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

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Summary of the Dissertation

The Cinematic Santri explores the rise and development over the last decade of cinematic practices among pious young Muslim students (*santri*) of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest traditionalist Muslim group in Indonesia and elsewhere. This exploration takes place from multiple angles. These include the study of the historical engagement and disengagement on the parts of some Indonesian Muslims of film technology, looking at the charged space of cinema theaters and certain kinds of images, through focusing on the new genres of *film Islami* that are produced by pesantren students, as well as paying attention to the kinds of creativity, challenges, experimentation, and negotiations that go into the production of the emerging new phenomenon of the “cinematic santri”.

This dissertation is based on one year fieldwork at the Jakarta headquarters of NU, and in an NU-affiliated pesantren in West Java, in which I followed the santri as they watched popular films in a cinema theater, created their own short films set in the context of their own pesantren environment, and as they screened films of their own across the main pockets of NU’s local communities. A library research was also conducted in Jakarta (at the Sinematek Film Library) and in Leiden (at the former KITLV library, its collections now being moved to the Leiden Asian Library), in order to collect information related to historical texts and discourses about Islamic film in Indonesia. Materials for this dissertation are framed by incorporating anthropological theories of discursive tradition and of ethics as everyday life, combining them with Bordieu’s concept of the ‘field of cultural production’, and an analysis of visual and material culture.

Results of this research are presented in six chapters. I start with a chapter introducing the fields of cultural production in which the cinematic santri work and (they feel) they compete with. Here, I explore the socio-historical background of the rise of cinematic santri among the NU people, the range of style and discourse of their cinematic activities, and their positioning within their santri communities and against Muslim filmmakers with ‘other’ affiliations. I show here how santri in the NU headquarters and beyond have characterized their cinematic practices through an identification with the NU-pesantren tradition in order to get recognized, while at the same time they have used a similar strategy to position themselves in the country’s Islamic ‘cinematic battle’ vis-à-vis the modernist and Islamist Muslim groups. I argue, while the rise of cinematic practice among the santri is produced through changes and continuities in multiple sectors of the social, political and technological life of the NU community, it is also a contest over the question for legitimate authority and who is to speak for, and on behalf of, the assumedly ‘right’ interpretation of Islam.

In the following chapter, I explore the ways in which, despite the lack of cinematic infrastructure, the santri have developed alternative ways for facilitating their cinematic practices, such as a mobile cinema practice, the making of a writers’ communities, DIY film-making projects, and an infrastructure which extends online. By focusing on the ‘poetic dimension’ of infrastructure, or those mechanisms that operate beyond its mere technical function, I show that the use and development of alternative cinematic infrastructure by pesantren people is largely facilitated by what I call “a sense of cinematic solidarity”, that is, a collective emotion among the cinematic santri to help and support each other in the development of their cinematic projects, the connection of which is shaped on the ground of their common identification with the tradition of NU and pesantren.

I dedicate the next four chapters to discussing a range of cinematic practices in the everyday lives of santri of the Pesantren Kidang of West Java. I start this discussion by looking at the ways the Kidang people have paved the roads of cinematic practices into the very interior of their pesantren’s areas. I focus on the pesantren’s narratives about changes, the agentive role of cinematic santri figures, and their habitual acts of citing classical texts of Islam (assumed to be originated from the *kitab kuning*) in order to authorize their engagement with either new directions of pesantren life in general, or cinematic practices in particular. I show how filmmaking has become an ethical practice among the santri, as ideas about the (re)production of the pesantren’s (textual) tradition are intimately tied to their collective capabilities and desires to engage with cinematic technologies and practices.

In Chapter Four, I explore the ways in which practices of film screening and cinema going are desired, regulated, and negotiated in, and by the santri of Kidang pesantren. I focus on the production of “authorized and non-authorized spaces” -places in which the santri are strictly regulated to stay or not to stay- in Kidang, secular tensions that come along with cinema going practices among the santri, and the cultural and subjective ways

by which the santri have dealt with these tensions. I give ample attention to the ways structures of authority are constructed and distributed among the Kidang members. I show that to the extent that Kidang's production of space has been lied out on the basis of the pesantren's structure of authority: it is the very same authority that has 'authoritatively' enabled the santri to leave the pesantren's ground for going to such a space as secular as a cinema theater. Interestingly, their capacity to do so is cultivated through their time spend in Kidang, and is passed on from generation to generation, as if a tradition in itself. Here, tradition continues to play a role in the ways the santri deal with worries and tensions arising from the cinema going experience.

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

In the last chapter of the dissertation, I explore the ways in which images of the pesantren are produced in and by the films of the Kidang santri. Here, I attend to the various ways in which the decision to film and not to film certain realities and materialities of the pesantren world are highly shaped by manifold desires and intentionalities. In particular, I examine the development of santri's film-making knowledge, relations of power and moral virtues that structure the everyday life practices of Islam in Kidang pesantren as an institution of learning, and politics of representation of the pesantren world in Indonesian film history. I argue that the efficacy of images do not only take place on the surface of screen, but that the efficacy of such images 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.

Toward the end of this chapter, however, I broaden my argument by examining the extent to which film can be served as a means to express a sort of Muslim femininity in a place that is strongly dominated by patriarchal culture, considering the fact that the majority of Kidang members who are engaged in film-making practices are (not) coincidentally women. I show here that through film practices, female students and teachers in Kidang are able to exercise their female agency of speaking in, and to Kidang's

male-dominated publics. Ironically, as such is enabled by 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 because of the marginal position of film practices among the NU leaders that these female students are able to move into areas that are less prestigious and receive less attention.