagram, and are active on especially Facebook and Twitter, just like many other young (and not so young) people in Indonesia.²⁰ I followed their Facebook statuses, Twitter posts, and read writings on their blogs as sources of my research data. Online and offline worlds are better understood as two interrelated spaces (Lim 2005), and one's activities on the Internet are an extension of their social interactions in the offline realities, and vice versa.

Likewise, I did a library research in Sinematek film library, the National Library, and the National Archives in Jakarta, where I watched a number of Islamic-themed films that are part of the history of Indonesian cinema, and read a selection of archives, film posters, newspapers and magazines. I also consulted the rich collection about Indonesian history held by the (since moved) KITLV library in Leiden, where I especially look into published *fatwa* (*fatwā*, legally-religious opinion) of Indonesian *ulama* and religious institutions, as well as other historical information and knowledge related to Islamic films. My aim was to prepare myself with the historical accounts of Indonesian Muslims' engagement with cinematic practices and their representation in Indonesian cinema.

In the course of my fieldwork, I also felt the need to compare situations in Kidang pesantren with those in other pesantren that have similar interests in film practices. To this end I went to pesantren Darunnajah in Jakarta and pesantren Gontor in East Java, both of which are regarded as modern pesantren. My visit to these pesantren was especially important as it gave me a sense about the extent to which, despite similarly being modern, the Kidang pesantren is more attached to the teachings of classical texts of Islam, an ethical disposition that, as I will show in the dissertation, significantly has shaped the cinematic discourses and practices of the Kidang people.

In terms of language, most of the people I worked with used the formal Indonesian language (*Bahasa Indonesia*) for our communication. The santri of Kidang, because

19) The role of memory in relation to field notes has long been discussed in anthropology. In his article "*I am a Fieldnote*", Jackson (1990) writes that for anthropologists, memory is another kind of field note. This is because while field notes are created by ethnographers as 'evidence', these written materials are only a trigger. When interpreting their field notes, and writing them down into a coherent narrative, anthropologists also draw on the total experience of their fieldwork, most of it are not written, but stored up in their bodies, memories, and all senses (Okely 1994: 21).

20) Social media has become hugely popular in Indonesia. Report has it that about 80 million out of 250 million people, mostly aged under 35, are active social media users, with Facebook, Twitter and Instagram topping the rank (Loras 2016). They use social media for various purposes, such as social communication, political activities, religious expressions, and economic transaction.

of the pesantren's language rules, would talk to each other in a mix of English, Arabic, and Sundanese languages. But when they talked to me, or when I was present among them, the santri would quickly change their language into Indonesian. Occasionally however, especially when they did not want me to be included in their talks, the santri would switch their language either into Arabic or mostly Sundanese. I frequently found this situation a bit awkward, because when they were doing that, both my Arabic proficiency and my father's Sundanese roots could still help me understand what they tried to conceal. I had never confronted them about it, though, especially for reasons that I will discuss below.

Insiderness and reflexivity

My relation with the subjects of my research to a certain extent, is a relation of an insider. This is because, culturally, I am a santri. Not only because of the fact that my parents, grandparents, and great grandparents were santri of strong NU affiliation, but also because I spent most of my education in both modern Islamic boarding schools and in traditional pesantren.

My insider status as a santri, however, has not always smoothed my fieldwork experiences. In fact, I was often confronted with, for example, questions about "what makes a site a field in anthropology" (Gupta and Ferguson 2007: 31). If the pesantren culture in which I have lived and experienced long before I started my doctoral research cannot be legitimized as "a field", as many anthropologists would argue, then to what extent and by what ways I am authorized to use that knowledge for my research? At the same time, because of my personal santri background, the pesantren people I worked with often assumed that I have known everything about their culture, beliefs and everyday live practices, giving them a tendency to provide less detailed information. Likewise, my familiarity with, and my previous knowledge about the pesantren culture often, unconsciously, led me to take for granted, and feel an attachment too strong with many aspects of what I had encountered during fieldwork; a situation of "homeblindness" (Eriksen 2015 [1995]: 41) that made it quite difficult for me to avoid biases and remain objective.

