

# CONSERVATIVE ISLAM TURN OR POPULAR ISLAM? an Analysis of the Film *Ayat-ayat Cinta*

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## Abstract

*This paper offers a film and cultural studies analysis of the Indonesian religious film *Ayat-ayat Cinta*. It examines the way in which the film represents Islam in the context of the globalisation of the media industry, the wider cultural transformation and religious context in Indonesia. This paper argues that the film *Ayat-ayat Cinta* represents “popular Islam”, which resulted from the interaction between the santri religious variants and the film industry, capitalism, market forces and popular culture in Indonesia. Santri religious variants in this film are rooted in traditionalist, fundamentalist, modernist, and liberal Islam in Indonesia, and those Islamic groups which have undergone a process of conformity with capitalism and popular culture.*

**Keywords:** *Ayat-ayat Cinta*, popular Islam, *santri*, traditionalist, fundamentalist, modernist, cultural studies.

## A. Introduction

It is inevitable that works of art, including films or television dramas, are part of cultural systems and are not merely in a vacuum. Films and television programs represent pictures of reality through codes, conventions, myths and the ideology of culture.<sup>1</sup> Newcomb and Hirsch<sup>2</sup> suggest that film is a cultural forum and a cultural mirror where

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<sup>1</sup> Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 131.

<sup>2</sup> See: H. Newcomb & P Hirsch, *Television as a Cultural Forum*, in H. Newcomb (ed.), *Television: The Cultural View* (London and New York: Oxford University Press,

cultural elements of a society are articulated, screened, discussed and negotiated. Thus, film is both a creator of and reflection of cultural values, which during the creation of a film interact with power relations of multiple interests.

Accordingly, religion as a cultural system has an active role in contributing to and constructing a film product. This is because as a cultural system, religion is understood as a pattern for behaviour and pattern of behaviour, as religious values become foundations and references for people's behaviour. On the other hand, religion also constitutes the people's religious activities in their daily lives.<sup>3</sup> The relation between a pattern for behaviour and a pattern of behaviour is located in, and can be interpreted through, symbols, which people enable to understand them.

Current studies about religious *sinetron* (soap opera) on Indonesian television networks reveal that the subordination of women is affected by religious (Islamic) values. For example, a woman's piety is shown by her pursuit of a man or husband and also women are shown to be a source of sins and social problems.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, gender is not intrinsic for men and women, rather it is constructed by the dominant ideology which is developed from religious and social norms, myth, legends, media and so forth.<sup>5</sup>

Theoretically, the dominant ideology can be interpreted through the representation and consumption process.<sup>6</sup> In the consumption process, the ideology could be internalized while the audience construes the meaning offered by this cultural artefact from all points of view. On the other hand, in the representation process, the dominant ideology

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1994), p. 508.

<sup>3</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Religion as Cultural System in Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (Tavistock Publication, 1985), p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> Ratna Noviani, "Matikan TV-mu: Agama Vs Media?", *Jurnal Maarif Institute*, vol.2, No. 6, November 2007, pp. 5-6. Also see: Muzayyin Nazaruddin, "Islam Representation in Religious Electronic Cinemas in Indonesia", [www.surrey.ac.uk/politics/research/.../CP-MuzayyinNazaruddin.pdf](http://www.surrey.ac.uk/politics/research/.../CP-MuzayyinNazaruddin.pdf), retrieved 29 May 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Haralambos & Martin Holborn, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives* (London: CollinsEducational, 1991). Also: Michael O'Shaughnessy & Jane Stadler, *Media and Society an Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 230-9.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practice* (London: Open University, 2003), p. 25.

is displayed by the way media outlets, such as movies and newspapers, choose to create the work. During the ‘representing’ process, the hidden ideology will be subtly integrated through the use of symbols which articulate the ideas, and reading these symbols will reveal the messages that are given to the audience film.<sup>7</sup>

This paper attempts to examine the representation of Islam through interpreting the symbols of gender relations within the film *Ayat-ayat Cinta (Verses of Love)* and is intended to discover the dominant ideology which infiltrates the symbols within the film. It is important to examine the film *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* for several reasons.

Firstly, the film is one of several recent Indonesian films that have encouraged debates among feminist activists and cultural experts concerning the issue of gender relations, with particular reference to polygamy in Islam. *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* deals with a host of sensitive issues such as Islam’s treatment of women and multiple marriages. Some people point out that the film advocates polygamy and the stereotypical portrayal of women as passive, inexpressive and dependent.<sup>8</sup>

Afriadi<sup>9</sup> states that *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* precisely advocates polygamy as still practiced by conservative Muslims. Iswarini<sup>10</sup> in analysing the novel of *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, points out that the author of the novel attempts to domesticate women’s roles by labelling and classifying his female characters as bad or good women, while also situating religion as the only one truth-claim as represented by traditionalists. Similarly, Krishna<sup>11</sup> also said that *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* holds males as the hero. Women are subordinated. They are all around the hero, and not *vice versa*. However,

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<sup>7</sup> Tambunan, “The Representation of the Holy Virgin in the Urban Society Teenage Sexuality in Two Indonesian Movies: Virgin and Jomblo”, *Asia Culture Forum*, Asian Youth Culture Camp, 2006, [http://www.cct.go.kr/data/acf2006/aycc/aycc\\_1102\\_S.M.Gietty%20Tambunan.pdf](http://www.cct.go.kr/data/acf2006/aycc/aycc_1102_S.M.Gietty%20Tambunan.pdf), retrieved 12 December 2008.

<sup>8</sup> M Samsul Arifin, *Poligami, Akhir Kisah Maria*, <http://blog.liputan6.com/2008/04/07/poligami-akhir-kisah-maria/>, retrieved 25 June 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Riana Afriadi, *Film, Pasar dan Tabu*, video recording, SCTV Television, 13 March 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Sri E. Iswarini, *Ayat-ayat Cinta: Domestifikasi dan Depolitisasi Perempuan dalam Karya Sastra Indonesia*, paper presented to the diskusi bulanan KAPAL Perempuan, Jakarta, April 2008.

