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Dossier “Researching media through practices: an ethnographic approach”

Religious TV Series: The Making of Popular Piety Culture in Indonesia*

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Abstract

In the last few years, Indonesia’s post-Suharto’s era has been marked by a proliferation of popular piety culture in the media. This proliferation is situated within the political transition from authoritarianism to democracy, the industrialization of media and the emergence of Islam as one of the important keys to unlocking the ongoing transformation of the political, social and cultural spheres of contemporary Indonesian society. My thesis, in general, is a study of the role of Islam in this transformation and how popular culture is an integral part of it. Through my study case of the production of a religious TV series, I want to explore the complexity that makes up religious practices when the piety movement takes up secular/capitalist media to further their movement. In other words, this paper asks: when the logic of the piety movement and the logic of the media industry converge, what kinds of practices in terms of religious practices and film-making practices are maintained, negotiated, and challenged? Building my methodological framework on theories of media practices (Bourdieu, 1977 and 1993; Couldry, 2004; Hobart, forthcoming; Rajagopal, 2001), I divide my analysis into how and why practices and standards are constructed, affirmed and challenged in two foci: on-site and off-site.

Keywords

popular culture, Islam, piety movement, cultural producer, Indonesia

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* This is an excerpt from my master’s thesis.



Resum

A Indonèsia, els anys posteriors a la caiguda del règim de Suharto han estat marcats per una proliferació d'una cultura devota popular en els mitjans de comunicació. Aquesta proliferació se situa en el context de la transició política d'un règim autoritari a la democràcia, la industrialització dels mitjans de comunicació i la irrupció de l'islam com una de les claus essencials per a entendre l'actual transformació en els àmbits polítics, socials i culturals de la societat indonèsia contemporània. A grans trets, la meua tesi analitza el paper de l'islam en aquesta transformació i com la cultura popular n'ha format part integral. Per mitjà del cas pràctic de la producció d'una telenovel·la religiosa, m'interessa explorar la complexitat que impregna les pràctiques religioses quan el moviment de devoció religiosa s'apropia dels mitjans de comunicació laics/capitalistes per a promoure el culte. En altres paraules, aquest article es pregunta el següent: quan la lògica del moviment de devoció religiosa i la lògica de la indústria mediàtica convergeixen, quin tipus de pràctiques religioses i cinematogràfiques es mantenen, es negocien i es qüestionen? Partint d'un marc metodològic basat en les teories sobre les pràctiques mediàtiques (Bourdieu, 1977 i 1993; Couldry, 2004; Hobart, propera aparició; Rajagopal, 2001), he estructurat en dues dimensions la meua anàlisi sobre com i per què es construeixen, ratifiquen i qüestionen les pràctiques i els estàndards: dimensió interna (*on-site*) i dimensió externa (*off-site*).

Paraules clau

cultura popular, islam, moviment religiós, productor cultural, Indonèsia

In 2005, inspired by a Malaysian magazine called *Hidayah*, the first *sinetron*¹ *religi* (religious TV series) named *Rahasia Illahi* was broadcast on Indonesian TV stations. Within a short period of time, not only did it increase the popularity of TPI – the TV station that screened the series – but more importantly, it engendered the proliferation of this new genre of TV series, which has continued to the present. For example, during the peak period of its popularity, 2005-2007, almost all ten private TV channels in Indonesia broadcast different kinds of *sinetron religi* produced by different production houses as their prime time program. Not only did these series suddenly become a site of contestation of religious teachings, but they also interpellated the public and triggered public debates and criticism of the media. Most of the criticism of the majority of the religious series lies in the themes “marketization of Islam”, “commodification of Islam”, “gory Islam” and “misleading teaching of Islam” (Sasono, 2005; Azra, 2008).

The broadcast of a TV series with a religious theme actually dates back to the early 1990s when Deddy Mizwar, a senior actor, producer and director in the Indonesian film industry, established his production house called PT Demi Gisela Citra Sinema (DGCS). In the spirit of *da'wa* (piety movement), he strove to obtain a space to represent the life of the Muslim majority on the television screen, which was at that time inundated by more secular shows. Starting from 1992, despite the fact that most television content was still under the control of Suharto's regime, Mizwar was

successful in bringing religious stories to the screen.² Although since then he has consistently produced several religious series, his series became much more appreciated as an ideal *sinetron religi* by the public during the burgeoning period of religious TV series,³ 2005-2007, when the term *sinetron religi* (religious TV series) itself was coined.

