**Ambivalence, Discontent, and Divides
in Southeast Asia's Islamic Digital Realms**

Special issue edited
by
Martin Slama and James Bourk Hoesterey

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Ambivalence, Discontent, and Divides in Southeast Asia's Islamic Digital Realms: An Introduction

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Abstract:

This introductory article to the special issue Ambivalence, Discontent, and Divides in Southeast Asia's Islamic Digital Realms *discusses the latest transformations in the field of Islam in Southeast Asia with a particular focus on digital media. It introduces the three key themes – ambivalence, discontent, divides – through which the special issue approaches contemporary socioreligious phenomena in Islamic Southeast Asia as they find their expressions online, often in close relation with offline dynamics. This approach allows this special issue to uncover the possibilities and predicaments afforded by engagement with digital and social media across Islamic Southeast Asia, understanding the latter as the locus of complex contestations, unanticipated affect, and poignant uncertainty. This introduction points to such un- or underexplored phenomena that considerably add to our understanding of religious and sociopolitical developments in contemporary Southeast Asia. The articles are introduced by highlighting how they contribute to our understanding of a broad mosaic of Islamic digital realms and how the latter have become sites of ambivalence, discontent, and divides. From Sufis to Salafis, masculinities to queer identities, and serious theologies to ludic critique, the case studies of this special issue devote special attention to the ambiguity, uneasiness, and division that marks Muslim engagement with digital domains across Southeast Asia.*

Muslims in Southeast Asia have embraced a range of digital realms and online worlds that have become sites of religious expression, connection,

and community. At the same time, the production, engagement, and circulation of Islamic online spheres are also marked by ambivalence, discontent, and divides. For this special issue, we asked scholars working across a broad range of Islamic media to reflect on these latter keywords – ambivalence, discontent, and divides – as a thematic approach to understand how Muslim engagement with digital and social media reflects broader trends in religious authority, practice, and politics. This thematic emphasis builds on theoretical developments in the study of Islam and media and offers a different vantage point than approaches to Islam structured solely around ideological, political, or organizational differences.

Together, these articles cover a wide range of social, political, and religious ground, attending to the possibilities and predicaments afforded by engagement with digital and social media across Southeast Asia. Muslims take to social media to speak of the miraculous deeds of Sufi saints, yet these very digital realms are also where others sharply criticize saint veneration and grave visitation as innovation (*bid'a*). Similarly, influential Islamic organizations cross swords online, making the case for the specific theological outlook of their respective movements, from the tensions between traditionalists and modernists to the cultural wars pitting Islamic preachers against an increasingly self-conscious Muslim LGBTQ movement. The articles consider Islamic texts as they are cited, circulated, and debated; yet, they also go well beyond orthodox texts to consider how digital romance novels and Instagram pages of celebrity Muslim converts reflect the complex connections between Islam and gender, power and patriarchy, public piety and sincere consumption.

Furthermore, the articles pay attention to visual representations of pious Islamic lives online and the debates they can elicit between and within Islamic movements. Online spaces such as YouTube sermons, for example, certainly provide a platform for conservative critiques of growing claims to the rights of gender and sexual minorities, yet Muslim women and sexual minorities also display a keen sense of how to navigate these voices as they build their own moral worlds, whether as active agents in *halal* online dating, prayer groups assembling their own theological education,

or queer Muslims turning to humor as one way to respond to the theologies of their conservative detractors. Such articulations and practices are further complicated in constellations where Muslims constitute a minority with any accentuation of divides in the community being particularly sensitive and perhaps even more disconcerting if expressed in digital realms. Moreover, within both minority and majority contexts, the latter might themselves be a source of discontent regarding different access to the digital due to socioeconomic inequality among Muslims, which can be consequential for religious practice and community formation. The digital divide thus adds to other divides in Southeast Asia's Islamic landscape.

As these opening paragraphs indicate, the articles of this special issue explore Southeast Asia's Islamic digital realms from particular angles. They deal with aspects of the digital that have ambiguous, dissociating, or disturbing effects on the religiosity of Southeast Asian Muslims. However, they do so by going beyond topics that are frequently referred to in discussions about the implications of the rise of social media, such as the spread of "fake news" and forms of cyberbullying in which religious actors sometimes play significant roles; not to mention the specters of phenomena that observers like to grasp with terms like "Islamic fundamentalism," "radicalism," or "extremism" that also haunt today's social media. Without disputing that these topics can be part of a fruitful research agenda (see e.g., Nuraniyah 2017), this collection of articles demonstrates that there is more to discover than the widely cited adversities of digital platforms by understanding them as the locus of complex contestations, unanticipated affect, and poignant uncertainty. And there is indeed a lot to take into account given the proliferation of online religiosity among Southeast Asian Muslims with not only social media usage at large but particularly their religious uses having become part of everyday life (Slama 2017; Jones and Slama 2017; Slama and Barendregt 2018).

As with the practice of religion itself, the uses of digital media have become constitutive for the formation and expression of Islamic subjectivities and collective identities that are manifest in both offline space and digital realms (Anderson 2013). Emphasizing these close entanglements between

offline and online spheres does not mean to conflate the two or to render the distinction between them irrelevant, since it is often the peculiarities of their connection that can give rise to the phenomena that this special issue discusses. In other words, they would not exist in their respective manifestations without the existence of digital realms that provide space for the expression of ambivalence, discontent, and divides and at the same time can function as the very locus of their production. In today's Southeast Asia, we therefore assert, these discomforting aspects of Islamic digital realms that can give rise to profound anxieties but also to unprecedented commitment and creativity should not be ignored if one seeks to understand the highly dynamic developments in the region's Islamic landscape.

Islam in Southeast Asia is a field driven by transformations, and media have played – and continue to play – a salient role in these processes. Media have created new publics in Southeast Asia that are filled with a variety of cultural and religious products (Millie 2016; Hasan 2017; Baulch 2020). Especially the rise of private television in the 1990s had enduring effects on the Southeast Asian Islamic landscape with celebrity preachers having become a fixed institution in the field of Islam of the region by challenging long-established players (Hoesterey 2016). Similarly, the internet and social media evolved into sites where contests for Islamic authority are staged (Schmidt 2018; Postill and Epafras 2018). These platforms constitute realms where dominant forms of Islam can be reinforced or heterodoxies can find a niche for expressing their views (Varisco 2010, 163). We might also note that online religiosity often has a tense relationship with orthodoxy and religious dogma, especially if orthodoxy is defined and upheld by the state bureaucracy as is often the case in Southeast Asia (Müller and Steiner 2018). Moreover, and equally important, these platforms afford the (re)invention and (re)contextualization of Islamic practices (Barendregt 2012; Slama 2017; Husein and Slama 2018; see also Hegazy 2020), the emergence of new Islamic movements (Nisa 2018), novel forms of audiovisual proselytization (Hew 2018), and the construction of gender, especially female Muslim subjectivities, through mediated piety (Beta 2014; Baulch and Pramiyanti 2018). In other words, the so-called Islamic resurgence

in Southeast Asia went hand in hand with a surge of media outlets and digital platforms. What we encounter here are entangled developments and mutually constitutive phenomena of religiosity and mediation.

These developments were accompanied by profound changes in the class structure of Southeast Asian Islamic societies, mainly due to the rise of a Muslim middle class being able to engage in conspicuous acts of consumption that comprise not only secular but also religious practices (Rudnyckyj 2015; Jones 2018). Changes in media technology thus met societal transformations that also resulted in increasing social inequality and in divides concerning access to and uses of these technologies (Baulch 2020). These emerging class differences had ramifications in Southeast Asia's mediascape that, in turn, affected the region's Islamic landscape. Unsurprisingly, this destabilizing constellation of growing inequality and the rapid introduction of media technologies that created new publics provided ample room for the emergence and articulation of ambivalence, discontent, and divides – to which the articles of this special issue relate in multiple ways. Yet before we introduce the articles in more detail, in the following sections we will briefly discuss these three concepts and explore how they inform Southeast Asia's Islamic digital realms.

Ambivalence

Ever since Talal Asad's seminal 1986 essay on the idea of an anthropology of Islam, the social scientific study of Islam (and religion more broadly) has been especially influenced by Asad's formulation of Islam as a "discursive tradition" that "consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history" (1986, 14). Asad's students and interlocutors, especially in the work of Saba Mahmood (2005) and Charles Hirschkind (2006), built on his understanding of discursive tradition and orthopraxy to offer important understandings about religious revival, specifically the forms of ethical cultivation of non-secular and non-liberal selves. Crucial to religious revival was the ways in which Islam provided embodied sensibilities and affective attunements

that made a pious life possible.

This focus on ethical perfection, and its reliance on a relatively narrow understanding of what counts as Islamic tradition, still left many questions unanswered. A body of scholarship in the anthropology of Islam began to tell more complicated stories about Muslim lives beyond ethical formation and Islamic publics. In a particularly insightful and influential essay, Samuli Schielke argues that Mahmood and Hirschkind's approach to ethical cultivation failed to acknowledge or address "the ambivalence, the inconsistencies and the openness of people's lives that never fit into the framework of a single tradition. In short, there is too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam" (2010, 1; see also Marsden 2005; Soares and Osella 2009). More in line with the existentialist anthropology of Michael Jackson (2013), Schielke addresses the difficulties of leading a pious life, in particular the ways in which doubt and moral failure are also important dimensions of everyday ethical life in Egypt (Schielke 2010; see also Schielke 2015). By looking for ethical life in sources and places beyond classical Islamic texts, devotional practices, and elite institutions – such as music, soccer, and romantic novels – Schielke argues compellingly that "the ideals and aspirations people express and the everyday lives they live are characterized by complexity, ambiguity, reflectivity, openness, frustration and tragedy. They argue for discipline at times and for freedom at others, but often live lives that lack both" (2010, 3). Such an approach refuses the totalizing logic of an Islamic studies that locates subjects solely within Islamic disciplinary regimes and discursive traditions.

This attention to the everyday – especially the focus on ambivalence, incongruity, and contradiction – refuses neat ethical categories and casts into doubt the convenient historical genealogies of Islamic texts and practices that undergirded a general Asadian approach to the anthropology of Islam. For Schielke, the focus should be more on Muslim lives (perhaps even just human lives) than Islam per se. As the pendulum swung towards this study of the everyday, others argued that such an approach should complement, not replace, attention to ethical cultivation. As David Kloos and Dan Beekers (2018) argue, scholars would do well to keep both

analytical frames in mind. People's understandings of their own moral failures might be part of a complex, everyday religious practice, yet the specific ethical frames of failure cannot be separated from the religious foundation of such ideals. Privileging the everyday over the religious, they caution, "risks artificially placing experiences and incoherence outside the domain of religious experience 'proper,' rather than examining the dynamic and productive interactions between the two" (2018, 2). In this reckoning, ambivalence, doubt, and the everyday can also be understood as part of religious ethics, not separate from it (2018, 14). Likewise, the authors in this special issue attend to the ambivalence, ambiguity, and predicaments of piety without losing sight of how Muslims in Southeast Asia still nonetheless draw from Islamic resources (if only as one of several ethical registers) and at least aspire towards a certain moral fortitude (if not coherence).

Such an existentialist–phenomenological approach, however, does not preclude attention to the important relationship between ambivalence and materiality. As Carla Jones (2010) observes with respect to the Islamic fashion industry in Indonesia, the material manifestation and public performance of Islamic piety generate their own anxieties and suspicions regarding capitalist consumption as it relates to Islamic ethics of sincerity and intent. Jones cogently argues that "connecting the commodification of dress with the failure to change one's behavior in line with adopting Islamic dress, trendy piety generates its own ambivalence" (2010, 625). Moral ambivalence is thus not simply a matter of interior affect, but also of intersubjective relationships and ethical appraisals of who embodies the "real," authentic Islam.

As the articles in this volume suggest, much of this cultural work of intersubjective, ethical appraisals has become an important part of the digital worlds – and divides – among Muslims in Southeast Asia. Similar to Beekers and Kloos, we understand ambivalence as deeply connected with both the everyday and the religious, the online–offline spaces where religious authority and authenticity are claimed and contested. These online–offline worlds do not resemble the Habermasian coffee shop,

with its rational debate among (elite, white, European) men. Instead, the emphasis on ambivalence in these essays emphasizes the affective realms of religiosity and religious argumentation (both its assents and refusals). Taken together, the articles of this special issue demonstrate that ambivalence is not simply the result of ethical anxieties, but that ambivalence itself is generative of new religious sentiments and practices.

Discontent

Digital realms are often understood as the locale of occurrences that provoke discontent among its participants. Users might encounter various content or engage in interactions online that are disturbing or make them feel uneasy. Religious digital realms are certainly not an exception to this and reveal specific ways that discontent can be generated. One is theological debate that might be welcomed by some believers but rejected by others if such discussion questions long-held convictions or the dogmas of orthodoxy. Conversely, digital realms can become the site where the followers of minority faiths or heterodox versions of established religions come under attack, causing worries and discontent among the latter. Islamic digital realms in Southeast Asia have evolved into such publics of debate, doubt, and offense where phenomena of discontent can be observed (see e.g. Schäfer 2018). Spoken and written words on today's social media platforms are both prone to affect Islamic sensibilities, not only if they comprise theological debate but also if they touch on issues of personal piety and the online representation of pious selves. Especially in the latter case discourse often does not stand alone or speak for itself but is accompanied by a repertoire of sensuous mediation that today's social media afford.

This leads us to the prominence of the visual in generating discontent in Islamic digital realms. Not just since the rise of social media have images circulated and touched people's feelings. They "move *around* and […] move *us*," as Patricia Spyer and Mary Steedly (2013, 8) have aptly pointed out. Yet with the increasing use of social media, the moving character of images has grown in both quantity and speed affording innumerable

possibilities for disgruntlement to come about. In the Islamic context, images of the Prophet Muhammed are prominent examples of discontent on the personal and collective levels, especially if they become subject to geopolitical contestation and identity politics (Flood 2013), which is an example of how publics are also "formed in relation to images in circulation" (Spyer and Steedly 2013, 29). This particular visual genre of offensive images is prone to inform social media publics that are (at least partly) religiously defined (Meyer, Kruse and Korte 2018), including Islamic digital realms. Today, taking offense and the discontent that follows from it is thus often not less an online than an offline affair elicited as much by the circulation of images as the spreading of words.

Discontent due to particular and often visual content on social media is, however, only one aspect; another, equally important, but less explored one is discontent that arises due to mediated practices. Since social media can be utilized to practice Islam, for example, to read the Qur'an, to recite prayers, to preach, et cetera, and since these practices often become visible to a (bigger or smaller) spectatorship, concerns can arise about the public nature of one's piety. When Islamic practices go hand in hand with media practices that can be recognized by others in digital realms, and piety becomes part of mediations that entail basically uncontrollable circulations and significations, discontent may arise on both ends of the platform, the acting person and the beholder. Discontent may relate to the correct Islamic performance, but also the pious act and its mediation as such. In the latter case, mediated Islamic practice online can elicit discomfort due to particular theological concepts, such as *riya'* – the showing off of one's piety – that is strongly discouraged by Islamic orthodoxy and regarded as sinful behavior, that is the exact opposite of pious practice (Hoesterey 2016; Husein and Slama 2018). Thus, in Islamic digital realms, there is a thin line between the practice of Islam through social media as a pious act and the latter's interpretation as showing off. This is particularly relevant in the Southeast Asian context where neoliberal informed ideas of transparency have gained considerable currency generating an intricate relationship with the visual (Strassler 2020, 30). However, translated into Islamic digital realms, these ideals of transparent visibility can turn into

a major source of discontent.

When digital realms become Islamic, pious sociality finds its expression online as well, being coupled with particular ideas of how Muslims should socialize on today's social media that are often rooted in offline conventions. In fact, one can observe discontent concerning the question of whether one should get in contact and communicate with other persons at all in online fora. These worries reflect norms and values that seek to determine gender relations by restricting interaction between non-related men and women. Similarly, the ways how one approaches other people online can generate considerable uneasiness, especially if the other person is an acknowledged religious authority. For example, in Sufi circles, discontent can be provoked by the question of whether the Twitter account of a Sufi *murshid* should also follow the accounts of his disciples, as this would be a reversal of the clear hierarchy that defines the teacher–student relationship in Sufism (Alatas 2017). Moreover, the sensitive issue of how to address an Islamic authority using appropriate language retains its relevance in digital realms that are known for their more informal forms of communication. Not paying sufficient respect in the (semi)public spaces of social media cannot only cause the discomfort of the addressed person but also discontent among a larger group of people who have become the witnesses of one's online interactions.

This leads us again to the option of foregoing social media if only for this particular purpose of communicating with Islamic authorities, that is when the uneasiness of using a particular technology for interaction instead of face-to-face encounters cannot be overcome. However, in Southeast Asian Islamic digital realms this seems to be the case only among some groups of Muslims, such as in Sufi communities and among less tech-savvy lower-class Muslims, whereas especially in middle-class circles social media have evolved into the preferred platforms through which Islamic preachers are approached by often ignoring offline etiquette (Slama 2017). The rancor and vitriol often found in online exchanges also mark a departure from offline cultural and religious etiquette that values emotional restraint and discourages direct

confrontation. These online moments of contestation and discontent often shed light on broader religious, political, and ideological divides.

Divides

In their now-classic book *Muslim Politics*, Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori (1996) observe what they describe as the increasing "fragmentation" of religious authority across Muslim-majority societies, where the religious authority of more conventional religious figures and institutions was being partially eclipsed by new voices claiming to speak for Islam. Building on these insights, Eickelman and Anderson (2003) examine the role of new media in this process, particularly the ways in which media offer models of religiosity and citizenship. They argue that new media in the Muslim world encourages an awareness of Islamic values that "feeds into new senses of a public space that is discursive, performative, and participative, and not confined to formal institutions recognized by state authorities" (2003, 2). Whereas subsequent events during the Arab Uprising would challenge the errant view that Islamic media were beyond state reach, the point is well taken that the rise of digital media (and shortly after that volume was published, social media) has led to a pluralization of voices of religious authority as well as amplification and "*contestive* pluralization" of religiopolitical divides (Hefner 2005, 10).

In Southeast Asia, such divides have taken many forms. In Cambodia, Islamic contestation occurs within a national context where Muslims are a minority and their histories detached from the origin story of the modern nation-state (Bruckmayr 2019). In Malaysia, religiopolitical divides have deep histories in British colonial administration and the conflation of Malay and Muslim identity (Peletz 2020). The figure of the Malay Muslim is often seen at odds, and in unfair competition with, ethnic Chinese and Tamil Hindus, the latter of which migrated as laborers during colonial rule. In the case of Indonesia, religious rifts cut across both modern Islamic organizations as well as the state-society divide, where the argument about authentic Islam is at once a conversation about Indonesian Islam (Hoesterey 2018; Slama 2020).

Religious divides in contemporary Indonesia, which we discuss in more detail here as an example of the complex dynamics in Southeast Asia's religiopolitical landscape, operate at global, national, and local levels. For centuries, Southeast Asian Muslims (known as *Jawi*) have gone back and forth between the archipelago and various holy cities and places of learning across the Middle East, North Africa, Central, South, and Southeast Asia (Bradley 2015). Over the last couple of centuries, reformist thought has created sustained theological and political cleavages manifest in the modern Indonesian organizations of *Muhammadiyah* (founded in 1912) and *Nahdlatul Ulama* (founded in 1926). Points of difference include reformist critiques of grave visitation, belief in saintly intercession, and commemorations of the Prophet Muhammad as innovation (*bid'a*). Whereas traditionalist religious education emphasizes classical Islamic scholars, modernist religious education prioritizes the Qur'an and tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, privileging independent reasoning (*ijtihad*). Not only have these organizations espoused different interpretations of theology (and theological reasoning itself), but they have also taken differing approaches to navigating Indonesia's national politics from late colonial rule through independence, authoritarian rule, and democratic transition and consolidation.

Whereas Julia Day Howell (2001, 703) argued that traditionalist–modernist divides were beginning to soften in post-authoritarian Indonesia, recently these divisions have (at least partly) resurfaced with competing visions for Indonesian Islam and relatively distinct allegiances to particular political figures. For example, in 2015 Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah each held their national congress (*muktamar*), with Nahdlatul Ulama promoting the idea of "Islam of the Archipelago" (*Islam Nusantara*) and Muhammadiyah promoting the concept of "Progressive Islam" (*Islam Berkemajuan*). During the run-up to the 2019 presidential election, it became clear that a large majority of Nahdlatul Ulama members supported Joko Widodo, popularly known as Jokowi, and his Nahdlatul Ulama running mate, Ma'aruf Amin, whereas Muhammadiyah members mostly fell in line with presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto. Online

arguments were tense and many found themselves unfriended in their online communities. This divide still lingers two years into Jokowi's final term.

Beyond these organizations whose influence is largely confined to western and central Indonesia, Islamic organizations such as *Nahdlatul Wathan* in Lombok (founded in 1953) have also proved formidable players in religion and politics, especially the recent rise to the national political stage of former West Nusa Tenggara governor Muhammad Zainul Majdi, affectionately known as Tuan Guru Bajang, or TGB. From another vantage point, after the fall of Suharto in 1998 Islamist leaders who were previously imprisoned or living in exile now had the political freedom to organize and participate in the public sphere and electoral politics. Paramilitary organizations such as *Laskar Jihad* stoked ethnoreligious tensions in eastern Indonesia during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Hasan 2006); organizations such as *Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia* began openly campaigning for an Islamic state (Muhtadi 2009); Muslim Brotherhood-inspired prayer groups, civic organizations, and political parties became popular among the aspiring middle and upper-middle classes (Machmudi 2008; Bruinessen 2013); Salafist organizations eschewed formal politics but took on causes for female modesty and sharia banking (Chaplin 2021); and, hardliner militant groups such as the *Islamic Defenders Front* (FPI) viewed themselves as moral police, conducting raids on various bars, brothels, and discotheques (Wilson 2015). Clearly, the landscape of theological and political divides in Indonesia goes beyond historical clashes between ulama and folk Islam or dichotomies between Islamists and secular states.

These divides play out in the mosques, on the streets, and in the courtroom, congress, and presidential palace. But all the more so, the various arguments, forms of evidence, and atmospheres of affect are created, shared, promoted, critiqued, refigured, and reimagined across a wide range of platforms of digital and social media. Religiopolitical cleavages not only reflect various strands of Islamization per se but these divides can also be understood as "global assemblages" of sorts that

reflect multiple ontologies that connect the sacred and profane (Ong and Collier 2005; Peletz 2020). At times, these divides have long, complicated histories, yet occasional moments of political (if not theological) unity also reveal the shallow and politically expedient nature of some of these temporary alliances, as with the "defend Islam" movement that united a motley bunch of Muslims to protest the supposed blasphemy of former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama and influence the outcome of the 2017 gubernatorial election (Fealy 2016). Many Muslims in Indonesia defend their positions within these divisions, as Muslims in Southeast Asia generally do in their respective (trans)national contexts, seeking like-minded online allies and recirculating news articles, memes, and online sermons that support their argument. Digital infrastructures, with their own algorithms of circulation, thus do not simply reveal divides; instead, they help to create and subsequently thrive on such divisions.

The Articles

The articles in this special issue are all based on original research, often tethered to larger intellectual projects about Islam, media, and public ethics in Southeast Asia. The impressive range of topics that the authors explore indicates the vast field of online production and consumption across religiopolitical lifeworlds and points to the futility of sweeping generalizations. Each article contributes to our understanding of a broad mosaic, still unfinished, of Islamic digital realms and how they have become sites of ambivalence, discontent, and divides. They indicate how the digital in tandem with the religious deeply inform the everyday lives of Southeast Asian Muslims. And they demonstrate the vast variety of how this connection between going online and being Muslim can manifest itself, again by pointing to the ambiguity, uneasiness, and division that engagements with digital realms can imply or generate. As will become apparent in the next paragraphs that briefly introduce the contributions, this special issue invites us to think about the digital in Islamic contexts in new ways by directing our attention to hitherto un- or underexplored phenomena that considerably add to our understanding of religious and sociopolitical developments in contemporary Southeast Asia.

