



Islam goes Hollywood

An exploratory study on Islam in Turkish cinema

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Abstract

By means of two case studies, this article demonstrates how differently Islam is depicted in a Turkish film composed by a secular, intellectual director and in a film considered to promote an Islamic way of life. Yılmaz Güney's art house film Umut/Hope (1970) depicts Islam as an integral part of Turkish reality. In the story of a poor carriage driver in South East Anatolia, who turns to treasure hunting guided by an imam, folk Islam is compared to a (secular) national lottery ticket: neither are the solution to existential problems. İsmail Güneş' film The İmam (2005) can be regarded as an example of the return of Islamic values into Turkish society, showing compatibility with modernity. However, whereas Umut is showing (folk) Islam as an existing reality in Turkish society of the 1970s, The İmam is teaching a moral lesson to Turkish society of the 2000s.

Keywords: Turkish cinema, Turkish Islam, Yılmaz Güney, İsmail Güneş, *Umut*, *The İmam*

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State of the art

From its start in the early 1920s, Turkish cinema has been predominantly secular and it still is. This is mainly due to the development of a secular Kemalist ideology, dominating Turkish politics and society until the 1950s (Zürcher 2005, pp. 221-273; Dorsay and Türkan n.d., p. 114). However, even during the most secular years of Republican rule, the majority of Turkish citizens were practising Muslims. Since Turkish cinema depicts fictionalized historical or contemporary Turkish society, naturally Islamic elements have been represented in Turkish films.

Research has been done on Islam and Turkish cinema. In the early 1980s, Atilla Dorsay and Turhan Gürkan amongst others (n.d., pp. 114-115), devoted two pages to religion and religious film in Turkish cinema. They briefly discussed representations of religion in the early Turkish cinema and the start of religious Turkish film production since the 1960s. Twenty years later Agah Özgüç recognized religious and saintly films as a special genre in Turkish cinema. His article is, however, extremely brief and does not take the development of Islam in Turkish cinema beyond the early 1990s (2005, pp. 187-189). Probably the most extensive study of Islamic elements in Turkish cinema is done by Salih Diriklik, who composed in 1995 an encyclopaedic history of Islamic cinema¹. Gönül Dönmez-Colin wrote about Islam, cinema and women (2004). This study focused on the representation of women in the Muslim world and the Turkish cinema is merely one of those under discussion. In her book on Turkish cinema Dönmez-Colin extended her view on Islam in Turkish cinema to more recent developments (2008). Savaş Arslan discussed Islamic Turkish cinema in the context of Turkish commercial Yeşilçam (Green pine) cinema, called so after the small alley where most producers had their office (2005).

Recently, academic research on Turkish cinema is booming. Many works are written in Turkish and in English about all kinds of topics concerning Turkish cinema. In this context, it is not surprising that an increasing number of scholars write on Islam and Turkish cinema. Some scholars analyze individual films, such as the article Serazer Pekerman (2010) wrote on the film *Takva/A man's fear of God* (Özer Kızıltan 2006) or the comparative study Tarık Emre Yıldırım (2009) undertook of Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1956) and Nurettin Özel's Islamic

film *Garip bir koleksiyoncu* (1991). An example of a more general article on Islam in Turkish cinema can be found in Özlem Avcı and Berna Uçarol-Kılınç's discussion of the reflection on the changing pattern of Islamic ways of life in Turkish cinema due to the social, political and economic developments of the past thirty years (2009). These sources show that Islamic religiosity as depicted in Turkish films has shifted over time. In addition, the sources highlight that some genres within Turkish cinema contain more Islamic religious elements than others.

This review essay aims to contribute to this developing field of research, through the analysis of a select number of films. The first film under discussion is Yılmaz Güney's art house film *Umut/Hope*, released in 1970. The second film that will be analyzed is İsmail Güneş' Islamic film *The İmam* (2005). This analysis will be cinematographical and narratological, using the methods offered by David Bordwell and Kristin Thomson (2004) and Peter Verstraten (2009). Central in this analysis will be the question: which means are used to represent Islam in this film and to what purpose? First an overview of the development of the representation of Islam in Turkish cinema will be provided. Then the two films will be described and their way of depicting Islam will be analysed. Finally the two films will be compared and placed in their cinematic historical context.

Islam in Turkish cinema

Commercial Turkish film developed during the first years of the Turkish Republic, founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938) in 1923. Atatürk wanted to build a modern secular state on the remains of the Ottoman Empire. This Empire associated itself with Islam, the Sultan being the Caliph of all orthodox Muslims. In order to create a modern secular state, the Kemalists tried to control Islam through the Ministry of Religious Affairs and to ban Islam from public life and politics. Under the Kemalist influence of the first half of the 20th century, a strong urban secular society was built. In this urban society, which existed mainly in the large metropolitan areas of Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir and some provincial towns, Islam was forced to retreat to the private sphere. In the countryside Islam remained a dominant part of everyday public life (Zürcher 2005, p. 159-165, p. 234-244).

