

# **Putri Muslimah Indonesia 2014: Redefining Indonesian Muslim Women Identity**

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## **Abstrak**

Tulisan ini mengungkap berjalinkelindannya kesalehan, kecantikan dan industri yang ditampilkan oleh kontes kecantikan Putri Muslimah Indonesia 2014 yang disiarkan oleh salah satu televisi swasta di Indonesia pada pertengahan Mei tahun ini. Melalui *tagline* yang dipilih “menjadi perempuan Indonesia sejati”, kontes ini diadakan untuk memilih perempuan muslimah, berjilbab, cantik dan juga memiliki bakat *entertainer* yang akan diproyeksikan menjadi sosok entertainer yang menarik sekaligus religius. Fenomena kontes kecantikan Islami yang menjamur beberapa tahun terakhir menunjukkan adanya gejala gerakan kesalehan baru di ruang publik di Indonesia dimana perempuan mampu menampilkan dirinya sekaligus sebagai yang religius dan modern. Gejala ini juga membantah prediksi Peter L Berger yang meyakini bahwa masyarakat dunia pasca modern akan mengalami penurunan minat pada hal-hal yang berbau agamis.

**Kata kunci:** *kontes kecantikan, jilbab, kesalehan*

“ Akhlak, bakat dan cantik,”

*Morals, talent and beautiful*

(Siti Nurmelia Baskarani (19 yo),

the winner of Indonesian Muslimah Pageant 2014)<sup>91</sup>

## A. Introduction

The statement above is a final answer given by Siti Nurmelia Baskarani (Meli), bringing her to to be a winner of Indonesian *Muslimah* Pageant 2014 eliminated twenty finalists from around Indonesia in describing what Putri Muslimah can contribute to Indonesia. Selected by an audition from nine big cities of Indonesia which were Surabaya, Bandung, Yogyakarta, Jakarta, Aceh, Palembang, Semarang, and Makassar, the top twenty finalists which have to be with veil, beauty and having talents would be projected to become what Indra Yudhistira, Director of Indonesia Television Production, said a muslimah--with hijab--and a real entertainer at the same time.<sup>92</sup>

Although having similar concept with the common previously beauty pageant in Indonesia such as Putri Indonesia and Miss Indonesia in term of the selection process, the run down event and the judging, the one significant difference lies on the veil which is the first requirement for the contestants showing their Islam and piety. Veiling was also becoming a common agenda for the contestants when they were asked about their motives to join the event. As Meli said “Hijab is an Islamic sharia, and with this award I want to give a support and self esteem for other muslima (with their veils).”

This Indonesian Muslimah Pageant 2014 was basically not the first event held in portraying veils as the current as well as accepted ‘trend’ of muslim women in Indonesia. Previously, Indonesia had also Miss World Muslimah 2013 which the contestants were representation from several muslim countries in the world such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Iran and Nigeria.<sup>93</sup> By carrying 3S which is ‘Sholeha, Smart

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91 Rommy Ramadhan, “Siti Nurmelia Baskarani Putri Muslimah Indonesia 2014”, *Liputan6.com*, 29 May 2014, <http://showbiz.liputan6.com/read/2055854/siti-nurmelia-baskarani-putri-muslimah-indonesia-2014#sthash.vUZrLEV2.dpuf>

92 “20 Putri Perebutkan Tahta Putri Muslimah Indonesia 28 Mei 2014”, *Media Liputan Indonesia*, 28 May 2014, <http://medialiputanindonesia.com/gaya-hidup/modern/63411-20-putriperebutkan-tahta-putri-muslimah-indonesia-28-mei-2014.html>

93 Kate Lamb, “Kontes ‘Miss Muslimah 2013’ untuk Tandingi Kontroversi Miss World”, *Voice of America (VOA)*, 20 September 2013, accessed on 23 July 2014, <http://www.voaindonesia.com/content/miss-muslimah-untuk-tandingi-miss-world/1753492.html>

and Style', the winner for this event was Obabiyi Aishah Ajibola from Nigeria.<sup>94</sup> Another muslimah contest was also annually held by Detik.com called Hijab Hunt which was followed by about 500 women with veil by online and then selected to only 20 finalists. Started in 2011, this Hijab Hunt has been argued as a forerunner of Putri Muslimah 2014 bringing the contest to the wider audiences broadcast in one of Indonesian national television. In more local scope, this muslimah or hijab contests have been also held by various communities in many areas in Indonesia such as Malang Post with Putri Hijab 2014.<sup>95</sup>

