

The 'cinematic' santri

In Indonesia, over the last five years or so, a new generation of *santri*¹ across the country has demonstrated a progressive attitude toward film production. Mostly using new film technologies such as personal video recorders and digital cameras, many of these young students have made films about, but not limited to, the everyday lives of Muslims in *pesantren*. Some of these films have only been circulated within the *pesantren* circuit, but most of them have also experienced alternative public screenings, particularly through social media such as YouTube. A few of them have even been screened at local film festivals and commercial cinemas.

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Voices hitherto unheard

Some scholars might have anticipated the emergence of these santri-made films in Indonesia,² yet the fact that the majority of these filmmakers made their films inside their *pesantren* raises questions of how they came in touch with film production in the first place. Despite them being many in number, santri are still a minority within the world of Indonesian film, and as far as the history of Indonesian cinema can be recalled, they have struggled to represent themselves within the national film arena. Significantly, this marginal position may hint at the somewhat intrusive character of their cinematic activities, to the world of film as well as the world of the Islamic boarding school itself. Furthermore, when talking to these santri and watching their films, it is clear that they voice concerns that hitherto have been overlooked by major commercial film companies and other media players in Indonesia. This article highlights some of the ways santri have come to producing films and what kind of concerns are voiced by these films.

Film production has been introduced into *pesantrens* in various ways, yet there are some similarities. The story of Ali, a santri in East Java who in 2010 made the documentary film *Para Penambang* (The Sand Miners), is as such revealing. Coming from a rural area in the Western tip of Java, Ali had been living in his *pesantren* in Kediri, East Java, for over seven years. During his *pesantren* studies, he also attended a nearby Islamic college to obtain his bachelor's degree in Islamic education. He was an avid reader and had much interest for writing and journalism. Ali had never seen a film in a cinema before, but one of his friends showed him the highly celebrated Islamic film *Ayat-ayat Cinta* (2008) on his laptop. Having seen the movie, he realized the importance of film in disseminating Islam, but also its potential use for spreading *pesantren* values. Hence he was encouraged to make a film about Islam in the context of the *pesantren*. But he did not own a camera, and he had no knowledge about film production.

Luckily, he was informed that a relative of one of the female santri was willing to lend him a camera, and some of his fellow santri had attended a nearby vocational school and had learned camera skills. In short, a borrowed Handycam, his friends' technical knowledge, and a donation from a parting santri enabled Ali to realize his ambitions; a documentary film about sand miners working the river nearby his *pesantren*. In his film, Ali not only sympathizes with the miners, but he explains his compassion by referring to the *pesantren*'s teachings.

Ali's story exemplifies the emergence of a generation of 'cinematic' santri who are aware of the power of film and film technology to engage in national debates. Importantly, the emergence of these filmmakers has been facilitated by changes in the *pesantren* curriculum, which now allows for santri to follow non-religious studies, and is no longer exclusively aimed at a young mostly rural population, but also welcomes students from largely middleclass backgrounds. In addition, the rise of the cinematic santri has been supported by film-related NGOs eager to introduce film literacy to particular *pesantren*.³

From texts to film

Pesantren films are by no means homogenous. They use diverse narrative methods, tell different kinds of stories and also make use of a range of film formats. *Pesantren* films come as short and feature films, fiction or documentary, and there are amateur and more professional films. Nonetheless, and as far as I can observe, what these films share is that most pay attention to particular *pesantren* traditions; traditions much akin to santri everyday life, but often ignored or simply overlooked in mainstream Indonesian cinema.

One of these traditions is the *kitab kuning*: a collection of classical Islamic texts dating from the medieval period within Islamic history. These texts have long been an exclusive source of Islamic knowledge in Indonesia's more traditional

pesantren.⁴ While many traditional *pesantren*, in an effort to modernize, have included non-religious materials as part of their curriculum, the majority continue to stress the importance of the *kitab kuning* and hence the central role of the scripture for education. Few films have acknowledged the pivotal role of the *kitab kuning* in santri life, instead choosing to foreground the Koran, contemporary Islamic books, or fatwas. A number of Indonesian films and television dramas have incited disappointment amongst the santri as the latter feel poorly represented. Many of my informants were concerned about how commercial films and television dramas discuss the *pesantren* world, but fail to correctly describe current *pesantren* life, with some even outright contradicting *pesantren* norms and values.

Keeping these concerns in mind, it is no accident that the film *3 Doa 3 Cinta* (3 Prayers 3 Loves, 2008), the first ever-Indonesian commercial film directed by a santri, has brought the *kitab kuning* to the screen. Without precedent in the history of Indonesian cinema, this film portrays the *kitab kuning* not only as a source of religious knowledge, but also as an identity marker of Indonesian Islam *vis-à-vis* an Islam of the Arabic heartland. Following *3 Doa 3 Cinta*, other *pesantren* films also started showing increased attention for the *kitab kuning*, and the book's place in santri life, in their films. This is particularly evident in *Intensif* (Intensive, 2012), the second feature film to be produced by the santri of the West Javanese Kidang *pesantren* within three years. The film succeeds in portraying the enthusiasm

Below:
Santri Film Festival.
From author's
private collection.

of students reading and discussing the book. The *kitab kuning* is shown as not only as the book that all Kidang santri have extensively studied in class, but also as the book that provides them with practical advice for their everyday-lives.

Voicing images

During his fieldwork in several *pesantrens* in East Java in the 1990s, Lukens-Bull identified the santri's strong emphasis on the *kitab kuning*, despite all the changes occurring in the *pesantren* environment. He explains such preservative efforts as being part of *pesantren* 'politics', and just one of the ways in which *pesantren* people maintain tradition and identities. They do this in the aftermath of intense educational transformations, in which local Islamic traditions were contested and choices had to be made between being Indonesian or being part of a transnational Muslim *Ummah*.⁵ His analysis is significant for understanding the current 'emblemization' of the *kitab kuning* in *pesantren* films, which should be understood as being part of the ways in which santri give voice to traditions that have been hitherto ignored by mainstream media in Indonesia. Santri films thus offer an alternative imagination and outlet for voices otherwise rarely heard.

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References

- 1 The term *santri* generally refers to a student at a *pesantren* – an Indonesian Islamic boarding school. It can also be used to refer to a specific cultural 'stream' of people among the Javanese, who practice a relatively orthodox version of Islam. In this article, I use both definitions interchangeably.
- 2 Eickelman, D.F. and J.W. Anderson (eds.) 1999. *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 1-18.
- 3 One of these NGOs is SFCG (Search for Common Ground). One of its programs is to give a film workshop to students of *pesantrens* across the country.
- 4 Van Bruinessen, M. 1990. "Kitab Kuning: Books in Arabic script used in the *Pesantren* milieu: Comments on a new collection in the KITLV Library", *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-en Volkenkunde* 146(2/3), Leiden, p. 227.
- 5 Lukens-Bull, R. 2005. *A Peaceful Jihad: Negotiating Identity and Modernity in Muslim Java*, New York: Palgrave, pp. 47-70.