<sup>11</sup> A. Khrisna, “Ayat-ayat Cinta, Ahmadiyah and Pancasila”, *Jakarta Post*, 5 June 2008, p. 4.

other people state that *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* tends to represent capitalist values rather than Islam. Syam<sup>12</sup> argues that some scenes in the film are not suitable within Islamic teachings and are taboo, such as the kissing scene and the honeymoon.

Secondly, it beats many Hollywood movies at the box office, gaining an audience of more than 4 million people. Thirdly, *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* clearly puts Islamic symbols forward, such as presenting the verses of the *Qur'ān*, head covering, and so on. The final point is that since the Orde Baru (New Order) regime collapsed in 1998, there has been a new tendency regarding religious life which cannot be separated from the film's production. This new tendency is seen in the rise of Islamic conservatism or Muslim fundamentalists and liberal Islam. However, in Indonesia moderate Islam is acknowledged as still dominant.

This research will use multidisciplinary approaches, namely, the formal analysis of film, semiology and discourse analysis. The two latter methods are commonly used to study representation in cultural studies.<sup>13</sup> A formal analysis will be used to analyse *Ayat-ayat Cinta* in relation to the religious-romantic film sub-genre. A semiotic approach will be utilised for analysing symbolic systems which operate on the film. It is useful for understanding and discovering the hidden meanings behind the film texts. To this end, this paper uses Fiske's method because it has more considerations in its semiotic analysis. Meanwhile, discourse analysis will be used to analyse the film *Ayat-ayat Cinta* in relation to the wider social and cultural context in Indonesia, particularly regarding the discourse of gender by Indonesian Muslims.

John Fiske<sup>14</sup> states that discovering the hidden meaning within films and television programs involves an analysis of three levels of code: the level of reality, level of representation and level of ideology. The level of reality focuses on "social codes" such as costumes, appearance, make-up, environment, behavior, speech, gesture, expression, etc. The level of representation includes "technical codes" such as the camera's movement and its angle, lighting, editing and music. The level of ideology involves

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<sup>12</sup> H. Syam. 2008, *Kecewa dengan Film Ayat-ayat Cinta*, <http://hensyam.wordpress.com/2008/03/04/kecewa-dengan-film-ayat-ayat-cinta>, retrieved 25 May 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Z. Sardar and Loon B.V., *Cultural Studies for Beginners* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> John Fiske, *Television Culture*, (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 5-6.

coherence and social acceptability such as individualism, patriarchy, religion, race, class, capitalism, etc. For discovering the meanings within the ideological codes of the film, the researcher should go through the levels of the code in a constant movement up and down as the understanding can emerge when those codes merge into a coherent and seemingly natural unity.

## **B. New Trend of Islam in Post-Soeharto Indonesia**

After the fall of the Soeharto regime in 1998, the political culture in Indonesia dramatically changed from being authoritarian with tight state control, to significantly less state intervention and a cultural scene in which the politics of identity is prominent. Minorities and other groups whose shared interests, ideologies and identities were marginalised, oppressed and controlled during the Soeharto dictatorship, have been taking advantage of the newly liberated public sphere to assert their presence and participation in national public discourse.<sup>15</sup>

The rise of Islamic parties and organisations which use Islam as ideology and symbol is one of the most visible political identity developments in post-Soeharto Indonesia. Azra identifies three tendencies regarding this. First, the establishment of a great number of 'Islamic parties' that mostly adopt Islam as ideology replacing Pancasila, which used to be the sole basis of any organization. Second, the increasing demands from certain groups among Muslims for the official adoption and implementation of *shari'ah* (Islamic law). Third, the proliferation of Muslim groups considered by many as radicals such as Laskar Jihad (Jihad Troops), Front Pembela Islam (FPI, Islamic Defender Front), Hizbut Tahrir (Party of Liberation), and Angkatan Mujahidin Indonesia (the Jihad Fighter Group of Indonesia).<sup>16</sup>

The trend of resurgent political and fundamentalist Islam after the fall of the Soeharto regime comes from the following causal factors. First, there is the relative absence of state control of public life and religion. Like the Sukarno government, the regime viewed religion, particularly Islam,

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<sup>15</sup> Amrih Widodo, *Piety and Consumption in Popular Islam*, <http://insideindonesia.org/content/view/1121/47/>, retrieved 21 November 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Hooker, M.B., *Indonesian Islam: Social Change through Contemporary Fatawa*, Allen & Unwin, Australia, 2003

as a principal source of identity that could be mobilised to challenge its rule and the policy of the secularised state. Hence, it undertook attempts aimed at controlling Islam and using its identity for state purposes. For example, this can be seen in the policy of banning political parties whose ideologies were based on religion. This also involved the regulation of political parties, forcing all parties with Islamic backgrounds to fuse under one party, Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP; the United Party of Development), which was orchestrated to support the government. Another form of marginalisation was the state use of the Ministry of Religious Affairs for containing Islam by creating a project of modern, tolerant and apolitical Indonesian Islam and promoting an Islamic *da'wa* that was acceptable to the state policy.

A second cause for the resurgence of political fundamentalist Islam was because of the fear that Islam's existence is being threatened. Tibi says that the rise of religious fundamentalism is a global phenomenon in response to open societies as well as open Islam.<sup>17</sup> Whereas Bruinessen states that:

many Muslims, and not just the radicals, believe in the existence of an international conspiracy, involving the assorted enemies of Islam: Zionists, Christian missionaries, imperialist politicians and their various local allies, which aim to destroy or weaken Islam in Indonesia. Considering Islam as harmful to their interests, they try to subvert it from within through sex, drugs and rock-n-roll or more dangerously, through spreading deviant teachings of various kinds ranging from *shī'ism* and heterodox mysticism to what is broadly subsumed under the label of liberal Islam.<sup>18</sup>

Another reason for the rise of the Islamic movement is as a response of people to the massive circulation and broad exposure to sensational and sensual tabloids in major cities in Indonesia resulting from liberalisation and a highly competitive media market in Indonesia post-Soeharto. Indeed, there was a dramatic increase in the number of media entities in Indonesia: 873 radio stations in 2002, 11 television stations, 186 daily newspapers, 245 weekly newspapers, 279 tabloids,

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>18</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, *Post-Subarto Muslim Engagements with Civil Society and Democracy*, paper presented to the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference and Workshop on *Indonesia in Transition*, Jakarta, August, 2003.

