

The Position of Religious Malays Films in Malaysia from the Perspectives of Islamic Da'wah

Rosmawati Mohamad Rasit

Abstract

Malay films that directly brought up the questions of Islam in Malaysia are produced in varieties of genres and are different. Based on the Malay film genre from the 2005-2010 statistics, there are only a few films that embed the elements of religion in the movie directly. The religious genre kind of films from the Western movie producers like to expose issues on god and Christianity. This can be seen from the films like *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *The Passion of Christ* (2004), *Leap of Faith* (1992), *Da Vinci Code* (2006) and *2012* (2009). Nevertheless Islamic cinemas such as in Indonesia and Iran have never stopped in making and producing religious films as to show their struggle towards the missionary cause of the new millennium by producing movies like *Dalam Mihrab Cinta* (In Mihrab Love) (2010), *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih 1&2* (When Love Says A Prayer) (2009), *Emak Ingin Naik Haji* (Mother Wants to Perform Haj) (2009), *Children of Heaven* (1997) and *The Song of Sparrows* (2008). In the effort to vary the medium of Da'wah, the film is seen as a new and influential way that can be explored. Therefore, this article is looking at the importance of discussing the position of religious Malay films in Malaysia as seen as the contributory factor in its role towards the medium of preaching of Islamic Da'wah.

Keywords: Islamic cinema, religious genre, Malay films, Islamic Da'wah

Introduction

Watching movies nowadays is seen as searching for entertainment and fun only when movies on slapstick comedy, violence, sex and horror and

superstitious movies are the line up. The audience by right should have their own perspectives towards a movie that is always related to a genre based and the genre is varied. FINAS (2011) showed that for the past 6 years (2005-2010), genre and sub-genre like horror, comedy and action are the famous choices among the Malay viewers. Malay films of those genres (most of them) reached the 'box-office' target and became the topic of discussion and it was a phenomenon to the local audience. This scenario of Malay films showed that the audience chooses to see these kinds of genres much. Bambang (2005) supported by saying that local film industry has also seen the flooded of comedy. One of the factors that lead the community to watch comedy is their heaviest and pressured life that they are having. This is a hail to them to watch comedy as an alternative to reduce stress. Hence according to Fuziah Kartini et al. (2009), audience who have some critical thought and are educated would choose quality movies to watch.

Nevertheless, the perspective of the new millennium Da'wah sees film as a medium and tool to spread the Islamic Da'wah. Varieties of Da'wah approach become the center of priority among the preachers who based their belief in the concept of amar makruf nahi mungkar (enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong). Thus spreading Da'wah through media which include films is seen as effort which has yet to be explored. This scenario puts the basis of producing movies which contain the Islamic element to lean against the idea of sending a good message about Islam and Da'wah through movies. This is portrayed through a phenomenon of movies produced in Indonesia and Iran that has made the Islamic movies a great prestige such as the movies like *Dalam Mihrab Cinta* (In Mihrab Love) (2010), *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih 1&2* (When Love Says A Prayer) (2009), *Emak Ingin Naik Haji* (Mother Wants to Perform Haj) (2009), *Children of Heaven* (1997) and *The Song of Sparrows* (2008). Malaysia film industry also did not sit idly where it also produces movies that have a religious touch, although it has never been popular among the locals.

This writing is looking at the aspect of Malay films especially religious films (Islam) in Malaysia to see its status and role as the medium of preaching Da'wah. Asiah (2009) once said our Malay films are included in the third world cinema which focussing on the function of being the transformation agent. Thus the role of movies is vital in taking the people to a clearer and more focus life through ideas and

messages sent. According Najib al-Kilani (2006), films, television drama and series has strong connection with the genre of drama (the father of all arts) and it is important to produce Islamic drama to give benefits to the community. This claim is parrallel with what Abd. Aziz (2007) has said:

“It’s about time we multiply movies that contain Islamic and humanity elements, so the world is balanced with other movies that have ‘no soul’ and are there on the market now”.

