

New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies

Volume 17 Number 1

June 2015



‘HOW FUNNY (THIS COUNTRY IS)’: A MORAL AND RELIGIOUS DEBATE THROUGH THE LENS OF AN INDONESIAN FILM

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Abstract

Islamic films gained their popularity after the collapse of Suharto's New Order in 1998. One film which took a different path in terms of its narrative and representations to most other Islamic films is *Alangkah Lucunya (Negeri Ini)*. Despite its content, loaded with social criticism, it was well received by its audience. This article seeks to analyse the moral debate on social inequality, corruption, and education represented in this Islamic film and how the film in its satirical comedic genre attempts to awaken its audience's sense of justice. As part of an 'ideoscape' the film inspires the audience to explore the issue of morality within the framework of failed State ideologies and a dream to have a better Indonesia. As a social text it reflects politics of hope within the shifting, dynamic yet resisting social spaces of the country. This article also shows fragmented consequences of Islamic understanding within the context of urbanised Jakarta and how religious rituals are somewhat detached from embodiment of religious piety as depicted in the movie. This claim may explain why in spite of being a Muslim majority country and despite apparent current resurgence of Islamism especially among the Indonesian middle classes, corruption proliferates amidst political elites and government officials.

Introduction

In the years following the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998, the local film industry seemed to find a new lease on life. Diverse themes, including controversial films which depict the country's religious tensions and political turmoil, found their way into public screening in local cinemas and on television. Previous regulations and rules on filmmaking and censorship of the New Order government were questioned, contested and renegotiated under the new government. A leniency in film screening – although a strict ban is still imposed on films considered taboo in terms of their political views – offers opportunities for marginalised themes to be screened in major cinemas around Indonesia. *Alangkah Lucunya (Negeri Ini)* (*How Funny (This Country Is)*) is one of the films which would not have seen the light of day if it was made prior to 1998 due to its criticisms of the government.

The history of Indonesian cinema has come a long way, although it is minute compared to the long span of French movies since silent films were invented in the late 1800s (Abel, 2005, pp. 396-398). Hanan (2010) classifies the history of Indonesian movies since independence from Dutch colonisation in 1949 into three main periods: namely post-independence period from 1950s to mid-1960s, the Suharto New Order

regime between 1966 and 1998, and post-Suharto's resignation. Film production has gone through a strenuous journey throughout these periods in terms of the serious decline in number and creativity due to the unpromising climate of the national film industry and excessive power of the censorship board. Even now, film producers and directors are still struggling to put Indonesian movies on the map since they have to both win the heart of local movie goers and the approval of the government.

With a scheme for subsidising the national film industry put in place in 1967 and a quota of imported films introduced later in the mid-1970s, growing commercial cinema has set a new tone to the local film landscape. The emergence of a new generation of talent brought with it a myriad of film themes during the Suharto era. From a musical film *Si Doel Anak Betawi* (*Si Doel, Betawi Lad* 1973)¹ which depicts the celebrated culture of local indigenous people and children of Jakarta, directed by the legendary Syuman Djaya, to a historical film *November 1828* (1979), a portrayal of the Java war with a touch of cultural contrast of Javanese and Western values and body languages, created by the prominent director Teguh Karya (Hanan, 2010). However the local film directors' hands were tied as they were not free to creatively make motion pictures that could express the story they want to portray. As Hanan (2010) emphasises 'in New Order Indonesia no one could criticise either the state ideology, "Pancasila", or the government'. Handajani (2012) also suggests that images of poverty and social injustice would be considered disgraceful in the New Order as what was expected were images of prosperity and order, and this would give the illusion of a united and harmonious Indonesia². One example is an international award recipient³ Slamet Rahardjo's *Langitku Rumahku* (*My Sky, My Home* 1990) which although passed the censors, was withdrawn from cinemas by the leading distribution conglomerate due to its content and became a national controversy debated publicly among Indonesians. The story of a friendship between a boy from a wealthy family in Jakarta and another boy who lives in a slum strikes a chord with the audience as it raises the issue of the wide existing gap between the affluent and the underprivileged in Indonesian society (Hanan, 2010).

Within the Indonesian diverse cinema, only a small number of films portray Islamic issues as the main theme since the post-independence period. In 1951 Usmar Ismail, another leading director, in his film *Dosa Tak Berampun* (*Unforgiven Sin[s]*) placed Islamic ethos centre stage by framing the story on the eve of Idul Fitri, the end of the annual fasting month of Ramadan (Hanan, 2010). In the 1970s Rhoma Irama, the

1 Si Doel is the name of the main character.

2 See Heider (1991, 1994) for a discussion on Indonesian's preoccupations with order and harmony, national unity and modernisation which can be seen in its movies. See also Sen (1994) for her argument on film produced in New Order. She points out that 'almost every film produced in New Order Indonesia – has a narrative structure that moves from order through disorder to a restoration of the order' (1994, p. 159).