The Kemalists put strong emphasis on the educational role of theatre. Atatürk considered theatre as a means to educate the people in the principles of Westernization and modernity. He encouraged the development of the production of Turkish plays, made villagers act in educational plays especially written for them in 'the people's houses', and stimulated the development of Western-oriented theatre groups and theatre education. Contrary to, for instance, the Soviet Union, where film was used in those days for propaganda purposes, the Kemalists did not pay much attention to this new medium. Turkish film industry was dominated by one man: Muhsin Ertuğrul (1892-1979), who studied theatre and film in Germany and Russia in the early twenties. Ertuğrul was a theatre

director and head of the leading Turkish theatres of the era. Although he dominated the Turkish film industry until 1939, cinema always remained a side product; his main interest was in theatre. The first Turkish films were mostly plays, recorded during the summer months, when the theatres were closed. The actors in these films were theatre actors. Since Muhsin Ertuğrul was the only person who produced films in this period, and since he was a believer in the progress of Turkey through Westernization and secularization, the films produced in this period did not show many Islamic elements (Özön 1962, p. 60-115; Filmer 1984; Ertuğrul 1989; Scognamillo 2003, p. 37-78; Dönmez-Colin 2008, p. 22-29; Arslan 2005, p. 27-47).

During the 1940s and 1950s Turkish society started to change. The mechanization of agriculture caused a large-scale migration of people towards the large metropolitan centres. With the influx of people, for whom religion still was an essential part of their life, during the second half of the twentieth century Islam gradually returned to Turkish public life. The rise of a conservative Anatolian business class formed a new centre of power and brought Islam back to politics (Zürcher 2005, p. 280-288; Jenkins 2008, p. 111-140).

The above-mentioned development is reflected in Turkish cinema as well. During the first period, Turkish cinema was predominantly secular. Religion was represented in a satirical way, for instance in the film *Aynaroz Kadısı/The kadi of Athos* (Muhsin Ertuğrul 1938), the adaptation of a famous play (1928/1929) by Musahipzade Celal (1870-1959) about a corrupt and womanizing kadı (religious judge in the Ottoman period). The kadı of Athos gains wealth and a good position at a provisional court with the help of his brother-in-law, the Şeyh ül-Islam (highest religious judge). He applies all available legal tricks to settle cases in such a manner that he will profit from them. When he tries to get hold of a beautiful young orphaned woman and her capital in collaboration with the local Christian clergy, a landowner exposes the injustice done to the girl. The kadı is brought before the highest religious court in Istanbul. However, with help of his brother-in-law the case is dismissed. Islam and Islamic law are depicted as so incurably corrupt that only the new secular Republican law system could make it just (Onaran, 1981, pp. 245-251).

Another example is the representation of corruption of Islamic clergy during the War of Independence (1919-1923). For instance in the film *Vurun Kahpeye/Hit the whore* (Ö. Lütfi Akad 1949), based on the book (1926) of the famous Turkish female writer Halide Edip Adıvar (1884-1964). An idealistic young bourgeois woman arrives in a village in West-Anatolia in order to elevate the Anatolian peasantry by teaching at a primary school. However, the village soon lies at the frontline of the War of Independence; between the Greek occupiers and the resistant movement. The woman helped hiding a resistance officer from the enemy. When the Greek occupy the

village, the conservative notables of the village, led by the imam, expose her. *The İmam* provokes the villagers into stoning her, on the pretext that she spent the night with a man outside wedlock (Negaticil 2000, pp. 387-388).

During the period between 1950 and 1980, the era of commercial Yeşilçam cinema, Turkish cinema flourished. Turkish film production became one of the largest in the world. It was a highly commercial cinema concentrated on the production of melodramatic films based on an idealized Turkish urban secularized society. It was a profitable business in which earning money was the main purpose. The films produced, covered several genres, ranging from comedies, melodramas, Westerns, adventure and pornographic films. This industry was modelled after Hollywood. Many remakes of Hollywood productions were issued. As the urban secular Turkish society formed the main topic of these films, Islam as such was not an issue in these films. However, since these films represent Turkish society of the 1950s until the 1980s, it might be interesting to have a closer look at these films. The basic public morals bear many Islamic influences (Scognamillo, 2003, pp. 81-312; Dönmez-Colin, 2008, pp. 30-36; Arslan, 2005).

With the renewed influence of Islam on public life and politics in the 1960s it is not surprising that the production of films with Islamic themes became profitable. As a protest against Western-oriented commercial cinema, Islamic as well as leftist intellectual producers intended to make genuine Turkish films. This development occurred at both sides of the political spectrum. Some producers considered Islam a characteristic element of Turkish culture and therefore made films about the lives of saints and Islamic heroes. They called their efforts Milli sinema (National cinema), later called Beyaz sinema (White cinema) (Dönmez-Colin 2004, pp. 87-93; 200, pp. 39-40, 46-48; Arslan, 2005, pp. 163-164, 167, 214-223; Avcı and Uçarol Kılıncı 2009, pp. 242-248).