Although the Islamic revivalism started in early 1984 was characterized by the emergence of political Islam, Islamic revivalism in terms of the emerging visibility of Islam in Indonesian contemporary society only occurred after the downfall of the regime in 1998. Rock songs, movies, talk shows, youth magazines and, most importantly, TV series, suddenly showed an Islamic influence. The media industry is thus indispensable to this emergence of the visibility of Islam.

This paper, in general, is a study of the role of Islam in the cultural, political and social transformation in contemporary society in Indonesia and popular culture as an integral part of that transformation. Through my study case of the production of Deddy Mizwar's religious TV series, I want to explore the complexity that makes up religious practices when the piety movement takes up secular/capitalist media to further their movement. In other words, this paper asks: when the logic of the piety movement and the logic of media industry converge, what kinds of practices in terms of religious practices and film-making practices are maintained, negotiated, and challenged?

1. The term *sinetron* in Indonesia refers to soap operas, melodrama series, or TV series. Although these three have some differences, for instance in terms of aesthetics and storylines, in Indonesia both non-melodramatic series and melodramatic series are categorized as *sinetron*. In general, *sinetron* means serial stories that are screened on TV that consist of a number of episodes.
2. Based on my interview on Thursday, June 5, 2008
3. Public appreciation of his series can be easily accessed in blogs, newspapers articles and magazines. But, one symbolic form of appreciation that was given to Mizwar and crews was when in 2005 the president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, invited them to come to the presidential palace as his acknowledgement of their success in producing good-quality series.



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For this study, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Deddy Mizwar's production house located in the Eastern part of Jakarta from May 30 - June 22, 2008. I spent every day at the production site of their latest sequel series *Para Pencari Tuhan 2* (from now on, PPT, 'God's Seekers 2').

On Methodology

Although I cannot flesh it out in detail here, my methodological framework is drawn from Pierre Bourdieu's, Nick Couldry's, Mark Hobart's and Talal Asad's theory of practices. Each of them focuses on theory of practices, media as practices and religion as practices respectively. While Bourdieu sees practices as ordered and governed by a systemic mechanism, Couldry, in his article "Theorising Media as Practice", contributes to the dearth of theory on media practices by calling for a study of media not as an object of political economy analysis or text analysis but as "the study of the open-ended range of practices focused directly or indirectly on media" (2004, p. 117). However important the former two are, he shifts the question to the notion of "media-oriented practices" asking "what [...] are people *doing* in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts?" (2004, p. 119). Seeing media as practices helps us to decenter the study of society from a mere focus on "media effects", something that is also called for by Arvind Rajagopal through his work, *Politics after Television* (2001).

While Couldry is interested in studying system, hierarchy, categorization and rules, Hobart is cautious in their tendency towards generalization, which has the potential to deter us from seeing more complexities of practices that are, according to him, "not just historical and cultural, but situated and so partly contingent" and "sometimes coherent, sometimes contradictory, sometimes unrelated and largely uninvestigated" (Hobart, forthcoming).⁴

Through the combination of these theories, I structure my foci in two dimensions: on-site and off-site. While Couldry's term, *media-oriented practices* is useful to understand the ways these systems govern the practices on-site in that the term presupposes an *awareness* of the practices oriented toward media production, in this case of TV series, I would like to use Hobart's caution to the possibility of ruptures to discuss the off-site practices, which I call *the off-site effects*.

These foci of on-site and off-site fit nicely to my definition of *popular piety culture* that is to see the condition of the production

of "what is visible/invisible, sayable/unsayable, and knowable/unknowable about public piety in Indonesia". More importantly, it is also in accordance with Talal Asad's proposition of studying religious practices to understand religious phenomena. According to him, "we must examine carefully the part played by religious *practices* in the formation of such experiences and that their possibility *and their authoritative status are to be explained as products of historically distinctive discipline and forces*" (1993, p. 53-4; 2001, p. 131). He also pleads to integrate "secularism" into the analysis of religion "for examining secularism not merely as a political ideology that structures the modern liberal state, but as an untidy historical complex that includes behavior, knowledge and sensibility in the flow of everyday life" (2001, p. 131-132). Studying religion as practices helps us to decenter from a mere "reification of religion" and to see more of its roles in constituting the everyday life.