3 In its website Monash University Faculty of Arts (1990) states that the film received 3 prizes at the Nantes Festival of 3 Continents in France, a UNICEF prize at the Berlin Film Festival and the Best Children's Film prize at the Melbourne International Film Festival.

icon of *dangdut*, a highly rhythmic Indonesian popular music style, starred in a handful of *dangdut* musical films crammed with Islamic dimensions (Hanan, 2010; Lockard, 1998). By portraying Muslim imagery through Arabian costumes and Islamic lyrics, his music is known as *dakwah* (Islamic sermon) music (Frederick, 1982; Weintraub, 2010). Films with Islamic themes continue to screen in major cinemas and gain a substantial number of unabashed imitations to the current Indonesia's cinematic repertoire. The popularity of films with Islamic themes gained momentum since the best-selling novel *Ayat-ayat Cinta* by Habiburrahman El Shirazy⁴ was adapted into a film. This highly successful melodramatic feature *Ayat-ayat Cinta* (*The Verses of Love* 2008), a love story between a young pious Indonesian Muslim man studying in Cairo and four young women of different ethnicities and religions set the tone and launched a new beginning for other movies with similar Islamic ethos in the post-Suharto period (Paramaditha 2010). The movie, which was directed by an aspiring filmmaker, Hanung Bramantyo, although well received seemed to invoke a protest from a religious group and stir up a heated debate among some members of the public – and his next film which was enigmatically titled '?' (2011) received a similar reception – (Making movies 2011). Pluralism, religion and tolerance in contemporary Indonesian society as film themes apparently are not easily and generally accepted by some Indonesian Muslims.

Towards the end of the New Order and the beginning of the post-Suharto *Reformasi* era was noted as the period in which there was a sharp decline in local film production. However it was also seen as a time when key figures in modern Indonesian motion pictures like Garin Nugroho and acclaimed female film makers⁵, such as Mira Lesmana and Nia Dinata, made their mark on Indonesia's cinematic landscape (Hanan, 2010). Garin Nugroho, an internationally acclaimed director, through his films portrays indirectly via allegory major divisive issues in Indonesia during the Suharto period – such as his film *Surat untuk Bidadari* (*Letter for an Angel* 1993) which provides a glimpse into the life of a young boy in Sumba, a remote island in Indonesia, who is caught between tribal conflict and a State sponsored criminal group (Hanan, 2008, 2010). Subsequently he created more radical films criticising the existing callous reality of repression and political domination of the Java-centric State (Hanan, 2008) especially in marginalised regions previously barely touched by major commercial films like Aceh (*Puisi Tak Terkuburkan/Unburied Poems* 2000) and West Papua (*Aku Ingin Menciummu Sekali Saja*⁶/*Bird-Man Tale* 2003). With much controlled censorship during the New Order government I suggest that his later, openly critical movies would have ended up on the cutting room floor if they were made prior to the fall of the regime. Hanan (2010) elucidates that the *Reformasi* period created a space and opportunities for film themes that previously were considered taboo, such as homosexual relations and polygamous marriages, to be shown on major cinemas. Nia Dinatas's satirical comedy

4 See Abdul Rani (2012) for a textual analysis of *Ayat-ayat cinta*, the novel.

5 See Hughes-Freeland (2011) on women film makers in Indonesian film industry and their creativity as directors, producers, trainers, publicists and distributors.

6 It literally means I want to kiss you just once

Arisan! (Gathering 2003), the first Indonesian film which portrays gay relationships in positive light⁷ (Kurnia, 2009), and award winning *Berbagi Suami*⁸ (Love for Share 2006)⁹ about a controversial theme of polygamous marriage are two examples of film features which cross the boundaries of previously long-standing constraints on media. As Hellwig (2006, p. 101) also observes, 'Indonesia entered a period of *Reformasi* (reform) which gave away to more democratic institutions and more freedom of speech for writers, filmmakers, journalists, and the public at large'. Weintraub (2008, p. 369) argues that post-Suharto Indonesia is a stage in which popular culture in Indonesia tries out or 'rehearse[s] an emergent democracy' which means testing the boundaries of the earlier stricter culture of censorship. This is not to say that every highly critical or delicate subject can be successfully transformed into a story on the silver screen. Hanung Bramantyo's features '?' (2011) and *Cinta Tapi Beda* (Love but Different 2012) were heavily criticised for their religious plurality contents. Different Muslim and ethnic groups voiced their protests due to depiction of religious conversion, religious plurality, an inter-religious marriage and to portrayal of a non-Muslim woman with Minangkabau (West Sumatra) ethnic background. It would be impossible, they claimed, for an individual from Minangkabau to believe in a religion other than Islam (Farouk, 2013). Even though the director has argued that the imagined woman is not of Minangkabau ethnicity but only happens to live in Padang (the capital city of Minangkabau) for several years, the people of Minangkabau descent still feel offended by the fact that Hanung Bramantyo is oblivious towards their cultural facets (Farouk, 2013).

