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

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## Chapter 6

# Imagining Everyday Pesantren Islam

We wanted to present a face (*wajah*) of pesantren in a film format that could serve as an image (*gambaran*) for others: ‘Oh, pesantren is an extraordinary place, [that its everyday life dynamic is] not to be found in any other places’.

(*Personal interview with both Taufik and Aisyah*)

## Introduction

This chapter analyzes the films produced by Kidang santri. These films are *Hidup Sekali Hiduplah yang Berarti* (We Live Only Once, Live it Meaningfully, or *Hidup*, 2011), *Intensif* (The Intensive Class, 2013), *Untuk Sahabat* (For Friends), *Sumpah Pemuda* (The Youth Pledge), and *Demam Cakra* (Cakra Fever).<sup>1</sup> The last three films were produced between 2012 and 2013. The first two films were directed by Aisyah<sup>2</sup>, and the others were by a man only known as Jalal.<sup>3</sup>

These films are both engaged with representations of everyday life in pesantren, as experienced in Kidang. Daily stories and activities of learning that occurred in Kidang, along with pictures of Kidang’s santri and *kyai*, and Kidang’s popular objects such as

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1) Cakra is a nick name of an Indonesian popular singer, see below.

2) For an account on Aisyah, see Chapter 3.

3) For an account of Jalal, see Chapter 4.

*kitab kuning*, the pesantren's buildings, and the santri's use of video camera, laptop and mobile phone, are common to all of the films. Nevertheless, some aspects of everyday life at the Kidang pesantren are excluded. Even the realities visible on their films, they have been done so by the Kidang films in many different ways: some are overlooked and others are overemphasized. Arguably, Kidang's films are less concerned with realities of pesantren, than with an imagined dimension of pesantren's realities (Dissanayake 2009: 878).

Scholars of film studies have long disputed whether the wedded provision between film and reality should offer a realistic mirror of the world (Kracauer 1960), a new form of the reality (Bazin 1946), or even a meta-psychological simulation of an impression of the reality (Baudry 1975). My theoretical inquiry departs from film theorist Rudolf Arnheim, who has argued that the reproduction of even a perfectly simple object is not only a mechanical process, but also a matter of delicate sensibility (1933: 283). That is to say that the choice of, for example, camerawork involves a feeling that is beyond any mechanical operation. Viewed in this way, what is given attention in a filmic expression is "often selected deliberately for the sake of achieving specific effects" (Ibid). Following him, I am inclined to presume that the Kidang people have been involved in a conscious process of selection regarding what and how the everyday realities of (Kidang) pesantren should and, or, should not be pictured on their films. By saying this, I want to emphasize here that the selection process can be technical, ideological and even political, that is, never purely visual.

In order to understand the ways in which images of pesantren's everyday life realities are filmed by the Kidang santri, I will follow the steps of scholars in the field of visual culture who refuse to recognize "the practice of showing and seeing" as one that is "purely visual" (Mitchell 2005), and have encouraged instead the significance of a non-essentializing approach for studying the visual. That is to say the manner in which the visual is regarded as one that is mutually and reciprocally related to other sensory dimensions, and highly operated within various relations of power and regimes of values (see Mitchell 1994; Mirzoeff 1998; Bal 2003; Mitchell 2005; Pinney 2006; and Edwards and Bhaumik 2008; Spyer and Steedly 2008; and Meyer 2009).

Such an approach is largely influenced by the rise of the "pictorial turn" (Mitchell 1994) in the study of visual culture. It refers to the emergence of image as "a central topic of discussion in the human sciences in the way that language (once) did" (Mitchell 1994, p.13), acknowledging the complex relation between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, and bodies, in turn positing the need of "a post-linguistic and post-semiotic rediscovery of picture" (p. 16). By this new discovery, explains Mitchell (1996), we should stop questioning what images can do to us, but instead ask "what do pictures really want?" through shifting the question of subjectivity from the producers and consumers of images to the images themselves.<sup>4</sup> By treating images as a subject, we

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4) Mitchell writes that "pictures are things that have been marked with all the stigmata of

do not only refuse to reduce images to language, but also recognize them “as complex individuals occupying multiple subject positions and identities” (1996: 82).

Similarly, Christopher Pinney, in an essay where he examines *Four Types of Visual Culture*, i.e. the visual as language; as transcendent; as power relation; and as presence, has argued that the visual should not be conceived as “a kind of language”, because it will only “disallow any confrontation with the figural and resistant properties of certain visual forms” (2006: 134). Yet, he also stated that the visual should not be regarded as “entirely antithetical, and inaccessible to, signification” either (Spyer and Steedly 2008). The best way to study the visual, Pinney said, is to look it as “a continuum ranging across different qualities from which different paradigms are called” (2006: 135). This way, the visual “is neither one thing nor the other, but encompass instead a diverse set of forms, differently constituted” (Ibid.), connection of which is better seen as “complexly intersecting practices, best described as networks, rather than territories” (p. 142).

Spyer and Steedly (2013) push these points further, emphasizing the ways in which “images *take place* in wider worlds” (p. 8, emphasis original). They argue, certain images become worthy of attention simply because they are made to be so through particular processes of “enframement” and “refocalization” (p. 19). That is, the manifold ways in which images are technically, ideologically, historically, politically and so on, made to be seen as an object of attention and desire in particular places and for particular audiences and contexts.

Following Spyer and Steedly, my approach of studying the images of a pesantren’s realities represented by the Kidang films is one that is foregrounding the ways in which one’s act of seeing and being seen is always never purely visual in the first place, but it is at all times “refracted” (Strasser 2010) through various “intentionalities and desires” (Spyer and Steedly 2013). And by considering the theoretical backgrounds I have explained above, my aim in this chapter is to question the contents of Kidang’s santri’s films, to paraphrase Edwards and Bhaumik (2008: 3), not only in terms of the use of the visual, but also of how the visual is *felt*, emotionally, physically and intellectually, at the interface between vision and the other sensory ratios, between the visible and the invisible, and between the seen and the overlooked (*italics mine*).

Images that are made by Kidang’s santri’s films are images of a specific feature. They are moving images, that are not primarily produced for mass-commodity, yet not created for internal collection either. Copies of Kidang’s films are sold, and publicly screened to Kidang and non-Kidang members. Some are also uploaded to YouTube. Production processes of the Kidang films, more importantly, are highly controlled by pesantren’s authorities, either through Kidang’s supervisory mechanisms or through internal funding (despite that paid-in-advance money had to be returned). Yet, at the same time, all Kidang’s cinematic santri are first-timer filmmakers who have no professional training in film-making.

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personhood: they exhibit both physical and virtual bodies; they speak to us, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively”.

On top of these characteristics, most of Kidang people, especially those who maintain the structure of Kidang's male-dominated authority, are less conversant with visual culture than with textual traditions, meaning that their views on the significance of film-making are often in conflict with those of Kidang's cinematic santri, who are (not) coincidentally female members of the pesantren. In short, these images have been produced by Kidang people at the intersection of various intentionalities. On the one hand, there is a strong desire among the Kidang members to produce films, as Aisyah and Taufik phrase it, that "could serve as an image" of the pesantren world for the non-pesantren people. But on the other hand, as we will see through this chapter, personal desires, motivations and experiences of the Kidang films' producers have strongly contoured the processes of visual production of the Kidang films. This is where the significance of understanding Kidang films through the notion of "there is no such a purely visual media" lies.

I divide this chapter into four sections. I firstly attend to the development of santri's film-making skills and discuss how such development could influence their film-making creativities. Then I focus on the portrayal of Kidang's daily life in Aisyah's first film, exploring the extent to which structure of the film's narratives is a mirror of the pesantren's ideological values. Next, I venture to the depiction of several core elements of pesantren realities, questioning the kinds of motivation that are infused in their depiction. Here, I especially give ample attention to how particular realities are depicted, the reasons for certain depictions, and what are their wider contexts. In the last part of the chapter, I question the extent to which films by the Kidang santri is served as a means to express a sort of Muslim femininity among the Kidang (female) santri. This focus is especially crucial, considering that majority of Kidang members who are engaged in film-making practices are women.

