# The cinematic Santri : Youth culture, tradition and technology in Muslim Indonesia
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# Chapter 1

# Cinematic Fever

## Introduction

On 12th April 2012, two weeks after the National Film-making Day (30th March) a large banner was hooked up in front of the main building of the central board of NU in central Jakarta, to announce that a film celebration was held inside the NU building, and by the NU administration. The celebration was opened by As'ad Said Ali, one of the NU's vice general chairmen, and it took the form of a film discussion. The discussion focuses on examining how to reclaim the position of locally-produced films against the influx of Hollywood, Chinese, and Indian film imports. Invited to speak during the discussion were a representative of the Indonesian government (the directorate of film of the ministry of tourism and creative economy), a film critic, and an NU-affiliated independent filmmaker. Before the discussion started, Gus Mus, a kyai and a cultural producer who by then was *Wakil Rois Am* of NU *Syuriah* (vice president general of NU's executive administration body) delivered his keynote speech. Importantly, upon concluding his speech, Gus Mus made an NU-typical joke that triggered laughter among the audience. His joke was, "*If it were not in the era of Gus Mus as the vice president general of NU, I could not imagine that such a film discussion as that we now had here would be organized in the main building of NU. I could not imagine it would take place in the era of Kyai Bisri Syansuri*".[1]

    Significantly, cinematic activities of this sort are not the first to be organized among

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1)    He is one of the founding fathers of NU who was active as an NU leader until 1970s.

the NU members, and Gus Mus, who is a prolific poet, was possibly using hyperbolic language when making his joke. This is because, back in the 1960s, some of the NU leaders had actually been active in the country's film arena through Lesbumi – a cultural wing of NU, established in 1962. Lesbumi was founded to counter the influence of the left-leaning Lekra, the cultural wing of the long-disbanded Indonesian communist party. This means, while the film discussion can be read symbolically as a public statement on NU's "return" to the country's film arena, Gus Mus rhetorical joke bears implicit witness to the ongoing changes on the part of the NU communities and their surrounding worlds, especially ones that have allowed for their current (re)emerging cinematic practices.

Based on these premises, this chapter aims to explore the ways in which the NU people want and are able to (re)turn to the film arena, within the contexts of post-Suharto Indonesia. In particular, it addresses the questions of "What makes the NU people (re)turn to the film arena, and what does it mean for them to do so?", "Why it happened now and how?", "What are their discourses about film? And how do their films differ from the others?".

To answer these questions, I follow Bourdieu (1993), who locates the relationship between a cultural work and its producer within "the space of positions and the space of the position-taking" (p. 30), or the field of cultural production. For Bourdieu, the value of a cultural work is not decided solely by its producer, but is relationally embedded in a set of specific circumstances and relations of power, upon which both the cultural work and the producer are forced to adjust, yet in which they are at the same time enabled to defend and improve their positions vis-à-vis other agents having involved in the field (see Little 2011). This is because, while the producer does not work in "a vacuum", but in "a concrete social relation defined by a set of objective social relations" (Johnson 1993: 6), the meaning of a cultural work is not inevitable. Rather, a cultural work is "*made to have a meaning*", that is, through "signifying practices" (Myers 2007: 7, emphasis original), i.e. the institutions and discourses that establish the meanings of a cultural work, as well as the social relations within which the practices of meaning-making occur.

In line with Bourdieu's notion of 'the field', this chapter is an attempt to examine the field of cultural production of the cinematic practices of the santri. In this regard, I will address my attention to the following aspects. First, the main figure of the santri's cinematic practices. Second, the historical backgrounds and socio-political landscapes significant to the santri's cinematic uptakes. Third, the cultural discourse and social agents by which the values of santri's cinematic practices are classified, and against which they are distinguished.

Also, it is imperative here to clarify that many of my arguments in this chapter draw on the concept of 'cinematic fever', which I adopted from Doreen Lee's (2016) '*pemuda* fever' (*pemuda* meaning 'youth'). Drawing from Derrida's 'Archive Fever', Lee uses it to describe "a contagious feeling of political belonging and identification" among the *Reformasi* generation (2016: 11). This refers to the young activists central in bringing

down the New Order era, who continue to document, preserve and (re)produce their *Reformasi* stories as part of their civic participation in the national history and politics. Here, I want to link these young activists to the "cinematic fever" of the young santri I worked with, and who had their own kind of "fever". Although they are quite different groups of people, they share some common grounds. These are being youthful and being Indonesian at a particular historical and political juncture, i.e. the post-Suharto era. My use of the term "cinematic fever" refers to an emphasis on the contagious energy and passion that the santri have invested in the campaigns for the significance of cinema for articulating their political and ideological differences.

I divide this chapter into three parts. I start with an exploration of the figure of the cinematic santri in order to foreground the sociopolitical and historical backgrounds that are significant to the rise of cinematic fever among the NU people. Then, I attend to the characteristics of the santri's cinematic activism, by exploring its ideal discourse, its position vis-à-vis the country's more established filmmakers and before the eye of the NU elites, its mode of operation, and its strategic linkage to the 1960s NU's cinematic tradition. In the last part of the chapter, I discuss the competition between the NU's film discourse of Islamic film with the ones that are produced by other groups of Muslim filmmakers, especially the modernist and the Islamist groups. Finally, I make two key arguments. These are that, firstly, the rise of the modern figure of cinematic santri is produced through changes and continuities in multiple sectors of the social, political, and technological life of the NU community; and that secondly, a contest over the question for legitimate authority to speak for, and on behalf of, the assumedly 'right' interpretation of Islam in Indonesia through visual film media has been central to their cinematic discourses.

## The cinematic santri figure

In an attempt to identify the key figures of Indonesian modernity, Barker and Lindquist et al (2009) have defined a figure as a category of "subject positions that embody, manifest, and to some degree, comment upon a particular historical moment in the complex articulation of large-scale processes that are not always easy to grasp in concrete terms" (p. 37). This figure is best understood as a symbol that functions as a semiotic sign of a particular social formation at a given historical moment (Barker et al 2014). What is significant in their approach is that it describes the figure as a historical agent, one that only appears against specific particular backgrounds (see also Introduction of this dissertation). In line with their approach, I look at the cinematic santri as a figure of modernity, in order to help us understand the extent to which its emergence is set against a larger-scale transformation that has taken place within and surrounding the NU-santri society.

In doing so, I will focus on Sahal's story throughout this chapter. He is my primary santri interlocutor whose cinematic activities in the NU headquarters proved to be

standing out in and as significant for the spread and intensification of the cinematic fever across the santri-NU communities. In particular, I will use his cinematic creative practices, experiences and struggles as an entry point from which our understanding of the emergence of cinematic santri can be further developed.

### Sahal's case

A self-professed film-enthusiast, Sahal was born in 1979 in a santri family in a vibrant and dense village near the town of Cirebon, West Java. Sahal went to 'general' (secular) public schools, *madrasah* and pesantren.[2] Later in 2000, he attended a bachelor's program at a *Syariah* Faculty of IAIN Yogyakarta (*Institut Agama Islam Negeri*, State Institute of Islamic Studies), during which time he was also active in LKiS (*Lembaga Kajian Islam dan Sosial,* 'The Institute of Islamic and Social Studies'). In late 2006, he moved to work at the NU headquarters in Jakarta where his involvement started with the central *LakpesdamNU* (*Lembaga Kajian dan Pengembangan Sumber Daya Manusia*, 'NU's Institute of Research and Human Resource Development').[3] When I first met him in early 2012, he was working for *NU-Online*, NU's online media center.

Sahal has no academic background in film-making, and he doesn't know how to make films. Yet, over the course of my fieldwork, I saw him organizing various forms of cinematic activities within the provision of the NU communities, either in the NU headquarters in Jakarta or wherever it is. Examples of his cinematic activities range from holding film screenings, film seminars and discussion, and to film competition and (trainings in) film-making. He also created an 'alternative'' network of film exhibitions for an NU audience. For this end, he approached several NU senior cultural producers to ask their patronage, and built communication with his fellow santri at other centers of the NU community who shared a similar passion and activism in film. He also benefited from the prevalence of *NU-Online* and he used his personal social-media accounts to reach out as wide as possible to have an impact with his cinematic activism. In short, Sahal is one of the many santri in the NU headquarters and beyond who is knowledgeable of the potential of the film medium in conveying messages and influencing society, as well as one to have invested his energy in the spread of cinematic fever amongst the santri across different centers of NU communities.

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2)   Unlike *madrasa* of the classical Middle-East Islam (Makdisi 1970), the Indonesian *madrasah* is not a higher learning institution, but a 'basic' school that consists of elementary, primary and high grades, and that has instruction and grading system on general and Islamic subjects, of which the latter received less attention than the former. By this, the Indonesian *madrasah* also differs from *madrasah* in Thailand and *madrasa* in Yaman and South Asian countries, all of which are more of an Indonesian equivalent to the pesantren (see Messick 1993; Noor 2008; Lukens-Bull 2010). Willing to the local distinction of each institution, I decide to maintain the Indonesian name *madrasah*, instead of *madrasa,* when referring to it.

3)   Information regarding his biography can be retrieved from his blog, http://www.sahhala. wordpress.com (last accessed, 19 September 2015).

Sahal seems to have had an interest in films since a young age. This is particularly evidenced by his childhood memory, which he often shared with me and others, about him going to open-air film screenings which were regularly held near his village. However, his cinematic 'activism' has only begun recently. As he told me, by early 2008, he used to hang out with his fellow santri at an Islamic University of Jakarta, where they discussed the significance of screening a *film Islam* ('Islamic film') for an NU-pesantren audience within the "framework" of the country's film-making day, which is annually celebrated on the 30th day of March.[4] Although, the screening plan was not realized, this idea became an intermittent topic of discussions between Sahal and his fellow santri, who regularly hang out in the "guest room" of his NU-Online office. This place was a favorite hang-out and drop-by place among santri who visited the PBNU building.

Three years later, Sahal was finally able to realize his cinematic plans, as he established Lintang Sanga, a mobile cinema practice through which he organized film screenings and discussions in small towns and pesantren throughout Java. While it was only a short-lived venture, he continued traveling from one pesantren to another, not only playing films, but also organizing film-making workshops. His negotiation skills and wide networks with many of the NU-santri people have enabled his cinematic programs to be relatively well-received among the NU people at large and have allowed him to collaborate with many other santri who have the same interest in film. In 2016, working with an NU-affiliated independent filmmaker, Sahal received some film funding from the Indonesian Ministry of Religion for producing *Jalan Dakwah Pesantren* (A Pesantren's Way of Proselyting Islam), a documentary film genre of the intellectual and cultural lives of santri in pesantren. The film was later screened through his NU-pesantren networks, not only in Indonesia but also internationally. As such, Sahal is an important figure in the emerging popularity of cinematic practices among the NUers.

My purpose for focusing on Sahal as an example of the figure of the cinematic santri is because of his biographical accounts and cinematic activities provide insightful openings into how the modern figure of cinematic santri has emerged. Firstly, his young age, educational background, and participation in relevant organizations, all show the extent to which the emerging figure of cinematic santri is a result of socio-cultural and political changes that have occurred within the larger NU-pesantren community. Secondly, the year when his passion in cinematic activism first started, i.e. 2008, was the same year the highly-celebrated Islamic film *Ayat Ayat Cinta* (Verses of Love) was released by a non-NU santri producer. This indicates that the emergence of our figure is strongly connected to the country's contemporary developments of both Islam and

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4)    I borrow the term "framework" from van Heeren (2012) who uses it to refer to a New Order's practice of "framing films in a specific context" (p. 96) in order to reconstruct the state's historical narratives and political ideology. The country's film-making day celebration is an apparent example of such New Order's framing-film practices, and the cinematic santri are not totally unaware about it. Yet, instead of leaving it out, they use it for their own cinematic agendas, as this chapter will show later.

a range of mediated *dakwah* movements. It refers to the emerging popularity of new media technologies among various groups of Muslim communities for (a battle of) both propagating and speaking for Islam. This means, the turn to cinematic practices by the santri has much to do with the strategical positioning of NU vis-à-vis other groups of Muslims in public domains, especially through cinematic discourses and practices.