One film in particular which was shown in major cinemas without any glitches is a multi-award winning film *Alangkah Lucunya (Negeri Ini)* (2010)¹⁰ directed by an award winning actor-turned-director Deddy Mizwar. In spite of its explicit criticism towards the government and its debate on religious understanding, the film did not incite a public protest or cause a ban from the censorship board. I was drawn to analyse this film since, to my surprise, it has never been discussed in an academic text unlike feature films *Ayat-ayat Cinta* and *Berbagi Suami*. These two movies have garnered interest from academics of various disciplines including anthropology. *Ayat-ayat Cinta* is considered important in leading the course of Islamic Indonesian films, whereas *Berbagi Suami*'s portrayal of polygamous marriage from the perspective of a female

7 See Murtagh (2013) for a comprehensive discussion on how lesbian, gay and transgender subjectivities have been portrayed in Indonesian films.

8 It literary means husband sharing.

9 See Chin (2012), Imanjaya (2009) and Kurnia (2009) for detailed discussions on Love for Share (2006) and its representations of Indonesia's polygamous life.

10 The film won several awards in a number of film festivals, such as Indonesian Film Awards 2011 for Best Supporting Actor, Best Child Actor and nominated at the same festival for Best Actor, Best Supporting Actor, Best Newcomer, and Best Child Actor. Other awards received including for Best Editor from Festival Film Bandung 2011 and nominations for Best Director, Best Screenplay, and Best Film from the same festival (Kineforum, n.d.). The film was selected as the Indonesian entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 83rd Academy Award 2010. Even though it passed through the preliminary phase it was not selected into the final shortlist (Sofyan, 2010).

director incites academic discourses on the practice of such marriage in the context of Indonesian Muslims. *How Funny (This Country Is)* on the other hand takes a different narrative path to most Islamic films produced in Indonesia since *Ayat-ayat Cinta* due to its social criticism content which focuses on poverty and social injustice with a touch of corruption and education issues.

In this article I seek to examine how *How Funny (This Country Is)* ideologically and imaginatively situates its narrative within the scope of religious understanding, moral debate and democracy in the national space. Gray (2010, p. 104) points out that from anthropological perspectives cinema can be read 'in terms of the influence that society or cultural contexts have on cinematic output' because anthropology 'takes seriously the local constructions of meaning, power, and politics (context) *as well as* the actual content of the films being studied, for their analytical value (cultural embeddedness) and for their dialogue with the audience' (2010, p. 106). Hence I argue that *How Funny (This Country Is)* can be seen as a representation of the pervasive anxiety, fear and hope felt by Indonesian citizens within the current situation of post-Suharto Indonesia as the film directly taps into the inequities and lack of religious understanding that highlight myriads of social and political problems in the nation sphere. The film serves as a mirror of the current Indonesia within the niche of urbanised lower middle class and the underprivileged struggling to survive the hardship of living in a *kampung* in the hub of the metropolitan where financial capital means power and good education does not necessarily guarantee improve social economy. This article also tries to interpret the film's narrative, particularly in terms of its portrayal of politics of piety and its interpretations of religious embodiment among the marginalised citizens and corruptors. It proposes that religious rituals are not a mere reflection of embodiment of piety since religiosity is a multidimensional rather than a uni-dimensional phenomenon (Stark & Glock, 1968 cited in Hassan, 2007). In this text I explore how (lack of) religious piety could explain the reason behind the existing corruption and social injustice in Indonesia which is eloquently portrayed by the film.

How Funny (This Country Is): The Story

The film revolves around Muluk, a young man in his mid-twenties determined to find work after he graduated from a university with a Bachelor's degree in management. He has been looking for a job for two years but to no avail. Set in Jakarta's *kampung* neighbourhood and the not-so-pretty face of the capital, the story starts with Muluk's struggle to find a job and to deal with the pressure from Haji Sarbini, his father-in-law-to-be, as Muluk wants to have his blessings to marry his daughter. Reluctantly Muluk is compared by Haji Sarbini to another suitor, a dim-witted candidate for a local house of parliament who always takes a laptop with him just to show off to Haji Sarbini and his daughter the laptop's fish tank screensaver and packman game – because this is what he mostly uses it for. Muluk is not alone in his predicament of seeking employment. His friends and neighbours, Samsul and Pipit, who both have university degrees, are also without jobs. Muluk always finds Samsul playing cards with his friends, day in day out. While Pipit is never far from the television set at home as she tries to answer and win live quiz shows by calling the TV stations or sending the answer in by mail without much success.

In one of his job-seeking excursions Muluk meets with Komet, a boy who has just run away with a purse stolen from a woman at a flea-market. When Muluk confronts him, saying that he should ask people nicely if he wants some money, Muluk is left speechless as Komet replies that he is a pickpocket and not a beggar. Being precariously poor leaves him with next to no choice but to earn a living as a pickpocket. Next, Muluk finds himself trying to manage money earned by Komet and his pickpocket group who operate under the guidance and protection of their big boss Jarot. The aim is for Muluk to obtain his ten per cent fee while he endeavours to make these boys' lives better by providing them with basic education – reading, writing, mathematics, religion (Islam) and State ideology with the help of Samsul and Pipit – since these children have no schooling and are destitute. The children live in a rundown factory with a cracked roof above their heads and a dirt floor under their feet. Muluk also promises these children that he will invest their money to set up a new 'business' that is not as risky as being a pickpocket who is often chased around and detained by local authorities.

