

Islam and Stardom in Malay Cinema: From *Ibu Mertuaku* to *Salam Cinta*

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Abstract

Perceived as promoting values associated with capitalism, such as individualism and consumerism, stardom often exists in opposition to the principles found at the core of many of the world's main religions. But stardom also shares similarities with religion, as stars can become new, secular objects of worship, even being referred to as screen gods and goddesses. This paper explores the interactions between stardom and religion by focusing on the relationship of the figure of the star with Islam in the context of Malay cinema. It examines the representation of stardom in a number of “stardom films”—films about fame—each taken from a different historical period. The films analyzed in the article include *Ibu Mertuaku* (P. Ramlee, 1962), a classic film of the “golden age” of Malay cinema in which the celebrated actor P. Ramlee plays a famous musician, *Layar Lara* (Shuhaimi Baba, 1997), which contrasts the attitudes and motivations of actors of that period with those of the performers from earlier decades, and *Salam Cinta* (Azhari Mohd Zain, 2012), which could be called an “anti-stardom film,” as a star rejects his “sinful” life as a celebrity in order to embrace his true Muslim identity. Across the three films we see transformations in the desirability of fame, its possibilities and limitations for self-actualization, and its interactions with Malaya/Malaysia's shifting religious context, particularly in relation to the increasing Islamicisation of society that has taken place since the 1980s

Keywords: Stardom, celebrity, fame, Islam, religion, Malay cinema, P. Ramlee, Shuhaimi Baba.

Introduction

During the silent cinema, film stars were often considered to be so far above ordinary people that they were referred to as screen “gods” and “goddesses,” a use of language that indicates a potential closeness between fame and religion. Yet, aside from a few pieces of scholarship, such as the work of Chris Rojek,¹ there has been relatively little work examining such connections, which is surprising given many similarities—as well as stark differences—that exist between these two important areas of culture. For instance, many (though not all) of the world’s religions centre upon individuals who combine elements of ordinariness and extraordinariness, a combination that Richard Dyer sees as central to notions of film stardom.² While stars are usually presented as ordinary identification figures, they also simultaneously (and paradoxically) embody ideals and are figures of desire, owing to their exceptional charisma, beauty or talent. Similarly, in the Bible there are several individuals who embody this dualism, most notably Jesus Christ who was both carpenter (ordinary) and son of God (extraordinary). As Rojek points out, stars have sometimes been seen to be on the same level as deities. John Lennon, for example, once claimed that the Beatles were bigger than Jesus.³ However, in other respects, fame and religion represent opposites. In some contexts, the ideologies associated with fame are antithetical to the values that shape many of the world’s religions. Dyer, for example, highlights the importance to stardom of conspicuous consumption,⁴ individualism,⁵ and in some cases narcissism.⁶ Moreover, while Saints and founders of religions typically have charisma and moral authority, they do not normally possess the glamour associated with stars, and while stars are often charismatic and glamorous, they do not usually have moral authority.

Rojek has argued that celebrity is like religion for secular society: “In secular society, the sacred loses its connotation with organized religious belief and becomes attached to mass-media celebrities who become objects of cult worship.”⁷ But what does it mean when the two co-exist in societies that value both stardom and religion? Do they enter into conflict or can they complement each other? To explore these issues, I examine the representation of fame in the Malay cinema of Singapore

and Malaysia.

Malay cinema emerged in Singapore in the 1930s, where it remained until the mid-1960s, when parts of it relocated to Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. While it has become a significant aspect of Malaysia's national film industry, it can also be viewed as an ethnic cinema, given that it primarily centres on and caters to the Malay community (as opposed to the significant Chinese, Indian and Orang Asli communities that also live in Malaysia). During the 1950s and 1960s, while the industry was based in Singapore, Malay cinema experienced a "Golden Age" owing to the existence of two large vertically-integrated studios (Malay Film Productions and Cathay-Keris), which had their own production facilities, including contracted personnel and stars, distribution networks and cinema chains. Large numbers of films were made during this time (approximately 360 films were made between 1948 and 1973)⁸, attendance figures were high,⁹ and many of the films made were critically acclaimed—several won prizes at the Asia Pacific Film Festival.