Part I: *da'wa* movement: on-site practices

The structures of the field and the modes of dispositions

Let me start by mapping the players in the TV series industry in Indonesia. In general, TV series/soap operas/melodrama series are produced by the big production houses. They are established mostly for seeking profit. In a year, for example, these production houses can produce up to 100 different series consisting of 100 episodes or more (Labib, 2002).⁵ When religious TV series gained popularity, these production houses started to use religious themes for their products. Like the name *sinetron religi* entails, they adopt typical Islamic symbols, like veils, religious wordings and Islamic stories, yet they are wrapped in typical melodramatic aesthetics and stories (for a discussion on melodramatic aesthetics see Rajagopal, 2001, ch. 2) that are intended to act on viewers' emotions and thus make it more saleable.

DGCS is a non-mainstream production house. With very limited economic capital, it only produces 2 TV series per year with 30 episodes each. Unlike the big production houses, they are not merely intended for commercial purposes but more as a realization of *da'wa*. Therefore, they can be categorized as the small-scale industry while the mainstream one is categorized as the large-scale industry. One main characteristic is that their

4. I am thankful for Mark Hobart's inputs on the theory of practices. My use of this theory emerged from the discussion with him.

5. Labib's (2002) field study on the Multivision Plus company, one of the largest production houses that has produced melodrama series since the 1990s, is very useful in informing my work. In his research, he seeks to analyze whether melodrama series produced by the big production houses use the aesthetics of its similar art form, ie, theater. He investigates the mechanism, the quality measurement, and the ethics of the way the production house works.



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aim is not merely for entertainment but to spread social criticism through entertainment. The production is also done in a long cycle. Therefore, they maintain an aesthetic ideal. Although not totally disavowing commercial interest and profit, DGCS's "interest in disinterestedness", using Bourdieu's term (Bourdieu, 1993), is realized through Mizwar's main motivation for *da'wa* and thus all practices are done in accordance with Islamic ethics. By producing "alternative" shows, he offers a more pious product than the big industries.

For example, unlike other houses, he is not interested in taking up issues on how God punishes a sinner, which can certainly be emotive and therefore attractive for the audience.⁶ It is because he does not think visualizing God's wrath is allowable. We can simply take from this account that the motivation is born from the imaginary of God. Moreover, believing in the afterworld and that all good and bad deeds will be counted in the hereafter, which then determines whether one will go to heaven or hell, serves as a technological disposition to reach God. This symbol of heaven and hell construes a disposition to do good and avoid evil. This is realized in a form of ethics (code of conducts based on the fear of punishment and the hope of rewards in the afterworld), including the making of a film. "Symbols" are then embodied in the practices of filmmaking. As Mizwar says, making bad films means sinning.

Applying religious principles in the house's routinization

While the story of PPT is centered on the mosque, the production activities are routinized in *sholat* (prayer) timing.⁷ When it is time to pray, the activities are automatically stopped and the producers will take a break or pray in congregation. This system of activities routinized in prayer "clock cycle" (cf. Giddens as quoted by Postill, forthcoming), is an important characterization of this house's production activities. Like the principles of *sholat*, people are not segregated based on their economic, cultural or political status. At dinner time, for example, Mizwar will sit together on the floor with the lighting crews. Moreover, the same food is served to everyone. This commingling of producers regardless of different classes, ethnicities and backgrounds create a familial atmosphere and ambience. This makes the series produced by a web of producers with different backgrounds who are all united in one system, Islamic, and familiar one.

Part II: "The off-site effects": the paradoxes of practices of piety

The realization of Islamic teachings in the everyday life of the producers is undoubtedly more complex than the series portray. But, what does this complexity look like when we complicate the situation with other issues, such as gender and modernity? How do the "non-religious practices" work in constructing their practices and understanding of Islamic religiosity? I would like to turn our discussion now to the "media-related practices" (Hobart, forthcoming) in the fieldwork and by this I would like to look at the proximity and distance of the life of the producers and the one they portray in the series. I will discuss this from my close observation and intense conversation with Zaskia – the lead female character in the series.

Coming from a religious family, Zaskia has been taught in Islamic schools all her life. She said that "my mom is very strict about religion and all her kids go to Islamic schools since kindergarten up to college". Zaskia started to don veil in 2005 when she realized that, using her words, "apparently it is compulsory". She learned religion from school but after going to ESQ, a workshop on religion in Indonesia usually attended by middle-upper class society because of its expensive fee, she realized that it was time for her to struggle to be a *better Muslim*.