What seems to be a perfect happy ending to the story has a twist up its sleeve. Brought up by a deeply religious father and surrounded by religious voices and milieu, Muluk begins to question the morality behind his everyday dealings with the pickpocket group. He feels uneasy about earning money from the boys whose vocation is considered *ḥarām*¹¹ (prohibited or forbidden) in Islamic understandings. However at the same time he and his friends perform good deeds by teaching and assisting these children who are less fortunate than they are in the absence of education opportunities that the State promises in its ideology to provide for every child in the country.

From the first scene to the last, the movie takes the audience on a polarised moral excursion between good deeds and misdemeanours according to Islam, between the softer treatment of corruptors and the harsher treatment of pickpockets, and between the highly educated but without income and those with basic education but wealthy enough to spend money for *hajj*. Whilst an anchor woman on television broadcasts that illegal logging offenders successfully escape overseas due to corruption in the justice system, Komet tells Muluk that he has been detained four times by the local authorities for his misconducts. Viewers are also subjected to layers of different exposures of the existing injustice in Indonesia and the contrast between the State ideology and the realities faced by the Indonesian society. The film even portrays a poignant scene – in which Muluk, Samsul and Pipit show the boys the impressive parliament building in the capital – which tacitly suggests that corruptors may have a safe haven in this place where people's representatives supposedly fight for their welfare¹².

11 Stealing in any forms is considered *ḥarām* which is stated in surah (chapter) Al Baqarah ayah (verse) 188 of the Qur'ān: 'and do not consume one another's wealth unjustly or send it [in bribery] to the rulers in order that [they might aid] you [to] consume a portion of the wealth of the people in sin, while you know [it is unlawful]'. Also in sūrah Yusuf ayah 77: 'they said, "If he steals - a brother of his has stolen before". But Joseph kept it within himself and did not reveal it to them. He said, "You are worse in position, and Allah is most knowing of what you describe"'.

12 See Firdaus (2013) for news on Indonesian members of parliament's high salaries and their involvement in corruption.

Moral Debate within a Nation Space

Half way through the film the audience finds Muluk, his friends and the boys singing the national anthem while raising the flag in the middle of a neglected field behind Jakarta skyscrapers. The song which was chosen as the national anthem for Indonesian Independence Day in 1945 supports the idea of a united Indonesia. It was composed by Wage Rudolf Supratman and is played regularly, usually on Mondays, at every flag-raising ceremony at schools throughout Indonesia and on every Independence Day commemoration. In this particular scene the characters end the song by saying 'ameen' which profoundly alters the meaning behind the song. What is simply supposed to be a mundane exercise of a flag-raising ceremony becomes a prayer and a dream to have a country that they can be proud of – just like it is described in the lyrics.

In his interview with SCTV Liputan 6¹³ (2010), when asked why the title of his film is *How Funny (This Country Is)* Deddy Mizwar replied with a chuckle that he would not name the film *How Scary (This Country Is)*, even though that is the reality that Indonesians face in their everyday lives, because it would be too pessimistic. It is daunting, he continued, to be at the receiving end to witness through the media on a daily basis the conflicts between different groups and people, and the news stories on countless corruptors. Through the film – which is filled with social criticisms – he did not intend to discredit anyone. Instead he invites the audience to laugh at themselves because what they see is part of their lives. He also emphasises the importance of maintaining positive attitudes based on their love for the country. Musfar Yasin, the scriptwriter who also collaborated with Deddy Mizwar on the film *Kiamat Sudah Dekat (Doomsday Is Near 2003)*,¹⁴ said that the idea for the story came after the financial crisis in 1998 when many people became poorer due to unemployment and layoffs, and children turned to the streets for their source of livelihood (Salamah, 2011).¹⁵ Musfar Yasin (Salamah, 2011) elucidates that the basic premise of the script is education with corruption and injustice as supplementary themes. He explains that being educated means that people could either use their knowledge to solve problems or harm other people such as the smart persons who misuse their power to corrupt (Salamah, 2011).

Central to my analysis in this article is Benedict Anderson's seminal work on his proposed definition of the nation as 'an imagined political community' with limited, finite and sovereign community (1991, p. 6). Anderson (1991, p. 6) claims that the nation is 'imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their

13 Liputan 6 is a current affair programme produced by SCTV, one of the public TV stations in Indonesia.

14 Unlike *How Funny (This Country Is)*, this film revolves around a young man who falls in love with a pious young woman and strives to do Islamic rituals and adhere to the Islamic belief. *Nagabonar Jadi 2 (Nagabonar Becomes 2 2007)* also scripted by Musfar Yasin and directed by Deddy Mizwar narrates similar story to *How Funny* in terms of its portrayal of nationalism and the feeling of restlessness towards the country's current condition yet it only lightly and implicitly touches the issue of corruption. Unfortunately, there are not many Indonesian films which convey such issues.