This essay discusses Malay notions of fame by analysing three "stardom films." These are films that are *about* fame, usually through the inclusion of a main character who is a star. This area of Star Studies has received little academic attention, aside from a conference held at King's College, London in 2014 called "A Star is Born: Cinematic Reflections on Stardom and the 'Stardom Film'." Stardom films explore the star phenomenon in diverse ways, though a few common themes can be discerned. In *A Star is Born* (all four versions: William A. Wellman, 1937; George Cukor, 1954; Frank Pierson, 1976; Bradley Cooper, 2018), *Singin' in the Rain* (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1952), *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, 2016) and *Om Shanti Om* (Farah Khan, 2007), we see how stars become stars. Similarly, *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950) and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Robert Aldrich, 1962) present narratives about the *end* of stardom, or the period *after* stardom. Films can show us the highs of fame, such as *Entourage* (Doug Ellin, 2015), which features the glamorous life of a star and his friends, or can show us the problems of fame, as in *Notting Hill* (Roger Michell, 1999), in which a star called Anna Scott (Julia Roberts) has difficulties living a "normal" life, as she is hounded by the paparazzi—here we get a dramatization of what Dyer

refers to as the theme of “the dream soured.”¹⁰ Stardom films, which also includes star biopics such as *My Week with Marilyn* (Simon Curtis, 2011), can portray many aspects of stardom, including the relationship between stars and fans/ordinary people, the star’s labour, and the star’s private life.

The three stardom films this essay looks at—*Ibu Mertuaku* (P. Ramlee, 1962), *Layar Lara* (Shuhaimi Baba, 1997) and *Salam Cinta* (Azhari Mohd Zain, 2012)—were made and released at different moments in Malay cinema’s history: the 1960s, 1990s, and 2010s. All three also demonstrate connections between stardom and Islam, the religion of the Malay community. In examining these films, I ask: what is the relationship between Islam and stardom in the history of Malay cinema? And how have representations of stardom changed from the 1960s to the present day? Given that the stars of these films bring complex semiotic meanings to their roles, I draw on ideas from Star Studies, while also placing the films in relation to the changing contexts of Malay cinema and society, including ideas relating to Islam.

***Ibu Mertuaku*: The P. Ramlee Stardom Film**

By far the biggest name in the history of Malay cinema is the multi-talented P. Ramlee. His prominence in the cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, at the height of his career, is evident from his ubiquity in the period’s fan magazines, from the number of films he made—he acted in sixty films and directed thirty four films¹¹—and from his status as Malay cinema’s highest paid star, earning more than twice as much each month as some of his closest rivals.¹² He is now prominent in Malaysian (and, to a lesser extent, Singaporean) popular culture. There are tribute albums devoted to him; he is regularly mentioned in the press; the road next to the Petronas Towers, the most iconic buildings in Malaysia, is even named Jalan P. Ramlee (P. Ramlee Road). His fame stems in large part from his undoubted talents: he took multiple roles in the filmmaking process and as Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng Uhde point out, some have joked that the P in P. Ramlee even stands for “*pengarah* (director), *pelakon* (actor), *penyanyi* (singer), *pelawak* (comedian), and *penulis* (writer)”;¹³ he worked in all four

of the period's main genres (contemporary drama, comedy, historical drama and horror); he even won the "Most Versatile Talent" award at the 1963 Asia Pacific Film Festival for his work on *Ibu Mertuaku*. The interest in Ramlee, however, goes beyond just his talents as a filmmaker. At the height of his fame there was considerable interest in his private life and the details of his numerous relationships and marriages (he was married three times, in 1950, 1955 and 1961, even though as a Muslim he only had one wife at a time). Fan magazine articles discuss his relationships, such as "Kesah Saya dengan Suami Saya" ("The Story of My husband and Me"), written by his third wife, Saloma (who was also a major star), which documents a star-studded party organised to celebrate their one-year anniversary.¹⁴ The stage show devoted to his life story, *P. Ramlee the Musical*, focuses more on his romantic life than his career, which indicates the continuing interest in who the *real* P. Ramlee was.

