

# “TEEN ISLAM”

## The Rise of Teenagers-Segmented Islamic Transmission through Popular Media in Indonesia

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**Abstract:** Religious-cum-cultural studies have lately noted the increasing concern of people with the religious life of the young and the teenagers. The production and consumption of Islam for teenagers have been widely undertaken. The publications, both print and non-print, have become evidence of this increasingly wide production and consumption of Islam for teenagers. Much has been written for examining this production and consumption of Islam. But, less has been devoted to analysing the growing production of Islam segmented for Muslim teenagers, particularly in relation to the historical context of the rise of this teenagers-segmented Islam, genres of this teenagers-segmented Islamic print publication, and the way of presenting Islamic ideas. This paper focuses on the rise of Islamic teen literature along with its different genres in a current context of Indonesia. In doing so, it is particularly concerned with the examination of the production of Islamic ideas among those Muslim teenagers through such a kind of print publication.

**Keywords:** teen Islam, Islamic teen literature, popular media, Indonesian Islam.

### Introduction

The religious life of young people or teenagers has recently become the deep concern of many religious-cum-cultural studies scholars. The publication of a book edited by James L. Heft entitled *Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews*,

*Christians, and Muslims*<sup>1</sup> justifies this increasingly deep concern. The central argument of the book is about the necessity of transmitting religious teachings and identities from one generation to the next. The importance of this religious transmission is applied to all Abrahamic religions, from Judaism, Christianity to Islam. Religious scholars are now rethinking how to strengthen the role of religion to stimulate an energetic faith in the next generation.

Recent development in Indonesia shows the growing concern with such a religious life of young people or teenagers above. The production and consumption of Islam for teenagers have been widely undertaken. The publications, both print and non-print, have become evidence of this increasingly wide production and consumption of Islam for teenagers. Much has been written for examining this production and consumption of Islam. But, less has been devoted to analysing this production and consumption of Islam segmented for Muslim teenagers. Moreover, less has been even oriented to exploring in a deeper way the genres of so-called “teen Islam” in popular print publication. For a short definition, “teen Islam” here refers to Islam transmitted through popular media and specifically segmented to teenagers.

This paper is an attempt to examine the rise of teenagers-segmented Islamic transmission through popular media in Indonesia. It focuses on the transmission through print popular media. However, it does not lose sight of the transmission through non-print media, especially television (TV) programs (or better known as “Islamic televangelism”) and movies. Furthermore, along the analysis of the rise of such a teenagers-segmented Islamic transmission through popular media, the paper is particularly concerned with genres of print publication oriented to teenagers, or popularly referred to as “Islamic teen literature [teenlit]”. It also deals with the significant features of Islamic transmission through the Islamic teenlit, including the way of conveying Islamic teachings within this teenagers-segmented popular publication.

### **“Teen Islam” in Indonesia: Print and Non-Print**

Despite the fact that the process of Islamic revelation completed by the death of the Prophet Muhammad more than fourteen centuries

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<sup>1</sup> James L. Heft (ed.), *Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

ago, attempts to interpret Islamic teachings and to translate them into a practical life have remained to be endlessly conducted. The result is that Islam could be transmitted and distributed among wider communities. The early Arab Muslims, for example, consumed the Islamic teachings through the transmission conducted by the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad (better named as *Ṣaḥābah*)<sup>2</sup> and the *ʿulamaʿ* (Muslim scholars-cum-leaders) who succeeded them. The so-called *ṭabiʿīn* (lit. “the followers”) and *ṭabiʿ al-ṭabiʿīn* (lit. “the followers of the followers”) were two subsequent early generations of Arab Muslims after the *Ṣaḥābah* whom people in the following periods referred to in attempts to understand the definitive messages of Islam.

How did Muslims of non-Arab communities at a later time and in more distant places (or, to borrow the words of Azyumardi Azra, “non-centres of Islamic learning”<sup>3</sup>) come to know Islam? The transmission of Islamic teachings through both oral tradition of communication and the published documentation appears to have been significant. The such farther away people from the period of the Qur’anic revelation and Ḥadīth delivery, the more likely it is that they rely on the practices of Islamic transmission through both oral and recorded documentation of those Islamic teachings for the definitive messages. This is evident in the central role of printed works of Muslim scholars, including in Qur’anic interpretation (*tafsīr*) and Ḥadīth, in constituting the reference of Muslims for the definitive messages of Islam on the one hand,<sup>4</sup> and the increasing practices of public preaching and sermons.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> An insightful and stimulating account of notion of *Ṣaḥābah* can be seen in Fu’ad Jabali, *The Companions of the Prophet: A Study of Geographical Distribution and Political Alignments* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: Allen and Unwin and University of Hawaii Press, 2004), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Francis Robinson, “Technology and Religious Change: Islam and the Impact of Print,” *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1 (Special Issue, February 1993), pp. 229-251.