As Ismail Fajrie Alatas' article *Digital Theology: Saintly Marvels and God-talks on Facebook* makes clear, online worlds create digital infrastructures of theology. A social media platform like Facebook thus can be turned into an Islamic digital realm by its users. In such an online environment Muslims extend versions of God-talk, assent to certain theological positions, and contest others. Devoting special attention to online stories of miracles and saint veneration (and their doubters and detractors), Alatas shows not only how theological arguments extend into online worlds but also how the very digital infrastructure of online networks provides the opportunity for some intra-religious dialogue and debate that do not occur in the same way during offline interaction. The digital theology of saint veneration Alatas is focusing on makes visible divides in the Muslim community regarding particular theological issues as well as demonstrates how Muslims explore new ways to articulate their positions within these divides. Discussions about saintly marvels that have a long history in Islam, and in Islamic circles in Indonesia in particular, thus take on new dynamics as they enter Indonesian digital realms of a globally operating platform.

Digital and social media make possible the convergence of the most unlikely of discourses, as demonstrated in Amirah Fadhlina's article *Humor, Piety, and Masculinity: The Role of Digital Platforms in Aiding "Conversations" Between Islamic Preachers and* Waria *in Indonesia*. It is concerned with popular preachers, idealized types of heteronormative Muslim masculinity, and how gender nonconforming *waria* wade in on gendered and sexualized religious discourse. Building on what she refers to as "carpool *dakwah* (preaching; propagation)," Fadhlina observes how popular preachers such as Ustad Abdul Somad and Felix Siauw pathologize LGBTQ communities on social media platforms by making *waria* the butts of jokes that are laden in transphobic religious language. Well aware of these demeaning discourses, Fadhlina notes, "*waria* are also adopting humor as a response by reclaiming slurs used against them and returning to their religious communities to advocate for their agency as Muslims." In this reckoning, humor plays an important role in a broader affective politics of the divide between so-called pious masculinities and their nonbinary others that can be observed in Indonesia's Islamic digital realms and can take place in this form only

there. Whereas the doctrinal position of the preachers that rests on a grave social devaluation of LGBTQ communities prevents a dialogue between the two sides, social media brings them nevertheless in "conversation," as Fadhlina asserts, expressed through rather different types of humor. Whereas popular preachers can use humor to further entrench pietistic divides and discontents, James Bourk Hoesterey's article *Nahdlatul Ulama's "Funny Brigade:" Piety, Satire, and Indonesian Online Divides* examines how netizens also deploy humor to mitigate online vitriol and even try to suture various social, political, and theological divides. Tracing the rise of the online "Funny Brigade" (*Garis Lucu*) of the traditionalist Islamic organization Nahdlatul Ulama, Hoesterey attends to "the affective force of satire, particularly how it summons, amuses, confuses, inspires, and even angers diverse viewers in online encounters." More than just online play, Nahdlatul Ulama Funny Brigade administrators espouse religious sensibilities of humility and sincerity by humorously pointing out the hypocrisies and ethical shortcomings of those Indonesian Muslims who show off their piety (*riya'*) and accuse others of being infidels. The article not only provides deep insights into the employment of humor in intra-Islamic contestations and their online circulation in Indonesia but also gives an account of how discontent and divide are negotiated within the country's traditionalist camp of Islam. It thus contributes to the study of how important Islamic players are positioning themselves in the field of Islam in Indonesia and shows that Islamic digital realms – having evolved into the major sites of these contestations – cannot be ignored anymore in this regard.

Plenty of popular preachers on both local and national stages fit the image of the self-assured conservative preacher convinced of his own righteousness. Yet preachers do not go wherever they please; they must be invited to preach. Fatimah Husein's article *Negotiating Salafism: Women Prayer Groups and their Preachers in Indonesia's Islamic Digital Mediascapes* shows how the online world of digital *dakwah* is informed by anxieties about what constitutes authentic Islam and ambivalences about which preachers truly embody Islamic virtue. Women's Islamic study groups in Indonesia invest much time and energy deciding on which preachers offer

the right balance of practical religious guidance and entertaining delivery without insisting on strict gendered restrictions. As Husein's analysis demonstrates, these women are indeed active agents in the building of a repertoire of religious knowledge and inspiration, especially when it comes to their engagement with Salafi preachers and the negotiation of the latters' preaching content. Moreover, her article reveals that ambivalence not only informs this relationship but has also become part of the preachers' sermons that have to navigate the discrepancy between Salafi doctrine and their audiences' lifestyles as well as the different composition of offline and online publics with the latter consisting also of other Salafi preachers and strict followers of Salafism.

Alicia Izharuddin explores another realm of ambivalence and discontent, that is romantic love, in her article *Reading the Digital Muslim Romance* which provides an incisive understanding of how Malaysian women actively engage the Muslim love stories on the online platform Wattpad. What Izharuddin refers to as an "archive of affect," Wattpad Muslim romance stories are presented in terms of *dakwah* and their female readers are called to perform various forms of affective labor that both reproduce and reformulate offline equivalents. Izharuddin argues that "affordances that allow for the creative and interactive reconstituting of gender relations are contingent upon the act of *working through* emotions and a range of unpaid online labor." In this respect, online worlds can open up new horizons of religious sensibilities, yet they also tend to reproduce gendered dynamics that demand the affective labor of women. Izharuddin concludes that romantic love and the affective registers related to it, such as feelings governed by ambivalence and discontent, are constitutive of the Islamic digital realms that she made into her object of analysis and inform the ways of how not only gender relations but also Islamic authority is constructed in Malaysia today, that is "necessarily social, emotive, and intimate."

The world of popular online culture is also at the heart of Carla Jones' analysis of Mualaf *Chic: Conversion and Mediation in Indonesian Pious Sociality*. Jones traces the career of a South Korean convert to Islam who became a brand ambassador for *halal* beauty products and Islamic fashion

in Indonesia. As goes almost without saying she attained the status of a social media celebrity as well, cultivating her image as an Islamic beauty icon and role model for young Indonesian women who developed a deep interest in Islam and pursuing a pious lifestyle. Jones examines how piety is construed here through the intersecting fields of fashion and religion, paying particular attention to the foreignness of the Korean star. In her analysis, two registers of ambivalence converge, one being connected to how the foreign can (at least partly) be appropriated in Indonesia and the other to the troubled relationship between fashion and piety. In the first instance, the allure of the star, obviously, rests not only upon her conversion to Islam but also upon her being Korean. This tension between representing the foreign and the familiar is displayed on her social media accounts for example by pointing to the difficulties of asserting oneself as a pious Muslim in the non-Islamic environment of South Korean society. At the same time, the piety of the star unfolds in a realm that is perceived by many Muslims as inherently ambiguous, as the world of fashion that lives on visual display (and the circulation of images on today's social media) evokes suspicion about the sincerity of religious commitment.

The question of sincere piety and its mediation is also a dominant theme in Wahyu Kuncoro's article *Ambivalence, Virtual Piety, and Rebranding: Social Media Uses among Tablighi Jama'at in Indonesia*. *Tablighi Jama'at* is known as a reformist proselytization movement that puts particular emphasis on the mobility of their members, who oblige themselves to leave their homes for particular periods of time to spread the word of Islam. This mobile form of proselytizing is based on a concept of missionary work that prioritizes face-to-face encounters over the mediation of Islam by means of modern technologies. Kuncoro points out that the use of social media is generally discouraged among Tablighis, especially when they are on a missionary tour. However, his ethnography reveals that this does not necessarily prevent Tablighis from going online. Kuncoro describes how they deal with the ambivalence that surrounds social media use that is also fueled by the fact that no clear guidelines have been published on the issue by the Indonesian Tablighi Jama'at leadership, and how they manage to reconcile discourses that emphasize the dangers that lurk in

these new media for Muslims with their actual social media practices that also comprise the display of their pious deeds on these platforms. Moreover, Kuncoro shows that some Tablighis use social media to counter stereotypes and negative images of Tablighi Jama'at that put them in proximity to terrorist groups, which he interprets as an attempt to rebrand the movement and to position it within the mainstream of Islamic activism in Indonesia.

The issue if one should or should not go online as a pious Muslim is more easily resolved in the case of Eva Nisa's study of *Online* Halal *Dating,* Ta'aruf*, and the Shariatisation of Matchmaking among Malaysian and Indonesian Muslims*. Nisa investigates mobile dating applications and matchmaking platforms that have been developed for an Islamic audience in Malaysia and Indonesia and that have indeed gained some popularity among young Muslims in the two countries. As Nisa shows, these platforms have been established to assist young Muslims to master a major rite de passage in their lives, namely, to marry, which preconditions that one can find a suitable partner. Whereas not so long ago parent-arranged marriages were common in Islamic Southeast Asia, and the agency of women was especially restricted in choosing a spouse, the trend clearly goes towards finding a partner by oneself. One might understand this process in terms of an irrevocable individualization that is accelerated by today's media technologies. However, Nisa points out that this process is much more ambivalent. On the one hand, the platforms afford young women to actively look for a partner providing them with room for action vis-à-vis young men and their parents; on the other, they remodel the matchmaking process into a Sharia-compliant form of learning to know each other (*ta'aruf*) that partly reintroduces gender and generational hierarchies.

Whereas the examples in the articles of this special issue are generally located in Muslim majority contexts, the contribution of Zoltan Pall and Alberto Pérez Pereiro represents an exception in this regard. In *Emerging Islamic Representations in the Cambodian Muslim Social Media Scene: Complex Divides and Muted Debates* they explore the online activities of Cambodian Muslims. Compared to the considerable amount of

literature that was published in the last years on social media practices of Indonesian and Malaysian Muslims, they venture into completely new territory with their study. Their article reveals that, unlike in the Southeast Asian Muslim majority societies, social media are much less used for contestation, discussion and debate by Cambodian Muslims. Whereas in Indonesia and Malaysia representatives of different Islamic currents meet and sometimes clash online, in the Cambodian social media scene critique is voiced in muted and camouflaged ways, if it is conveyed at all. Pall and Pérez Pereiro explore this phenomenon by looking at complex offline divides and their deemphasizing online, while they point to the plurality of Cambodia's field of Islam and the strong position of the Cambodian state and its Islamic bureaucracy that is eager to uphold an image of intra-Islamic harmony.

A hitherto rather neglected topic in the study of Islamic uses of social media in Southeast Asia is also pursued by Martin Slama in his article *Tracing Digital Divides in Indonesian Islam: Ambivalences of Media and Class*. He applies the concept of the digital divide to the field of Islam in Indonesia and asks what consequences unequal access to today's social media platforms has for Islamic practice and sociality. His analysis builds on anthropological work that points to the ambivalence inherent in Indonesian constructions of social inequality, especially with regard to questions of belonging to a rapidly developing middle class. Slama sees such manifestations of ambivalence reemerging in Islamic digital realms that can involve renegotiations of class boundaries and uneasiness in approaching Islamic authorities online, while it can also lead to rather unambiguous forms of exclusion of lower-class Muslims from Islamic online socialities. The article argues that with the introduction of social media social divides among Muslims have indeed found new platforms for their expression – through non-religious and religious practices. The question of being or not being online is thus not only a question of how long (if at all) one is able to be online but also whether one can participate in Islamic digital realms to engage in particular Islamic practices and socialities that largely remain a middle-class affair in Indonesia.

Concluding Remarks

Looking at Southeast Asia's Islamic digital realms through the prism of ambivalence, discontent, and divides reveals the multiplicity of how these concepts can be connected. Taken together in their varied constellations they constitute a field of Islamic practice and sociality that considerably influences religious life in Southeast Asia today, as the articles of this special issue attest. They demonstrate how digital platforms provide glimpses into the intricacies of everyday religious life – its ritual worship, ethical frameworks, and emotional valences. In light of this and the dynamics, transformations, and contradictions that characterize the region's Islamic landscape, it does not come as a surprise that Southeast Asian Muslims frequently find themselves in situations that they perceive as ambivalent, especially when they go online, or that can be the result of wider social and religious phenomena fueled by ambivalence. This is especially the case when Islamic digital realms are navigated to deal with or to solve problems in one's private life, that is when ambiguity and discontent lie at the heart of one's Islamic online practices or one's desire for a (more) pious life. However, such dynamics can also occur in reversed form with pious online practices constituting not an escape from but the very reason for ambivalence; or they can be linked, the articles of this special issue also teach us, as one can evolve into the other with the initial solution becoming a source of discontent, if not for oneself, then for one or the other beholder.

In Islamic contexts, discontent is often closely related to the display and circulation of images, which also applies to Southeast Asian digital realms where conspicuous representations of piety can lead to suspicion, debate, and agitation. At the same time, the articles of this special issue suggest, discontent not only can be geared towards the visual but also the social as the latter becomes articulated in relationships, socialities, and intimacies online. The degree of closeness between social media users that is regarded as acceptable, especially between male and female users, often remains ambiguous and can lead to resentment when gender orders are suspected to be undermined. Furthermore, and more generally speaking,

social media are sites where Islamic ideas of socioreligious hierarchy can easily become contested, not only concerning gender asymmetries but also with regard to hierarchies between generations and concepts of inequality that pervade the construction of Islamic authority. Yet this is not only a question of divergent views of the social world and their articulation in Islamic digital realms, as hierarchies become manifest in and are expressed through online practices. Often it is the latter that are deemed ambivalent or become the sources of discontent, giving rise to new rounds of discussion and contestation.

Given these contentious aspects of Islamic digital realms, we would like to note that not every form of ambivalence and discontent is a sign of a profound divide among Southeast Asian Muslims. The articles of this special issue indicate that they sometimes indeed mirror the broader social upheavals and ideological frictions in Islamic societies, but that they can also reveal minor, yet not less significant fault lines and (still) low tides of discontent. Paying heed to these less pronounced signs of discontent in Islamic digital realms, however, can result in early detection of divides that have the potential to become more significant in the future. And this leads us to another observation that the articles of this special issue allow us to make: while divides might be traceable on social media in their embryonic stage or in suppressed guises, those divides that are already clearly visible might not always become manifest in loud and bitter debates. Moreover, digital platforms can both create and reflect offline divides, yet there is also evidence of how Muslims in Southeast Asia draw on the digital infrastructures of online worlds to mend and to mitigate these divisions, albeit with perhaps limited success. In this regard, humor seems to constitute a central weapon, strategy, and, for minorities, survival kit that can be skillfully applied across different platforms.

Such rather neglected topics in the study of Islam and its digital realms thus can provide important insights into the contemporary dynamics of Southeast Asia's Islamic landscape featuring not only ideological, but also material divides that can become digital through excluding Muslims from participating in particular online socialities and forums of discussion.

And these observations of inequalities and power asymmetries bring us back again to the ambivalence and discontent that the digital can generate – expectedly or much less so – in Southeast Asian Islamic contexts. In light of these intricate entanglements of the digital with phenomena of ambivalence, discontent, and divides, this collection of articles reminds us that our understandings of Islam and Muslim practices and lifeworlds must not only rely on conventional approaches to particular Islamic texts and histories (most often from the Middle East) but should also account for the ideas, theologies, forms of argumentation, affective registers, and audiovisual expressions deployed by Muslims in their everyday online–offline lives. Acknowledging the complexity and variety of Islamic trajectories that cross online and offline realms in sometimes unexpected ways, as the contributions to this special issue inspire us to do, will allow us to recognize new topics of research or approach established themes from novel angles, and to contribute to considerably enriching the picture of the study of Muslim societies.

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Digital Theology: Saintly Marvels and God-talk on Facebook

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Abstract:

*Among Indonesia's traditionalist Muslims, anecdotes of saintly marvels (*karāma*) relating occurrences that contradict reason or human understanding of nature are lodged in everyday conversations. While scholars have noted how recounting and listening to* karāma *anecdotes is believed by Muslims to transmit the blessing (*baraka*) of the saints and facilitate their intercession, this article explores such anecdotes' capacity to engender conversations about God and other issues pertaining to religious belief. It does so by observing the circulation of* karāma *anecdotes among Indonesia's traditionalist Muslims on Facebook and their role in provoking a variety of God-talk. The circulation of such anecdotes affords their publics with the ability to assent to, engage with, debate, and question theological propositions. Facebook creates the material preconditions for the production and circulation of accessible and shareable* karāma *anecdotes that enables Muslims beyond the scholastic elites to participate in theological discussion and reflection while facilitating digital practices that can be construed as theologically meaningful. It also facilitates various disputations, including those that are theological, between Muslims adhering to different Islamic currents. Far from simply being a channel of communication or a mode of dissemination, Facebook may indeed come to function as* a digital infrastructure of theology.

Keywords:

Islam, Theology, Facebook, karāma*, Indonesia*

The praise for the Prophet sung by the muezzin of a nearby mosque made me realize that the time for the dawn prayer was less than an hour away. There were five of us that night, all men, chatting in the patio of Ali's

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house that overlooks a small garden where a sturdy but fruitless mango tree stands. The voice of the muezzin did not deter our natural storyteller friend, Alvin, from recounting an anecdote of saintly marvel (*karāma*) that he had read on Facebook involving a Moroccan saint who was able to miraculously summon water to rise from the depth of a well, needing neither rope nor bucket. It was one of the many *karāma* anecdotes exchanged that night. "It is quite ironic," I said as Alvin concluded the anecdote, "that we have passed the entire night drinking coffee and conversing about saints without trying to emulate them as if they were mere characters from a Marvel comic book." Alvin did not say a word, opting instead to empty the ashtray that was crammed with peanut husks and cigarette butts. "Aren't we supposed to spend the night in prayers and contemplating the divine just like those saints?" I asked. Upon hearing my self-righteous question, Ahmad – who had spent many years studying in a Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) – put down his cigarette and said: "Haven't we been contemplating the Almighty? We have been talking about the reality of saints and their *karāma*. That is *dhikrullāh* (remembrance of God)!"

The foregoing vignette comes from one of the many nocturnal get-togethers that I attended during my fieldwork in Pekalongan, Central Java (2011–13). I frequented such laidback gatherings to unwind and have a good laugh, although they often turn to be an invaluable learning experience. The folks I was hanging out with are usually described as traditionalist Muslims, although they themselves prefer the term *nahdliyin*, referring to the *Nahdlatul 'Ulama* (NU), Indonesia's premier traditionalist Islamic organization that they identify with. *Nahdliyin* generally follow the teachings of contemporary and past scholars and saints instead of resorting to independent reasoning in religious matters. They recognize the importance of Sufism and are enthusiasts of public religious rituals like the ritual recitation of the Prophet's nativity story (*mawlid*) and commemoration of scholars–saints (*ḥawl*). They believe in the intercessory power of saints and are actively seeking their intercession by visiting their graves and reciting or listening to stories of their *karāma*. Indeed, among *nahdliyin*, *karāma* anecdotes are lodged in everyday conversations. Privileging the marvels of the saints over their biographies, such anecdotes relate occurrences that contradict reason

or human understanding of nature (*khāriq al-ʿāda*). The short anecdotal form that such narratives take has "a relation to the patterns employed in naturally occurring conversation" (Millie 2008, 44), which explains their smooth circulation across multiple conversational contexts. While scholars have noted how reciting, recounting, or listening to *karāma* anecdotes is believed by Muslims to transmit the blessing (*baraka*) of the saints and facilitate their intercession (Millie 2008; Millie 2009; Gilsenan 1973; Ewing 1997), Ahmad's response to my question made me aware of another, less-discussed, significance of *karāma* anecdotes for my *nahdliyin* friends, one that can be described as *theological*. By theology, I simply mean "God-talk in all its forms" (Chittick 2008, 221). William Chittick's capacious definition of theology is analytically useful as it allows us to think about the myriad forms that theological discourse can take, from the most explicit, authoritative, and formulaic like creeds (*ʿaqāʾid*, sing. *ʿaqīda*), to a range of scholastic treatises on formal theology (*ʿilm al-kalām*), Sufism, and Qurʾānic exegesis, to those that are informal, less-scholarly, and even unregulated by any established religious authority. The theological significance of *karāma* anecdotes lies in their ability to engender conversations and debates about God and other issues pertaining to religious belief.

This article observes the latest stage in the long-established circulation of *karāma* anecdotes among Indonesian Muslims, one that unfolds on Facebook, to explore their roles in provoking a variety of God-talk and engendering digital theological practice. Similar to their offline circulation, the dissemination of *karāma* anecdotes on Facebook affords Muslims the opportunity to engage, debate, and assent to theological propositions. In following the circulation of *karāma* anecdotes on Facebook, the article foregrounds "connection and interrelation between online and offline religious contexts" (Campbell and Evolvi 2019, 6) while exploring how older religious practice is reproduced and reconfigured through practices of mediatization. As a digital infrastructure, Facebook creates the material preconditions for the (re)production and circulation of accessible and shareable *karāma* anecdotes, while opening up the possibility for Muslims to assent (*taṣdīq*), question, or deny the veracity of such stories or the reality of *karāma* that they illustrate. Moreover, Facebook facilitates

heterosocial discussion and disputations between Muslims with different religious orientations. Consequently, Facebook should not be treated simply as a channel of communication or a mode of dissemination, and instead, may come to function as *a digital infrastructure of theology.*

Scholars of religion and the media have drawn attention to how increasing dependency on commodified media forms assimilates religion into their logics and modes of existence (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996; Eickelman and Anderson 1999; Roy 2004). Such a view reflects a genealogy of thought – exemplified by the works of Walter Benjamin, Marshall McLuhan, and Benedict Anderson – that attributes to media the power to reconstitute individual sensibilities and communal belonging in ways that are different from religion. Other scholars are more cautious about contrasting religion and media (Anderson 1999; Meyer and Moors 2006; Dasgupta 2005). Recent anthropological works on religion and media have stressed either the importance of comprehending religion *as* mediation inseparable from technological artifice (De Vries 2001, 28; see also Engelke 2010, 371) or the need to study how actors utilize the media as part of religious practice (Eisenlohr 2009; Engelke 2010; Hirschkind 2006; Hirschkind 2011; Meyer 2009; Stolow 2005). Several recent works on Islam and (social) media in Southeast Asia have also shown how new technologies and forms of mediation are reconfigured by established religious practice. Instead of positing the development of new media as inevitably detrimental to religion and religious sociality, these works invite us to observe how religious actors use and reshape different media forms as part of changing religious practice.[1]

Theology, like other religious discourse and practice, takes shape through a "materializing process," which means that it "must be concretized through material mediation" (Zito 2008, 81). This entails that material mediation should not be seen as distinct from but rather as the condition for theology. The media should not be analytically separated from theology, as theological discourse and practice presuppose a mediatic structure. This entails that a social media platform like Facebook does not necessarily absorb theology and transform it in accordance with its own commodified modes of functioning. As will be shown in this article, new

technologies and novel forms of mediation may themselves be transfigured by older theological practice into infrastructures of theology.