Ramlee's star persona centres on an opposition between tradition and modernity. This has been explored by Timothy Barnard in several essays, which focus on Ramlee's role as a director, or even *auteur*, and which consider this tension as one of his core thematic concerns.¹⁵ For Barnard, Ramlee's films explore traditional Malay identity, with Ramlee portraying characters who live in a *kampung* (village) community. At the same time, he also portrays the modern Malay male: many of his songs are influenced by jazz and other Western musical forms; he would frequently wear Western clothing; his films are often set in Singapore, a rapidly modernising metropolis. As his stardom grew, he appeared in star vehicles, designed to showcase his star persona and considerable talents; in many of these he plays a musician, a trope that created narratively-motivated opportunities for him to sing and play musical instruments. In *Ibu* (S. Ramanathan, 1953), *Anak-ku Sazali* (Phani Majumdar, 1956) and *Ibu Mertuaku*, his character is also famous within the world of the film, making these instances of the stardom film, albeit music stardom.¹⁶ In order to explore the P. Ramlee stardom film more fully, I explore the most famous of these—*Ibu Mertuaku*—in more detail below.

Ibu Mertuaku follows a famous musician called Kassim Selamat (Ramlee), who marries a young modern woman, Sabariah (Sarimah),

against the wishes of her mother, Nyonya Mansoor (Mak Dara), who wants her daughter to marry someone with a traditional middle-class vocation. When Sabariah tells her mother that she would like to marry Kassim, her mother delivers one of the most famous lines in the Malay cinema: “Siapa Kassim Selamat? Lawyer? Majistret?” (“Who is Kassim Selamat? Lawyer? Magistrate?”). The couple move from Singapore to Penang, where Sabariah convinces Kassim to end his career as a musician, in the hope this will bring about a reconciliation with her mother. As a result, they enter into poverty, living in the small space below a traditional kampung house. When Sabariah returns to Singapore to give birth to their child, Nyonya Mansoor deceives Kassim, informing him that Sabariah has died in childbirth. The distraught Kassim enters a lengthy period of mourning, during which he goes blind as a result of his continuous crying. After being evicted for not paying his rent, he ends up being taken in by a kind family, consisting of Mami (Zainon Fiji) and her daughter Chombi (Zaiton Abdullah), who has recently lost her husband. Kassim returns to his career as a musician, which takes him back to Singapore where the guilt-stricken Sabariah persuades her new husband, Doktor Ismadi (Ahmad Mahmud), to perform eye surgery on him, to return his sight. The operation is a success, but when Kassim learns of Nyonya Mansoor’s deception, he plunges a pair of forks into his eyes, before being taken away by Mami and Chombi.

Ibu Mertuaku, a film about a famous musician, contains several parallels with Ramlee’s biography. It is set in two locations that were important in Ramlee’s life: Penang where he was born and discovered, and Singapore where he became a star. Another Ramlee “stardom film,” *Anak-ku Sazali*, charts a similar trajectory, following a young man who moves from a kampung to Singapore where he becomes a famous musician.

In some respects, *Ibu Mertuaku* is explicit about the problems relating to fame. For example, Sabariah is established as a fickle modern woman, who is easily affected by the modern culture that Kassim represents. One of the film’s early scenes, in which she listens to Kassim on the radio, offers a frank portrayal of female desire, depicting her writhing on her bed as though the music is making love to her. On the one hand,

this celebrates Kassim's (and Ramlee's) power, showing the impact his talent can have on his audience. At the same time, the film suggests a danger in this response, given that Sabariah turns out to be capricious. However, it is Nyonya Mansoor who expresses the greatest reservations about Kassim's fame, owing to his low social class—a common theme in Ramlee's cinema, in which the working-class characters he plays are often treated badly by representatives of the Malay middle- or upper-class.

Aside from these issues, the film represents fame as potentially beneficial to society. The main way this is achieved is through foregrounding the uncontroversial aspects of fame, such as its connections with *talent*, and minimising the potentially problematic parts, such as glamour, wealth or the star's private life—problematic because of the way these can articulate ideologies relating to consumerism and/or secularized forms of individualism. While Ramlee's stardom revolved around his talent, his fame was also based on an interest in his glamorous off-screen life. Although we get glimpses of this in *Ibu Mertuaku*, particularly when we see Kassim dressed stylishly, frequenting glamorous, modern locations, such as the radio station where he performs or the restaurant where he meets Sabariah, the film generally shies away from showing Kassim living a luxurious existence. We see him wearing simple clothing, including a traditional sarong, and living in a humble house that he shares with his bandmates. Indeed, it is stressed that he doesn't make much money—hence the problem Nyonya Mansoor has with him.