This paper will examine to what extent veiling can answer what Berger's prediction about the world after modernization which he describes as the decline of religion in the public sphere. Berger referred this religious decline due to the secularization which modernity promoted: the more people are modernized and rationalized, the more they place religion away from their public interests.<sup>96</sup> The Indonesian Muslimah Pageant 2014 can be used to look at how veiling as muslim women identity has been transformed significantly just about after reformation era in 1998 of Indonesia along with the development of modern life in various aspects of Indonesia: the more advanced technology, industries, individual specialization, democracy and so forth. The question will be addressed is how veiling is constructed in the event and to what extent the event can explain the changes of muslim women identity in Indonesia. The answer is important to understand.

## B. Veiling in Indonesia

Historically speaking, the first historical record on veiled women reported by Andaya in Indonesia was found in Makassar in the seventeenth-century worn by noble women where one chronicler mentions that this was also the custom in the holy city of Mecca.<sup>97</sup> In this period, the tradition of *hijab*, the arabic name of veiling, was brought to the Indies and influenced women to adopt it implying the

94 Kate Hodal, "Nigerian woman wins beauty pageant billed as Islam's answer to Miss World", *The Guardian*, 19 September 2013, accessed on 23 July 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/19/nigerian-woman-beauty-pageant-islam-miss-world>,

95 "Syarat Pendaftar Minimal Berhijab Satu Bulan", *Malang Post*, 18 June 2014, accessed on 17 July 2014, <http://www.malang-post.com/kota-malang/88133-syarat-pendaftar-minimal-berhijab-satu-bulan>

96 Peter Berger, "Toward a Critique of Modernity," *Facing Up to Modernity: Excursions in Society, Politics, and Religion*.

97 Barbara Watson Andaya, *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia*, (USA: University of Hawa'ii Press, 2006), p. 85.

tradition of segregation between men and women of the Arab. The story recalled by Andaya about Sultana Taj al-Alam Safiyat al-Din Syah in Aceh in the sixteenth century confirms this phenomenon. Sultana who succeeded her husband to be a ruler in Islamic court of Aceh spoke to men behind a screen.<sup>98</sup> In this period, veiling shows the first adaptation of veiling by the Indies women brought by Arabic traders in the early Islamization in Indonesia.

However, although the practice of veiling in Indonesia after the seventeenth century had been lack of scholarly studies, Dewi believes that the veiling practice of noble women in that period in Makassar had been not commonly adopted by Javanese women until the nineteenth century.<sup>99</sup> She argues that the photographs of women available in that periods show the dominant dress of Javanese women was *kemben* worn by either noble women or lay women.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, the discourse on veiling after that period has been interwoven with the various influences within different social and political situation in each period. Although does not focus specifically on the veiling issue, Dewi sees the veiling practices in the early twentieth century was in lining with the spread of Islam in the Indies leading to the establishment of Islamic reformist movement.<sup>101</sup>

Furthermore, the practice of veiling in Suharto period (1966-1998) had been flavored by the strict state control on religious appearance including veiling practices which was banned in government offices and in non-religious state schools.<sup>102</sup> Because of this, Smith-Hefner stated that very small number of women wearing veil in this period showing the very less popularity of veiling at that time. Therefore, the choice of veiling in that period was a very serious women choices showing their commitment to religious life or as Brenner said a kind of women conversion from a bad past to a better future in religious life.<sup>103</sup>

Furthermore, the significant growth of veiling phenomenon has been argued began after the Reformation era where the euphoria of people's expression has become more public. Veiling has been then transformed from what Brenner said before to more complex reasons, purposes and appearances. Veiling has been more publicly seen than in previous eras, thus showing the freedom for women's choices in

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98 *Ibid.*

99 Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, "Javanese Women and Islam: Identity Formation since the Twentieth Century", *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, April 2012, p. 114.

100 *Ibid.*

101 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

102 Nancy J. Smith-Hefner, "Javanese women and the veil in post-Soeharto Indonesia", *Journal of Asian Studies*, 66 (31), 2007, p. 397.