<sup>5</sup> Several works highlight the practices of public preaching and sermons in Indonesian Muslim communities. See Akh. Muzakki, “Islam as a Symbolic Commodity: Transmitting and Consuming Islam through Public Sermons in Indonesia,” in Pattana Kitiarsa (ed.), *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 205-219; Ward Keeler, “Style and Authority in Javanese Muslim Sermons,” *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1998): pp. 163-78; Syamsul Rijal,

In the early periods of the coming of Islam to Indonesia, the practices of public preaching and sermons played an important role in propagating teachings. However, the identity of *ʿulamaʿ* who brought Islam to this region in these phases become the subject of debate; some say from Arab, some others state from India, and still others argue from China.<sup>6</sup> Irrespective of the debate, one important point can be made that it was so-called Muslims “foreigners” who brought Islam to the region in its early stage. Oral transmission was their vector. In later developments, however, the production of print publication became a growing phenomenon. Many *ʿulamaʿ* then published their ideas in a print publication better named as *kitab* (lit. “book”).<sup>7</sup> In their argument, in order for the public to be able to consume the teachings offered, the materials or ideas developed need to be published.

In the context of contemporary Indonesian Islam, Islamic transmission through both the published documentation and oral tradition of communication shows its presence in an active way. People have readily responded to Islamic transmission through both print and non-print publications. This is evident in the high saleability of both print and non-print publications.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Islamic transmission through oral tradition of communication remains important for Muslim communities. Moreover, thanks to the advance of information technology, oral-based Islamic transmission comes to the forefront, since Islamic televangelism as a kind of *daʿwah* (religious predication) through the medium of television channels adds a new vector for Islamic transmission. People from across Indonesia can access the television-based sermons delivered by popular preachers

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“Friday Prayer and An Indonesian Islamic Identity in Canberra, Australia,” *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, vol. 03, no. 01 (June 2009): pp. 148-167.

<sup>6</sup> A thoughtful discussion about this issue can be found in Merle C. Ricklefs, “Six Centuries of Islamization in Java,” in Nehemia Levtzion (ed.), *Conversion to Islam* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979), pp. 100-28; H.J. de Graaf and Th.G.Th. Pigeaud, *Chinese Muslims in Java in the 15th and 16th Centuries: The Malay Annals of Semarang and Cerbon*, Monash papers on Southeast Asia, 0727-6680, no. 12, ed. Merle C. Ricklefs (Melbourne: Monash University, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> Muhammad Ali, “Transmission of Islamic Knowledge in Kelantan,” *Journal of Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (JMBRAS)*, vol. 79, part 2 (December 2006), p. 39; Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism*, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Akh. Muzakki, “Cultivating Islamic Ideology: Print Islam in Post-independence Indonesia (A Preliminary Study),” *Studia Islamika*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2007): pp. 424-426.

such as KH. Abdullah Gymnastiar, Ustadz Jefry Al-Buchory (better-known as “UJ” or “uje”), Ustadz Arifin Ilham, and Ustadz Yusuf Mansur. In addition to the growing number of female popular preachers delivering sermons on TV channels such as Ustadzah Mamah Dedeh (exclusively on Indosiar TV channel) and Ustadzah Lutfiah Sungkar (on several TV channels), Indonesian female popular preachers of Chinese descent also emerge, as represented by Ustadzah Tan Mei Hwa (especially on Surabaya-based TV channels such as JTV).<sup>9</sup> In several cities, furthermore, there is a significant rise to the demand for a new breed of university-based preachers in competition with those from traditional *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school).<sup>10</sup>

Much has been undertaken by Muslims in Indonesia, as with other parts of the Muslim world, for Islam to be transmitted to the public. But less has been devoted to putting this Islamic transmission segmented and oriented toward young people and teenagers. This less teenagers-segmented Islamic transmission takes place particularly in audio-visual programs through popular media, mainly TV channels. The programs are either in the form of pure preaching (better known as “Islamic televangelism”, as suggested earlier) or movies or miniseries. The presentation of Islamic teachings for the young and the teenagers through the TV channels can be rarely found. Almost no TV programs are specifically developed for and devoted to this population group except *Yang Muda Yang Berislam [the Young and the Muslims]* on ANTV in 2005, exploiting Jeffry Al Buchori as the mentor. The program was broadcasted (?) in non-prime time, that was at 3:00 pm, on the weekend.

Approximately two years earlier in 2003, there was indeed an Islamic televangelism program broadcasted (?) on ANTV channel with Amien Rais as the tutor or counsellor. Benefiting from the occasion of the holy month of Ramadan, the broadcast of this teenagers-based Islamic televangelism seemed to grow out of political motivation. The run for presidential election in 2004, in which Rais was one of the presidential candidates, appeared to be the obvious context for this TV

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<sup>9</sup> Akh. Muzakki, “Ethnic Chinese Muslims in Indonesia: An Unfinished Anti-Discrimination Project,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* (London), vol. 30, no. 1 (March 2010), p. 92.