His talent, on the other hand, is undeniable. In part this is conveyed through the fact that Kassim is played by Ramlee, a star who was well-known for his talent. These talents are showcased throughout the film, with him drawing on both comic and dramatic registers as well as singing several songs (though unlike in many of his films, he does not play any musical instruments—he mimes the saxophone, which was recorded by Yusof B.). We also see evidence of Kassim's talent through the effect his performances have on people: in addition to seducing Sabariah with his music, he packs out crowded theatres when he tours Malaya and his music is even powerful enough to pull Chombi from

her grief-induced depression, following the death of her husband—the impact of his singing and his depth of feeling are shown to have a profound, healing effect. His talents are also shown to be central to his own happiness and sense of self. As a musician in Singapore, he is presented as full of life and energy. Yet when he gives this up, we see him slump into depression. Also, when Sabariah tells him to find a job, he states that he doesn't know how to do anything else.

The opposition between Kassim and Nyonya Mansoor reveals the intersections between stardom and religion. As a deceitful and shallow character, belonging to the upper-middle class, Nyonya Mansoor is presented as having lost her connection with Malay tradition and, by extension, her religion. By contrast, at one point in the film, Kassim prays to God, asking him to save Chombi's family, even if it is at the expense of his own life. This moral goodness stems from his identity as an ordinary, working-class character who has been uncorrupted by wealth and secularization as well as by his stardom, which shows that he uses his musical talents to express his feelings with an honesty and sincerity that captivates his audience.

In *Ibu Mertuaku*, then, we are presented with an image of fame that ultimately presents stardom in a positive light, which is unsurprising, given that the film emerged from the Malay film industry, which had a well-developed star system. Malay stars of the period were at the centre of their films; they were the main focus of marketing and publicity materials; and they were discussed at length in film magazines, some of which were owned by the studios themselves, such as *Majalah Filem*, which belonged to the Shaw Brothers. This magazine discussed the studio's stars, and usually included colourful, glossy pictures, depicting them in glamorous settings and poses. Such star culture was presented within its pages as compatible with Islam, most obviously through large double page spreads during the *Hari Raya* (the Malay term for *Eid al-Fitr*) Muslim festival, which included images of the studio's stars and text that wished the readers "*Selamat Hari Raya*" (Happy *Eid al-Fitr*) from Malay Film Productions.¹⁷

Similarly, the positive representation of stardom in *Ibu Mertuaku* can be understood through reference to Ramlee's own career. It was after all

in his interest to present stars as talented, authentic and honest. This was more important than ever, given that he had received some bad publicity the previous year. Following his second divorce, his newly divorced ex-wife Norisan had gone to the press to complain about Ramlee in a manner that implied he had succumbed to the temptations of celebrity life. She told the newspapers: “Most of the time he is at the studios. If he is not there he will be at night clubs or parties, coming home at 4 am.”¹⁸ The 1950s and 1960s are generally regarded as a more liberal period in Malay history in comparison with the present, with the 1980s marking the beginnings of an increased Islamisation in the region. While many Malay women nowadays wear *tudungs* (scarves to cover their hair), this was less evident in the film and lifestyle magazines of the 1950s and 1960s, and it was not uncommon for Malays to gamble and drink alcohol (some Guinness adverts from the period even included pictures of Malays), behaviour that is now less socially acceptable. Nevertheless, the accusations against Ramlee were potentially damaging and he sought to defend himself: “I gave up drinking. I gave up all night life after I married her. I have never gone to any social meetings without taking her along.”¹⁹ When we consider *Ibu Mertuaku* within this context, we can see that Ramlee presents his star persona in a way that contrasts with these reports. Kassim is an honest and authentic star who is always putting his loved ones first.

Layar Lara: Nostalgia for the Stardom of the Past

Layar Lara is a critically acclaimed film directed by Shuhaimi Baba, for which she won the best director prize at the Brussels International Film Festival in 1997. Shuhaimi, one of a relatively small number of female Malaysian directors, is one of the most successful filmmakers in the Malaysian film industry. Released in the late-1990s, *Layar Lara* comes from a different social and cinematic context to *Ibu Mertuaku*. Firstly, while *Ibu Mertuaku* was filmed in Singapore, *Layar Lara* was made in Malaysia, with much of its location shooting taking place in the capital, Kuala Lumpur—in some shots we can even see the iconic Petronas Towers in mid-construction. In the almost forty years between *Ibu*

Mertuaku and *Layar Lara*, there had been major changes in Malaysian life. Two years after the release of *Ibu Mertuaku*, in 1963, Malaya joined with Sabah and Sarawak (both located on the island of Borneo), and Singapore to become Malaysia (Singapore would be expelled two years later in 1965). Malaysia had also gone through a major economic transformation, which is often credited to its fourth Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, who was elected in 1981 and in 1990 introduced his “2020 Vision,” which targeted making Malaysia a fully developed nation by the year 2020.