242 magazines and 5 bulletins in 2003.<sup>19</sup> This massive circulation and broad exposure to sensational and sensual tabloids in major cities in Indonesia has created a moral panic, especially among certain Muslim organisations and activists who view media liberalisation as signalling an offensive and immoral process of westernisation and secularisation that threatens Islamic values.<sup>20</sup>

The fact of the moral panic is seen in a serious shift in Indonesian society concerning the *jilbab* (Islamic headscarf). In the past, most Indonesians considered Islamic dress a matter of private interpretation. But since the advent of Reformasi (reform) which followed the New Order regime, local governments and Islamic institutions have begun to force women to cover, while at the national level the proposed anti-pornography laws place restrictions on women's dress and emphasize control of the female body as a tool for social reform. Supporters of these new regulations argue that this is a necessary step for addressing what they see as moral crises in Indonesian society, claiming that *jilbab*-wearing women will create a more moral and stable community.<sup>21</sup>

Another indication of this moral panic can be seen through the fact that there has been a dramatic growth in the publishing industry, film and music productions which are using Islamic symbols. For example, Abu al-Ghifari, started a small publishing company, Mujahidin Press in 2002 to publish his own writings in order to respond to the kinds of problems that teenagers currently face. Al-Ghifari's books tend to take a didactic tone, warning of the danger of modernity while presenting Islam as the norm, and self-help as the solution.<sup>22</sup> The musician, Opick created an Islamic musical genre through his *Tombo Ati* album, which has sold over 800.000 copies, while the religious albums of Gigi and Ungu, Indonesian pop music groups, have had a huge response from the public. And then there is the success of the *Ayat-ayat Cinta* novel and film.

However, although radical Islamic conservatism is a political and social player in Indonesia, its role and position represents a tiny

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<sup>19</sup> Gobel & Escborn, *Indonesia: KAF Democracy Report 2005*, [http://www.kas.de/upload/Publikationen/KAF-dem-rep2005\\_3-7.pdf](http://www.kas.de/upload/Publikationen/KAF-dem-rep2005_3-7.pdf), retrieved 08 July 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Amrih Widodo, *Piety and Consumption*.

<sup>21</sup> Eve Warburton, "No Longer a Choice: Veiling has become a highly Politised Practice in Indonesia", *Inside Indonesia*, April-June 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Amrih Widodo, *Piety and Consumption*.

proportion of Indonesian Muslims. Even Muslim militant groups failed to use the local conflict on Maluku island to mobilise the mainstream Muslim community. Indeed, in the context of about 200 million Indonesian Muslims, only 6,000 to 10,000 men responded to a call for *jihad* against the Christians in Maluku, and they were a minority in the June 1999 election after the fall of Soeharto regime.<sup>23</sup>

There have been liberal and moderate Muslim groups that give different responses in facing the issues of globalisation, liberalisation, and civil liberty in Indonesia. They tend to repel Islamisation movements through signalling Islamic symbols. They disagree with the official adoption and implementation of *shari'a* in the public sphere, including state-politics. Forcing Muslims to follow a particular form of *shari'a* could be construed as infringing on their personal freedoms and basic human rights.<sup>24</sup>

In short, although there has been a huge movement of fundamentalists and conservative Muslims in the post-Soeharto era, Islam in Indonesia still has many different versions and interpretations owing to the influence of traditional Indonesian cultures, and also in response to globalisation.

### C. Religious Film Genre

It is necessary to understand the definition and characteristics of the religious film genre in general based on many studies that focus on the relation between religion and film, before exploring previous studies of religious films in Indonesia.

According to Lacey,<sup>25</sup> types of characters, setting, iconography, narrative, theme and style usually determine which genre a film belongs to. Wright says that the interaction between religion and film has been occurring since the beginning of cinema itself and can be identified in many films that represent religious ideas, rituals, and communities. Some of them are relying almost entirely on religion for the development of

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<sup>23</sup> Eliraz, *Islam and Polity in Indonesia: an Intriguing Case Study* (Washington: Hudson Institute, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> M.B. Hooker, *Indonesian Islam: Social Change through Contemporary Fatawa* (Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2003), p. 243.

<sup>25</sup> Lacey, *Narrative and Genre: Key Concepts in Media studies* (Hongkong: Macmillan Press, 2000).

narrative and character, portraying implicit ideologies and themes relating to religion such as life style, hospitality, forgiveness, redemption, sacrifice or tradition.

For example, a film such as *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) is based on a Hindu epic (the *Mahabharata*) and associates with the Temple, religious ritual and values. Some more examples are *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005), *What Dreams May Come* (1998), *The Passion of Christ* (2004), and *The DaVinci Code* (2006), all of which clearly rely on religion in theme, iconography, and the development of narrative and character.<sup>26</sup> The film *What Dreams May Come* (1998) visualises heaven based on the Christian Bible and depicts reward and punishment from a religious perspective. The film *The Passion of Christ* (2004), directed by Mel Gibson, tells the story of the last 12 hours in the life of Jesus and clearly develops the narrative, characters, iconography and themes based on the Catholic religion. Whereas, *Jesus, The Spirit of God* which won an award in a 2007 religious film festival in Italy, is based on Islamic teaching.

