

Islamic Song In Indonesia: Expressing and Popularizing Piety Through Popular Music

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Abstract

This article deals with the emergence of Islamic songs produced by some prominent Indonesian pop music bands. Particular attention is paid to their music and songs based on several reasons; firstly, their music genre is quite different from what the so-called Islamic mainstream songs which previously took the form of Arabic-inclined music, such as *gambus*, *qasidah*, and *nasheed* with exclusively and explicitly conveyed Islamic messages towards the audiences. This later genre of Islamic songs utilizes pop music and even rock music to perform their creativity. Although according to the artists their ultimate goal in producing Islamic songs is to celebrate magnificent of Islam (*syi'ar Islam*) or in many ways for *dakwah* (preaching), the way they convey the message is not necessarily the same with what has been known as mainstream Islamic songs. They choose their own way that is deemed to be more popular and entertaining than before. Secondly, the production of this genre of Islamic song involves the major label companies which consider it as promising and profitable business.¹ Formerly, Islamic songs had hardly been produced by major labels except popular bands like *Bimbo*. In this regard, Islamic songs were considered as countrified (*kampung*) and preferred by low class society. Thirdly, this music generally targets young people in urban regions as its main customers. This is of course by modifying musical style and performance that meets the need and desires of these young people through modern popular music genre.

Key Words : *Islamic songs, popular music, dakwah, commodification theory, commodification of religion, religionisation of commodity*

Introduction

Recent development in Indonesian music industry has witnessed an interesting phenomenon related to the production, consumption and distribution of Islamic songs through market mechanism. With the emergence and advancement of mass media communication, particularly radio and TV stations over the last five years, this cultural product has undergone unprecedented growth with a diverse form of articulation compared to the previous era. This, among others things, is demonstrated by the trend of producing religious albums conducted by Indonesian music bands which are commonly known as pop or rock bands (in particular, *Gigi* and *Ungu bands*) performing music as a mere entertainment for young people in Indonesia, or industrial manufacture for making a huge profit either for the recording companies or for the artists.

Formerly, Islamic songs' production was done in a relatively small quantity and maintained a monotonous form of music and performance, such as *qasidah*, *gambus*, *nasheed*, and so on; mainly for the purpose of *dakwah* (preaching Islam). As such, this Islamic song was considered as an outdated and uninteresting kind of entertainment, and intended for old people as its consumers. Consequently, it was not a promising and profitable business from the view of music industry companies.

¹ See <http://selebriti.kapanlagi.com/Gigi/.com>

The latest development of Islamic songs has marked the diversity of production, consumption and distribution of this cultural product. It has been embraced by major label companies, such as Warner Music, Sony Music, BMG and the like, and consumed by mainstream youngsters who are fans of the artists or music bands. This of course has brought about Islamic songs to the mainstream pop music industry in the country and rejoices Islamic piety in entertainment industry at the same time. This phenomenon can be seen, in one way or another, as an encounter between modernity and piety which lead to the commodification of religion, that is the process of 'turning something into, or treating something as a(mere) commodity; commercialization of an activity, and so on, that is not by nature commercial' (OED:563)

This essay will deal with the emergence of Islamic songs produced by some prominent Indonesian pop music bands, such as Gigi and Ungu; and a singer and songwriter named Opick. Particular attention is paid to their music and songs based on several reasons; firstly their music genre is quite different from what the so-called Islamic mainstream songs which previously took the form of Arabic- inclined music, such as *gambus*, *qasidah*, and *nasheed* with exclusively and explicitly conveyed Islamic messages towards the audiences (Barengredt and Zanten, 2002:78); this later genre of Islamic songs utilizes pop music and even rock music to perform their creativity. Although according to the artists their ultimate goal in producing Islamic songs is to celebrate magnificent of Islam (*syiar Islam*) or in many ways for *dakwah* (preaching), the way they convey the message is not necessarily the same with what has been known as mainstream Islamic songs.² They choose their own way that is deemed to be more popular and entertaining than before. Secondly, the production of this genre of Islamic song involves the major label companies which consider it as promising and profitable business.³ Formerly, Islamic songs had hardly been produced by major labels except popular bands like *Bimbo*. In this regard, Islamic songs were considered as countrified (*kampung*) and preferred by low class society. Thirdly, this music generally targets young people in urban regions as its main customers. This of course by modifying musical style and performance that meets the need and desire of these young people through modern popular music genre.