Religious Genre Film

From the journal Religion and Film, issues that touched important aspects in both religion and films are synthesized and discussed. A research done by Teusner (2002) supported the idea of theology as being accepted as a genre in lifting up the element of god. While Plate (1998) and Matties (1998) discussed religion and film as interdisciplinary approaches and debated on ideas of religion that can be interpreted through the medium of films. Flesher and Torry (1998) also talked about the two important scenarios on the approach of films towards religion which are films that are produced based on religious issues. Second is secular films that used religious symbols and image with many purposes.

The religious genre kind of films from the Western movie producers like to expose issues on god and Christianity. This can be seen from the films like *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *The Passion of Christ* (2004), *Leap of Faith* (1992), *Da Vinci Code* (2006) and *2012* (2009). Hence the awaken of this new genre is seen as fulfilling the question of god and spiritual which is needed by human beings. Religious films produced by Western cinema touched a lot on Christianity, spirit, soul, morality, angel and demon (Lindvall 2004; Nayar 2010; Santana and Erickson 2008; Kozlovic 2005; Okuyade 2011). The influence of the existence of these Christian philosophical scholars in the West somehow affects the community. As the example the film *The Passion of Christ* (2004) talks about the sacrifice of Jesus Christ reached the box-office collection and received tremendous response from the audience. There are also Hollywood movies that are diverted from the true religious value until they are labelled as religious parody when this movie *Bruce Almighty* (2003) mocks the religion (Christian) as well as the power of the god. This film is also known as anti-religion film. Other than that, there are

also films that are not only focussing on the Christianity element in the film, some elements of Islam are also found in them. Movies like *The Message* (1976) and *Lion of the Desert* (1981) made using all the Hollywood production even though the director is a Muslim, Mustapha Akkad. Hence, Hollywood has produced *Kingdom of Heavens* (2005) which portrays the struggle of both Christian and Islam through The Crusades.

Besides Hollywood and other Western cinemas, the world of Islamic cinema is nearer to the religious film especially in looking at the religion and spiritual elements through the films. Among those are Arab-Egypt, Iran, Turki, Indonesia and even Malaysia film cinemas that lift up the issues and genres in religion which are connected most of the time with multi religion and multicultural way of life. The rise of these films which are based on Islam are positive and have gained interest among the Muslim audience. Films made in Indonesia and Iran lately are seen has dominated the rises of Islamic films are also known as the Da'wah films. Films like *Ayat-ayat Cinta* (Sentences of Love) (2008), *Dalam Mihrab Cinta* (In Mihrab Love) (2010) and *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih 1&2* (When Love Says A Prayer) (2009), managed to pull the attention of audience who thirst for Da'wah movies like the aforementioned movies. The contributions of religion scholars like Habiburrahman el shirazy contribute to the production of religious films which are more honest and sincere.

Javed (2010) discusses the participation of Islamic cinema that can produce religious films and comply with Islamic laws, culture and community values. The scenario is supported and proved right by Howell (2008) who touched on the participation of sufisme in Indonesia. Howell (2008) proved right on how Islamic televangelism has translated the sufisme approach of these two Indonesian scholars Abdullah Gymnastiar and M. Arifin Ilham which used the media approach in their effort to spread Islam and Da'wah. Other than that the rise of the masterpiece from Majid Majidi (Javed 2010), a prominent director from Iran who spread its wings to ever produce films that contain strong spiritual and religious elements like *Children of Heaven* (1998), *The Color of Paradise* (2000) and *The Song of Sparrows* (2008) add color to the Islamic cinema. Iran cinema is the example of how films are produced through the development of spiritual and religious concept which are translated through a film. This transformation is felt by the

when the making of the films in this genre is almost non-existence in the development of Malay film in Malaysia. After *Semerah Padi* (The Red Coloured Paddy) (1956) and *Isi Neraka* (Residence of Hell) (1960), the production of such movies stopped for years until Malaysians are awoken by the birth of *Syukur 21* (Thank You 21) (2000) that lifts up the side of da'wah and Islam directly in the film. Unfortunately, this movie which directed by Eddie Pak (Aliff Najmi) failed to collect good collection. But its existence is seen as the paradigm shift in the development of film industry in Malaysia. As time moves on, we have *Syurga Cinta* (Heaven of Love) (2008) which also has the element of Islam inserted together in a lighter theme and question.