In Indonesia, there have been a number of religious films such as *Rabasia Ilabi* (*The God Secret*), *Takdir Ilabi* (*The God Destiny*) and *Pintu Hidayah* (*The Guidance Way*), *Allah Maha Besar* (*Allah is the Greatest*), *3 Doa 3 Cinta* (*Three Prayers Three Loves*), *Mengaku Rosul* (*Claim to be Prophet*), *Nada dan Dakwah* (*The Song and Religious Proselytising*).<sup>27</sup>

Nazaruddin's findings from studying five melodramas on television concludes that religious films have three features. Firstly, religious films use Islamic symbols such as titles using Islamic idioms, *Rabasia Ilabi* (*The God Secret*), *Takdir Ilabi* (*The God Destiny*) and *Pintu Hidayah* (*The Guidance Way*), and characters wearing Islamic attire. Secondly, the film's story is taken from Islamic popular books and magazines. Some are even taken from *hadīth* (Prophet's statement). Thirdly, the religious electronic cinema portrays Indonesian Islamic clerics.<sup>28</sup>

Irwansyah categorizes religious films based on the setting and theme. For example, the films *3 Doa 3 Cinta* (*Three Prayers Three Loves*), *Mengaku Rosul* (*Claim to be Prophet*), *Nada dan Dakwah* (*The Song and Religious Proselytising*, 1991) are set in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). The

<sup>26</sup> Melanie Jane Wright, *Religion and Film: an Introduction* (London & New York: IB Tauris, 2000), p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Muzayin Nazaruddin, *Islam Representation*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16-22.

film *3 Doa 3 Cinta* represents reality in the *pesantren*. It portrays students' (*santri*) daily life as they pray, study, and sleep, as well as the practice of homosexuality and the practice of polygamy by Muslim clerics of *pesantren*. The film *Mengaku Rasul* is also set in a *pesantren* and tells of a Muslim cleric who claims to be a prophet. The film *Nada dan Dakwah*, directed by Chaerul Umam, describes the role of *pesantren* and Muslim cleric as moral guards.<sup>29</sup>

Focusing on the film *Ayat-ayat Cinta*, Sasono<sup>30</sup> categorises this film as an Islamic film based on location, setting, iconography and the source of the film's story, although the theme and narrative follow the category of melodrama or romance film. The remarkable feature of this religious film is that it uses Al-Azhar University in Egypt as the setting for the film. This location is associated with an Islamic University where many students are studying Islam. Also the film is born from serial stories in *Republika*, an Indonesian newspaper which tends to include Islamic ideas in its news. The film is also categorised as a romance film as its plot structure focuses on the love between Fahri and four women, and the theme of polygamy. Similarly, Irwansyah<sup>31</sup> classifies *Ayat-ayat Cinta* as a romance-religious sub-genre film because of its mixture of romance and religion.

### ***1. The Representation of Islam in Indonesian Film***

Most Indonesian scholars studying the representation of Islam in Indonesian films have produced different findings. These findings point out that Islam is described in two forms, namely, Islam as an irrational religion based on superstition, myth, tradition and the untangible, or on the other hand Islam as a rational religion. Nazaruddin's *The Representation of Islam in Religious Electronic Cinemas in Indonesia* claims that Islam is an irrational religion and full of superstitions. These television programs depict the ideal Muslim as one who surrenders their will to God and in doing so will get happiness, abundance, love, forgiveness and a successful life from God, without any physical effort.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ade Irwansyah, *3 Doa 3 Cinta*.

<sup>30</sup> Sasono, "Pertemuan Baru", p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Ade Irwansyah, *3 Doa 3 Cinta*.

<sup>32</sup> Muzayin Nazaruddin, *Islam Representation*.

Further, Islam is portrayed as a religion that has extreme views: black and white, right and wrong. This conclusion is drawn from the characterisation of protagonists as being extremely good. Conversely, antagonists in Indonesian religious melodramas are portrayed as extremely bad. The Islam that is represented in these religious melodramas is a representation of the beliefs of most Indonesian Muslims and is greatly influenced by Javanese perceptions about superstition, spiritual beings, and so on.

Similarly, Noviani's<sup>33</sup> analysis on religious electronic cinemas such as *Rahasia Illahi* (The God Secret), *Kuasa Ilahi* (The God Power), *Pintu Hidayah* (The Guidance Way) shows that the representation of Islam reflects a general Muslim tradition in Indonesia that is full of superstitions and domesticates women's position. This is because in general those religious electronic cinemas describe a woman's piety according to her pursuit of a man or husband, and depict Islamic clerics in the opening and closing of programs to explain and justify the storyline with the *Qur'ān*. Often their explanation focuses on superstition and fear of authority.

However, Ali Amin's<sup>34</sup> *Agama dalam Film Horror Indonesia 2000-2006* (*Religion in Indonesian Horror Films*) shows that films in Indonesia since 2000 relate to urban culture. Their orientation is more rational in understanding religion rather than the horror films which screened during the 1980's. The evidence is that there have been changes in solving conflict between humans and the devil in the film plots. In the religious films of the 1990's the plots not only use *kyai* (religion teachers) or magicians to conquer satan, but also by meeting satan's rights. This research also shows that religion remains an important part of Indonesian culture, and so film becomes a medium to transfer religious values and hopes that people can integrate into their social life.

Ekky Imanjaya in analysing the film *Doa yang Mengancam* (*Threaten Prayer*) concludes that the representation of Islam in this film is fully social criticism. The film tells of the struggle of a poor Muslim to survive a hard and inequitable life. It is a combination of both spiritualism and social criticism. A similar film is *Para Perintis Kemerdekaan* (*The Pioneers of Liberty*) which portrays a woman who is oppressed by her husband, and

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<sup>33</sup> Ratna Noviani, "Matikan TV-mu", p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Ali Amin, "Agama dalam Film Horror Indonesia 2000-2006", p. 15.

who eventually apostates in order to stay away from the violence and oppression.<sup>35</sup>

Irwansyah in analysing the film *3 Cinta 3 Doa* (*Three Loves Three Prays*), has a different finding of the representation of Islam. Through analysing the narrative and the characterisation of the protagonist, he notes that this film represents Islamic pragmatism. This is because the protagonist not only refuses Islamic extremist's views, but also does not choose to be a Muslim traditionalist or modernist. At the end of the film, the main character, after graduating from *pesantren*, establishes a production house and chooses to be a Muslim who has a simple life.<sup>36</sup>

## 2. Ayat-ayat Cinta as an Islamic-Romance Sub-genre Film

In this stage, this paper will examine the film *Ayat-ayat Cinta* as an Islamic-romance sub-genre film by utilising the combination of a formal analysis and semiotic approach. Following Lacey's method<sup>37</sup> in identifying film genre, this section will analyse the type of characters, setting, iconography, narrative, theme and style of the film *Ayat-ayat Cinta*.