Thirdly, Sahal's cinematic activism, which was only started in 2008, bring into minds the popularity of '*indie*' (independent) film movement in the post-Suharto era. That is, the rise of young film activists who started to produce their own films with 'do it yourself' spirit (van Heeren 2012: 2), in order to voice "the concerns of their generation" (Paramaditha 2015: 3). The santri and the *indie* film activists are similarly young and living in post-Suharto Indonesia and thus the link between them is worthy of being explored. In addition to that, Sahal's frequent visits to cinema for watching (mostly secular, Western) films, a routine he had been doing since his childhood through his mobile-cinema experiences, also reminds us that the emerging field of cultural production of a santri's cinematic practices is not separated from the other secular and Western film circuits.

Finally, Sahal's close contacts with Lesbumi, an NU-cultural wing by which NU was able to produce a feature film in the 1960s, speaks to the significance of NU's (assumed) cinematic tradition for the rise of our cinematic figure.

I will now explore the most relevant of these insights in the following sections. I start from the positioning of NU in view of the other Muslim groups for political influences in public domains.

### *Religious rivalry*

One of the strongest narratives in the study of Islam in Indonesia suggests the significance of a 'traditionalist-modernist' divide as an analytic tool to explain the political and cultural expressions of the NU people in public spheres (Geertz 1960; Bowen 1993; Hefner 2000; Bush 2009; Burhani 2015). This divide was triggered by a religious conflict between the traditionalist and modernist groups. The traditionalists are loyal adherents to the schools of *ulama* of the classical era of Islam (*taklid*, or *taqlīd*), and observe culturally-contextualized practices of Islamic rituals. The modernist Muslims, who began to emerge in what is now Indonesia by early twentieth century, are widely known for their strict reference to the Qur'an and *Hadis,* and for their advocacy for 'purifying' Islam from local customs.[5] They reject the traditionalists' practice of *taklid*, and regard the culturally-contextualized practices of Islamic rituals as *bidah* (*bid'a*), or unacceptable innovation. This religious conflict became a serious threat for the traditionalist groups when the modernists, such as Muhammadiyah and Al-Irsyad, established an organizational form of Islam in 1912, and used it as an institutional means

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5)    By this, thus, some scholars have dubbed the latter as classicalist, and the latter as reformist (Lukens-Bull 2005).

for the spread of their understandings and practices of Islam. In response to this, the traditionalist Muslims created an organization of their own right, namely *Nahdlatul Ulama* in 1926, largely served to preserve "their beliefs and religious expressions" (Bush 2002: 346). The birth of NU, in other words, is a result of religious rivalry between the traditionalist and modernist groups (see also van Bruinessen 1994 and 1996; Feillard 1994; and Fealy 1996).

Further discussions about NU's rivalry with the modernist Muslims, however, have seen several moments of rapprochement between the two groups (Feillard 1997), exemplified by NU's involvement in Masyumi (Consultative Council of Indonesian Muslim). It is an Islamic political party active during the Sukarno era that was dominated by the modernist groups. This in turn has invited some scholars to move beyond the modernist-traditionalist rivalry discourse when discussing Islam in Indonesia (Barton 1994; van Bruinessen 1994; Fealy 1996; Effendy 1998). Nevertheless, Robin Bush's research on NU's civil society movement in post-Suharto Indonesia shows that this rivalry is still relevant amongst the younger generations of NU (2009 [2002]). Bush describes that the eventual split of NU with Masyumi in 1952, triggered by the traditionalists' severe disappointment at the attitudes of modernist factions of the party toward the NU *ulama*. The event was so traumatic for the NU people that their memories about it are passed from generation to generation. Because of this, memories of this conflict are not only still vivid among the younger generation of NU, but also continue to occasion their socio-political and cultural behaviors in contemporary public domains (Bush 2002: 346).

Current trends of Islam in Indonesia also show the rise of Islamist groups[6] such as the political party *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* ('Prosperous Justice Party, PKS) in the early 2000s, which aims at 'Islamising Indonesia" through party-political activism leading to an establishment of an Islamic state (Machmudi 2008). Members of PKS have their origins in an Islamic predication movement called '*Jamaah Tarbiyah*' ('the Tarbiyah Movement'), mushrooming across mosques of the top Indonesian secular universities in 1980s. Many members of *Jamaah Tarbiyah* were children of the rising Muslim middle class families who benefited from the New Order's economic growth in the 1980s (Rinaldo 2008: 35). Pioneers of the *Tarbiyah* Movement had close links to ex-Masyumi members, who sent the former to Egypt or Saudi Arabia to study Islam, in which they learned the teachings of Muslim Brotherhood (Machmudi 2008: 93). The PKS and its auxiliary organizations are seen by the NU people as a rival similar with, but also different from Muhammadiyah. That is, while they similarly support a purist view

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6)   My use of the term Islamism/Islamist refers to the alignment of resurgent Islam with political ideology (Lybarger 2007: 1) and suggests to its diverse forms (Cinar 2005: 13). In this regard,  PKS as an Islamist party, is no different in that it upholds a more moderate and pragmatic approach than do the Indonesian hardliners Islamists groups such as the Indonesian Hizbut Tahrir (HTI), or the Islamist vigilante groups such as the Islam Defenders Front (FPI) (Machmudi 2008 (2006): 193).

of Islamic orthodoxy, in term of Islamic politics, the former generally tends to hold an Islamist approach and the latter a nationalistic one.[7]

Still, as urban, educated, and middle-class Muslims, most Muhammadiyah and PKS people are similarly known for their savviness of using new media and popular culture, especially film, for propagating their Islamic understandings, and articulating their Islamic expressions in public sphere. An example of this is the 2008 release of *Ayat Ayat Cinta,* by a Muhammadiyah-affiliated director, Hanung Bramantyo, and based on a novel by a PKS-associated writer, Habiburrahman el-Shirazy. A romantic love story of a pious Indonesian student of Al-Azhar University, (thus, a santri in the wider sense), the film had attracted no less than two million paying audiences across the country's mainstream cinema theaters, and in a few neighbouring countries. Its commercial success was in turn followed by a wave of Islamic films whose narratives appropriated the structures, themes and plots of *Ayat Ayat Cinta*.

There is a tendency among the traditionalist people to respond to the innovations of their Muslim rivals in "an equally bold manner" (Hefner 2009: 25). The initial year when Sahal and his fellow santri in the NU headquarters first started their cinematic activism, i.e. 2008, is crucial here, and as far as I am concerned, by no means a coincidence. In the last part of this chapter, I discuss how this film has sparked debate among the santri I worked with in the NU headquarters and beyond. Here, it is sufficient to say that many of the santri criticized the portrayal of 'Indonesian Islam' in *Ayat Ayat Cinta* as being reminiscent of an 'Arabized-way' of being a Muslim. As such has encouraged them develop their own efforts.[8]

Four years after the release of *Ayat Ayat Cinta,* or by the time I just begun my fieldwork, cinematic practices such as film-making, film screening, and film discussion, become a new trend among younger santri across Indonesia. Sahal is only one example of the santri in the NU headquarters who 'discovered' the effectiveness, if not also the 'coolness' of cinema for expressing their beliefs and political differences. In other places, many other young santri also started to organize their own cinematic practices from their pesantren. While most of them similarly conducted their cinematic practices with the spirit of DIY (Do It Your Self), the trajectories of their cinematic practices are not always the same. Some of them do not have the support from their pesantren's authorities.

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7)  I associated Muhammadiyah with nationalistic movement because it is a national organization that was involved in the struggle for independence, and supported the establishment of Indonesia as a Pancasila state, instead of an Islamic state (van Bruinessen 2014: 64).

8)  van Heeren (2012: 119-120) has also demonstrated that the emergence of Islamic film communities in the early post-Suharto era, which initiated the organization of film screenings and film discussions in the wide-ranged provisions of the modernist-Islamist-affiliated groups, did not only dominate, but also preceded that of the traditionalist NU people. This says the degree to which the turn to cinematic practices by the NU santri has many to do with the earlier cinematic moves done by the other Muslim 'rival' groups, i.e. the Muhammadiyah and PKS filmmakers.

Yet, many of these santri received the full support from their pesantren. This is often the case in a pesantren that, for reason of modernization, has allowed the teaching of video-making skills and relevant digital literacy subjects as part of their curriculum. Many of the films that these santri have produced are increasingly uploaded on platforms such as You Tube and Facebook. This has proved to be an effective way for the santri to spread their interest in film, and to maintain a network among the santri filmmakers themselves. Many of these santri filmmakers are connected to each other through other cultural networking platforms such as a pesantren-based literary communities. All in all, in a decade after the reform era, and following the arrival of the Muhammadiyah and PKS filmmakers into film arena, cinematic-related practices have become fashionable among the young santri in the NU headquarters and beyond.

Nonetheless, I do not argue that the figure of cinematic santri is just an imitation of what Muhammadiyah and PKS filmmakers previously have produced. This is because, long before the popularity of today's Islamic film genre, several socio-cultural and political transformations, particularly ones that are proved to be significant for the post-Suharto's emergence of our cinematic figure, have occurred inside the provision of NU societies. Below I will discuss the two most relevant transformations: educational changes of the pesantren and NU people, and the emergence of NU's civil Islam movement.

### Education and civil Islam

Educational reform plays a significant role for the emergence of the cinematic santri figure. Sahal's Islamic education in pesantren, *madrasah* and Islamic university, epitomizes the educational trends among present day santri; it also breaks with the educational trajectory of the traditionalist santri Muslims.[9]

As early as 1920s, several pesantren began to teach a new subject in basic science, partly in response to the establishment of *madrasah* by their modernist rivals (van Bruinessen 2008: 224-5; Hefner 2009: 61-3). Yet, it is the increasing secularization of the country's Islamic education implemented by the ruling elites of Indonesian government that has caused greater changes. Through the serial enactments of regulations, applied from the 1950s onwards, pesantren (along with other Islamic schools) were required to include general sciences into their traditional curriculum. This initiative was arguably linked to the government's concerns, especially during the New Order era, against the

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9) Since the seventeenth century, few 'pupils' from Sulawesi, Sumatra, Sumbawa, Borneo and later Java had travelled to Mecca (and two centuries later extended their travel to reach Cairo) for studying Islam. They lived in the holy land for some years, some did not return though. Later in the nineteenth century, the accumulative of these pupils would form a distinctive community of the *Jawi* people, 'people from the archipelago', in the Hijaz (Laffan 2003; Azra 2004). Those who returned would strengthen the process of Islamization and lead the emergence of santri societies in Indonesia (see Geertz 1976 [1960]: 124-6).

rise of orthodox and political Islam (Hefner 1997 and 2000; Ichwan 2006; Pohl 2009). The major expansion of state-run Islamic universities (called IAIN) across Indonesian provincial cities in the 1960s has had a strong impact on Islamic education (Mueleman 2005 [2002]; Hefner 2009).[10] It opened up wider opportunities for pesantren graduates to pursue higher education at the IAIN, from which many of them were able to take a higher degree at Western universities. By the 1980s, a few of the Islamic universities have become "incubators of innovative and progressive thoughts" of Islam in Indonesia (Barton 2002: 163).[11]

Likewise, it is through university campuses, that many of the pesantren graduates were able to engage in film-related activities, such as film screenings. Sahal and many other santri who graduated from IAIN Yogyakarta, for instance, often recalled their stories of watching and discussing as wide a variety as American, France, Iranian and local films, screened in *Jamaah Cinema*, a student's cinema club of the university in the 1990s. It was obviously not about film-making as such; but such experiences harnessed the santri's cinematic pursuit and desire to produce their own films in the years to come. Sahal's educational track, reflecting general trends in Islamic education in Indonesia, thus reveals that the emergence of the figure of cinematic santri is partly an (unintended) effect of the government's secularizing control and standardization of Muslim education in the country.

In addition to education, another significant development in NU societies for the yet-to-come emerging figure of the cinematic santri is what Eickelman and Piscatori (1996) call, 'Muslim Politics'.[12] By the late 1980s, NU started to witness the rise of young and progressive santri, dubbed as '*kaum muda* NU', who promoted an NU-style "civil Islam" (Hefner 2000), largely in response to the New Order's policy on political Islam.[13] Islamic policy under the New Order was never consistent.[14] This is because Islam was

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10)  One of the country's earliest state-run Islamic colleges, established in 1951, is IAIN Yogyakarta, now transformed into UIN (*Universitas Islam Negeri,* 'The State Islamic University'). It is where Sahal received his bachelor diploma on Islamic law. On the development of Islamic higher education in Indonesia, see Mueleman (2005 [2002]); Ichwan (2006), and Hefner (2009).