Although Malaysia’s economy improved, the cinema went into decline. Coinciding with the creation of Malaysia, the Malay film industry began to relocate from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur, with the Shaw Brothers opening Merdeka Studios in 1963. Their biggest talent, Ramlee, moved there to continue his career, apparently at the behest of the Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, who was keen for the cinema to play a role in building the new nation. Thus, from 1963 onwards, Malay cinema became the Malaysian national cinema, even though it focused exclusively on Malays (and rarely featured the Chinese, Indian and Orang Asli populations). However, the films made at the Merdeka Studios were not able to recapture the glory of the earlier period in Singapore. The equipment and technical staff were of a lower quality, and the Malaysian public were becoming interested in new forms of culture, including television, which was introduced in 1963, and the “Pop Yeah Yeah” music that emerged following the global spread of Beatlemania. After the closure of Merdeka Studios in 1974, films continued to be produced independently, but in smaller numbers.

These developments inevitably had an impact on Malay stardom. With the fall of the studio system and the reduction in output, Malaysian cinema did not produce stars who attained the levels of fame that Ramlee had enjoyed, though there were still some important figures. *Layar Lara*, for example, starred Ida Nerina, who plays the main character Ena, and who had already appeared in successful films like *Selubung* (Shuhaimi Baba, 1993) and *XX-Ray* (Aziz M. Osman, 1992). She would go on to appear in one of the most well-known Malaysian films of all time, *Sepet* (Yasmin Ahmad, 2004), playing the mother of one of the main characters, Orked (Sharifah Amani). *Layar Lara* also included the singer Maman

(in the role of Shark, Ena's boyfriend) and featured several stars of the Golden Age of Malay cinema, including Aziz Ja'afar, Mahmud Jun, Aziz Sattar and Siput Sarawak.

Set in the Malaysian film industry, *Layar Lara* follows a film production, exploring some of the behind-the-scenes drama that occurs. When Malik (Sidi Orazia), a film director, starts work on his latest film he is informed by his producer that he must cast Ena in the starring role, on account of her popularity, a decision that displeases him—as a director with artistic aspirations he dislikes having to bow to such commercial considerations. To make matters worse, Ena is an unprofessional prima donna who misses several days of shooting, claiming to be ill when she is actually away on holiday. When Malik discovers this, he fires her, much to her surprise and distress. After spending time with Seniwati Zai (Azean Irdawaty), an actor from the old Malay cinema who wants to appear in a film one last time, she learns about the earlier generation's hard work, craft and communal values, which inspires her to beg for her job back. She succeeds and even offers to work for free when some of her scenes need reshooting, owing to issues with censorship.

In the film, there are two main types of film stardom represented. On the one hand, at the beginning of the film Ena represents fame as potentially corrupting. She is a prima donna who is motivated by a desire for fame rather than self-expression, something that is evident in an early scene in which she arrives on set. Her body language conveys her sense of self-importance: she is first seen signing autographs for fans, before confidently walking towards the set, hips swinging, one finger pulling down her sunglasses to peer over the top. Her stardom also foregrounds self-destructive behaviour, which is on display through her passionate, but destructive, relationships, particularly with Shark. It is also made evident through her approach to her work when she opts for the immediate gratification of a holiday over her responsibilities to the making of the film. While Kassim, then, is a talented musician whose stardom contributes to his self-actualisation, Ena is presented as shallow, unprofessional and self-destructive, at least to begin with.