<sup>10</sup> Muzakki, “Islam as a Symbolic Commodity,” p. 205.

program. Afterwards, people, in fact, could no longer enjoy and consume this Islamic televangelism program.

In recent developments, the Islamic televangelism or miniseries has experienced a boom through a number of Indonesian TV channels. This boom seems to become a global phenomenon in the Muslim world. Like Indonesia, Egypt, as another example, witnesses this growing phenomenon, since popular preachers, such as `Amr Khaled, become so popular for their appearance and propagation activities on TV channels.<sup>11</sup> In the case of Islamic televangelism in Indonesia, for example, Abdullah Gymnastiar (or more popularly addressed as Aa Gym), Yusuf Mansur, Jeffry Al Buchori, and even Arifin Ilham have become prominent preachers and mentors whom people can enjoy on TV channels such as RCTI, SCTV, and TransTV.<sup>12</sup> However, these popular Islamic televangelists seem to have neglected the young and the teenagers as a subject, as well as a segment, in their own televangelism activities. Even though promoting active piety to the public through the ritual practices of popular Sufism,<sup>13</sup> these so-called lay Islamic televangelists have not addressed this subject and segment sufficiently.

A similar phenomenon also emerges in the realm of so-called Islamic TV miniseries (or *sinetron religi*). Even though the miniseries are a rising phenomenon and are on several TV channels, the materials, issues and segmentation are mainly for adults. The recent miniseries of *Munajat Cinta (The Prayer of Love)* starring Baim Wong, Zaskia Adya Mecca and Rianti Cartwright, and broadcast in prime time (8:00 pm) on RCTI during the weekdays in 2008 is an example. Exploiting love triangle plots through the strongly-held presentation of polygamous family life between the characters, this Islamic TV miniseries does not appear specifically to be devoted for the consumption of the young and the teenagers.

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<sup>11</sup> See the discussion about the popularity of `Amr Khaled in today's Egyptian Islamic televangelism in Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic* (Stanford CA.: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 150-151.

<sup>12</sup> Julia Day Howell, "Sufism on the Silver Screen: Indonesian Innovations in Islamic Televangelism," *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, vol. 02, no. 02 (December 2008): pp. 225-239.

<sup>13</sup> Julia Day Howell, "Modulations of Active Piety: Professors and Televangelists as Promoters of Indonesian 'Sufisme'," in Greg Fealy and Sally White (eds), *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2008), pp. 40-62.



During the Ramadan of 1429 (or 2008), a very limited number of Islamic TV miniseries and Islamic televangelism, if any, were segmented specifically to this age group. The miniseries *Aqso dan Madina (Aqsha and Medina)*, broadcast on RCTI starring Marshanda, Dude Herlino and Carissa Puteri, is an example. The plots, stories, and materials presented are more for adult consumption than for teenagers. Certainly profit is a factor. Miniseries which exploit plots and stories about the drama of love as well as conflict and harmony in personal life have certainly allowed the TV stations that broadcast them to become the most preferred and favoured channel with a high rating.

Unlike the Islamic transmission within TV programs in the form of either televangelism or miniseries, there was a boom in popular print publications devoted to transmitting Islamic teachings to the young and the teenagers. This kind of publication is popularly referred to as Islamic teenlit, as suggested earlier. The sales of Islamic teenlit are very high. Obvious evidence can be found, for example, in the publication of a series of Islamic teenlit entitled *Ngefriend sama Islam* by Teguh Iman Perdana which consists of seven volumes, as further elaborated below. Moreover, every single volume of this series has been published more than five times within one or two years since its first release. In fact, the young and the teenagers as the subject as well as the segment of Islamic transmission through print publications can economically generate a prospective market.

### **The Historical Context of the Rise of Islamic Teen Literature**

The rise of Islamic teen literature certainly cannot be separated from the booming of the imported teen literature which is translated into Indonesian. The facts show that the imported, translated teen literature has recently inundated the market. It is hardly possible to find a bookstore without a section focusing on the display and sale of teen literature. The following figure illustrates an example of how bookstores place teen literature as one of their pre-eminent commodities:

**Figure 1:** The Teenlit Section of Gramedia Bookstore

The imported teen literature presents characters and lifestyles of so-called permissive, hedonistic and highly consumptive urban teenagers. In these teenage novels, the presentation of teenagers who have been familiar with inter-sex kissing and partying is a quite common picture. The life of well-off teenagers, undoubtedly with a polished car for travelling, routinely going around cafes, proudly admiring Western pop artists, and habitually going shopping, is another commonplace characterisation of the imported, translated teenage novel. Just for example, the imported, translated teenlit works such as *Menggaet Pangeran: Pulling Princess, The Calypso Chronicles* by Tyne O Connell,<sup>14</sup> and *Rahasia Menginap: Mates, Dates and Sleepover Secrets* by Cathy Hopkins<sup>15</sup> present this kind of plot or story.