## **An ongoing creativity**

In this section, I argue for the significance of considering the Kidang santri's film-making projects as a learning process. I draw attention to, firstly, how the santri have learned to improve their film-making skills through the films they have so far produced, and secondly, how such improvements of film-making skills have influenced the ways of them filming their own pesantren reality.

Before coming to that, though, I need to state a fundamental difference in the ways both Aisyah and Jalal have covered production costs of their films. This does not mean that I want to compare Aisyah's films to those of Jalal. Conversely, by showing the difference in financial support from each of their pesantren, I want to argue that our valuing of their films should be done on the basis of their films' own merits. Unlike Jalal's films that are his personal project, Aisyah's films are part of the pesantren's extracurricular activities of Kidang Matapena, the pesantren-sanctioned and funded literary-film club. This means that while Jalal had to self-fund his film-making projects

(if needed), Aisyah received a payment in advance from the pesantren's treasurer, approximately around 300 USD for each film production.<sup>5</sup> This in turn has significantly influenced the ways both Aisyah and Jalal have experienced the processes of their film productions.

With the advanced payment she received, for example, Aisyah was able to rent a set of video-making technologies, and hire professional camera operators and video editors, to shoot every scene of her films and to edit them later.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to Aisyah's case, and having no source of funding, Jalal's film production seemed to primarily investing in his personal business. Thanks to a digital camera of the pesantren, a newly acquired property from a local donor, he shot and edited the films himself, relying on his learn-it-yourself skills of operating camera and editing video. Locations and other properties background to his films are based on real places and materials available in and near the pesantren area, at most times, without any further decoration. Characters in his films, played mostly by santri under his supervision, all wore their ordinary everyday clothes, with minimal make-up. Access to his films in Kidang, at least by the time I was conducting this fieldwork in 2013, was limited to his close friends only, as they were neither sold nor circulated through any possible means of film screening, even not to a 'wider public' of the Kidang pesantren.

The cases of Aisyah and Jalal reflect the heterogeneity of film-making experiences of the santri, even though they live in similar pesantren. The different production costs is reflected in some aspects of the quality of the films. Nonetheless, their films should be judged by the ways in which the difference of their film-making experience is meaningful to inform us about the patterns on which their film-making skills and creativities take shape in various processes. That said, I decide to focus on how both Aisyah and Jalal have similarly developed the format and narrating techniques of their films from time to time.

At first glance, both Aisyah's and Jalal's films are characterized by a choice for particular formats: the latter tended to focus on short and the former on feature films. However, it is worth mentioning that Aisyah's first film, *Hidup*, is actually a compilation, of nine short films that are paralleled by their thematic similarities and which chronicle the santri's everyday life and studying in Kidang pesantren.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Jalal's short films also center on comparable accounts of living as a santri in Kidang.

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5) The payment, however, is regulated as a loan that Aisyah has to pay back to the pesantren after she had completed the film project, money of which is expected to come from the selling of the film's DVDs, mostly, but not limited to the Kidang santri.

6) To the extent that the advance payment can be translated as the pesantren's institutional support at its widest sense, the production of Aisyah films has called for the attention and efforts of almost all Kidang men and women to be involved in it.

7) They are *Language is Our Crown*, *Ummu Naum* (The Sleeping Girl), *Blezzzer*, *Saksi Bisu Terunik* (Blezzzer, the Unusual Silent Witness), *Pepping, No Way!* (Peeping, No Way!), *Pondok Tak Pernah Tidur* (Pesantren Never Sleeps), *Belanja Sambil Beramal* (Shopping

What makes the difference, particularly viewed from the point of the film format, is the fact that Aisyah put together her short films into one feature, and Jalal did not. This means, despite the apparent length difference, both Aisyah's and Jalal's first films actually similarly take a short format. Yet, the length difference in film format is important for the case of the Kidang filmmakers.

In the context of the Kidang cinematic santri, who are first-timer filmmakers with no professional training in film-making, making a short film is apparently a good way to start from. This is what I have described in Chapter 1 as a *percobaan*: an attempt, effort or an experiment. The choice of a short film format by the santri has some resonances with Cheng's exploration (2007) on how indie filmmakers in Malaysia were forced by their limited budgets to start their project "from small and began from [what] they know best and simplest". In the case of the Kidang santri, it is not only because of their limited budgets but also their nascent knowledge and skill in film-making. In this regard, Aisyah's second film, *Intensif*, and Jalal's third film, *Demam Cakra*, are worth mentioning here as both films take a longer format from that of Aisyah's and Jalal's first films. Unlike *Hidup*, *Intensif* is produced as a complete feature film of 72 minutes long. Likewise, *Demam Cakra* – despite being a short film – now takes a longer duration (11.41 minutes), especially if compared to Jalal's earlier short films. On commenting upon the release of *Intensif*, Aisyah said: "it (the production of her second film) is a kind of our way of proving (to ourselves and other people) that we can do it again, and that we want to improve (our film-making skills) better and better." This suggests that, in the contexts of the Kidang santri, there is a close relationship between the development of the santri's film-making skills and the length format of their films.

Another part of the development of both Aisyah's and Jalal's film-making skills relates to narrative techniques. In the case of Aisyah, the progress in her films' narrating techniques is seen in the ways she exploited 'the visual power' of a moving image in order to convey the main messages of her film. In her first film, Aisyah often slipped, whether conscious or not, into the trap of verbalizing the dramatic intention of her film. In *Intensif*, while such an act of 'verbalization' is discernible, she has made some good efforts to let the images convey messages to the audience, for example, by varying the focus, angle and placement of the film camera in order to capture particularly significant scenes of the film. She had indeed experimented with camerawork in her first film, yet in *Intensif* Aisyah was able to further exploit it in a more effective, and smoother way.

The establishing scene of *Intensif*, which portrays "a modern-looking santriwati who walked down the pesantren's entrance" – the most central part of the film that epitomizes the film's main message – is a case in point. To capture the importance of this scene, Aisyah has simultaneously varied the camera placement, that is, starting from the front side where the girl is moving forward, then from the backside that follows up

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for Charity), *No Gosob* (No Stealing), *Alunan Nasyid dan Dakwah* (Melodious Nasyid and Dakwah). I will discuss their contents in the following sections.



the girl's movement, and finally from the house of the pesantren's *kyai*, from which the film story begins. She also varied the use of camera angles, such as, a lower camera angle that signifies the grandeur of the pesantren's towering building the girl looked at, and an eye-level camera angle that emphasizes the girl's full-body gestures. Aisyah also kept changing the camera focus, in particular by playing on close-up shots, in order to highlight, among others, the girl's smiling face, her elegant-looking shoes, and a thick book she holds on her chest with her left hand. All in all, the complexity of narrating techniques through variation of the camerawork that Aisyah has deployed in *Intensif* reflects an (on-going) improvement of her film-making skills and knowledge.

Similarly, Jalal's films also show some progress in his film-making techniques. As far as the production of his films depends mainly on his DIY creativities, the progress of Jalal's film's narrating techniques were even more obvious. Jalal's first two works, *Untuk Sababat* and *Sumpah Pemuda*, are possibly regarded as video than as film, considering that they are humble recordings of selected dance/drama performances made by the Kidang santri. Yet, because they consist of a story with a message, I also regard them as films. If almost all scenes of *Untuk Sababat* seemed to have been shot from one angle and, mostly, in a static position, clearly indicating that Jalal only used one camera, in *Sumpah Pemuda*, Jalal began to vary the camera angles and at times to play with the zooming in-out techniques, despite those still being used in a rough way. But Jalal's third work, *Demam Cakra*, reveals the biggest sign of improvement in his film's narrative technique, as the film contains a fully developed storyline, has several film characters, and uses a few of film props and various musical backgrounds. In his third film, Jalal even employs a narrator who helps dramatize the film's story lines and solicit its main messages.

