



# PROCEEDING

International Seminar

## Culture Across Perspectives II : Redefining Cultural Identity in Multicultural World



Semarang, 5 November 2014

Faculty of Humanities  
Diponegoro University

ISBN : 978-602-310-000-2

**CULTURE ACROSS PERSPECTIVES II:**

**REDEFINING CULTURAL IDENTITY IN A MULTICULTURAL WORLD**



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## *Sinetron Religi and Commodification of Religion*

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### Abstrak

Komodifikasi adalah proses mengubah objek menjadi komoditas yang laku dijual di pasar (Barker, 2004b). Oleh karena itu, komodifikasi agama berarti proses menjadikan atau memperlakukan agama sebagai komoditas yang dapat dan laku dijual di pasar. Meski tidak selalu berarti mengurangi atau merusak nilai-nilai agama, komodifikasi atau komersialisasi agama tetap merupakan sebuah proses yang harus dikritisi agar agama tidak semata-mata menjadi alat untuk meraup keuntungan ekonomi. Salah satu bentuk komodifikasi agama di Indonesia adalah sinetron religi, yang banyak menuai kritik karena dipandang tidak sesuai dengan ajaran agama dan menggunakan agama hanya sebagai kemasan. Paper ini boleh jadi *hanya* menambah panjang daftar kritik terhadap sinetron religi, tetapi melalui paper ini saya juga ingin berharap ada nilai positif yang kita dapatkan dari sinetron religi, misalnya sikap dan tindakan memaafkan sang tokoh protagonis. Nilai-nilai positif agama semacam inilah yang seyogyanya dikembangkan dalam sinetron religi, agar wajah agama tidak hanya tampak hitam dan putih, tetapi agar wajah agama menjadi lebih indah dengan ajaran yang penuh kasih sayang dan kedamaian. Dengan demikian, di dunia yang multikultur ini agama tidak lagi menjadi sekat-sekat yang memisahkan manusia, tetapi menjadi kekuatan yang menyatukan serta menggerakkan manusia untuk bekerja-sama demi kehidupan yang lebih baik.

**Kata kunci:** *sinetron religi, FTV religi and commodification of religion.*

### 1. Introduction

Indonesia is not a theocratic country, for the system of governance is not based on a certain religion, and the country is not ruled by certain religious leaders. However, religion has since long been of significance to the life of the nation, as is reflected, among which, in the foundation and the state ideology *Pancasila*, where the first principle is *Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa* or Believe in the Divine Omnipotence (Nieuwnehuije in Hidayah, 2013)<sup>7</sup>.

The centrality of religion to the people of Indonesia is one reason religion is a highly marketable product across the country. Holy days, such as Eid al-Fitr and Christmas, the two major religious holy days in Indonesia, are perfect moments to sell because within the atmosphere of these special occasions a large number of Indonesians willingly spend more money on clothes, footwear, food, jewelry and even motorcycles or automobiles.

Commodification or commercialization of religion is becoming even more massive by the proliferation of mass media, including television. Religious preaching or sermons, some of which are not at all educative and enlightening, are offered in a daily basis in some TV channels (e.g. Muzakki, 2008). Alternative healings, advertisements, talk shows, soap operas and films are offered in the name of religion. Religion is but one most marketable product in Indonesian TV channels.

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<sup>7</sup> See: Sita Hidayah (2013) for an inspiring discussion on the English translations of the first principle of Pancasila.

One popular TV program carrying religion as its label is local soap operas, mostly known as *sinetron religi* or religious soap opera. *Sinetron religi* is strongly criticized for its poor content, its simplification of religious teachings and its discriminative portrayal of women. Yet, *sinetron religi* is continuously to be produced and broadcasted in some private TV channels.

While I was very much concerned about the distorted religious teaching *sinetron religi* showed, I was wondering as well if there was something positive we could learn from a *sinetron*. *Sinetron religi* is the central point of this paper, in which I agree with media critics' opinion that *sinetron religi* is a mere commodification or commercialization of religion, but I also believe that there is something positive in our *sinetron*. Yes, the positive side is still very much unexplored compared to the negative one, but a *sinetron* can actually be a place where we disseminate the seeds of the liberating power of religion.

Religion, as we all have known, is a social structure having two different, if not contrastive, potentials. On the one hand, religion potentially divides people into in-and-out group members. Those embracing the same religion are *in* the group, whereas those following different religions are out of the group, i.e. they are "the other". In other words, religion has a potent to separate human beings. On the other hand, religion is a powerful mass mobilization; it unites and moves people together for a cause or a reason. Religion, in this case, empowers people. These two "powers" of religion can be either destructing or liberating, depending on how we—its followers—control their direction. Religion's power is liberating and empowering if we use it for the sake of humanity and the betterment of the world, and this positive "direction" of religious potential can actually be voiced through our *sinetron religi*.