11)  On the role of IAIN in advancing the renewal of Islamic thoughts for promoting democratization and social cohesion in Indonesia, see Kraine (2007).

12)  They use this term to emphasize the sense of 'beyond the state' and 'beyond the formal' of a *thing* that is political, and to bring forward the dialectical relation between individuals and the government of that 'political thing' (1996: 4-5).

13)  Other scholars have called it NU's civil society (Bush 2002; Sirry 2010).

14)  In the 1970s, he marginalized Muslims in favour of secular nationalist and Javanese *abangan*. By 1980s, he courted NU to be his allies, before turning to conservative Muslim of ICMI in early 1990s and wooing the ultraconservative Islamists in the last years of his dictatorship. Suharto was never hesitant to use his "dividing and conquering" strategy, by pitting one ethno-religious group with the others (e.g. anti-Christian and Chinese propaganda in late 1990's) so as to guarantee, in his eyes, the New Order's state of order (see Hefner 2000).

never Suharto's main interest. Rather, his obsession "was power, and he was happy to change ideological grab to keep it" (Hefner 2000: 19). Thus, the general pattern of his Islamic policy is that he suppressed Islamic political parties, and was never hesitant to play the Islamic card whenever he needed to retain his power. In the 1970s, his Islamic policies had taken a toll on NU, exposing the latter to various measures of exclusion and pressure, such as the enforcement of NU to merge with other Islamic parties into a single party, i.e. the Unity and Development Party, or PPP (Feillard 1997: 135). Upset at this situation, in 1984, under Abdurrahman Wahid's leadership, NU withdrew from party-politics practices, returning to what it was originally presumed to be, a socio-religious organization, or *Kembali ke Khittah26* (Returning to the Original Principle of the 1926).[15] The withdrawal proved to have remarkable consequences: NU was able to improve its relationship with the government, and enjoyed rapid development in its education, religious predication, and charity programs (Feillard 1997).

Yet, NU's withdrawal from party politics had another significant impact on the part of its younger generation. In the 1970s, when just returning from his study in Cairo and Baghdad, Abdurrahman Wahid worked for a pesantren-related NGO, called LP3ES (Barton, 2002: 103).[16] As soon as he became the leader of NU, he architectured the proliferation of various NGOs in the NU communities. Leaders of these NGO were young santri activists who often worked under the supervision of NU's progressive thinkers not structurally affiliated to NU, but playing a significant role in transforming the cultural premises of the organization (Ibid: 161). P3M, LakpesdamNU, and later LKiS were among the first NU-affiliated NGOs to be founded and sought to promote the compatibility of Islam with, above all, values of democracy, human rights, and liberal thought (Bush 2009: 100).[17] While many observers take it that NU's civil society

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15)  Its withdrawal decision, however, can also be linked to NU's heightened conflict with the modernist factions within the Islamic party of PPP (Feillard 1997; Bush 2002), a dejavu of what they had in 1950s with Masyumi.

16)  An abbreviation of *Lembaga Pengkajian, Pendidikan dan Pengetahuan Ekonomi dan Sosial* ('Institute for Economic and Social Research, Education and Information), LP3ES was founded in 1971, under the auspices of the Neumann German Institute and, later, of the Ford Foundation. Interestingly, the NGO was founded by activists of modernist Muslim backgrounds, telling the extent to which both the traditionalist and modernist groups could share a common ground when it comes to values and ideas of civil society.

17)  P3M ('The Indonesian society for the Development of Pesantren and Society'), established in 1983 on Gus Dur's initiative, was sort of an 'extension' of LP3ES. By early 1990s and through to 2000s, more NU's "civil society" organizations were established, such as The Wahid Institute and Gusdurian, to name only a few (Salim and Ridwan 1999; Ida 2004). It should be noted however that the popularity of "civil society" in Indonesia, as in many other regions, was largely due to the intervention of many international donor agencies (and academic circles alike) that vigorously introduce it as a jargon for propagating democracy in developing countries. For some scholars, such intervention has run the risk of essentializing civil society as a universal ideal replicable in all contexts, times and traditions (Hann and Dunn 1996; Howell and Pearce, as cited in Bush 2002: 15).

movement maintains a critical stance toward the state (Sirry 2010), Bush (2009) provides a convincing argument that their agendas are strongly informed by NU's interest in political Islam vis-à-vis the modernist groups, instead of the state.[18] By 1993 LKiS shifted its focus, becoming a publishing and literary movement, which later proved to be infrastructural for the emergence and spread of the cinematic santri (Chapter 2).

The involvement of Sahal in NU's civil Islam movement through his membership in LakpesdamNU and LKiS, shows that the cinematic santri bears a relationship with the earlier emergence of NU's civil Islam activists who worked for NU's agendas in political Islam through cultural approaches. Our figure – personified by Sahal - is an embodiment of the younger generation of santri, who shares a common 'activist' spirit with the santri activists supporting NU's civil Islam movement. Yet, the cinematic santri figure works in a different arena, and through a different medium. I will explore their activist spirit more thoroughly in a later part of this chapter. I will now explore how the emerging figure of cinematic santri connects to a wider context of the rise of '*indie*' (independent) film movement that has become popular in the early 2000s, not to mention with the other secular, Western and Asian film circuits.

### The influences of 'Kuldesak' spirits and the circuits of other secular films

At the turn of *Reformasi*, a successful release of an *indie* film entitled Kuldesak (Cul-de-sac), produced by Riri Reza, Mira Lesmana, Nan T. Achnas, and Rizal Mantovani, marked a new development of *indie* film-making movement in Indonesia.[19] It is an anthology film shot in a digital format, featuring the voices of urban, middle-class Jakartan youth, concerning issues of, among others, drug addiction, (homo)sexuality, and the rebellious agency of the self (van Heeren 2012: 53). After its release, an array of *indie* film-related activities, ranging from film-making, film screening and film communities, become fashionable amongst young people in and out of the urban centers of the country (Paramaditha 2014). Most of these young people were born in educated middle-class families, had a degree of English fluency, and were comfortable with global youth culture (Barker 2011: 107). While its successful release was partly facilitated by the widespread popularity of digital technologies and practices across the globe (Negroponte 1996), and the opening of media markets of the country's film industry following the downfall of the Suharto era (Sen and Hill 2007), its appeal to these young generations was also because the film brought to them the spirits of "new alternative practice" (van Heeren 2009: 53), "space of experimentation" (Paramaditha

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18)  Indeed, while NU had officially withdrawn from party-politic practices, interpretation of such decision by the NU elites was highly diverse. The NU people, furthermore, have never totally shied away, in one way or the other, from party-politics practices (discussed below).

19)  van Heeren (2009) has rightly noted that the *indie* film movement in Indonesia does not necessarily bear the Eruo-America's association of the term as an opposition against the mainstream studio system. It is instead a genre that becomes "a model and banner for many young people who set out to make their own films" (p. 53).

2014: 67), and "act of breaking through" (Barker 2011: 84) in all sectors of Indonesian film mediation practices.

The influence of *Kuldesak* on the emergence of the cinematic santri figure is strong. Later, I will show how Sahal often viewed his cinematic activities as an alternative to the existing film practices and an experiment with what he wanted to further achieve in film arena. I will also attend to a story in which the cinematic santri in the central office of NU had made an endeavor to invite some of the *Kuldesak* filmmakers, now seen as the new established filmmakers in the country's film industry, and get them involved in their film-making-related activities. This anecdote shows the extent to which the *Kuldesak* filmmakers have become inspirational film figures for the cinematic santri. Throughout this dissertation, I will also show how the affordability, accessibility and sense of freedom of the new digital and audio-visual technology and Internet online space have in many different ways helped the spread, exchange and intensification of the cinematic fever across the NU communities in a way that it has never occurred before.

The emerging field of cultural production of the santri's cinematic practices cannot be separated from variously secular film circuits. In fact, the Bond image, the excerpt from *3 Doa 3 Cita* which I use as a starter to this dissertation, shows the influences of secular Western film genres on the santri's cinematic aspirations. To this point, it is worth mentioning that the country's film exhibition platforms such as cinema theaters, mobile cinema practice, and TV, all have offered a variety of film genres to local Indonesian film audiences. This includes films of romantic, horror, comedy, and action genres, to name the most notable examples, all of which are variously produced by Indonesian, American, Chinese, and Indian film companies. The cinematic santri like Sahal, as evidenced by his childhood memories of frequenting an open-air film screening near his village, are familiar with these secular film genres through one of the film exhibition platforms available. Moreover, with the rising popularity of video-based social media platforms such as You Tube, and one-click hosting sites, such as RapidShare and MediaFire, through which people can watch and download collections of various film genres of world-wide production (see Slama and Barendregt 2018: 11), access to these films is unprecedentedly more open, if not easier, to the cinematic santri.

In addition to these secular films, television dramas also have played a significant role in the birth of the cinematic santri figure. The state-controlled television broadcasting system was first established in Indonesia in the 1960s, and for a long time had been largely aimed at fostering the invention of national culture (Kitley 2000). The establishment of commercial TV stations in early 1990s, however, triggered by changes in the country's political, social, and economic situations. This coincided with the advances of television products and services which had popularized new TV programs that were framed as popular entertainment. A new form, locally known as sinetron (*sinema elektronik)* emerged as an Indonesian rendition of internationally-popular television dramas, such as Latin telenovela, American soap opera, and Australian melodrama, which since the 1970s had been well-received among Indonesian

TV audiences. The early 2000s marked the "conservative turn" in religious practices among Indonesian Muslims in the public domain (van Bruinessen 2014). This saw the emergence of a new genre of sinetron in Indonesian television: that is, one that showcases obvious themes of Islam, popularly called '*Sinetron Religi*'. The Islamic genre of sinetron were a hit with Indonesian TV audiences, dominating prime time television programs, and in turn signifying the process of "mainstreaming Islam" into contemporary Indonesian pop culture (Rakhmani 2017). With this in mind, Islamic soap opera is as influential as other secular films and television dramas I mentioned above, in the birth of cinematic santri.

In later parts of this chapter, I will return to this discussion in order to show how these secular films, television dramas, and religious *sinetron* have helped shape the kind of ideal films that the santri aim to produce. Yet for now, I will continue my discussion on the history of cultural activism of the NU people, with which many of the cinematic santri I work with have maintained a historical continuity.

### Cinematic tradition

A final significant notion for the rise of cinematic santri figure is the organisation's own tradition of film making. Many santri at the central headquarters of NU and elsewhere often emphasized the historical role of NU in the 'national' film arena particularly through Lesbumi, an organization for Muslim artists and cultural activists, established by the then NU Party in 1962. Although Lesbumi did not specifically focusing on film, many of its central figures were film-workers, including the likes of Djamaluddin Malik, Usmar Ismail and Asrul Sani. While Sani and Ismail were film directors, Malik was a businessman, an NU politician, and the owner of the *Persari* film-company. The trio held the central positions on the board of Lesbumi: Malik as the general head, Ismail and Sani, respectively, as the first and second vice of Lesbumi (Chisaan 2008).[20] In 1964, Lesbumi managed to produce a film about the pilgrimage to Mecca, entitled *Tauhid* (The Unity of Allah).

Lesbumi's 1960s cinematic activism was closely related to the then political situation. According to Sen (1994: 30), its establishment was "largely in response to Lekra's influence in the artistic and cultural field".[21] Lekra, an abbreviation for *Lembaga*

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20)  Misbach Yusa Biran, a filmmaker close to Sani, Ismail and Malik, later joined Lesbumi and headed the organization's branch for the great Jakarta (Jakarta Raya) (Biran 2008a). Compared to Lekra that only had Bachtiar Siagian as a filmmaker amongst its elite members, and seen from the logic of political economy, it is unsurprising that 'cinema was more central to Lesbumi than it was to Lekra' (Sen 1994: 30).