The improvement of certain qualities in Jalal's and Aisyah's films reveals a process of learning about making film and its related creativities among the Kidang santri. Having no professional training in film-making, both Jalal and Aisyah learned and developed their skills and knowledge of film-making in a self-taught manner. Usually, they learned the required knowledge of film-making from the films they have watched. The Internet, especially YouTube videos, has become another important source and reference for their film-making knowledge. The pesantren's digital SLR camera has also been helpful for them to practice their photographic skills. Aisyah's participation in several writing workshops have become a foundational source of knowledge regarding how to write, a film script. Their creative will to "learn from the film they watched" is commensurate with the culture of "cut and paste" that is used by Luvaas (2012) to describe the development of do-it-yourself creativities among the indie communities in the post-Suharto Indonesia who depend their mode of production on a principle of "creating by any means necessary" (p. 1).

Considering how the Kidang santri have creatively developed their film-making skills, along with the apparent progress of their film qualities, I am inclined to argue that the visual production among the Kidang santri is always an ongoing process of creativity.

## Disciplining everyday life

Film theorist S. Brent Plate (2008) has argued about the mirror-like proximity between film and religion, writing that, “the ways films are constructed”, arguably, “shed light on the ways religions are constructed and vice versa” (p. 2). This means, film as a visual form, has the affective capacity to frame and being framed by the ways religion is lived in one particular context. In this section, I want to explore the ways the films by the Kidang santri have particular resonance with the pesantren’s ideological principles as an Islamic learning institution. That is, Islam in Kidang is not just a religion, but one that is daily framed, spatially and temporally, in a particular setting (see Chapter 4). To this end, I will focus on the narrative structures of their films. My reason to focus on this aspect is because most of the Kidang’s films similarly consist of what I will later call, “the narrative of order”, referring to Turner’s perspective of ‘social drama’ (Turner 1974) which consists of four phases: the breach, the crisis, the redressive action and the reintegration of the disturbed social group.<sup>8</sup> This in turn triggers the following questions: “why does it (the films’ similar narrative structure) so?”; “what does it tell us about, as Plate has above argued, the proximity between their films and the role of Kidang pesantren as an institution of religious learning?” and “how does it help us to read (the images that are produced by) their films?”. I will start my exploration by looking at an episode of Aisyah’s *Hidup* as an example, that is, *Language is Our Crown* (LOC), simply because of the strong resemblance of its narrative structure with that of other episodes from *Hidup*.

LOC, as implicit from its use of the word “crown”, is a metaphor for how the Kidang people have treated both English and Arabic languages as one of the pesantren’s targeted points of excellence. In Kidang, there is a rule that all santri are obligated to speak in both English and Arabic for daily communication - the schedule of which is rotated once in every two days. Any failure to follow such an obligation will cause him/her a series of disciplinary procedure as punishment. To implement this regulation, a band of fifth grader santri are appointed as members of the pesantren’s Language Section (see also Chapter 4). And as one of their main tasks, every day after the morning prayer, members of the Language Section will gather the santri at the pesantren’s main yard in order to practice their English/Arabic speaking comprehension. In the end of the gathering, they will announce names of the santri who were found guilty of breaking the language rule during the yesterday and give them a punishment according to the severity of their transgression.

The LOC episode centers on Linta, a female santri who is not willing to obey the language rule. She was portrayed to have violated the rule more than three times in

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8) Turner describes a social drama as a collection of harmonic and disharmonic social process that arises in a situation of crisis. He especially introduced this concept to describe how a ritual is essentially a processual form, while it is in itself a process of social drama (1966: 14).

just one week. Because of that, and on the basis of pesantren's disciplinary mechanism, she was punished by wearing a green veil for one day. It is a brightly green-colored head cover with a tag line "Transgressor of the Language Section". The punishment, emphasizing the state of exposure of the language transgressor to the public gaze of the Kidang people, caused her not only a feeling of shame and humiliation, but also an exclusion from her friends (see Chapter 4). As the episode proceeds to describe Linta's fate during the punishment period, almost all her santri friends avoided to talk to her and made her an object of their gossiping routines, a situation that only worsened to her embarrassment. Yet, thanks to the positive advice and support from both her best friends and members of the Language Section, Linta was finally encouraged to learn harder and to publicly speak the "international" languages. In the end, Linta was depicted happily looking at the list of the pesantren's language transgressors, for her name was cleansed from it.

### ***Institutional perspective***

Central to the ways LOC has been structured as narrative is a notion of order. The LOC's narrative structure consists of the following phases: order, crisis, a situation of disorder, and a restoration of order. The crisis is portrayed by LOC when a santri failed to follow the proper pesantren conduct – that is the student doesn't use the official language. Such a crisis then results in a situation of disorder. An act of violating the pesantren's rule by a santri would lead to public moral disgust, that is to say that the transgressing santri will be excluded by their friends, causing him/her an emotionally terrible feeling of pain. Here, the santri is forced to learn not only about "obeying the proper pesantren conduct", but also about "the danger and pain of exclusion". But at the story's conclusion, the disorder is described as resolved by the solidarity of santri being best friends, and the role of members of the Language Section, as a representative of the pesantren's institutional authority. That said, the notion of order is crucial here, not only because it is how the film's narratives are structured, but also because the main message of the film's narrative is about "how to maintain a situation of order inside the pesantren grounds". If you obey the rules all is well and if you do not obey the rules you will suffer from the danger and pain of exclusion. Considering that LOC's narrative of order is common among the other *Hidup*'s episodes,<sup>9</sup> even among the other Kidang films, it is imperative for us to question what does it mean in relation to the expansive visualization of Kidang's daily life by the Kidang santri's films?

Indeed, the narrative of order used by the Kidang films is nothing new. Yet, this

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9) To illustrate their narrative structure similarity: if in LOC, the disorder is burst out when a santri had not been willing to communicate in the pesantren's "official" languages; in *Pepping, No Way*, it occurred when a female santri refused to stop her habit of peeking into the restricted corner of Kidang's male area; in *No Ghosob*, when a santri took one's belongings without permission; and in *Ummu Naum*, when a santri had an unbearable habit of sleeping during the learning season.

reminds me of Sen's exploration of the New Order films, in which she found out that most films produced during the New Order applied a similar narrative of "ordered" structure, moving "from order through disorder to a restoration of the order". She argued that such ordered pattern should be referred to both the particular history of the country's film medium and the political characteristics that are attributed to it by the New Order regime (Sen 1994: 159-161). By this, I do not mean to conclude, that the narrative structures of *Hidup* films are reminiscent of the New Order's films, without first investigating their specific contexts. Rather, following Sen's argument, what I want to argue here is, in order to understand what is the meaning behind *Hidup*'s narrative of order, we should place it in the context of how the Kidang people have – historically, politically, socially, religiously – turned to particular cinematic practices.

In Chapter 3, I have discussed how the pesantren people have come to engage with filmic practices. I argue that their cinematic turn is predicated upon their efforts on the one hand to keep up with changes taking place inside and surrounding the pesantren grounds, but on the other hand to maintain pesantren's discursive tradition at the course of the changes. *Hidup*'s narratives of order are structured on the similar efforts. Since the application of the *Terpadu* system in Kidang by early 2000s<sup>10</sup>, all Kidang santri have to fully stay inside the pesantren areas and are required to participate in all Kidang's learning activities and religious practices, extending from the time they wake up, early in the morning to the time they return to their beds in the late evening. This rule has in turn come with an arrangement of a set of disciplinary mechanisms and security institutions that control, among others, circulation of the santri inside and outside the pesantren grounds, and segregation of the female and male area, as to regulate interaction between santri of the opposite gender identities. Such a rule is very much to create a situation of order imposed for the effectiveness of the learning and religious activities of the pesantren, hierarchy of which is strongly embedded in the pesantren's patriarchal structure of authority (more on this, see Chapter 4).

That said, to the extent that much of the *Hidup* films seem to be geared at disciplining Kidang members, and teaching them how to be a good member of the Kidang community, if not 'citizens' of the institution, the narratives of order of the *Hidup* films is a reflection of Kidang's understanding of authority. Thus, insofar as it is very much about patriarchy at work, Kidang films are reminiscent of the New Order films (Sen 1994). As such I argue, the daily life that is visualized by the films of the Kidang santri is not 'just' a daily life: but it is a daily life that affirms the institutional perspective of the pesantren.

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10) In response to changes that happened within and surrounding Kidang's backgrounds, Kidang's family members reformed the pesantren's educational system, by combining its 'Salafiyah' traditional education with Gontor's modern *madrasah* curriculum and the state-sanctioned system of education. The new system is called, *Sistem Terpadu*, or the 'Integrated System' (see also Chapter 3).