## 2. Soap opera (Sinetron) and *Sinetron Religi*

Soap opera is a television serial characterized by "open-ended narrative forms, the use of core locations, the tension between the conventions of realism and melodrama and the pivotal themes of inter-personal relationships" (Barker, 2004b, p. 75). 'Open-ended narrative' means that soap opera tends to have an unplanned ending; a soap opera can always be lengthened up to hundreds or even thousands of episodes. It is "a long-running serial without a formal ending" which "does not have the sense of closure to be found in the feature film or the 13-episode series" (Barker, 2004a; 2004b, pp. 75, 184).

Also, soap opera uses a certain location that its viewers can recognize as the main setting. *Neighbour*, for instance, took suburban Melbourne as its "core location", while *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders* took working class communities in the main cities of England (Barker, 2004a; 2004b, pp. 75, 184).

Another characteristic of soap opera concerns the balance of the realist-and-melodrama conventions, meaning that a soap opera attempts to present a real picture of life on the one hand, and amplify the emotion of its viewers on the other. Therefore, a soap opera often presents such an exaggerated scene that we find illogical or impossible to happen in reality.

Finally, the themes of soap opera are centered on the family domain where such issues as romance, love affairs or family feud become the main idea of the story:

The pivotal themes of inter-personal relationship wherein marriages, divorces, break-ups, new alliances, arguments, acts of revenge and acts of caring are at the core of the soap opera narrative and provide the dynamic and emotional interest (Barker, 2004a, p. 184).

Soap opera was first broadcasted in Indonesia in the 1980-s. It was TVRI (*Televisi Republik Indonesia*), the state-owned TV channel, that aired a local soap opera entitled *Losmen* 'lodgings, inn' (Yasin, 2011). However, the Indonesian word of 'soap opera', i.e.

*sinema elektronik* (electronic cinema) or *sinetron*, was not used until 1989 with the show of the TV series *Jendela Rumah Kita* 'The window of our house' (Yasin, 2011).

Nine years later, the first *sinetron religi* was broadcasted: "It was started with *Doaku Harapanku* [My prayer, my hope], which was the first *sinetron* to be aired thematically coinciding with the fasting month in 1998 by RCTI, a few hours before dusk, just before the breaking of the fast" (Arditya, 2013a). *Doaku Harapanku*, using Islam as its package, was a success and became the milestone of the production of other *sinetron religi* programs (Arditya, 2013a; Diananto & Irwansyah, 2012).

*Sinetron religi* was initially produced to "celebrate" the fasting month of Ramadhan; it was usually aired before the coming of the month and ended in happy endings on the fast-breaking day (Eid al-Fitr), which Muslims consider to be the day of their victory after fasting and controlling their worldly desire for an entire month. Nowadays, however, *sinetron religi* is shown every day: "religious *sinetrons* have become staple shows outside of Ramadhan too" (Arditya, 2013a).

The massive production of *sinetron religi* that uses Islam as its wrap<sup>8</sup> is not followed by the production of religious *sinetron* using the points of view of religions other than Islam. *Buku Harian Nayla* (2006) and *Mukjizat itu Nyata* (2007), aired before Christmas, were among a few *sinetrons* produced from a Christian perspective.

Within the last eight or nine years Indonesian audience witnessed the birth of a new "genre" of *sinetron*, i.e. Film TV or FTV, which takes a film feature in that it lasts for 120-180 minutes. This type of TV show was first launched in the private TV channel SCTV, and its central theme was romance between young lovers. However, in its recent development, FTV has presented narratives related to religion. We now have *FTV religi* that uses Islam as its packaging (Arditya, 2013a) and *FTV rohani* (FTV) which uses Christianity.

Religious FTV offers theme that dovetails with that of religious *sinetron*; the theme of *FTV religi* and *rohani* is centered on interpersonal relationship within a family. The conflict is built on such issues as marital affairs, hypocrisy, jealousy, or greed for material wealth. Religious FTV is also similar to *sinetron* in that both feature "the tension between the conventions of realism and melodrama" (Barker, 2004b, p. 184) because religious FTV also locates its narrative within reality on the one hand and stirs the audience's emotional state on the other. Therefore, in the succeeding discussion of the paper, I use the phrase *sinetron religi* to include both the long-running *sinetron* and *FTV*.

### 3. Commodification of Religion in *Sinetron Religi*

Commodification is a process through which "objects, qualities and signs are turned into commodities", whereas a commodity is "an item whose primary purpose is sale in the market place" (Barker, 2004b, p. 28). Commodification is a word reserved for "the action of turning something into, or treating something as, a (mere) commodity; commercialization an activity, and so on, that is not by nature commercial" (in Kitiarsa, 2008, p. 6). Commodification of religion is thus the process or action of turning religion into a (mere) commodity or commercialization of religion.