21)  While the national stage of the country's 1957-66 political turmoil was crucial to the foundation of Lesbumi, Sen (1994) has focused 'too much' on it at the cost of neglecting both the local politics and cultural dynamics of NU, surrounding the establishment of Lesbumi. During the periods of 1930s and 1950s, NU had participated in the national debates over the questions of cultural foundation of (what is today called) Indonesia, and had made an effort for modernizing its artistic and cultural works especially among its less

*Kebudayaan Rakyat* ('Institute of People's Culture), was founded in 1950 and was affiliated with the Indonesian communist party, or PKI (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*). By early 1960s, the cultural debates and polemics on the search for the cultural foundation of Indonesia reached its most vitriolic, if not worst, tip of tension, as it was marked by declaration of manifestos. The authors of Lekra had advocated "art for the people", which strongly suited the rhetoric of Sukarno's Guided Democracy.[22] Between 1963 and 1964, when PKI was in its strongest position, Lekra's cultural producers were engaged in fierce attacks against their rivals (Foulcher 1986: 126; Ricklefs 2001 [1981]: 327). Those who were attacked by Lekra, or worried about Lekra due to either its increasingly strident attacks on its allegedly ideological opposition with Islam, responded with the *Manifesto Kebudayaan* (Cultural Manifesto*),* in which they refused to use art for political ends and as such formed an anti-communist cultural group (Vickers 2005: 153).

NU leaders, however, refused the use of art either for art's sake or for political ends, and went to call for the use of an artwork for both religious and social functions: one that is based on a belief in both monotheism of Islam and the principles of humanity. They called it 'religious humanism' (Chisaan 2008: 149). Friction between these highly fragmented groups, in which "statements of solidarity and actual alignments were subject to rapid change" (Bodden 2013: n27), finally reached its peak in the 1965-6 mass killings, during which 500,000 - 1 million people were killed. The victims were generally those with suspected Lekra and Communist affiliations. Despite NU was at the 'winning end' of the conflict, the organization disbanded Lesbumi in 1966.[23] According to Jones (2013: 108), it was partly because of 'the decreasing importance of (and increasing state and social antipathy towards) political association' of Lesbumi.

During the New Order era, the NU leaders never totally turned away from cinema. In conjunction with the rise of Islamic 'nine-saints' films in the 1980s, for example, a few of NU religious figures participated in public discourse on how film could be used

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conservative members (Chisaan 2008; Salim 2012; Zuhri 1974: 236). Likewise, the cultural rivalry in local politics during the 1960s was not always between Lesbumi and Lekra, but sometime between Lesbumi and the modernist *Muhammadiyah* groups (Hatley 2012). These reflect the influence of both local tensions and dynamics of NU's cultural expressions on the establishment of Lesbumi. The establishment of Lesbumi was obviously political, but I add, in *many, and highly nuanced ways.*

22) In response to the failure of his 1950s parliamentary democracy, Soekarno created a political ideology of NASAKOM (*Nasionalisme, Agama dan Komunisme*, or 'Nationalism, Religion and Communism'), which he aimed to unite the three most progressive political factions in his government: the nationalist, communist and NU-Muslim groups. Later in 1960, he redefined it as MANIPOL-USDEK, an acronym for, 'the Political Manifesto of the 1945 Constitution – Indonesian socialism, Guided Democracy, Guided Economy and Indonesian Autonomy. Central to his campaigns were rhetoric of anti-America, pro-communist, anti-imperialism, anti-feudalism, and slogans of political ideology (see Ricklefs 2001 [1981]; Vickers 2005).

23) On accounts of NU's involvement in the tragedy, see Cribb (1990); Hefner (1995); and McGregor (2009)

for *dakwah* (Wahid 1983).[24] At the same time, a call for an Islamic film production was often heard from the *pesantren* grounds, often as a reaction to the influx of "indecent films" (of domestic and overseas production) assumedly featuring sex, violence and incorrect representation of Islam (van Heeren 2012: 116-18). During the 1980s, as reported by van Heeren (2012: 116-18), a few of NU religious leaders took part in public discourse on how film can be used for *dakwah*.[25] In the early years of the *Reformasi,* which were signified by freedom of expressions and the rise of cultural practices such as that of the Kuldesak generation in Indonesian cinema, discussion about "upholding cultural practices for religious and political expressions" had intensified among the younger generation of NU. This in turn has led to the reestablishment of Lesbumi in 2005 (see Rapat Kerja 2010). The late Alex Komang, a santri and multi-award-winning actor who learned acting from Teguh Karya's *Teater Populer,* was appointed as the vice president of Lesbumi, and film-making was set a part of its programs.[26] His appointment was an indication that the re-establishment of Lesbumi brought new hope for the santri people to re-enter the film arena. Sahal said it this way: "Lesbumi had a history (in film arena), and was charged by NU to take part, in *dakwa* education […] through art and culture".

To sump up this section, the modern figure of the cinematic santri is produced through changes and continuities in multiple sectors of the socio-political life of the NU community, as it is at the intersection of their relationship with the state and other Muslim communities living in Indonesia and abroad. Its emergence is an embodiment of the state-imposed transformation of Indonesian Islamic schools that has been well responded to by NU members. The state's tightening control over Muslim politics forced the santri people to turn to cultural practices as a means of expression. The cinematic santri is part of the rise of educated, middle class Muslims who have relatively easy access to discourses of civil Islam and the advance of digital media technology, be that on the part of the NU santri or their rivals. It is also an outcome of the historically and politically-driven activism of Lesbumi in the country's 1960s film arena that has been seen as a sort of cinematic tradition for the NU people. The emergence of the cinematic santri figure and its intertwinement with the historical, social, political, religious, economic and digital backgrounds posit a question regarding

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24) The nine-saint films are an Islamic film genre that focus on a mission of spreading Islam through the folk-tales of nine holy men who were believed to have spread Islamic teachings in Java. News has it that an NU-affiliated *kyai* was recorded to have played in one of these films (Sembilan Wali 1985: 48).

25)  This discussion had actually circulated among many urban Indonesian Muslims since early 1940s (Soerono 1941a and 1941b).

26) Teguh Karya is one of the most influential film directors that Indonesia has ever had, and his *Teater Populer* was an important training ground for new talents, as many Indonesia's best actors and actresses in the period from 1970s to 1990s received their acting class from him (Hanan 1996: 691).

the characteristics of santri's cinematic activism. I will discuss this point in the following section.

## Santri NU-style film

The characteristics of cinematic activism amongst santri are diverse. They can be best understood through what I call "santri NU-style film". This term refers to "the space of styles" (Bourdieu 2010: 165) of the films that the cinematic santri is (inspired) to produce.[27] To explore it further, I will return to Sahal to discuss his ideals of what good films (about Islam) should look like.

Sahal, like many other santri with whom I worked, was concerned with films that contained messages held by NU and pesantren (*film yang sesuai dengan nilai-nilai NU dan pesantren*). When I asked him to explain what are these 'NU-pesantren' films, Sahal answered that these are films that contain one of the following: a spirit of NU's religiosity, a spirit of nationalism, a virtue of education, and attention to local culture. This answer seems to be rooted in the NU's Civil Islam discourses discussed above. Yet, on many other occasions, Sahal also told me, that an ideal film of NU-pesantren virtue should not contain one of the following scenes: kissing, defamation of the country (*menjelek-jelekkan negara*), and a hedonistic lifestyle. He also tried to convince me several times that he would never screen in his 'mobile cinema practice' any local film taking its setting outside Indonesia, even if the film had 'Islamic symbols' (*simbol-simbol Islam*).[28]

Sahal did not single out any specific film title that he regarded as 'defaming the country', 'outside Indonesian setting', or 'promoting hedonism and sexual liberation'. I argue, however, what he means by the "country-defaming" film is related to the NU's narrative of 'nationalistic credentials' (Ramage 1995: 31). This refers to the putative commitment of the NU people in supporting Indonesia as a nationalist, not-Islamic state that is based on Pancasila ideology.[29] As for the (Islamic) film with an "outside

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27) The santri unsurprisingly addressed (the likelihood of) films of their production in many different names. They are *film* pesantren (pesantren film), *film* santri (santri film), *film NU* (NU film), *film Lesbumi* (Lesbumi film), *film agama* (religious film), *film Islam* (film of Islam), *film Islami* (Islamic film), and *film dakwah* (*dakwah* film), to mention most of them. The last three names, however, are sometime used by the santri in the context of a competing discourse with the other Islamic films of non-NU santri production, such as film *Ayat Ayat Cinta* (The Verses of Love)*,* which are not in my category of the santri NU-style film. The use of all these names, however, is somewhat loose, for a film of santri production may entitle all of these names, but at the same time not every film of cinematic-santri production should be 'called Islamic'.

28) What I mean by 'mobile cinema practice' is a film screening practice Sahal usually conducted in (remote) areas where the country's mainstream cinema chains are not available and the NUers were the majority group (Chapter 2).

29) The most recent evidence of this is the 2015 publication of *Nasionalisme dan Islam NU-Santara*. It is a selection of essays by scholars of NU associates and non-associates that

Indonesian setting", it is likely that Sahal was referring to the film *Ayat Ayat Cinta*, which was released in 2008 to huge success. *Ayat Ayat Cinta* is set in Egypt and features many landmarks familiar to Indonesian audiences: the historic Al-Azhar mosque, Cairene old-dwellings, its noisy alleys, busy traditional markets, and not to mention the exotic Egyptian pyramid and deserts.

I am hesitant, however, to conclude that it is just the sheer idea of Egypt that matters to the NU santri. Throughout my time hanging out with the santri in the NU building and elsewhere, they often shared in our conversations their concerns about Islamic films that associate Islamic piety with things that are 'Arabic' - be they culture, language, or landscape. Sahal and other santri criticized the Arabisation of Islam, which manifests in the act of associating Arabic landscape, culture and language with Islam, as it is indicated by the film's exotic use and description of Arabic language, dessert lands, and the *niqab* (face veil), and of associating them with a sense of Islamic piety. In other words, his criticisms are less about a film that takes its settings outside Indonesia, than about one that associates a form of Arabic culture with a 'true' Islam. Thus, Sahal's reluctance to play such a film as *Ayat Ayat Cinta* in his mobile cinema hints at a sort of discourse of "Islamic film" that is in contention with that that is promoted by santri of the non-NU groups.

The last criteria resonates with the pedagogic purposes of the santri's cinematic activism in relation to issues of public morality. Targeting young audiences with his mobile cinema, Sahal often proclaimed that he wanted to "accompany the young while they grow up" ('*menemani anak muda yang sedang tumbuh*') by providing them with what he considered 'good films'. In this regard, Sahal and the other santri often complained that most films and soap operas targeting young Indonesian viewers, whether these are local or imported ones, centered mostly on wealthy people who lived hedonistic lifestyles and displayed lascivious behavior. For Sahal and his friends, such a lifestyle was far from the reality of most Muslims in Indonesian society.

Still, santri's concern with, and fear of sexualized morality resounds in the hotly debated Anti-Pornography Bill of 2006, the contents of which would prohibit materials deemed pornographic and covered in all sorts of mediated work, including film (Allen 2007: 101). While debates about the law had been started since the early 2000s, it was the 2004 release of a 'teen-flick' film that fueled the national blaze of its publicity (exacerbated by publication of Indonesian *Playboy* magazine the same year, see Kitley 2008; and preceded by Inul's 'drilling' dance controversy a year earlier, see Heryanto 2008).[30] The bill was ratified in 2008 and it has been viewed by some scholars as devising

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conceives of NU as both an Islamic and nationalistic organization, which at the same time fully supports Indonesia as a semi-secular Pancasila state (Ubaid and Bakir 2015).

30)  The movie was *Buruan Cium Gue* ('Kiss Me, Quick!'). It features a simple love story that ended with an implicit kissing scene. The controversy started when an Islamic preacher of national audiences, Abdullah Gymnastiar, protested against the film's release. Without watching the film, he was ironically convinced that it contained pornographic elements,

the politics of resistance for defining the 'ideological' future of the nation (Allen 2007; Heryanto 2008), particularly between the Islamist vis-à-vis the liberal-Muslims and the other 'secular' groups (Paramaditha 2013: 120).[31] Yet, Muslim voices are strongly divided upon these matters. The NU people, notably, had no unified voice over the bill. While a majority of NU associates are said to have supported the bill, several NU public figures including Gus Dur, and members of NU's female auxiliary, or *Fatayat*, were against it, on the ground of its threat against freedom of expression and women's rights (Rinaldo 2007). According to Rozaki (2010) Muslim groups who supported the Bill, were either for campaigning Islamic law or upholding Islamic public morality, and the NU leaders fall into the second category.