Paradoxically, being a santri does not necessarily mean that my santri interlocutors will turn a blind eye to my "outsider-ness". In fact, there were times that I was always an outsider to the santri, and that the borders between my insider-ness and outsider-ness was easily penetrable and quick to change. On one evening, for example, three santri and one assistant teacher paid a visit to my rental house, for watching a video of badminton matches from my laptop. While watching the video, we chatted about some random topics, until at one point, one of the santri begun to gossip about one of the Kidang authorities. The assistant teacher who was among us was initially taking part in the gossip. Yet, when realizing that the santri's talk was one step too far, he quickly reminded the santri to not talk about secrets of pesantren in front of a "*lain urang Kidang*" (a non-Kidang person), i.e. me as an outsider researcher.

Similarly, my affiliation with a Dutch university, while at many times advantageous to my fieldwork experiences, could be a trigger for interrogation among my santri interlocutors (as well as among my other Indonesian people in general), as they would like to check me whether or not living in the Netherlands had compromised “the purity of my santri-ness”. Obviously, there was an expectation among the santri that I should act and think like the santri generally. Failing to answer their expectations could trigger a critical reaction from the santri, thus risking the relationship that I have built so carefully with my informants. My gender as a male fieldworker influenced my otherness among the female santri of Kidang, since the pesantren’s gender segregation rule denied any male access to private spaces of the female areas of Kidang pesantren. Of course, the gender segregation rule still allowed me to talk to them in more public spaces or outside the pesantren premises, but it would not let me hang out with them as free as that I did with the male santri.

Obviously, my struggles over positioning myself during fieldwork are by no means unique. Most fieldworkers, whether doing ethnography at home or at foreign societies, are commonly challenged by the difficulties to maintain the insider-outsider boundaries (see for example, Halstead 2001; Berreman 2007 [1972]; Powell 2017). In fact, solving these problems is one of the main tasks of a fieldworker. The 1970s and 1980s reflexive trend in anthropology has provided an insight into the ways in which ethnographers could learn and enrich their knowledge about the societies they studied through a reflection of their identities and their constitutive positions as fieldworkers in relation to their fieldworks and informants (see Robben and Sluka 2007).

In my experience, I found out that a crucial step to solve my fieldwork struggles is by acknowledging and fully accepting the multiple dimensions of my identities when doing fieldwork: such as an Indonesian, a male fieldworker, a traditional santri, a PhD student in a secular and liberal university, and a friend to some of the santri I work with. It was only after I acknowledged and accepted different dimensions of my identities (as well as the identities of my informants), that I was able to “step outside myself” (Watson 1999: 4), helping me to see myself and my studied society from distant, open-minded, critical but emphatic perspectives. How the santri reacted to my identities is beyond my control, but once I came to terms with my identities, I have more self-confidence and courage to take the risks that may appear from the different roles that I played out when doing fieldwork, while simultaneously I became more aware and respectful of the different identities of my research subjects. In short, accepting my identities helped me realize what Dutch anthropologist Léon Buskens (2015) has reminded us about the variety of our statuses, and the importance of being aware of our changing statuses in relation to our research informants when doing fieldwork.

Still, to protect the identity of the people I worked with, I have rendered anonymous almost all their names, except those who are public figures. For the same reason, I do not rightly name the pesantren in which I mainly conducted my research, despite it would be easily recognizable through my description of the pesantren here and elsewhere.

Outline of the Dissertation

This dissertation consists of six chapters and is divided into two parts. Part One, consisting of the first two chapters, discusses the topography and the infrastructure of the rise and spread of cinematic fever, or a contagious passion and interest among the santri with regard to cinema. Part Two, the case study, focuses on various dimensions of cinematic practices in the everyday lives of members of Kidang pesantren in West Java.

Chapter One introduces the fields of cultural production in which the cinematic santri work and compete against. It explores the socio-historical backgrounds of the rise of cinematic santri among the NU people, the ranges of style and discourse of their cinematic activities, and their positioning among their santri communities and against the ‘other’ Muslim filmmakers. I show how the santri in the NU headquarters and beyond have characterized their cinematic practices through an identification with NU-pesantren tradition in order to be recognized among each other, while at the same time have used the similar strategy to position themselves in the country’s cinematic battle of Islam vis-à-vis the modernist and Islamist Muslim groups. I argue, while the rise of cinematic fever among the santri is produced through changes and continuities in multiple sectors of the social, political and technological life of the NU community, it is a contest over the question for legitimate authority to speak for, and on behalf of, the assumedly ‘right’ interpretation of Islam, especially through film media, that has been central to the santri’s cinematic discourses.