Religious commodification is not automatically a negative process that can lead to the deterioration of religion: "'commodifying the sacred' does not lead to a critical decline of religiosity as argued by secularization theorists...." (Kitiarsa, 2008, p. 1). Kitiarsa argues that "the commodification process makes consumer religion, in which 'the sacred is able to sustain itself outside of organized religion within consumer culture' (Featherstone 1991: 126)" (2008, p. 7). This suggests that commodification of religion does not mean the disruption of religious values; quite contrary, religious commodification can mean the infusion of religious values in a world generally

<sup>8</sup> See: "Islamic 'sinetron' more down to earth, closer to viewer" (Arditya, 2013b) for a discussion of the "evolution" of Islamic *sinetron* in Indonesian television.

considered to be mundane and profane (Kitiarsa, 2008). Religious (Islamic) bumper stickers, becoming “a hot commodity” in Indonesia in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Lukens-Bull, 2008), are examples of religious commodification that has positive influences. Indonesian Muslims use the stickers as an expression and affirmation of their inclusion to a Muslim world as well as a means by which they disseminate “a certain version of Islamic practice with ease and convenience” (Lukens-Bull, 2008, p. 233).

However, Kitiarsa (2008, p. 7) also reminds us that religious commodification can “disturb and disrupt” the society and culture if we do not consider the extent to which religion and economy intermingle: “commodification process can be socially and culturally disturbing and disrupting, unless symbolic market intimacies, or extents and degrees which blend religious and economic values together, are put into consideration”.

Unfortunately, many religious *sinetrons*, as far as I have concerned, are produced not by considering the extent to which religion and economy can blend. They are produced for the sake of what is frequently claimed to be “audience demand and industry direction” (Manoj Punjabi in Arditya, 2013b) and are created without mindful consideration and strict control of the religious content. Hence, as Maman Suherman and Ilya Sunarwinadi say, in our *sinetron* religion is no more than an empty shell, for it is profit that lies as its basis:

Media expert and TV creator Maman Suherman believes there is nothing religious about the Islamic *sinetron* as production houses only use religion as packaging, while the content is pretty much the same as pop *sinetrons* throughout the year. “For example, they have actors playing clerics or *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) but the core story is still about: love, family conflicts or the ridiculous black-vs-white characterization,” Maman said (Arditya, 2013a).

Ilya Sunarwinadi, a communication expert from the University of Indonesia, said that the *sinetron*—in all its forms—had become trapped in profit-orientation. “We see the repetition of similar, tired patterns in stories and packages. *Sinetron* are being more commercialized, airing every day for ever longer hours,” said Ilya (Arditya, 2013b)

#### 4. “*Anakku diakui anak maduku*” and “*Aku mau mantan suamiku kembali*”

“*Anakku diakui anak maduku*” and “*Aku mau mantan suamiku kembali*” were broadcasted on 7 June and 8 June 2014. They belong to a TV serial *Sinema Pintu Taubat*, which presents a different narrative in each episode and is claimed to be based on true stories. *Anakku diakui anak maduku* ‘My son is claimed to be my co-wife’s son’ began with unexpected car accident between Vita and Fadil’s parents, in which she, instead of asking for forgiveness, scolded the couple. This left them a bad impression of hers, and when they found out that Vita was Fadil’s lover with whom he wanted to get married with, they got furious and objected to their marriage.

Fadil’s parents decided to arrange a marriage between Fadil and Annida (Nida), a modest and pious *kampong* woman; they also promised him half of their fortune upon the birth of Fadil and Nida’s first child. Greed for material wealth led Fadil to agree with the arranged marriage although—unbeknown to his parents—he kept his love relationship with Vita after marrying Nida. Interestingly, while Nida knew that his husband was against the rule of religion, by having an extramarital love affair, she did not do anything to stop him, to cry for help, and to fight against his repression. She continued to serve him and perform her obligation as a wife. All she did was to weep and pray, wishing God would show her husband the truth.

When Nida was expecting their first son, Fadil told a lie that Vita was also bearing their extramarital baby, which he used as a reason to legally marry Vita. Nida eventually

delivered a baby boy, but Fadil took him secretly and deceived everyone that their baby passed away. The boy was in fact given to Vita and claimed to be Fadil and Vita's son. Having had a son, Fadil demanded half of his parents' fortune and set a wealthy life.

Greed for material wealth is also the main idea of *Aku mau mantan suamiku kembali* 'I wanted to remarry my ex-husband'. Jihan, the main character of the story, left her husband Reihan and her son Evan for a rich man Heri, who turned out to be a wicked and violent playboy. He verbally and physically harassed Jihan every time she was trying to say her stand. Unable to endure the abuse, Jihan wanted to remarry her ex-husband Reihan, but her plan was deterred by Reihan's marrying Ayu. She therefore did anything she could to separate Reihan and Ayu; she became even more evil after discovering Ayu's pregnancy. Her evil intention was finally disclosed by her son Evan, and—as is often the case in *sinetron* where the antagonist gets God's punishment—Jihan's life ended in agony.