Indeed, the santri's ideals about NU-pesantren film are not only diverse, but also, sometimes are hostile to each other.[32] The case in point is my conversation with Ali, a santri in a traditional pesantren in Kediri, who had produced *Para Penambang* (The Sand Miners), a film of socio-economic problems faced by the sand miners living near his *pesantren* (see Chapter 2). By then, Ali and I were talking about Nurman Hakim, who had produced *3 Doa 3 Cinta* (3 Prayers 3 Loves) – a film I discussed at the beginning of this dissertation. In particular, we were discussing Hakim's 'brave' move of normalizing an implied homosexual-intercourse scene in his film. Considering the widespread taboo of homosexuality, along with the increasing cry for criminalizing homosexuals in Muslim Indonesia, the homosexual scene in Hakim's film is controversial to the majority of Indonesian film audiences, let alone to the santri at large.

Regarding this, Ali told me that he would have never filmed the issue of

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arguing that its title alone implicitly means "hurry up and have illicit sex with me". The preacher soon got supports from the MUI, the country's council of *ulama*, and other Islamic and non-Islamic religious organizations. On August 14, the MUI sent a letter to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, responsible for affairs of the country's film industry in post-Suharto time, asking the latter to remove the film from the cinemas. At the same time, Gymnastiar asked other non-Muslim religious figures to support the MUI's effort. Finally, on August 20th 2004, the movie was withdrawn from the cinemas. The country's film censorship board, the LSF, said to media that the decision was on the ground that the film had 'disrupted public order' (see van Heeren 2012: 161-8).

31) I used the term liberal-Muslims to refer to those embraced the liberal values by contextualizing them with their individual beliefs and practices of Islam. Meanwhile, I should also clarify here that the secular groups are highly complex, multi layered and never monolithic. Thus, my use of it here is to emphasize the various ways by which they have embraced the secular values and contextualized them with their individual (dis)beliefs and practices of religion.

32) As I have written elsewhere (Huda 2014), the cinematic santri films so far have been produced by using diverse methods of narration, tell different kind of stories, make use of a range of film formats, and go to different circuits of exhibition and circulation. They come as short and feature films, fiction and documentary, amateur and professional; as well as go to ordinary exhibition and alternative screening. Usually, such heterogeneity is an effect of combined factors ranging from film-making skills, funding, authority's support, professionalism, to knowledge and film experience of the cinematic santri.

homosexuality in pesantren the way Hakim did in his film. Understandably, for Ali, still living in a pesantren compound in a local region (certain regions are sometimes less accepting of so-called liberal thinking), the sheer mention of issues of homosexuality is already taboo, let alone depicting them in a film. But for Hakim, now living in Jakarta, and having graduated from the country's most established film school, a frequent attendant of public discussions at Komunitas Salihara, and receiving film funding from international donors, the case is different.[33] The homosexual love scene in his film is not only poetically feasible, but also what politically has made his film widely reputable amongst the transnational film festival audiences.

In my view, this diversity also reflects the heterogeneity of NU, both as an organization and as a religious community. As an organization, NU's leadership consists of different categories, ranging from politicians, (conservative) *ulama*, and reformers (Bush 2002: n.134). As a religious community, it consists of roughly 80 million members, with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.[34] Given this breadth, no one in NU has a definitive claim to the monopoly over the interpretation of (religious) truth in and for NU society at large.[35] In contrast, a (religious) truth in NU is produced, interpreted, experienced, distributed and even contested among different NU leaders and members, emphasizing the diffuse nature of NU society. Following this argument, the diverse and conflicting discourses with regard to the ideals of what an Islamic film should be among the NU santri reflects what scholars have so far argued about the diversity of NU society at large. That is, as a community of religion, NU consists of various factions ranging from conservative, moderate, and to 'hybrid' forms of neo-modernist, post-traditionalist and liberal Islam (Bush 2009; Kersten 2015).

This often-conflicting diversity, however, does not constrain the santri from recognizing their peers among the other cinematic santri. When asked if Hakim's film *3 Doa 3 Cinta* was an ideal one for the pesantren film, Sahal told me as follows: "Hakim's film still lacked in portraying the realities of pesantren. But it was much better than the pesantren films made by non-NU santri directors such as *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (The Woman with the Turban, Dir. Hanung Bramantyo)."

Similarly, Hakim also told me that he once declined Sahal's question for a film-making project after learning that they had different ideas about it. Nonetheless, Sahal has tried to screen *3 Doa 3 Cinta* at his mobile cinema practice and over time Sahal and Hakim have often worked together on film-related projects. One thing is significant here. Despite the heterogeneous, often conflicting characteristics of the santri's film

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33) Salihara is a community of cultural producers associated with liberal and secular thoughts, established, among others, by a cultural activist and writer, Goenawan Muhamad.

34) There is no definitive data with regard to the exact number of NU members. Yet, many NU leaders claimed that the total number of NU affiliates, including those culturally practicing NU's specific religious rituals, is estimated in a scale of 80 million (Jumlah 2018).

35) A situation that springs from the absence of a Church-like institution for the production of religious authority characteristic of Islamic societies.

discourses, it is clear that their cinematic practices are identified within the same spaces of style, thus in turn rendering them to be systematically recognizable amongst the santri themselves. As such is largely due to the close proximity of their cinematic discourses with either the pesantren tradition or NU as an organization which is rooted deeply in pesantren. This is the crux of what I mean in the start of this section as the santri NU-style film**.**

If this is true, though, the very same proximity with NU-pesantren tradition will render their cinematic activism distinctively classifiable from the other filmmakers. In the following section, I will focus on the story of a 'film day celebration' held by Sahal and his fellow santri in the NU headquarters, in order to explore the position of the cinematic santri vis-à-vis the country's other, more established, filmmakers.

## Vexing marginality

In early April 2012, Sahal, Komang and other santri in the PBNU building organized a film day celebration, commemorating the 62nd year of the so-called *Hari Film Nasional* (the National film-making Day), and the 50th anniversary of Lesbumi. Officially, the celebration of both days occurs on every 30th and 28th of March.[36] The initial plan of Film Day Celebration was to run a series of film seminars and a week-long of film screenings. Upon a preparatory meeting, seven films were listed. The films were: Usmar Ismail's *Darah dan Doa* (Blood and Prayer, 1950), Usmar Ismail's *Lewat Djam Malam* (After the Curfew, 1954), Asrul Sani's *Pagar Kawat Berduri* (Barbed Wire, 1961), Asrul Sani's *Tauhid* (The Unity of Allah, 1964), Erros Djarot's *Tjoet Nyak Dien* (1988), Nurman Hakim's *3 Doa 3 Cinta* (3 Prayers 3 Loves, 2008), and Ifa Isfansjah's *Sang Penari* (The Dancer, 2011). Some notable Indonesian filmmakers were also invited to the film seminars, such as Ifa Isfansjah, Riri Reza and Nia Dinata (Proposal 2012).

The films were chosen based on common criteria. Usmar's and Asrul's films were selected because of the involvement of both Umar and Asrul in Lesbumi back in the 1960s. Djarot's film's intense message of 'war against the colonial Dutch', close to NU's nationalistic narrative, has made his film attractive in the eye of the santri. And the selection of Isfansjah's film, meanwhile, was mainly to do with the fact that it was based on a novel of Ahmad Tohari's *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* (The Dancer from *Paruk* Hamlet) and starred Alex Komang. Tohari, a prolific writer with strong affiliation to NU, is one of the NU influential cultural-figures; while Alex Komang is one of the santri who initiated the Film Day Celebration itself. The film is even more significant to the santri once put in the context of NU's political history. Portraying a miserable, manipulated life of a dancer against the backdrop of the 1965-6 mass killings, the film is politically significant for NU, particularly regarding the latter's undisputable involvement in the tragedy. Meanwhile, the selection of Riri Reza and Nia Dinata,

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36)  The celebration of the National Film Day in 30th of March, which refers to the first shooting day of Usmar Ismail's film *Darah dan Doa,* was set by the New Order government in order to maintain a 'cultural order' through film institutions (Sen 1994).

originating from the Kuldesak generation, was based on their reputable position as film producers in today's country's film arena.

As a member of the committee, I was responsible for the availability of the films.[37] When trying to get copies of the films, I faced some problems with the four older films of 'the Lesbumi directors', and with *Sang Penari*. By that time, *Sang Penari* was still a newly released film and its DVD copy was not yet easily available. Because of that, I tried to contact Isfansjah via email in order to get a copy of his film. I did this more than once, but I didn't hear back from him. When I explained this issue to Sahal and Komang, both of them gave me a hint of similar responses from other filmmakers that they had invited to the film seminars, after which they asked me to stop contacting Isfansjah.

As for the former films, they were supposedly only available in *Sinematek Indonesia*, a center of film archives and library, established in 1975 by Misbach Yusa Biran, and financially supported by Ali Sadikin, the then governor of Jakarta (Biran 2008: 249). It turned out that the library was no longer headed by Biran and now charged a considerable cost for every film to rent. This frustrated the santri given the past involvement of Biran in Lesbumi.

The holding of the film day celebration reveals several issues. Exacerbated by other more fundamental problems than the film's availability, the santri decided to drop most of the films from the initial list. The film-screening was postponed and happened three weeks later than planned. It was moved away from its original place, i.e. the conference room of PBNU building,[38] to an auditorium of the Humanity Faculty of an Islamic State University in Jakarta, and finally only screened one film of Usmar's *Lewat Djam Malam*.[39] On another occasion after the film screening, Sahal told me that he still planned to play another title from the list at a neighboring pesantren. However, until my return to the Netherlands in July 2012, the plan had not been realized.

The film seminar, likewise, initially planned as a three-day series of public discussion, was cut back to a half-day event. None of the notable filmmakers invited were present at the film seminar. Crucially, one of the keynote speakers accepting the invitation, Hikmat Darmawan, is a film critic whose name was not even included in the initial list of speakers at the proposal of the event.[40] He opened his talk by saying that he was 'surprised' for getting an invitation letter from Lesbumi, and was more surprised when knowing what the invitation was about, a film day celebration by the NU santri. He acknowledged to the audience that he had never heard about such a film

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37) I deliberately tried to not help the santri, however, in selecting the films to be screened.

38) The screening was initially planned to be held in the conference room of the PBNU building. The cancellation, I was told, was due to its being not equipped with screen-projecting technology.

39) In fact, I finally managed to get the copy of all (old) films, except that of *'Tauhid'*, from 'a black market'.

40) Yet, we did mention him upon the preparatory meetings. This means that his name was in the back-up plan.

Picture 1: The banner of NU's Film Day celebration. My photograph.

organization of NU as "the new Lesbumi*"*and that the NU people (still) had an ongoing interest in cinema. As a film critic, Darmawan is to my assumption knowledgeable about development of cinema issues and discourses on film-making in Indonesia, although he was probably pretending to be naive when stating his "ignorance" about Lesbumi. In any case, he was rightly putting his finger on the marginal position of the cinematic santri in the country's film arena.

And yet, the santri are also aware about this marginality. On interviewing Sahal upon my return to Indonesia, a year after the film seminar, I asked him about the difficulty that he had faced for the sustenance of his cinematic project. He answered my question as follows: "Our main difficulty is the (dearth of) human resources. After Lesbumi was dormant for so many years, we become unfamiliar with that kind of media (i.e. film)." Indeed, many of the santri who organized the cinematic project from the centre building of NU like Sahal, are not professionally trained to be filmmakers. Nevertheless, the santri are knowledgeable of the fact that the involvement of Ismail, Sani and Biran in old Lesbumi had much to do with the then political turbulence, which, according to Biran's story, forced them to find an institution able to give protection for their cinematic expressions (see Biran, 2008b: xii). Without the involvement of these men, Lesbumi would have lacked film directors amongst its board membership.[41]

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41) Amongst the top film figures of Lesbumi, it was only Malik who was beforehand a

That said, I am inclined to assume that what Sahal intended to say by "unfamiliarity" refers less to their lack of technical skills and knowledge needed for film-making, than to their state of becoming, if not being, unrecognized in the national film arena. To rephrase Sahal's statement, after fifty years of Lesbumi's political exile from the country's film arena, the santri become ignorant of the field, and, more problematic to the santri and NU, was no longer acknowledged in it. Darmawan's participation at the film day conference, along with the refusal from the majority of established filmmakers whom the santri wished to give their talks (read: get involved) at the same event, well translated the NU's state of being unrecognized in the country's more established, some new, dominant filmmakers.