By adopting a similar style and technique of story arrangement which lead such imported, translated novels to success, a number of local young writers in Indonesia publish their own teen literature. The number of this local teen literature is quite large. Teen novels such as *Tabula Rasa* by Ratih Kumala,<sup>16</sup> *Let's Party* by Fadil Timorindo,<sup>17</sup> *Dealova* by Dyan Nuranindya,<sup>18</sup> *Eiffel I'm in Love* by Rachmania

<sup>14</sup> Tyne O Connell, *Menggaet Pangeran: Pulling Princess, The Calypso Chronicles* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Cathy Hopkins, *Rahasia Menginap: Mates, Dates and Sleepover Secrets* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Ratih Kumala, *Tabula Rasa* (Jakarta: Grasindo, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Fadil Timorindo, *Let's Party* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Dyan Nuranindya, *Dealova* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2004).



Arunita,<sup>19</sup> and *Cintapuccino* by Icha Rahmanti<sup>20</sup> represent examples of teen novels written by Indonesian young writers, promoting the plot, style and technique of writing developed by the imported, translated teen literature in general.

The market has enthusiastically responded to such local teen novels written by young Indonesian writers. The novel *Eiffel I'm in Love* by Arunita, for example, is highly saleable. It has been republished more than ten times since its first release. The novel *Cintapuccino* by Rahmanti, is another example and has been published twelve times since its first launch. These two popular teen novels have even been transferred into movies with the same title as the novels. They appear to have become favourite movies. Adopted and developed from the novel with the same title, *Eiffel I'm in Love* is a film directed by Nasri Cheppy, for example, which has attracted a large number of moviegoers. The soundtrack arranged by a husband-and-wife-team of favourite music producers, Anto Hoed and Melly Goeslaw, and the recording for better audio-visual images by Mark Blackwell and Antonio Rojas at Soundfirm, Fox Studios, Sydney, Australia, add other points to the attractiveness of the movie. Adopted from the novel with the same title, the *Cintapuccino* film was also produced in 2007 by Jakarta-based SinemArt Pictures, directed by Rudi Soedjarwo, following the popularity and high saleability of the novel.

Those local teen novels, however, developed ideas which are not different from those promoted by the imported, translated novels above. Permissiveness, hedonism, and consumerism become the main issues of these local teen novels. In the novel *Tabula Rasa* and *Let's Party*, for example, the plot is much concerned with a romance or love drama like the novel *Eiffel I'm in Love*, focusing on issues from male-female relationships to relationships between lesbians. The novel *Bukan Saya, tapi Mereka yang Gila (Not Me but They are Crazy)*, by Stefani Hid,<sup>21</sup> is another example, which also has intensive sexual content, concerning a female character (Nian) with all her personal problems, including conflicts with her family and lovers.

Although the local teen novels written by young Indonesian writers have been made available widely on the market, there has still

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<sup>19</sup> Rachmania Arunita, *Eiffel I'm in Love* (Jakarta: Terrant Books, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Icha Rahmanti, *Cintapuccino* (Jakarta: GagasMedia, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Stefani Hid, *Bukan Saya, tapi Mereka yang Gila* (Jakarta: Katakita, 2004).

been an empty and neglected space during the early *Reformasi* period in Indonesia for teen literature which is based on, and developed from, Islamic values. Considering that Muslims are the vast majority of the population in Indonesia, Islamic teenlit came to the forefront, occupying the empty, neglected space in the hands of young Muslim writers. Some of those Muslim writers have *pesantren* background (or commonly referred to as *santri* writers), while others do not. Islamic teenlit, in short, represents a response towards the lack of teen literature or novels which broadly promote, or are based on, Islamic values.

On top of that, the economic growth and the rise of literacy rate play an important role in the emerging phenomenon of Islamic teenlit. The annual economic growth of 7 to 8 percent during several decades of the New Order era (1966-1998) has paved the way to prosperity for the people.<sup>22</sup> As a result, public consumption has also increased during this period. Likewise, the literacy rate has increased over time during several decades of the New Order era. Schooling programs have become a major factor for this increase in the literacy rate. Two projects formally installed by the state to implement the schooling programs are the so-called Presidential Assistance Program for Elementary Schools in 1974 and the Six-Year Compulsory Education Program in 1984. These two projects have, in fact, facilitated the increase of literacy in Indonesia.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, the increasing literacy rate of Indonesian communities in the post-independence period, from 61 per cent in 1971 to 92.5 per cent in 2004,<sup>24</sup> has allowed an increasing penetration of Islamic books

<sup>22</sup> See a good account of economic development in the New Order Indonesia in Anne Booth and Peter McCawley (eds), *The Indonesian Economy during the Soebarto Era* (Kuala Lumpur, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1981).