From FINAS (2011) statistics (2005 to 2010), Malaysia has produced 140 Malay films from many categories of genres (Table 1) which have gone through the screening under terms and conditions before the films are shown in the cinema. Sad to say, within this timeframe non of the films discussed the elements of religion as the main issue of what Muslim directors and script writers should fight for in Malaysia. On the other hand they prefer to adapt the western genre that conflicts with our cultural value and religion. For that Malaysians have seen films like *Anak Halal* (Legal Child), *Bohsia...Jangan Pilih Jalan Hitam* (Bad Girl...Don't Choose Bad Direction), *V3...Samseng Jalanan* (V3...Road Gangster) and other films that have Western element as their background. Adam (2008) mentioned that:

We are so busy in making and producing fiction, romance, action 'drift' films, until we overlooked on how desperate we are in making films that hold the purity of Islam.

Based on the Malay film genre from 2005-2010 (FINAS 2011) (Table 2) there are only a few films that insert the elements of religion in the movie directly. Even though debates and comments are felt necessary to be uttered about any particular religious materials based on laws of Islam in those films, literally it is considered as good effort to lift up the religious element directly through the films. Films that are said to contain the elements of Islam need to be discussed and debated equally to check whether the elements are precise and comply to the Islamic laws and Da'wah concept truly or not. Sad to say only these two films *Syurga Cinta* (Heaven of Love) and *Maut* (Death) reached the box-office collection when others faced a great loss.

whole community of Islam after its revolution (Javed 2010; Sadr 2006; Bahar 2010; Soltani-Gordfaramarzi and Kazemi 2010) which contribute to a lot of massive change in movie making. This is a contribution to the making of Iran films that denotes the dimension building of life of the Iranian as a whole. Thus, there are many movies from Iran that have these features; spirit, soulfulness and religion as the foundation in producing Islamic film and to remain strong.

The Position of Religious Malay Films in Malaysia

Malay films that directly brought up the questions of Islam in Malaysia are produced in varieties of genres and are different. The truth is Malaysia is still below in considering religion (Islam) film as one of the film genres and accepting the fact that religious theme and issues are depending solely on the established genre of film. Naim (2010) differentiates between Islamic films and films that are Islamic based. Naim (2010) said that films that are Islamic based are films that contain elements that parallel to the laws of Islam. However, not necessarily the movie has to be Islam as a whole. The Islamic elements could only be at its narrative, dramatic, cinematography, semiotic, application, technical and contextual. Whereas, Islamic films according to Naim (2010) brings a message of self-surrender, obedience and believes in Allah the Creator. Naim (2010) added by saying:

Product of explanation from the discussions about arts in Islam, as Islamic film is uttered as an art in the form of 'halal (legal) product', pre and post production with the input and elaboration on codes of ethics and Islamic values until the process of spreading, watching and audience viewing. The purpose is to spread Da'wah, absorb moral values and practice the concept of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong.

Nevertheless, the film that has Islamic elements has been coloring the film industry in Malaysia since then and even during the time when films were produced in the Jalan Ampas Studio. Furthermore it was indeed a success when the film *Semerah Padi* (The Red Colored Paddy) (1956) has put P Ramlee as one of the successful directors in translating a religious film in its unique and standard continuum. Back then religious film was not the choice of the local director at all. This can be seen

TABLE 1 Total and list of genre and sub-genre Malay fiction films (2005-2010)

Genre/Subgenre Film	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	Total
Action	2	1	1	1	0	2	7
Comedy	3	4	1	5	4	2	19
Drama	2	4	3	6	2	3	20
Love	1	1	1	0	2	1	6
Horror	1	0	1	3	4	4	13
Animation	0	0	1	0	1	0	2
Patriotic/History	0	0	1	0	1	0	2
Comedy/Action	1	2	0	1	1	4	9
Comedy/Love	3	2	4	2	0	4	15
Comedy/ Horror	1	0	1	1	1	2	6
Comedy /Science	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Comedy /Musical	1	2	0	0	2	0	5
Comedy /Fantasy	0	0	0	2	2	0	4
Comedy /Drama	0	2	0	0	0	2	4
Comedy /Adventure	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Comedy/Mystery	0	0	0	1	0	1	2
Drama/ Love	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Drama/Action	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Drama/ Horror	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Drama/ Musical	1	1	1	0	1	1	5
Musical / Love	1	0	0	1	2	2	6
Horror / Mystery	1	1	4	0	1	0	7
Horror /Scary	0	0	0	1	1	0	2
Musical /Fantasy	0	0	0	0	0	1	10
TOTAL	19	21	21	25	25	29	140