What is *Karāma?*

It is perhaps proper to begin with the notion of *karāma* (Ind. *keramat*). According to the 14th–15th century *Sunni* theologian and lexicographer ʿAlī b. Muḥammad al-Jurjānī (d. 1413),

> *karāma* is the appearance of something that annuls the customary way of things (*amr khāriq li-l-ʿāda*) on behalf of someone without concomitant claim to prophethood. If it is not accompanied by faith (*īmān*) and pious deeds, it is called a deception (*istidrāj*). If it is accompanied by the claim to prophethood, it is called a miracle (*muʿjiza*). (al-Jurjānī 2004, 154)

In simpler terms: *karāma* is a supernatural occurrence divinely bestowed on individuals who are faithful, pious, and do not claim to be prophets. *Karāma* is posited as different from prophetic miracles and from natural wonders or oddities, the latter of which is usually referred to as *ʿajāʾib* (Ind. *ajaib–keajaiban*). What makes *karāma* different from the fanciful *ʿajāʾib* is the theological framing of the former. *Karāma* serves to attract their spectators not to the marvelous occurrences themselves but to Divine omnipotence, together with the admirable and imitable lives of the pious individuals associated with those supernatural phenomena.

Apart from Ahmad, whose remark about listening to *karāma* anecdotes as remembrance of God (*dhikrullāh*) opens this article, another person who made me realize the theological significance of *karāma* anecdotes was the contemporary *nahdliyin* scholar and Sufi master, Habib Luthfi Bin Yahya (b. 1947). One Ramaḍān morning in 2011, I attended Habib Luthfi's class on Qurʾānic exegesis in which the Sufi master described the theological motive of *karāma*. "Without *karāma*," Habib Luthfi explained,

faith (*iman*) can wear off (*luntur*). How so? Because without it, they can then ask, "is it true that the Prophet can resurrect the dead?" and so on. After hearing and reading about how saints perform *karāma*, Muslims can assent (*tasdīq*) to the truth of the prophetic miracles. If mere saints can do such extraordinary things, prophets can undoubtedly do much more. So *karāma* anecdotes help strengthen our faith in the Qurʾān. They show that Allāh continues to help his friends just as He once assisted the prophets, as told in the Qurʾān.

For Habib Luthfi, *karāma* anecdotes allow their publics to assent (*taṣdīq*) to the theological propositions they concretized. Central to Habib Luthfi's discussion is a conception of faith (*īmān*) as personal *recognition of, and engagement with something knowable* (Smith 1979, 111). "Faith increases and decreases (*iman itu naik turun*)," as Habib Luthfi repeatedly says, quoting a Prophetic *ḥadīth*. It requires maintenance by continuous *taṣdīq* to what has become known. Insofar as *taṣdīq* involves recognition of something knowable, however, that which is knowable must have some material manifestation that makes it available to perception (Keane 2008, 114).

Muslim philosophers have discussed the role of materiality in facilitating *taṣdīq*. The medieval Arab philosopher Abū Naṣr al-Farābī (d. 950), for example, explains that both philosophy and religion provide accounts of the same reality. Whereas philosophy does so through demonstrative methods that produce intelligible (*maʿqūlāt*) accessible only to the trained, religion presents accounts of reality "by means of their similitudes taken from corporeal principles" (al-Farābī 1995, 90). Religion involves *takhyīl* – which I gloss here as *creative imagination* – that concretizes concepts, thereby rendering them accessible to the multitude. *Takhyīl* imitates, imprints, and presents concepts and propositions as perceivable imaginal products (*takhayyul,* pl. *takhayyulāt*) to render them communicable and sensorily available for *taṣdīq*. One goal of *takhyīl* is to facilitate *taṣdīq* to truths that otherwise are not available to the senses (Black 1990, 72–74, 180–208).

Takhyīl materializes theological propositions (like "God protects the righteous" (Qurʾān 7:196)). As products of *takhyīl*, *karāma* anecdotes serve

as communicable illustrations of divine existence, together with God's assistance, protection, and care for the righteous. They serve to help people envisage reality differently, in ways that expand what is usually regarded as commonsensical. They provide their publics with particular templates that enable them to imagine God's participation in the world while challenging them to assent to the theological propositions they concretize. Nevertheless, *karāma* anecdotes are public entities that are relatively autonomous from inferences and open to different interpretations. As publicly available semiotic forms, there is nothing to guarantee that such anecdote "will produce identical interpretations or experiences across time or between persons" (Keane 2008, 114). This means that for *karāma* anecdotes to be taken as evidence of a particular theology, there has to be a kind of regimentation that renders them recognizable and meaningful as such. To become theologically useful, such anecdotes need other forms of God-talk to frame them, like formal theologies (*ʿilm al-kalām*) and creeds (*ʿaqīda*) that provide basic conceptions about God and how he functions in the world.[2]

Transmitting *Karāma* anecdotes

"How does one assent to the reality of *karāma*?" I asked Habib Luthfi in one of our many conversations. His reply was short and straightforward. *Taṣdīq*, he explained, could be as simple as talking about *karāma*. The Sufi master's response seems to suggest that speaking is believing (Harding 2000). Participating in the transmission of *karāma* anecdotes or responding to them positively already constitutes *taṣdīq* to the reality of *karāma*. Habib Luthfi's response was similar to that which I got from Ahmad during one of our nocturnal get-togethers. Both Ahmad and Habib Luthfi seemingly suggest that talking about *karāma* is, in itself, understood as a theological practice, a form of God-talk. This realization has helped me to partly understand – aside from the question of *baraka* or intercession – why my *nahdliyin* friends enthusiastically reproduce, transmit, and listen to *karāma* anecdotes. It is no surprise that ever since Facebook became popular in Indonesia, the social media platform has been used to reproduce such anecdotes.

Take Toha, for example. Like Ahmad, Toha is a *pesantren* graduate who often

joined our nighttime gatherings. Unlike Ahmad, however, Toha maintains an active social media presence. His frequent posts on Facebook relate to various contemporary issues, from Indonesian politics and economy to discussion of classical Islamic texts that he learned in the *pesantren*. Owing to his social media activity, Toha has garnered more than 23 thousand Facebook followers. Along with his avidity for commenting on current affairs, Toha is a keen disseminator of *karāma* anecdotes. The following is Toha's Facebook post from January 30, 2020:

> The *karāma* of the mother of *Kyai* Maksum Jauhari of *Pesantren* Lirboyo.
>
> One day she called an electrician to fix a circuit problem in her house. Arriving without his toolbox, the electrician asked for her permission to go and get his tools. She, however, insisted that he fix the wires with his bare hands. *Subḥannallāh* [glory be to God], he was able to do so without experiencing any electric shock. The electrician was so elated that when he went back to his office, he tried again. This time, however, he was electrocuted and fainted. The electrician finally realized that his ability to fix the wires with his bare hands was due to the *karāma* of the mother of *Kyai* Maksum. (As told by K. H. Adibus Solih b. K. H. Anwar Mansur and quoted from the Facebook post of Rashid).

Toha's Facebook post received 455 likes and was shared by 64 people. Prior to Toha's posting, the *karāma* anecdote already had a public life. As Toha himself was not a witness to the event, he mentions the anecdote's chain of transmission or *isnād*. The short *isnād* clarifies that Toha read the anecdote on the wall of Rashid's Facebook. Rashid, in turn, heard the story from K. H. Adibus Solih, the son of K. H. Anwar Mansur, one of the scholars of *pesantren* Lirboyo and the nephew of the saintly woman. Modeled on the transmission of Prophetic *ḥadīth*, the *isnād* functions to safeguard the authenticity of a narration. It serves to inform the reader that the anecdote is not Toha's invention. Toha's role is simply that of a transmitter. By including the *isnād* – which in this case involves not only oral but also Facebook

transmission – Toha follows an established model of narration, one that can be found in classical Sufi hagiographies. By sharing the story on Facebook, both Rashid and Toha are performing *taṣdīq*. They are assenting to the veracity of the anecdote – and the reality of *karāma* – by reproducing and extending its public life.

Texts and utterances are *communicable* (Briggs 2007). They "represent their own points of origin, modes of circulation, intended audiences, and modes of reception" (Briggs 2007, 556). Textual communicability achieves effects as people respond to the ways that the texts seek to interpellate them. Of course, there are various possible responses, including actors' refusal to locate themselves in the position being offered, their revision of the position being offered, or their rejection of interpellation altogether. In this sense, *taṣdīq* involves yielding to the communicable cartography of *karāma* anecdotes, allowing oneself to be interpellated by them into one of the available discursive capacities that can aid their reproduction. One can also perform *taṣdīq* by simply liking or loving the *karāma* posts – two functions provided by Facebook – as to do so is to let oneself be interpellated by the anecdotes to occupy the place of their consumers who responds positively. Of course, one can simply read or ignore the posted anecdotes without ever engaging with them. To do so may be construed as a refusal to occupy any position offered by the anecdotes.

Another form of engagement is to actually respond to the anecdotes. Most of the comments on Toha's post, for example, consist of simple religious phrase like "praise be to God (*alḥamdulillāh*)," "glory be to God (*subḥanāllāh*)," or "alfātiḥa," the last of which denotes reciting the first *sūra* of the Qurʾān for the spirit of the saintly woman. Such comments may consist of formulaic religious phrases. But when understood through the prism of theological practice, they can be understood as *taṣdīq* to the reality of the *karāma*, which entails assenting to (1) God's omnipotence, including his ability to suspend natural order on behalf of certain individuals; and (2) the sanctity of the mother of *Kyai* Maksum Jauhari.

As they travel online or offline, *karāma* anecdotes create positions and recruit actors to occupy them, whether as translators, disseminators, readers, or listeners. Access to such positions, however, is not evenly distributed. An Indonesian literate in Arabic would have access to the treasure trove of hagiographical texts or Facebook posts not available to those without such a linguistic competency. This allows her to occupy the position of translators of *karāma* anecdotes. As a *pesantren* graduate literate in Arabic, for example, Toha has been translating *karāma* anecdotes from Arabic hagiographical texts or from the Facebook page of Arab scholars. Similarly, a person who has access to a living saint or Sufi master or has witnessed a supernatural occurrence can also assume the role of an author of *karāma* anecdotes. Thus, another *nahdliyin* Facebook user, Nur, was jubilant as he publicly declares, in his February 23, 2020 post, that God has finally granted him "the opportunity to personally experience the *karāma* of Habib Abdul Qodir Bilfagih." In his post, Nur recounts how he was determined to attend the annual commemoration of Bilfagih's death in Malang, East Java, though he could only find a seat for a flight that leaves Jakarta several hours before the event. On his way to the airport, Nur was stuck in traffic, and he knew that he would not arrive on time to catch the flight. He told the driver to keep on driving to the airport because he wanted to try his luck. En route, Nur did not stop praying to God and petitioning Bilfagih's spirit to intercede. When he arrived at the airport, he discovered that his flight had been delayed and he was able to attend the commemoration. "I have always heard and shared stories of saintly *karāma*, but today I have experienced it myself, all praise to Allāh," Nur concludes his post. From being a consumer and disseminator of *karāma* anecdotes, Nur has finally become an author.

Significantly, Facebook has added new measures of *taṣdīq*. For example, Facebook differentiates between liking and loving a post by providing different emoticons to express them. To love a post is usually considered more intense than to simply liking it. Some people like a *karāma* anecdote post while adding comments that further intensify their engagement with the anecdote. Facebook also allows users to share the anecdote they read on other people's walls. This last function allows readers of the anecdote to transform their roles from consumers to disseminators or co-producers.

In the latter role, people are able to use Facebook to prolong the anecdote's public life and extend its communicability. As a digital infrastructure, Facebook thus allows different kinds of engagement, from the simplest to the more intense, which are then construed by my *nahdliyin* friends as degrees of *taṣdīq*. In this sense, one cannot simply posit Facebook as a platform of dissemination. By using Facebook for *takhyīl* and *taṣdīq, nahdliyin* like Toha, Rashid, and Nur, together with those who like, love, respond to, and share their *karāma* posts transfigure the social media platform into a digital infrastructure of theology. Concurrently, by introducing different forms of digital engagement with such posts, Facebook has also reconfigured the old theological practice of *taṣdīq*.

Refusing *taṣdīq*

Being imaginal products, *karāma* anecdotes can be deemed excessive by some people, leading to their veracity being questioned. Refusing to accept the veracity of a *karāma* anecdote, however, is not always synonymous with denying the reality of *karāma*. One may deny an anecdote for lack of clear provenance (hence the importance of *isnād*) or simply because one does not think that the people featured in the story deserve the divine gift of *karāma*. In the thriving religious marketplace of contemporary Indonesia, people often refuse to assent to the veracity of a *karāma* anecdote simply because it features individuals representing different Islamic orientations or organizations. *Nahdliyin*, for example, often ridicule *karāma* anecdotes featuring, or disseminated by, those from Wahhabī or Salafī circles. In such cases, the refusal to assent is not equivalent to a denial of the theological propositions that those imaginal products illustrate. To clarify this point, I turn to another post by my *karāma* enthusiastic friend Toha.

In mid–March 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, eight thousand people from across Southeast Asia made their way to Gowa (South Sulawesi) to attend the annual gathering (*ijtimaʿ*) of the global Islamic revivalist movement Tablighi Jama'at. The gathering was scheduled to begin on March 19 but was canceled at the eleventh hour due to pressure from the authorities. The holding of such a large gathering in the time of

corona became a *cause célèbre* in Indonesia before making its way to the pages of *The New York Times* and *The Economist*. Indonesian netizens condemned and mocked the Tablighis on Facebook and Twitter for their reckless behavior. Indeed, subsequent reports indicate that Tablighis, who were forcefully repatriated to their homes from Gowa, "went on to infect more than 1,000 people from 22 (out of 34) different provinces" (The Economist 2020). Under vitriolic attacks from all sides, some Tablighis who attended the gathering utilized different social media platforms to upload videos showing their healthy condition while stressing that God will always protect the righteous.

It was in response to this that Toha composed his April 29, 2020, Facebook post. He quoted several media reports to show that many attendees of the canceled gathering had become carriers by the time they arrived in their hometowns. He then wrote,

> The lesson from this is that one should never assume that piety or good deeds will make us invincible from diseases or other dangers. The world works according to the law of nature. *Karāma* is an interruption of the law of nature [*hukum alam*] that only happens once in every billion cases. To think that one is under God's protection [*al-ḥimāya*] from physical and spiritual dangers is the gateway to destruction.

Here is a post by someone who otherwise can be fairly described as a keen reproducer of *karāma* anecdotes. This post suggests that being a firm believer in the reality of *karāma* does not necessarily entail denying the laws of nature. One can be a dedicated believer of *karāma,* who frequently renews one's *taṣdīq* by reproducing *karāma* anecdotes while being simultaneously committed to the notion of the laws of nature or to modern science. The two are not mutually exclusive, even if they cannot be easily resolved. One possible resolution would be to assent to the reality of *karāma* in certain cases while denying its plausibility in others. For Toha, such a choice seems to be informed by his religious orientation and organizational membership. Thus, most of the *karāma* anecdotes that Toha shares on Facebook involve

nahdliyin. He has no difficulty in rejecting the reported *karāma* of those associated with other Islamic orientations like the Tablighi Jama'at or critiquing their misguided faith.

Toha's post received 757 likes, 144 comments, and is shared by 216 users. None of the comments is critical of Toha's stance, which shows that Facebook may generate echo chambers consisting of people with similar religious orientations. Indeed, many of those who comment are *karāma* enthusiastic *nahdliyin*. One response comes from a well-known *nahdliyin* activist who writes: "I agree. Even the Prophet, who was accompanied by angels, conformed to the laws of nature." What is interesting about this comment is the fact that it was written by someone who is in the habit of using Facebook to recount the ability of some saints (mostly *nahdliyin*) to suspend the laws of nature. Organizational belonging may thus become a way to negotiate the irresolvable tension between commitments to the laws of nature and the ontological possibility of *karāma*. One can deny the reality of *karāma* performed or narrated by certain actors and champion the laws of nature while assenting to its reality in others. While this may suggest that refusing *taṣdīq* may be driven by political motives, those who do so, like Toha, understand their refusal as being theologically driven. In fact, in Indonesia, political and theological discourses are often entwined and difficult to disentangle, as illustrated in the following section.

The Political Theology of *karāma*

Producing, assenting to, or denying a *karāma* anecdote for a political reason can be observed in a widely shared anecdote involving a deceased Ḥaḍramī saint and the former governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, popularly known as Ahok. A Christian Indonesian of Chinese descent, Ahok is held in high esteem by some Indonesians but spurned by others due to his ethnic and religious background. In September 2016, he made a statement regarding his opponents' deployment of a Qurʾānic verse to argue that Muslims cannot vote for a non-Muslim in the gubernatorial election. For Ahok, utilizing the scripture for electoral purposes was an attempt "to fool" the public. This statement went viral on social media, sparking a

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series of protests that culminated in one of the biggest demonstrations in Indonesia's history on December 2, 2016. Accused of blasphemy, Ahok lost the gubernatorial election and was sentenced to two years imprisonment in May 2017. (Peterson 2020)

Notwithstanding the controversies, some Muslims in Jakarta respect Ahok for his success in protecting a precarious Ḥaḍramī saintly shrine during his governorship. Situated in the vicinity of Jakarta's Tanjung Priok container terminal, the shrine is believed to intern the remains of Ḥabīb Ḥasan b. Muḥammad al-Ḥaddād (d. c. 1899), popularly known as Grandpa Priok (*Mbah Priok*). For years there was a conflict between the *Indonesian Port Company II* (PT Pelindo II) – a state-owned public company that has now become a subsidiary of the world's leading port management conglomerate CK Hutchinson Holdings – and the scions of the saint. The company had claimed ownership of the land on which the tomb is located and sought to demolish the mausoleum complex as part of the terminal's expansion plan. Following a long legal battle, the court ruled in favor of the company. On the morning of April 14, 2010, three thousand members of the Civil Service Police Units (Satpol PP) were dispatched by the Jakarta government to forcibly evict the saint's family and devotees who refused to budge from the complex. A riot broke out, leaving three police officers dead, hundreds of people injured, and eighty vehicles torched. In its aftermath, the governor of Jakarta brokered mediation between the conflicting parties, culminating in an agreement that the mausoleum will be protected and renovated at the government's expense (Quinn 2019). While the agreement was reached during the governorship of Fauzi Bowo that ended in 2012, it was during Ahok's term as governor that the renovation of the 5.4 hectares shrine complex was completed. On March 4, 2017, weeks before the second-round gubernatorial election, Ahok finally secured the shrine's precarious existence by declaring it a legally protected heritage site.

Between March 3 and 5, 2017, an Ahok supporter by the name of Rudi Valinka published a series of tweets on the relationship between Grandpa Priok and Ahok (@kurawa 2017). The tweets went viral and subsequently reappeared as a long article on several blogs before finding its way to

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Facebook (Infomenia.net 2017). The article recounts the history of the contentious shrine up to the 2010 riot. It then tells how in January 2017, in the midst of the gubernatorial campaign, a scion of Grandpa Priok, Habib Sting, received a message from the deceased saint summoning Ahok to the shrine. Ahok paid a nocturnal visit to the shrine accompanied by Habib Sting. There, before the holy tomb, Habib Sting relayed the "supernatural whisper" (*bisikan ghoib*) of the saint to the "blasphemer." Ahok, the message says, must prepare himself, for he is destined to become the leader of Indonesia.

Sya'roni was among the many who shared Valinka's article. His repost drew 960 likes, 207 shares, and 274 comments. Responses range from those who assent to the veracity of the anecdote and those who accused the writer of producing a hoax for political purpose to those who problematize the ability of a deceased saint to communicate to the living. "Who actually whispered? How can a dead person whisper?" asks one comment. "This is an entertaining hoax," says another. One person asks, "why would the deceased Grandpa Priok muddle himself in politics?" Yet another person writes that the anecdote "reads like a movie script." Those who consent to the truth of the anecdote write against the naysayers by telling them to learn the religion deeper. "The saints are alive, they simply live on another plane, and they can still communicate," one person writes. "Those who don't believe this story are those who learn Islam from teachers who do not understand the reality of the saints," writes another. Some even go as far as accusing the naysayers as either Wahhabīs or secularists. One comment says, "I simply believe in God. Why should I believe in tombs? That is idolatry. You should repent and restate the *shahāda*." In response, a person affirms that "God has many ways of communicating with his creations… it is his prerogative to choose whoever he wishes to communicate with through any means he wants." Another response to the comment says, "not believing in the *karāma* of the saints is a form of disbelief in the omnipotence of God… you should be the one to repent and restate the *shahāda*."

It is clear from the comments above that this *karāma* anecdote engenders not just political but also theological debates among Muslims who do not

know one another. Liking and sharing the article can be construed as a form of *taṣdīq* while choosing the angry emoji can be read as a refusal to assent. Interestingly, the comments suggest several grounds of refusal. Some deny the veracity of the anecdote for political reasons, while others deny altogether the ability of saints to communicate posthumously. The anecdote generates various forms of God-talk that reproduce contending theological positions. Accusations of associating divinity to any being other than God (*shirk*) or belittling God's omnipotence flies in the midst of the debate, turning the political debates theological. Indeed, those who question the story's veracity for political purpose are construed by others as *karāma* deniers*,* thereby reframing their politically-driven objection as theological position. Those who deny the plausibility of the *karāma* are accused of playing down God's omnipotence, while those who assent to it are charged with *shirk*.

Significantly, some are skeptical of the anecdote by pointing to its resemblance to a movie script. This is important to note. As a product of *takhyīl*, a *karāma* anecdote should ideally draw attention to the theological propositions it ought to concretize. Oftentimes, however, the anecdotes themselves can be too excessive to the extent that their consumers are stuck with their formal properties. Consequently, they may fail to generate God-talk and instead engender debates on their authenticity.

Audiovisual anecdotes

Traditionally, *karāma* anecdotes are either orally communicated or textually inscribed. More recently, however, they have been reproduced in audiovisual formats, like films. In the 1980s, for example, several films were produced in Indonesia about the *wali songo*, the nine saints believed to Islamize Java (Izharuddin 2017). Such films are replete with *karāma* occurrences that are successfully restaged with the help of modern cinematic technologies. Such films can, of course, be seen as another iteration of the popular kung fu or martial art films. Insofar as they also serve explicit theological or moralizing purposes, however, they can be situated as a modern iteration of the old practice of theological *takhyīl*. Indeed films of the *wali songo* are

framed with explicit theological messages that help viewers to make sense of the films as more than mere entertainment.

While not everyone can produce a film, the development of computer-based filmmaking software has allowed amateur videographers to reproduce *karāma* anecdotes in audiovisual formats. Facebook, in turn, provides a platform for disseminating them. Nevertheless, most audiovisual *karāma* anecdotes that I have seen on Facebook are quite simple and unsophisticated. They simply consist of the voice of a narrator reading a previously prepared *karāma* narrative superimposed on images or photos of the saints and other illustrations. While the coexistence of voice and images help to shape viewers' imagination, they can also fail to reinforce one another, thereby weakening the imaginal product. Instead of eliciting *taṣdīq* or engendering God-talk, a weak imaginal product may draw attention to itself as opposed to the theological concepts it ought to concretize.

One example is a simple, amateurish, but nonetheless widely shared audiovisual *karāma* anecdote concerning the relatively obscure Abuya Syar'i of Ciomas, Banten. The five-minute video consists of two anecdotes framed by the narrator as "among the many *karāma*s of Abuya Syar'i witnessed by his disciples" (JEJAK PARA WALI 2020). The narrator spends the first minute of the video introducing Syar'i before moving to the first of the two anecdotes. This anecdote tells the story of a Malaysian who visited Syar'i to seek a particular gecko (*tokek*) that he needed for a medicinal purpose. Upon hearing the purpose of his visit, Syar'i excused himself and went to his bedroom. Moments later, Syar'i came back to the reception room empty-handed. The Malaysian guest was disappointed before seeing a giant reptile creeping behind Syar'i. Syar'i told his guest that the reptile is the gecko he is looking for. But the Malaysian was so scared by what he saw that he decided to leave. The second anecdote tells the story of two mountains located behind Syar'i's house. The narrator explains that the mountains used to be located elsewhere before Syar'i moved them – with God's help – to their current location. The reason being that Syar'i likes to teach his disciples about nature. He would often discuss the sun, the moon,

and the clouds while pointing at them. Having the mountains behind his home thus allows him to point to them as he teaches. The narrator then quotes Syar'i directly that "the purpose of creation is to serve as signs to help humans know God." The narrator concludes by asking the viewers to think deeply about the two *karāma*s, for they are testaments to God's omnipotence.