15 Salamah (2011) interviewed Musfar Yasin as part of her thesis about the film.

fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion'. He further elucidates that the development of mass communication by means of print technology laid the foundations for national consciousness (1991, p. 44). With the emergence of more communication tools this concept can be extended to other forms of media such as film, television and the Internet. As Appadurai (1990) suggests, with the rise of mediascapes, the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information, provides a huge, complicated and interconnected repertoire of images and narratives to viewers around the world which undeniably affects their public and private lives. Like print technology, cinema through its discursive system of signs and representations also creates and shapes ideas. By means of its narratives and images, film assigns meanings and symbols which the audiences interpret (Chin, 2012) and is a popularly selected space in which national imaginary is articulated, sustained and reinforced. In his account of national cinemas, Higson (1995, 2000) draws his argument in the same vein as Anderson's concept of the nation. He argues that Anderson's theory provides an appropriate framework to discuss and conceptualise national cinema because 'films will construct imaginary bonds which work to hold the peoples of a nation together as a community by dramatizing their current fears, anxieties, pleasures and aspirations' (1995, p. 7). Gemünden (2004, p. 182) also asserts that cinema becomes the vital mass medium in the twentieth century for it 'participates – in both enabling and critical modes – in representations and discourses of community building'.

How Funny (This Country Is), as a creative product which explores 'reality' and imaginative interpretations of particular viewpoints and meanings, provides viewers with moral debates and interrelated meanings on certain religious understandings, social injustice and nation in its representations of poverty and State ideology. As Appadurai (1990, p. 9) states, mediascapes 'tend to be image-centred, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements (such as characters, plots and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives'. I argue that the film's use of plot, characters, textual forms and music articulate and question the State ideology as merely empty promises with no action to solve the harsh reality of poverty. It provokes a sense of justice in its audience when they learn through its narrative that the boys who then change their occupation and become street vendors are still chased on the street by local authorities for disturbing the already chaotic metropolitan traffic. Meanwhile across the city, corruptors have the means to escape prosecution. Where is the justice when being a pickpocket incites problems from local authorities, while being a corruptor who unquestionably steals the public's money and makes a lot of people suffer can walk freely? Where is the justice when the boys strive to leave their prohibited profession of being pickpockets and acquire a new way of earning money that is acceptable in the eyes of God and with consequently a lot less income, while the corruptors parade on television like celebrities without any guilt? These moral questions presumably are intended by the filmmaker to awaken the ideas of welfare rights and democracy. Indeed the film creates a collage of morality, religious understanding and state ideologies that critically question the reality of inequality and injustice faced by the underprivileged. Hence I would also suggest that *How Funny (This Country Is)* is also in a sense part of an 'ideoscape' (Appadurai, 1990) in which the ideas of Western democracy, justice and

welfare rights are embedded and carried over in a local film. As Appadurai (1990, p. 9) states ideoscapes are 'concatenations of images, but they are often directly political and frequently have to do with the ideologies of states and the counter-ideologies of movements explicitly oriented to capturing state power or a piece of it'. I also argue, reiterating Higson (2000), that *How Funny (This Country Is)* as a national film articulates people's anxieties and fears of the situation of the current Indonesia and carries their aspirations as citizens to have a more just society. As suggested by Appadurai (2007, p. 31), equality is the core value of democracy in which 'fundamental human sameness', 'the idea that all humans had a right to rule' and 'the elimination of poverty', are embedded in its meaning. It is true that by interpreting the hegemonic images of this film it may not provide a solution to the problem of poverty, corruption and injustice, but it may move Indonesia one step in that direction.

It is noteworthy to point out that every Indonesian citizen is familiar with the content of the State ideologies of Pancasila¹⁶ and UUD'45 (Undang-Undang Dasar 1945)¹⁷ because these ideologies are taught at every school in the country from as early as primary school. In essence the 'national' symbol of Indonesia as a state is a homogenous concept of 'a truly inclusive nation' which is depicted in its slogan 'Bhinneka Tunggal Ika' or 'Unity in Diversity' (Lloyd & Smith, 2001, p. 3).¹⁸ Unfortunately Indonesia has been struggling since its conception to materialise its dream to unite in harmony the vast diversity of ethnic groups, religions, political views and other pluralities. As Lloyd and Smith (2001, p. 3) suggest, women, minority ethnic groups and the economically disadvantaged in Indonesia all experience inequality. The nation is also very sensitive to the idea of plurality in its myriad forms and sizes and apparently has paradoxical acceptance and rejection towards change (Lloyd & Smith 2001, p. 3). It is in this historical, political and social climate that *How Funny (This Country Is)* serves its purpose as an ideoscape. The film is peppered with scenes that remind viewers of the unfulfilled promises declared in the State ideology and constitution. For example, the audience is exposed to a scene in which a pickpocket boy recites a principle taken from Pancasila that declares social justice for all citizens of Indonesia. Also, at the very end of the film a particular statement is shown which is taken from UUD'45 which states that impoverished persons and abandoned children are to be taken care of by the State.