Source: Adapted from FINAS (2005-2010)

TABLE 2 Spreadness of Malay Films that inserted the religious elements in 2005-2010

Year	Film & Genre	Director	Producer	Gross Collection (RM)
2005	Qaisy & Laila (Drama)	Raja Ahmad Alaudin	Nizarman (M) Sdn. Bhd. & Serangkai Film Sdn. Bhd.	0.10 million
2006	-Nil-			
2007	-Nil-			
2008	-Nil-			
2009	Muallaf (Drama)	Yasmin Ahmad	MHZ Film Sdn. Bhd	0.19 million
	Maut (Horror/ Scary)	Bade Hj. Azmi	Tayangan Unggul Sdn. Bhd	1.6 million
	Syurga Cinta (Drama/Love)	Ahmad Idham	MIG Productions Sdn. Bhd.	2.38 million

Film from the Perspective of Islamic Da'wah

Da'wah denotes preaching of Islam for all Muslims (Ab Aziz 1997; Ibn Hamid 1999; Sohirin 2008). The purpose of Da'wah is to give people a better life now and later (life after) as well as achieving the God's pleasure and practice it in our daily lifestyle, individually and as a family or even social community (Zaydan 1976; Ab. Aziz 1997; Sohirin 2008). In the effort to vary the medium of Da'wah, the film is seen as a new and influential way that can be explored.

Sohirin (2005) has emphasized it clearly that Da'wah does not only tighten the people traditionally. Whereas Da'wah can be exposed and engaged in the form of telling, drama and film besides using the printed and electrical medium to clarify on the religion and Islamic messages. Hence, tasks and responsibilities that need to be carried out in a group of an organization do not only lie on the shoulders of an individual. Cooperation and support from other parties including the preachers, script writers, drama and filmmakers, actors/actresses needed to present the Da'wah messages to reach the target audience who loves

entertainment easily. While Suhaina (2006) stated that the film does not only act as an entertainment tool, the elements of morality and good deeds should be inserted.

This is being explained by Abu Hassan (2006) when he said that film in one aspect is a process of searching for the truth towards Islam, how it is being developed and altered in all the cinematographic structure from the narrative to the picture, from the dialogue to the gesture, from the actors to the characters, from the ideas to the end product must compose and posit the Tawhid as when it must also have acid, morals, ibadah, characters and Shariah. All films that within the framework of Islam are encouraged to be made and produced because the purpose of the films is to educate the audience in all sorts of education, religion, spiritual and moral. On the other hand, films that are not on the track of Islam are categorized in the ugly criteria should be banned. These include films that are fun and entertainment based and portray moral decay and bad behavior among people and leaving all the good values of Islam behind. (Khatijah 2002).

Mohd Hilmi (2010) also shared his thought that Islamic film should not contain unnecessary scenes like hugging between the opposite sex, expose too much of aurah (legal female parts of body to be exposed), portray wrong and bad activities openly, extreme action scenes and discuss elements of cult and superstitious in the film. Also included in the context are films that have comedy and jokes elements but the jokes are slapstick, empty, insensitive, ugly and dirty. This is to show that in order for a film to practice the Islamic Da'wah through film, a consideration on those good and bad elements are vital. In other words the concept of amar ma'ruf (enjoining what is right) should be combined with the nahi munkar (forbidding what is wrong) in spreading the Da'wah through films. Take *Syurga Cinta* (Heaven of Love) (2008) as an example of a film that puts in the Da'wah and religious elements and at the same time portray the wrong doings and western lifestyle carried out by the character of 'Irham' and his friends in the movie.