<sup>23</sup> Fasli Jalal and Nina Sardjunani, "Increasing Literacy in Indonesia," Paper Commissioned for the *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006, Literacy for Life* by the UNESCO, accessed on 20 October 2008 from URL: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001460/146011e.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> The more detailed account of the increasing literacy rate in Indonesia is as follows: from 61 per cent in 1971 to 84 per cent in 1997, 87.9 per cent in 2002, and 92.5 per cent in 2004. For more details, see "A Demographic Profile of Indonesia," available in Population Resource Center Website: <http://www.prcdc.org/summaries/indonesia/indonesia.html> (Accessed 10 June 2007); "Adult Literacy Rates in Five High-Population Countries by Gender, 1990-1994 and 2000-2004," available in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) website:

and magazines. Not surprisingly, therefore, the development of Islamic book and magazine publication has ever since deeply affected the way Islamic teachings are transmitted to wider audiences in Indonesia. Islamic teachings have not only been transmitted in the so-called *shafahi* (oral) way, a pattern of Islamic transmission using sermon and speech as the main instruments, but have increasingly been conveyed through the so-called *kitabiyah* way, a mode of transmitting Islamic teaching using printed media as the major mechanism.

Such a rise in both economy and the literacy index has affected the way of Islamic teachings to be transmitted to wider consumers in Indonesia, especially in terms of the segmentation. The transmission of Islamic teachings through print media, for example, has not been merely conducted through book publications specialising in academic Islamic books and/or Islamic books segmented for the adult and mature people. Rather, there have also been a number of attempts to transmit Islamic teachings through popular book publications with the young and the teenagers as the key targeted consumers. The growing publication of Islamic teenlit along with its diverse genres, as further discussed below, becomes clear evidence of this teenagers-segmented Islamic transmission through popular publication.

As a further consequence of such a rise in both economy and the literacy index, attempts also emerge to transmit Islamic teachings through popular book publications with children as the main targeted consumers. Ermita Soenarto further notes that the production of popular media such as films, comic books, and cartoons, critically negotiating between *shari'ah* (Islamic law) and *adat* (traditional customs) gained a positive response from the market. In her study, she examines the marketability of this popular media through the textual analysis and visual interpretations of films, comic books, and cartoons about the myth of the Wali Songo (Nine Saints of Java).<sup>25</sup> Such a children-segmented popular publication is more commonly referred to as "Islamic kid literature [kidlit]". This rising phenomenon of Islamic kidlit publications was initiated basically, during the New Order era but thereafter, has been strengthened during the *Reformasi* period.

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[http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/file\\_download.php/71aab5ac68977a2d997446bc8256bea3table3.8.pdf](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/file_download.php/71aab5ac68977a2d997446bc8256bea3table3.8.pdf) (Accessed 10 June 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Ermita Soenarto, "From Saints to Superheroes: The Wali Songo Myth in Contemporary Indonesia's Popular Genres," *Journal of Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (JMBRAS)*, vol. 78, part 2 (2005), pp. 32-85.

## Genres of Islamic Teen Literature

From the perspective of ideas and materials, there are two categories of Islamic teenlit genre: general Islamic teenlit, and *pesantren*-based Islamic teenlit. The general Islamic teenlit promotes wider issues, ideas, and materials of Islamic teachings as applied in the general life of Muslims. Two examples of this sort can be cited, the seven piece-long series of *Ngefriend sama Islam [To be Familiar with Islam]* by Teguh Iman Perdana<sup>26</sup> and *La Tabzan for Teens [Don't be Sad for Teens]* by Qomaruzzaman Awwab.<sup>27</sup> As suggested earlier, the book *Ngefriend sama Islam* develops Islamic ideas in dealing with urban and day-to-day life of teenage Muslims. It pretends to lay the ground for Islamic ideas to become a practical guidance for those teenage Muslims. Likewise, the publication *La Tabzan for Teens* is oriented to providing teenage Muslims in general with so-called “religious recipes” for their engaging in daily activities.

The *pesantren*-based Islamic teenlit, however, develops issues, ideas and materials taken from Islamic values specifically rooted in *pesantren* teaching and applied particularly in *pesantren*-related life. It is thus more specific than general Islamic teenlit in terms of the sources of ideas and materials for publications. This kind of Islamic teenlit can be exemplified by publications such as *Gus Yahya Bukan Cinta Biasa [Gus Yahya, not a Common Lover]* by Fina Afidatussofa<sup>28</sup> and *Bola-Bola Santri [Stories about Pesantren Students]* by Shachree M. Daroini.<sup>29</sup> The former, as discussed further below, deals with issues of male-female relationship in *pesantren*'s milieu, as represented by characters such as Gus Yahya and Zahra. The latter presents *santri*'s experience in academic activities and personal as well as social life in *pesantren*.