16 Pancasila was established by President Sukarno in June 1945 and was based on five principles, namely (in its current order) 1) belief in the one and only God, 2) just and civilized humanity, 3) the unity of Indonesia, 4) representative government or consent, 5) social justice for all Indonesian citizen. See Bertrand (2004) for details on Pancasila and how it has changed its order with belief in God having placed in the fifth place and moved to the first order due to protest from Muslim leaders at the time.

17 UUD'45(Indonesian Constitution 1945) was written between June and August 1945 and has gone through a few amendments since the fall of Suharto in 1998 especially in the sections dealing with government branches and with the addition of sections on human rights (Asian Human Rights Commission n.d.).

18 See Roberts (2000) and Paramaditha (2011) for discussions on particular films, which ideally portray the unity of Indonesia, shown in Imax Theatre in Taman Mini Indonesian Indah (Beautiful Indonesia Mini Park), a theme park located on the outskirts of Jakarta.

Since the end of World War II the idea of democracy has been embodied with notions of participation, empowerment, and capacity-building in which reduction of poverty is the aim (Appadurai, 2007). Appadurai (2007, pp. 31-32) also emphasises that each of these concepts 'implies a general politics of hope, built on the premise that human suffering and misery require primary ethical and practical attention'. The underprivileged, who were previously thought of as docile victims of poverty, had virtually no other means to alter their fate except to pray and dream. However by means of the cultural flows that unlock human imagination, they open the doors of opportunities for '*rakyat*' (common people) to visualise a different life for themselves (Appadurai, 1996, pp. 3-7). Thus the ideoscapes of rights and democracy become sources of inspiration. What seems to be impossible becomes hope that they can turn their dreams into reality (Appadurai, 2007). Unfortunately, in spite of the hope that is placed on education as an instrument for empowering the common people to move upwards on the social ladder, it does not necessarily offer a full proof guarantee. The film in its satirical comedic genre reflects the flaws of education and political systems in Indonesia to provide promised employment for educated people. There is no assurance for university graduates of obtaining a good job (or any job for that matter), but as long as people have the right connections and financial back-up, even with minimal schooling, political power is in their reach (see also Handajani, 2012; Witoelar, 2002). The reading of the film as a social text therefore can be seen as interpreting the film's imagining of nation and democracy with its politics of hope within the shifting, dynamic yet resisting social spaces of the country. However the moral/political debate does not end here. Religious tenets are also placed on centre stage.

Religious Representations and Moral Ambivalence

Similar to Deddy Mizwar's other film *Kiamat Sudah Dekat* (*Doomsday Is Near* 2003), *How Funny (This Country Is)* is filled with Islamic nuances which makes it reasonable to categorise it in the so called *film Islami* (Islamic films). Hoesterey and Clark (2012, p. 208) explain that what constitutes as an Islamic film is when it 'breathe[s] Islam' (*bernafaskan Islam*). They elucidate by saying that 'the *film Islami* genre is especially remarkable in its capacity to articulate forms of aspirational piety that resonate with the anxieties, desire and frustrations of middle-class Muslims in Indonesia' (2012, p. 208) due to previously long suppressed social forces including overly controlled Islamic representations amidst the Suharto regime (Paramaditha, 2010). Islamic films become a public domain in which normative piety and Muslim modernity are expressed, constituted and contested (Hoesterey & Clark, 2012). The ever increasing popularity of products which 'breathe Islam' in post-Suharto Indonesia is owed to the eagerness of Muslim middle classes to adopt 'new forms of religiosity through consumption and public piety' (Hoesterey & Clark 2012, p. 209, see also Hasan, 2009). After the collapse of the New Order, media liberalisation quickly prompted unexpected mushrooming of sensational and sensual tabloids which consequently generated a moral panic among certain Muslim groups who considered these phenomena threatening to Islamic values (Widodo, 2008; Paramaditha, 2010). Widodo (2008) suggests that the context of global Islamic revivalism and a growing local Muslim middle class have created a conducive

environment for concerned Muslims to strike back by taking control of the production and consumption of media and popular cultural products. It was at this time that Islamic pop culture gained its prominence with *The Verses of Love* (2008) as the benchmark. Eric Sasono (2010) observes that Islamic-themed films in the post-Suharto era mostly articulate Muslims in their everyday life in which piety is the core, such as in finding a life partner, self-identification in which Muslim identity is part of symbolic marketing strategies, and personal achievement which is considered as manifestation of piety.

