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Ethical Problems in Contemporary Indonesian Television Programmes [Religion and Television in Indonesia: Ethics Surrounding Dakwahtainment]

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Ethical Problems in Contemporary Indonesian Television Programmes

This chapter will first explore some ethical problems in contemporary Indonesian television programmes and problematise some of the negative approaches to what I call comedies of error. Subsequent to this will be a more nuanced elaboration of how religion is played out and instrumentalised to increase the entertainment value of such programmes. This will then be measured against normative Islamic religious ethics. The chapter delves into the many and various ways in which Indonesian television has persistently undermined some of the core principles and values entrenched in Islam's normative religious ethics. The second half will place emphasis on the ethical problems confronted by the numerous *Dakwahtainment* programmes currently broadcast on Indonesian television.³⁰

Comedies of Error

As mentioned earlier, comedians have been an integral part of the Indonesian television industry for quite some time. The 1980s, however,

³⁰ The dataset presented in this chapter is derived mainly from direct observation through recordings made with my research assistants throughout 2012. Other data were derived from KPI and MUI's documents on monitoring, warning and advisory letters.

saw the mushrooming of home-grown comedy shows such as *Ria Jenaka* – the Wayang Orang or Javanese traditional puppet characters³¹ – *Jojon Cs*, and *Srimulat*, some of whom remain active until now in variety comedy shows and *sinetrons*. In the course of its journey, comedy in these television shows has been transformed from merely a form of entertainment for the public into major show business. In the increasing celebrity culture, there are no holds barred. Contemporary, post-reform Indonesian variety comedy shows, currently shown on numerous channels, are plagued with ethical problems, which have persistently irked the *Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia* (KPI) (Indonesian Broadcasting Commission), an independent state agency, which has been tasked by law to monitor and scrutinise programmes broadcast on radio and television throughout Indonesia.

During Suharto's New Order, television comedies were an outlet to escape from the intense securitisation, if not indeed militarisation, of society. The macho performances of men in military uniform, especially the army, parading with their rifles and artillery were a common feature on television. The prevalence of the military was also evident in weekly television musical performances such as *Aneka Safari* in which the venue more often than not was a military base. As if the location were not enough, it was common for the female hosts, obviously not military personnel, to don the military's official green camouflaged uniform together with its green, black or red beret, depending on which military unit sponsored the weekly programme.

³¹ *Ria Jenaka* was once a popular 15-minute televised comedy performance by then famous comedian Ateng and friends, who dressed up and played traditional Javanese puppet characters such as Bagong (by Ateng), Petruk (by Iskak), Gareng (by Suroto and Slamet Harto), Semar/Romo (by Sampan Hismanto) and, as a late addition to the group, Mono (by Teten). The formula for *Ria Jenaka*'s success usually entailed government propaganda, advising the audience on issues related to family planning, transmigration, maintaining law and order, mutual respect and tolerance for others.

Interestingly, during that period in the 1980s when state television seemed truly to cultivate the militarist culture, Indonesian comedies came to provide an alternative to, if not the antithesis of, the male chauvinistic culture by having male comedians dressing and performing as women with wigs or acting like *banci* (male effeminates). Comedians such as Ucu and Ester in *Jojon Cs*, for instance, regularly performed as damsels in distress, minus the beauty, grace and elegance. From this, a certain pattern seemed to emerge, in which female and effeminate characters constantly were reduced to an *object penderita* (literally, object of suffering), the target of degradation and humiliation.

Unfortunately, this pattern has re-emerged on Indonesian television with much more vigour and rigor, often using religion as the basis for mortification. The pattern of mortification shows itself in the following manifestations: making fun of physical attributes, sexual innuendos, mocking underprivileged people, and undermining religion. Each will be elaborated below.

Physical Attributes

Indonesian comedians appear to bar no holds in making fun of people's physical appearances. People who are short, fat, bald, small- or flat-nosed or buck-toothed seem to be the most convenient targets of insult. People's faces and bodily parts are often equated with shameful objects such as toilets, buckets, floor mats and even voodoo dolls. Animals too are habitually deployed as a spectre of comparison.

During one comedy programme aired on 7 August 2012, a comedian described the relationship of a man and woman sitting next to each other. He came up with a couplet associating the man with a

beruk (short-tailed macaque):³²

Barang antik dari kulit jeruk

Orang cantik kok pacaran sama beruk?