103 Suzanne Brenner, "Reconstructing self and society: Javanese Muslim women and "the veil", *American Ethnologist* 23 (24) 1996, pp. 673-697.

expressing their religious identity. The significant growth of veiling which has been also experienced in several muslim countries is seen by Brenner and Gole as a way of women finding their own modern identity that opposes their parents' traditional practices as well as modern-secular ways of life.<sup>104</sup> For this they see that being modern and pious can go hand-in-hand.

The growth practice of veiling has been also captured by many scholars in different analysis. Amrullah points the influence of Islamization from abroad as well as the rise of Indonesian designers combining imported and local designs of Islamic fashion have contributed to this practice in current muslim society in Indonesia.<sup>105</sup> Media has been argued also contributing to this phenomenon as Annisa analyses on the content of *Paras* magazine promoting fashionable and trendy muslim clothes as well as halal cosmetics. She argues that this magazine promotes that "using halal cosmetics and wearing veil are not a barrier to looking beautiful in any situation" making this idea is acceptable for Indonesian society.<sup>106</sup> In similar outlook, Willer sees the construction of potential women with veils also showed by Sunilk Clean and Fresh shampoo arguing that the product is not a just a shampoo to clean women hair, yet, by using women with headscarf in the cover, she stressed that it implies the nowadays reality of the increasing of muslim women in Indonesia who are achieving more responsibility and power and continuously develop their potential to work and improve their quality of life as explicitly mentioned in its advertisement.<sup>107</sup>

Similar in some points, through ethnographical approach, Sunesti also reveals the different reasons for veiling of women in Yogyakarta and to what extent they affected veiled women's access to the public sphere.<sup>108</sup> The respondents argued that besides their motives of veiling

104 Suzanne Brenner, "Reconstructing self and society.."; Nilufer Gole, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling*, (Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press 1996) and J. White, *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics*, (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2002).

105 Eva F. Amrullah, "Indonesian Muslim Fashion Styles and Designs", in *ISIM*, Review 2/ Autumn 2008.

106 Firly Annisa, "Representation of fashion as Muslima Identity in *Paras* Magazine", in Johanna Pink (ed.), *Muslim Societies in the Age of Mass Consumption: Politics, Culture and Identity between the Local and the Global*, (UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing), pp. 271-279.

107 Ragnar K. Willer, "The Re-Spiritualization of Consumption or the Commercialization of Religion: Creativity, Responsibility, and Hope: The Case of Sunilk Clean and Fresh in Indonesia", in Johanna Pink (ed.), *Muslim Societies in the Age of Mass Consumption: Politics, Culture and Identity between the Local and the Global*, (UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing), pp. 282-302.

108 Yuyun Sunesti, "Tubuh dalam Persepsi Perempuan Berjilbab di Yogyakarta (Sebuah Kajian Etnografi Feminis)", *Tesis*, CRCS UGM Yogyakarta, 2007.

was a conscious choice for being a pious person, they admitted that the influences from their surroundings were also much influential such as the Islamic discussion forums they joined, their interaction with current friends in their organizations as well as sources they read such as Islamic books and magazines as well as information from the internet.

The recent phenomenon of veiling community and their activities in the public sphere is also reported by Beta. By looking at the emergence of the new veiling namely *hijabers* community in Indonesia, she argues that hijabers community representing young urban middle class are actively redefined themselves through their preferences influenced by scene media. From their redefinition, Beta sees that this new trend has deconstructed the dichotomy between Islam and 'capitalist West' due to their reception to various available cultural references.<sup>109</sup>

#### **D. Indonesian Islamic Pageant: Putri Muslimah Indonesia 2014**

Indonesian Muslimah Pageant was held on 20 May 2014 in Taman Mini Indonesia Indah theatre followed by twenty finalists from around Indonesia who competed with hundreds of the participants in the early selection. This twenty finalists were those who are fitted with the criteria required by the committee which are women with veiling, between seventeenth and twenty years old, single, attractive, have a flair for acting, singing, modeling, presenting, and other talents, and be able to read the Quran.<sup>110</sup> After they were selected to become finalists, then they were quarantined and trained by some professional trainers on modeling, public speaking as well as makeup to be a real entertainer.<sup>111</sup> This contest aims at looking for a beautiful muslim woman, talented, and knowledgeable person who will be the new colors in the world of entertainment.<sup>112</sup> This Islamic beauty pageant carried a theme 'Perempuan Indonesia Sesungguhnya' (the real Indonesian women).