### ***Ethical goals***

Another crucial aspect of the narrative of order of the Kidang santri's films, as exemplified by LOC, is that all of their stories finish with ideal endings. I argue, that these ideal serve particular purposes. To explore this, I will return to my fieldwork notes, notably in regard to how these ideal endings relate to what actually happens in the 'real world' of the Kidang pesantren.

During my stay in Kidang, I was often told about problems involving both male and female santri breaking the pesantren's regulations, in which the disorder they created was not always easily resolved, or at least the breaking of regulations was in practice restored differently from how it was portrayed by the films. There were cases in which the santri were expelled from the pesantren after committing an assumedly serious violation of the pesantren proper conduct, such as going on a date (*pacaran*) with another santri. I also often encountered that several santri did not speak in the official language(s) of the pesantren without fearing being caught by someone from the Language Section. And still, I was also told that parents of Kidang's santri occasionally visited the pesantren's office in order to call into question the kinds of punishment their sons/daughters had received. As such, there is always a gap between what happens in the pesantren and what their films' ideal endings portray about the daily life of Kidang. By saying this, I have neither intention to say, nor having an interest in doing so, that the narratives of their films are *not* true. However, as I have time and again argued, the gap between what has been visualized in the film's narratives and what has actually happened in the pesantren's realities should be understood in a way that informs us on the ways religious life, practices and expressions are learned, experienced, and ideally constructed by the Kidang people *within* the Kidang contexts.

In a way, the narrative structures of Kidang films might have reflected the impression of some film scholars about efforts of "applying religion and film to Islam" (Blizek and Yorulmaz 2005). That is, the use of film by the believers for didactic, preaching, and devotional purposes of the religion, such as Dwyer's 'Muslim devotional film genre' (2010) in Indian cinema.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, as it is apparent from LOC's narrative, Kidang films contain strong pedagogical and ideological elements of pesantren and Islamic teachings. However, I would go further to look at the ideal ending of narrative structure of the Kidang films in a slightly different way.

Anthropologist Kenneth M. George (2010), in his work on the making of Islamic art by an Acehnese Muslim painter, offers an insight into "how making art might help Muslims [to] pursue their ethical and religious goals". George writes that the painter often used his paintings to record 'spiritual notes' that might function to him, and his painting audiences too, as a retrospect for reflection and meditation (p. 105). In the case

11) The use of film for such purposes, indeed, is not specific to Islam (Wright 2007). As examples: for a Christian 'Evangelical genre' context in Benin, West Africa, see Merz (2014); and for an India's 'Hindi mythological and devotional genre' film context, see Dwyer (2006).

of the Kidang santri, who come to and live in Kidang first and foremost for learning how to practice Islam correctly (according to pesantren tradition), the ideal endings of their films might be telling the extent to which the making of the visual image of pesantren realities is experienced as an ethical practice: one that functions to perfect their piety. This is not to argue that all ideal endings of a film should be read as a sole ethical practice. My reading, conversely, is highly dependent on the discursive settings of Kidang, meaning that it should not always be applicable to other contexts, or as Bal (2003) puts it, “the same visual can mean different things in different settings”. I will return to my observation on how the meaning of *Hidup* is translated among the Kidang people.

I have stated elsewhere in this dissertation that *Hidup Sekali Hiduplah yang Berarti* was originally a book of the same title, written by members of Kidang’s Matapena. The similar title of the book and film merits a special examination, particularly regarding the way the title is given its meanings by members of Kidang pesantren. While expression of *Hidup* (We Live Only Once, Live it Meaningfully) seemed countering the more secular street slang of YOLO (You Only Live Once), the use of *Hidup* as the title for both the book and film is, according to Taufik, due to the importance of the expression for the Kidang people. Taufik said:

The title was inspired by the pesantren’s motto. It reads, “Our life in this world is only once, so that our life should be meaningful” (*hidup kita di dunia ini cuma sekali, karena itu hidup kita ini harus berarti*). It becomes a kind of wisdom that all santri of Kidang is taught about during their study. Like the book, the film brings the same mission. It wants to bring forward the Kidang values. Specifically, it wants to portray that what santri of Kidang have learned here [in the pesantren] is meant to reach that end, being [a] meaningful [Muslim].

In Kidang, the motto of *Hidup* is engraved on a monument that stands near the pesantren’s mosque and is frequently cited by members of Kidang. During a weekly evaluation meeting I attended, one senior *ustadz* explained to a number of assistant *ustadz* and *ustadzah*, including Aisyah and Jalal, that the expression of *Hidup* shall motivate all members of Kidang pesantren to be more creative and make use of their times in order to reach the goal of being, to cite his words, “a Muslim who is advantageous to other people.” Significantly, he supported his explanation by citing a *hadis*, which says, *khairu al-nās anfa’uhum li al-nās* (the best men are those who are the most helpful ones for others), which to the best of my knowledge is very popular too as a moral teaching amongst the Kidang people.<sup>12</sup> A female santri who wrote about the *Hidup* expression in her essay published by Kidang’s Matapena argued that such an expression could be used for motivating one to be a better santri, that is, by spending

12) Many santri in Kidang use the *hadis* of *khairu al-nās anfa’uhum li al-nās* as their motto of life, as do many other santri outside Kidang. This says the degree to which such *hadis* is popular amongst, specifically members of Kidang pesantren, and generally santri across the country.



his/her time in doing rewarding activities and for worshipping God, or *ibadah* (Hapadoh 2011: 46-51).

The use and interpretation of the *Hidup* motto reveals the symbolic, at times sublime, power of the oft-quoted words amongst the Kidang people. It symbolizes their continuous effort to perfect themselves through worships and good deeds in order to be a meaningful person, which according to the prophetic tradition is the main virtue of *khairu al-nās*, or the ‘best human being’. Explicit from the entitlement of the film’s episodes to the pesantren’s motto, thus, is that the making of visual images of the pesantren realities in *Hidup*, and arguably in any other films of their production, is purposed for self-improvising themselves for, to cite Kloos (2013), “becoming a better Muslim”. In other words, the notion of ethic is very crucial to a production process of the visual by the Kidang santri. To provide a background for it, a brief discussion of ethics needs to be introduced here.

Ethics, in the Aristotelian sense, is defined in terms of the goal, action, purpose, or inquiry that aims to “reach at some good” (MacIntyre, 2002 [1967]: 55). This implies that ethics do not only question about what is good, but also, more importantly, about how to be good: meaning that ethics is different from morality, and a dimension of action is central in the so-called ethical. Foucault, similarly drawing his argument from Aristotle’s work, refers to ethics as a set of practices, techniques, and discourses by which human subjects transform themselves in order to achieve a particular state of being, happiness, or truth (as cited in Mahmood 2005: 28; but see also Foucault 1984a and 1984b). In his view, an ethical formation essentially consists of agency and the role of subjectivity.

Anthropologist Michael Lambek has further pushed the Aristotelian concept of ethics by complicating the ethical as an immanent part of human condition (2010a: 1). For him, ordinary practices such as daily speech and social interaction are inherently ethical, because in order to act well and judge wisely, we must constantly exercise our judgement with respect to what we do or say in relation with others, and within a set of cultural contexts and relations of power (Lambek 2010b: 39, see also Lambek 2015). Webb Keane elucidates Lambek’s approach by showing that the ethical is embodied in our act of objectification, or in “the surfaces of things and the interactions they mediate” (2010: 69). Using the practice of gifting as an example, he shows that an act of gift exchange does not have a moral weight unless “the gift, the persons and the act of passing the gift” (or the surfaces of thing) are framed to have had moral consequences through “certain physical and verbal expressions” (or the mediated interactions). Seen this way, the ethical is always a form of never-ending interpretation about how to become a better person in certain contexts: it is part of “people making sense of their lives in the course of living them” (Lambek 2014: 491).