In the case of general Islamic teenlit, urban life is only one among the sources of ideas and materials for publications. The seven pieces-long series of *Ngefriend sama Islam: Track Number 1 [To be Familiar with Islam: Track Number 1]* by Teguh Iman Perdana<sup>30</sup> is an example of

<sup>26</sup> All of the seven piece-long series of *Ngefriend sama Islam* are first published by Bandung-based DAR! Mizan in 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Qomaruzzaman Awwab, *La Tabzan for Teens* (Bandung: DAR! Mizan, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> Fina Afidatussofa, *Gus Yahya Bukan Cinta Biasa* (Yogyakarta: Matapena, 2006).

<sup>29</sup> Shachree M. Daroini, *Bola-Bola Santri* (Yogyakarta: Matapena, 2005).

<sup>30</sup> See one of the examples of this series in Teguh Iman Perdana, *Ngefriend sama Islam: Track Number 1*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition (Bandung: DAR! Mizan, 2005).

general Islamic teenlit which gains inspiration from Jakarta-based urban life. This series deals with the life of young Muslims in urban areas, which have been bombarded by the overwhelming production of information and practices potentially threatening humanitarian and Islamic values. All volumes of this series aim to present themselves as “penuntun remaja” (guidance for teenagers), as displayed in the cover. The figure below are most illustrative.

**Figure 2:** Six Examples of the Series of Teen Novel *Ngefriend sama Islam*



As publications devoted to the guidance of teenagers, all volumes of this series present Islam with the mode and style of language expression, as well as cases of ideas which conform to the needs of the young and the teenagers. As an example, the publication of *Ngefriend sama Islam: Track Number 1* develops three important issues conveyed as book chapters, including: “Yang Aneh, Yang Ajaib” [lit. “The Strange, The Miraculous”], “Agama: Kudu dan Perlu” [or “Religion: A Must and A Need”], and “Kenapa Islam” [or “Why Islam?”]. These issues deal with the day-to-day life of young and teenage Muslims.

Much Islamic teenlit of a general kind has grown out of a deep concern regarding the overwhelming currents and sources of information in which they can get access to news and entertainment as much as possible. In the initial section of the novel *Ngefriend sama Islam: Track Number 1*, Perdana, remarks that the novel represents his yawning anxiety regarding the negative impact on the religiosity of the

young and the teenagers of the bombardment of information. The reason, he argues, is that many kinds of information have eroded the basic values of humanitarianism and religiosity. In this situation, very few Islamic media initiatives seek to oppose or fight against the dilemma being posed for Muslims in their life in this information era. In response to this reality, as Perdana encapsulates in the following quotation, the Islamic teenlit of the general kind emerges:

Most [of the information media] undeniably have brought about impacts which can wear down aspects of humanitarian and religious values. Unfortunately, the number of Islamic media which endeavour to deal with this problem is not many. If any, as far as I am concerned, it is very rare to find Islamic media present themselves as a “counterpart” for the young people, communicating in their language of expression, listening to their aspirations, and empathetically dealing with their problems. It is quite often, however, that those young people have big problems with Islamic values. Attempts to make them aware of those Islamic values cannot be undertaken except by holding to the premise “speak in the language of the people”.<sup>31</sup>

The production of Islamic teenlit aims mainly to bring Islamic teachings down to teenagers, and to transmit them, in accordance with the characters and the needs of teenagers. Perdana remarks in his book *Ngefriend sama Islam* that the book aims “to seek to present the picture and character of Islam as a religion of friendship, peace, and convenience for the young and the teenagers”. The way to present this picture, he further maintains, is by exploiting two main methods, dialogue and chatting as in daily conversation styles.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, this way of presenting Islam is coupled with the method of developing

<sup>31</sup> The original Indonesian reads: “Kebanyakan, tak dapat disangkal, telah membawa nilai-nilai yang menggerus sisi-sisi kemanusiaan dan nilai-nilai (utamanya, keislaman) mereka. Sayangnya, media (baca: media Islam) yang mencoba melawan arus ini, tidak banyak. Dari yang adapun, sejauh pengamatan saya, masih jarang yang tampil sebagai “pendamping” anak-anak muda ini, yang mencoba berbicara dengan bahasa mereka, memahami unek-unek mereka, dan berempati terhadap persoalan-persoalan mereka. Padahal, tak jarang kawula muda itu punya persoalan dengan nilai-nilai Islam. Membuat mereka mau menerima nilai-nilai itu, mau tak mau harus memakai adagium “berbicara dengan bahasa kaumnya.” As quoted in “Kata Mengantarkan,” in Perdana, *Ngefriend sama Islam*, p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Perdana, *Ngefriend sama Islam*, p. 14.