In addition to this explicit Islamic cinema, the number of films in which Islam is represented in a less overt way, increased since the 1970s. This development is caused by leftist intellectual producers, gathered around a journal called Yeni Sinema (New cinema), published between 1966-1970 (Anon. 2011a). Inspired by Marxist theories, Soviet Revolutionary Cinema, Italian Neorealism, French nouvelle vague and Brazilian cinema novo, these filmmakers tried to create an alternative cinema. They wanted to create a genuine Turkish cinema by making realistic films about the harsh life in the Anatolian countryside and at the fringes of life in the metropolitan city of Istanbul. They called their efforts Ulusal sinema (National cinema). The word milli for national is a loanword from Arabic and therefore associated with conservative nationalistic circles in Turkey; the word ulusal is the word for national used by Kemalists. Secular republican Kemalists tried to reform the Turkish language by replacing the Arabic and Persian loanwords and grammatical structures, as where commonly used in late Ottoman Turkish, with words of Turkic origin, called öz Türkçe (pure Turkish) (Levend, 1972). Islamic values were shown in many

of these films about rural areas in Anatolia, although not explicitly or with the purpose of propagating Islam (Dönmez-Colin, 2008, pp. 36-42).

Yücel Çakmaklı's film *Minyeli Abdullah* /Abdullah from Minye (1989) is considered a landmark of Islamic cinema. The story is situated in Egypt, during the reign of the last King Faruk, who was overthrown by Nasser in 1952. This location was chosen because of censorship. The writer of the book which was published in 1967 and on which the film is based, Hekimoğlu İsmail (1932) was imprisoned for more than a year and the book was forbidden. *Minyeli Abdullah* is a poor self-educated boy from the province. In his younger years he is rather short-tempered but when he discovers Islam he turns into a very peaceful wise man. He is accused of Islamic propaganda and imprisoned. Hereby he loses his family. Many year later he is coincidentally reunited with them (Dönmez-Colin, 2004, p. 88).

After 1990, religious circles in Turkey, wanted to spread the Islamic voice through modern mass media, such as newspapers, television, internet and film (Dönmez-Colin, 2004: 88; Avcı and Uçarol Kılınç 2009, p. 240). Mesut Uçakan's film *Yalnız Değilsiniz* /You are not alone (1990) was a great box-office success. This film tells the story of a girl from a wealthy secular background, who turns religious. Films, such as this one, were openly propagating Islam. However, the initial success of White cinema did not hold. Nijat Özön explains this phenomenon as follows: "these films 'tried to bring a solution to the complex problems and value judgments of a rapidly changing society with fossilized religious and moral understandings'" (Dönmez-Colin, 2004, p. 93). In her book on Turkish cinema Dönmez-Colin added to this: "However, 'white cinema' did not establish itself as a genre, mainly because the films lacked artistic quality" (2008:, p. 48). At the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century, we see though that Islamic factions, especially those who advocate a moderate form of Islam adjusted to modernity, become very active in the mediascape. At the same time, Turkish cinema in general witnesses a revival. These two developments result in Turkish films with Islamic topics, which are of far better quality and less missionary.

At the beginning of the 21st century a continuation of Islamic cinema is to be found in what Avcı and Uçarol Kılınç called Green Cinema or Wise Cinema. (2009, p. 240). Besides that, within secular art film circles Islam became a topic. Films mildly criticizing Islam, but emphasizing the human character of religious citizens, such as *Takva*/A man's fear of God (Özer Kızıltan, 2006), were produced by secular directors (Pekerman, 2010, p. 83). While, on the other hand, films presenting universal human values through Islam, such as *The Imam* (İsmail Güneş 2005), found their way to a broad audience.

With the rule of the liberal Islamic government of the AKP since 2004, polarization increased between secular and religious forces in Turkish society. Despite the tensions this caused, it put Islam back on the cultural agenda. For instance the young director Mahmut Fazıl Coşkun (1973) produced the film *Uzak İhtimal/ Wrong Rosary* (2009), in which he depicted the impossible relation between a lonely young Imam, newly arrived in Istanbul from Anatolia, and a lonely Christian orphan girl, who chooses for a religious life in a convent. This delicate film just shows the life of its characters, without any value judgment.

Yılmaz Güney (1937-1984)

Yılmaz Güney² was one of the most important actors, scriptwriters and producers of 20th century Turkish film. He was the son of Kurdish farmers, who migrated to Adana to work in the cotton fields. Yılmaz grew up among the poor working class, which formed a strong background for his future works. Güney studied Law and Economics in Ankara and Istanbul. At the age of 21 he became actively involved in film-making. From 1958 he worked as a screenplay writer, directing assistant and actor with famous Turkish film producers, such as Atıf Yılmaz, whom he considers to be his first master (Ciment, 1983, p. 31). In addition to filming, Güney wrote stories and novels. In 1959 he was convicted for ‘Communist Propaganda’ in one of his short stories published in a literary periodical *Onüç (Thirteen)* (Teksoy, 2008, p. 66-67). He claimed that at the time he did not know what communism was and only learned about it in court (Ciment, 1983, p. 30). Later he read the books of Marx, Lenin and Mao and became a convinced communist, although he did not join the communist party (Heijs, 1983, p. 11). Güney, although devoted to the communist cause, always made a strict division between his political work and his artistic work (Heijs 1983, pp. 13-14).