However I would like to point out that there is another take on Islamic film, unlike the narrative mostly used by *film Islami*. Instead of showing the model image of piety of Muslim middle class, *How Funny (This Country Is)* represents a different side of Muslim consciousness and subjectivities. Take for example a scene in which Samsul enthusiastically gives a compliment to one of the boys who comes back from praying at a nearby mosque and wears a nice pair of sandals. The boy gladly accepts the praise for his own initiative to diligently perform his prayer while at the same time explains that he nicked the sandals from the mosque. Shocked by the candid truth Samsul whispers to Pipit that no wonder people who pray and know Pancasila by heart are still corrupt. A polarising opposite continuum of good behaviour versus misconduct seems to be a method that Deddy Mizwar uses in the film to incite a sense of right and wrong in the audience. Yet there are certain circumstances which are not as 'black and white' as the example above. What about the pursuit of Muluk and his friends to empower the boys with education but at the same time earning their own 'salary' from a prohibited profession according to religious tenet? While it is religiously acceptable (and even encouraged) for them to leave the boys and no longer have any part in managing the boys' earnings, is it morally tolerable to stay aside and watch the boys struggle to deal with poverty and its consequences themselves? The film offers no solution to these dilemmas. Also, there is no happy ending to the story. If the audience was looking for an Islamic film with a standard formula as mentioned by Sasono (2010) they would be disappointed. There is no romanticism in the story of Muluk and his will-be-wife. The main cast are even portrayed as failures and far from reaching their personal goals. Indeed the Muslim identities represented in the narrative seem to be frustrated, anxious and hopeless – far from the ideal image of Muslim middle class depicted by many other *film Islami*.

This moral ambivalence is clearly shown throughout the narrative. It is true that Muluk and his friends end up deciding to oblige with the religious code by leaving the boys to their own devices. However this is by no means easy and without moral struggle. In his distress Samsul tries to bargain with Muluk that helping the boys is not as bad as the corruptors who rob *rakyat* of their rights to escape from poverty. However Muluk is adamant that they cannot earn money from the boys because everything they buy with the money will become *haram* according to religious rulings. Samsul's outburst and nagging are not merely a spectacle, rather a reflection of anxieties and frustrations felt by the underprivileged. In desperation Pipit wishes that she is able to help the boys without having to earn her salary from them. A perfect solution is far from the realities of everyday life in a *kampung* in the hub of metropolis Jakarta in which the lower middle classes are also having trouble in untangling themselves from their

own predicaments. Nevertheless the film shows the intricate layers and fragmented consequences of Islamic understanding within the context of urban daily life.

Moreover, I want to explore another facet that is brought to the screen by Deddy Mizwar which I suggest reflects the depth of religious understandings and piety among Indonesian Muslims. The statement Samsul made in response to the boy who steals a pair of sandals, albeit subtly delivered, strikes a chord and questions the juxtaposition of religious understandings and religious practices of the corruptors especially and Muslim middle classes in general. It is true that there is a resurgence of Islamism in Indonesia particularly due to many Muslims' enthusiasm to express their Muslim identities by holding their faith amidst the secularising societies which is clearly indicated by the rising popularity of Islamic preaching (*pengajian*) and popular Islamic culture (Sakai & Fauzia, 2013). Soares and Osella (2009, p. 11) use the term *Islam mondain* to describe 'ways of being Muslim in secularizing societies and spheres'. As Paramaditha (2010) suggests, unlike Malaysia which puts pressures on its Muslim citizens by means of Islamic laws, social institutions and peer compliance to publicly reveal their Muslimness (Khoo 2009, pp. 115-116), in Indonesia such performativity is instead due to the desire to gain social acceptance and draw sympathy from the Muslim majority as in the case of public figures. Yet the increase of public Muslim persona does not necessarily mean embracing a deeper understanding of Islamic faith, I argue. Paramaditha (2010) points out that many non-practising Muslims admit to fasting (or pretending to do so) during the fasting month of Ramadan simply because they want to comply with their parents' wishes or to provide a good example for their children. It is common knowledge that Indonesian Muslim female celebrities parading in their *hijab* (head covering) in Ramadan quickly remove their Muslim clothing and return to their secular attire once the fasting month is over (Paramaditha, 2010). Paramaditha (2010) considers this practice as a form of passing which Caughie (1999, p. 20) defines as 'the practice of assuming the identity of another type or class of persons in order to pass oneself off as a member of that group, for social, economic, or political reasons'. This is also evident in contemporary Indonesian societies in general and is accepted as 'normal behaviour' (Paramaditha 2010, p. 75). However it would certainly be incorrect to assume that public display of Muslimness is a sign of inner piety, in my view. In agreement with Paramaditha (2010) I would like to move a step further and extend this notion to include other religious practices such as prayer (*ṣalāt*), and move beyond passing. As Samsul wonders how conducting prayers and having knowledge of Pancasila do not deter corruptors to misbehave without any remorse whatsoever, I seek to explain this phenomenon in terms of the embodiment of religious piety. Performing prayers and fasting in this case seems to be in isolation of their understanding of right and wrong according to Islamic tenet. Religious practices and rituals of prayer and fasting are somewhat detached from other Islamic teachings of virtue, good deeds and immoralities. It may or may not be a form of passing but normative moralities within the context of religious piety seem to be fragmented and fluid. To put it in another way, Muslims who are pious would consequently and consciously perform the religious practices and rituals without hesitation, but not vice versa. People who conduct religious rituals, such as praying, fasting, attending *pengajian* or even going for *hajj*, do not necessarily embody true religious piety.