Through looking at the theme, characters, costumes, action, language, characterisation, and locations, the film is based on Islam. This film fits Wright's<sup>38</sup> characteristics of a religious film, namely that it represents religious ideas, rituals, communities and relies on religion for the development of narrative, theme and character.

Focusing on character, it is important to pay attention to the development of the characterisation of Fahri. As the main character, Fahri is portrayed as well-mannered and sympathetic, a simple and humble person. He does not believe in the concept of relationships prior to marriage (*pacaran*). He has regular meetings with Syech Usman, a Muslim cleric, asking for advice relating to his life problems, particularly regarding his marriage plan and his relationships with Maria, Noura and Nurul. In the semiotic approach, the characterisation of Fahri as having a simple personality and displaying thoughtfulness and care in facing his situation by asking the advice of a Muslim cleric, signifies this piety in upholding Islamic (religious) teaching. The depiction of Fahri as reading the *Qur'an*

<sup>35</sup> Ekky Imanjaya, *Wajah Islam*.

<sup>36</sup> Ade Irwansyah, *3 Doa 3 Cinta*.

<sup>37</sup> Lacey, *Narrative and Genre*, p. 136.

<sup>38</sup> Melanie Jane Wright, *Religion and Film*, p. 2.

in his *talaqqi* (meeting with Syech Usman) and performing *ṣalat* (praying), is also a sign of a pious person and a good Muslim.

Almost all characters in the film represent Islamic values. They use Islamic norms as the patterns for behaviour. In other words, they justify their action by referring to the *Qur'ān* or to a traditional collection of stories that relate words or deeds of Muhammad (*sunna/ḥadīth*). The clearest example is found when Fahri's mother and his flatmate, Saiful, discuss the idea of a soulmate with him. She says that a soulmate is God's predestination 'if Allah has intended so, anybody can become your 'soulmate'. Whereas Saiful argues that a soulmate is Allah's secret, and advises Fahri to surrender everything to Allah. Also when Fahri argues with the Egyptian man in the train to defend Aisha's action, Fahri cites one *ḥadīth* of the Prophet Muhammad to justify his and Aisha's action, 'he who hurts foreigners hurts me, whoever hurts me, hurts Allah'. Moreover, in many scenes, male characters do not touch women prior to marriage, as in the Islamic faith where a man can only touch his wife.

Turning to iconography, the film *Ayat-ayat Cinta* utilises music, objects and locations which refer to the Islamic tradition. Lecay notes that iconography refers to sight and sound. The film opens with Islamic invocation (*shalawat*) by Emha Ainun Najib, a famous Muslim man of letters. This song constitutes a prayer for the prophet Muhammad and is a symbol of Muslims expressing their love to their prophet. The use of the University of Al-Azhar as the location where many students were studying Islam remarkably associates the film as being religious. The depiction of the mosque, the Muslim cleric and the costumes of characters such as the veil and *gamis* (Egypt-style shirt) also signify that *Ayat-ayat Cinta* is a religious film. Another memorable iconography is that the film often portrays the characters as using Islamic idioms such as 'Assalamu'alaikum', 'Alhamdulillah', Ustadz (Islamic cleric), *Insyallah* (God's will), *Demi Allah!* (For Allah's sake).

*Ayat-ayat Cinta* strongly conveys Islamic themes including patience, surrender to God's will, honesty and piety. Through the portrayal of Fahri as a suspected rapist who is jailed, the film clearly conveys the theme of patience and piety. In Islam, Muslims must be strong and patient when facing bad life experiences and consider them God's way of testing human beings' faith, loyalty, and strength. In one scene, Fahri's cellmate

tells him the story of the Prophet Yusuf when he was accused and jailed for rape and how he was patient when facing his problem. Therefore God rewarded him with happiness. This depiction of Fahri being jailed is also God's test for Aisha, Fahri's wife and his parents to be patient in facing this problem.

Another theme evident in the film is Noura's honesty which can be seen from the scene when she gives testimony in the court. And in terms of surrendering to God's destiny, this can be seen in many scenes, particularly when Fahri decides to marry Maria as his second wife. In one scene, Aisha convinces him to marry Maria by saying that soulmates are God's destiny. Also in another scene, Fahri discusses his plan with his friend to marry Aisha, and also Fahri and his mother discuss the marriage via phone as well.

However, the plot's structure in the film *Ayat-ayat Cinta* focuses on a romantic love story which is a part of the romance film's characteristics. According to Dicks the characteristic of a romance film's plot is its focus on a love story. To this point, the film's plot centers on Fahri's romantic life with four women who are attracted to him. The film tells the story of how Fahri is studying at the University of al-Azhar, but there are almost no scenes that show Fahri's activities attending lectures in the classroom. The characterisation of Syech Usman as the Muslim cleric or expert of Islamic studies is not related to Fahri's studies at university, but he plays the role of consultant for Fahri's love problems with women.

In another scene, Fahri is defending two American women and Aisha in the train against a narrow-minded bigoted Egyptian Muslim. Although in this scene Fahri argues and attempts to explain the Muslim attitude to non-Muslim visitors, this scene is the entry point for the first meeting between Fahri and Aisha, which leads to her falling in love with Fahri and marrying him. Similarly, Fahri's friendship with Maria Girgis is oriented to develop the love story among them. It seems that Maria's interest in Islamic religion could not be separated from her obsession with Fahri. Furthermore, the romance film sub-genre is depicted when Fahri is practising polygamy. The portrayal of Fahri's life with his two wives in one home really attracts the emotions of the audience as it relates to human love and women's sacrifice. Indeed many spectators fell their tears as following the love story of the film.