Broadcast in Indosiar television channel, this event was enlivened by Indonesian singers who were also worn covered clothes such as Bunga Citra Lestari and Iis Dahlia. This contest was supported by

109 Annisa R. Beta, "Hijabers: How young urban Muslim women redefine themselves in Indonesia", *International Communication Gazette*, published online 7 March 2014, <http://gaz.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/03/05/1748048514524103>.

110 "20 Putri Perebutkan Tahta Putri Muslimah Indonesia 28 Mei 2014", *Media Liputan Indonesia*, 28 May 2014,

111 Ibid.

112 Ibid.

Ellips (a hair vitamin), an International brand cosmetic industry and muslimah fashion boutiques by Jenahara. The judges came from various background who were Chand Parwez (Film producer), Arzeti Bilbina (a model), Yenni Wahid (a woman activist), Opcik (a singer), Pipik Dian Irawati (female religious preacher) dan Nurulita (Photographer).<sup>113</sup>

Of twenty finalists, the grand final selected five finalists and then only one to be the winner. Below is the five finalists with their agenda if they are chosen to be the winner.

Finalists	Name	From	Agenda
1	Siti Nurmelia Baskarani	Jakarta	If I am elected, I will invite Muslim Indonesia to care for children and education
2	Febi Rendra Febriani	Lamongan	I want to approach and motivate Indonesian Muslim women to wear <i>hijab</i> (veil) because I am sure <i>hijab</i> is not an obstacle to the work and career
3	Hanifah Razan	Wonosobo	It will be much easier for me to promote Islam through the hijab and fashion and will hold events in the form of hijab for your good.
4	Nadia Alaydrus	Yogyakarta	I will realize my dream to open a model school for women, especially women with hijab to prove that women with hijab are capable of becoming a successful model.
5	Annisa Sabrina	Madiun	I will develop one day one juz activity as a place for <i>sillaturrahmi</i> and submission to Allah

Source: *youtube* <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ccuQSV9LPA>>

113 "Press Conference Malam Puncak Puteri Muslimah Indonesia 2014", *Indonesian Pageant*, May 26, 2014, <http://indonesianpageants.com/national/puteri-muslimah-indonesia-national/press-conference-malam-puncak-puteri-muslimah-indonesia-2014/>

## D. Between Piety, Beauty and Industry

Berger's prediction on the decline of religion in the public sphere due to modernization has been likely difficult to see in Indonesia nowadays. Although it has been argued that Indonesia has been more modernized in various aspects, veil which was represented the tradition opposing modernity, has been easily seen in many places in Indonesia; in public sphere and also in the private sphere from higher to lower classes of society. Bringing this fact to the Putri Muslimah Indonesia 2014 event, it clearly shows that veil was becoming an 'accepted' Islamic tradition worn by 'modern, educated and trendy' women represented by the finalists. In this muslimah contest, veil was promoted by the contestants as a practice which muslim women can be at the same time pious, beautiful, fashionable, talented and attractive neglecting the traditional perception before.

Supported by modern brand cosmetic and fashion industry, veil is then becoming more than just a piece of fabric covering hair, but it has been a package of fashion showing a modern, stylist, beauty and attractive women performances on one side and broadcasting program supported by capitalist industry on the other side. If back on about twenty years ago, it was likely difficult to see veiling has been massively worn by Indonesian women as well as supported by cosmetics or fashion industry in the practice. This was likely because as Brenner (1996) said that at that time veiling was a very individual choices showing their commitment to their religious order. Therefore, veiling was commonly worn with very modest style and appearances, contrast with today's colorful, stylist and trendy veils.