Considering the notion of ethics as an immanent dimension of the social life of the human condition, the quotidian use of *Hidup* by the Kidang people as a modality of learning with which they perfect themselves to be a better Muslim, is a mirror of

how picturing pesantren on screen is valued by the santri in an ethical weight.<sup>13</sup> To say it differently, the films' narrative of order and ideal endings are discursively "objectified" (Tilley 2006) by the Kidang santri as a "framing" (Keane 2010) with which they give ethical appropriateness to how realities of Kidang pesantren should be or should not be filmed. The film's voiceover that accompanies the introductory scenes of *Hidup*, emphasizing the film's protagonist's transformation from what she was in the past into what she is now in the present, is worth reading to summarize my argument:

*I used to ask myself, what life is? What do I live for? And how should I live my life? It is often said, life is only once and chance never comes twice. But I never know, what is my life for and what can I do with it. Hmm... but now I understand that life only needs one principle, a principle that brings me into a reality of life, and helps me to color it with decency. Because life is only once, I decide to choose a life that is meaningful. This is my life, this is me, this is my taste. Its texture, color and nuance are meaningful. (Emphasis mine).*

In this section, I have interpreted the production of the visual as highly pedagogical, ideological and constituting of an ethical practice for the Kidang members, in the following section, I will move on to an exploration of how the production of the visual is related to a yearning among the Kidang people to give voice to everyday realities of pesantren that are hitherto unheard.

## Voicing the realities of a pesantren

John Berger (2002: 53) writes, "the photograph cannot lie, but, by the same token, it cannot tell the truth; or rather, the truth it does tell, and the truth it can by itself defend, is a limited one". To an extent that making film is highly dependent on a similar technology that produces a photograph, that is a camera, images, or reel of images of a film, like a photograph, cannot fully capture the truth, but rather, the truth that has been modified.

In relation to "a notion of capturing the truth through film", at many times during my research, as well as apparent from the films that the santri have produced, an effort of filming "what truly happened in Kidang" is a matter of concern among the Kidang people. Indeed, the Kidang films are by no means documentary works, and they were not intended to be so. Nevertheless, most of their films contain some of the virtues of the documentary, as for example, they speak about Kidang's values as directly as possible, and they do so for conveying (to their audiences) a host of information, awareness, and voices about the pesantren world.<sup>14</sup> In this section, I explore their decision of "filming with documentary virtues", by focusing on the portrayal of, respectively, Kidang's learning activities, Kidang's santri, and the *kitab kuning*. My reason to focus on these

13) Somewhat resonating the utility of listening practice to cassette sermon for the task of ethical self-improvement among Cairene Muslims (Hirshkind 2006).

14) Since the complicity between documentary and filming the real has received strong criticism from film scholars (e.g. Aufderheide 2007), here, following Nichols Bill (2010) I define



“everyday realities” of pesantren life, is not only because of their highly recurrent visibilities throughout the Kidang films, but also their political significance in and to the santri’s film discourses that I have already discussed in earlier chapters, that is to say, they are part of “the main elements of pesantren tradition” (Dhofier 1999).

### *Insider’s insight*

The representation of learning activities in Kidang pesantren across the Kidang films is both common and also faithful. The last episode of Aisyah’s *Hidup* confirms my point. Entitled *Pondok Tak Pernah Tidur* (Pesantren Never Sleeps, PNS), the episode designates what have made Kidang as a pesantren incessantly alive. It centers on a *santriwati* character playing as a host of a TV’s infotainment show program. The show is titled ‘*La Ghibah*’, an Arabic word roughly meaning ‘Don’t Gossip’. While the show’s name can be interpreted as an implicit critique by the Kidang people of the popularity of infotainment shows among Indonesian TV audiences, it suggests that what is reported by the show is “not a gossip”, but “the reality” of Kidang pesantren. As such it is consistent with the show’s content, as it presents a kaleidoscopic view of 24-hours activities in Kidang pesantren, which are shot on *real* locations, and are based in *real* time, on *real* people, and using *real* costume and props. Importantly, the daily activities that are presented by the show, are (only) those that pertain to Kidang’s learning practices, such as *muhadasah* (English-Arabic conversation), *muhadlarah* (training of oratory skills), *mudzakarah* (reviewing session of the pesantren’s course materials), boy-scouting program, and sporting exercises. Considering its emphasis on showing the ‘factuality’ of the learning activities in the Kidang pesantren, PNS does not only send a message about the centrality of learning particular activities in the pesantren world, but also speaks to its audiences that (Kidang) pesantren is fundamentally an educational institution of Islam.

Aisyah told me, her decision to maintain the ‘factuality’ of Kidang throughout her films was partly due to time and budget efficiency. Yet, she also acknowledged that her decision of filming the “real life” of Kidang pesantren was also deliberate. Here, it is worth mentioning that Aisyah and many other santri in Kidang (and elsewhere) shared similar views on that representation of pesantren as an Islamic educational institution is often vilified by various media platforms. For example, after the events of September 11, 2001, which was followed by a series of bombing attacks in Indonesia, media coverage has, in a way of generalization, increasingly described pesantren as fostering religious militancy and ‘terrorist’ jihad (see Pohl 2006). While radical pesantren do exist (see

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a documentary film as one that “speaks directly about the historical world” (p.7), that is purposed to stimulate “a desire to know” (p. 40) in their audiences. It is a particular film genre that “convey an informing logic, a persuasive rhetoric, and a moving poetics that promises information and knowledge, insight and awareness”, and that is produced by “He-Who-Knows” to “those who wish to know” (p. 40). And as I will make it explicit throughout the following paragraphs of this section, several parts of Kidang films contain some of these documentary characters.

Atran, Magouirk and Ginges 2008), the Kidang members, and the pesantren people elsewhere, seem quite irritated by such generalization. For example, when I asked one of the Kidang *kyai* about his opinion regarding the portrayal of pesantren in Indonesian commercial films and Television dramas,<sup>15</sup> the *kyai* told me that pesantren as a place of Islamic learning was generally misrepresented. He then cited a TV soap opera (*sinetron*) currently being broadcast on Indonesian TV station, entitled “Pesantren Rock & Roll” (2011), which according to him had distorted the image of pesantren as a mere dating place between the pesantren members.<sup>16</sup>

Keeping in mind both Aisyah’s and the *kyai*’s statement, I argue, representation of “the real life” of Kidang’s learning activities by PNS, could be interpreted as an index of shared efforts among the Kidang people for providing an “insider view” (to non-pesantren people) regarding the shape of everyday life practices of pesantren, notably as an Islamic learning institution.

### ***The ‘cool’ santri***

Another portrayal of Kidang’s realities that recurred in almost every film produced in Kidang pertains to images of the (Kidang) santri. It is self-evidently acceptable that a film about pesantren will contain portrayals of the pesantren’s students. Yet, what I will problematize here is less the omnipresent image of the santri throughout the films, but rather how and why the Kidang people have similarly tended to represent santri in their films as young, ‘cool’ and pious Muslims, as the following case of Jalal’s third film *Demam Cakra* reveals.

*Demam Cakra* speaks about an epidemic ‘fever’ (*demam*) of Cakra Khan’s popularity, that (is said to) have plagued the santri of Kidang pesantren. Khan is an Indonesian pop singer whose 2012 single release, *Harus Terpisah* (We Must Separate), received a country-wide popularity, especially among the Indonesian teenagers. The beginning of the film shows that many of Kidang santri were excited to sing Cakra’s song every now and then, and to follow updates of the singer through any possible

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15) Note my story in Chapter 1, in which I solicited Sahal’s disappointment at Hanung Bramantyo’s filmic portrayal of a pesantren world in his “*Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*” (Women on Turban).

16) ‘Pesantren Rock & Roll’ is a story of Subuh Wahyu, a Jakartan ex-rock-singer cum ex-prisoner, who was forced by his parents to live in a pesantren in Yogyakarta for rehabilitating his (mis)behaviour. As a protest against his parent decision, Wahyu shows rebellious conduct during his first days in the pesantren, hoping he will be expelled by the pesantren’s *kyai*. But when he sees Nada, the pesantren’s *kyai*’s daughter whose beauty has attracted the attention of male members of the pesantren, including one of the pesantren’s young teachers, *ustadz* Najib, Wahyu starts to enjoy his time in the pesantren. Wahyu falls in love with Nada, who seems to give him a mutual signal. Yet, despite their reciprocal feeling of affection, it is not easy for Wahyu to stay close with Nada, not only because of the pesantren’s strict regulation against a mix-sex sociability, but also because of Najib’s fierce resistance against their apparent love affairs, not to mention the interception from Wahyu’s ex-lover in his past life.

ways, including via the Internet that is accessed without permission from an *ustadz*'s laptop. The intensity of this Cakra fever, unfortunately, has held up many of the santri from performing a punctual attendance to the regular communal prayers. After being disciplined by the pesantren's santri organization, however, they realized that their fondness for Cakra's song should not lead them away from practicing the religious rituals and performing their 'duties' as pesantren students.