As the narrator tells the two anecdotes, the screen shows a series of images. There are photos of Syar'i sitting with his disciples, photos of two mountains, as well as a short video of a hungry-looking Komodo dragon to illustrate the giant gecko that sent shivers down the Malaysian guest's spine. Direct quotations from Syar'i read by the narrator are also shown on screen. Perhaps owing to its audiovisual format, this *karāma* anecdote enjoys significantly more attention than the textual variants. This post has been viewed by 1.9 million people, liked by 28 thousand people, and shared by four thousand. It was first posted on May 3, 2020, on a Facebook *TV programme* account Current News (*Berita Terkini*) that produces various audiovisual Islamic content, mostly sermons.

The post elicited 863 comments. Among the comments are those that question the anecdote's veracity. Such comments often entice others to respond, either affirming the skeptics or admonishing them for their denial of *karāma*. Observe the following:

> Ali: Moving a mountain? Seriously? Sir, don't dream too much!

> Soenarto: Ali, this is not a dream. If this is a dream, then the stories of the *wali songo* are false. You are stupid. This is *karāma* from God.

> Ali: Soenarto, legends are for putting one to sleep. Don't be daff! It is impossible to move mountains. The person who created this post is a fool. Those who believe it must have a very low IQ, aka idiots!

Bambang: Ali does not believe in the wonders (*keajaiban*) of God. Surely, he is not a Muslim!

Peggy: Ali, for us, there is nothing impossible in this world so far as God wills it. If God wills it, a pious person can even make a whole island disappear in the blink of an eye.

Darsam: Ali, do you know that the Demak mosque was built overnight by the *wali songo?* But then again, for you, that is just a legend.

Hoegeng: May God grant his guidance to those who deny the *karāma* of God.

Yarman: Moving mountains? hmmm… This reminds me of a cigarette ad. Let's use our brains, brothers…

Ari: Yarman, everything can happen as long as God wills it. Those who deny *karāma* are infidels.

Rini: The story sounds like a *Mahabharata* film that I watched when I was a kid. Only the monkey God Hanuman can move a mountain [laughing emoticon].

Mansur: Sounds like a scene from a kung fu film. By the way, that is not a gecko. That is a Komodo dragon. What a hoax…

This audiovisual anecdote engenders lively God-talk among people – both men and women – who do not know one another. If *karāma* anecdotes are traditionally shared in homosocial settings among friends and acquaintances, their reproduction on Facebook has allowed for the emergence of heterosocial publics consisting of strangers, *nahdliyin* or otherwise, who are interpellated by the anecdotes. Facebook provides a digital platform in and through which strangers can respond to one another's position, eliciting theological debates that can easily turn ugly. Actors question each

other's faith or intellect. Refusal to assent to the veracity of the anecdote can easily be construed as signaling a lack of faith. Yet some, like Rini and Mansur, point out the resemblance between the anecdote and films of Indian mythology or Chinese martial arts. Mansur even calls on the discrepancy between the narration of the anecdote and the visual projected on the screen, which for him makes the overall veracity of the imaginal product suspect. Such a comment indicates how the visuals that are meant to reinforce the narration may indeed fail to deliver, thereby undermining the overall coherence of the imaginal product.

Interestingly, in this particular case, there are responses from people who claim to personally know Syar'i. These comments call into question the authority of the anonymous producer of the anecdote:

> Bambang: Please do not invent things. I know Abuya Syar'i well, and he never likes superfluousness. I apologize for the audacity of this post.

> Karim: The producer of this video is a liar. Abuya Syar'i is not like what the video portrays.

> Muhammad: I know Abuya Syar'i. This video portrays him negatively. He is a good scholar, a pious man. He teaches what the Prophet taught. Nothing of this sort.

> Jimi: Muhammad, perhaps you do not truly know him. You should reread the *karāma* of the saints.

> Muhammad: Jimi, I believe in *karāma*. But to move mountains? I think that is no longer *karāma*, but a *muʿjiza* [miracles reserved for the prophets]. We should not equate the power of saints with that of the divine.

> Jimi: Prophets have *muʿjiza*, but saints have *karāma*, all come from God. If God wills it, then it is possible, even if we deem it strange.

The foregoing conversations illustrate how *karāma* anecdotes take lives of their own beyond the people who are featured in them or those who know them. Three comments, written by those who claim to know Syar'i personally, deny the veracity of the anecdote. But as can be seen in Jimi's response, that does not really matter as what is at stake is the possibility of *karāma*. It seems that for Jimi, it does not really matter whether the particular anecdote is factual. What truly matters is the possibility of *karāma* precisely because it pertains to the theological notion of God's omnipotence.

While Facebook opens up new possibilities in the production and circulation of *karāma* anecdotes, it is also important to take into account its continuity with long-established patterns of *karāma* circulation. Traditionally, *karāma* anecdotes do service to marginal religious figures and sacred sites. Here we see a similar dynamic whereby Facebook allows the relatively obscure Syar'i to be known to a broader public. Equally important is how *karāma* anecdotes have always had an ambiguous relation to Islamic authority, and their circulation is often unregulated and free of the hierarchies that claim centrality to public religion. Similar to the circulation achieved through oral telling, Facebook enables wide circulation of *karāma* anecdotes without approval from any established authority or those associated with actors featured in the anecdotes. This suggests how the digital infrastructure opens up new possibilities for religious practice while simultaneously allowing for the continuity of established patterns.

Conclusion

The squabble between Muhammad and Jimi is one of the many examples of digital God-talk engendered by the circulation of *karāma* anecdotes on Facebook. Such dissensions indicate that there is more to *karāma* anecdotes than the issue of facticity. It is in this sense that we can begin to understand how *takhyīl*, or creative imagination, operates as an affordance to *taṣdīq*. *Takhyīl* serves to provoke wonders and awe. In this sense, they are no different from myths, legends, Mahabharata films, or Kung Fu movies. When framed theologically, they become a means of perceiving God's omnipotence. Assenting to or denying the truth of the anecdotes can,

therefore, be construed as a theological practice. Insofar as the practice of *takhyīl* and *taṣdīq* has now been made possible by, and occur in and through Facebook, then the social media platform has become a new infrastructure of theology.

Karāma anecdotes travel through contentious social mediascape. As they circulate, they attempt to create positions and recruit social actors to occupy them by inviting them "to construct practices of self-making in their terms" (Briggs 2007, 556). By liking, loving, sharing, or commenting on them – whether positively or negatively – Facebook users utilize the social media platform to position themselves in the anecdotes' communicable cartographies, including as believers. As I have discussed in this article, the term *taṣdīq* conveys a more complex meaning than what is denoted by the term *believing*. As described by Muslim theologians, the term does not only mean to regard what is knowable to be true but also means incorporating that which is held to be true into one's own moral integrity as a person (Smith 1979, 105). *Taṣdīq* involves recognition, affirmation, appropriation, and actualization. One assents to the reality of *karāma* by, among others, positive engagements with *karāma* anecdotes. This may entail yielding to such anecdotes and allowing oneself to be interpellated by them into one of the available discursive capacities that can aid their reproduction.

A social media platform like Facebook thus opens up the possibility for ordinary Muslims who do not know one another to digitally assent to and participate in theological questionings, inferences, recognition, and disputations. While Facebook may generate publics that consist of people coming from similar religious orientations (like the case of Toha and his fellow *nahdliyin*), the social media platform also engenders heterosocial arenas for debates between people representing different theological positions (see the case of Abuya Syar'i). Facebook certainly facilitates God-talk, heated or otherwise, involving men and women of various backgrounds that seldom takes place offline, at least in Indonesia. In this sense, it has come to function as a digital infrastructure of theology.

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Notes

[1] See three recent collections of essays: *Practicing Islam through social media in Indonesia*, edited by Martin Slama (2018); *Online publics in Muslim Southeast Asia,* edited by Martin Slama and Bart Barendregt (2018); *Piety, celebrity, sociality*, edited by Martin Slama and Carla Jones (2017).

[2] Here, I am rephrasing Webb Keane's definition of semiotic ideology as "basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world" (2003, 419).

Humor, Piety, and Masculinity: The Role of Digital Platforms in Aiding "Conversations" Between Islamic Preachers and *Waria* in Indonesia

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Abstract:

This article explores the influence of digital platforms in opening up ways for Islamic preachers in Indonesia to conduct dakwah *and connect with their Muslim audience using distinct affective mechanisms, such as localized humor, pious activism, and display of Islamic knowledge–authority. Since 2016, influenced by online preachers who have earned a loyal following through YouTube, there has been a spike in national interest toward the Islamic discourse of immorality associated with the globalized LGBTQ liberation movement. In this article, I will investigate the role of digital* dakwah *in perpetuating a moral discourse against gender nonconforming expressions and reinforcing the popular discourse of embodying daily Islamic piety to preserve the morality of the Indonesian nation. I am specifically interested in examining the digital presence of* Ustadz *Abdul Somad and* Ustadz *Felix Siauw, two prominent Indonesian Islamic preachers, and their particular "interactions" and views toward* waria *communities in Indonesia. Using evidence from YouTube, I distinguish and illuminate three affective mechanisms used by Islamic preachers and* waria *to engage in the broader discourse of LGBTQ rights and gender nonconformity in Indonesia: carpool* dakwah*, humor, and religious authority.*

Introduction

In Indonesia, popular attitudes surrounding LGBTQ communities took a radical turn in the past two decades, shaped by a growing number of Islamic preachers who began focusing on LGBTQ issues as a crucial part

of their message against the rise of immorality and secular attitudes in the country. Preachers' arguments against visible expressions of LGBTQ identity in Indonesia stand in tension with the growing circulation of globalized LGBTQ values that have also entered mainstream sociocultural spheres in Indonesia. Since 2016, influenced by *dakwah* (preaching) figures who have earned a loyal following through their popularity on mainstream media and digital platforms, there has been a spike in national interest toward the Islamic discourse of immorality associated with the globalized LGBTQ liberation movement.

The year 2016 was pivotal in transforming the Indonesian religious and political scenes. This year marked the rise of Islamist mass mobilizing efforts to denounce the leadership position of the former Governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama; the first Christian and ethnically Chinese Jakartan Governor who was inaugurated in November of 2014 (Peterson 2020). Scholar of Islamic politics, Greg Fealy, reports that in 2016, Islamist organizations under the umbrella of the *212 Movement* organized the *Defending Islam Action*, mass demonstrations that sought "to demand action against […] Purnama, for alleged blasphemy against Islam" (Fealy 2016). Fealy claims that the second rally held on November 4, 2016, "had attracted an estimated 150,000 to 250,000 people," while the third rally on December 2, 2016, attracted 500,000 people in estimates, "making it probably the largest single religious gathering in Indonesian history" (Fealy 2016). The influence of these 212 mass demonstrations has also ignited debates among political commentators and scholars of Indonesian Islam about whether or not Islamist groups represent "genuine sentiments among the [Indonesian] population" and if these events "indicate a considerable shift in the religious, social and political attitudes of Indonesians" (Mietzner and Muhtadi 2018, 2). Marcus Mietzner and Burhanuddin Muhtadi claim that while there is "a considerable decline in conservative and radical attitudes between 2010 and 2016," their data show that there is a significant increase in feelings of intolerance shared among Muslims from different geographical, economic, and social backgrounds in 2016 (Mietzner and Muhtadi 2018, 3).

The *212 Movement* provided a platform for Muslims from intersecting class backgrounds expressing certain ideologies of intolerance to take part in mass political actions and moral debates that affect the construction of modern pious subjects in Indonesia. By making spaces for intolerance, Islamic preachers and leaders within the *212 Movement* were able to challenge contemporary sociocultural phenomena they viewed as blasphemous, particularly LGBTQ activism and its role in sparking new expressions of rights and morality in Indonesia. As the *212 Movement* gained traction, Muslim political figures who were concerned about the wider discourse on moral panic, also took part in amplifying religious sentiments against the rise of LGBTQ discourse in the country. The Indonesian Minister of Higher Education, Muhammad Nasir, for instance, tweeted about his attempt to ban LGBTQ organizations on all university campuses on January 24, 2016, illustrating how 212 organizers were not the sole perpetrators and agents behind the spread of anti-LGBTQ discourses following the 2016 heightened political moment in Indonesia.

In 2016, *Human Rights Watch* (2016) claims that "the combination of government officials, militant Islamists, and mass religious groups stoking anti-LGBT intolerance led to immediate deterioration [and condemnation…] of LGBT individuals." Within the *212 Movement*, two preachers who have focused significantly on addressing issues of gendered and homosexual deviance were *Ustadz* (an Arabic–Indonesian term that refers to Islamic teachers) Abdul Somad and *Ustadz* Felix Siauw. Known for their rhetoric of humor and strong, emotional preaching tone, Somad and Siauw's public *dakwah* instantly attracted the mainstream Indonesian Muslim audience. Aided by the rise of YouTube as a popular digital platform in Indonesia, Somad and Siauw's *dakwah* content that was initially broadcasted on national television has now moved into the digital realm.

The work of Hew Wai Weng has illuminated how social media technology in Indonesia opens up new opportunities for Islamic preachers to urge "Muslims to uphold Islam as a way of life and a political ideology" through forming an intimate connection with their followers online

(2018, 61). Focusing on Siauw, who communicates with his followers (mainly women) via YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram, Hew claims that through social media, Siauw practices "visual *dakwah* and Islamist persuasion" strategy that is "fun yet radical, colourful yet conservative, [and] interactive yet dogmatic;" allowing Siauw to use social media to "normalize religious radicalism" (Hew 2018, 76). It is through this context that figures like Somad and Siauw begin relying on digital platforms to primarily conduct preaching, in an attempt to reinforce the idea that embodying heteronormative ideals of gender and sexuality is crucial to the preservation of Islamic morality in Indonesia.

Today, one of the most marginalized, surveilled, and misunderstood communities within the Indonesian discourse on LGBTQ rights is *waria* (for consistency, I will use this term as singular and plural)*,* a gender nonconforming community native to Indonesia. Despite the long history of acceptance and tolerance toward *waria* communities in Indonesia, in recent years, *waria* have begun receiving a spike in negative attention through their association with globalized LGBTQ discourses. Anthropologist Benjamin Hegarty suggests that *waria*, as a gender category, first emerged in the late 1970s and is "a combination of the Indonesian words *wanita* (woman) and *pria* (man)" (2019, 48). Indonesian scholar, Dian Maya Safitri, provides a more ambiguous interpretation of *waria*'s identity in her work. Safitri suggests that *waria* embody "a subordinate position within masculinity; not because they do not conform to the mainstream of heterosexual orientation, but rather because of their awareness that they are physically born as males, though some of them have undergone genital-changing surgery and practice [feminine self-expressions]" (2013, 93). Based on Safitri's nuanced articulation of *waria's* gender presentation and identity, I believe that ambiguous and pluralist values and language surrounding gender in Indonesia significantly influence how *waria*, as well as non-*waria* communities, understand their gendered subjectivity.

Within popular Islamic discourses on *waria*, there is often a conflation between *waria* and gay men, stemming from the presumption that *waria* feminine presentations reflect the deviant desire of gay men. While there

is much research to be done to distinguish the two subjectivities, for the purpose of this article, I will limit my focus on the experience of gender nonconforming *waria* to examine their specific online reactions to anti-LGBTQ discourses. Even though the mainstream Indonesian population still generally perceives *waria* as male, it is important to recognize that *waria*'s subjectivity embodies a sense of in-betweenness that should not be simplified through a primarily Eurocentric identity category like transgender or male transvestites. To honor the ambiguity of *waria*'s gender identity, I will use the local terminology, *waria*, to describe subjects who identify with this gender category in the digital data I draw on. I will also use the "she–her–hers" pronoun because I believe that it is the pronoun they may prefer in English (in Indonesia, the third person pronoun, *dia*, is gender-neutral), though I recognize that some *waria* still embody masculinity and may prefer identifying with a different pronoun.

This research is part of a broader project that will involve offline ethnography and interviews. Due to limitations from COVID-19, however, I was not yet able to integrate offline methods into this research. I am also aware that due to the popular reduction of *waria* as homosexuals and male in the scholarships, statements, and reports I cited in this article, gay men in Indonesia are also significantly affected by Islamic preachers' narratives on *waria*. Within the limit of my research, I have not delved into how gay men respond to anti-LGBTQ discourse (Thajib 2014), which certainly limits the data on feelings and emotive responses I examine in this article. In this article, I ask: How do *waria* respond to Somad and Siauw's online preaching about their communities and gendered subjectivity? What cultural, linguistic, and emotive mechanisms do preachers and *waria* use to convey their stances toward the contemporary discourse of LGBTQ rights in Indonesia? Using evidence drawn from YouTube, I argue that there are three primary mechanisms used by Islamic preachers and *waria* to engage in discussions surrounding issues of LGBTQ rights and *waria* in Indonesia.

I call the (1) mechanism "carpool *dakwah*." Utilized primarily by Siauw, carpool *dakwah* illuminates the way Islamic preachers employ accessible

casual environments, such as a car ride, to deliver their *dakwah* and political stances against gender nonconforming expressions. The (2) mechanism is humor. In their *dakwah*, Siauw and Somad can be seen tapping into the negative emotions (anger, shame) of their audience by articulating their gendered ideology through Indonesian metaphors and masculinized humor that point to *waria*'s failure to practice Islamic ideals of masculinity. Simultaneously, *waria* are also adopting humor as a response by reclaiming slurs used against them and returning to their religious communities to advocate for their agency as Muslims. The (3) mechanism is religious authority. Even though humor is commonly deployed by preachers and *waria* in their respective advocacy, both groups also significantly return to Islam and the Qur'an as a way to find legitimacy in their claims toward supporting or denouncing the existence of LGBTQ communities in Indonesia.

Using "emotive politics" as a theoretical framework, a concept put forward by young Indonesian scholars Aulia Nastiti and Sari Ratri, I will demonstrate how the three mechanisms described above reach their effectiveness due to their ability to activate certain emotions of shame, anger, and anxiety in their Muslim audience (Nastiti and Ratri 2018, 201). For instance, "by claiming authoritative knowledge of religion, [Islamic preachers like Somad and Siauw] exploit emotional aspects of piety to define the rights and the wrongs of political choices [such as supporting LGBTQ narratives and electing a non-Muslim official]" (Nastiti and Ratri 2018, 198). While this article focuses on the politicization of emotions in online preaching, the phenomenon of affective *dakwah,* which signifies the use of emotion and intimacy for political–religious goals, has predated the internet. The work of James Hoesterey (2015) points to the great influence of emotions in shaping the *dakwah* performances of prominent male preachers in the early 2000s, like celebrity preacher Aa Gym. Locating his analysis in "the rise and fall of [Aa Gym]," Hoesterey claims that Aa Gym rose to prominence due to his uniquely emotive mode of preaching that combines Sufi elements of "the ethical heart with self-help slogans of Western popular psychology" (2015, 1).

Facilitated by the emergence of the internet as a new medium of preaching, there has been a significant increase in preachers' utilization of emotions to spread political messages in their digital *dakwah* that promotes elements of "emotional reciprocity, […] community of trust," and information sharing between people (Abidin 2017, 2). Before delving further into my examination of emotive politics, I will discuss the dynamics of digital *dakwah* on YouTube, followed by a comparative analysis of the three different strategies deployed by Islamic preachers and *waria* to assert their positionality toward issues of gender nonconformity in Indonesia.

Emotions, *Dakwah*, and the Rise of YouTube

Internet platforms and social media have opened up an opportunity for preachers in Indonesia to conduct *dakwah* widely and exercise their religious authority in defining moral, political, and cultural expectations for Muslims. As Muslims increasingly turn to online *dakwah* content for religious and moral guidance, Islamic preachers, as a result, possess a greater capacity to influence the inner emotions and ethical beliefs of their pious Muslim subjects. Anthropologist Martin Slama (2017) argues that digital platforms have aided a form of "mediated intimacy" between Islamic preachers and their followers, in which preachers use digital communication apps to directly contact their followers and introduce them to trendy, affective concepts to promote the daily embodiment of Islamic piety. Slama centers his analysis on the notion of "charging the heart," a popular concept used by preachers and their followers to characterize their intimate, personal *dakwah* engagement, in which their direct communication is itself perceived as an act of embodying piety. This demonstrates the power of digital platforms in expanding the influence of *dakwah* forums and leaders in Indonesia, particularly as the internet allows them to promote religious teachings on a mass scale and connect more intimately with a wider audience.

In 2019, an Asia–Pacific focused network company, *Greenhouse*, published an article claiming that 88 percent of active internet users in Indonesia spend their time on YouTube, making YouTube the most

popular social media platform in the country (Greenhouse 2019). Due to its popularity, YouTube has become one of the most popular platforms for *dakwah* today. Using Google Trends, a free statistics tool provided by Google, I was able to track search statistics on YouTube using keywords. Through typing "Abdul Somad" as a keyword, I found that he appeared for the first time as a popular search term on YouTube in April of 2016; "Felix Siauw" appeared as a search term as early as 2012. Google Trends also show that the peak of searches for both Somad and Siauw happened in December of 2017.

As preachers possess a greater capacity to reach their followers and promote moral lessons online, Somad and Siauw's *dakwah* content on *waria* and homosexual subjects has successfully garnered millions of views, turning them into two of the most important conversation leaders and spiritual guides in the broader discourse of morality that produces narratives against LGBTQ communities in Indonesia today. Somad and Siauw, who are known for their emotional gestures and tones in *dakwah*, turn their preaching and teaching into an affective mechanism to shape their moral, political pious subjects.

In their article *Emotive Politics*, Aulia Nastiti and Sari Ratri (2018) contextualize the growing political Islamization over the past two decades in Indonesia by examining the rising influence of Islamist organizations and political Islam in 2017. Nastiti and Ratri suggest that contemporary figures behind Islamist organizations utilize certain emotive mechanisms, such as a strong preaching tone that exposes anger and shame, to trigger certain reactions in their pious audience. Through the use of emotional tone and physical gestures (waving and pointing at crowds), preachers use their religious authority as a mode for controlling and shaping the collective attitudes of Muslims toward certain political ideologies (2018, 198). Nastiti and Ratri claim that "Islamic groups, by claiming authoritative knowledge of religion, exploit emotional aspects of piety [such as *malu* (shame) and *kegelisahan* (anxiety)] to define the rights and the wrongs of political choices," such as their claims that LGBTQ practices and electing a non-Muslim official are inherently sinful (2018, 198).

The Islamist movement's claim about the way LGBTQ identity influences moral destruction successfully taps into mainstream Indonesian Muslim's consciousness of their public performance of gender, desire, and piety. In their attempt to invite their contemporary Indonesian pious subjects to strive toward protecting and embodying Islamic morality, religious authorities behind the mass mobilizing organization would often treat nonnormative expressions of gender and sexuality as a marker of immorality and sin. Therefore, the effectiveness of Islamist organizations' mass mobilizing message that targets LGBTQ narratives relies heavily on their ability to "shape individuals into pious political subjects," which is possible due to the significance of Islamic piety and everyday religious practice in the lives of the Indonesian Muslim majority population (Nastiti and Ratri 2018, 200). This political strategy of using theologically grounded moral articulations to reshape Muslims' emotional and religious sentiments toward the contemporary LGBTQ movement is exemplified in YouTube *dakwah* videos by Somad and Siauw, as well as *waria* communities, which I will examine in the next sections.