Yılmaz Güney became famous as an actor in commercial Yeşilçam films. He acquired the nickname *Çirkin Kırık*, The Ugly King, for his role in a series of violent films about an urban Robin Hood who protected defenceless women and other oppressed (Akser, 2009, p. 144). With the money he earned as an actor Güney started to produce his own films. He implemented concepts of Italian Neorealism and used his experience with commercial Turkish cinema.

In an interview he gave in 1982 to *Revolutionary Worker*, an American left-wing periodical, he declared that his goal was to make films for a broad public. An artist with the right political point of view will reach the mass, he maintained. He told the story of human suffering and showed the suffering and the hopelessness of their existence. The audience itself should draw conclusions and look for causes and solutions. Most of Güney’s films therefore do not have a happy ending (Heijs, 1983, p. 12). Güney was not the first Turkish film director to protest against the

highly commercial Yeşilçam concept. Others, such as Atif Yılmaz, preceded him. Nevertheless his film *Umut* /*Hope*, produced in 1970, is considered a turning point in the history of Turkish cinema (Dönmez-Colin, 2007, p. 41; Teksoy, 2008, p. 67).

Yılmaz Güney spent a lot of time in prison. In 1972, he was convicted for hiding communists. After his release he was involved in a shooting incident, while filming in South East Turkey. It never became clear what really happened. The local judge died in the incident. Probably Güney was not guilty, but in 1973 he was convicted to 19 years of imprisonment. In 1981 he escaped to France, where he died in 1984. With the help of friends, he produced several films while imprisoned, amongst others his most famous film *Yol*/*The Road* (1982). He wrote an elaborate screenplay; the footage was shot by Şerif Gören on his instructions and when he escaped, Güney edited the film. With this film he won the great prize of the Cannes Festival (Heijis, 1983; Ciment, 1983).

Umut/Hope (1970)

Umut starts with a shot of a truck spraying water on the dry streets of Adana. Cabbar, played by Yılmaz Güney himself, is waiting early in the morning together with other carriage drivers, taxi drivers and kebab sellers at the station for the arrival of the train. The train arrives and all drivers and shop owners prepare themselves. People leaving the station find taxis and carriages. Finally only Cabbar is left. The last family that leaves the station wants to pay far under the price and walks away with their heavy luggage. Just as Cabbar, they are poor people.

That Cabbar's family is very poor is clear in many details. In the first shot of his wife, she is half awake looking sadly ahead with a small boy sleeping on her lap. They cannot pay their debts and have many loans. The children walk around barefooted and they all wear torn, worn-out clothing. Cabbar's carriage is old and gradually taxis are taking over the business. The municipal government wants to get rid of the carriages. Cabbar, however, is very reluctant to give up his independence. As many people in rural areas in Turkey, Cabbar moved with his family from his village to a large provincial center. At the countryside they were labourers, working at the cotton fields for a land owner. Cabbar does not want to return to this situation of dependence, although it would provide his family at least with food. Instead, he keeps his independence and pride and places all his hope on the lottery and treasure digging.

A man with a car collides at high speed with Cabbar's parked carriage. One of the horses dies, the police arrives and in the end Cabbar is blamed, because he parked at an illegal spot and left his carriage. Now Cabbar's misery is

complete: without this horse he cannot earn a living. He tries to find enough money to buy a new horse by selling all his belongings, but his creditors conspire and sell his carriage and the last horse.

Hasan, a friend of Cabbar who just left prison, repeatedly tried to talk him into treasure digging. Cabbar initially reacts with scepticism and unbelief, but when he is desperate he gives in. Hasan knows a hodja (Islamic teacher), who by praying can tell where the treasure can be found. With the money Cabbar has gathered by selling his belongings, the hodja and equipment for the digging operation can be paid. For days the hodja and Hasan are the guests of Cabbar's family, who barely have enough to feed themselves. The hodja has the children look into a bowl of water. He pretends to see where the treasure can be found, but the children have to confirm it. The children do not see anything and start crying. Eventually, they ask Cabbar's daughter Hatice to look. Although the girl does not see anything either, in order to help, she pretends she does. She describes several objects that hang from the roof. Cabbar sees the spot as well and in the middle of the night he is discovered digging there. Of course nothing is found. The hodja then decides they know enough and after Hasan tried his luck at the same spot they set off.

They buy two donkeys, food and equipment and travel to the river Ceyhan. The treasure is supposed to be found between two bridges under a dead tree, where a white stone with a black spot and a black stone are indicating the hiding place. They travel for days, but nothing is found. Finally they find a tree and Cabbar and Hasan start digging, but to no avail. In the end they are away from home for more than a month. Cabbar becomes desperate, because all his hopes have gone up in smoke, while he left his family with money only enough for ten days. This part of the film consists nearly exclusively of images, accompanied by the melancholic sound of a clarinet, with a minimum of spoken text.