Syurga Cinta (Heaven of Love) cannot be categorised as Islamic film because it still has the concept of haq (truthness) and batil (irreligion). Nevertheless, the film can be grouped as a film that contains the Islamic elements because of the direct Islamic plot that it has. In Malaysia we are still behind in producing Islamic films especially that cover the criteria mentioned by Naim (2010) in his paperwork entitled "Filem Islam: satu

perbicaraan” (Islamic Film: A Discourse). Furthermore, discussion in seeing the Malay film as films that contain the Islamic elements or at least can be positioned as a religious film is always open.

Conclusion

The term religious films need to be explained so that confusion among communities will not happen. In other words, films that brings forward question on Islam should be honest in sending the Islamic message to avoid all sorts of confusion. Take this film directed by Hanung Bramantyo entitled *Tanda Tanya* (Question Mark) (2011) as an example. This film is said has centralized the issue of pluralism in religion until it was rejected and commented badly by the Indonesian Ulama’ Association. Not forgetting *Muallaf* (Converts) (2009) which was prevented from entering the cinema in Malaysia once because the movie is said to bring forward pluralism and religion freedom. In whatever it is, the film that is Islamic based and is brought up should portray Islam as a lifestyle which scope is wide. They have to consider the perfect Da’wah concept as its content covers the real Muslim community life specifically.

In reality the journey of Malay films nowadays is imbalanced starting from its genre making. Local movie/film producers like to choose a popular genre in gaining support from the audience. This scenario makes comedy, horror and action genre lately become the chosen genres of film directors and producers. The imbalance of this film genre is worrying if it is seen from the aspect of its content. This is because many Malay films ever produced in comedy genre are seen as stupid as it contains the slapstick and sloppy jokes. Whereas the horror genre that dominates the making of the Malay film nowadays is also worrying as it challenges Muslims’ belief and understanding. Not to mention the action genre that contributes to the deviance attitudes and behavior of teenagers. All of these films that are ever available in the market affect the making and producing of the Islamic films in Malaysia. In other words the production of this kind of film will remain low if nothing is done.

Riding on from the consequences of today’s scenario it is seen that the effort of spreading the Islamic Da’wah through religious films should be the best approach to bring the audience and the community closer and

to a better lifestyle. Da'wah through films also gives out opportunities to the Muslim producers and directors in Malaysia especially to understand the meaning of religious film better. Research on this issue is seen as important in the role of films in spreading out the good even though many of the Malay films only portray the elements of religious in a small scale through scenes like sins repayment, repentance, prayer, the mosque and a matter of grave. These scenes are famous in horror films to show how the typical religion man (ustaz) acts and recites the doa to vanish the jin and demons from the possessed body. Last but not least we are hoping to see films that really portray Islam as a blessing lifestyle (rahmatan lil 'alamin).

References

- Al-Quran al-Kareem.
- Ab. Aziz Mohd Zin. 1997. *Metodologi dakwah*. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya.
- Abd. Aziz Itar. 2007. *Perbanyakkan Filem Berunsur Keislaman*. Utusan Malaysia, December 12.
- Abu Hassan Hasbullah. 2006. Filem sebagai ar-Risalah-menemukan keimanan dan kebijakan dramaturgi wayang gambar Melayu. Dramatic Writing Seminar, December 2-3.
- Adam Salleh. 2008. Tandus Filem Agama. *Harian Metro*. April 20.
- Asiah Sarji. (2009). Malaysian Film Industry Development in the Context of Islam Hadhari. In *Komunikasi di Malaysia Suatu Penelitian Awal Pendekatan Islam Hadhari*. edited by Mohd Safar Hasim & Zulkiple Abd. Ghani. Bangi: Islam Hadhari Institute, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. 193-218.
- Bahar, Mehri. 2010. Religious identity and mass media: the situation of women in Iranian cinema following the Islamic revolution. *Journal Media and Communication Studies*, 2(6): 144-153.
- Bambang SM Said. 2005. Judicial criticism of comedy value. *Screen Journal*, 2(2), 83-91.
- FINAS (The National Film Development Corporation Malaysia). 2011. Tayangan filem cereka tempatan. <http://www.finas.gov.my/index.php?mod=industry&sub=cereka> (30 Mac 2011)
- Flesher, V.M. Paul dan Torrey, Robert. 1998. Teaching religion and film. *The Journal of Religion and Film*. 2(3). <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Fleshart.htm> (2 November 2010).

