

How popular culture defines identity

Indonesia is often referred to as one of the countries in which social and visual media and their users play a key role in the formation of society and politics. But these media have also been influential in how Indonesian people, especially the young and urban based, see their own cultural identity.

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Take 1: Spring, 2008

Looking for some last-minute presents for those at home, I ran into a long queue at the movie theatre in one of the many shopping malls in Jakarta. My friends tell me that I should have made up my mind earlier about visiting the mall because then we would have had time to watch the absolute film hit of the year. They are talking about *Ayat-ayat cinta* (Verses of love), a romantic religious drama based on the bestselling novel with the same title by Indonesian author Habiburrahman El Shirazy. The movie turned out to be an instant success. Later I learn that it will be the best selling Indonesian movie ever until the release of *Laskar Pelangi* (*Rainbow warriors*) in 2009.

The movie owed its popularity to its fulfilment of a long-standing desire among the young Muslim Indonesians, to define a position between the militant Islamists and the over-zealous, pious and submissive Muslims. *Ayat-ayat cinta* features some male and female youngsters with a moral conscience and industriousness, who feel at ease with both their religious background and a Western way of life, full of modern equipment. The people that flocked to *Ayat-ayat cinta* are those that have been waiting for a long time to see their own aspirations of being young, pious, hip and materialistic mirrored in a feel-good movie. These people that don the veil while gazing at expensive clothes and bags in shopping malls, where western music alternates with the regular calls to prayer, are the main focus of Ariel Heryanto's *'Identity and pleasure'*. In this book he looks into the role of media and screen culture (film, digital appliances ...) in the life of young, urban-based Indonesians living in the first decade of the 21st century and how the use of these media has helped them to redefine their identity.

Post-Islamist piety

In order to manage this Heryanto starts with some theoretical explanation of how Islamization has recently shaped the Indonesian society after the fall of the Suharto-regime. In fact Heryanto proposes not to use the term Islamization for several reasons. First, because already during the last years of the declining Suharto's new order, top officials tried to incorporate Islamist ideas in their government in order to rescue their power. Secondly, the term has led to conflicts between those who referred to the commercialization of Islam (Islam being domesticated by commercialism and globalism) and those who see in it the triumph of Islam by slowly penetrating Western culture. Heryanto prefers the use of *Post-Islamist piety* as it draws closer to the formation of a new group of modern (and modernist) Muslims, who tend to redefine what it means to be Muslim in a global, secular world. As examples of this Heryanto refers to recent changes in Iran, Egypt and the Middle East. The new status of these young (and mainly) middle-class Indonesians has generated new needs, politically, culturally as well as in religious domains. In this context it suffices to look at the popularity of television preachers who combine their messages with the use of a new style of communication. Unlike the Middle-East (where people were weary with the idle promises of Islamist regimes) this post-Islamist piety in Indonesia has not developed out of a crisis, but it has emerged in an organic way to become a trend even before any Islamist rule had been set up. Using movies and serials as examples Heryanto tries to show how this Post-Islamist piety is reflected in popular culture.

Take 2: Spring 2014

In my hometown I am waiting to buy a ticket for a movie I have been eager to see for quite a while. I am not surprised to see that most people around me are queuing for the blockbusters, while ignoring the movie I want to see. Two hours later, I find no difficulty recognizing the people that sat through the same movie as I did. While most people leaving the theatre are cheerful and smiling, only those having watched *'The act of killing'* show frowns of aversion and bewilderment. Joshua Oppenheimer's magnum opus has let none untouched, even those that have no link with Indonesia. The topic of this documentary has been commented on in many media and should not be repeated in this article although it features at length in Heryanto's book, as an example of how recent documentary movies have destabilized familiar notions of opposites. *'The act of killing'* was produced in a time in which Indonesia slowly tied to bring together opposing parties in a schism that has run through the nation for decades.

As this book shows (and many others have, time and time again) no study of recent Indonesian history (be it politically, sociologically, culturally,...) can ignore the events of 1965 when violence of previously unseen vigour swept through many parts of the country, following the abduction and murdering of some high-level generals. *'Identity and pleasure'* stresses the importance of film as a means of forces within Indonesian society to gain control of power and legitimacy. On the one hand, film is used in a propaganda style as the compulsory watching of the state-sponsored film *'Pengkhianatan G30 September/ PKI'* (*The treachery of the 30th September Movement*) by millions of students for decades has shown, while on the other hand younger generations of independent documentary makers have recently tried to counterbalance the official narrative. Heryanto notices that the attempts of this second group of people have neither been numerous nor always very successful in terms of appreciation or cinematographic quality. Not only because the new generations are rather indifferent to facts that happened half a century ago, but also because any attempt to produce an attractive movie or documentary on the 1965 happenings, faces numerous problems, such as the need to provide enough historical context as most people have limited knowledge of their past, and the dilemma of addressing the question of what really took place in 1965. As Heryanto shows in a different context, maybe the most problematic issue is whether the filmmaker will be able to conclude his project since many parties still oppose any attempt to rewrite official history. If *'The act of killing'* challenges this general remark, it is because it is unique in its approach. In the movie the faces and voices of those responsible for killing real and supposed members of the Indonesian communist party are shown. In fact, they are the leading characters of the film, not only describing but also showing (in order to visualize this, Joshua Oppenheimer uses the technique of making a movie within a movie) how they carried out the killings and executions. It is this grotesque aspect of the movie that has drawn large numbers of spectators to its screening (evidently more abroad than in Indonesia).