Building from earlier works of von Hugel, Stark and Glock (1968) identified five core dimensions which claim to signify religious piety and are shared by the world's religions including Islam (Hassan, 2007). These dimensions of religiosity are the ideological, the ritualistic, the intellectual, the experiential and the consequential. The ideological dimension consists of the fundamental belief in one's religion as expected and required by the religion. The ritualistic dimension consists of the specific acts of worship and devotion which can be private and public, such as personal and communal prayer, fasting and performing *hajj*. Meanwhile the experiential dimension involves feelings, perceptions and sensations experienced by an individual or a religious group in relation to God. Religious persons are considered to possess the intellectual dimension if they have some knowledge of the basic tenets of their faith and its sacred scripture. Although the intellectual dimension is related to the ideological dimension, they do not necessarily co-exist. 'Belief need not follow knowledge, nor does all religious knowledge bear on belief' (Hassan, 2007, pp. 439-440). The consequential dimension comprises of the effect of religious belief, practice, experience and knowledge on the believers in their everyday lives which include what they need to do and how they need to behave as a consequence of their religion. Along this line I suggest that embodiment of religious piety would have to include these five core dimensions as a full package. Lacking in one or two dimensions would mean lacking in religious commitment. So by performing communal prayer, fasting or *hajj* without having the knowledge of the basic tenets of honesty or caring for the poor as prescribed by the Qur'an could mean that Muslim corruptors or government officials have no understanding that their misconducts deviate from their religious teachings. In this case they possess the ritual dimension but they lack the intellectual dimension. Otherwise their public Muslimness can be a form of passing because they want to be accepted by the Muslim majority.

Furthermore, Hassan (2007, p. 442) elucidates that 'participation in religious rituals may, or may not, indicate religious commitment or piety' because piety depends on the devotionism instead of the ritual dimension. He describes devotionism dimension as akin to ritual dimension but private in its expression. Due to the pervasiveness of daily religious rituals in Islam a person can join a daily communal prayer without having achieved the devotionism dimension which is private and often spontaneous.¹⁹ Hassan (2005: 442) suggests that the devotionism dimension is 'a good and meaningful indicator of religious commitment'. This would also explain why people who perform religious rituals or even belong to a supposedly 'Islamic' political party²⁰ have no

19 Hassan (2007) used two measures of devotionism in his study, namely consulting the Qur'an to make daily decisions and private prayers. In his article Hassan (2007) replaces the intellectual dimension from Stark and Glock (1968) with devotionism dimension. However, I prefer to separate these two dimensions as Hassan (2007) and Stark and Glock (1968) assign different meaning into these two dimensions.

20 Former head of Islamic political party PKS (Partai Kesejahteraan Sosial/Prosperous Justice Party) Luthfi Hasan Ishaq was summoned for a beef-import corruption case which centred on the Ministry of Agriculture and importer Indoguna (Setuningsih, 2013). This is only one of the many cases of corruption involving political elites and government officials, most of them Muslims, in the current Indonesia.

insight and regret when they misuse and corrupt public money because of their lack of devotionism. Hence, the ironic portrayal of corruptors in the film as people with power who could overturn a legal verdict and as individuals shamelessly parading on public television is merely a reflection of the reality of the lack of religious piety among some Muslims in Indonesia.

Conclusion

How Funny (This Country Is) is uniquely situated among the majority of Islamic films in post-Suharto Indonesia. It deviates from the popular path of imagining the ideal piety of Muslim middle classes. Yet with its explicit social criticisms towards the State ideology and the nation as a whole, this feature film survives its nationwide screenings and even garners public appreciation.²¹ Unlike other films which reflect pluralities, especially religious pluralities, its portrayal of polarised moral excursion does not incite protest from religious groups or invoke debate among the public.

Through the film's narrative and reception it can be said that the social criticism theme as a response to the reality of poverty and injustice may in fact emotionally move the audience, but whether or not it can empower them to take action remains to be seen. Nevertheless, the film has become a space in which the voice of the less visible acts of resistance by the underprivileged is heard as it challenges the failed state's promises of democracy and welfare rights.

The increase in Islamic popular culture certainly echoes the resurgence of Islamism in Indonesia particularly among the middle classes. However it is not necessarily embedded with a deeper understanding of Islamic tenets and profound piety. As this film shows, the fragmented and fluid nature of religious embodiment amidst secularising society is contested. It seems that another take on Islamic film to the common narrative has opened up a new perspective on the link between religious practices and piety. If piety is embedded within religious rituals and public persona of Muslimness is not merely a display or a form of passing then I conclude that the appropriate portrayal of pluralities, religious or otherwise, in (Islamic) films may well be welcomed.

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21 Deddy Mizwar was invited to speak about this film at different seminars which attracted many participants (MGMP Bahasa Indonesia SMP 2010).

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere thanks to Dr. Graeme MacRae for his generosity in sharing comments on the drafts of this article and special thanks to the two anonymous NZJAS reviewers.

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