Crash Course on Masculinity Through Carpool *Dakwah*

Once viewed as a loose outlet for expressing decadent and immoral behaviors, the internet has become one of the most accessible venues for enforcing and teaching the practice of Islamic piety in Indonesia today. As Eva F. Nisa has pointed out, internet platforms are "used by practicing Muslims in Indonesia to enhance their religious practices and conduct *dakwah*," transforming the internet into a space of "diverse interpretations of Islam" (Nisa 2018, 24). Through the internet, Felix Siauw has turned into one of the most celebrated icons behind digital *dakwah* movements centering preachers who position themselves "as moral guardians that strive to introduce Islamic morality and combat moral decay" (Nisa 2018, 25). On his official YouTube channel, Siauw has a series called *#NgajiEverywhere*, a hashtag he also uses in many of his posts on other digital platforms like Twitter and Facebook (Siauw 2020).

Ngaji is a colloquial Indonesian term that refers to the recitation of the Qur'an, but it also generally means embodying or absorbing Islamic knowledge through the Qur'an and other religious texts. "Ngaji everywhere," in a sense, is a *dakwah* praxis created by Siauw that promotes the act of learning and embodying Islam anywhere, including in casual environments like a car. Siauw's unique methodology of preaching in a moving car in his YouTube channel is what inspires my concept of carpool *dakwah*. Carpool *dakwah*, on the one hand, demonstrates Islamic preachers' creative approach to digital *dakwah*; and on the other hand, also shines a light on Islamic preachers' way of reinforcing Islamic morality through emphasizing the sinfulness and immorality of the LGBTQ community.

In October 2018, Siauw uploaded a YouTube video titled *Perilaku Kaum Nabi Luth* (the behaviors of Prophet Lot's community). This video was released as a part of his *#NgajiEverywhere* series on YouTube. In this 20-minute-long video, Siauw is shown driving around a city with three younger men who seem to be his *santri* (pupils). Siauw and his pupils discuss the recent phenomenon of pro-LGBTQ celebrations and events in Indonesia. They frequently utilize homophobic jokes and local slurs for homosexual and transgender people to justify their Islamic stance against the lifestyle of *waria* communities. The young men in the video are also shown to ask Siauw many questions surrounding homosexual behaviors and "un-manly behaviors," creating a space where Siauw becomes the ultimate source of authority to the young men, legitimizing any religious interpretations he may offer regarding the position of LGBTQ communities in that instance (Siauw 2018).

In the video, Siauw and the three young men began their discussion by talking about *Miss Gaya Dewata*, a pageant show hosted by an LGBTQ organization in Bali that has a large number of transgender and *waria* participants (Siauw 2018, 0:10). The four of them are shown to laugh and chuckle, describing participants of the pageant as *anjing* (dogs). The term *anjing* is one of the most offensive terms that can be used to describe a person in Indonesian culture. While on the one hand, *anjing* (dogs) signify

one's *haram* (forbidden) and immoral behaviors, calling someone *anjing* is also a way of marking a person as shameful (*memalukan*), filthy (*najis*), and lustful (*bernafsu*). In the video, Siauw and the young men then exchange to one another, "anjing ketemu anjing berantem, [alias] cowok sama cowok; tapi ini seanjing-anjingnya, ngeliat anjing lain bukannya berantem, tapi dia pengen jadi perempuan [when dogs meet dogs, as in boys, they fight; but these people, as much as they are dogs, (when) they see another dog, they don't fight, instead, they want to be a girl]" (Siauw 2018, 0:56). From this statement only, the markings of shame onto the bodies and identities of *waria* and gender nonconforming communities occur on a multiplicity of levels.

First, as Siauw and his students introduce the topic of Miss Gaya Dewata, they characterize the pageant participants as animals. By calling *waria* and transgender participants dogs, not only does Siauw diminish the participants' full sense of humanity, labeling them as dogs also allows him to transform gender nonconforming subjects into a humorous topic because of their failure to submit to the macho and aggressive expectations of males as "dogs." Second, using localized Islamic figurative speech that associates homosexual men and *waria* as *najis* (impure and unclean), Siauw and the three young men's playful commentary turns into a powerful emotive mechanism for promoting gender norms and heterosexual ideals to the broader Muslim audience watching the video.

In his carpool *dakwah*, Siauw effectively exercises his religious authority as an *ustadz* who is closely guiding young Muslim students to the right path; he draws on Qur'anic verses to justify his gendered stance, while simultaneously utilizes masculinized humor and anti-LGBTQ slurs to contextualize the "unnatural" lifestyle of *waria*. The combination of humor, which pokes fun at the notion of gender nonconformity or "being gay," and Islamic figurative speech, such as "*astaghfirullah*" and "*nauzubillah,*" intensifies the marking of shame on to *waria* and their nonnormative gender expressions. In situations where one experiences tragedy, witnesses immorality, or undergoes hardships, these expressions are often conveyed as a way to seek God's forgiveness and refuge, in a sense

relieving oneself from sins. It is important to note that Siauw's conflation between the notion of being gay and being gender nonconforming shows that within the popular Islamic anti-LGBTQ discourse in Indonesia, gay men are often lumped together with critiques against *waria*'s gender nonconforming presentations. Siauw's carpool *dakwah*, in a sense, is a crucial site for defining normative expressions of gender and sexuality. As an emotive strategy, by delivering humor about *waria*'s failure as men and their immoral status under Islam, Siauw begins activating the emotions of shame and anxiety in his pupils, as his *dakwah* emphasizes the notion that *waria*'s lifestyle is punishable in the Qur'an and that supporting LGBTQ discourse will lead to one's moral destruction.

"I am not just a minority, I am a Minori-*Cong*:" Emotive Strategies in *Waria* Responses

On YouTube, members of the *waria* community have also contributed to the growth of Indonesian Islamic discourses about gender nonconformity by adopting humor as a weapon to combat the discomfort that Muslim communities express toward *waria*. As an emotive strategy, humor serves *waria* communities as a mechanism to negate and reduce the markings of shame and immorality imposed upon them by Islamic preachers. As an affect, conceptions of shame are "conditioned by sets of rules, technical approaches and history," meaning that local Islamic understandings of shame, surrounding *waria* communities in the contemporary Indonesian cultural and religious context, are not static and can be shifted through creating dialogues that trigger emotions of empathy and tolerance (Nastiti and Ratri 2018, 202).

The adoption of humor by *waria* as a way to connect with the larger Muslim community is visible in a video uploaded by *Islam Number One* in 2020 called *Banci ceramah di depan ribuan orang ini tanggapan ustaz Abdul Somad* (Banci spoke in front of thousands of people and this is ustad Abdul Somad's opinion). *Bencong* is a derogatory terminology used to describe "gay" expressions, male transvestites, transgender women, and *waria* in Indonesia. Since *bencong* also generally means

"effeminate male" and marks the failure to perform masculinity and manliness, many *waria* communities find "the derisive tone" of *bencong*, as an identity category, offensive (Boellstorff 2004a, 162).

In the video, the *waria* stands in the middle of thousands of people, as if she is performing *dakwah* in a large mosque space. She begins her speech by expressing her gratitude for the space she has been given to talk about some of her community's struggles. When she introduces herself, she asserts, "I am part of the LGBT community; however, I am not a minority, I feel like I am a minori-*cong!* Being a minority also includes my non-Muslim friends, but we are different, we are minori-*cong*" (Islam Number One 2020, 1:02). The *waria*'s reclamation of her identity automatically triggers the crowd to cheer and clap for her. Following the joke that she made about being a minori-*cong* rather than *bencong*, the *waria* expresses, "in this moment right now, I honestly feel like I am forming a new family with you all; so many of you have reached out to me on Facebook and Instagram, wanting to get to know me and sharing positive notes, I am very happy and grateful" (Islam Number One 2020, 1:29). The crowd then cheers and claps even louder, which further illuminates how the *waria*'s playful reclamation of *bencong*, a slur that is often used against her community, provides her with a way to humanize her community, which in turn pushes her Muslim audience to dissociate the notion of shame from *waria*.

After the loud cheering, the *waria* speaker begins addressing her past sins, which is then followed by another comedic performance to resolve the tension coming from her outward articulation of shame. She asserts, "for almost ten years now, how can I say this, I don't mean to be disrespectful, but for the past ten years, I have not been active, I am sorry to say this, but I have not followed any of my spiritual duties and I have, instead, committed *maksiat* [immoral actions]" (Islam Number One 2020, 1:49). She stutters as she speaks, illustrating a clearly visible position of discomfort and vulnerability. The word that she uses to refer to her past immoral actions, *maksiat*, is a loaded term that generally refers to actions prohibited by God. *Maksiat* can refer to a variety of things; however, the most severe acts of *maksiat* are "*zina* (illicit sexual relations), alcohol consumption,

theft, and murder" (Siregar 2019, 2). In the Malay–Indonesian cultural and religious cosmology, the term *maksiat* is often understood to refer to illicit sexual behaviors, such as prostitution, sex outside of marriage, and dating. Therefore, when the *waria* declares that she has committed *maksiat*, as an Indonesian, I understood her to refer to her past sexual history (possibly prostitution or engaging in same-sex relations).

As the *waria* notices the silence in her audience during the declaration of her past *maksiat* and her lack of spiritual nurturing, she then forms a joke and starts acting comedically. She says, "oooh, perhaps over here there's a few of you who messaged me personally in the past, sending me gross messages!" as she playfully whips her hair, gestures pointy fingers at her audience, and catwalks on the stage (Islam Number One 2020, 1:55). The crowd then cheers once again, clapping loudly as they witness the comedic relief performed by the *waria* speaker. I also interpret the *waria*'s expression as her subversive way of reminding the crowd of their own past *maksiat* and sins; something she is attempting to redeem by returning to her pious duty as a Muslim. This act of collective reminder also demonstrates the *waria*'s active participation in broader *taubat* narratives (the act of repenting and purifying oneself from sins), often promoted by Islamic preachers.

From this video, it is evident that the *waria* subject stands on a precarious ground as she exposes her vulnerable position as a gender nonconforming Muslim who is seeking acceptance from the crowd in front of her. At the same time, she utilizes humor to turn conversations surrounding *waria*, a topic that brings a level of discomfort to her audience, into a more lighthearted topic. In a paradoxical sense, the humorous act of reclaiming an anti-*waria* slur and performing funny effeminate moves becomes an emotive strategy that allows the *waria* speaker to perform a sense of agency and express her gendered subjectivity in front of an intimidating crowd of Muslims. Thus, the *waria*'s performance of humor can also be interpreted as a significant display of power. Even though the *waria* perpetuates the marking of shame onto her body by referring to herself a "minori-*cong*," the humor that she uses also enables her to engage with her Muslim crowd on a more intimate level. In contrast to Siauw's use of humor as a way to create barriers

between pious Muslims (demonstrated through his pupils) and LGBTQ people, the *waria*'s humor is a bridging mechanism that illuminates her resistance to the physical, emotional, and religious boundaries that lie between her community and the pious Muslim crowd.

Constructing Authority Through Pious Engagement with Islam

The most frequent emotive mechanism used by Indonesian preachers, *waria*, and pro-LGBTQ advocates, in their response to the discourse of LGBTQ rights, is a return to Islamic teachings and holy book as a source of guidance. This use of Islamic authority is particularly visible in Abdul Somad's YouTube preaching, which, in contrast to Siauw's more informal approach to *dakwah*, has a more traditional format. In the majority of his videos, he is often the main speaker and subject of the video, either through addressing a congregation or speaking directly to the camera. Even though Somad is also known for his humorous and approachable *dakwah* personality, through observing his preaching style on YouTube, I notice that he treats religious justifications as the most effective way to challenge issues surrounding gender nonconformity and LGBTQ rights in Indonesia.

In 2019, *SM Channel* uploaded a preaching footage of Somad responding to issues surrounding *waria* identity and the influence of mass media in normalizing their existence in Indonesian society. The video is titled *UAS Bolehkah Bencong Menjadi Imam Sholat?* (UAS [*Ustadz* Abdul Somad] are *bencong* allowed to perform as *Imam* [prayer leaders]?) In the video, Somad is shown to be filled with contempt and disgust as he responds to a question on a piece of paper about whether or not *waria* (*bencong*) can lead prayers. As he looks down on the piece of paper, he responds:

> I am sorry, but the person who asked this does not understand the distinction between *bencong* [waria] and *khuntsa*. This is a very serious issue. *Khuntsa*, according to *fiqh* [Islamic jurisprudence], excuse my language, are people who have two genitalia. For instance, when someone who looks like a man hits his puberty,

and suddenly he has menstruation, you bring him to the doctor, and you can seal the female genitalia to make him a man. But *bencong*, these are men! [Quoting a Qur'anic definition of male]: men are people who have a penis and testicles! Ask these people [*bencong*], what is your genitalia? They only got one kind [penis]! Then ask them again, why are you acting like a woman? And they go ehhh [making a high-pitch feminine gesture]. You know what, call the police department and put these people in a training program. And what's the program going to be called? BE A MAN. (SM Channel 2019, 1:38)

In a different YouTube video, Somad responds to the discourse of LGBTQ rights in Indonesia by denouncing a feminist–liberatory interpretation of a verse in the Qur'an, a verse that Aan Anshori, a pro-LGBTQ Muslim ally, claims to be an indication of how the Qur'an ethically recognizes the existence of gender nonconforming people. In his advocacy, Anshori emphasizes Muslims' duty to recontextualize Qur'anic verses through a liberatory approach stating that "a big failure within our Muslim community is our inability to comprehend that humans are complex beings; which leads to the failure of Muslims to read the Qur'an through a lens of equality" (Al-Khaf 2018, 0:29). Somad, however, disagrees with Anshori's take on the Qur'an's pro-equality message. He says, "the Qur'an is a text that should not be picked apart and manipulated, especially when it was written over a thousand years ago. What they do is take things out of context and fill in new interpretations" (Al-Khaf 2018, 5:51). Here, Somad makes a similar argument to Anshori, which is the need to contextualize the Qur'an and its verses; however, Somad believes that the Qur'an's truest context lies in its historicity as a product of the Prophet's time and must not be manipulated to fit into our modern context.

Somad then exclaims:

Yes, a verse in the Qur'an recognizes that some [biologically male people] do not have sexual desires toward women. Even though that verse can be interpreted to represent LBGT people, the Qur'an

also includes punishments for immoral behaviors, including theirs! An Imam at the Nabawi Mosque I met once told me that we must interpret these people as people with mental disorders, or people with sickness; it does not mean it accepts LGBT people. (Al-Khaf 2018, 7:12)

By claiming that the verse should not be interpreted as God's way of accepting LGBTQ communities, Somad once again taps into the discourse of what should be considered moral and immoral for Muslims. Through reminding the host of God's destructive punishment upon Lot's people in the Qur'an, Somad successfully intensifies the emotive elements of "fear, anxiety, and unpredictability" that comes with siding with pro-LGBTQ narratives as a Muslim (Nastiti and Ratri 2018, 201). Additionally, Somad's anecdote about the Imam he once met at the Nabawi Mosque, a Mosque built by Prophet Muhammad in Medina, can also be interpreted as a strategy for further legitimizing his religious authority and credibility as an *ustadz*.

Somad's strategy of utilizing his authority as a preacher to legitimize his claims about issues of gender nonconformity and homosexuality is also adopted by many *waria* activists, particularly those who belong to *Pesantren* Senin-Kamis Al-Fattah in Yogyakarta, Central Java. *Pesantren* is an Indonesian term that describes an Islamic educational institution. Enrolling in a *Pesantren* often includes an obligation for students to live in dorms alongside their peers and religious teachers, who also serve as their caretakers. *Pesantren* Senin-Kamis Al-Fattah is an Islamic boarding school dedicated to *waria*, where they are "taught how to perform the *shalat* (daily prayer), memorize *doa* (the invocation of prayers), and [...] recite the Qur'an" (Safitri 2013, 95). Ever since its establishment in 2007, the religious activism of *waria* founders and members of the Islamic boarding school has been heavily featured through a variety of Indonesian and international news–documentary channels on YouTube. The digital representation of Muslim *waria*'s religious advocacy on YouTube popularly exists alongside preaching content that challenges their embodiment of gender and deems their pious practice immoral. It is worth

noting, however, that Muslim *waria* activists do not have official YouTube channels like Somad or Siauw, and that their digital representation on YouTube is aided significantly through the efforts and projects done by national and international media.

In 2012, one of the first YouTube documentary films on *waria* at *Pesantren* Senin-Kamis Al-Fattah was uploaded by *VICE*, a Canada-based broadcasting media, which has garnered over four million views. In the video, the *pesantren* founder, Mariani, asserts that to her, "*waria* are humans" who were created by God, and as *waria,* they "all have the rights to worship" God (VICE 2012, 1:14). Mariani's refusal to stand by the discriminatory attitude shared by her Muslim communities is also echoed by a local *ustadz* featured in the documentary, who has personally chosen to provide spiritual nurturing and religious education for *waria* at the *pesantren*. The teacher explains, "there are many communities that see them as *haram* [forbidden], which is why I am taking a personal stance in believing that this boarding school is *halal* [lawful]. I feel a strong calling in my heart to guide them [*waria*] because they long for spiritual guidance and they sincerely want to practice piety in their lives" (VICE 2012, 4:44). The documentary then shows a scene of the *ustadz* introducing the concept of *sabar* (patience), to *waria,* where he illustrates that patience can eliminate sins and turn one into a more virtuous person. The *ustadz'*s lesson on *sabar* demonstrates that not only do *waria* return to Islam as a way to reconcile with God, but it is also equally important for Muslim leaders to provide *waria* with Islamic resources on how to cope with the negative attention they regularly face from their Muslim communities.

More recently in 2019, *CNN Indonesia* uploaded a YouTube documentary about the current reality of *waria* at *Pesantren* Senin-Kamis Al-Fattah as part of their documentary series called *CNN Indonesian Heroes*. This was a major exposure because, on the one hand, *CNN Indonesian Heroes* is one of the most-watched segments on CNN Indonesia; and on the other hand, the fact that Muslim *waria*'s religious dedication is recognized as a heroic act shows that mainstream media are also actively responding to the discourse surrounding *waria* that Islamic preachers have popularized.

In contrast to how the *pesantren* looks in the VICE documentary – a small home with a few tiny rooms for religious lessons – the CNN documentary shows that the Senin-Kamis Al-Fattah *pesantren* has developed significantly. The documentary depicts a few large classrooms and a bigger number of religious teachers, as well as *waria* students in the *pesantren*. The documentary begins with a scene of Shinta Ritri, a veiled *waria* who took over the *pesantren* leadership after Mariani passed away, teaching a group of *waria* how to read Arabic alphabets and the Qur'an. In a scene where she addresses what message Muslim *waria* at the *pesantren* hope to share with their Muslim communities, Ritri asserts:

> We [*waria*] are the same as you [Muslim communities]; we have the right to worship God. However, they [some preachers] say that *waria* can only worship God once they have fully become men. But what does that mean? What is our fault, exactly? Our worshipping is between us and God. If someone asks us in the past, whether or not we want to be *waria,* I can certainly say that we will say no. Why? Because being *waria* is filled with struggles and discriminations. We are the source of joke, insults, and we are deeply impoverished. How could you explain the way we choose to be *waria?* This is simply a destiny given by God. (CNN Indonesia 2019, 9:40)

Ritri's tone and facial expressions are deeply emotional as she attempts to represent the voices of Muslim *waria*, who demand their right to practice Islam and seek the acceptance of their broader Muslim communities in Indonesia. The sorrow, displayed on Ritri's face, becomes a powerful emotive visual that demonstrates the precarious position of Muslim *waria* in Indonesia and their strong desire to return to Islam as a mode of survival. Following Ritri's statement, the documentary depicts more scenes of *waria* conducting daily prayers, engaging in Qur'anic lessons, and holding religious meetings. There are also a few *waria* providing testimonies about how much the *pesantren* has helped guide them spiritually, and how through the *pesantren* education, many *waria* are now able to recite the Qur'an and have become better Muslims.

Through examining Somad's preaching and Muslim *waria* representation on YouTube, it is apparent that Islamic preachers and *waria* both strongly rely on Islamic theological concepts and religious texts to justify their views on the contemporary discourse surrounding *waria* and LGBTQ rights in Indonesia. It is important to note, however, that *waria* activism is significantly visible due to the efforts of Indonesian and international media in broadcasting their realities and religious activism. Even though *waria* are able to showcase their pious practices and religious commitment through mass media content on YouTube, *waria* do not have the same level of agency in expressing their theological interpretations because they do not have the authority possessed by Islamic preachers. In other words, while on the one hand, *waria* are able to demonstrate their pious gendered subjectivity and religious knowledge through YouTube documentary and news features, Islamic preachers still ultimately have a larger influence in the broader Muslim community because they earn legitimacy through occupying *dakwah* platforms, which allow them to exercise their Islamic authority over a large Muslim audience.

Conclusion: Between Recognition and a Non-Dialogue

In the past two decades, the religious and political spheres in Indonesia underwent a significant transformation through the development of policies that provided a platform for Islamic organizations to launch a discourse of moral panic in response to their perceived spread of immoral activities in Indonesia. One of the first policies that shaped the formation of a new consciousness toward the embodiment of piety in Indonesia is *RUU-APP*, an anti-pornography bill authorized in 2008 that sets up Islamic standards and guidelines for television and concert programs (Saat 2016, 558). Political scientist Norshahril Saat claims that the religious and legal endorsement of this bill by organizations like Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) shows that RUU-APP ultimately serves as a tool for Indonesian Ulema Council "to have authority in monitoring public morality" and to "obtain state recognition as moral gatekeepers" (Saat 2016, 558). The decades-long process of integration between mass Islamic organizations and the Indonesian state, which gained significant momentum in the

post-Suharto era, has paved the way for movements like 212 to attract participants across the nation. In 2016, the *212 Movement* became a unifying symbol that created legitimacy for Islamic organizations and preachers to utilize *dakwah* as a way to reinforce Islamic moral teachings on a mass scale, making *dakwah* a radically effective tool to shape Muslims' popular opinions and theological understandings of various social and political issues.

In a 2004 article, anthropologist Tom Boellstorff traces the contemporary "unprecedented series of violent acts against 'gay' Indonesians," which he claims to be a result of the collective redefining of Indonesian national identity through a masculinist, heterosexist, Islamic lens since the fall of Suharto's New Order regime in 1998 (Boellstorff 2004b, 465; see also Thajib 2014). Boellstorff asserts that the increase in negative attention toward homosexual and gender nonconforming communities in Indonesia stems from the emergence of political homophobia in the nation's religious and political spheres. Through political homophobia, Muslim politicians and authorities bring "together the direct object of nonnormative Indonesian men with the indirect object of contemporary Indonesian public culture, making enraged violence against *gay* men intelligible and socially efficacious" (Boellstorff 2004b, 469). It is through the post-Suharto Islamist-cum-nationalist discourse of protecting the sanctity of the Indonesian Muslim majority population that issues of LGBTQ rights began entering the realm of *dakwah* on YouTube, where the existence of *waria* is interpreted as Muslims' failure to embody ideals of Islamic masculinity.

Adding to Boellstorff's analysis, I have shown how *waria's* advocacy is influenced and to some extent championed by a globalized, secular, LGBTQ liberation movement, which challenges the alliance of local authorities like *dakwah* preachers and state officials who actively oppose LGBTQ rights. While there is a long history of LGBTQ activism in Indonesia, led by activists like Dede Oetomo and organizations like Lambda Indonesia (one of the oldest LGBTQ organizations in Southeast Asia), the popularization of Western LGBTQ discourse in the past two

decades has intensified Abdul Somad and Felix Siauw's desire to focus on issues related to *waria* in their YouTube *dakwah*. In recent years, *waria,* a gender nonconforming community native to Indonesia, has been one of the most heavily discussed subjects in *dakwah* content tackling issues of LGBTQ rights in Indonesia.

