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Shaming the State: Subjectivity and Islamic Ethics in Indonesia's Pornography Debate

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The inaugural Indonesian edition of Playboy magazine hit the streets of Jakarta in January 2006. At that time, Indonesia's parliament was debating a controversial anti-pornography bill. For weeks on end, parliament invited leading intellectuals, public figures, activists, and religious leaders to offer relevant testimony. Whereas human rights activists and women's groups bemoaned restrictions the bill placed on female bodies, many Muslim leaders lauded the legislation for "enjoining the good and forbidding evil." In particular, celebrity televangelist K.H. Abdullah Gymnastiar, known across the archipelago as Aa Gym, or "elder brother" Gym, urged parliament to consider the moral hazards



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of viewing pornography. Aa Gym admonished that, according to an Islamic ethics of vision, to view such images would lead to the moral decay of the heart. He testified before parliament: “Allah commands us to avert our gaze. What Indonesians need is to cultivate a sense of shame that will help them avoid looking at such things. Shame is noble (*malu itu mulia*).” According to Aa Gym’s Sufi-inspired understanding of the heart as a moral organ,¹ averting the sexual gaze is an ethical act that cultivates a pure heart, and steers one from vice to virtue. In the months after his testimony, Aa Gym launched a media campaign in which he invited state actors – most notably Indonesia’s president – to appear on his national TV program to publicly profess their own sense of shame, and to support the anti-pornography bill. With the backing of nearly every political party (even the supposedly secular nationalists), the bill was eventually signed into law in December 2008.

Shortly after testifying before congress, Aa Gym took me to “Electronic City,” a huge warehouse store that appealed to his passion for cutting-edge media technologies. As we strolled through an aisle of giant plasma TVs, images of bikini-clad women and close-up shots of breasts and buttocks began to play on all of the TVs. Aa Gym covered his eyes, groaned “sinful!” (*dosa*), and averted his gaze, only to turn to the same image to his left and right. Somewhat amused and befuddled, I joked that Americans have a saying, “You can look, but don’t touch.” In a much more serious tone, Aa Gym replied, “In Islam, it is precisely the act of looking that has moral consequences.” Despite listening to his congressional testimony just hours prior, only in Electronic City did I begin to understand that Aa Gym understood vision itself – specifically the averted gaze – as an ethical act that connects the senses with a moral psychology of the heart.

Anthropologists and historians of religion have offered important insights into the role of the senses in crafting ethical, modern subjects. Leigh Eric Schmidt (2000) has questioned assumptions about the primacy of vision in Enlightenment Christianity, and Charles Hirschkind (2006) has described the ethical work of listening to sermons (and its dependence on a particular affective sensibility). However, anthropological research concerning the “pious sensorium” (to borrow from Hirschkind) and its relation to the rise of modern subjectivities in Muslim societies (Hirschkind 2006; Meyer and Verrips 2008; Schulz 2012) offers decidedly less insight into the faculty of *seeing* as an ethical and political project. Likewise, recent scholarship on Islamic visual culture tends to focus more on public debates about iconoclasm (George 2009) and the politics of portraying the Prophet (Asad et al 2009) than on vision itself as ethical practice.

In this short paper, I address this imbalance through an ethnographic analysis of how an ethics of vision played an important role in the constitution of public piety during Indonesia’s pornography debate. I examine how Aa Gym promotes an Islamic ethics of vision and leverages his public pulpit to mobilize popular support for the anti-pornography bill. In doing so, I offer two main arguments. First, our

¹ See Kugle (2007: 221-264) for insights on Sufi notions of the moral psychology of the heart.

study of visual cultures in Muslim societies must expand our analyses to address vision itself – not just visibility -- in order to broaden our understandings of visual culture as ethical practice. Second, I will argue that the importance of Aa Gym’s notion of visual ethics and moral subjectivity goes beyond the ethical self-fashioning of an autonomous subject. Aa Gym proclaimed that the key to

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developing “national morality” (*moral bangsa*) was to cultivate a “culture of shame,” and he summoned state actors to assist with his grand moral vision. Building on recent scholarship on political affect and the state, I describe how Aa Gym mobilized his media pulpit to endow the state itself with a moral affect of shame. Through an examination of political Islam beyond the ballot box, this paper sheds light on the processes that connect pop culture, the state, and the politics of public piety.

Popular Islam and the Moral Psychology of Vision

Celebrity preacher Aa Gym is similar to other pop preachers throughout the so-called Muslim world who have garnered religious authority, in part, through an adept use of media technologies. Within the marketplace of modernity in post-authoritarian Indonesia, Aa Gym gained popularity within the market niche of Islamic self-help psychology. His TV shows, best-selling books, and even corporate training seminars preached the importance of managing the heart, what he coined in an Indonesian-Arabic-English lexical hybrid as “*Manajemen Qolbu*.” With this quasi-Sufi moral psychology, Aa Gym frequently preached about the habits of the heart that lead to either a pious and pure heart or a corrupted and callous heart.



Aa Gym framed his moral psychology within the discursive field of the Quran, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, and al-Ghazali’s insights about the heart.