Chapter Two explores the ways in which, against the lack of cinematic infrastructure in the provision of santri communities, the santri have developed an alternative form of infrastructure for facilitating mobile their cinematic practices, such as a mobile cinema practice, writers’ communities, DIY film-making projects, and an online infrastructure. By focusing on the poetic dimension of infrastructure, or one that is operated beyond its technical function, I find out that the use and development of these alternative cinematic infrastructures by the pesantren people is largely facilitated by “a sense of cinematic solidarity”. That is, a collective emotion among the cinematic santri to help and support each other for the mobility and development of their cinematic projects, the connection of which is shaped on the ground of their common identification with the tradition of NU and pesantren. However, looking at infrastructure as both bridge and barrier, I also argue that, as long as networks of pesantren tradition have enabled the young santri to render their cinematic practices mobile, the very similar networks have the potentials to limit the mobility of the santri’s cinematic practices within their communities.

In Chapter Three to Chapter Six, I shift my focus to discuss a range of cinematic practices in the everyday lives of the Kidang santri. Chapter Three starts by looking at the ways the Kidang people have paved the roads of cinematic practices into the very interior of their pesantren’s areas and ordinary lives. I focus on the pesantren’s narratives about changes, the agentive role of its cinematic santri figures, and their habitual acts

of citing classical texts of Islam (assumed to be originated from the *kitab kuning*) in order to authorize their engagement with either the pesantren's changes, in general, or cinematic practices in particular. I show how film-making has become an ethical practice among the santri, as ideas about the (re)production of the pesantren's (textual) tradition are intimately tied to their collective capabilities and desires to engage with cinematic technologies and practices, hence becoming traditional santri in a modern and globalizing world.

Chapter Four explores the ways in which practices of film screening and cinema going are desired, regulated, and negotiated in, and by santri of, Kidang pesantren. A santri trip to a cinema theater can be experienced as transgressing the pesantren's authorized boundaries, and a santri being seen in a public space such as a cinema theatre can be associated with sinful behavior. In this chapter, I focus on the production of the authorized and non-authorized spaces in Kidang, secular tensions that come along with cinema going practices among the santri, and the cultural and subjective ways by which the santri have dealt with these tensions. I give ample attention to the ways structures of authority are constructed and distributed among the Kidang members. I show that to the extent that Kidang's production of space has been lied out on the basis of the pesantren's structure of authority: it is the very same authority that has 'authoritatively' enabled the santri to leave the pesantren's ground for going to such a secular space as cinema theater. Interestingly, their capacity to do so is cultivated through their time spend in Kidang, and is passed on, as if tradition, from generation to generation. Here, tradition continues to play a role in the ways the santri deal with worries and tensions arising from a cinema going experience.

In Chapter Five, I turn my attention to the materiality of film and other new media technologies that relate to it, such as mobile phone and the Internet, and the ways they have been objectified by members of the Kidang pesantren for fashioning their personal and collective identities, and their social and political distinctions. This chapter shows how the engagement with these technologies, along with the visual and communicative possibilities offered by them, has generated anxiety among the older members of Kidang pesantren, and have often disrupted the pesantren's social order and construction of authority. In contrast to it however, many of the younger generation of santri come to the materiality of film technologies for their aspirational desires toward Western ideas of modernity, despite modernity that comes with it is seen by the Kidang people as destructive to santri's piety and morality. Because of this, the santri developed particular discourse on how to master these technologies, and to use them according to their own tastes and needs, or to phrase it with their own rhetoric: "being santri 'and' modern, not just being santri 'but' modern".

In Chapter Six I explore the ways in which images of the pesantren are produced by the films of Kidang santri. Here, taking a cue from Mitchell (2005) who argues that the act of showing and seeing in "never purely visual", I attend to the various

ways in which the decision to film and not to film certain realities and materialities of the pesantren world are highly shaped by manifold desires and intentionalities. In particular, I examine the development of santri's film-making knowledge, relations of power and moral virtues that structure the everyday life practices of Islam in Kidang pesantren as an institution of learning, and politics of representation of the pesantren world in Indonesian film history. I argue, the efficacy of images do not only take place on the surface of screen, but it also unfolds in the ways they are emotionally, technically, religiously, and politically rendered significant in the contexts of how the Kidang people understand and give meanings their life words. In the last part of this chapter, however, I broaden my argument by examining the extent to which film can be served as a means to express a sort of Muslim femininity in a place that is strongly dominated by patriarchal culture, considering the fact that the majority of Kidang members who are engaged in film-making practices are (not) coincidentally women.