Representation of Islam in *Umut/Hope*³

Several elements contribute to the depiction of Islam in *Umut*. The film shows realistically the life of poor people in South East Turkey. Cabbar and his family are Muslims but not very pious. The adult women cover their heads with a thin loosely attached headscarf within the walls of their yard. When Cabbar's wife goes shopping she is covered in the way women in urban centres in Turkey are in this period: she wears a raincoat and a thicker scarf that covers all of her hair (Pusch, 2001, pp. 139-145; Jenkins, 2007, pp. 138-139). Before Cabbar sets off on his journey, he prays to God to reward him. Directly afterwards he has sexual intercourse with his wife and we see him wash himself. However, when Cabbar is desperate, after the creditors have sold his horse and carriage, we see him drinking wine. The same holds true for Hasan, we see him buying a bottle of wine when he goes shopping in

the nearby village and drinking before he returns to the others. In several scenes the hodja is depicted performing his obligatory prayers, while Hasan and Cabbar sit and watch him.

The hodja is represented as a symbol of folk Islam. The secularist Turkish government tried hard to ban elements of folk belief from public life, but especially in Anatolia in this period this had little success (Zürcher, 2008, pp. 240-241). The hodja is depicted as a pious man. He performs his religious duties, such as his daily prayers, and praying the rosary. In addition, he links Islam to elements outside the realm of official religion. When we first meet the hodja, he is praying at the deathbed of a very ill man. Later, when Cabbar is worried that the children will be driven mad, Hasan explains that the hodja can cure all kinds of diseases including madness. At Cabbar's place, the hodja is constantly praying his rosary in order to find the spot of the treasure. He claims that it is the devil that prevents the children to see the spot of the treasure. When they finally start digging, the hodja makes Hasan and Cabbar perform the ritual washing. They place 101 white stones in a circle around the tree on which the hodja writes the names of the suras of the Koran. Another verse is written on Hasan's thumb and the hodja blows against it. Hasan steps into the circle and starts going around. Finally he becomes dizzy, reflected by an in- and out-zooming camera, and he falls to the ground. At that spot they start digging. From this moment the hodja is dressed up in white. This makes the contrast between Hasan and Cabbar, who become dirtier every moment, even more distinct. The treasure can take on the form of all kinds of small animals: when you touch them they will turn into gold. When Cabbar catches a snake that does not turn into gold, the hodja holds this for a good sign. He makes Cabbar perform the ritual washing again, blindfolds him and prays. He explains to Cabbar that he will only find the treasure when he has donated his purified soul to God. Cabbar must trust in God and surrender.

In relation to the last scene, Dönmez-Colin (2007, pp. 46-47) referred to the unpublished MA thesis of Nebihat Yağız (1998). Yağız explains this scene, in which Cabbar is whirling blindfolded as a desperate madman, as a reference to the practice of the dancing Mevlevi dervishes and the thick lines on the tent they set up, as a reference to a shamanistic concept of the sky divided in steps, with God on the highest level.

Yılmaz Güney used interesting cinematographical devices. *Umut* is in black and white, still standard for Turkish films of that period, but it also points to the fact that it is a low budget film. Apart from the main characters, most parts are acted by non-professionals. Güney did not have money to use expensive technical devices. Therefore he experimented with simple techniques to create special effects. For instance, Güney used backlighting in order to create an atmosphere of the traditional Turkish shadow theatre (Karagöz) in a couple of repetitious scenes,

showing the three treasure diggers travelling. Dönmez-Colin interpreted it as a bad omen (2007, pp. 46). It is also possible to read it as a reference to the stories of the shadow plays. In these plays the main characters are poor men always looking for a way to get money, with their efforts always in vain.

Besides this Güney used sound to create a special effect. Throughout the film a melancholic solo clarinet is heard; only at two places suspense music with string instruments is used. The composer Arif Erkin Güzelbeyoğlu (1935) won with this film music the first prize of the 1969 Golden Palm festival in Adana (Anon. 2011). A clarinet is an instrument used in the gypsy music of Turkish whine houses in Istanbul, called fasıl (Stokes & Marinelli, 2006, pp. 602-603). While the whole film depicts the life of poor people in South East Turkey in a realistic way, the choice for this ‘Istanbulite’ music is interesting. The melancholic sound of the solo clarinet adds an intellectual level to the film. It encourages the intellectual audience to feel the melancholic doom that hangs over people such as Cabbar, living in a slowly modernizing South East Turkey. Güney intended to represent life in all its hardship in order to make his urban intellectual audience aware of their poor living conditions. As stated before, Güney, although a convinced communist, does not want to make communist propaganda or teach a moral lesson. He wants to depict the difficult living conditions of these people and with this he wants to give his viewers food for thought.