((There is) an antique item made up of orange peels

Why would a beautiful person go out with a macaque?)

Jarwo Kuat, a popular comedian, then cited a phrase saying, while directing his attention to his balding colleague:

*Allah bersama orang-orang yang sabar*³³

Setan bersama orang botak

(Allah is with those who are patient

Satan is with those who are bald)

Sexual innuendos

Many variety television shows and even some *Dakwahtainment* programmes suffer from inappropriate content deemed suitable only for adults. This comes in various forms: sexually insinuating jokes and anecdotes, bodily gestures and facial expressions. Related to this is the tendency to degrade people with different sexual orientations and habits, who are often referred to as *banci* or *bencong* (male effeminates).

In a live comedy variety show, a rising stand-up comedian, Ustadz Taufiqurrahman from the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah in Jakarta, went on stage and engaged the hosts in comical

³² A macaque belongs to the family of monkeys.

³³ This phrase is taken out of a well-known Quranic Chapter 8 entitled Al-Anfal (The Spoils of War), verse 46, which originally reads: Innallaaha ma'ash-shaabiriin (For Allah is with those who patiently persevere).

conversation. He ventured to downgrade effeminates, transvestite homosexuals and queers by deploying rhythmic couplets with clear sexual overtones, such as:

Ada panci dari Cibelati
Sesama banci jangan saling menyakiti
(There is a frying pan from Cibelati³⁴
Being effeminates, you should not hurt one another)

This was immediately followed by another couplet:

Makan arem-arem serasa anget
Ama banci mah serem amet
(Eating *arem-arem* feels warm³⁵
With an effeminate is very frightening)

He then asked the audience, and asked: “You know why it is so? Do you know why? I have been told that”:

Jangan suka makan kwaci
Karena kuaci makanan kampret
Jangan suka godain banci
Karena banci dadanya karet
(Do not eat too often *kwaci*³⁶
Because *kwaci* is food for small bats³⁷)

³⁴ Cibelati is a small town in West Java.

³⁵ *Arem-arem* is a traditional Indonesian food made up of sticky rice wrapped in banana leaf with meat or chicken inside.

³⁶ *Kwaci* is salted dried watermelon seeds usually eaten as a snack in Indonesia.

³⁷ The term *kampret* is a particularly derogatory term to characterise shady, untrustworthy people working under the cover of darkness, and engaging in illicit activities such as burglary and others.

Do not fool around with the effeminates
Because their breasts are made of plastic)

There are at least two points in this example worth noting. Ustadz Taufiqurrahman is seen as a religious figure, with the title *ustadz* before his name. This implies that the individual is more knowledgeable in religious sciences than the average person or audience, hence the venerated title *ustadz*. The other damaging aspect of his performance was that it was shown live during the holy month of Ramadhan.³⁸ This raises further questions about the appropriateness of such contemptuous statements made by the *ustadz*, in a month when he and the audience were supposed to be observing the ritual of fasting or abstinence from food, water and sexual activities during the day. As a consequence, SCTV received an “administrative sanction” from KPI.

Mocking underprivileged people

Judging from their communication patterns, some Indonesian television programmes have yet been sensitised to the most basic ethical principles about offending people with disabilities or learning difficulties, low-income earners, and the poor. Labels such as *gila* (crazy), *cacat* (handicapped), *orang susah* (literally, people with difficulty) or *miskin* (poor) are sprinkled in many programmes, notably comedies and variety shows.

On one occasion, after humiliating an audience member for his physical appearance, the hosts began a tirade about low-income earners,

³⁸ Aired on SCTV's Sabarr Tingkat 2 (patience level 2) on 24 July 2012 at 10:53 a.m.

in this case bus drivers. The young teenager, named Rosi, was called onto the stage by the good-looking hosts. One host then yelled, “Hey audience!” “Hoy!” the audience shouted back. “Did you guys notice Rosi’s teeth? They are like gates to a zoo,” the host said. As though that were not bad enough, another male host called Rosi, and asked, “Rosi, is your dad a bus driver?” Rosi replied, “How would you know?” The host responded, “Because your face is flat, just like the front part (of the bus).” This was followed by an uproar of laughter from the live audience members.