Contemporary Indonesian preachers powerfully deploy emotions of shame and guilt, often through humor, as a means to uphold normative gender roles and expressions of sexuality in response to the globalized LGBTQ discourse in the 21st century (Nastiti and Ratri 2018, 201). By characterizing *waria* as animals, effeminate men, and destroyers of morality, preachers launch their theological stance by "inviting people's […] guilt" and shame towards a certain political movement or social phenomenon they deem un-Islamic, such as the contemporary LGBTQ movement (Nastiti and Ratri 2018, 201). Preachers' fast-moving content on YouTube is also easily accessible, which allows Muslims across Indonesia to have the ability to self-educate themselves online on any issues through preachers' religious lens.

Waria communities, however, are not absent in online conversations taking place surrounding issues of LGBTQ rights in Indonesia. On top of mobilizing within their local communities, *waria* activists are also participating in many national and international digital projects that highlight their distinct approach to religious activism and advocacy for their rights in Indonesia. Some *waria* also adopt humor as a mechanism for survival as a way to reassert their agency and own up to the negative stereotypes used against them. In a sense, Muslim *waria* have reclaimed humor as a mode of emotive politics by transforming themselves into a lighthearted subject that triggers a feeling of normalcy and familiarity within Muslim communities – instead of giving in to Muslims' misconceptions and learned anxiety about their existence.

Even though YouTube has a great number of videos centering *waria*'s activism and preachers' *dakwah* on *waria* and LGBTQ issues, I could not find a video where Somad and Siauw directly take part in a discussion

with the *waria* community. As of now, the "conversation," between the two preachers and *waria* occurs indirectly on YouTube and is significantly aided by algorithms, as well as content creators who put together juxtaposing videos of preachers and *waria* on YouTube, making it rather a *non-dialogue*. This demonstrates that in reality, it is still incredibly difficult, or rather impossible, to host a direct and reciprocal dialogue between Islamic preachers and *waria*. Even though physically and digitally, these direct conversations have not taken place, my analysis has demonstrated that neither preachers nor *waria* are in denial of living alongside each other, and in a way, both groups express their recognition of each other's realities and Islamic positionalities. Despite the indirect nature of this communication, I have documented how preachers and *waria* are actively speaking *about* each other and participating in the broader discourse of Islamic morality in contemporary Indonesia rather than speaking *with* each other.

Using the concept of "emotive politics," I have demonstrated the importance of affective triggers and emotions surrounding Islamic piety and morality in the ways Islamic preachers and *waria* articulate their distinct positionality on the issues of gender nonconformity and the broader LGBTQ discourse (Nastiti and Ratri 2018). Through poking fun at *waria*'s "failure" to embody ideal masculinity in their preaching, for instance, combined with their active display of gestures and strong facial expressions, Somad and Siauw effectively intensify the markings of shame and immorality on to the bodies of *waria*. Simultaneously, through defining *waria*'s gender performance and "lifestyle" as sinful through the lens of Islam, Somad and Siauw are also able to trigger the emotions of fear, anger, disgust, and anxiety in their Muslim audience.

These affective triggers are crucial to the workings of emotive politics in *dakwah* spaces because, in Indonesia, political outcomes and social cohesion are largely defined by what is perceived as deviant through a lens of Islamic piety and morality. Through addressing issues of gendered deviance, exemplified by the lifestyle of *waria*, preachers embark on a mission to reshape and reconfigure new ways of understanding pious

practices and embodying Islamic morality that conform to ideals of heterosexuality and masculinity in the country. In a sense, not only does the cultural relevance of *dakwah* indicate the importance of performing piety to the Indonesian Muslim majority population; *dakwah*, and online *dakwah* in particular, is also a crucial site for reshaping popular attitudes and reworking political dynamics in Indonesia, where preaching becomes a mode for asserting norms, articulating social expectations, and defining shameful behaviors in the modern context.

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Nahdlatul Ulama's "Funny Brigade": Piety, Satire, and Indonesian Online Divides

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Abstract:

Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama *(NU), arrived relatively late on the Islamic social media scene. By the time Nahdlatul Ulama leadership recognized and commissioned the need for online advocacy, a generation of young media-savvy preachers had already stoked the embers of sectarian divides and cast suspicion on those deemed secular or liberal. Even within Nahdlatul Ulama, a sprawling network of religious leaders and Islamic schools mostly in Central and East Java, the rise of social media revealed internal schisms about the meaning of Islam and the future politics of NU. By 2015, some Nahdlatul Ulama members began to speak in the name of an NU Straight Brigade (*NU Garis Lurus*) that proclaimed to return Nahdlatul Ulama to its original roots purportedly betrayed by current NU leadership. In response, a diverse group of NU youth – notorious for a love of humor – formed the NU Funny Brigade (*NU Garis Lucu*)*, *a social media community that used satire and humor to temper the accusations of NU Garis Lurus and to mobilize social media as a uniting force within Nahdlatul Ulama and Indonesia more broadly. In this article, I examine the interplay between these two Nahdlatul Ulama communities, paying special attention to how social media reveals fragments and fault lines, while also providing online space to bridge doubts and divides.*

Keywords:

Islam, social media, satire, religious authority, subjectivity, Indonesia

Over the last couple of decades scholars of Islam have been studying how diverse forms of Islamic media, new media, digital media, and social media are part of the constitution (and contestation) of religious authority, national politics, and global hegemony (Eickelman and Anderson 2003;

Kraidy 2017; El-Ariss 2019; Mandaville 2007; Moll 2018; 2012; Nisa 2017; Izharuddin 2017; Schulz 2012; Smith-Hefner 2007).[1] Much of the literature has its focus on how social media affords the digital space for various religiopolitical organizations to articulate visions of religion and nation. In his work on cassette sermons in Cairo, Charles Hirschkind (2001) challenged Habermasian understandings of the public sphere as a space for rational discourse and exchange, demonstrating how publics and "counter-publics" can be disciplinary not just deliberative, and affective not simply rational. Social media in Indonesia have become an especially elucidating way to understand the religious and political fault lines of the nation (Slama and Jones 2017; Slama and Barendregt 2018). Within a broader discursive approach, scholarly discussions of TV shows and pop stars are often deployed to elucidate broader debates about exegetical divides, civil society movements, radicalization, and gender and minority rights. Although my intent here is not to survey an impressive body of scholarship across disciplines and in diverse geopolitical contexts, these studies have brought important insights about power, religious authority, subjectivity, and the state.

Scholarly focus on Islamic media, most notably those studies on online terror groups, has tended to focus on the seriousness of social media and online worlds. With a few exceptions (Kraidy 2017; El-Ariss 2019), decidedly less attention has been devoted to the ludic corners of the digital world, the humorous spaces where digital and social media provide opportunities for religious humor and political satire. As Karen Strassler observes in her masterful work on (re)mediation in post-authoritarian Indonesia, "ludic images deploy remediation, repurposing, and reworking to generate new constellations of truth and modalities of revelation" (2020, 24). Whereas Strassler examines exposure, scandal, and the ludic as it relates to the impossibility of achieving the liberal democratic dream of transparency and truth, in this article, I pursue a parallel project that views the increasing popularity of humor and satire as important elements within public discourses about Islamic authenticity and legitimacy. I devote special attention to the online efforts by young activists in Indonesia's (indeed, the world's) largest Muslim organization, the traditionalist *Nahdlatul Ulama*

(NU). In particular, I explore how the recently-formed NU Funny Brigade (*NU Garis Lucu*) deploys humor as a way to disrupt digital spaces, draw attention to theological difference, and stake claims on the religiopolitical spaces of the nation.

By looking to the ludic, I want to understand the politics of online controversy across Indonesia's divided Muslim communities. I am especially interested in the affective force of satire, particularly how it summons, amuses, confuses, inspires, and even angers diverse viewers in online encounters. Reflecting increasingly acerbic rivalries between Nahdlatul Ulama and other religious and political organizations (see Fealy 2018; Nuraniyah 2020), NU Funny Brigade humor exposes perceived hypocrisies and challenges others' claims to religious authority. Occasionally this involves humor that might be understood as moral discipline that incites tensions, whereas other jokes are aimed to disorient, disarm, and defuse tensions. Beyond these more functionalist explanations related to religion, politics, and power, I suggest that satirical memes also reveal a ludic religious ethos among NU online activists that places great value on the relationship between humor and humility – a topic that has received little scholarly attention. Before returning to some conceptual moorings, allow me to briefly describe the background story of how NU Funny Brigade came into being in 2015 and has transformed within the wider world of Islam online.

Satire as Discipline

Nahdlatul Ulama is a modern traditionalist Muslim organization founded in 1926 as part of a wider response to the rise of reformist Islamic thought in Indonesia that was connected to global intellectual forces emanating from Cairo and various places in the Middle East. With much of its base in Central and East Java, NU went on to become one of several anti-colonial Muslim organizations that helped Indonesia eventually declare its independence in 1945. Over the last several decades, NU has taken varying approaches to party politics and national issues and several of its earliest leaders are now considered national heroes (Bush 2009; Fealy 1998). Nearly a century after its founding, NU continues to find itself in the position of vying with,

arguing with, and complaining about reformist influence in Indonesia. As an organization whose cultural clout resided mostly in the rural countryside of Java, NU was relatively late to join the online competition for religious authority. Beginning with NU Online, and later with various NU apps, WhatsApp groups, blogs, and websites, young NU digital activists began to catch up to those Salafist and reformist figures who had become much more adept at acquiring publicity to deploy as political currency amidst the many entanglements of Islam and nation in democratic Indonesia (Schmidt 2018; Slama 2020). To be sure, these myriad NU online activities were making a strong case for the idea that national democratic citizenship is indeed part of one's faith, not a deviation from it. More recently, however, NU's online activism began dealing with critique from traditionalist preachers *within* NU.

NU has a decentralized structure where its leaders on the national stage are not immune from criticism by local and regional NU leaders. The impulse behind NU Funny Brigade must be understood within this context of competition of ideas *within* NU, not only between traditionalist and reformist understandings of Islam. Some more theologically conservative NU scholars took issue with what they perceived as the liberal bias of many national NU leaders. This group of young, media-savvy, and more conservative NU preachers took on the moniker NU Straight Brigade (*NU Garis Lurus*). NU Straight Brigade's Twitter tagline is "straightening crooked thinking (*meluruskan pemikiran bengkok*)," and their leadership includes disaffected NU preachers with mostly local-level followings in their respective regions, M. Idrus Ramli (Jember), Yahya al-Bahjah (Cirebon, borderlands of West and Central Java), and Luthfi Bashori (Malang, East Java). Through print, digital, and social media the NU Straight Brigade took issue with what they felt was the wayward liberal direction of the current NU national leadership, especially figures like NU Chair K. H. Said Aqil Siraj who frequently relish in public polemics. A NU Straight Brigade retweet from December 4, 2019 shows a clip of the late NU Chair K. H. Hasyim Muzadi's 2012 sermon for members of the *Islamic Defenders Front* (FPI) where he refers to those subscribing to liberal Islam as "infidels in the making (*kafir yang belum jadi*)." Trying to settle his own score with the

then-new NU Chair Said Aqil, Muzadi proclaimed that whereas he truly guarded against any influences of liberal Islam during his tenure as Chair, "all of the liberals poured in" once Said Aqil took over. (Pemimpin Goblok 2019)

As part of Said Aqil's efforts to combat what he felt to be an onslaught of Salafist thought and a public mimicry of Arab custom and garb in contemporary Indonesia, he enjoyed sprinkling his own sermons with pithy phrases to provoke conservatives, such as "the longer the goatee, the more stupid the person." Although such tussles internal to NU have long histories and regional variation, Said Aqil is among many contemporary NU scholars and leaders who take inspiration from prior NU champions of liberal thought and religious pluralism such as the late Abdurrahman Wahid. Popularly known as "Gus" Dur (an honorific granted to sons of esteemed religious leaders, *kyai*), Wahid was celebrated by many (certainly not all) for his humorous approach to piety and politics.

So, in 2015 when Said Aqil and national NU leaders announced that "Islam of the Archipelago (*Islam Nusantara*)" would be the theme for its upcoming national congress and elections (held every five years), NU's self-proclaimed Straight Brigade took to social media to express their displeasure at the concept of "Islam Nusantara" which, in their view, was a harmful innovation with no referent in the Qur'an or *hadith* (Iqbal 2020). Mostly an online phenomenon, their leadership includes disaffected NU members with mostly local-level followings in their respective regions. Indeed, one of the more public leaders of the NU Straight Brigade, the popular preacher Buya Yahya in Cirebon, reportedly referred to the concept of "Islam Nusantara" as forbidden "pig disguised as goat meat." Whereas NU has always been a decentralized organization with plenty of animated disagreement, this self-proclaimed righteous wing of NU caused alarm among the more progressive NU online community and NU-related websites. Although we will get to satirical memes shortly, the meme below does not intend to be funny at all. Instead, it makes an ominous warning directed, implicitly, but obviously, at the NU Straight Brigade (Figure 1).

Figure 1: caption: "The bent nails won't be hit; it is those who are straight that will keep being hammered. Understand?" (NU GARIS LUCU 2019a)

This image provides a good example of how memes more closely approximate "affective hacking" (El-Ariss 2019) than the idealized forms of rational debate carried out in the Habermasian coffeehouses of Europe. While this particular image is not intended to evoke laughter, it forces the beholder to reorient themselves to the image and text, to figure out why, against the presumption of moral discipline, the straight nails would get hit. The individual author and perhaps even the specific intent are less important than the viewer's feeling of being hacked. Avowed fans of Said Aqil laugh gleefully, whereas the serious stakes of satire are most certainly felt differently by leaders of the NU Straight Brigade. Whereas NU Straight Brigade has its own trove of clever memes and witty insults that advance their theological arguments and detract from liberal-leaning NU leaders, for the sake of brevity in this article I have chosen to focus mostly on social media satire that takes aim at such conservatives within and beyond NU.

The NU Funny Brigade makes this form of ludic critique apparent in their tagline for various social and digital media accounts juxtaposed with an avatar of Gus Dur: "speak the truth, even though it's funny" (NU Garis Lucu 2019; Figure 2). This tagline, not an actual quote by Gus Dur, is nonetheless a clever adaptation of a well-known saying of the Prophet Muhammad (*hadith*) that states, "speak the truth, even though it's bitter."

Figure 2: caption: "Speak the truth, even though it's funny" (NU Garis Lucu 2019).

This creative reworking of religious themes has become the hallmark of NU Funny Brigade and other related social media producers in NU circles who turn to humor in order to address the serious business of religious authority, competing models of citizenship, and a general ethos towards everyday life. To further illustrate this point, consider the title given to a collection of Gus Dur's humorous essays, *To Counter through Jokes* (*Melawan Melalui Lelucon*; Wahid 2000). The precise translation of *melawan*, to counter, is a bit slippery. In the context of Gus Dur's humor, *melawan* could also intimate related, but much stronger, action verbs like resist, oppose, and even fight against. At the same time, Gus Dur's humor – and its invocation as a meme caricature by a younger generation of NU humorists – is intended to disarm, to defuse, and to minimize the overall significance of what is being so hotly argued, whether related to prohibitions on beer or theological defenses of Sufism and grave visitation. Also prominent in this meme is another famous Gus Dur-ism, *Just that, what's the fuss!* (*Gitu aja kok repot!*). This rhetorical statement is intended as the full stop to public debate, a rebuke about life and religion taken too seriously, too literally. This humorous slogan has been transposed, transfigured, and (re)mediated across a range of contexts from a Gus Dur parody on a satirical television program to DIY T-shirts and bumper stickers among young NU intellectuals. In what follows I examine how the NU Funny Brigade, in the tradition of Gus Dur, deploys humor as a

form of religiopolitical critique that variously pokes fun, mocks, chastises, and publicly shames those who are perceived to be *sok suci*, the "oh-so-pious" who trade on their public image for worldly ends.

Islam, Humor, and Subjectivity: The Funny Brigade as Religiopolitical Critique

As a form of visual critique images interpellate their subjects by publicly calling out the perceived hypocrisy of various strands of Islamists and Islamic conservatism, what meme creators believe to be the insincerity behind the public piety. As Christiane Gruber and Sune Haugbolle have observed with respect to visual culture in the Middle East, "the image serves as a powerful carrier of meaning as well as a sign that hails viewers by 'speaking' to them through the symbolic language of form, a kind of interpellation that in turn requires of them a number of active, interactive, and interpretive acts" (2013, xxiii). Yet, the summoning considered here is quite different from the Althusserian traffic cop yelling "hey you" to hail the citizen–subject from the perspective of the state apparatus (cf. Althusser 1977). The creators of satirical memes seek to cause a scene by exposing scandal and vice, whereas those being critiqued are intended to feel judgment, mockery, and public rebuke. Beholders might be hailed in this sense, but the actual effect on those being critiqued remains unclear. The NU Straight Brigade and others being critiqued have not exactly backed down from their own theological critique on account of such criticism. As we shall see, satirical memes can actually embolden followers of conservative preachers and boost their solidarity.

In an impressive analysis of digital culture during the Arab uprising, Tarek El-Ariss notes that forms of online interpellation do not neatly adhere to Althusser or Foucault's insistence on discourse, power, and the state apparatus (El-Ariss 2019, 157). El-Ariss explains the cultural and political force of the online exposure that social media can bring about, revealing various self-righteous public figures for who they "really" are. Drawing from metaphors of social media, El-Ariss conceives of the moral politics of scene-making as a form of "affective hacking": "Shedding light as opposed

to enlightening, the flashlight as opposed to the electric light, constitutes a visual and affective exposure (*fahd*) that shames, makes a scene, causes a scandal" (2019, 2). Whereas El-Ariss attributes the preoccupation with public exposure and scene-making to Arab cultural and literary traditions, we might also consider broader Islamic ethical concepts that are also at play in satirical memes in Indonesia (and elsewhere) that challenge the sincerity (*keikhlasan*) of self-styled religious figures who they accuse of shamelessly peddling a false piety, claiming their "real" intent is to show off their personal piety (*riya';* see also Husein 2017). Exposure promises transparency, yet memes are also subject to challenges to their own authenticity and sincerity.

In line with El-Ariss' understanding, I will attend to forms of "affective hacking" as moral discipline in the everyday, online worlds in Indonesia. As the special issue of which this article is a part suggests, online communities are diverse, crosscutting, never quite ideologically as cohesive as we scholars might want them to be, and always evolving, responding, retweeting, reframing, and reimagining moral debates about religious authority and political legitimacy. How, then, are we to understand parody and play, politics and piety? To the extent that there exist multiple and occasionally subversive digital realms, how can we account for those images that stray from our theoretical explanations about power and authority, or whose actual effects stray from their intended meanings?

As used by NU Straight Brigade, the juxtaposition of "line (*garis*)" with "straight (*lurus*)" evokes the sense of rows of soldiers. Indeed, one synonym for the root word *garis* is *baris*, whose grammatical form *barisan* refers to a group of soldiers. Whereas one could translate *Garis Lurus* as the "straight line" and *Garis Lucu* as the "funny line," I have opted for a more playful translation that imbues the "line" of troops with a greater sense of online sociality and community that reflects the competition of theological and political positions. NU Funny Brigade speaks to – and with – multiple audiences within NU, the wider Indonesian Muslim community, and even across religious traditions. These ludic spaces of digital and social media appear to engender identity-based digital *communitas* within certain NU ranks. Yet, satire is not always motivated by a desire to generate

organizational-cum-theological solidarity, or to convince the audience about particular theological positions, or even to discipline through public rebuke and shaming. Through a closer look at NU Funny Brigade, I consider how online satirical humor can also be about reorienting subjects, taking them aback, defusing potentially sensitive theological divides, and occasionally minimizing difference, whilst at other times memes are more direct and provocative about their theological and political messages. The aims of NU's social media producers – perhaps different from national-level NU religious leaders such as Said Agil – are not always to garner religious or political authority per se, but to disorient and discombobulate, to show the world as it supposedly is by turning it on its head, to tweak power more than to take it.

Following important early studies in Islamic media (Eickelman and Anderson 2003), we could understand the active use of social media by traditionalist Muslims of NU in terms of the competition for religious authority. There is certainly evidence for this argument. Related to their anxieties that online spaces end up spreading conservative and intolerant Islamic understandings, traditionalist Muslims such as those in NU were also aware that since the early 2000s new mediated figures of religious authority – whether on TV or Twitter – had encroached on their own religious authority and popular standing within Indonesian society. The rise of popular Muslim preachers – like Aa Gym as well as more recent celebrity preachers such as Felix Siauw whose religious authority depended more on their marketability than extensive religious education (Hew 2018) – was observed with no small amount of suspicion by traditionalist religious scholars. Especially for traditionalists whose own cultural and religious upbringing placed great value on village religious leaders (*kyai*), they worried what might become of the Indonesian *umma* if Muslims began to follow the teachings of those with less erudition in classical Islamic theology, jurisprudence, philosophy, and mysticism.

Consider one of the more popular Twitter memes frequently recirculated on social media that captures this anxiety of misplaced religious authority (Figure 3; NU GARIS LUCU 2015a).

Figure 3: caption: Panel 1: "Religious teachers in the Era of *Kitab Kuning* [literally, yellow books, indicating the traditionalist approach of learning opinions of classical Islamic scholars]: Concerning this case, various religious scholars have differing opinions. On page 1500 in *Muwatha*, Imam Malik says… whereas Imam Syafi'i in the book Al-Umm, page 900, says… If we return to the base of Islamic jurisprudence… personally, I am inclined toward… but I respect those with differing opinions. God knows best" (italics added). Panel 2: "Religious teachers in the Google Generation: The law clearly states this is forbidden. According to the writings of Ustad so-and-so at SuperIslam.com, the law clearly states this is forbidden. On his Twitter feed, sheikh so-and-so is of the same opinion. So, I am as certain as certain can be that any other opinion is wrong. Full stop!" (NU GARIS LUCU 2015a)

Under the title "Santri Google" (*santri* refers to an Islamic school student), the images contrast the traditionalist preacher on the left, who answers a student query by noting the many different opinions expressed by various *ulama*, with the media-driven religious authority figure ("Ustadz Generation Google") who angrily shouts that Islamic law clearly states that (this hypothetical issue) is *haram*, at least according to "Ustadz so-and-so from Islambenget.com" and "Syeikh so-and-so on Twitter." Based on the eyes and body language, this online Islamic authority is characterized with the course mannerisms of what some Indonesians stereotypically associate

with Arab culture, indicative of broader anxieties about the Arabization (*Arabisasi*) of what some feel to be an exceptional, and moderate, Indonesian Islam (Hoesterey 2013; Menchik 2019). Note also the contrast between the intellectual humility of the traditionalist preacher with the proud theological arrogance of the social media-dependent preacher: "I am as certain as certain can be. Any other opinion is wrong, full stop." A similar satirical ethos is readily apparent in this NU Funny Brigade tweet below (Figure 4; NU GARIS LUCU 2015b).

Figure 4: caption: Top tweet: "Being an Indonesian requires humor. Because here, celebrities are referred to as *ustadz* [religious teachers] whereas *kiai* [traditionalist Muslim leaders] are accused of being apostates only on account of difference of opinion." Bottom tweet: "Living in Indonesia requires intelligence–cleverness. Because here religious leaders who are experts in exegesis are accused as unbelievers, whereas those who have just begun to know Islam have become role models. :)" (NU GARIS LUCU 2015b)

Such humor resonates, in part, because of the increasing anxiety that the notion of NU as a necessary, enduring, and indispensable pillar of Indonesian civil society was being somewhat elided by the phenomenon of rising Muslim celebrities and the marketization of religious authority.