Manajemen Qolbu Training sessions begin with a power point slide of a hadith: “Inside the body there is a piece of flesh. If that piece of flesh is pure, so too is the entire body. However, if that flesh is soiled, so too is the entire body. Let it be known that this is the heart.” In one sermon early in his career, Aa Gym quoted a Quranic passage that warns of the ethical perils of the sexual gaze: “Say to the believers to lower the gaze and to guard their carnal desires” (24:30). In order to underscore the importance of sexual restraint and lowering the gaze, he also summoned the Quranic story of Yusuf and Zulaykha (12:24).² In Aa Gym’s re-telling of this story, Yusuf avoided giving in to sexual temptation by averting his gaze of the lovely Zulaykha, who was unable to restrain her gaze and, consequently, made sexual advances towards Yusuf.³ Aa Gym admonished the audience, “If left unguarded, the gaze becomes a door through which Satan enters and the heart is soiled.” To underscore this ethics of vision with an allusion to pop culture, next he recalled a verse from an Indonesian song, “From the Eyes, Down to the Heart” (*Dari Mata, Jatuh ke Hati*): “Oh, my love. I fell in love with you from the eyes, down to the heart.”

In other sermons Aa Gym often quoted al-Ghazali, who described the moral perils of sexual passion in terms of vision and the heart. Aa Gym’s book publishing company translated Ghazali’s works, and Aa Gym’s popular psychology of *Manajemen Qolbu* drew heavily from Ghazali’s treatises about the heart. In Ghazali’s classic *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, he describes the moral hazard of the gaze as “fornication of the eye”: “God says: ‘Tell the believers to control their eye sight.’ The Prophet said: ‘Everyone has got a share in fornication. His two eyes commit fornication by sight... His heart commits fornication by thought’” (v. 3, 104). Similarly, in *Alchemy of Happiness*, Ghazali quotes the Prophet Muhammad: “The Messenger said: ‘Looking at women is a poisoned arrow from the arrows of the devil. Whoever restrains his eye out of fear of God Most High is given a faith that he perceives in his soul. ... The eye commits adultery just as the genitals. The adultery of the eye is looking.’ Consequently, it is incumbent upon whoever cannot restrain his eye to discipline his sexual craving” (v.2, 491). As yet another example of this ethics of the averted gaze, consider this television commercial in which a man tries to overcome the visual-ethical distraction of an attractive blonde woman passing by (in Arabic with Indonesian/Malaysian subtitles): (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&v=52OaXvtuN0U&feature=endscreen>). As it turns out, the woman is actually Satan in disguise. However, the man seeks refuge in Allah and thus thwarts the efforts of Satan, who then complains that the man is too God-fearing to be tempted.

Shaming the State: An Ethics of Vision on the Public Stage

Aa Gym’s emphasis on shame is more than self-help sound bytes of Sufi psychology. It is a conscious political strategy both to control the moral terms of

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLbAExnBbMo>

³ This story is also recounted in al-Ghazali’s “Alchemy of Happiness” (v. 2, 492).

public debate and to use affect to discipline state officials – what I call here “shaming the state.” In his critique of the Habermasian notion of the public sphere, Charles Hirschkind describes an Islamic counter-public concerned with “the disciplinary power of ethical speech.” According to Hirschkind, these practices “need to be analyzed in terms of a particular articulation of personal and political virtues within contemporary Islamic discourse” (2001: 4). During the current socio-moral climate of post-authoritarian Indonesia, such “personal and political virtues” are especially evident in the ethical speech about shame and its disciplinary power over state officials.

Building on Philip Abrams’ seminal essay (1988 [1977]) on the “difficulty of studying the state,” scholars have shifted their attention away from the state as static structures and towards an understanding of the everyday relationships and strategies that forge what we refer to as “the state” (van Klinken and Barker 2009: 5-7). In her posthumously published essay, “Maddening States,” Begoña Aretxaga reminds us that, “if the fictional reality of the state is socially powerful, then scholars must focus on not only those discourses and practices that produce this state form as real *but also on the actual social and subjective life of this formation we call the state*” (2003: 401; emphasis added). Aretxaga’s work builds on prior scholarship that explored the state in terms of political affect. In their study of state rituals in post-revolution Iran, Mary-Jo Delvecchio Good and Byron Good argued that “anthropologists have tended to neglect the role of the state in authorizing or prescribing particular forms of emotional discourse, in mobilizing those sentiments through civic rituals, [and] in interpreting emotional actions in relation to state ideology and political purposes” (1988: 59). Their analysis demonstrates how the Iranian state “promoted the expression of mourning, grief and sadness as the *national* emotional tone” (1988: 57). Similarly, Ann Stoler (2009) has argued that colonial governance in the Dutch East Indies was preoccupied with what she calls “habits of the colonial heart.” Stoler describes colonial statecraft as “affective mastery”:

the management of these ‘states of sentiment’ [are] crucial to the arts of governance. [...] At issue was the emotional economy of empire, and how colonial states intervened in shaping which feelings mattered, who had a right to them, and how they were politically framed (2009: 59; 68-69).