Islamic ideas “tanpa menghakimi” (“without any value judgment”).<sup>33</sup> The use of these day-to-day linguistic methods in expressing the ideas is a key element of Islamic teenlit.

The Islamic novels written by *pesantren*-based young Muslim writers have added a typical characteristic of teen literature. In general, the *pesantren*-based Islamic teenlit is mainly concerned with the exploration of local values of *pesantren* which have received insufficient public attention. In a more detailed way, even though developing similar characteristics to general Islamic teen literature (including that being written by young Muslim authors and the exploitation, to a certain degree, of Jakarta’s style of oral day-to-day language expressions), the *pesantren*-based Islamic teen literature promotes an Islamic life in *pesantren* which has long been perceived as being marginalised. Other distinctive characteristics of the *pesantren*-based Islamic teen literature include the using of terminologies of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), the quoting of Islamic books taught in the *pesantren* milieu, and the exploiting of *pesantren*-based humor.<sup>34</sup>

Such an exploitation of Jakarta’s style of oral day-to-day language expressions by the *pesantren*-based Islamic teenlit, in particular, seems to follow the trend of the young and the teenagers across Indonesia in daily verbal communication. Recently, Jakarta’s style of day-to-day oral expressions, such as “loe” (lit. “you”) and “gue” (lit. “I”), has become the trendsetter. The rise of popular culture in a wide range of vectors, from publication, food, fashion, to film in recent development in Indonesia<sup>35</sup> allows for the energeticism of this trendsetter. As many products of popular culture, especially music and film, refer to Jakarta as the symbol as well as standard of modernity and advance, the young and the teenagers tend to regard this national capital city as the trendsetter in socio-cultural expressions, including day-to-day verbal expressions. The *pesantren*-based Islamic teenlit tends to go along this trend, especially in conveying ideas through language expressions, to reach wider audience.

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<sup>33</sup> Perdana, *Ngefriend sama Islam*, p. 13.

<sup>34</sup> “Teenlit dari Bilik Pesantren.”

<sup>35</sup> For further discussion of the rise of popular culture in the post-political authoritarianism era in Indonesia, see Ariel Heryanto (ed.), *Popular Culture in Indonesia: Fluid Identities in Post-authoritarian Politics* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2008).

Further, the *pesantren*-based Islamic teen literature can be seen as a kind of literature from Muslim teenagers to Muslim teenagers themselves. It is concerned particularly with teenage life in the *pesantren* milieu and is written mostly and specifically by teenage Muslim writers. Fina Afidatussofa, the author of teen novel *Gus Yahya Bukan Cinta Biasa*,<sup>36</sup> was 16 years old when his novel was first launched in 2006. The novel itself concerns the love story of a son of the *pesantren*'s leading figure called "Gus" and a female *santri* (*pesantren* student), Zahra. The significant lesson the young and the teenagers can take from this novel is how Gus expresses his love with no more than sending poetry and a piece of rose. More than that, he never shows up in the complex of female *pesantren* buildings to see Zahra. This way of male-female relationship is typically *pesantren* as no male student is allowed to have access to female *pesantren* buildings.

As another example, Maia Rosyida, the author of the novel *Tarian Cinta*,<sup>37</sup> was less than 20 years old when her novel was first released in 2007. The novel itself features a main character, Dahlia. She comes from a very poor family background, earning money to support her family from her profession as an art performer. Despite the poor condition of her family, Dahlia never gives up studying. Her painstaking life has attracted two sons of Jalaluddin Rumi (the *kyai* or *pesantren* leader), Aiman and Bilal. The two siblings fall in love with her. Conflict arises because several groups of Muslims accuse her of earning *haram* (religiously illegal) money from her profession as an art performer. This is because in their understanding, Islam has prohibited dance and art performance and the like. Rumi then backs Dahlia against any social criticism and cynicism. In short, the love story in *pesantren* milieu developed within the novel is enriched with public controversies over Islamic perspectives of some social issues, including the mode of livelihood.

These two plots are examples cited from the *pesantren*-based teen novel. The story life of *pesantren* has long been a neglected subject matter. Moreover, *pesantren* life itself has long been regarded as a lower-level educational milieu in Indonesia. It has therefore been marginalised within the dynamism of social life in Indonesia. The location of major *pesantren* in rural areas has made this Islamic

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<sup>36</sup> Afidatussofa, *Gus Yahya Bukan Cinta Biasa*.