In this respect, the rise of religious authority figures beyond the more established religious organizations led to a renewed call for pride in NU, often displayed through NU Funny Brigade online memes, likes, and replies (Figure 5).

Figure 5: caption: "I am happy to be a member of NU" (NU GARIS LUCU 2019b).

To put it in market terms, televangelists and Islamic pop icons were taking an increasing amount of the market share of religious authority in Indonesia, while at the same time political parties like *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* (Prosperous Justice Party) were acquiring political capital within the state apparatus (Fealy 2008; Hasan 2012; Hoesterey 2016). Despite their delayed entrée onto the digital and social media scene, however, long-standing Islamic organizations such as NU are making up for lost time.

Importantly, the response to the dubious religious authority of celebrity Muslim figures has not always been to angrily question their credentials or to join in the chorus of calling others unbeliever (*kafir*). Instead, a generation of young NU online activists has turned to humor to make their case and to demonstrate the absurd hilarity of those who condemn others in order to establish their own political and religious legitimacy. Consider this tweet from NU Funny Brigade that pokes fun at the chronic declarations of various religious minorities as deviant unbelievers: "Everything that smells like communism is said to be

PKI [Indonesian Communist Party], everything that smells critical is said to be liberal, everything that smells like Iran is accused of being Shi'a. Why practice religion with the nose? NU Garis Lucu" (Wijaya 2017).

In this example, NU Funny Brigade summons the legacy of Abdurrahman Wahid, known as Gus Dur, the three-term chair of NU (1984–1999) and former Indonesian president famous for his humor and quick wit, who had a humorous quip about using our smell for religious matters. The humor plays on the Indonesian phrases for having a "scent (*berbau*, or *bernafaskan* in more refined language)." Rather than simply focus on the accusations hurled towards religious and political minorities like Shi'a and suspected communists (the targets of mass purge in the 1960s that still influence religion and politics today), the joke decenters, reorients, and discombobulates by questioning the very method of suspicion. The political ploy of finding supposed communists everywhere is not argued with (certainly not in any Habermasian sense of the public sphere as a space for rational deliberation) as much as it is mocked, laughed at for how ludicrous it sounds to many in the 2010s, discarded as not even worthy of rational engagement. Consider this NU Funny Brigade meme, but one of many similar examples, where evidence of an imminent communist revolt is clearly evident, at least if one looks hard enough and in a certain, most peculiar way (NU GARIS LUCU 2019c; Figure 6).

Figure 6: The image mocks conspiracy theorists who seem to be able to find communist symbols, such as the hammer and sickle, everywhere (NU GARIS LUCU 2019c).

In the comments section, someone observed sarcastically "Sprout Noodles. Probably the Russians," to which the NU Funny Brigade administrator responded, "Oh, so Sprout Noodles are popular in Russia, huh?" One comment was simply another meme evoking a related joke that juxtaposes the idea of communists being on the political left, with the everyday usage of the word "left" when one calls to the public transport driver that they have arrived at their stop (Figure 7).

Figure 7: caption: "Left, Sir" (Amalana 2019).

Account administrators often engage in ongoing jokes back and forth in the reply section, indulging satirical replies with even more humor. Satire thus has multiple audiences; it can bolster an in-group feeling among NU netizens while also targeting out-group others perceived as theologically and politically duped.

With the fall of Suharto in 1998, groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front had more leeway for vigilante activities, often as Ramadan approached, such as raiding bars and brothels, what the Islamic Defenders Front refer to as "sweeping," part of their self-proclaimed efforts to carry out the Qur'anic injunction to enjoin the good and forbid what is reprehensible. Consider NU Funny Brigade's retweet about alcohol and self-righteousness: "to feel

better than someone who drinks beer is a bigger sin than drinking beer itself" (NU GARIS LUCU 2019d; Figure 8).

Figure 8: The short form of Twitter is amenable to short, pithy aphorisms that function as theological and political jabs at opponents (NU GARIS LUCU 2019d).

The contention was decidedly *not* that alcohol was permissible, but ethical comportment was complex and that vice had its own forms of hierarchy. To feel morally superior to those who drank beer, they argued, is also a violation of Islamic ethics even greater than the act of drinking itself. What is interesting here is how NU Funny Brigade administrators use clever remarks to play with the boundaries of the literary, humorous, and visual. In this respect, this tweet might best be understood with longer histories of Islamic aphorisms, wisdom literatures, and theologies of ethical comportment. The ethics of humility and *riya'* relate to one's relation with others and with God. For NU leaders like Gus Dur and others, God did not need to be defended, as the Islamic Defenders Front leaders and foot soldiers promulgated. With a clever play on words, Wahid often spoke about the need for Muslims to embody an Islam that is "friendly, not angry (*ramah*

bukan marah).” Consider this NU Online tweet about the subtle difference between worshipping God versus worshipping religion (Figure 9).

Figure 9: caption: "If you make enemies of those with a different religion than you, that means you are not worshipping God, but religion" (NU Online 2017).

The legacy of Gus Dur as both religious scholar-*cum*-humorist looms large in social media, and especially after his passing in 2009 a cottage industry of books, lectures, and online tributes have contributed to this popular hagiography (without much critical reflection on any shortcomings). In contemporary Indonesia, Gus Dur's ethical and national commitments are carried on by myriad NU-related organizations from formal social media platforms to more grassroots (yet still humor-laden) NGOs such as that led by one of his daughters Alyssa Wahid, the *Gusdurian* network – the very name a humorous play on words evoking both Gus Dur and the durian fruit. As one NU Funny Brigade member phrased it for a Kumparan journalist, "we want to present Gus Dur's humor in the midst of the communication deadlock that is currently happening in Indonesia" (Kumparan News 2019). Consider the image below, arguably one of the most popular and widely-shared memes by proponents of Gus Dur and NU, in which a boatful of generic Salafists (denoted by their white robes) snidely asks Gus Dur why he is paddling against the current. The next frame reveals the waterfall that awaits (Figure 10).
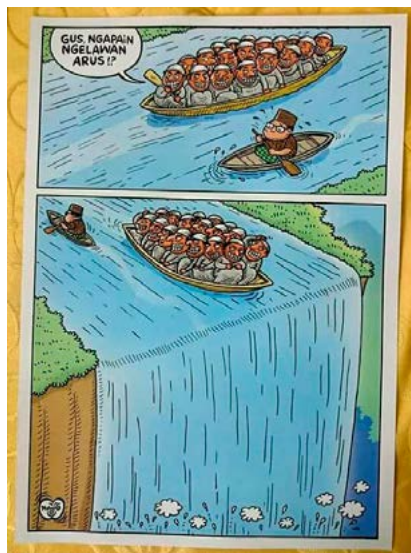
Figure 10: caption: "Gus, why are you going against the current?"
(Novriantoni Kahar 2017)

When shared in online spaces, this image engenders solidarity among acolytes of Gus Dur while also demarcating the theological and political divides between traditionalists and Salafi reformists who are portrayed cynically as caricatures who are not just immoral but theologically hoodwinked (i.e., headed in the wrong theological direction, going against the mainstream current). What is interesting here is that, while perhaps not resorting to direct accusations of innovation or deviance, the clear implication is that conservative ideas may have gone mainstream in contemporary Indonesia but nonetheless have "gone astray" from Islamic teachings (*sesat*). Further, the image invites the viewer (at least those sympathetic with Gus Dur) to enter the imaginative space of their adversaries' imminent demise. Salafists represented here are not just the butt of the joke, but are meant to be laughed at, not reasoned with. To make this point more clearly, consider this NU Funny Brigade tweet that jokes about jokes (@NUgarislucu, April 7, 2016): "For religious preaching, why do you use laughter, Gus?" to which the preacher (presumably Gus Dur) replies, "well, rather than fighting, better to just laugh at the enemies of Islam." NU Funny Brigade's Twitter image is even a cartoon of Gus Dur laughing uproariously.

The celebratory, self-congratulatory, and even self-righteous tone of some NU-inspired jokes at the expense of Salafists, reformists, and hardliner vigilantes is not universally appreciated. Not long after the impending waterfall meme circulated with Gus Dur as the presumptive moral protagonist, an inverted meme was circulated with what appears to be the Islamic Defenders Front leader, Habib Rizieq Shihab, paddling upstream and a boatful of traditionalists heading for the waterfall. Interesting here is that this new meme depicts Shihab, who was not intended as the moral antagonist of the original meme and is actually a traditionalist, albeit one who is a socially conservative hardliner with a penchant for fiery sermons and moral vigilantism that many young NU netizens find unethical. Following the spread of this second meme portraying Shihab as the righteous one, NU netizens recirculated an image of the two cartoons side by side, the one with Gus Dur paddling upstream denoted as the "original (*asli*)," the Islamic Defenders Front's aligned image marked as "fake (*plagiat*)." The use of the word *plagiat* refers to plagiarism or piracy when juxtaposed with its "original (*asli*)" other in the image above, which is yet another example of the broader social and political claims to religious authenticity. In this sociolinguistic sense, *plagiat* can also be understood to mean *palsu* (which also means "fake"). When juxtaposed with the purportedly "original (*asli*)" meme, this third meme with side-by-side images conjures the moral language of the popular Indonesian neologism *as-pal* (*asli tapi palsu*) or "authentic but fake" (see Barker, Lindquist, *et al.* 2009; Hoesterey 2017; Siegel 1998; Strassler 2009; 2020).

Such meanings, of course, are not fixed in the images themselves and the circulation of memes stirs quite different responses depending on the positionality and allegiances of the beholder. As Karen Strassler has argued, "political communications thus travel from medium to medium in a complex traffic, taking on, at each remediation, distinctive forms of address, authority, and authorship. Unruly processes of reception and reinvention […] have thus become an integral feature of contemporary Indonesian political communication." (2009, 95). Once memes circulate online, as Strassler notes, original intentions of the original image can become lost, contested, and reappropriated. Thus, memes' power and provocation are

refracted through the digital reception and the new public(s) created in relation or response to the original image. Similarly, Patricia Spyer and Mary Margaret Steedly analyze the nature of "images that move": "Unmoored from their sites of production, mobile images may still retain traces of their initial provenances even as they are variously inflected, refracted, reframed, remixed, digitally enhanced, cropped, hijacked, and amplified and their effects intensified or muted" (2013, 18). For the most part, this online back and forth of humor and derision is not necessarily intended to sway the viewpoint of the perceived opponent, as if part of some rational dialogue.

Indeed, support for Islamic Defenders Front among followers and some power brokers has remained steady, even as Shihab became increasingly embroiled in a personal scandal, spent several years in self-exile, and returned to Indonesia only to have his organization formally disbanded by the government. This sentiment of unwavering support among Shihab's followers is celebrated in the meme below that applauds, even revels in, Shihab's personal resilience in the midst of attacks on his character (Yamin 2017; Figure 11).

Figure 11: Image of Habib Rizieq Shihab, leader of Islamic Defenders Front (FPI). Caption: "Insulted, loved even more; Made scared, even more brave; Slandered, still not defeated; Silenced, yet still not quiet; Imprisoned, yet not deterred; Threatened, yet still able to pounce." (Yamin 2017)

Not unlike various memes aimed at Shihab or Salafists, when juxtaposed with the text this meme conveys a form of gleeful mockery, an ethical relishing in one's own self-righteousness, a mediated refusal to view the world – much less their charismatic leader – through the religiopolitical prism of their detractors from NU or elsewhere. In response to Islamic Defenders Front's recent disbandment, the organization has decided to simply change its name and official government status, still with the acronym of FPI, but instead of Islamic Defenders Front, it was announced as the "Islamic Association Front (*Front Persatuan Islam*)," only to be changed again more recently to the "Islamic Brotherhood Front (*Front Persaudaraan Islam*)." Thus, the disciplinary efficacy of satirical memes is never given. Whether or not one gets offended is largely due to whether one identifies with the subject being ridiculed.

Santri Kreatif: *The Serious Humor of Online Activists*

NU Funny Brigade continues a long-standing NU tradition of both ethical and affective allegiances to Islam and the nation. However, the satirical spirit of NU Funny Brigade – and its repertoire of digital aesthetics – has spilled beyond its origin in intra-NU politics and wider debates about authentic Islam. Not long after NU Funny Brigade arrived on the scene, similar online groups popped up among other groups, even those who have been the targets of NU Funny Brigade's satire and derision – for example, *Wahhabi Funny Brigade*, *Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia Funny Brigade*, *Muhammadiyah Funny Brigade*. Even other religious groups including Catholics, Protestants, and other religious minorities established their own Funny Brigade Twitter handles and social media presence. What is it about the ludic that is so powerfully felt by online producers and their multiple audiences? In this final section, I suggest that the ludic has become a certain style – a genre perhaps – of Indonesia's online religiosity. Humor can claim theological spaces, public places, and intimate desires. It can be sharp and piercing, but also affectionate and defusing.

There is a certain allure about being a social media producer, especially among younger generations who view themselves as carrying on previous

NU (and other) legacies, but in the language and medium of their generation. Consider the meme below characterizing the NU Funny Brigade's sense of being a "creative Muslim student" (NU GARIS LUCU 2015c; Figure 12).

Figure 12: caption: "Regarding creative Islamic students" (NU GARIS LUCU 2015c).

With a generic rural Islamic school background, sarong wrapped around the shoulders, and batik *peci* hat in the lower-left corner, these signs and images conjure the playful memories of an adolescence spent in Islamic boarding schools. The meme below from NU Funny Brigade offers yet another example of the ludic experiences of religious worship, in this case, prayer (NU GARIS LUCU 2015d; Figure 13).

Figure 13: The raised eyebrows and *peci* hat flipping back offer a humorous contrast to the other supplicant's *peci* falling off during prayer (NU GARIS LUCU 2015d).

There is a particular nostalgia to this humor that evokes childhood experience in the Islamic school. In the Indonesian film about adolescent boys in an Islamic school in rural Java *Three Prayers, Three Loves* (*Tiga Doa, Tiga Cinta;* featuring celebrity actor Nicholas Saputra), one of the more humorous scenes includes this very gag of a student falling asleep during predawn prayers. Other humorous scenes include boys waking with erections, peeking through a hole in the wall to get a glimpse of the girl next door, and sneaking out at night to go listen to popular *dangdut* music featuring the sexy singer "Dona Satelit." Such film scenes and pop culture memes work, in part, by creatively juxtaposing the sacred and profane, perhaps suggesting that they are not that distinct after all.

The social media presence of groups like NU Funny Brigade occasionally includes direct jabs at religious and political opponents. Many images, however, embrace a more expansive sense of religious humor, or perhaps more aptly put, the religious pleasures of a humorous life. Another NU Funny Brigade meme plays on the tradition of asking forgiveness of family, neighbors, and friends as part of the Eid (Lebaran) celebration (NU GARIS LUCU 2020). Juxtaposed with the image of a person smiling is the text, "someone asked me for forgiveness, but it's not yet *Lebaran*, bro!" Perhaps on one level, the meme could be interpreted as a critique of the perceived superficiality and insincerity of ritualized forms of begging forgiveness. However, meaning is seldom singular. Sometimes a meme is just funny, without any particular religious message. The following NU Funny Brigade image plays on the multiple meanings of the word for March, *Maret*, a word that can also mean "store" or "market" as in the name of an Indonesian convenience store, *Indomaret* (NU GARIS LUCU 2015e; Figure 14).

What, exactly, are we to make of these zany and occasionally irreverent corners of digital media realms? In terms of the methodology of researching online worlds, I would argue that it is incumbent on the researcher to include such other content providers, images, and jokes that at first glance seem to have very little to do with religious and political rivalries yet shed light on a religious ethos of ludic living. Even if they reference religious themes or images, the joke is not always religious or framed as political critique.

Nonetheless, such memes reflect a way of being religious in the world, of being religious through humor.

Figure 14: caption: "Don't shop here. Last month's stock is still being sold. Shop at *IndoApril* instead" (NU GARIS LUCU 2015e).

Consider this more recent COVID-19-era meme from NU Funny Brigade below (NU GARIS LUCU 2015f; Figure 15).

Figure 15: caption: "Only now is it the case that we can't go on the *umroh* pilgrimage due to Covid. Usually, we can't go on *umroh* because we don't have any money" (NU GARIS LUCU 2015f).

Finding humor in Islam's most sacred site and one of its most holy of rituals is not about disrespect or sacrilege. Rather, it is a commentary on what it means to be human, to exist and subsist in this world with its socioeconomic divides, to know the sacred through its profane. Humor, then, is serious business. My focus on the ludic does not detract from the very real ways that humor can originate with deeply felt political consciousness and religious commitment. Consider another NU Funny Brigade tribute below to commemorate the anniversary of the passing of Indonesian comedian Wahjoe Sardono (NU GARIS LUCU 2018; Figure 16). The image is a reminder that this funny figure was more than just a humorist. In fact, he was among the activists who helped to bring down Suharto's authoritarian regime in 1998. Sardono's piercing eyes appear to summon the viewer, though precisely what he hails or demands of the beholder is unclear. In this image, Sardono embodies and exudes a certain strength of conviction standing next to soldiers with rifles, a sense of being above the obvious power difference. Perhaps it is about a power that mere soldiers and guns cannot take. In this respect, comedians, humorists, and social media producers can and often do understand themselves as activists. Beneath Sardono's solemn image is a message, perhaps a reminder, or even an admonition: "Don't belittle everything funny, because a critical perspective is disguised inside."

Figure 16: Sardono's shirt reads, "Join Us. We fight for a clean government." (NU GARIS LUCU 2018)

One of the NU Funny Brigade administrators included a message along with the meme:

> Wahjoe Sardono was known by the Indonesian public as a comedian. Nevertheless, seldom do they know his thoughts and perspectives. Today, a few decades ago, Dono gathered with fellow college students to protest the government's policy concerning the MALARI event.[2] In addition, during the demonstrations in 1998 to protest Suharto, he was at the front line. *Alfatihah* on his behalf. A TRUE INTELLAUGHTUAL.

This hybrid notion of an "intellaughtual" perhaps best describes the trickster element of online comedians and satirists who gleefully bridge the humorous with the religious and political. Consider this message below juxtaposed with a caricature of Gus Dur relaxing in a white T-shirt, joking around while drinking coffee (Figure 17).

Figure 17: caption: "Don't get all serious just because you are learning Sufism, [for example, you] don't want to smile or laugh anymore. Know that behind every laugh of a wise person lies the essence of truth." (Google images)

By evoking the Sufi concept of the essence of truth (*hakikat kebenaran*) and then insisting on the power of humor to lead one to ultimate truth, these social media producers are indeed staking claims to the humorous life as a religious life – as a way of being, of seeing, of feeling in online–offline worlds.

Conclusion

Clashes between popular preachers and established scholars are nothing new in Islamic history (Berkey 2001). Competing visions of the "real" Islam are never too distant from ideas of citizenship, alliances, and political power. Following the fall of Suharto's authoritarian regime in 1998 and the privatization and proliferation of television media, as well as the subsequent expansion of new media, the state's near monopoly on media was eclipsed by a younger generation of digitally-savvy social media producers who deploy their own regimes of surveillance, censorship, and interpellation. Through clever juxtapositions of ethics and affect, NU Funny Brigade offers a fresh style of critique and public exposure, of pity and mockery rather than the condemnation and violence of the hardliner vigilantes more often associated with political Islam. The religious ethos of being humorous has found the perfect means of its expression in today's social media.

We have seen how satirical memes can be refracted, refigured, and reformed into mediated reiterations that attempt to invert the critique, thereby exposing the other as the real charlatan, hypocrite, even infidel. Whereas the projects of post-authoritarian reform (*reformasi*) promised political transparency and religious authenticity, the overlapping media spheres in contemporary Indonesia have become a cacophony of cyclical (and often cynical) insult and offense. As Karen Strassler incisively argues, the promises of moral exposure and political transparency are themselves subject to doubt, delegitimization, and manipulation:

> If the scandal of the exposure scandal is that transparency fails to deliver on its promise, the political potential of ludic critique is that, circulating in public, it might throw a wrench in transparency's machinery of exposure and unending search for the hidden secret,

opening a space for alternative forms of public visuality and political imagination. (2020, 130)

It is precisely in this moment of stalled reform and democratic backsliding that enchanted forms of the ludic are able to disorient and disarm. The ludic ethos of NU social media producers seeks to reset the hostile sentiment in Indonesia's divided online worlds, even as satirical exposure itself is always subject to its own forms of critique, suspicion, and surveillance. At times it is difficult to distinguish theological humility from Gusdurian hagiography, and there is certainly no consensus on who are the "real" defenders of "true" Islam. That debate continues to rage, and to laugh, online. *Gitu aja kok repot*!

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Notes

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[2] MALARI is an Indonesian acronym for The Catastrophe of January 15 (*Malapetaka Limabelas Januari*) which references a student-led protest in 1974 against rampant corruption that led to the burning of cars and buildings, the deaths of eleven protestors, the imprisonment of others, and a crackdown on dissent inside and beyond Suharto's government.

Negotiating Salafism: Women Prayer Groups and their Preachers in Indonesia's Islamic Digital Mediascapes

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Abstract:

This article is concerned with Muslim women's negotiation of Salafism at the intersection of online and offline spaces. It focuses on two groups of Indonesian Muslim women who formed majelis taklim *(study groups on Islam), namely* Majelis Mutia *(lit. Assembly of the Obedient) and* Majelis Sahabat Cinta *(lit. Assembly of the Friends of Love), to examine how these social media-savvy women, who demand a more contextual interpretation of the Islamic foundational texts, negotiate Salafi teachings in order to bring them in accordance with their everyday lives. This article argues that online and offline encounters at these majelis have brought different negotiations. They have also created incongruencies, especially on the parts of Salafi preachers, as the latter have to adjust to the audience who are not used to pure Salafi discourse. These incongruencies provide opportunities for the members of the* majelis taklim *to practice a "softer version" of Salafism that, on occasion, seems to contradict those same Salafi teachings. Contrary to the general understanding that Muslim women are easy prey for Salafis, my research shows that the proliferation of preachers in the context of Indonesia's Islamic digital mediascapes have created a far more pluralized and optative religious forum.*

Keywords:

Muslim women, Salafism, Indonesia, Digital Mediascapes

This article focuses on the encounters between Salafi preachers and Indonesian Muslim women who are active at *majelis taklim* (Arabic *ta'lim*, prayer and study groups on Islam), namely *Majelis Mutia* and *Majelis Sahabat Cinta*, within the context of today's proliferating Islamic digital mediascapes.[1] This

article also addresses the question of how these women, most of whom do not have a personal history of sustained study in the Islamic sciences, adhere to but also negotiate Salafi teachings in order to bring them in accordance with their everyday lives that are informed by particular priorities and interests. It further examines how the online and offline spaces, which have become their media of interactions, are partly characterized by incongruencies and ambivalences, and how this influences the Muslim women's negotiations of Salafi teachings.

In this article, Salafism is understood beyond its generic meaning as an ideology that preserves a literalist reading of the Qur'an and the Hadith (Prophet Muhammad's words or acts that are considered authoritative by Muslims) as well as rejects *taqlid* (uncritical acceptance of the four schools of Islamic law established a millennium ago within Sunni Islam) in order to maintain the purity of Islam (Byman and Gold 2012, 28; Moosa 2017, 570; Pall and Pereiro 2020, 237). It rather emphasizes two additional characteristics of Salafism, that is the acceptance of the Salafi *manhaj* (path, method) and the doctrine of *al-wala' wa al-bara'* (loyalty and disavowal). Salafis generally agree that a proper literalism is possible only with a methodology of scriptural reading explicitly based on the scholarship and a *manhaj* of a recognized Salafi scholar. Hence, "Muslims' return to the first two sources [the Qur'an and Hadith] alone is not a warranty that they will embrace true Islam because they still may go astray due to a false understanding of these sources" (Wahid 2014, 20). In line with this, Heykel (2014, 47) stated that the concept of *manhaj* constitutes an important element in understanding Salafism. The second prevalent characteristic of Salafism is the doctrine of *al-wala' wa al-bara'*, meaning loyalty to those who are proper Muslims and repudiation of all those who are non-Muslims or who profess a corrupted variety of Islam. Meijer (2014, 10) further underlined that the disavowal should be directed towards non-Salafi Muslims. In this context, "the concept of *al-wala' wa al-bara'* bears the meaning of love and hate for sake of Allah" (Wahid 2014, 30).