Looking at the trend of producing Islamic songs through popular music genre, including pop-rock as commercial products, and through the process of modern production and distribution which involve marketing and promotion, the proliferation of Islamic songs in Indonesian marketplace could not be seen as merely a means for *dakwah* as it was the case prior to the last five years. Instead, it is a promising and profitable business no less than other commercial activities in market economy. In this regard, it can be argued that Islamic songs as "a commodity has been fetishized, in the sense that it has both economic and religious values" (Widodo cited in Jones; 213, 218-19). As products Islamic songs have been commodified as it is produced through capitalist mode of production by recordings companies. It available in marketplace from small stores to big shopping malls; promoted through mass media means (radio, TV, and the Internet) and distributed through chain of retailer. At the same time, the singers or performers of these Islamic songs, in spite of getting material profits they consider this product as a means for devotional and spiritual purposes in conveying the message of Islam and enlightening their young audience to be closer to the religious path, besides for their own spiritual enhancement.

The first part of the essay is concerned with a brief account on the phenomenon of Islamic songs in Indonesia as a means for Islamic preaching (*dakwah*) or celebrating Islam (*syiar Islam*). The second part will deal with the emergence of Islamic songs performed and produced

² See <http://loversul.blogspot.com/>

³ See <http://selebriti.kapanlagi.com/Gigi/>

by Indonesian pop bands and singers seen as commodification of religion and religionisation of commodity (Kitiarsa 2008:6-7).

Islamic Songs as a Medium for *Dakwah*

The phenomenon of Islamic songs in Indonesia is not a new one. It can be traced back along with the tradition of contests in which Qur'anic verses are recited in a loud and beautiful voice. This kind of recital has been a popular genre all over Indonesia, and national and international contests have been organised for it. From this tradition emerged the genre of Islamic songs known as *qasidah*, *gambus*, *salawat* and the like. In this music genre, particularly *qasidah* was mainly performed by young women and was targeted at Indonesian Muslim youth. The lyrics are mainly in Indonesian and musically accompanied by ensemble of synthesizers, piano, flute, several violins, mandolins and electric guitar, producing a sound to that of *dangdut* orchestra. This type of music is often considered as music "breathing Islam" (bernafaskan Islam) [Barendgreedt and Zanten, *ibid.*, 76-77]. Maintaining that it is a music "breathing Islam", the lyrics of *qasidah* is mainly Islamic in nature; for instances considering blessing to the Prophet, message of enjoining good and forbidding evils, expressing moral teachings, reminding of Muslims' duties and responsibilities in this world and in the hereafter.⁴ The performance of this Islamic music takes place in religious congregations as "Islamic entertainment" and as a means for delivering the message of Islam through artistic expression.

For this very reason these Islamic songs are considered to serve as an effective medium for conveying Islamic teachings and spiritual guidance (*dakwah*). In this respect, it can be argued that the existence of Islamic songs was not really an area or domain of music business, mainly because it is deemed as having sacred values for its attachment with religious aura, and thus it is worthless to be exploited through music industry which is concerned primarily with gaining profit as much as possible. Here, religious concerns or activities might not be joined with economic purposes considering that this stage will reduce or diminish the sacred values of this religious acts or deeds. However, this is not always the case because even at this level the commercialisation Islamic cultural products (such as Islamic songs) had taken place although in a slightly small manner. For instance, in order to have a live performance of *qasidah* one needs to request a *qasidah* group to do so and for this matter should pay a charge for the group. The amount of charge is based on the popularity and quality of music they performed. Also, in making a *qasidah* group one need financial resources to purchase musical instruments, maintain it, and to pay the members of the group for their performance.⁵ But in many ways the live performance is done for charity purposes or Islamic cause without any payment, instead it is intended for *dakwah* and *syiar* (preaching and glorifying) Islam.

For a long time *qasidah* or *gambus* were considered as the only legitimate form of Islamic songs or music. Other music genres which commonly known as pop music are considered unlawful form of music, and thus it is forbidden in Islam. The unlawfulness of this kind of music in Islam is based on the perception that it is Western music which contained moral laxity and represent Western way of life that is contrary to the Islamic teachings. In addition, the performance of this pop music is often considered indecent by many Muslims, particularly those who have strong or strict understanding of Islam.

⁴ See, <http://loverasul.blogspot.com>

⁵ This was usually the case in rural areas when people host religious gatherings and other ceremonial activities

In fact, the status of music in Islam has been a subject of controversy among Muslim scholars for a long time up to the contemporary era. Some Muslim scholars consider music as unlawful in Islam totally, due to its allegedly nature of denying God's remembrance and association with immorality, sex, violence, drugs, and profanity. But other scholars view that music is just a medium that could be used for any purposes; good or bad thing. So, it depends on the intention of the performance, and as long as it does not violate the principles of Islam it is permissible (*halal*).⁶ In Indonesia Muslims mostly take the latter position, and the development of what so-called Islamic music or Islamic songs is relatively high from time to time. This has happened over the last ten years at the time since Indonesia gone through the reform era that marked by the dawn fall of Suharto regime in 1998.