The beginning of Indonesian film

A complete chapter is dedicated to the position (and lack of visibility) of Chinese people in Indonesian film history. Using a sociological approach Heryanto claims the Chinese to be an ethnic minority under erasure. While their position and realizations in almost any field is swept away, traces of their ethnic identity are continuously brought to surface for ongoing discrimination. For Heryanto this is the result of the colonial concern with labelling people in clearly defined categories. This labelling renders discrimination and stigmatization normal. As a result the position of the Chinese in film history results from a narrow, almost racist view, based on an ethnical segregation by Indonesia film experts. The best example is the pre-occupation of film experts with the beginning of Indonesian film history. While many (especially Chinese) film makers have made movies in the first years of Indonesia's independence, officially Indonesian film started in 1962 only, with the shooting of *'Darah dan doa'* (*Blood and prayer*). In order to justify this stance the term *Indonesianness* was coined, but without clearing the vagueness of this term. In reality, the choice for this movie as the official beginning has more to do with the fact that it was the first movie to be produced and directed by 'true' Indonesians only. Fortunately, the leading roles and contributions of the



Film poster of *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*. An example of movies depicting ways in which young urban Muslims link their faith to modernity.

ethnic Chinese (and other social groups not considered full blood Indonesians) to the early developments of screen culture have recently been valorised. In this sense the renewed interest in the role of the non-pribumi in cultural matters may be the trigger for an unbiased examination of Indonesia's history!

The rise of recent popular culture does not only reflect the social empowerment of clearly defined religious or ethnic groups, it represents as well the emancipation of Indonesian middle-class women. The popularity of Korean Pop (a generic term for popular culture originating in mainly South-Korea and surrounding countries) has gone side-by-side with social mobility of urban middle-class young women. This becomes clear in Korean movies which, unlike Indonesian-made serials, feature female protagonists that struggle to overcome the various battles resulting from living in a strongly patriarchal culture as second-hand citizens due to gender. This mirrors the attempts of Indonesian female Muslims to find peace with their position in society. Recent studies have shown the priority these girls give to job security and financial independence. It is obvious that the depiction of this battle has struck a chord with urban middle-class female spectators. The popularity of soap operas and reality TV can – in their most basic manifestation – be seen in the lives of many Indonesians who light heartedly imitate the behaviour and speech of actors in popular movies and television shows. One may also wonder – and this is a question that Heryanto does not address – if the role of the government in bringing cultural phenomena to the surface is not crucial. While the Korean government has supported K-Pop extensively in an attempt to promote South-Korea among foreigners, Indonesia has never invested much in its culture for the last two decades, although experts have pointed at the genuine power of (among others) Indonesian dance and *wayang* theatre.¹

Democracy according to reality TV

Finally Heryanto shows how increasing access to popular media has influenced the unpolitical masses in a political way. For this he compares the periods of elections during and after the New Order. It is no surprise to see how the sham elections during Suharto's government drew on the mobilization of huge crowds who were granted some temporary power. The government allowed what were meant to appear as opposing parties to take to the streets and show their support for any of the three allowed political parties. Within the restrictions set up by the government, popular culture during election time was synonymous to waving multi-coloured flags and driving around the main cities on motorcycles. In Heryanto's opinion these actions should be considered as utterances of power, subversion and hyper-obedience. Unfortunately as the book draws closer to its end, the author's attempts to elaborate on these ideas get poorer and this theory is not really defended in a convincing way.

Of course the popularity of digital media has changed the way in which people participate in elections. For this it suffices to look at the elections of 2009. Two characteristics come to the surface: the role of celebrities and the emergence of the independent candidate campaigning with some self-made propaganda tools. As a result the election campaign attained a high level of entertainment in which popular culture (song, dance, theatre) played a key role. Together with the feminization, the 1999 elections were a turning point in the way Indonesian people got involved in this democratic process. It is still unclear if this change will bring positive results. Anyway, what we have seen (an issue Heryanto's book missed because it was published earlier) is that during the recent presidential elections in 2014, social media proved to be essential instruments in mobilizing people, disseminating information and commenting on results.

For Ariel Heryanto this preoccupation of Indonesian people with items that come to them through screens, should not be seen separate from the fact that Indonesians have been raised for decades in an orality-oriented society. As such, Indonesians are less inclined to read long texts that are presented through computers, word processors, and so forth. Even in his own academic world, Heryanto sees an eagerness among Asian researchers to communicate from person to person. Although I am not sure of this distinction between the orality-oriented societies (The East) and the textuality-oriented ones (The West) – think how young people in the West tend to adhere to their screens – Heryanto has a point when stating that in Asian countries popular culture defines personal identity in a more forceful way.

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References

- 1 The lack of interest in *wayang* by the government is reflected in this book since Ariel Heryanto does not study the role of *wayang* (which is also presented on a screen) as an example of popular screen culture.