The cinematic santri, however, are also marginal in the eye of the NU elites. They received only little financial support from PBNU, the highest organizational structure of the NU members. To the extent that financial shortage often altered and even downgraded the santri's cinematic plans, this situation often frustrated the santri as was the case of the Film Day Celebration described above. Nevertheless, their marginality is not likely due to the lack of PBNU's finance, but because film clearly has no priority among the NU elites. Regarding this, Sahal said as follows:

> PBNU had more than enough resources to fund our cinematic programs [...] Some elites in PBNU did hear our will of developing film practices in the NU community, but we understand that our cinematic aspiration is only one out of many aspirations that are handled by the PBNU: and ours is probably queuing up after a long line of other more important aspirations.

Based on Sahal's remarks, I argue, "the other more important aspirations" with which the cinematic santri compete to having win the hearts of the PBNU elites, relate to NU's relentless contention amongst its internal elites and members regarding the primary orientation of NU as an organization, whether a political or a religious one. To explain my argument, I shall now focus, again, on Lesbumi.

## The struggle to win the elites' hearts

Earlier I have talked about the santri's Film Day, coinciding with the 50th birthday of Lesbumi. From its very first preparatory meeting in early February 2012 until its commencement two months later, Zastrow Al-Ngatawi, the president of Lesbumi, was not involved in the event, a situation that often frustrated the other santri. Apparently, he had been informed about the event but he handed it over to his deputy (Alex Komang) to organize it. It was rumored though, that his absence had to do with the lack of co-ordination between board members of Lesbumi, or as my interlocutor expressed such situation in Arabic, as a typical way of doing it amongst the santri, "*wuğūduhu ka*

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member of NU. Yet, despite he was 'a big name' in the country's film company, he was not a film director. This indicates the significant extent to which most of the santri had been unfamiliar with film-making skills and knowledge even when Lesbumi was at its best.

*'adamihi*" (lit. 'its existence is like its absence').[42]

As every rumor is a socio-political construction, the rumor about his absence does not come from a void. During my visits to the NU headquarters, I have never seen him around at the office of Lesbumi. Many also had told me that he rarely came to the office. Nonetheless, I don't want to position him as the scapegoat for the difficulties that the santri had to deal with in the realization of their cinematic project. He must have had his own story to explain his absence that should be heard, and more importantly, frustrations of the santri seem to be much bigger than his absence could explain.

Although I had never met Al-Ngatawi, he told a journalist of NU Online, that the position of Lesbumi was marginal in NU due to the former's political insignificance to the latter. The conversation ran as follows:

> The journalist:
> "What is the difference between Lesbumi in the 1960s and now?"
>
> The LESBUMI president:
> Lesbumi in the 1960s had a close relationship to the center of power since it was an integral part of NU as a political party, which at that time was also close to the ruling government. So it had privileged accesses to centers of power too. But now, Lesbumi is far from the central power, even in a marginal position, not only in government circles, but also within the NU itself. Among the NU elites, Lesbumi was ignored. For Lesbumi was never regarded important: it's only seen as an institute of 'entertainment' that merely organized events of art and culture. We had tried to explain to them the significance of a cultural movement, yet there was not yet any good response from them. Maybe it was because economic and political movements were more appealing to them than is a cultural movement. (Alawi 2013).

His answer to the journalist insinuates that it was the interest of NU's elites in partisan politics (in particular compared to their interest in other cultural projects) that caused the marginal position of Lesbumi within the organization of PBNU. Despite often hearing similar insinuations from other santri*,* I do not want to take it at face value. Instead, I use such insinuations as a way to understand the complexities of aspiration in NU as a nation-wide-scale organization with so many members and often-divergent interests, and within which the aspiration of the santri regarding their cinematic project is only but a small part. At this point, it is useful to look into the relentless debate amongst the NU elites themselves, regarding how NU wants to define its organizational platform, i.e. as a social-religious or political organization, a debate that has its roots in the very first days of NU's establishment.

When it was first established, NU was not a political organization, and it remained

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42)  Significantly at the time of film day celebration, the president of Lesbumi, according to his comment on a Facebook account of my santri interlocutors, was in a local branch of Lesbumi for a similar celebration. This says the extent to which the rumored lack of coordination in Lesbumi had created a conflicting situation amongst the board members.

so until it joined Masyumi, which in 1948 became a political party. Nonetheless, as many scholars have suggested, NU was as 'socio-religious' as it was political at its birth, and ever since it had been rife, and struggling, with the tensions between socio-religious and political interplays (see van Bruinessen 1994: 17-45; Feillard 1999: 7-15; and Bush 2002: 29-33).[43] As I have already stated, aside from connecting the traditionalist *ulama*, the most prominent cause for the establishment of NU was to counter the foundation of Muhammadiyah and the rise of reformist movements in the Muslim world. While its transformation to a political party only made its political orientation explicit, NU's 1984 withdrawal from party-politics practices was interpreted differently amongst both the NU elites and 'ordinary' members.

Their interpretation range widely from those that see the *Khittah26* as a complete departure of NU from party politics toward purely socio-religious activism, to other ones that understand it as the giving of full freedom by NU to its members for their alignment with any political party (Bush 2009: 79). The difference in interpretation, Bush adds, is largely made possible by the wording of the decision that is vague enough to allow room for multivocality: and as such is typical of NU (Ibid).[44] In spite of the multiple interpretations of the *Khittah26*, Gus Dur went on to regard it as "a strategic move that would allow NU to concentrate its energies in those spheres of informal political activity" (Hefner 2000: 169), allowing an Islamic organization like NU to safely get involved in 'Muslim politics' amidst the New Order's oppressive policy on political Islam. When such repression was removed, history proved that by 1999 NU declared PKB (The Resurgence of the Nation Party') as its official party, and Gus Dur ascended the presidential palace, despite disagreement between many of the NU elites and it's younger generations who were involved in NU's civil Islam movement (Bush 2002). This indeed reverberates that NU by some is considered a self-professed socio-religious organization that is replete with political motivations.

As for how NU's tight entanglement in between the socio-religious and the political interplays has its influence on the cinematic project of the santri, I will turn to my story of the first NU-documentary film competition, organized in accordance with the 33rd NU's national congress that was held on 1st-5th August 2015 in Jombang, East Java.[45]

I was at the congress for the full five days. The conference was rife with political

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43)  In practice, the term 'social' is often loosely interpreted by the NU people to refer to cultural and economic issues, ones that are not related to party-politics practices (Kadir 1999).

44)  While multivocality is commonly marked in every society, it should not be solely understood as a way to exploit political advantage. In this regard, Beatty's illuminating work *Varieties of Javanese Religion* (1999) has brilliantly pointed out how, through an example of ritual practices such as *slametan*, multivocality has been utilized by Javanese villagers in Banyuwangi, East Java, as "a means of blending together dissonant voices and thus of orchestrating social harmony" (p. 49).

45)  The congress, periodically held in every five years, is organized to elect the new top leaders of NU, as well as to discuss NU policies on cultural, economic, social, political and religious problems. This means the significance of the congress for the 're-structuration' of the

maneuvers. No sooner had the participants arrived than they were divided into two opposite blocks of the two leading candidates for the PBNU top leadership. The conference was opened by Joko Widodo, who had recently become president of Indonesia. And on the evening of August 1st 2015, rumors were circulated that many *muktamirin* (congress participants) still did not get their badges that would allow them to enter the congress venue. Many attendees still hadn't received their badges by the following day when the first plenary session on 'rule and regulation of the congress' commenced. Before the first plenary session started, water and air conditioning systems in the venue were mysteriously turned off, and it continued happening throughout the day, only to heighten the emotional state of the *muktamirin*, which was already tense. Against these unusual occurrences, it was rumored that someone was sabotaging the upcoming voting process.

Part of the tension was related to a question from participants that called for changing the format of election for the *Rais Am,* the president general of NU's administration body. This was part of an effort to return the power of *ulama* to the politicians within the NU.[46] Over the next four days, the tension between the groups increased. The small panel sessions were held on the third day - more than 24 hours behind their original schedule. While the *bahtsul masail* panel ('*baḥt al-masā'il'*, the panel for discussing *fatwa* on religious and other issues) was uncharacteristically very quick and smooth, the panel on the structure of the organization, in which the postponed discussion of the selection format for the top heads of PBNU was resumed, lasted until very late evening of the fourth day.

In addition to my role as a member of the delegation of NU's special branch for the Netherlands, my attendance at the conference also related to my research agenda to attend the ceremonial announcement of the film competition. The schedule of the announcement, however, was still uncertain. Initially, news had it that it would be held on the first day of the congress, but later I was informed that it was changed to the fifth day of the congress, coinciding with the election schedule for the new top leaders of PBNU. On the evening of the fifth day of the conference, an hour before the election started, I met Sahal, who was in charge of the film competition, in front of the entrance venue. He told me that the trophy conferring ceremony for the winners of the film competition would be held at 'Pendapa' at 9p.m. in the city's meeting hall, about three

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organization for the five years to come.

46) The organizational structure of NU consists of the board of *Syuria*h and *Tanfidziyah*. Theoretically, the difference between the two is that the former, mainly consisting of NU's senior *ulama,* is conceived as the legislative body, upon which the highest authority of NU is vested. The latter, consisting of those who are capable of doing organizational and administrative jobs, and dealing with NU (more practical) decisions on a daily basis, is conceived as the executive body. The *Tanfidziyah*, therefore, while seen as 'political', are theoretically subjected to the authority of the *Syuriah*. At the practical level however, the relation of power between the two councils has constantly been negotiated and reversed over time (Bush 2009).

hundred meters from the congress location. As we parted, I promised that I would come to the conferring ceremony.

Since the first day of the conference, I had seen a huge crowd of santri people and others surrounding places of the congress. Yet on this night, it was at its busiest. Everyone seemed to be flocking to the main venue of the conference. As the election time drew near, I went back inside the venue. I observed the heightened tension. A large fenced-area was installed inside the ground, guarded by many *Banser*, NU's paramilitary division. Only the voting members of NU, the provincial and regional leaders of NU, were allowed to enter it. Those who were not authorized to get in, including me, gathered around the fence. The election process lasted until dawn. Yet before 9 p.m., I managed to leave the venue through the crowd of people, hastily heading to Pendapa but only to find out that no one was there. I checked other nearby possible locations for thinking that I might have misheard what Sahal said: still, I could neither find him, nor able to spot any conferring ceremony of sort.

I did not try to reach Sahal afterward. Three months later, however, he wrote on his Facebook account about his dissatisfaction regarding the competition. He wrote as follows:

> The '*khataman*' (ending ceremony) of the competition was lukewarm, as if there was nothing happening. There was no *sembelih jago* (a slaughtering of rooster), no *nasi tumpeng* (a cone-shaped rice) decorated with various fruits, and no prayers from the elder, as it is a *khataman* of *pengajian* (a religious learning) ritual usually looks like. Whereas, we had run the competition as if it were a *pengajian,* even, (a religious learning) of a national level.[47] ...It had no trophy-conferring ceremony; the plan of compiling the seven best films was not yet realized; and the plan of screening the films was still uncertain. ...Of course, a film competition in NU could (have) be(en) organized in a proper, right, and continuous way, because NU is not *a political party*. Do you agree, Bro(ther)?

Notably, the chaos at the congress squarely mirrors the strong intertwinement of the socio-religious and the political in NU as a national organization of many interests, in which the political seems to be more attractive than the former. Furthermore, the metaphor of *pengajian* that is used by Sahal for describing the importance of a cultural activity like his film competition is telling the extent to which a cinematic activity, however political it can be, is seen by the NU santri within a "theological discourse" (Bowen 1993).[48] I argue, it is against the backdrop of NU's complicity between the socio-religious and the political that the santri's cinematic activism is trying to find its

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47)  According to the news, no less than seventy films from both NU and non-NU filmmakers residing as far as Aceh, Yogyakarta, South Sulawesi and other provinces across the country participated the competition.