Socio-political circumstances over the last decades have a great impact in the production and consumption of religious cultural products. Indonesian reform era that was driven by multidimensional crisis in the life of Indonesian people has brought about a wide range of social problems; such as high level of unemployment, low standard of living, uncertainty of future, and the like (Effendy2003:200-201). In this respect, many people often try to overcome the problem through religious approach that could tranquil stressful feeling and bitter experience in life. Islamic songs with its religious messages and spiritual contents offer 'entertainment' and at the same time could relieve and lessen the burden of life at least at psychological level.

This can be seen from the return of religious songs in the form of *salawat* album (*album salawat*) or *nasheed*, performed by Haddad Alwi duet with Sulis, producing several Islamic albums entitled Cinta Rasul (Love for the Messenger) 1,2,3 and 4 in 1999, Cinta Rasul 5, 6,7 in 2004. These Cinta Rasul albums mainly contained lyrics about *salawat* (prayer and blessing to the Prophet Muhammad) with Arabic texts and sung mainly with minimal musical instrument, particularly percussion and violin. In some way, it was targeted at young children with simple musicality.⁷ But the longtime absence of Islamic songs for Indonesian Muslims public audience had led to the booming sale of this album which is proved by producing up to seven album. So, when *Cinta Rasul 1* was released over ten million copies were distributed. Even Haddad Alwi collaborated with Victoria Philharmonic Orchestra of Sydney and Melbourne to produce special edition of Love for the Messenger debut. Alwi and Sulis then became new idols for a hundred of millions, even beyond national boundries, such as Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Egypt, Turkey and other countries in the Gulf region. The main theme of these albums which is different from previous Islamic songs is about love, that is love of God, love of the Prophet, and love for others. Reflected in the tone of his voice, Alwi expressed a romantic path of passionate love and longing towards God, the Prophet and fellow human beings.⁸

The emergence of Haddad Alwi as a *nasheed* singer marked the return of Islamic songs in Indonesia which had been absent for a long time. From then on, the emergence of Islamic songs or Islamic music has taken a wide variety of forms, not only the traditional Arabic *qasidah*, *gambus* or *nasheed*. Along with the development and common widespread and strong penetration of mass media communication, Islamic songs and Islamic music

⁶ See <http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English->

[Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503545728](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503545728)

⁷ See, <http://loversul.blogspot.com>

⁸ Ibid.

evolves in line with the fast and complex advancement in music business and industry. In this regard, Islamic songs have changed considerably from a marginal worthless cultural product to the level of mainstream industry with the involvement of capitalistic mode of production, consumption and distribution. This has a great impact in changing the nature of these Islamic works and cultural products from mainly as an expression for devotional and religious observances, to expand to be at the same time a commodity to be sold in the market place and thus become an object of commercialization that may reduce it to a lower level.

Islamic Song as a Part of Mainstream Music Industry

As mentioned before over the last five years Indonesian music industry has witnessed a widespread proliferation of Islamic songs which take various forms of musical genre. This period signifies the diversity and variety of what so-called Islamic song in Indonesia from the traditional form of *qasidah*, *gambus* or *nasheed*, to the modern music genre, such as pop or even rock music.⁹ This development is marked by the emergence of Islamic songs created and performed by several Indonesian music bands and singers which are publicly branded as ordinary pop music performers which have nothing to do with Islamic cause, let alone to serve to be a *dakwah* medium (as the traditional role of Islamic songs in general). In addition, the sale figure of these Islamic songs album from the beginning to the present day demonstrates an increase number that attracts music industry in investing money to produce and distribute this religious album.

This quite new trend in Indonesia among others represented by well-known pop rock music bands, namely *Gigi* band, *Ungu* band, and the performance of Opick as a famous religious singer and songwriter.

Gigi band formed in 1994 is an Indonesian pop rock band with fifteen albums released so far, among other things, *Angan* (1994), *Dunia* (1995), and *3/4* (1996). Led by the founder Armand Maulana (singer), and Dewa Budjana (songwriter), most of the album of *Gigi* band is pop rock genre focusing on youth concerns and everyday social life. The theme love, the future of young people, loneliness, disappointment are among the central theme of *Gigi*'s albums. *Gigi* band is among the successful music bands in Indonesia, its second album sold up to 400,000 copies. This group also frequently received awards, such as MTV Exclusive Artist (2004), SCTV Awards, AMI awards (2008).¹⁰