In a programme called “John Lenong” broadcast on *TransTV* on 22-26 July 2012, one comedian host lamented to his colleague, “Oh, so you are a *tukang bakso* (meatball-soup seller), because your face is like coffee residue.”

Undermining religion

Religion too has been a target of ridicule by various television programmes. Although these ethical violations have seemingly tended to be unintentional or based on simple ignorance, the recurrences hardly seem to be innocuous and even suggest a systematic attempt at undermining religion and God.

A prominent and voluptuous singer Zaskia once conducted a stage performance, where she greeted the audience with the typical Muslim religious greeting *Assalaamu’alaykum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh* (peace be upon you all and I hope that you shall receive mercy and blessing from Allah). The problem was not the greeting, which in the Islamic tradition is *sunnah* (a commendable act). Rather, it was how Zaskia conducted her usual *itik* dance move as she greeted

the audience, shaking her buttocks profusely and rotating in all directions. The MUI protested and urged the KPI to “request an assessment” (*Permintaan Penilaian*) of the programme. It made four statements:

- a. The phrase *Assalaamu 'alaykum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh* is a prayer derived from the holy Quran;
- b. The sexually suggestive act of shaking one’s buttocks while reciting the Quran in public is deemed unfitting and inappropriate;
- c. Viewers who watched the television programme are diverse and not restricted by age or educational level. What is more, the imitative effects of television programmes are very high.
- d. The MUI therefore urges the Central Office of the KPI to take an appropriate decision on this matter.

As a consequence, KPI imposed an “administrative sanction” on the programme and forced the television station to shorten the programme’s duration.

Indonesian television programmes are rife with such ethical violations. Some have even gone as far as name-calling, which undermines the elevated position that human beings occupy, based on Islamic religious precepts and ethical teachings.

Islamic Humour

At its most superficial level, Islam seems to be somewhat ambivalent when it comes to humour and play. On the one hand, the sacred texts of

Islam (i.e. the Quran and voluminous body of *hadists*) predominantly contain teachings that delve into serious subjects such as God, his divine will and plan, mysticism, martyrdom, cosmology, eschatology, salvation, and the destiny of humankind. In fact, like all other religions, some of the most serious subjects propounded by religious zealots are the all-too-familiar stories of heaven and hell and the prospects for those who are on the side of belief or unbelief. For radical and militant Muslims, emphasis is placed on the teachings that clearly reinforce the demarcation between Muslims (literally, those who submit) and the *Kafirs* (infidels) and on the inescapable logic of war, conflict and Armageddon.

To support the seriousness of the subject matter, one famous Prophetic saying often cited by the depressed Sufis and Muslim mystics alike is that: “If only thou know est what I know, thou wilt be in tears for fear of what is to come.” This is reinforced by the legal opinion of one of the most celebrated theologians and philosophers of Islam, Hojjatoleislam Muhammad al-Ghazali. One of the harshest critics of comedians, he argued that people whose preoccupation is to make people laugh will only lead people astray and to forget the path of God.

On the other hand, the Prophet Muhammad, despite the heavy burden of responsibility placed on him, is depicted in many *hadists* as being playful and humorous with his companions and followers. One story recounts how a woman approached the Prophet of God and complained about her husband, who had been less than fair to her. The Prophet of God Muhammad responded by asking the woman whether or not her husband was the one with the white spots in his eyes. The woman felt perplexed and relayed the Prophet’s saying to her husband.

The husband explained that the Prophet was merely playing with her. He told her that every human being has white spots in their eyes. Her husband was no exception.

Another *hadist* related by Anas bin Malik relates an incident when a man came to the presence of Prophet Muhammad and sought to get a ride on a camel. The Prophet replied, “We should then give you a ride on a camel’s baby then.” The man was stunned and tried to confirm what the Prophet had just said. “O Messenger of God, how can I ride on a camel’s baby?” With his usual warm smile, the Prophet responded, “Are not all camels the babies of a mother camel?” (*Abu Dawud*, On Ethics No.92).

Such *hadists*, together with many others, suggest how even a prophet of God deploys playful humour to engage and interact with his followers. When asked about the Prophet’s playfulness with his companions, one of his followers said, “O Prophet Muhammad, yet you also joke with us!” He replied: “Yes, I do. But I only tell the truth.” In many ways, this attitude is consistent with what is revealed in the chapter *Al-Hujurat* (49:11), which states that:

O ye who believe! Let not some men among you laugh at others: It may be that the (latter) are better than the (former): Nor let some women laugh at others: It may be that the (latter) are better than the (former): Nor defame nor be sarcastic to each other, nor call each other by (offensive) nicknames: Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness, (to be used of one after he has believed: And those who do not desist are (indeed) doing wrong.