<sup>37</sup> Rosyida, *Tarian Cinta*.

education identical with rural, underdeveloped community development. Adopted as materials for the Islamic teen novel, *pesantren* life has recently come to the main attention of people. Furthermore, a wider range of people can now take certain lessons from *pesantren* life through the *pesantren* teen novel, largely available in the market and attracting popular attention. The attractiveness of the *pesantren* teen novel appears to be increasingly high since, borrowing the words of Hairus Salim, the editor of *Gong* magazine, “its language and style of expression is similar to that of the urban people: communicative-trendy-suitable for the teenagers, using English words at times, and enriched with some acronyms and Jakarta dialects.”<sup>38</sup>

Such an exploitation of *pesantren*'s life by the *pesantren*-based Islamic teenlit seemingly aims to allow for wider audience to take practical lessons from the practices of Islamic teachings by *pesantren* community. It is in this context that the *pesantren*-based Islamic teenlit presents Islamic teachings to wider audience through applied acts and role model in *pesantren* milieu, giving the rise of, borrowing the words of Virginia Matheson Hooker, “transmission through practical example.”<sup>39</sup> Through these practical examples, it gives general Muslims a better sense of Islamic teachings by sensibly referring to factual practices by Muslims in *pesantren*'s life.

## Conclusion

Much has been undertaken by Muslims in Indonesia, as with other parts of the Muslim world, to have Islam transmitted to the public. But, less has been devoted to put this Islamic transmission segmented and oriented towards the young people and the teenagers. This phenomenon seems to contradict the rise of Islamic popular media in recent period in Indonesia which is mostly concerned with, and segmented for, the adult, mature people. The increasing production of particularly print publication segmented to the young and teenagers fills in this gap. With its categories, including the general Islamic teenlit and the *pesantren*-based Islamic teenlit, this kind of print publication contributes to the rise of teenagers-segmented Islamic transmission through popular media in contemporary Indonesia. The

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<sup>38</sup> As quoted in “Teenlit dari Bilik Pesantren.”

<sup>39</sup> Virginia Matheson Hooker, “Transmission through Practical Example: Women and Islam in 1920s Malay Fiction,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (JMBRAS)*, vol. 67, part 2, no. 267 (December 1994), pp. 93-118.

young and the teenagers are now increasingly provided with varied ideas and materials of Islamic teachings, rooted and applied in both generally Muslims' life and specifically *pesanteren*-related life.

Based on the previous experience with the lack of attention to Islamic transmission to the young and the teenagers, Muslims in Indonesia should pay more attention to this teenagers-segmented Islamic transmission, especially through popular media. Two main reasons can be laid here. First, people and scholars of all religions, as suggested earlier, are now increasingly aware of the need for the transmission of Islamic teachings segmented specifically to the young and the teenagers. Strengthening the role of religion to stimulate an energetic faith in the next generation is the key consideration for this teenagers-segmented Islamic transmission. Along with the universal awareness of this kind of religious transmission among all religious believers, Muslims in Indonesia should rethink how to effectively transmit Islamic teachings segmented specifically for the young and the teenagers. As a result, maintaining Islamic understanding amongst the next Muslim generation can be relatively secured.

Second, the teenagers-segmented Islamic transmission should take benefits from the growing kinds of popular media. The reason is that the life of the young and the teenagers cannot escape from the products of popular media, both print and non-print. Popular media increasingly influences the teenagers' life as it sets a trendsetter for them. Popular print media becomes gradually a particular concern of young Muslim writers. This concern should call upon all Muslims to expand their activities of Islamic transmission from mainly conventional way (including oral preaching at the mosque, *majelis taklim* [meeting for religious learning] and Islamic schools or boarding house), to unconventional way with popular media, both print and non-print, as the vector.

Above all, one among several important reasons of the growing popularity of Islamic teenlit is its way of presenting Islamic ideas. As suggested earlier, Islamic teenlit combines diverse techniques of presenting Islamic teachings, following the rising trend in verbal communication, and of conveying them in a non-doctrinaire way. In the context of the former technique, it exploits, to a certain degree, Jakarta's style of day-to-day language expressions, as this style becomes the increasing trendsetter. In dealing with the latter, it presents Islamic ideas as a practical guidance, developing the so-called "non-value

judgment” method. This way of Islamic transmission allows Islamic teenlit to strengthen its capacity in attracting wider teenage Muslims.

In grasping a better sense of the significant role of popular media for Islamic transmission, people should take lessons from the production of Islamic teenlit. On the one hand, the high sales of Islamic teenlit basically give, in fact, an insightful sense that the young and the teenagers as the subject as well as the segment can economically generate the prospective market. On the other hand, the high sales of such kinds of Islamic teenlit show that popular print media increasingly attracts the attention of the young and the teenagers. It is in this context that the influence of the popular media lies particularly on the teenagers’ life. The increasing production (as well as consumption) of the Islamic teenlit conveys clear evidence of such a growing impact of the popular media on the teenagers’ life. []

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