Considering the lack of alternative in Islamic songs that previously predominated by old style of musical expression, members of *Gigi* band tried to create a new genre of Islamic songs that in many ways differed from the commonly known as Islamic songs, by performing Islamic song with pop rock music genre. So, under Sony Music label in 2004 *Gigi* band released religious album *Raihlah Kemenangan*. In this album the songs were not all new, many of them were recycled from old songs and rearranged in pop rock music genre. Even as *qasidah* song entitled 'Perdamaian' had been rearranged in new pop rock with high tempo and rhythm. Other famous single were also performed in a poprock music, including *Dengan Menyebut nama Allah*, *Lailatul Qadar*, *Rindu Rasul*, *Ketika Tangan dan Kaki Berkata*, *Keagungan Tuhan*, *Karuniamu*, and so on. This first religious album of *Gigi* was sold 150,000 copies and received Platinum Awards from Sony-BMG in less than a month from its release. This brought *Gigi* to produce another religious album in 2006 with the title *Pintu Sorga* (the Gate of Heaven) in which all the songs are 'breathing Islam' (*bernafaskan Islam*). This album was released to welcome the coming of Month of

⁹ This can be seen from a number of music bands that released religious albums recently.

¹⁰ <http://www.Gigionline.com>

Ramadan. Among the singles in this album are *Pintu Sorga*, *Damai Bersama-Mu*, *Sahur Tiba*, *Kota Santri*, *Ada Anak Bertanya pada Bapaknya*, *Dosa ini*, and so on. Along with the previous religious album, *Gigi* again rearranged many of the old popular song by *Bimbo* or *qasidah* group through rock, pop, punk and even new wave music genre.¹¹ The desire to produce religious album by this pop rock band and the successful sale of their album reveal that the demand for this genre of Islamic songs is promising from the perspective of music industry.

Another Indonesian popular music band that released religious album is *Ungu* band. Led by Pasha as a singer and Makki as a bassist *Ungu* band is considered a very successful Indonesian band. Although their first emergence was not as successful as it is now, their album entitled *Melayang* released in 2005 received double Platinum Awards for the success of selling more than 300,000 copies just in a month after its release. With regard to the religious album, *Ungu* has released *Surgamu* as its first religious album. This album sold 150,000 copies in just a week of its release and worth of AMI awards in 2008.¹²

Other quite different case is what happened with Opick, a religious pop singer and songwriter. After releasing his first album in 2005 which got double platinum awards for successful sale of 310,000 copies. Formerly involved and sung for his rock band, Opick transformed into pop religious singer and songwriter. In his performance Opick collaborated with other pop artist such as Melly Goeslow in his single *Takdir*. He also wrote songs for other singers which specifically religious songs. The music genre which Opick employ is pop music with his baritone voice offers serenity, peaceful and tranquil atmosphere in his performance. So far, Opick has released two albums: *Istigfar* (2005), and *Takdir* (2006).¹³

From these two Indonesian pop music bands and a religious pop singer with their phenomenal success in Indonesian music industry, it can be seen that Islamic songs have transformed from just for the aim of expressing piety and religiosity serving as preaching medium for Islam to become an object of capitalist industry involving market mechanism in term of production, distribution and consumption; and have enter entertainment industry that seems to reduce its religious values and sacredness. In my opinion, this last point can be seen from two different perspectives. From the perspective of the artists/performers who created Islamic songs they acknowledge they personally perform their Islamic songs music for the purpose of *dakwah or syiar Islam*. This for example is shown by their explicit statement that their songs are devoted for spiritual enlightenment for young people, not a mere mundane entertainment or for gaining financial profits. In this regard, what happens is a kind of religionisation of commodity, in the sense that popular music, in one way or another has been Islamized, and filled with Islamic contents. In contrast, from the perspective of entertainment industry the increasing growth of religious album production is seen as a merely a part entertainment industry which involves "supply and demand" principle, have nothing to do with religious and spiritual concerns. In this regard, the case is economic interests that rely on the process of production, distribution and consumption. Here, it might be that religious or spiritual values of this product have been reduced or even disappeared or it goes hand in hand and combined a product that has economic and religious values at the same time, as suggested in the commodification theory.

Conclusion

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² <http://www.Unguband.com>

¹³ <http://selebriiti.kapanlagi.com/opick/>

Over the last five years following Indonesian reform era Islamic song has changed considerably from just being religious entertainment among exclusive circle of Muslim audiences, to be transformed into mainstream pop music industry. The former typical features of Islamic songs as being Arabic or Middle Eastern style, associated with countrified class or as folk entertainment have changed to the extent that Islamic has transformed into popular music genre, produced, promoted, and distributed in the market place; involving major labels, such as Sony-BMG, Warner Music and the like. This transformation leads to the shifting paradigm toward Islamic songs that previously known to be a *dakwah* medium rather than for profitable business. However, this does not necessarily reduce religious value of this Islamic product. Even, it may function as a means to Islamizing pop music in Indonesia.

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