48)  Bowen (1993: 10) uses the term 'discourse' in its most diverse meanings and broadest senses, in order to show that the production of everyday life practices in a Muslim society is embedded in "the practice of exegesis", in which local events are linked with the authoritative texts of Islam. In many of the following parts of this dissertation, I will make

strategic position in the NU's institutional supports. While acknowledging the poor preparation of the NU film competition, film is not highly valued among the NU elites. This has forced the cinematic santri to creatively find a way to win their place in the heart of the NU leaders: and as reverberated from the ethnography above, the santri is struggling to do so.

## Modes of operation

A set of operational patterns of the santri's cinematic activism is created in the context of such a struggle. Sahal's mobile cinema project provides a good example. Sahal told me, while he seemed often to be using his own money, NU-Online supported him a lot in terms of financial matters and beyond. His film screenings which I attended in Brebes district, aside from being befriended by film maker Hanung Bramantyo, was also in partnership with a broker: a local journalist who was an NU-online respondent and was primarily in charge of organizing the audience and the film screening.

A project such as running a week-long of film screening involves many people with different skills. Thus, the santri's cinematic project used its operation as a 'collaborative' strategy. The collaboration some time took between several (groups of) santri, or between (a group of) santri and a third party. To a certain extent, the project did display the individual agency of the santri (see Chapter 4 and 6), in most cases nevertheless, it was never a purely personal enterprise. The third party, who more often is not a santri associate, and consists of people with different ideological and social-economic backgrounds, causes significant influence to the ways the project is carried out.[49]

Thus, whimsicality becomes another common feature to the operational patterns of the santri's cinematic projects. Uncertainty, change of plan, and even cancellation is part of the "art of survival" efforts that the santri had to deal with. In fact, most of the films the santri have produced, such as Ali's *Para Penambang* I mentioned above, and films by Aisyah and Jalal which I will discuss in Chapter 4, are of amateurish sort. Despite that, more often than not, the santri tended to have strong desire to create something new, something alternative, and as I will discuss it later, something critically intrusive to what they considered to be 'mainstream'.

In relation to such *modus operandi*, many santri often told me in a typical way that their cinematic project had initially started from *percobaan* (an experiment; an attempt). In his explanation of his mobile cinema project, Sahal for instance, said as follows: "it was not [meant to be] a permanent program. It was actually an experiment (*uji coba*), which was meant to observe the response from the NU people in local regions."

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this issue more pronounced.

49) My conversation with the broker of Lintang Sanga's film screening in Brebes, and from what I overheard of his conversation with his peers at the last afternoon after the film screening had ended, suggested that the local organizer did not share Sahal's cinematic values. They appeared more concerned with the amount of money they earned from the film screening: a situation that Sahal was annoyed by.

Sahal's explanation brings to mind Paramaditha's "the scenario of experiment" that she solicited to explain the prevalence of experimental modes of production among the young Indonesian cultural producers of "the Kuldesak generation". This generation saw rehearsal as their tactical tool of grasping with newness, uncertainties and opportunities of the post-Suharto time for their search of something in the making, the new wave, the new project (2014: 51-91).

While coming from a very different realm, the Kuldesak generation is similar to the cinematic santri in the sense that they emerge after the commencement of the *Reformasi* era. The santri thus shared a similar tactic to the 'Kuldesak generation'. Yet, what is different in the santri's experiment is that their cinematic activities were often spoken of as, Sahal said, a strategic move to "*caper*", an abbreviation of *cari perhatian,* or 'looking for attention' from, according to Sahal, the government. However, I would extend this 'looking for attention' to reach, the NU elites, their santri peers, and the competing others, i.e. the country's most established film producers and the Muhammadiyah and PKS Muslim filmmakers. To say it more explicitly, it was not only as a strategic tool to grasp with the uncertainty, newness and opportunities of the post-Suharto time, but also to deal with their marginality of being 'unacknowledged and unsupported' both in the country's film field and within NU politics.

One of the purposes of this chapter is to examine the ways by which the cinematic santri adapt and establish their positions within the field of cultural production of the contemporary Indonesian cinema. In order to show this, I will now turn my discussion on the use of Lesbumi rhetoric among the santri.

## *'Lesbumi film(s)'*: a creative, but ambivalent strategy

The term 'Lesbumi' often appears in santri's conversations about their cinematic activism as one kind of filmic ideal that the santri seek to be identified with. The list of films to be screened in the Film Day celebration is a case in point. I noticed through my field notes that the santri were aware that it was only Asrul Sani's *Tauhid* (The Unity of Allah, 1964) amongst the seven films that were actually produced by Lesbumi members.[50] However, the santri often used the term "Lesbumi Films" (*Film-film Lesbumi*) in a plural form to refer to the list. I had never asked them what those were, partly because I was not aware of this issue when doing the fieldwork; they had never told of such a list of 'Lesbumi films', and I doubt if they had one.

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50) It was most probably only *Tauhid*, if not along with Misbach Yusa Biran's *Panggilan Ibrahim* ('The Hajj', 1964), made in supplementation of the former, that was produced by *Lesbumi* (Biran 2008a: 139). Talking about pilgrimage to Mecca, or hajj, Tauhid's funding come mostly from the ministry of religious affairs, then headed by an NU central figure, Saifuddin Zuhri (Said 1982: 80). And it was also pointed out by Salim, that the shooting processes of Tauhid in Saudi Arabia was eased through a kind role of the then Indonesian ambassador for Saudi Arabia, another NU leading figure who later would succeed Zuhri's position in the ministerial office, K.M. Ilyas (2012: 99).

Nonetheless, the context of their talk about films of the Lesbumi kind is quite revealing. I often heard people mixing-up the Lesbumi films with films produced by the Lesbumi filmmakers at the course of time beyond their involvement in the organization, despite some of them were well aware of this confusion. A case in point is Ismail's *Lewat Djam Malam* ('After the Curfew' 1954). When I indirectly asked Sahal if the film was a Lesbumi one, he refused to call it so because it was made before the establishment of Lesbumi in 1962. Nevertheless, during the screening of the film at the occasion of film day celebration, many santri sympathized with the film due to its association with Lesbumi.[51] The term 'Lesbumi Films', apparently, has attained a new meaning to the santri people of so many decades later. It is now used in such a way to include particular films of Lesbumi filmmaker activists produced beyond the time of their activism in the organization.

Significantly, central to the ways the santri idealized Lesbumi for their cinematic project is the creation of a new meaning of films of the Lesbumi filmmaker activists. In the process of such appropriation, as the time extension indicates, films of Lesbumi filmmaker activists seemed to be experiencing a sort of distortion by which they become augmented from their initial memory, or "the memory once they were made" (Barthes, 1972 [1957]: 142). This way, Lesbumi has become a mythical type of discourse amongst the santri. As such, I argue, the appropriation of Lesbumi can be seen as one example of efforts that the santri need to perform in order to strategically locate their project in the national landscape. As such, the Lesbumi strategy, in my view, is creative. For it is precisely Lesbumi that provides the NU people with claiming a cinematic tradition in the country's film arena. And because of that, the santri finds in it, to use their term, a "*sanad*" ('*isnād*'), a genealogical linkage that connects them in an authentic way to the NU-earlier generations in the film arena.[52]

By referring to Lesbumi, the santri create a sort of legitimate continuity in their project with the cinematic tradition of their elders. By extension, they creatively innovate through such continuity an opening space in the cinematic field that will render their state of being unrecognized now becoming visible and recognizable, i.e. to have a place "on the map" (Ferguson 1999: 235) among the others in the country's 'national' film worlds.

Yet, the return to Lesbumi for branding their project is ambivalent. Two following cases show this. First. Another Lesbumi-inspired film that received frequent mention

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51) Mostly, they referred to it as films that breathe Lesbumi values (*film-film yang bernafaskan Lesbumi*).

52) In the *hadis* scholarship, *sanad* refers to a chain of oral transmission of a *hadis*, made up of a list of reliable and pious Muslims through whom the hadith reaches the latest transmitter all the way from Muhammad in an unbroken linkage, a guarantee of the hadith's authenticity (Brown 1996: 81). Influenced by such tradition, the santri is strongly aware of a notion of "being connected" to their greater masters in the past through their Islamic knowledge studied in pesantren (van Bruinessen 2008: 221).

in the santri conversation is Ismail's *Darah dan Doa* (released as The Long March in English), a film that "is intended to be a historical document of the Siliwangi division's suppression of the Madiun rebellion in October 1948, its role against the Darul Islam movement in West Java, and its celebrated 'long march' from Central Java back to West Java after the so-called 'Second Dutch Police Action" in December 1948" (Sen 1994: 21). Its mention by the santri, however, had often been instilled in a slightly different context from that of the other 'Lesbumi films' I mentioned above. It is often appraised by the santri in relation to its signification by the New Order as 'a role model of the national film' in view of the fact the authoritarian regime had decided the film's first shooting day (March 30, 1950) as "*Hari Film Nasional*" ('The National Film-making Day'). Scholars of Indonesian cinema have pointed out the New Order's political ideology and national historiography inherent in the signification of the 30th of March as the Film Day (Sen 1994; van Heeren 2009). Yet, the santri had a tendency to take such signification as a historical fact.[53] This likely indicates the encroaching extent to which New Order's propaganda effort of narrating its history of the nation through film arena had its aftermath impact on santri's cinematic discourse.

Second, in relation to trends in Indonesian cinema, the santri often made a public outcry over the dominance of Hollywood films in the country's mainstream cinemas. According to them, this trend was to the detriment of the local film-making community. To my surprise, one santri once asserted to the other santri that his concern with the American-Hollywood domination in the country was inspired by Lesbumi's anti-American movement in the 1960s, and no one who heard his assertion corrected him. My surprise was related to what I had learned that it was not Lesbumi's vow but Lekra's (Sen 1994: 32; Said 1982: 68), and largely because ex-Lesbumi filmmaker activists such as Biran himself made it very clear in his autobiography (Biran 2008a: 186).

Nevertheless, I came to know that the (other) santri are not oblivious about the true fact of the anti-American film movement. A santri author wrote an article in which he rightfully credited the stance to Lekra, and his writing was distributed at the film day celebration by the committee and circulated in the Internet through NU Online (Malik 2012). Still, his observation went overlooked during the discussion. The twist of an anti-American film movement is not existent only amongst the santri. Sen has stated that such an ironic twist of crediting the anti-American film movement not to Lekra but instead to Lesbumi filmmakers appeared in Indonesian newspapers in early the 1980s, and re-occurred in 1990s, as a result of the New Order's agenda of rejecting the PKI, that is, by distorting its cultural and political role in Indonesian historiography after 1965 (Sen 1994: 35).

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53) As many other Indonesians do it too! While at the same time, scholars of Indonesian cinema, insiders and outsiders, have severely criticized the term of *nasional film* as part of the way the New Order regime took its full control toward the repressive, single definition of what the Indonesian film should look like (Sen 1994; Sen 2006; Setijadi-Dunn and Barker 2010).

The collective memory, notably, becomes a pivotal issue in the process of Lesbumi re-branding by the santri. They spoke of their turn to cinema as a critique of the government's film policies, and the film day celebration is a considerable evidence of (their effort to realize) it. Yet, paradoxically, their inadvertent preference of the New Order version of the national film, along with their twist of anti-American movement is an example of how "the ghost from the past" of the New Order's cinematic historiography are still at work today (van Heeren 2009). The use of Lesbumi for branding their cinematic project has in turn required the santri to uphold some features signifying the 1960's political discourse as a one big package. Considering the historical enmity between Lesbumi and Lekra in the past, the very name of Lesbumi has been recalled in the collective memory of the santri in reference to the 1965-66 bloodshed in which NU had been involved. On one of my visits to the NU Online editorial board, I overheard a santri, to my assumption born in late 1980s, telling the other santri that an elder santri told him about how a member of Lekra was destructing a reel of film of a non-Lekra filmmaker with a pair of scissors.[54] This story significantly attests to Fealy and McGregor's argument that despite there being a small voice within NU to criticize NU's participation in the bloodshed, the dominant attitudes in NU were, among others, to justify the killing, e.g. for protecting the Muslim community and Indonesia from communist aggression (2010: 59).