Ena is placed in contrast to a more idealised model of fame represented by stars from the Golden Age of Malay cinema, including

some very famous performers. Aziz Sattar, for example, appeared with P. Ramlee in the *Bujang Lapok* films, some of the most well-known films from that period, and Siput Sarawak was one of the biggest Malay stars of all time and starred in the first film that Ramlee ever appeared in, *Chinta* (B. S. Rajhans, 1948). These characters represent a different idea of fame by embodying professionalism and self-expression, which makes them similar to Kassim in *Ibu Mertuaku*. Also, in contrast to Ena's self-destructive individualism, this group represents community. The film opens with a scene showing the elderly actors talking together sitting on the veranda of a house, in an image that captures a sense of family and togetherness. Indeed, it is often commented that during the Golden Age of Malay cinema there was a strong emphasis on community, particularly within the two main studios. Most of the cast and crew working for Malay Film Productions lived together in accommodation next to the studios on Jalan Ampas and interviews often commented on the communal atmosphere. Here the film creates a stark dichotomy between Ena's secular stardom and the traditional values represented by the Golden Age stars. However, as we have seen with Ramlee, stardom during that time also involved tensions between tradition and modernity—Ramlee's stardom, like Ena's, contained secularized elements, which was part of his appeal. Nevertheless, the use of these stars in *Layar Lara*, and their association with traditional values, show that *Layar Lara* is celebrating aspects of stardom, albeit through nostalgia for a particular vision of the Malay stardom of the past.

These representations of fame make sense when we consider the film within its cinematic and social contexts. While *Layar Lara* is on the surface "apolitical,"²⁰ as Khoo Gaik Cheng comments, it belonged to what she has identified as a new wave of Malaysian cinema, represented by the works of filmmakers like Adman Salleh, Erma Fatimah, U-Wei Haji Saari and Shuhaimi Baba. According to Khoo, these films combined commercial appeal with the exploration of themes relating to Malay identity. During this time the Mahathir government oversaw some significant transformations in the economy and urban landscape, but it was also a repressive regime, which involved strict censorship, control of the press and detentions without trial under the Internal Security Act

(ISA). Some of the new wave of films subtly challenge this politics, which we can see in *Layar Lara* when the film-within-the-film gets censored, hinting at the climate of state control. However, the main way these films respond to their historical context is through their reclamation of *adat* (the Malay word for tradition/customs). For centuries, Malay culture has been shaped by a range of religious influences, such as local animistic beliefs and Hinduism—early Indian traders brought the religion to the Malay Archipelago before the introduction of Islam in the 12th century. The influence can still be seen in Malay culture, such as in clothing and wedding rituals. Following the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Malay society, however, became increasingly conservative, with many young Malays studying in the Middle East and returning to Malaysia with new religious ideas. One result of this was that many “un-Islamic” aspects of Malay society began to be rejected. The new wave of Malaysian films was eventually to challenge this rejection through a return to the past. Khoo writes: “This reclamation of *adat* is simultaneously a postcolonial or anti-imperialist strategy and a subversion of more restrictive notions of Islamic discourse that emerged since the 1980s.”²¹ What is interesting about this is the way stardom is used to explore these issues. Khoo argues that *Layar Lara* demonstrates that Ena must re-establish an equilibrium between tradition and modernity.²² The highly individualistic, egocentric stardom she represents at the beginning of the film is modified by the community-based stardom of the past, represented by Seniwati Zai and the other stars of the Golden Age at the end.

Salam Cinta: An Anti-Stardom Film

While the Malaysian film industry has achieved a resurgence since the early-2000s, in part owing to its healthy independent film scene, the nation has still not created film stars who are on a par with those produced during the Golden Age. The most famous people in contemporary Malaysia come from a range of cultural spheres, such as music (Yuna and Siti Nurhaliza), politics (Najib Razak and Mahathir Mohamad), sport (Lee Chong Wei and Nicol David), business (Tony Fernandes and Robert Kuok), and social media (Jinnyboy). The stars of

Salam Cinta, Diane Amir and Kamal Adli, have managed to find success in the Malay cinema, with both appearing in several films during the last decade. Kamal Adli's Instagram account currently has over 1.6 million followers, an impressive number in a nation of around thirty million people. Even so, while Diane Amir and Kamal Adli are likely to be well-known in the Malay community, they are not household names in the nation as a whole.

Early in *Salam Cinta*, Amirul (Kamal Adli), a young star, takes a role in a film as an Imam. He visits a small kampung community to research his character by meeting with a real-life Imam, Haji Rahman (Abdul Razak Ahmad), and, while there, falls in love with the Imam's daughter, Laila (Diana Amir). Moreover, he experiences a religious awakening, which leads him to quit as a film star and embrace his Muslim identity. Of the three films considered so far, this one makes the most explicit connections between fame and religion, which it does by presenting stardom as inherently un-Islamic.