Nevertheless, the romance plot in the film *Ayat-ayat Cinta* relies on Islamic values, such as Fahri not touching, hugging or kissing Aisha and Maria before marrying them. Also Fahri's decision to practise polygamy relies on Islamic values that a soulmate is God's secret. At this point, it is clear that the interface between Islamic values and romantic plot establishes religious romance as the main theme of *Ayat-ayat Cinta* and also develops the film into the Islamic romance film sub-genre.

Based on the above explanation, it is clear that *Ayat-ayat Cinta* can be categorised as belonging to the Islamic-romance film sub-genre as it uses religious values in developing narrative, theme and character, which fits Wright's theory of religious film. This film also uses romance as the main theme and its plot focuses on a love story and so fits Dicks' theory of the romance film, namely romance film's plot centering on a love story.

## **D. The Islamic Teachings in *Ayat-ayat Cinta***

### **1. *Women's Position in Relation to Men***

This section attempts to look at the representation of Islam through analyzing the position of women in *Ayat-ayat Cinta*. Regarding this, it is important to examine the setting, costumes and characterization of the four main female characters in *Ayat-ayat Cinta*: Maria, Noura, Nurul and Aisha. Then it will be discussed in terms of Islamic values in relation to gender relations discourse in Islam.

In general the women in this film are depicted as clever, creative, and active in the public sphere. However, they are still very dependent making decisions.

Maria Girgis is an energetic, active, creative and open-minded Coptic-Christian girl. Although she does not go to university and stays at home with her mother, she is portrayed as a smart girl who has critical thinking and computer skills. In the opening of the film Fahri asks Maria to find the problem with his computer. With a long shot, she is depicted sitting in front of the computer trying to identify the computer problem, and at the same time Fahri and all his flatmates are standing behind her paying attention to what she does. As a sign, the depiction of Maria identifying the computer problem while surrounded by males, signifies that she is a clever and well educated girl. In another scene, she

is portrayed reciting the verse of Maryam fluently in front of Fahri in the metro-bus and arguing for a professor's opinion about 'Alif Lām Mīm' (the first verse of *al-Baqara* of the *Qur'ān*). This also reflects that she is a smart and open-minded Christian girl.

The second main character is Nurul. She is a smart student at al-Azhar University and an activist with a student organization. Both Nurul and Maria fall in love with Fahri, but are shy and unable to express her feelings clearly to him. Maria just writes about her obsession and admiration for Fahri in her diary, whereas Nurul only keeps Fahri's photos in her diary. Another main character is Noura. She is an abused Egyptian neighbour who develops strong romantic feelings for Fahri. Unlike Nurul and Maria, Noura is more aggressive in expressing her love to Fahri. She gives Fahri a love letter that conveys her admiration and love for him. The fourth main character is Aisha. She is a German Turkish student at Al-Azhar University. She is clever, rich, humble, and kind. This can be seen in the scene in which Aisha gives her seat to an American journalist in a metro bus.

In terms of setting, most female characters in this film are depicted in public areas such as the university, public transport, market, tourist places, park, court and hospital. Only 20% of the scenes portraying women show them doing domestic chores in the home, such as in the bedroom, kitchen and family room. They are not doing domestic activities very often in the film. According to feminist theory, the public sphere is identified as a male domain that women must become involved in to gain gender equity.<sup>39</sup> Regarding this, by utilising a semiotic analysis of settings, the proportion of scenes of women being portrayed in a public sphere is higher than the depiction of them in a private space and determines that women in this film are active, independent, and educated.

This portrayal of women seems to clearly follow the ideas of modernist and liberalist Muslims, because according to this religious group's perspective, women are allowed to be involved in activities in the public sphere with or without *muhrim* (husband and their family).<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Foster, "Citizenship Education and whereas the People...Another Case of 'Add Women and Stir'", in L. Yates (ed.), *Citizenship and Education* (Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 1995), p. 38-9.

<sup>40</sup> Hooker, *Indonesian Islam*, p.134.

An Indonesian liberal Islamic feminist, Mahmada<sup>41</sup> states that there is a dichotomy between the private and public spheres in Islam. Both men and women can access public areas such as involvement in political, social and economic activities. Other scenes that represent a Liberalist viewpoint are of a student meeting at the university wherein the location of males and females are not separated and the women are not covered by *hijāb*, as well as the depiction of Fahri alone with Maria talking about a soulmate on the Nile river.

This perspective differs strongly with fundamentalist Islamic ideas. Shehadeh<sup>42</sup> in her book *'The Idea of Women Under Fundamentalist Islam'* says that fundamentalism forbids men to be alone with women except their wives. If women go out of the home and become involved in an activity in the public sphere without *mubrim*, it is considered as deviating from Islamic values. Although this group agrees that women should be educated, they must however be segregated from men and must be isolated behind a curtain. In their viewpoint, the 'women's role is confined to the family and the home, except in extenuating circumstances and after securing the permission of their husbands. A prominent figure of Muslim fundamentalism, Hasan al-Banna states that a woman's place is at home and her main role is as mother, wife and home keeper. She is not allowed to socialise with men. Therefore, in terms of the characterisation of women and settings, the position of women in this film fits into modernist and liberalist Islam, rather than fundamentalist Islam.

However, there are some gender bias relations in this film that rely on a fundamentalist perspective. This can be seen in many scenes where female characters do not have crucial positions in the public area and must surrender to a male's policy in domestic matters. For example, many women who are involved in the students' organisation at the University, including Nurul as a main character, never hold a strategic position in the organisation. Also the position of Aisha is to always obey Fahri's directions as her husband. It can be seen in the film when Aisha obeys Fahri's decision regarding the house and car they use. According to the Fundamentalist's perspective, women are not allowed to lead men in

<sup>41</sup> Mahmada, "Hijabisasi Perempuan dalam Ruang Publik", in L. Assyaukanie (ed.), *Wajah Liberal Islam di Indonesia* (Jakarta: JIL, 2002), pp. 47-59.