Veil has played a very important role in constituting Zaskia's identity. Since her first appearance in Mizwar's religious series, her popularity skyrocketed and magazine headlines once called her "a new icon of a young Muslim woman". When I introduced myself, her first question was: "do you really wear veil everyday?" Indeed, she finds a common ground with me as a young veiled Muslim battling and trying to accommodate Islam in the modern life we are in – me living in New York and she in her middle class and celebrity life style. She recounts about her principle of donning veil:

For me personally, *veil* is just a cloth. This is just an *additional cloth* on my head. This is nothing. *Taqwa* (piousness) should not be measured from veil. This is only our *choice* in life. So, when I smoke and people say "why do you smoke?" it does not seem like that (that you are not pious). This is an additional cloth on my head to *protect* me.

As smoking became a part of the routine of the producers, it was also difficult for Zaskia to not adopt that habit. Although it is not prohibited in Islam, a veiled woman is not expected to smoke. It is not about health, rather, the fact that it is seen in society as

6. Based on our informal conversation on Thursday, June 5, 2008.

7. Muslims are obliged to pray five times a day: 1) before sunrise (*fajr*), 2) noon time (*zuhr*), 3) in the afternoon (*ashr*), 4) in the dawn time (*maghrib*), and 5) an hour after the dawn time (*isya*).



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a symbol of a “bad woman”, demands a veiled woman, who is expected to be a “good woman”, not to do so.

Donning veil also raises an issue. When one dons veil, they are expected to wear it “properly”. When I first met Zaskia in the production site, she was wearing a *ciput*, that looks more like a cap covering her hair but still reveals her neck. One day, somebody told her, “a neck is like a thigh for a veiled woman,” and told her to wear a proper veil. It is clear that collective community requires conformity to Islam in totality.

But, it does not mean that she was totally compromising about practicing Islam. She told me about her insights on piety. She said:

Taqwa ('piety') requires *istiqamah* ('consistency'). And I do that by consistently choosing only those series that fulfill my standards about a good quality series and also of wearing veil. *Taqwa* is also my *relationship to God*. If the crews go to the mosque for prayers, I pray in the costume room because in the *Prophet's time* the wives pray in the home.

Despite her seemingly too modern lifestyle as a Muslim veiled woman, she also shows us a sound knowledge about Islam. She told me that one of the challenges of being an artist is when a scene requires her to hold hands with the male characters. She also has problems that as an artist she usually goes home late at night. For her, going home late at night is “not appropriate for women”. While before we assume that she is very compromising about modern life style, at the same time here we see how she also demonstrates practices conforming to the standard teachings of Islam. After all, Zaskia's saying that she “struggles to be a better Muslim” presupposes that there are contradictions.

Conclusion

In general, my paper demonstrates that the on-site and off-site practices work as a microcosm where religious standards are negotiated, affirmed and challenged through congeries of practices. It also shows the *condition* which causes such negotiations or resistance to occur. On-site, the systems are set to create the condition to produce the visible themes and symbols that go toward clearly dividing and explaining what is Islamic and un-Islamic and resonates and conforms to the teachings in the Koran and Hadith. When negotiations or resistance occur, it is to direct the “misguidance” or the quasi-religious to the “straight path”.

Film-making practices, in this case, are carried out to be in line with religious standards. Because the clear centrality of the *da'wa* and profit-seeking systems set in the production site, negotiation and resistance of practices are usually done in accommodating religious teachings in secular norms such as media production.

On the other hand, off-site, we witness a rupture of different kinds of negotiations and resistance. After all, it is in a non-public area where these negotiations happen. But negotiations and resistance should not be seen as a “subverting” action to power but more as, using Abu-Lughod's term, *diagnostic of power* (discussed in Mahmood, 2005). With the many ruptures we witness off-site, it is clear that the different systems/powers off-site are multi-layered and multi-faceted. Thus, the preference of one to conform, resist or negotiate a certain rule or even modify the established practices is highly arbitrary, contingent and ephemeral. It also depends on the “visceral modes” (Mahmood, 2005) of each individual. Religious practices, therefore, go beyond conformity to the circulating symbols, rituals and standards in public.

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