- Fuziah Kartini Hassan Basri, Faridah Ibrahim and Mohd. Safar Hasim. 2009. *Viewing Feature Films in Malaysia: Behavior, tastes, perceptions and expectations*. Ampang: FINAS.
- Howell, Julia. 2008. Sufism on the silver screen Indonesia innovations in Islamic televangelism. *Journal of Indonesian Islam*. 2(2): 225-239.
- Ibn Hamid, Soleh bin Abdullah. 1999. *Ma'alim fii Manhaj al-Dakwah*. Jeddah: Dar al-Andalus.
- Javed Mohammed. 2010. Muslim cinema: an introduction. My Favorite Review. <http://www.myfavoritereview.com> (1 September 2011).
- Khatijah Mohamed Yatim. 2002. *Malay da'wah film: the most extensive analysis of rhetoric*. Unpublished Project Paper. Universiti Malaya: Academy of Malay Studies.
- Kozlovic, Anton Karl. 2005. Hollywood hermeneutics: a religion and film genre for the 21st century. *The Film Journal* <http://www.thefilmjournal.com/issue11/religion.html>. (3 Mac 2011).
- Lindvall, Terry. 2004. *Religion and film part 1: History and criticism*. A Quaterly Review of Communication Research 23(4):1-44.
- Matties, Gordon. 1998. Religion and Film: Capturing the Imagination. *The Journal of Religion and Film*. 2(3). <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/imagine.htm> (2 November 2010).
- Mohd Hilmi Abdullah. 2010. Kenapa festival filem Islam menyepi? Utusan Online Bicara Agama, January 17. http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=2010&dt=0117&pub=Utusan_Malaysia&sec=Bicara_Agama&pg=ba_01.htm (4 April 2011).
- Naim Ahmad. 2010. Islamic film: a trial. Broadcasting Fiqh Workshop paper. Organized by JAKIM, TV al-Hijrah & FDAM. ILIM, Bangi 20 June
- Najib al-Kilani. 2006. *Drama about Islami*. Mokhtar Hussain. (Terj.). Shah Alam: UPENA.
- Nayar, Sheila J. 2010. Reconfiguring the 'genuinely' religious film: the oral contours of the overabundant epic. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol78, No.1: 100-128. doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfp086
- Okuyade, Ogaga. 2011. Woman and evangelical merchandising in the Nigerian filmic enterprise. *Kemanusiaan*, 18(1): 1-14.
- Plate, S. Brent. 1998. Religion, literature, film: toward a religious visuality of film. *Literature and Theology*, 12(1): 16-38.
- Sadr, Hamid Reza. 2006. *Iranian cinema a political history*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co.Ltd.

- Santana, Richard W. dan Erickson, Gregory. 2008. The gods of film: representing god and Jesus at the movies. In *Religion and popular culture rescripting the sacred*. Santana, Richard W. dan Erickson, Gregory. (eds). USA: McFarland and Company, Inc.
- Soltani-Gordfaramarzi, Mehdi dan Kazemi, Abbas Varidj. 2010. Iranian movies and gender display: a study in post revolution cinema. *International Journal of Innovation, Management and Technology*, 1(2): 110-115.
- Sohirin M. Solihin. 2008. *Islamic Da'wah Theory And Practice*. Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia.
- Suhaina Hj. Mat Ludin. 2006. The effectiveness of preaching through art entertainment music and drama: a survey of psychological perspectives. *Proceedings of the Regional Seminar on Da'wah and Islamic Art*, 35-47.
- Teusner, Paul. 2002. Horror film and the construction of religious identity in contemporary media culture. <http://paulteusner.org/docs/paper.pdf> (2 November 2010).
- Zaydan, 'Abd. Al-Karim. 1976. *Usul al-Da'wah*. t.tp.: Maktabah al-Manar al-Islamiyah.