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I would like to turn this kind of analysis on its head. Rather than studying how the state promoted a national affect, I am more interested in how Aa Gym tried to endow the state – or perhaps his fantasy of the state -- with a particular political affect and moral subjectivity. To this end, I find Asef Bayat’s concept of the “socialization of the state” a useful way to conceptualize how Aa Gym uses the disciplinary power of ethical speech. Rather than viewing this process as the inverse of Foucauldian governmentality, as does Bayat (2007:204), I argue instead that we should understand Aa Gym’s “socialization of the state” as the inverse of Althusser’s (1977) idea of interpellation, namely the idea that the state hails individuals into particular subject positions. I will describe how Aa Gym parlays his public media pulpit into political capital by hailing state actors to adhere to - and publicly perform - a political affect of shame. In this sense, my work bridges Bayat’s notion of the socialization of the state with Aretxaga’s focus on the “subjective life of this formation we call the state.”



President Yudhoyono at the 10-K Run for Aa Gym’s “Movement to Build the Conscience of the Nation”; May 2006

Just days after his congressional testimony, Aa Gym invited Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) to appear on his Sunday afternoon TV program. During this show, Aa Gym spoke about the importance of shame and invited SBY to publicly profess his sense of shame, and to let the viewers at home know what he was doing to safeguard the morality of the nation (*moral bangsa*). For Aa Gym, a sense of shame is integral to personal piety and civic virtue. Corruption and pornography were just symptoms, not the source of the problem. The “secret,” he tells the audience, lies within our own hearts and conscience:

A part of this country is morally degenerate because they lack the feeling of shame.... It’s the same way with people who are, excuse me, corruptors. They are corrupt, yet show off their possessions, show off their house, show off their car, they have no shame... they take the people’s money and don’t know shame... According to the prophet, peace be upon him, ‘Faith is compiled of many branches... and shame is one of them.’

Aa Gym told the President he was giving voice to what he referred to as the “silent majority”:

Earlier, I was speaking with members of the... *silent majority* who do not have much of a voice in the media, cannot write in the newspapers, and cannot speak in the parliament building. But their hearts moan just the same when they see things that disturb the

future of the younger generation. And I believe that Mr. President is also disturbed by that...‘impolite’ magazine [Playboy]? ... So what do you think, Mr. President?

Here Aa Gym summons the penultimate voice of the state to publicly declare an affective-ethical position concerning a divisive national issue. President SBY, eager to cloak himself in the language of Islamic ethics, played his role in the political theatrics of public piety:

I consider it... a big threat to our nation... I have declared war on things like pornography, sadism, mystical programming that goes too far... Isn't that the spirit of *Amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* [enjoining the good, forbidding the evil]... everyone, not just the president, not just Aa Gym, not just cabinet members, governors, but every party/side must safeguard this nation. This nation will wage war [on pornography]. God-willing it will succeed.

In this excerpt, SBY explicitly frames the work of the state in terms of Islamic ethics. Shortly after his conversation with SBY, Aa Gym concluded the program by emphasizing, once again, the connection between faith and shame:

I hear a magazine is coming... this country is currently sick, in moral crisis... We need a magazine that educates, that gives the people spirit, motivation, ethics, and prestige. Those who like [pornography] are only enslaved by their sexual passion and those against implementing regulations are only those business people that carry on with their obscene business. But we know that shame is a part of faith. '*Al ahyaa'u minal iiman*'. Shame is a part of faith... We must begin to judge our level of faith through shame.... The good kind of shame is that which makes us obedient to God and steer clear of vice.... Shame and faith go together. The more shameful, the more faithful.

Encouraged by his conversation with President SBY, Aa Gym decided to summon other state officials, religious leaders, and civil society representatives to attend a “National Dialogue for a Just Anti-Pornography Law.” Using a similar rhetorical strategy, Aa Gym asked each of them to publicly profess their sense of shame and their support for the anti-pornography bill. Standing in moral solidarity beside these leaders, Aa Gym closed the rally with a recording of his televised exchange with the President: “Shame is noble... The more shameful, the more faithful.”



My concept of “shaming the state” bridges Aretxaga’s understanding of the subjective and

affective dimensions of the state with an inverse reading of Althusser's notion of interpellation and subject formation. Contrary to Althusser's concept of the state hailing its citizens into subject-positions, I have argued that Aa Gym hailed state actors to embody and perform -- on behalf of the state -- an ethics of shame. In doing so, Aa Gym projected a political affect onto what Arexaga refers to as "the social and subjective life of this formation we call the state." Or, in Stoler's words, Aa Gym's media campaign helped to shape "which feelings mattered, who had a right to them, and how they were politically framed." As Aa Gym's moral narrative goes, shame was the feeling that mattered, only the pious who averted the sexualized gaze could claim a sense of shame, and shame was politically framed in terms of support for the anti-pornography bill. Thus, when thinking about an ethics of vision in terms of political affect and moral subjectivity, the relationship between the averted gaze and shame goes well beyond the inner feelings of an autonomous self. As I have shown here, an Islamic ethics of vision and shame was central to the political project of endowing the state -- even as "fictional reality" -- with an Islamic sense of feeling, what we might refer to as the subjectivity of the state.

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