<sup>42</sup> Shehadeh, *The Idea of Women under Fundamentalist Islam* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida), 2003, p. 39.

any organisation. Referring to the *Qur'ān* (4:34): “men are in charge of women” and *ḥadīth*: “no group lead by women can succeed” .

Another element that is important to explore regarding the position of women in this film is the costume because it is a social code and integral to religious identity. The depiction of female characters' costumes is diverse. Aisha often wears a long dark dress and covers her face with a *cadar*. Nurul wears a *baju kurung*, and short veil. Similiar to Nurul, Noura as an Egyptian Muslim girl wears *baju kurung*, span, and long veil. Whereas Maria, an Egyptian Coptic Christian girl, wears a t-shirt, trousers and a veil which does not cover her head.

According to Arthur, costume is a social construction and expression that consolidates the individual's place within a wider religious framework. In line with this, the way these women dress represents their social and cultural background and religious perspective. For example Aisha wearing a *burqah* and *cadar* (face veil) represents fundamentalist Islam because this religious group requires women to cover all of their body. An ideologist of fundamentalist Islam, Abul A'la al-Maududi points out that wearing a *cadar* for women is the Islamic way in respecting women. So Muslim women must stay at home and wear the *cadar* and gloves, except in cases of necessity.<sup>43</sup>

Nurul's dress represents traditionalist Islam, which is usually used by *santrivati* (female students at Islamic boarding schools) in Java. Noura also represents traditionalist Islam which believes the normal dress for Muslim women is to only expose their hands and face. Traditionalist Islam does not require women to wear the *cadar*. According to Syukri, Muslim women are not required to wear *cadar* because the Prophet Muhammad never required women to wear *cadar*. Even Syukri says that the *cadar* comes from Egyptian culture not Islamic culture.

Maria's custume in this film is depicted as liberalist Muslim because she often does not wear the *jilbāb* or cover her whole body. An Indonesian liberal Islamic feminist, Mahmada<sup>44</sup> says that wearing *jilbāb* is not compulsory for Muslim women, because the status of the *ḥadīth*

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<sup>43</sup> B. F. Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (Oxford, New York, 1994), p. 127. Also see: M. Moghissi, *Feminisme dan Fundamentalisme Islam* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2005), p. 52.

<sup>44</sup> Mahmada, *Kritik atas Jilbāb*, <http://islamlib.com/id/artikel/kritik-atas-jilbāb/>, retrieved 25 May 2008.

about the obligation for using *jilbāb* is *āḥād* that cannot be used for legal reference, and even the tradition of wearing *jilbāb* among Muslim society tends to refer to cultural obligation rather than religious obligation. Furthermore, by using al-Ashmawi's statement, Mahmada points out that if women's hair, face, body and voice are *awrāt* (part of the body which may not be visible), it will mean that women cannot do any activities.

## 2. *Polygamy and Interreligious Marriage*

Polygamy is a controversial issue in Islamic society. Some agree with polygamy such as conservative and fundamentalist groups, while other groups who disagree with it are modernist and liberalist.<sup>45</sup>

In this film, it is clearly seen that polygamy is one of the themes. This theme is shown through the film narrative when Fahri decides to marry Maria as his second wife in order to save Maria's life and because Fahri needs her to become a witness in court. In the plot, the three of them are illustrated living together in one house. To this point, the film's depiction of polygamy is closer to the fundamentalist rather than the traditionalist perspective.

Modernist Islam does not support polygamy. The ideologist of modernist Islam, Muhammad Abduh, through a reinterpretation of the *Qur'ān* and *fatwas* (legal opinions) suggests the abolition of polygamy in Islam, because 'polygamy had been a sound and useful practice among righteous early believers (*al-salāf al-ṣāliḥ*), but had developed into a corrupt practice of unbridled lust, devoid of justice and equity, and thus was no longer conducive to community's welfare'.<sup>46</sup>

Another theme in this film that can be considered in terms of Islamic values is inter-religious marriage. Although their marriage is conducted through Islamic ritual, it can still be categorised as inter-religious marriage because the depiction of Maria converting to be a Muslim is not clear. This is because when Fahri marries her, she is in an unconscious condition and she has not declared *shahādah* yet as the rule for being Muslim. Based on the this narrative it is obvious that the film represents a liberal Islamic perspective as this group believes that inter-religious marriage is allowed by Islam. A prominent Indonesian liberal

<sup>45</sup> Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, p. 121.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

Muslim, Ulil Abshar Abdalla states that the prohibition of inter-religious marriage is no longer relevant. The *Qur'ān* never strongly prohibits Muslims from doing it, because the *Qur'ān* has a universal perspective of human equity and does not discriminate against other religions.

Modernist, traditionalist and fundamentalist Islam disagree with inter-religious marriage. Muhammadiyah, an Islamic group in Indonesia which is categorised as modernist believes that a Muslim is forbidden to marry a non-Muslim except if they convert before marriage. Similarly, Nahdlatul Ulama also forbids Muslim men from marrying Christian or Jewish women.<sup>47</sup> However, there are some ambiguities in the way this film represents Islam. Even in certain settings, the characterisation does not fit with Islamic values. For example, the portrayal of Fahri when living together in one home with his wives; Aisha and Maria. Although traditionalist and fundamentalist Islam agree with polygamy, they do not support the man and his wives living together because Prophet Muhammad never asked all of his wives to live with him in the same home. Also in many scenes, Fahri is often shown looking for a long time at Aisha's eyes while she wears the *cadar*, and *vice versa*.