With respect to the character of the hodja Güney’s presentational style leads to multiple interpretations. Dönmez-Colin analyzes the character of the hodja and states that:

“The character of the hodja as a man of religion is open to discussion. Neither Cabbar nor Hasan are fervent devotees. Cabbar sets his hope on the so-called supernatural power of the hodja when all else fails. (...) The fact that Cabbar’s daughter lies to the hodja, who wants to locate the treasure by visualizing its image in the water, is interpreted by some critics as the rising consciousness of the masses against religious oppression. However, the hodja is not a corrupt man who hopes to win money by fooling Hasan and Cabbar. He also partakes in the treasure hunt, spending his days with them in miserable circumstances. The hodja carries the remnants of the feudal system in a period when Turkey is in a transition; his attitude is not necessarily the feudal attitude of a religious man but rather the attitude of one who has become depraved in the race towards capitalism. He is the product of his society and believes in what he does. Intentionally or not, he delays the awakening of Cabbar, and, as a result, is a necessary parasite for the dominant class.” (2007, p. 47)

The role of the hodja may be interpreted differently. The hodja only participates in the treasure hunt when Cabbar has raised enough money. He lives for days as a guest at Cabbar's house, seeing the desperate poverty of the family. Cabbar mentions several times that he left his family unattended. In the scene where the children are looking at the bowl of water Güney makes very clear that the hodja is well aware of the fact that he is cheating. The hodja claims that he can see the spot of the treasure, while there is obviously nothing to observe. The hodja may well be seen as a representative of folk Islam, that is seen by Kemalists as an obstacle for progress and modernization. Besides, this folk belief fits well within the Marxist concept of religion that is the opium of the people. Güney started around 1970 to be interested in Marxism. In *Umut*, religion in the form of folk Islam is similar to a (secular) national lottery ticket: neither are the solution to Cabbar's problems.

İsmail Güneş (1961)

In contrast to Yılmaz Güney, there are not many sources on the life of film director İsmail Güneş (Özgüç, A. 2003, p. 102; Emre, D. 2011). İsmail Güneş was born in Samsun. He studied fine arts and literature in Istanbul. Throughout his career, until the present, he has worked as a journalist and has produced advertisements and television series, in order to be able to finance his feature films. He has won several national and international prizes for his work (Anon. 2011c). Critics such as Dorsay and Çapan praised him for using experimental cinematographical techniques, but criticized the narratological structure of, for instance, *Gülün bittiği yer/The place where the rose ended* (1998) (Onaran, A.Ş. and Vardar, B. 2005, p. 202-203). Güneş occupies a middle position in the Turkish political climate. He has produced films about 'leftist' subjects such as torture during the military intervention of September 12th and produced a television series for the secular channel Star TV (Anon. 2011e). However, he also worked for the religiously-oriented television channel TGRT (Anon. 2011d). Deniz Emre states on the official İsmail Güneş website, that he is known as a "nationalistic patriot who is not dominated by freedom-restricting party bonds⁴" (2011).

*The İmam*⁵ (2005)

The İmam's first shot is Emre or Emrullah, played by Eşref Ziya, riding his motorcycle through a desolated Anatolian landscape. During this shot the credits are presented and the song *Yolcusun sen* (You are a traveller) by the Islamic Anatolian rock singer Mustafa Cihat is heard. In the next shot, Mehmet, Emre's best friend from the

time they both attended a İmam Hatip school, presents himself at Emre's office⁶. He asks for Emrullah Hacıođlu but the secretary does not know who is meant. The name of the main character in *The İmam* is carefully chosen. Emre's descent from a religious family where the children would likely attend a religious high school is clear from his name. Emrullah is an Islamic name meaning literally Allah's will or order. His family name Hacıođlu means son of a hadji, someone who fulfilled the pilgrimage to Mecca. The abbreviation that is used, Emre, is a neutral Turkish surname, referring to the famous 13th century poet Yunus Emre, who is venerated by Islamic and secular circles alike. For religious people he is one of the great Turkish mystical poets; secularists see in him a great humanist thinker (Smelik 1992; Demirci 1997; Halman 2007a; 2007b). The choice for this name is illustrative for the neutral position İsmail Güneş wants to take up.

When Emre enters, it is clear that Mehmet has come for him. Emre had hidden his graduation from an İmam Hatip school for his environment. He had been very unhappy at school. We see repeatedly the same flashback, where girls, looking down from a high wall, call the male İmam Hatip students "corps washers." Emre wants to throw a stone at the girls and they disappear. At one instance there is a flashback in which Emre is punished for his long hair. With a pair of scissor it is cut irregularly. After school Emre studied computer engineering in London and since ten years he has worked together with Mert in their own firm. He is well-off and lives in a house in a gated community with a swimming pool. He has a lookalike Harley Davidson motorcycle and a posh car. He dresses in jeans, long hair and a leather jacket. When Mert finds out that Emre has hidden his İmam Hatip past for him for more than ten years, he laughs at him. Emre gets angry at Mert, but Mert replies that it is his own fault: Emre himself is to blame, because he has renounced his origins.