The two *sinetrons*, as we shall readily see, display the clichéd, monotonous pattern of soap opera. Both are centered on the family domain, wherein greed for material comforts is presented as the main source of the family break-up. Also, they presented a real scene of human life, but the portrayal was to some extent exaggerated. For example, the female protagonists and antagonists are depicted in extreme characterizations, as if it was possible for an individual to be having either entirely good personality or fully malicious, immoral one. The protagonists Nida and Ayu are exceptionally pious, patient, forgiving, *pasrah* 'submissive' and *ikhlas* 'wholehearted', whereas the antagonists Vita and Jihan are unusually evil. The antagonists continuously abused their rivals Nida and Ayu, who had never fought against their repressive attitude and actions but turned to religion for consolation and solution. In the end, however, the heroines Nida and Ayu won against the villains, who—due to their wrongdoing and bad deeds—got God's punishment. The punishment, strangely enough, was given only to the female antagonists Vita and Jihan; the male antagonists, Fadil and Heri, were saved!

In this point, it is true that the *sinetron*-s have reduced the teaching of religion to a great extent! *Sabar*, *pasrah* and *ikhlas* (patience, submission and wholehearted) should not have been translated into passive acceptance of our fate, for religion teaches us to fight against repression and injustices. As we have known, the first generations or the founders of religion, be they Siddharta Buddha Gautama, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, were born and raised among their people to oppose the unjust and repressive situations. They were sent to the powerless so as to empower and liberate them from the corrupt and authoritarian elites. Within this circumstance, *sabar* 'patience' and *ikhlas* 'wholehearted' suggests persistent continuous efforts to reach justice, equality and prosperity, rather than passivity and powerlessness.

*Pasrah* should not have been interpreted as accepting our fate without questioning, but it should have been and should be understood in terms of submission to God's will after our hard work. We turn to religion for power, for we believe that God helps those who work for a better world; we turn to God for strength, for we believe that She assists those who struggle for justice, equality and prosperity for all human beings.

Justice and equality are actually one main message our religious propounders brought about; everyone in the face of God is equal. Therefore, reward and punishment are given to those who deserve, be they women or men and rich or poor. On the other hand, religion teaches us that God is forgiving, and Her forgiveness is for everyone.

Thus far we have seen that "*Anakku diakui anak maduku*" and "*Aku mau mantan suamiku kembali*" are not in line with the teaching of religion. Simplification of and reduction to the teaching of religion do occur in the *sinetrons*. In this case, in the *sinetrons* religion has been treated as a mere commodity, a product that is sold to satisfy market demand, rather than actually showing what religion has taught us.

However, clichéd as it may be, the *sinetrons* raise a positive value in terms of love and compassion, as is always shown by the protagonists. James Cone (1997) wrote an

inspiring book on how an interpretation of religion that is against violence and oppression should be; liberating the oppressed means, at the same time, liberating them from hatred and desire to take revenge towards the oppressors. Here lies the beauty of liberation that James Cone proposed. Liberation is a struggle to fight against alienation and repression that is built on a sincere heart to seek the love of God. Therefore, liberation theology holds that in our effort to fight against injustice, we are not to take revenge to the oppressors, but to reconcile, to forgive them. In this case, religion liberates and empowers us.

## 5. Conclusion

Religion has always been of importance to the life of the people of Indonesia, which is reflected, among which, in the first principle of the state foundation Pancasila, i.e. *Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa* (Belief in the Divine Omnipotence). The significance of religion has made it a highly marketable product across the country, and this commodification or commercialization of religion takes many forms, one of which is in the form of what so called *sinetron religi* or religious soap opera. While commodification of religion, as Kitiarsa puts it, is not necessarily negative, the commodification of religion in our *sinetron religi* is worrying, for religion is significantly reduced that some scenes of the *sinetron* are actually against the teaching of religion per se. I, however, do not want to claim that *sinetron religi* is fully negative and that there is nothing we can learn from it. Although it sounds clichéd, the act of forgiving that is always shown by the protagonists indicates the liberating power of religion. As James Cone, a proponent of liberation theology, holds, in our effort to fight against injustice, we are not to take revenge to the oppressors, but to reconcile and to forgive them. Hence, I—as well as a lot of other Indonesians, I believe—hope to see *sinetron religi* that is very much positive in tone, i.e. *sinetron religi* that does not show God's destructive power (by punishing the wrongdoers) but that shows the face of religion which is full of love, compassion, equality, peace and tolerance. Religion is not to segregate its believers, but to unite them and to move them to work for the cause of humanity.

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