## 2. *The Film Ayat-ayat Cinta and Popular Islam*

There is always a good market for religious Indonesian films, religious films that involve supernatural ideas or religious films which are based on urban culture. For example, *Sundel Bolong* (rated third in Indonesia in 1981), *Nyi Blorong* (first in 1982), *Kisah Cinta Nyi Blorong* (fourth in 1987), *Sunan Kalijaga* (second most popular film in Jakarta in 1984), *Alkautsar* (awarded in Pacific-Asia Film Festival in 1975) *Nada dan Dakwah* (nominated in Citra Award in 1993), *Fatahillah* (box office in 1997) are all religious films.<sup>48</sup>

Geertz<sup>49</sup> classifies Javanese religion as having three variants, namely *abangan*, *santri* and *priyayi*. *Abangan* is a religious variant that emphasises faith and ritual and includes many kinds of ghosts and superstitions, which are associated with rural or agricultural society. Whereas the

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<sup>47</sup> Hooker, *Indonesian Islam*, p. 76.

<sup>48</sup> Muzayin, *Islam Representation*.

<sup>49</sup> Clifford Geertz, "The Religion of Java", in A. Ibrahim, S. Siddique & Y. Hussain (eds.), *Reading on Islam in South Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1961), pp. 271-7.

*santri* religious variant has a strong link with Islam and is associated with traders. The *priyayi* emphasises aspects of Hinduism and is associated with bureaucracy. However, these classifications sometimes overlap, particularly *santri* and *abangan*, because currently many *santris* become *abangan*, or *priyayi*, and *vice versa*.<sup>50</sup>

Indonesian religious films have a strong relationship with, and represent, the various Javanese religious societies. This can be seen from the history of Indonesian horror and legend films that involve ghosts and are full of mystics, for example, the films *Buaya Putih* (The White Crocodile), *Ratu Pantai Selatan* (The Princess of The Southern Sea), *Sundel Bolong*. Although Indonesian horror movies utilise some western horror genre techniques, they always involve supernatural monsters which are associated with traditional folklore. Also some Indonesian Islamic films involve mystics and are full of superstitions which represent a mixture of *santri* and *abangan* religious variants, for example, *Pintu Hidayah*, *Rabasia Ilahi* and *Astaghfirullah*. Some current Islamic films like *Doa yang Mengancam*, *3 Cinta 3 Doa*, and *Ayat-ayat Cinta* are closer to the *santri* variant which is associated with urban culture and far from mystical themes. The characteristic of *santri* culture in the film *Ayat-ayat Cinta* is clear as the characters often use Islamic doctrine in justifying their behaviours, the film is full of Islamic symbols and its themes are not related to mystics and superstitions. However, unlike other Indonesian Islamic films, *Ayat-ayat Cinta* clearly locates romance or love as the main theme. The films *Titian Serambut Dibelah Tujuh*, *Nada dan Dakwah*, and *Fatabillah* apply entirely Islamic symbols and costumes but do not only use romance as the main theme.

The interaction between Islam and romance causes the main purpose of this film as a medium for *da'wa* (Islamic mission) to become blurred. It seems that *Ayat-ayat Cinta* must conform with film industry standards, technically, socially and ideologically. Although the film *Ayat-ayat Cinta* represents *santri's* culture and Islamic values and symbols, there are some ambiguities in the way this film represents Islam. Even in the setting, the characterisation does not fit with Islamic values. For example, the portrayal of Fahri living together in one home with his wives, Aisha and Maria. Although traditionalist and fundamentalist Islam

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<sup>50</sup> Nur Syam, *Islam Pesisir* (Yogyakarta: LKIS, 2005), p. 25.

agree with polygamy, they do not support the man and his wives living in the same home, because Prophet Muhammad never asked all of his wives to live with him in the same home. In terms of semiotic, it seems that the depiction of Fahri sleeping alone in the family room, and his wives sleeping in their own rooms has been done to meet the needs of technical and social codes in order to elicit empathy in the audiences for Aisha's sacrifice.

Also, in many scenes, before their marriage Fahri is often screened looking into Aisha's eyes (she wears the *cadar*) for a long time, and *vice versa*. A scene of Aisha and Fahri kissing while on their honeymoon is also included. These depictions are of course at odds with the fundamentalists' perspective. This is another indicator that *Ayat-ayat Cinta* does conform with film genre conventions and market interests. For example, this film could not avoid the kissing scene or the intense eye contact between Fahri and Aisha because of their importance as melodramatic convention. Using the semiotic of social code, the depiction of Aisha looking deeply into Fahri's eyes for a long time, signifies that she is falling in love or at least admires Fahri, and the other way round. Furthermore, almost all female characters in *Ayat-ayat Cinta* are beautiful and wear fashionable *jilbāb* (veils) in order to cater to market expectations.

It is clear from the above discussion that the image of Islam which is represented in the film *Ayat-ayat Cinta* is popular Islam as a result of the interaction between the film industry, capitalism, market forces and Islamic variants in Indonesia. Islam is presented in a pluralistic form, as this accommodates all variants of Indonesian Islam, and is performed in a simple way that has the potential to be a part of popular culture that can be easily adopted.

## E. Conclusion

The film *Ayat-ayat Cinta* is an Islamic-romance sub-genre which combines religious and romantic film genre conventions. The religious genre is identified from the way Islamic symbols and values are applied in the film's narrative, theme and iconography. Whereas the romance film sub-genre is seen through the plot structure and theme, which dominate in this film.

This film represents “popular Islam” which resulted from the interaction between *santri* religious variants in Indonesia and the film industry, capitalism, market forces and popular culture. *Santri* religious variants in this film are rooted in traditionalist, fundamentalist, modernist, and liberalist Islam in Indonesia and are closer to urban culture, and those Islamic groups which have undergone a process of conformity with capitalism and popular culture. As a result, the representation of Islam in this film is pluralist, tolerant, and fashionable.

These images of popular Islam are highlighted in many aspects of the depiction of women’s position, inter-religious marriage and polygamy in the film. Women in this film are portrayed as active and smart in line with liberalist and modernist Islam. The polygamy theme in this film is closer to fundamentalist and traditionalist Islam, which support polygamy, whereas inter-religious marriage in this film represents liberalist Islam. In general, the representation of liberal Islam is stronger in this film than other Islamic variants.

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