## *'Budaya tanding'*: competing discourses

For the cinematic santri, film is often viewed as a medium that can embrace and bridge all classes of people (*semua kalangan*) i.e. the wider masses. According to them, particularly in comparison to paper-based printing media such as books and magazines, film is not only cheaper but also more 'pleasurable', especially for those who do not like reading. When discussing about this, significantly, the santri always compared "the high potential of reaching the masses" of the film medium with that of the paper/printing media. Usually, they will follow it by explaining the need "to produce a "*tontonan*" (a show) that becomes a "*tuntunan*" (educating values) at once.".

The 'show that educates' discourse is often translated by the santri in two similar ways. Firstly, it takes on the spirit of *dakwa* and educating people, which has been for long time the concern of the pesantren folks (as it is for the Tarbiyah and Muhammadiyah folks). Conversation like this usually revolves around the call for filming the NU-pesantren's Islamic teachings and moral values. Secondly, it takes in the spirit of "the cinematic battle" (Heryanto 2014). A particular group of santri, such as those in the PBNU building, not unusually bluntly suggested the use of film

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54) The very word 'scissors' suddenly evoked to my own memory a haunting scene from the New Order's film on PKI that I was 'imposed' to watch it when I was only a schoolboy. The scene was about a cruel cut with a razor blade by a woman described as a member of PKI on the face of one of the generals killed in the 1965-66 bloodshed.

medium for "*budaya tanding*", as a battle arena over, let's say, the right interpretation and practice of Islam, vis-à-vis their Muslim rivals, especially the Muhammadiyah and PKS groups.

Earlier, I have explained about the santri NU-style film discourse, in which I hinted at the contention between the cinematic santri and film producers from the secular strands. Indeed, the secular strands are never monolithic, but what I intended to refer here is those who embrace Western liberal-secular values when contextualizing their beliefs and religious moralities in public domains. Having in mind the Anti-Pornography Bill controversy I have mentioned above, which was not coincidentally triggered by a secular film entitled *Buruan Cium Gue*! (Kiss me Quick! 2004), the rise of cinematic santri obviously has much to do with their efforts to counter the secular and Western films, especially the ones which according to them feature hedonistic life-style and sexual imagery.

Yet, the santri have actually never totally turned away from filmmakers of the other secular strands, evidenced by their effort to invite Riri Reza and Nia Dinata, representatives of the secular filmmakers from the Kuldesak generation who are among those who reject Anti-Pornography Bill, to get involved in a film day celebration that the santri organized. By this, I argue that the santri's film discourse is less driven against that of the secular filmmakers, than against the rise of Islamic-themed films produced inside the Islamic discourse of the non-NU santri Muslim groups.

On commenting upon the cinematic santri project, one santri said as follows:

> As for me this is interesting... that NU as a traditional organization has a media (film), which is very modern. There has been an idea (of NU film production), and it has to be realized. But Muhammadiyah does not have one. I think this is important.

In my view, the santri was naive to assume that the modernist-Muslim's organization like Muhammadiyah did not have any interest in producing a film. Conversely, as I have said earlier, a similar cinematic movement in the provision of Muhammadiyah communities has preceded that in the NU communities. The 2013 release of 'Sang Kyai' (The Kyai), a biopic film of Hasyim Asy'ari, the NU's founding father, in which some of the NU elites were said to have been involved during its production process, was actually preceded by the 2010 production of 'Sang Pencerah' (The Enlightener). It is a biopic film of Ahmad Dahlan, the founder of Muhammadiyah. The santri's naive assumption, as it is of a recurrent case amongst them in term of comparing themselves with the Muhammadiyah group, is telling, given the significance of the rivalry between the NU-affiliated santri with the modernist Muslims for the former's decision to make a comeback into film arena after a long break.

Sahal's rejection to screen *Ayat Ayat Cinta* is worth recalling here. Sahal has an argument for this rejection, as it is common knowledge that *Ayat Ayat Cinta* is produced by a film director who affiliates himself openly with Muhammadiyah, and this director has come to a Muhammadiyah religious leader for seeking religious advice regarding the

Islamic contents of his film. On another occasion, I asked Sahal about how domestic Islamic films have so far portrayed pesantren and the NU people. He said:

> There was no complete portrayal about the santri society in national films. NU in a specific way did not appear. But, Islam probably did. What's covered was (only) Islam, which was far from the realities of Islam in the archipelago at large, let alone the Islam of NU. ...in general those Islamic films were fine, despite many had criticized us. For an example, (the critic of NU by) "*Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*" ('Woman On Turban', Dir. Hanung Bramantyo) was okay.[55] But he (the film director) made a mistake when making that film. For an instance, the way he (poorly) wrote "*Al-Huda*" in Arabic (the name of the pesantren in the film) was an indication that he had not "finished" yet on 'learning' about Islam. If he were to criticize (the santri society), he could have balanced it with (reflecting on) the positive side of the santri too. Yes indeed, the novel on which it was based was not my preference: full of rage, nothing enjoyable, I only read the first 75 pages of it. It was a project that was funded by the Ford Foundation.[56] But to say it in general, these Islamic films were disappointing. They were trapped in the superficial symbols of Islam.

Significantly, the arrival of the modernist groups at the center of national film stage, marked by the increasing production of an Islamic film genre in post-Suharto Indonesia, often was of concern to the traditionalist santri. I have earlier argued that it was NU's conflicted relationship with the modernists that has triggered its establishment in 1926, and ever since such rivalry has become the main driving factors of NU's socio-cultural and political behaviors in the public sphere (Bush 2009). Sahal's rejection to the film *Ayat Ayat Cinta*, along with his fellow critics of those Muslim filmmakers who have wrongfully depicted pesantren, exacerbates the competition between the traditionalists and the modernist groups over the right interpretation of Islam which is now extended into the film field.

Muslim competitors, however, do not come only from the modernist side. On one of the meetings for the film day celebration, Alex Komang advised that the cinematic project of the santri be aimed at countering against what he called *film seolah-olah Islam*, or film that only superficially deals with Islam, clearly singling out *Ayat Ayat Cinta* and *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* (When Love Glorifies). Heryanto (2014) has analyzed at length

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55) The film, above all, speaks about women equity and is an argument against a patriarchal culture in pesantren and society at large

56) By mentioning as such, Sahal seems to point out his presumption about the film's hidden agenda of promoting Western's liberal ideas of women equality. This indeed indicates that a topic of, let's say, liberalism can be sensitive to Sahal; and as the next chapters will unfold, also to many other santri. This does not mean, however, that the santri reject liberal values all together, and that they all share a uniform attitude toward it. In fact, while to an extent the santri generally accept religious pluralism and tolerance; there was a significant movement among a segment of the young NU santri to embrace Western's liberal philosophy in order to reinterpret Islamic orthodoxy, exemplified by the recent emergence of the Islam Liberal Network, or JIL; however controversial this movement is to many other conservative majorities of the NU communities (see Bush 2002; Ibrahim 2011).

the battleground that surrounds the production of both films. Yet, considering the fact that both films are adaptions from the novel of the similar writer, and similarly portray the life of protagonist Indonesian *Azharis* in Cairo, they were seen by the santri to have had some parallels with each other. My treatment of them in this chapter, thus, is to foreground the extent to which they are similarly at odds with the santri's cinematic discourse.

The novel versions of the two films, notably, were written by Habiburrahman el-Shirazy, a santri who was trained in a combination of Islamic institutions: Javanese pesantren, modern *madrasah* and Al-Azhar University. Yet, member of FLP, an Islamic writing club that has a strong affiliation with the *Tarbiyah* movement (see chapter two), el-Shirazy identifies himself as being different from that of the traditionalist NU-santri in the NU headquarters and beyond. Significantly, identification with the ideology of the *Tarbiyah* movement is observable throughout the narratives, images and messages of both *Ayat Ayat Cinta* and *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih*. As Barker says, they yield a picture of Islamic piety that leaves a commitment to social change for a dedication in individual development of faith (2011: 224), a characteristic of the *Tarbiyah*'s ideological emphasis on the 'individualistic pattern of Islamization' (Machmudi 2008). In the words of a film critic, Eric Sasono, that emphasis on the individualistic pattern of Islamization is described in the films as follows:

> [T]he main issue in *Ayat Ayat Cinta* and *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* is mundane love, which in the films is transformed into finding life-partners (as in the near-future marriage arrangement) because categorically love can lead Muslims into *zina* (fornication) which is strictly forbidden in Islam. The lead characters of these films are depicted performing prayers and reciting the Qur'an (*Mengaji*). They often quote the Qur'an and Hadith (The prophet Muhammad's saying as quoted by his disciples), or book written by classical Islamic scholars in Arabic, but they rarely addressed issues related to the deprivation of the *Ummah's* life or other social and political issues. Personal issues dominate the discourse of piety in these films (2013: 45-76).

It is the focus of Islamic-themed films of "the *Ayat Ayat Cinta* formula" on Islamic symbols and normative reference of individual's piety, which are seen by the santri group as a 'superficial' form of Islam, that is in contention with the santri's discourse on Islamic cinema as I have earlier discussed. One point is clear here. The increasing production of Islamic-themed films in the post-Suharto Indonesia, particularly since the phenomenal success of *Ayat Ayat Cinta* in 2008, that, seen from the santri's perspective, have misrepresented "the realities of Islam in the archipelago," after a long pause has encouraged the santri to return to the national cinematic contest. Significantly, their come back to the film arena, I argue, has mainly to do with the question of authority regarding who has the legitimate right for "picturing Islam" (George 2010) on film screen, vis-à-vis other Muslim rivals in the country.

In the past, a similar motivation has forced the NU elders for the establishment of their organization in 1926. Yet, today, the situation is different. If in the past, the

rivalry mainly came from the modernists, especially Muhammadiyah, now it also comes from the Islamists, especially the Tarbiyah movement, who are similarly, and with some overlapping interests, 'not only comfortable with pop culture but also sees pop culture as a means by which *dakwah* can occur' (Barker 2012: 224). Such a differently armed rivalry has challenged the NU santri to once again response to it with 'a reform of their own' (Hefner 2009); that is by arming themselves with the similar weapon and running back into the film arena.

## Conclusion

I have explained in this chapter the social actors, ideal discourse, space of positions and position-takings, as well as competing discourses of film that became the cultural fields in which the escalation of cinematic fever in the provision of the NU-santri communities operates, and with which it competes.

I have illustrated this by zooming in on the cinematic santri figure, that has played a significant role in the escalation of the cinematic fever among the santri in post-Suharto Indonesia. I argue that their emergence, symbolic of the historical trajectory of NU's Muslim politics, explains a strong desire of the santri to run into the question for legitimate authority to speak for, and on behalf of, the assumedly 'right' interpretation of Islam in Indonesia. One of their major causes to do so is by responding to the production of Islamic films by the other (Muslim) groups, i.e. the modernist and the Islamist, who do not only find in film a mean of *dakwa* but are also conversant with film-making and popular culture practices.[57] The marginal position of the cinematic santri both in NU and the country's film industry, though, has caught them up in the struggle to win the hearts of both the NU elite santri and the country's more established filmmakers. Because of that, the santri is often required to employ particular strategies for making them visible in the film world, such as by linking themselves with the elder Lesbumi's 'NU filmmakers' of the 1960s.

This does not mean, however, that the figure of cinematic santri is a bold imitation of the Modernist filmmaker groups. This is because, long before the popularity of today's Islamic film genre, the social, cultural, technological, and political transformations, significant for the post-Suharto era's emergence of our cinematic figure, have taken place inside the provision of NU societies. Therefore, as much as the emergence of cinematic santri is a phenomenon belonging to the post-Suharto Indonesia era, the present day cinematic fever among the santri, and very unlike to the past, is followed by, firstly, the concerted development of film-making infrastructure and, secondly, the expansion of cultural sites of cinematic activism in many local centers of NU community. I will explore this in the following chapter.

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57) I especially thank to Peter Mandaville for urging me to think of the 'intrusive' character of the santri's return to cinema at the course of the 2012 NISIS autumn school held at Leiden University.