Central to *Demam Cakra* is the santri's aspiration for how to be a pious Muslim and a young person at the same time. Bayat and Herrera (2010) argue that being young is not a matter of age per se, but involves a sort of socially constructed dispositions in which young people cultivate their consciousness of being young, by participating in manifold forms of youth practices, cultures and activism that fit within their generational consciousness (p. 6-8). Implicit in the film's focus on Cakra Khan's single is an association of santri being attuned to the current trends of Indonesian youth culture and lifestyle, especially ones that are regarded as global, modern and secular. Such association is also tangible through the portrayal of santri as an Internet and technological savvy. Likewise, the language use in the film is telling. Instead of speaking in Sundanese, English or Arabic, the three most daily spoken languages among the Kidang people, the film's main character maintained the use of Jakartan-street dialect of Indonesian language (*bahasa gaul* Jakarta), a language that associates its user with being a "trendy and modern" subject, especially among the Indonesian youngsters (Barendregt 2008: 166). The film's narrative style, too, cannot be more telling about such an association, as it imitates that of Raditya Dika's *Malam Minggu Miko* (Miko's Saturday Night), a YouTube serial comedy that was so popular among (Indonesian) YouTube users that it was later broadcasted by a nation-wide TV station and adapted to a film format.

That said, reading *Demam Cakra* with Bayat's and Herrera's theory in mind, the portrayal of the santri seems to have concerned with their efforts of "reclaiming the youthfulness" (Bayat 2010), that is, by participating in "the current trends that make them cool" (Naafs 2012: 119) as young and Muslim santri. This interpretation will lead us to conclude that the portrayal of the cool santri by Kidang films is a reflection of Bayat's and Herrera's (2010: 18) "politics of possibility", which refers to the ability of young people to make their best to accommodate their youthful claims within the constraining norms and institutions of their "poorest situations".<sup>17</sup> An example of this kind of political acts ranges from appearing in the fake but globally typical brands such as Nike baseball caps, to listening to pirated international CDs: and here, in the case of *Demam Cakra*, I add, by producing a film that is relevant and in line with the country's nationally-acclaimed trends of popular lifestyle and culture.

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17) Be it financially or politically: which in the case of Jalal and many other cinematic santri can be broadly interpreted as the incipience and shortage of film-making infrastructures, the lack of financial backing and institutional support from the central board of NU for example, et cetera.

However, I would like to push these ideas further by underlining both the political and ethical dimension of “the portrayal of the cool santri” in their film. A santri is indeed a Muslim - but being a santri is different from being a Muslim, largely because the former is politically differently charged than the latter. Elsewhere in the dissertation, I have talked about the century-long stereotypes of the santri being backward and rural people, and I have also explored how such stereotypes have occasioned their desires to turn to film practices. That is to say, making film is part of their long struggle to prove to themselves and others that, like the other young people elsewhere, they are not ‘that rural’, but are conversant with, and being up-to-date to current trends of global popular culture. That said, the depiction of the cool santri is a defensive strategy against the views that the santri are not being cool. The use of *gaul* language by the film is particularly telling here: for among the Indonesian youngsters, *gaul* means ‘talking about the right things, having your own opinion and lifestyle, but also being interested in modern technology and gadgets’ (Barendregt 2008: 166), including making film.

This way, the “cool santri” differs from Khabeer’s “Muslim Cool” (2011, 2016), which she uses to describe “a way of being Muslim” that links together the notions of Islam, hip hop music and blackness in order to resist and contest both the supremacy of white American normativity and the hegemony of Arab and South Asian Muslim communities, in the US. The notion of resistance, blackness and its racial narrative seems to be too strong in the context of the santri. Yet, what I found interesting in Khabeer’s “Muslim Cool” and something which is close to the context of the Kidang santri, is that it articulates a particular way of thinking and of being a Muslim that is grounded in the notion of popular culture, foregrounding that being Muslim is not something that is foreign or threatening to one particular place. By extension, the “cool santri” is another side of the same coin of what Rudnyckyj (2009) has called, “market Islam”, referring to an effort by some Muslims to “mobilize Muslim ethics to meet the challenges of the free market, yielding Islamic practices conducive to economic liberalization” (p. S197). The cool santri phenomenon seems to be revealing the claim made by the santri that they are ‘just’ part of this larger modern world.

I will now explore the portrayal of *kitab kuning* in Kidang films.

### ***Kitab kuning***

Another of the Kidang realities that received a lengthy portrayal in and across the Kidang films is images of the *kitab kuning*. Examples of such portrayal range from a book the santri was continuously holding in their hands, to the santri reading loudly from it in their class rooms, to the santri carefully putting it on their bookshelves, and to that of competing to become Kidang’s ‘santri of the year’. The following excerpt from a trailer of *Hidup* is the most revealing one, not only because it closely pictures the *kitab kuning*, but it is part of the establishing shot of the trailer. The trailer was also uploaded on a YouTube channel that belongs to a Kidang student, and it was tagged as “film santri”. So, this means, while the trailer has been deliberately signified for drawing public

attention that the film is about life and (mis)behavior in pesantren, showing the *kitab kuning* means, “we are in pesantren”. The excerpt is as follows:

In a full close-up shot, it starts with an image of an open book that lies squarely on a school table. As the close-up image got quickly clearer, it shortly exposed details of the book: tinted pages containing of black-inked Arabic scripts. By the right side of the book, brown-skinned bare fingers were seen loosely holding it. The camera then slowly made a zoom-out shot, thus revealing to the film’s audience that the fingers belong to a Kidang santriwati who, sitting in an empty class, seemingly felt asleep at the course of self-studying the book. By the time the audience realized this spatial context, two girls holding the similar book with that of the sleeping student’s, entered the class. Then, as the scene was fading into another sequence, a voice over was heard, saying, “*I used to question what is life, what it is for, and how I should live it*”. (Trailer of *Hidup*, minutes 00.05 - 00.11)

Notably, representation of the *kitab kuning* in Kidang’s films reveals the process of transmission, sacredness, and authoritative power of the *kitab kuning* among the (Kidang) pesantren people.

The history of Indonesian cinema only has a few films with Islamic themes which portray the everyday lives of the country’s assumed observant Muslims since the 1960s. Very few of these films portray the *kitab kuning*. When it comes to representation of the importance of scriptural tradition among Muslims, most of them have referred to the Qur’an and the *Hadis*, or to Islamic books that are written in Romanized Indonesian, usually call *buku putih* (lit. ‘white book’). It is probably Chaerul Umam’s *Al-Kautsar* (1977, Scr. Asrul Sani) that has tried most significantly to endow the portrayal of *kitab kuning* with a certain prominent position, as the film described it stacking up on a *kyai*’s table, that is, at the film’s establishing scenes.

While, it is arguably only Nurman Hakim’s *3 Doa 3 Cinta* (3 Prayers 3 Loves) that has portrayed the *kitab kuning* in a similarly extensive way as the Kidang films have done so far, in that it has carefully pictured details of not only the book’s contours, but also the book’s process of being transmitted from a pesantren’s *kyai* to his santri. Not coincidentally, *3 Doa 3 Cinta* is a film of a NU-affiliated santri director, thus revealing the extent to which the typical portrayal of *kitab kuning* by films of santri NU-style in general is aimed for articulating a specific voice. By saying this, I argue that to the extent that “appropriate” representation of the role of the *kitab kuning* for the pesantren people has been lacking in, if not ignored by, Indonesia’s mainstream ‘Islamic cinema’, the portrayals of the *kitab kuning* by the Kidang films can be regarded as voicing the pesantren’s tradition that is hitherto underrepresented by the history of Indonesian films.