One of the main ways that stardom is critiqued is through the idea that fame breeds inauthentic forms of behaviour and identity. We have seen with Kassim and Ena that stardom can contribute to self-actualisation. Kassim essentially loses his sense of self when he loses his stardom and capacity for self-expression. Similarly, when Ena embraces stardom's more self-constructive dimensions, she enhances her sense of self. In *Salam Cinta*, however, stardom is seen to conflict with a person's true identity. We see Amirul going to night clubs, wearing trendy clothing and living in the city. During these parts of the film, Kamal's acting is slightly overstated, as if to convey a sense of artifice, rather like Ena in the early scenes of *Layar Lara*. However, when he moves to the countryside and rediscovers his religion, there is a noticeable change in his character. As he becomes interested in religion, his appearance transforms: he wears simpler clothing and Kamal's performance becomes more nuanced and low-key, as if to convey his increased authenticity. The implication is that while fame (and the secularized forms of behaviour it represents) breeds artifice, Islam can help return people to their true selves.

In addition, Amirul's life as a film star is presented as sinful. This

emphasis on the immorality of stardom is an idea that has been attached to fame in many contexts, particularly when stars have been seen as living excessive, hedonistic lives and have been embroiled in scandals. In *Salam Cinta*, Amirul lives a sinful life before his religious awakening. While we don't see him drinking alcohol (which would be controversial in a contemporary Malaysian film), we do see him going to a nightclub, a milieu that hints at questionable behaviour.

Amirul's journey is presented through several oppositions within the film, such as the tension between the city and the kampung, wherein the former, a place of nightclubs and hedonism, is a morally suspect space, and the latter, where his religious awakening occurs, is shown as synonymous with Islamic values and good morality. Both spaces are also associated with contrasting images of women. At the beginning of the film Amirul is in a relationship with Nadia (Mon Ryanti), a woman from the city who, like Amirul, is out of touch with her religion. By contrast, Laila is deeply religious. This contrast is represented visually through Laila wearing a tudung and Nadia not wearing one (at least until later in the film, when she has a religious awakening of her own). These dichotomies between the city-village and bad woman-good woman are common in Malay cinema, and we can even see hints of this in *Ibu Mertuaku*, where the city is associated with Sabariah and Nyonya Mansoor, and the Kampung in Penang is the place where Kassim recuperates and meets Chombi, a woman who cares for his well-being. However, *Salam Cinta* is more extreme. While *Ibu Mertuaku* shows value in the urban world, particularly through the jazz music that Kassim plays, in *Salam Cinta* the city is rejected more completely.

One of the main reasons why stardom is presented in this way is because of the film's genre. In recent years, there have been a group of Malay films, including *Nur Kasih: The Movie* (Kabir Bhatia, 2011) and *Ombak Rindu* (Osman Ali, 2011), that share similar themes, film style and storylines, often centring upon religion—the subject matter which speaks of the country's religious changes and the increased Islamicisation experienced since the 1980s. As with *Salam Cinta*, these films frequently depict a morally corrupt urban milieu and a pure, idealised kampung. In *Ombak Rindu*, for example, Izzah (Maya Karin) leaves a kampung, which

is shown in wide shots depicting the natural beauty of the environment. She expects to take up a job in the city, but upon her arrival, she is raped by Hariz (Aaron Aziz) almost immediately. Also like *Salam Cinta*, these films often show a pious woman helping a man rediscover his religion, which occurs in *Ombak Rindu* in a highly controversial manner when Izzah helps Hariz, and the two of them fall in love in the process. Within the context of this genre, the use of stardom in *Salam Cinta* becomes a novel way for exploring these themes.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by drawing some comparisons between the three films considered and by saying a bit about how and why these representations have changed. One theme we have seen in all three films is the connections between stardom and artifice/authenticity. In *Ibu Mertuaku*, Kassim's fame, particularly his talent, is presented as his way of achieving authentic self-expression; it is part of his self-actualisation as an individual. In *Layar Lara*, Ena's stardom is initially a source of artifice, which leads her to self-destructive behaviour, until she gains inspiration from the older stars of the Malay cinema and discovers how she can better herself through commitment to her profession. *Salam Cinta* suggests the opposite point of view: stardom is an artificial, secularized construct in which individuals lose touch with their true, authentic selves.