A comparable kind of humour can be found in the extensive literature of popular Sufism, containing witty humour, counter-intuitive parables and countless tales of whimsical, if not quirky, behaviour on the part of Muslim mystics. One such celebrated Sufi was Mullah Nasruddin Hoya, whose refreshing jokes have inspired many of his ardent

followers:

Being a popular figure in society, Nasruddin Hoya was one of the most sought-after *khatibs* (sermoners for the Friday congregational prayers). However, owing to his genius, he was always successful in rejecting politely the people's earnest and persistent offer. Until one day, he had run out of options and excuses. So he finally went up to the pulpit and asked the congregation: "My dear congregation, do you know what I am about to say?" The congregation shouted back at Hoya by saying: "No! How could we know?" Hoya then responded by saying: "In that case, what is the use for me to say anything if you don't know what I will be talking about?" He then stepped down from the pulpit, leaving members of the congregation all confused. The following week, the congregation members – wanting to desperately listen to Hoya's sermon – agreed to respond affirmatively when asked the question. So when Hoya stepped up to the pulpit, he asked again: "My dear congregation, do you know what I am about to say?" Having agreed on the right kind of response beforehand, the congregation shouted back at Hoya by saying: "Yes, we do!" Hoya then said, "In that case, what is the use for me to say anything here if you already know what I am going to say?" The whole congregation became frustrated, and then conspired against Hoya, and planned a different response. So, in the following Friday prayers, Hoya again asked the same question. And as a response, one member of the congregation responded to Hoya by saying, "Some of us here know what you will say, while others do not." Hoya stood still for a moment, and replied: "In that case, those who know what I am about to say should inform those who do not know," as he climbed down from the pulpit with a victorious smile.

This witty tale shows how Islamic humour is normally played out. One of its characteristics is the absence of any tasteless, vulgar or offensive materials. As the examples above illustrate, there are no victims nor any cause for any casualties of the heart. It is characterised by refreshing ideas based largely on counter-intuitive religious logic, which has been a particular trademark of the Muslim mystics.

Contemporary Islamic humour in Indonesia can be illustrated by the late president Abdurrahman Wahid, otherwise known as Gus Dur, whose political witticisms habitually overlapped with self-deprecating jokes. Gus Dur came from a blue-blood line. His grandfather was Syaikh Hasyim Ashari,

founder of the influential *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) in the early 20th century. His father, Wahid Hasyim, was Indonesia's first Minister of Religious Affairs. Gus Dur's political victory over Megawati during the 1999 elections proved beyond doubt his cunning skills in politics, despite his party's loss to hers. In one political conference, Gus Dur joked about himself. He said:

All Indonesian presidents are crazy. Our first president, Sukarno, was crazy for women. Our second president, Suharto, was crazy for money. Our third president, Habibie, was crazy for aeroplanes. And the fourth president (Gus Dur himself) was truly crazy (*gila beneran*).

Such behaviour led many to find Gus Dur one of the most fascinating figures in Indonesian politics and the Muslim religious community. Sadly, his political enemies exploited such habits of Gus Dur to bring his presidency to an abrupt halt, arguing that his seemingly erratic style of leadership was un-presidential and counterproductive for Indonesia.³⁹

In the United States, following the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers, a similar phenomenon can be found in the Muslim and Arab community. Some have made headway in stand-up comedy by exploiting their problematic identity as the perpetually accused. Muslim comics from *Allah Made Me Funny* and the *Axis of Evil*, two of the most popular examples, also resort to self-deprecation to put forward their social criticisms, notably of the government's heavy-handed approach to the war on terror as well as the policy of racial profiling and stereotyping.

³⁹ Gus Dur was voted out of office by parliamentary impeachment after serving less than two years. He was replaced by then Vice-President Megawati, who continued his presidential term until 2004, before she was defeated in an electoral landslide by the current President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

Thus, in many ways, religion has not been so unfamiliar to comics and the world of entertainment. Religion has been part and parcel of the entertainment industry, providing its own self-serving justifications and rationale for their marriage of convenience.