In conclusion, the everyday realities that are pictured by Kidang films are eclectic. Not only they are selected for particular intentions, but the way they are pictured by the film is driven by a range of motivations. They range from an aim to provide an insider view of pesantren life, to a defensive strategy against pesantren stereotypes, and to picturing an element of pesantren tradition that is hitherto unheard in the history of Indonesian Islamic cinema.

## A female gaze in patriarchal culture

In the last section of this chapter, I focus on the portrayal of female santri in Aisyah's second film, *Intensif*. I explore the extent to which making a film by Kidang (female) santri can be seen as a way of expressing a Muslim femininity in a place that is strongly dominated by patriarchal symbols, narratives, images, and structures of authority. Such exploration is especially significant because of the fact that most of the Kidang members who engaged in the practice of film-making are (not) coincidentally females.

Many recent works on the status of Muslim women have shown that the agency of Muslim woman subjects can neither be reduced nor compared to Western feminists' and women's rights activists' ideas, which foreground secular agendas and individual agency (Deeb 2006; Mahmood 2005; Srimulayani 2006; van Doorn-Harder 2006). Yet, any effort to simply equate, let's say, gender (in)equality in Muslim society with Islam's patriarchal tradition is similarly misleading, considering that the status of women in different Muslim societies greatly varies from one to the other.

In this regard, working on a women's piety movement in Egypt, Mahmood (2001) proposes two interrelated approaches for an analysis of woman Muslim agency. The first is to consider the kind of "desires, motivations, commitments, and aspirations" (p. 225) of female Muslims, by which they are able to uphold particular practices "that are germane to the cultivation of their ideal virtuous self" (p. 202). The second is to look at female Muslim's agency not as "a synonym for resistance to relations of domination", but as a "capacity for action" (p. 203) that is embedded in Islam's patriarchal tradition (that legitimates women's subordination). In a similar way, Kloos (2016) suggests that an analysis of the status of women (in Muslim societies) needs to consider the "salience of gender", referring to the social conditions and backgrounds within which gender becomes a salient factor in women's lives and careers, especially in relation to their male counterparts.

In the context of Indonesia, Rinaldo (2006) and van Doorn-Harder (2006) have demonstrated the ability of contemporary Indonesia's woman Muslim activists, leaders, and scholars to interfere in public debates about the (re)interpretation of Islamic teachings concerning the role and rights of women, as part of their strategies to mobilize and improve the condition and position of women in their communities. Their findings are strengthened and enriched by Srimulayani (2006), who worked with a number of pesantren's female santri and leaders (*nyai*, lit. wife of *kyai*) in Java, who pioneered the emancipation of women's status in pesantren communities. Srimulayani describes the pesantren in which she conducted her fieldwork as one that maintains an obvious patriarchal tradition, one that is essentially originated in both Islamic teachings and Javanese (and other Indonesian) local cultures.<sup>18</sup> In these pesantren, women are seen as the ones who, by their *kodrat* (God-given nature), have to undertake domestic chores and responsibilities. Nonetheless, continues Srimulayani (2006), many of the pesantren's

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18) For the prevalence of patriarchal tradition in Sundanese pesantren, see Kusmana (2017).



*nyai* and female santri “have refused to be daunted, and have explored their potential and transformed this into an agency, whose effect is felt not just in their pesantren but also their community” (p. 27). She concludes, the ability of these female figures to arrange their domestic activities in a well manner, such as by being a good wife or a good mother, is a necessary condition for their expansion to the public space (p. 107), meaning that recognition of these women’s leadership authority in public domains goes hand and hand with their ability to perform well their domestic duties.

By reflecting on the arguments of these scholars, I want to explore the possibility of Kidang santri’s films as a means for the female members of Kidang pesantren, such as Aisyah, to empower their agency as a female (santri) Muslim subject. I decided to focus on *Intensif* as my point of departure, largely because of its strong emphasis on imagining woman santri Muslim as a modern subject, and the ways it reflects the female gaze in Kidang’s public space.

*Intensif* tells a story of a former santriwati of Kidang, namely Raihani, who pays a short visit to Kidang out of nostalgia for her pesantren days. It starts with a scene in which Raihani is seen walking down the pesantren’s main area, in her bright-colored long dress that is combined with elegant-looking high heels and fine veils, symbolic of her modern and successful taste. In front of her *kyai*’s house, Raihani stops by to give a *salam* (greetings) to the *kyai*’s wife, who then praises her for becoming a successful writer. The film however, hardly tells about Raihani’s writing career, except through a thick book that she holds on her chest. Rather, through a hidden handycam owned by a mysterious santriwati, the film focuses on Raihani’s memory of studying in Kidang.

In a flashback, *Intensif* portrays Raihani as a student of Kidang’s *Intensif* class.<sup>19</sup> She is smart, diligent, and has a strong leadership character. It is described that while other members of Kidang have gone to their beds on a midnight, she is still reading her pesantren’s textbooks and writing her diary project. On her first day in Kidang’s classroom, Raihani is grouped with Nuni, Hana, and Ina, who later become her best friends. The rest of the film then centers on portraying that the best friends face several problems during their living in Kidang. Examples of their problem range from Nuni’s and Hana’s lack of confidence in joining Kidang’s extra-curricular activities, to their difficulties in keeping up with the pesantren’s language rule and *kitab kuning* lessons, and to Ina’s tragic family problems which threatens a continuation of her study. Faced with all these problems, Raihani plays a heroic role since she always appears as the one who helps her friends to find a solution to their problems. Toward the end of the film, Raihani is selected by *Ustadzah* Rani, their *Intensif*’s supervisory teacher, to represent their class in joining the pesantren’s *kitab kuning* competition. A surprise to many people in Kidang, and as how *Intensif* is ended, Raihani champions the competition. (See picture 10).

19) In Kidang, *Intensif* class is designed for those starting their study in Kidang from high school, which means that members of the *Intensif* class are mostly still unable to read the *kitab kuning*.



Picture 10: The shooting process of *Intensif*. Courtesy of Aisyah's photography.

Significantly, Raihani is a representation of a female santri, who is educated, modern, pious and well-versed with religious texts, all together. I argue, the signification of Raihani's images as an 'empowered' female subject, (especially through her veils, dress, expensive shoes, thick book and her '*kitab kuning*' trophy), "is undoubtedly intentional" (Barthes 1998: 72). To an extent, Raihani's 'veiled' image resonates the increasing visibility of veiling and female's veiled body in contemporary Indonesian cinema, which according to Izharuddin (2015), has mainly to do with a wider discourse of representing an identity of (pious, tolerant, and educated) Indonesian Muslims versus the Other. In the case of *Intensif*, however, I will not focus on veiling per se, rather on the whole figurative elements that are used by Aisyah to signify Raihani's powerful image.

When first watching Raihani's image during my first screening of the film, I immediately sensed that she is quite a personification/representation of Aisyah herself, a sensation that increasingly got stronger as the film rolled on. Raihani's interest in writing, her leadership character, and her 'trophy-winning' knowledge of religious texts, all concurs Aisyah's biographical accounts, which I have explored in Chapter 3. If one is to find a significant character of Aisyah that is missing in Raihani's, it is perhaps the former's interest in film-making. Yet, not-coincidentally, the film describes that among Raihani's friends in her *Intensif* class other than Nuni, Hana and Iina, there is a mysterious female santri, namely Shella, who comes from Jakarta, and has an unusual hobby of filming her friends with her handycam in a secretive manner. Even



the final scene of the films, showing Shella's hidden handycam secretly filming Raihani and her friends celebrating her winning of the *kitab kuning* competition, seems to suggest that *Intensif* is a film that this girl might have produced: an ability that she had secretly developed while studying in Kidang. Shella's character in her *Intensif* obviously signifies Aisyah's effort of representing herself throughout, if not Raihani, several of the santriwati protagonists in her film.