The contest also successfully presented a program which was not merely about choosing an icon of Indonesian muslimah women, but also a program to find a talented women in modeling and singing as written in the requirements. Although a morality was becoming an important requirement placing it in the first criteria for the contestants, yet it was not clear what kind of morality (*akhlak*) they defined. The only possibility for this criteria was that wearing veil can be referred to the representation of good *akhlak* and piety based on the common perspective of Indonesian society. The fact came up from the contest was beautiful women with stylist veils, glamour clothes with thick makeup and walked on the stage with confidence and big smile. The purpose of the contest as Indra Yudhistira, Director of Indonesia Television Production, said to find a muslim women with hijab and potentially to be entertainer can confirm this intertwine of veil-as symbol of piety-and industry.<sup>114</sup>

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114 "20 Putri Perebutkan Tahta Putri Muslimah Indonesia 28 Mei 2014", *Media Liputan Indonesia*.



## E. Shaping the Future: Redefining Indonesian Muslim Women's Identity

Choosing the theme *Perempuan Indonesia Sesungguhnya* (the real Indonesian women), Putri Muslimah Indonesia 2014 was trying to present what can be represented as the real current Indonesian muslim women. The answer of the winner, Meli, which is "good morality, talented and beautiful" was likely becoming the best answer to describe what is the real Indonesian women bringing her to win the contest. Although the image presented in the contest cannot be generally described what is the real Indonesian women, it can likely portray what is happening in the contemporary Indonesian society.

The veiling practices in Indonesia nowadays can be seen as one of 'piety movement' models in term of how this practice is a unique phenomenon involving the pious performance of muslim women as well as their tactic to adapt and survive in current modernized-globalized Indonesian society. The term of piety movement has been used by many scholars in describing the emergence of religious symbolic in the daily practices of women in modern world. It refers to the condition in which women tend to look for an alternative way for being a muslim woman different with traditional and secular modern ways of life.<sup>115</sup> Having similar notion, Turner viewed it as a cultural creativity of women by changing habits and practices in modern world by involving religious practices in their lives.<sup>116</sup> Following Turner, Rinaldo referred this to a religious revival in term of resurgence of religious teaching and practices which can be found in many religions all over the world nowadays.<sup>117</sup>

Through piety movement point of view, what is happening in Indonesia is that there has been an obvious mushrooming of almost all classes in society, especially urban middle classes people to be more religious and using various Islamic symbols which is one of them is veils among muslim women. They are educated, modern and having access to sources of information including in term of modern lifestyle, but at the same time they have been experiencing a current phenomenon of Islamization which has also struck in many Islamic countries in the world. In this sense, they want to stay alive with their modern way of life, but they cannot also avoid the Islamization around them. As a result, to be survive, they have been creatively adapt to these contrast culture bearing a new phenomenon of pious modern culture. Rather

115 Nilufer Gole, *The Forbidden Modern*.

116 Bryan S. Turner (Ed.), *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*, (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

117 Rachel Rinaldo, "Women and Piety Movement", in Bryan S. Turner (Ed.), *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion* (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

than labeling this return of the symbols of Islam in the public sphere as Islamism, Bayat called it as Post-Islamism referring the phenomenon of “ambiguity, multiplicity, inclusion and compromise in principle and practice” of religion.<sup>118</sup>

What is presented in the Putri Muslimah Indonesia 2014 can describe this phenomenon. The contestants appearances were far from the traditional practices of veiling perceived as un-modern, backward and un-beauty. Supported by cosmetics, fashion, modeling, and television industry, they performed not only a modern, beautiful, confidence, fashionable women, but also a pious women showed by their veils. In this sense, veils as representing *akhlak* and piety go hand in hand with industry represented by modern-Islamic fashion, halal-cosmetics, catwalk, as well as artist performances to define what is the real Indonesian women nowadays.

## F. Conclusion

Putri Muslimah Indonesia 2014 held in Jakarta on May 2014 was the second Islamic beauty pageant broadcast in Indonesian television after the world Muslimah award in 2013 as a form of response to Miss World 2013 held in Indonesia. By theme ‘the real Indonesian women’, the contest was trying to find an Indonesian muslim woman (wearing veils) who can be an entertainer at the same time. Through the answer of the winner, Meli, “*akhlak*, talented and beauty” which Indonesian muslim women should have and the support from the beauty industry as the sponsorship, the contest was seemingly confirm the intertwine of piety, beauty and industry in defining what is contemporary Indonesian women.

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118 Asef Bayat, “What is Post- Islamism?”, *ISIM*, Revue 16, Autumn 2005.

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