The three films also deal with stardom in relation to morality. In *Ibu Mertuaku*, Kassim is the film's moral centre whose talents reveal his innate goodness. In *Layar Lara*, stardom leads to problematic behaviour, particularly through Ena's self-centredness and vanity. At the same time, the film offers nostalgia for the Malay stardom of the past, embodied by the Golden Age stars. It is this turn to the past that inspires Ena to change her ways. In *Ibu Mertuaku* and *Layar Lara*, the representations of stardom have implications for religion, particularly in terms of how fame is at the centre of each character's moral journey. However, *Salam Cinta* goes furthest in presenting stardom as morally corrupting inasmuch as Amirul must in effect relinquish his career as a film star to become a

good Muslim.

The transformations across the three films stem from several factors. In part, they are defined by the changing cinematic contexts of Malay cinema. *Ibu Mertuaku* was shaped by the authorship of P. Ramlee as well as the surrounding star culture of the Golden Age of Malay cinema. With the decline of the vertically integrated studios, the Malay star system became weaker, which is evident in *Layar Lara* in which Shuhaimi Baba takes a nostalgic look back at the stardom of the past in order to critique the dual but contrasting forces of secularization and Islamicisation. *Salam Cinta*, which was made during a period in which superstars like Ramlee no longer exist, fits within a genre of religious melodrama that currently has a following in Malaysia. Such transformations have also been shaped by the broader changes in Malay society that have occurred since the 1960s, and in particular, the increased Islamicisation since the 1980s, which demonstrates some of the varied ways in which ideas relating to stardom and Islam have changed and intersected in Malay society over the last 60 years.

Notes

¹ Chris Rojek, "Celebrity and Religion," in *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*, eds. Sean Redmond and Su Holmes (London: SAGE Publications, 2007).

² Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 43.

³ Rojek, "Celebrity and Religion," 175.

⁴ Dyer, *Stars*, 38-39.

⁵ Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies* (London: Routledge, 2004), 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁷ Rojek, "Celebrity and Religion," 172.

⁸ Amir Muhammad, *120 Malay Movies* (Petaling Jaya: Matahari Books, 2010).

⁹ Joel S. Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), 129.

¹⁰ Dyer, *Stars*, 44.

¹¹ William Van der Heide, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film: Border Crossings and National Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002), 139.

¹² Jamil Sulong, *Glass Gems: A Director's Memoir [Kaca Permata: Memoir Seorang Pengarah]* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1990), 130.

¹³ Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng Uhde, *Latent Images: Film in Singapore* (Singapore: Ridge

Books, 2010), 30. The P in P. Ramlee in actual fact stands for Puteh, which was taken from his full name Teuku Zakaria bin Teuku Nyak Puteh. P. Ramlee was a stage name he adopted when he started performing in bands.

¹⁴ Saloma, "My Affair with My Husband" ["Kesah Saya dengan Suami Saya"], *Majallah Filem*, December 1962, 26-31.

¹⁵ Rohayati Payseng Barnard and Timothy Barnard, "The Ambivalence of P. Ramlee: *Penarek Beca* and *Bujang Lapok* in Perspective," *Asian Cinema* 13, no. 2 (2002): 9-23; Timothy Barnard, "Sedih sampai Buta: Blindness, Modernity and Tradition in Malay Films of the 1950s and 1960s," *Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* [Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde] 161, no. 4 (2005): 433-53.

¹⁶ We could also include *Seniman Bujang Lapok* (P. Ramlee, 1961), a film in which the character Ramlee attempts to become a movie star. However, it mainly centres on the farcical mishaps involved when he and his friends try to shoot a film, rather than on their acquisition of fame.

¹⁷ "Happy Hari Raya from the Stars of Shaws' Malay Film Productions" ["Selamat Hari Raya dari Bintang2 Shaws Malay Film Productions"], *Majallah Filem*, April 1960, 24-25; "The Stars of MFP Celebrating Hari Raya" ["Bintang2 M.F.P. Berhari Raya"], *Majallah Filem*, April 1962, 14-15.

¹⁸ "Ramlee and Norisan Part in Divorce," *Straits Times*, October 20, 1961.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Khoo Gaik Cheng, *Reclaiming Adat: Contemporary Malaysian Film and Literature* (Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2006), 119.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²² *Ibid.*, 118.