To read the meanings of the images of the empowered female santri in Aisyah's *Intensif*, I argue, it is imperative to place them within the context of the pesantren's patriarchal culture, which manifests in the form of, among many others, gender-segregation rules and domination of male authority (see Chapter 4). In this regard, Aisyah and other santriwati often told me, either explicitly or implicitly, that as a woman in pesantren, their mobility, expressions and activities in public domains (of Kidang pesantren), are more limited than those of Kidang male members. One obvious example is that there is a regulation in Kidang that every cultural performance such as dancing and singing organized by santriwati of Kidang, is restricted to female santri spectators only; while the one organized by male santri is open to both male and female audiences. The reason of such regulation is that, for members of Kidang, female's voice (let alone her dancing body) is considered as an *aurat*, one that is forbidden to be exposed to a male's public gaze.

Making a film has undoubtedly allowed Aisyah to speak across gender-segregated forms of Kidang's public space, as her films, unlike her veiled body, will circulate more easily, if not more freely, in an otherwise restricted gaze of the male spectators. By extension, it is through her films that she is capable of obtaining her agency to speak to not only to public domains of Kidang people and beyond, but also, to a certain degree, to Kidang's male authority. Or, as Aisyah often phrased it, making film is one of her many "means to be productive" (*sebagai sarana untuk berkarya*), notably, as a female santri in Kidang. It is a means through which her putative 'dangerous' gaze, voice, and embodied femininity gain an emancipated form of expressions in Kidang's male-dominated public.

Aisyah is not, and never explicitly identifies herself as, a woman's rights activist or a female *ulama* who deliberately works to improve the status of woman in her community. Her view on religious ideas in general, and the position of women in particular, is also conservative. She holds a belief that veiling properly, one that loosely covers an upper part of the female's chest, is mandatory for a female Muslim, and an unsupervised sociability between male and female (*pergaulan bebas*) is forbidden in Islam. In an essay she wrote for her blog (Bicara 2011), she confirms and conforms to patriarchal views that assign men to become family's patriarchs and breadwinners, while women are directed to handle domestic responsibilities, raising children and nurturing family at home. She also rejects a Western liberal (Muslim) feminists' idea of gender equality, critically citing in particular the controversy of a US-based Muslim feminist Amina Wadud who led a Friday prayer in a New York prayer house. For her,

men and women are born in different *kodrat* (God-given innate nature), which in turn has ascribed them differently “natural” roles and obligations.

Aisyah, however, has a concern with the idea of women’s emancipation. In the very same essay of hers as I cited above, she also argues that women should be given equal rights to education as that of men and should be allowed to decide their own choices in life. More importantly, in her daily life, Aisyah aspires to public recognition and social mobility. Aside from her activities in Kidang’s Matapena, she teaches Indonesian language to both male and female santri of Kidang’s high schools, directs the publication of Kidang’s semi-annually magazines, and later, handles the operation of Kidang’s radio-news programs. In 2013, she was a representative of the province of West Java for a national-level competition of Qur’anic interpretation, in which she finished as a runner up. She is also a freelance writer for local newspapers, and a member of several local writers’ communities. She also often traveled to other provinces in Indonesia for a few of writers’ community gatherings, workshops and conferences. Many of my male interlocutors in Kidang, as far as I asked them, considered Aisyah as a woman of a high profile and respect. Her marriage to a grandchild of the pesantren’s *kyai*, Taufik, seems to ascribe Aisyah with a sort of power in regard to her social mobility. Yet, it is her religious knowledge, her leadership characters, and her potentials and skills in writing, film-making, and public speaking, that have been a significant source of power for her agency.

Considering the apparent contradiction between the pesantren’s patriarchal values (Chapter 4) and her conviction to improve the status of woman, one day I asked Aisyah to comment upon pesantren’s segregation rules that often limited her mobility in Kidang. She told me that such regulation is enacted for the good sake of all people in Kidang. She added, more or less this way, “Kidang gives a same freedom to every male and female santri to express and develop their potentials, but Kidang needs to regulate how we (Muslim women) are doing it according to Islamic teaching, because we are in pesantren”. Her answer seems to resonate with what van Doorn-Harder (2006: 8) has called “Islamic feminism”, referring to a sort of feminist agenda that is prevalent among Indonesia’s women’s rights activists and female religious leaders, who seek references for their discussion on Islam and women’s rights from Islamic teachings mostly written by (male) Muslim scholars. Islamic feminism, she said, is manifest in various forms, ranging from conservative, to liberal, and to ultraconservative.

Still, Kidang’s patriarchal culture is somewhat pressing (to the way Aisyah experiences her agency). In 2013, for example, a couple of months after her marriage to Taufik, Aisyah gloated on her Facebook page about what she thought a wife-husband relation should look like. No sooner did I read her status it triggered a couple of harsh reactions from both her female and male counterparts in Kidang. A (more) senior *ustadzah* told her quite dully that she had to learn to be wiser in keeping a family’s private problem, and as a woman she had to sincerely follow her husband, a comment that was supported even more harshly by one of the pesantren’s *ustadz*. Aisyah did not

confront to their critics, saying instead that what she wrote did not relate to her family affairs. Yet, after this Facebook incident, Aisyah shows a more careful behaviour on her Facebook page (read, public space), indicating the extent to which her capability of managing her family's domestic and private affairs will influence the expansion of her agency into public domains and recognition in Kidang's patriarchal culture.

To this point, Shella's character in *Intensif*, and the ways she mysteriously appeared in many scenes of the film with her hidden camera is worth recalling. Considering the restricting feature of Kidang's patriarchal culture toward the visibility of female's bodily expressions in (male's) public space, Shella's mysterious character and her hidden camera are revealing the ways in which a female gaze should be carefully and quietly mediated when it comes to (Kidang's male dominated) public space. In this regard, I argue, the prominent role of women in Kidang's cinematic practices should never be seen at face value. In fact, I argue, the eagerness of these female students to come to film as a medium for their expression in Kidang's public space has much to do with the fact that film to many of the NU leaders is not highly valued, nor even central to NU today. In other words, it is precisely because of the marginal position of film among the pesantren and NU communities, including in Kidang, that the female students are granted easier access to their agency. The exercise of female agency in Kidang, while it is not impossible, is fundamentally predicated upon, and operated within the "limitations" of pesantren's patriarchal values; and it is by moving eagerly into film, a practice that is deemed marginal in Kidang today (and elsewhere), that Aisyah have an easier way of channeling her desire to exercise more freely her agency to speak in, and to Kidang's male-dominated publics.

## **Conclusion**

I started this chapter with a citation from Aisyah and Taufik about the desire of the Kidang people to produce an authoritative representation of the pesantren world in a film format. Not surprisingly, contents of their films consist of particular ordinary stories and materialities prevalent in Kidang's pesantren compounds. Yet, by focusing on the notion that "the practice of showing and seeing is never purely visual" (Mitchell 2005), I have shown throughout this chapter that the ways by which the Kidang people have selected and filmed certain realities and materialities of the pesantren world are highly shaped by manifold intentionalities, example of which range from the technical, the ideological, the historical, and to the political. In this regard, the efficacy of images not only takes place on the surface of screen, but it also unfolds in the ways they are emotionally, technically, religiously, and politically rendered significant in the contexts of how the Kidang people understand and give meanings their life words.

In the beginning of the chapter, I have shown that the (incipient) knowledge of film-making techniques among the Kidang santri are influential to their film qualities: yet insofar as qualities of their films show a sign of progress, the production of the visual

in Kidang should be viewed as a learning process. In the following sections, I have also explained how certain images of the pesantren realities and materialities, such as the language speaking practices and the *kitab kuning*, are intentionally voiced and muted by the Kidang films for various reasons: such as to signify an ethical practice that confirms the pesantren's ideological perspective of being a good citizen of the pesantren world, to defense against pesantren stereotypes, and to speak up an element of pesantren tradition that is hitherto unheard in the history of Indonesian Islamic cinema.

Images of the pesantren on screen can be revealing as an arena for a cultivation of religious self that is embedded in a relation of power between the individual santri and the pesantren institution. My exploration on the images of a modern Muslim female subject as they are emphasized by Aisyah's film *Intensif*, speaks volumes to her desire to exercising her female agency of speaking in, and to Kidang's male-dominated publics. Finally, this ends up by arguing that the prominent role of female santri in Kidang patriarchal settings may be enabled by the marginality of film practices in NU today: that is, because these practices are marginal they are able to move into areas that are less prestigious and receive less attention.