His old schoolmate, Mehmet tells him he has stomach cancer. He has had an operation, but he is obviously not cured. Emre takes him to a private hospital, where Mehmet receives chemotherapy. Mehmet is worried about his religious community in the small Eastern Anatolian village of Yenice in the district of Darende, in the province of Malatya. For the moment he is replaced by the carpenter hadji Feyzullah, who is strict and severe. Since a few years a community evacuated from the village Göçerli, that is inundated because of the building of a dam, lives in his village. These people are not as strict with the daily duties as hadji Feyzullah wants them to be. It is not clear, but there are references to the fact that these people might be Alevis: they do not often attend the prayers at the mosque, they drink alcohol and one of them is called Haydar (Lion); a name common among Alevis, because of its reference to the Shiite İmam Ali. Ramadan is coming soon and Mehmet fears that Feyzullah will start a

campaign of hate against the people from Göçerli, whom he keeps on calling opium smokers and drunkards. Mehmet will only have peace of mind when he is properly replaced. After thorough deliberation Emre decides to do the replacement himself, in order to help his friend and in order to achieve peace of mind with his İmam Hatip past. He leaves Mehmet to the care of his business partner Mert and takes off.

When Emre arrives at the village, all adult villagers are sceptical about him. The children adore his motorcycle, especially since Emre takes them for a ride. Besides Qur'anic verses, Emre teaches the children how to use a computer. Feyzullah, however, thinks that Emre can never be a proper imam. He forces his son, Tarık, to learn the Qur'an by heart, but the boy is not very talented. Feyzullah constantly beats him up and forbids him to join the other children in the Qur'an school and in riding on the motorcycle.

One day Emre returns from a ride with Zehra, the daughter of the mayor. Her tractor got stuck in the mud during a heavy thunderstorm. The whole village accuses Emre of indecent behaviour and is about to send him away. The story goes that Emre is in love with Zehra. Although Emre definitely feels attracted to this bright and independent girl and even dreams of her, it is clear that he has no intentions to marry her, especially when he finds out that she is in love with his assistant Hasan.

Tactfully, Emre wins the hearts of all villagers. He teaches Hasan to recite the call for prayer. He even convinces Feyzullah to join him in an effort to fight against pre-Islamic folk belief. Outside the village there is a wishing tree. The villagers attach ribbons to its branches in order to have their wishes fulfilled. Finally Emre succeeds in breaking Feyzullah resistance. One day Tarık gets on the motorcycle and disappears. Emre helps Feyzullah find back his son and solve his matrimonial problems. Tarık is found back at the wishing tree, where he is loosening the ribbons tied to its branches.

Then the news of Mehmet's death arrives. In the last scene, filmed partly from a bird's eye perspective, Emre washes Mehmet's body, with the help of Feyzullah. Mert, who had taken care of Mehmet during his last days, has brought Mehmet's body back from Istanbul with his car. Emre leaves the motorcycle behind in the village and

during the final credits we see Mert and Emre driving through the same Anatolian country back to their urban lives. This time Mustafa Cihat's song 'Dünya' (World) is heard. This song corresponds with the song Yolcusun sen at the beginning of the film. In the first song Cihat sings about somebody who cannot find harmony in his life, he advises him not to despair but look ahead and not to be afraid. This referred to Emre, who lost the harmony in his life because he renounced his religious past. At the end of the film Cihat sings about the fact that life brings pleasant and unpleasant events. A person should not look back and not be afraid to face what life has in store for him. This refers to Emre who is now capable of facing what happens in life.

The tempo of *The İmam* is fast, many cross-cuttings are made and the plot consists of many storylines. However, not many experimental techniques are used.

The İmam and Islam

Many aspects of Islamic religious life of people living in a rural community are present in *The İmam*. This way of life is contrasted with modern urban life in the metropolis of Istanbul. Many daily life situations are depicted, such as the ritual washing, a sahur meal, a simple meal before dawn during the Ramadan and the teaching at the mosque. Güneş represented Islam in a Turkish rural situation true to life. Most of the men dress in a şalvar, with a shirt, a waistcoat and a cap, the most common way to dress for not strictly religious males in rural areas in Turkey. The cap was introduced by Atatürk. Many villagers wore it back to front out of protest. The strictly religious hadji Feyzullah and his son dress similarly, only their shirt is collarless and they wear a takke (knitted skull cap). The women veil themselves loosely, as is usual in rural areas, with coloured scarves with flower motifs and crocheted edges. Even the wife of Feyzullah does not cover her hair completely. Girls do not cover their heads except when they are inside the mosque.

Islam is the main subject of this film. Güneş used Emre's struggle with his İmam-Hatip background in order to prove that Islam can be compatible with modernity and modern urban life. Therefore the film contains many elements that stress the contrast between urban city life and a traditional rural life style, in which religion and morality are respected. Güneş referred to this contrast already in the title of the film, using the English article 'the' in combination with the word 'imam', in Turkish and English written the same except for the dot on the capital letter 'I'. At the start of the film, when Emre reflects on the replacement for his ill friend Mehmet, he is so

preoccupied that he drives with his motorcycle on Istanbul's highways like a madman and two police officers stop him. They check him on alcohol and are very surprised to find out that he is completely sober.

Another example is the first contact between the villagers and Emre. A delegation of the village is waiting for the imam, on a terrace in the provincial town of Darende. The bus from Istanbul arrives; a man, all dressed up, gets off; they jump up, but he is not their imam. When a man on a motorcycle stops, they do not react. Only when the man asks for their village and a servant sends him in their direction, they realize that this is their imam. They bring Emre to the village and they arrive just in time for the Friday sermon. Emre preaches of love for one's neighbour. Güneş exploits here the prejudice that someone riding a motorcycle, wearing a leather jacket with long hair, can never be a good Muslim.

Comparison

Central in this analysis is the question: what means are used to represent Islam in these films and to what purpose? When we compare Yılmaz Güney's film *Umut* with İsmail Güneş' film *The İmam* we observe two different approaches to the representation of Islam. Yılmaz Güney's film *Umut* used, in the character of the hodja, a representative of folk Islam in order to emphasize the similarities between putting all one's hope on a lottery ticket and putting all one's hope on a religious man using Islamic magic. Güneş's film is dominantly secular with Islamic elements. Islam is not part of the main theme of the film. (Folk) Islam is represented in *Umut* as a useless kind of magic that will not help a poor man to overcome his problems of survival in a semi-urban provincial environment. İsmail Güneş' film *The İmam*, on the contrary, is dominantly Islamic. Islam is depicted as a religion that constructs a harmonious loving society, when it is not interpreted too strict and severe. Having a religious education is nothing to be ashamed of and can be combined with modern life in an urban setting. Interestingly, folk belief, here in the form of the wishing tree, is just as in *Umut*, regarded as something that has to be challenged. In Güneş's film because it is not helping people out of their misery; in Güneş' film because it does not comply with the standards of modern Islamic life.

Both *Umut* and *The İmam* depicted an Anatolian rural or semi-rural area. As stated above, rural areas remained dominantly religious. However, in *Umut* this society is depicted as Muslim, but not strictly rule obeying; in *The İmam*, the society is much more homogenously rule obeying. In *The İmam*, the countryside represented a pure,

example society not yet effected by the decadence and amoral behaviour of metropolitan urban centres. In *Umut* the country side is not depicted for its religiosity, but it is represented to an intellectually engaged public as an example of a place where in the modern Turkish society of the 1970s people live in poverty.

Conclusion

Umut and *The İmam* are films in which Islam in Turkey is represented; however in different ways. In *Umut* depicting Islam was not an objective: for Güney Islam is an element existing in the society he want to present. In contrast, *The İmam* presents an Islamic way of life in order to propose an alternative for demoralized urban secularism.

Both films represent important developments in the history of Turkish cinema. Güney's *Umut* is one of the first non-commercial films. Realistic in the sense that it depicts the life of ordinary people; experimental and intellectual because meaning is added through special effects. *Umut* is considered a turning point in Turkish cinema, and that holds true also for its representation of Islam. Islam is depicted in *Umut* as an integral part of Turkish reality. *The İmam* can be regarded as an example of the return of Islamic values into Turkish society. Although this film is less experimental and intellectual in the use of cinematographical techniques, it uses unexpected elements, such as *The İmam* on a motorcycle, and teaching computer skills at the mosque. However, whereas *Umut* is showing (folk) Islam as an existing reality in Turkish society of the 1970s, *The İmam* is teaching a moral lesson to Turkish society of the 2000s.

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ This book is no longer available. The author placed a summary on his personal website: Diriklik (2011).
- ² There are many publications on Yılmaz Güney; especially during the 1980s when he won the Cannes festival and after his untimely death. For instance: Behram, N. (1998); Ciment, M. (1983); Ergün, M. (1978); Giles, D. and Şahin, H. (1982, 2005); Heijs, J. (1983); Özgüç, A., (1988a); Özgüç, A. (1988b). Recent studies on Turkish cinema devote considerable attention to Yılmaz Güney, such as: Dönmez-Colin, G. (2008); Teksoy, R. (2008).
- ³ Much has been written about *Umut*. The most recent elaborate scholarly article is by Gönül Dönmez-Colin (2007).
- ⁴ “özgürlüğünü sınırlayıcı parti bağlarıyla kuşatılmamış ülkücü bir yurtsever”.
- ⁵ The only available analysis of *The İmam* is Avcı and Uçaral-Kılınç (2009). Their analysis concentrates on the main characters.
- ⁶ At an İmam Hatip school pupils are trained to become İmam or hatip (the person who delivers the Friday sermon), next to the ordinary highschool curriculum. These religious highschools became very popular since the 1950s, because they offered relatively good quality education, in comparison to the secular state schools. For many conservative parents, they offered the opportunity to give their children a good secular as well as religious education. In leftist intellectual circles in urban centers, such as Istanbul, many looked down on this type of education (Acar, F. & Ayata, A., 2002, pp. 92-93).

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