This attitude of repudiating those whom they consider as infidels has often placed Salafism as diametrically opposed to Sufism. Howell (2010, 1030), however, found "the Salafist colouration of Sufism" in the teachings of two

Indonesian Muslim preachers, namely HAMKA (d. 1981) and M. Arifin Ilham (d. 2019). She further argued that contrary to the argument that Sufism is "antithetical to Salafi Islam," it is "being reworked in Salafist variants" (Howell 2010, 1049). Mandaville (2005, 315–316) has outlined a similar line of thought when identifying different groups within contemporary transnational Islam who, unlike the Salafis who emphasize "hard-and-fast categories," tend to be "much more eclectic in their reading and understanding of textual sources." He further argued that some major modern Islamist movements, such as that of Hassan al-Banna (d. 1949) of the *Ikhwanul Muslimin*, have also been "heavily influenced by Sufi thought and practice" (Mandaville 2014, 45). Possible intersections between Salafism and Sufism are also discussed by Schielke (2015a) for Egypt, where he attempted to understand the everyday religious commitments of his interlocutors at different phases of their lives. While they subscribed to the Salafi teachings in their times of difficulty, they shifted to other forms of religious piety, chiefly Sufism, when feeling frustrated with the strict doctrine offered by Salafism. Schielke thus underlined "the impossibility of perfection and the primacy of the incomplete and inconsistent" (2015b, 91), which leads us to the concept of negotiation to explain "how people are able to live 'in between' different demands and expectations" (Schielke 2015a, 37).

Academic studies on the development of Salafism[2] have particularly blossomed after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States of America (among others, Heykel 2014; Pall 2018; Wiktorowicz 2001). *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* edited by Roel Meijer (2014) is among those works that attempt to discuss Salafism and its relationship to politics and violence, its transnational character, as well as its appeal among youth. Within the context of Indonesia, Salafism has received considerable scholarly attention (Hasan 2002; Krismono 2017; Sunarwoto 2016; Wahid 2014; Wildan 2013), not least because it is often seen as contradicting the character of Indonesian Islam which is blended with local traditions.[3] Furthermore, van Bruinessen (2013), in his mapping of Islamic radicalism in post-Suharto Indonesia (after 1998), argued that starting in 2005 Indonesian Islam was taking a "conservative turn" as chiefly evidenced by the issuance of controversial *fatwa* (religious edicts) by the *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (Indonesian Council of Islamic

Scholars) stating that secularism, pluralism, and liberalism are against Islamic teachings. Wahid's study (2014, 191–234) of Salafi *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) seems to support this thesis when he found the internalization of Salafi teachings in those boarding schools.

My case studies focus on a different aspect of Salafism and are among the few accounts that examine Salafi online behaviour in Indonesia (see Iqbal 2019; Nisa 2013), which contributes to the understanding of contemporary Islam well beyond the Javanese urban landscape. Moreover, this study is the first to relate Salafism to pious practices of Muslim women who are not part of Salafi communities. However, there are several studies dedicated to the exploration of how Salafi members negotiate the teachings, which can take multiple forms. In discussing the Indonesian *Madkhaliyya* Salafis, who draw their teachings from Rabi' al-Madkhali (b. 1931), for example, Sunarwoto (2020, 228) maintained that they are caught in ambiguity as they endeavour to hold the Salafi core doctrine of "obedience to the ruler" within the context of Indonesia's democratic system. They, therefore, attempt to constantly negotiate this ambiguity by neither expressing publicly their discontent with democracy nor participating in the Indonesian elections. Within the context of Muslim communities in Cambodia, Pall and Pereiro (2020, 265) argued that in order for the Salafis to win political protection, they have to show their "pragmatism and flexibility in responding to their specific local contexts" by supporting the ruling party. Inge (2016) delved into the lives of Salafi women in the UK and their everyday negotiations. She concluded that some Salafi women have to compromise their Salafism by, for example, prioritizing the advice of their parents or husbands in case the latter disapprove of the *niqab* (full-face veil), which is perceived as *wajib* (obligatory), whereas for many Muslims the practice is only considered to be a *sunna* (recommended) act (Inge 2016, 160; see also Uthman 2006; Wieringa 2009). My research on Indonesian Muslim women builds on these earlier studies and offers a different perspective on negotiating Salafism within the intersection of online and offline spaces, where women actively assemble the religious pedagogies within which they encounter Salafi teachings.

Scholars have studied online and offline Islamic practices, including the ways social media is used to express one's religiosity (Hew 2018; Hoesterey 2016;

Lengauer 2018; Nisa 2018; Slama 2017c). Thanks to the growth of "smart" communication technology, online Islamic practices have increased in popularity and this has coincided with the emergence and spread of offline, collective forms of piety, including *majelis taklim* (Slama 2017c) and the *One Day One Juz* (ODOJ) Qur'anic reading practice (Nisa 2018). Hew's (2018) examination of the intersection between online activities and offline events within the preaching of Felix Siauw, a popular Indonesian Hizbut Tahrir (HTI) preacher,[4] provides a background for this present article.[5] Hew's main argument (2018, 68) is that Siauw's online and visual *da'wa* does not replace his offline and textual *da'wa*, but that they rather complement each other. Siauw combined social media platforms and offline events in urban and rural places arguing that "online is important for spreading Islamic messages (*syiar*), online is crucial for strengthening Islamic faith (*pembinaan*)" (Hew 2018, 68). Based on interviews of key organizers and preachers at Majelis Mutia and Majelis Sahabat Cinta (2014–20), online research, and participation in offline events of both *majelis taklim* in Yogyakarta, I take Hew's argument a step further by arguing that, in the case of Majelis Mutia and Majelis Sahabat Cinta, the relationship between online and offline *da'wa* is not only "complementing" and "co-constituting" one another, but is also involving negotiations of the Salafi teachings that point to incongruencies and ambivalences.

This article starts by discussing the formation of Majelis Mutia and Majelis Sahabat Cinta, their choice of preachers (*ustadz*, male sing. and *ustadzah*, female sing.) and their positioning in Indonesia's Islamic digital mediascape. This background information paves the way for an analysis of how the members of the *majelis* negotiate Salafi teachings in accordance with their lifestyles. The last part of the article considers the incongruencies and ambivalences that are part of these processes and that have become particularly apparent in differences between online and offline practices.

Majelis Mutia

The history of *Majelis Mutia* (lit. Assembly of the Obedient), formerly known as *Majelis Dhuha Mutia Sholehah* (lit. Assembly of the Pious Obedient),[6] can be traced back to 2010 to a middle-class woman in her thirties by the name of

Rully Surbakti. Surbakti recalled that, at that time, many middle-class, young Muslim mothers, including herself, spent their time at shopping malls while waiting for their children to return from school. Acknowledging the malls as places of "moral distraction" (Hefner 2019, 498) and perceiving this habit as unproductive, she initiated a small-scale *pengajian* (religious gathering) with around twenty people at her house. This initial religious activity later developed from discussions of religious issues to practical applications of social services aimed at helping local communities. In 2012, she and her friends established Majelis Dhuha Mutia Sholehah, a *pengajian* for Muslim women. "When a problem arises, people tend to be close to God and this can be easily facilitated at the *majelis*," as noted by Rully Surbakti.[7] It is interesting to note that some organizers of the *majelis* joined the group not only for increasing their knowledge about Islam but also for seeking support in dealing with their marital problems (see also Abaza 2004, 183).

At the beginning of its establishment, most of the Majelis Mutia organizers did not have much knowledge about Islam and thus did not know how to select a good *ustadz* and *ustadzah*. *Ustadz* Wijayanto was one of its early supporters, and they also invited other celebrity preachers of that time including *Ustadz* Ahmad Hadi Wibawa (known as *Aa* Hadi) and *Ustadzah* Ninih Muthmainnah (known as *Teh* Ninih). Some important criteria for selecting the preachers were later included, such as their willingness to be contacted through existing social media platforms (Slama 2017a), their public speaking skills, their attractiveness, and their ability to preach in a humorous way (see also Millie 2017, 20).

With the development of social media and the increase of media-savvy Islamic preachers (Hew 2018; Hoesterey 2016; Slama 2017a), the members of Majelis Mutia started to invite those who were active online. And because many members struggle with questions and issues they are facing in their family, they turned to Salafi preachers,[8] who could be perceived as capable of providing firm answers. While it is clear that Salafism has prescribed textual interpretations of Islam, which at first glance might contradict the lifestyle of the *majelis* members, some of them, on the contrary, claim that the Salafi teachings are more appropriate to cater to their modern context: "I think

Salafism is a more appropriate choice for living at this time. It is simpler, suitable, and there is no practice of *tahlilan* (communal prayer for those who have just passed away)," as stated by Rully Surbakti.[9] However, while choosing certain Salafi preachers who they deem "smart" and "have broader perspectives," they have some reservations against those who are "more extreme," "strict," and "inflexible."[10] In addition, they prefer preachers who studied hard sciences as they are expected to provide clear answers and instructions on how to live an Islamic life. [11]

These criteria are found in *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal, who has become a regular preacher at the *majelis*. He is a prolific writer and started his *da'wa* through his website in 2013.[12] He also uses social media creatively, including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter to propagate *Salafi* ideology and to increase his "public visibilities" (Hew 2018, 62). *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal completed his undergraduate study in Chemical Engineering at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, while at the same time studying at an Islamic boarding school under the Islamic Center Bin Baz in the same city (Tuasikal 2020).[13] He continued his Master's degree at King Saud University, Riyadh, in Polymer Engineering in 2010. In addition, *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal studied the works of Ibn Taimiyyah[14] for six years.

During the early phase of establishment, the organizers tried to avoid discussing sensitive topics such as *fiqh al-mar'ah* (Islamic jurisprudence for women) due to the fear of losing members.[15] However, they gradually welcomed such issues in responding to the members' need to find well-founded answers for their daily issues. At one session, for example, *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal quoted *Syech* al-Fauzan, a member of the Saudi Arabia Commission of *fatwa*, listing 12 requirements for proper female dress, including covering from head to toe except for the face and the hands.[16] These prescriptions are compatible with what has been addressed by other Salafi preachers online, including the celebrity preacher *Ustadz* Adi Hidayat.[17]

On another occasion *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal discussed the topic of *Bakti Istri pada Suami* (Wife's Devotion to Her Husband) at the *majelis*, underlining that women should only participate in outside activities in urgency and only

after completing their household chores. In addition, when they have to work, they have to choose jobs that will place them among women so they will not be burdened by male sexual advances.[18] This topic was indeed very sensitive to discuss among young mothers who are socially active. Yet *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal's style of *da'wa*, which is "colourful yet conservative" and "interactive yet dogmatic" (Hew 2018, 76) has won the hearts of the mothers and kept him on the preacher list of the *majelis*.

In addition to Salafi preachers, however, Majelis Mutia continues to include various *ustadz* and *ustadzah* in its programs, including preachers with a traditionalist background, such as *Ustadz* Novel Alaydrus, and celebrities who converted to Islam such as Dewi Sandra. Thus, while the organizers of this *majelis* depart from more familiar patterns of authority and compliance in conventional Salafism by adhering to *Salafi* preachers, they also welcome a variety of preachers to maintain its members' interest in joining the *majelis*. This choice of non-Salafi preachers also evades the loyalty and disavowal ethos in stricter varieties of Salafism.

Majelis Sahabat Cinta

Majelis Sahabat Cinta (lit. Assembly of the Friends of Love) owes its birth to Majelis Mutia in December 2012 (Zaen 2018). Rima Nanda, who is currently the leader of Majelis Sahabat Cinta, was one of the former coordinators of Majelis Mutia. At the time when a special Qur'anic reading group, known as *One Day One Juz* (ODOJ)[19] was introduced to Majelis Mutia, some members realized that their ways of reading the Qur'an were not correct and that they lacked understanding of the history of the Prophet Muhammad. For that purpose, a group of four women started to learn from *Ustadz* Andi Ardiyan Mustakim who had just returned from Al-Ahgaff University, Yemen.[20] The Majelis Sahabat Cinta was later established in 2014 as a female learning community following the Shafi'i *madzhab*.[21]

Majelis Sahabat Cinta's focus on learning from permanent *ustadz* and *ustadzah* on arranged topics marks its difference from Majelis Mutia. Majelis Sahabat Cinta focuses more on the *tahsin* (the correct way of reading the

Qur'an), *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis), *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and later added *tasawwuf* (Islamic mysticism). These differences in methods and topics of learning (*ta'lim*) were noted by Rully Surbakti who explained that Majelis Sahabat Cinta was closer to Nahdlatul Ulama in its ideology and practices, whereas Majelis Mutia was closer to Muhammadiyah and Salafism.[22]

Even though Majelis Sahabat Cinta used various social media accounts, chiefly Facebook and WhatsApp, it does not primarily base their choice of *ustadz* and *ustadzah* on their engagements with social media, nor their academic backgrounds in hard sciences, because of its emphasis on learning from more permanent *ustadz* and *ustadzah*. Realizing that their members come from various Islamic backgrounds, Majelis Sahabat Cinta does hope that differences in interpreting Islamic teachings could be solved by understanding the roots of these dissimilarities under the guidance of their *gurus* (teachers), namely: *Ustadz* Andi Ardiyan Mustakim, *Ustadz* Sholihuddin Alhafiz, and *Ustadz* Syatori Abdurrouf. This, however, does not mean that they completely avoid Salafi *ustadz* and *ustadzah*, as narrated by Rima Nanda:

> Yes, we did invite Salafi *ustadz*. We take only what is positive from them. For example, I think there are Salafi preachers who have a good way of calling Muslim women to wear proper Islamic dress. So we asked them to speak about *busana Muslimah* (Muslim dress). When we invite them, we give them a specific topic so that they do not touch other issues. We give them supervision of what they preach.[23]

Hence, while arguing that they establish their learning on Shafi'i *madzhab*, Sufism, and under the guidance of their three main teachers, they accept Salafi *ustadz* who could meet their criteria. The choice of the Salafi *ustadz*, however, has to be in consultation with their permanent teachers, who would digitally check the credibility of the Salafi preachers and the content of their preaching before giving their permission.

It was therefore not surprising that on the Majelis Sahabat Cinta's Facebook page during 2017–18, one can find shared postings of conservatively inclined preachers, including *Ustadz* Salim A. Fillah (2017). However, the *majelis* has

ceased learning from the Salafis since then due to their preference over the Shafi'i preachers, even though some members continue to follow Salafi preachers online, as stated by Rima Nanda: "I follow *Ustadz* Adi Hidayat on his YouTube channel. I first attended his preaching in Jakarta, and then in Bogor, even though I do not go there regularly."[24] In a more recent conversation with her, however, she revealed that she no longer follows his YouTube channel except when excerpts of his videos are shared by her friends on social media, or when they appear on her Facebook timeline because the *majelis* has firmly opted to learn from Shafi'i preachers.[25]

The reason for this change seems to be closely related to a new tendency, developed over the past three or four years, by the *majelis* to invite and learn from *ustadz* and *ustadzah* of Hadhrami descent, especially the Indonesian Ba 'Alawi preachers who are the *sada* (sing. *sayyid,* descendants of the Prophet Muhammad).[26] Among the Ba 'Alawi teachers who are often invited to the *majelis*, three female preachers are worthy of discussion in the context of this article, namely: *Ustadzah* Halimah Alaydrus, *Ustadzah* Aisyah Farid BSA, and *Ustadzah* Muna Al-Munawwar, all of whom are graduates from the Daruz Zahro boarding school in Tarim, Yemen,[27] and are thus perceived as holding religious authority. These teachers and preachers often share their knowledge and practices of the *Thariqah 'Alawiyyah*, a Sufi path established by Muhammad bin 'Ali 'Alawi (d. 1255; Alatas 2011; Knysh 2001), to the *majelis'* members through various activities and events. The *majelis* is consistent with its hashtag #dakwahsantun (polite *da'wa*), #dakwahmenyejukkan (refreshing *da'wa*), and #transferrasa (empathy transfer) by inviting *ustadz* and *ustadzah* who they claim can "soften and calm their hearts."[28]

Issues related to modern Muslim women have become one of the *majelis'* primary concerns. To cater to this purpose, they base their learning on certain Islamic books, such as *Khuluquna* (our morality) written by *Habib* 'Umar b. Muhammad b. Hafidz (b. 1963) from the Darul Mustofa boarding school in Tarim, who is also the founder of the female-only Daruz Zahro. The emphasis on Sufism, such as the importance of the members to cleanse their hearts, is evident in many activities of Majelis Sahabat Cinta. In addition, for the past four years, they have regularly conducted *dauroh* (a short-term, in-depth training, workshop) with various topics,

including *Bekal untuk Muslimah* (provisions for Muslim women). They also have their routine meetings on *khataman* (prayer upon completing the reading of the Qur'an), *majelis shalawat* (gathering to invoke the blessing of Prophet Muhammad), and *JiHad* (an abbreviation of *Ngaji Ahad*, religious gatherings on Sundays), all of which underline the importance of drawing closer to Allah. This emphasis on morality, however, does not eliminate practical discussions related to Islamic law that are also found in Majelis Mutia. Issues related to *hukum sikat gigi saat berpuasa* (rules on brushing teeth during fasting) or *hukum zakat* (rules on alms-giving), for example, are discussed offline in their meetings as well as posted on their social media accounts (Majelissahabatcintaofficial 2019; 2020).

Another important phenomenon during the online *ta'lim* is worth discussing. While the offline *ta'lim* provides an assured women-only gathering, the online engagement does not always provide this warranty. This has concerned some female Ba 'Alawi preachers who consider their voice as part of *aurat*. For this purpose, Majelis Sahabat Cinta has created a closed platform called *Amanah Sahabat Cinta* (lit. Commitment of the Friends of Love) only for women, based on Zoom and customized live streaming on Facebook page called *Amanah Sahabat*, which is not an open account. In addition, a women-only WhatsApp group has been created to particularly exchange information related to online *ta'lim* with female preachers.

It is therefore clear from the above that Majelis Sahabat Cinta's emphasis on Sufism, on the one hand, and their initial interest in learning from Salafi preachers, on the other hand, confirms the above discussion on the crossover between the two ideologies as outlined by Howell (2010), Mandaville (2005; 2014), and Schielke (2015a). At the same time, their ability to later replace Salafi preachers with non-Salafi *ustadzah*, notably female Ba 'Alawi preachers, allows them to evade the requirement for submitting to the authority of a Salafi scholar who commands a proper *manhaj*.

Muslim Women Negotiating Salafism

The above-mentioned criteria of Majelis Mutia for Salafi preachers, such as not being "extreme," "strict," or "inflexible," has opened the possibility

for its members to negotiate the teachings offered by the preachers. When I attended a session on July 30, 2018, a topic on *Nasihat untuk Para Istri: Cara Mudah Wanita Masuk Surga* (Advice for Wives: Easy Ways for Women to Enter Paradise) was discussed.[29] During the question and answer session, one member asked:

> *Ustadz*, you explained that if a woman wanted to enter Paradise they should perform their daily prayers at home, and should not go out to the mosque. I have a son and I want to accustom him to pray in the mosque, whereas my husband works in another city. I have been accompanying him to pray at the mosque. What would you say about this?

The *ustadz* answered: "Yes, in that case, it is alright, but let his father take him to the mosque when he is around." Her question indicates that the *majelis* member not only interpreted the teaching of the *ustadz* in light of her current circumstances, but she was also exercising "a new form of consumer power" (Hoesterey 2016, 19) through negotiation, expecting that the *ustadz* would compromise and legitimize her choice. On another occasion, one member asked him: "*Ustadz*, you stated that, when we are outside of our house, we need to be among women, but this is impossible to be practiced here. So, what should we do?" *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal answered: "Yes, I have delivered some theories and I realize that prohibition on free-mixing is often difficult to practice in Indonesia. It is alright to go outside, but try your best to distance yourself from men."[30]

Such negotiation does not stop at the discourse level when the *majelis taklim* takes place. What the members learn from the Salafi preachers is often negotiated and adjusted according to the members' own interpretations. When discussing *Muslimah yang sholehah* (pious Muslim women), for example, some Salafi preachers whom they invited had clearly listed several rules, including covering a woman's body from head to toe. However, members of Majelis Mutia found ways to negotiate the boundaries of what had been outlined as pious Muslim women by the Salafi preachers, as the following example from the leader of Majelis Mutia indicates:

> As for me, I prefer Salafi teachings… I only choose the Salafi teachings that are simple… Our *ustadz* stated that a good outfit for women is the one that is wide and not too tight, but I couldn't wear a long dress as I often sit casually. So I wear wide trousers, and this is my choice. This is better than wearing a long dress but showing off my thigh, right? Therefore, as I said, I am not a Salafi but in this modern life, Salafism is easier to apply.[31]

It is notable that for members of Majelis Mutia becoming a good Muslim woman does not mean following their preacher's word for word. They can negotiate to find what is comfortable and logical for them without necessarily losing the opportunity to be a pious Muslim woman. This attitude is resonant with what Schielke (2015a, 70) argues, namely that "embracing a Salafi understanding of religiosity and morality is not necessarily the same thing as becoming a committed Salafi."

A member of the *majelis* confirmed this statement when saying: "There were indeed some preachers whom we invited and with whom we took selfies, but they warned us not to share them on social media for fear of *fitnah* (slander). In fact, we often shared them on social media, and the preachers did not object."[32] Similarly, while uploading a self-portrait is prohibited according to their Salafi *ustadz*, members of the *majelis* continued to do so, as this was perceived as something natural in the era of social media. Here we see that while Salafism in its core form is premised on the acceptance of a *manhaj*, and this acceptance implies full and uncompromising submission to a Salafi scholar, the members of the *majelis* find their ways to adopt a more pick-and-choose approach to their engagement with Salafism.

Another interesting negotiation of Majelis Mutia with Salafism rests on its more recent selection of preachers and in their choice in conducting activities associated with Sufism. A *khataman* (a ritual prayer where *dzikr* litanies are chanted to mark the completion of the reading of the whole Qur'an) led by *Habib* Mustafa Sayyidi Baraqbah (Majelismutia 2019) exemplifies this negotiation. *Khataman* is traditionally practiced by Muslims of Nahdlatul Ulama background, which contradicts Salafi teachings. In this

context, the discourse on Sufi-Salafi crossover, as discussed above (Howell 2010; Mandaville 2005; 2014; Schielke 2015a), retains its significance.

Majelis Sahabat Cinta's negotiation of Salafism takes a different form as compared to that of Majelis Mutia. The former does not normally confront its teachers nor directly negotiate their teachings. (1) The above discussion on Majelis Sahabat Cinta's criteria for preachers offers insight into how its members negotiate Salafi teachings. At the earlier stage of its establishment, the *majelis* occasionally invited certain Salafi preachers, whom they considered suitable and who could offer useful teachings. Only certain topics, however, were given and the preachers would therefore not be able to touch on other issues. This shows the power of not only choosing the preachers but also limiting what they could preach. The above statement of the *majelis* that "We give them supervision of what they preach" also indicates how the relationship is hierarchically constructed: a collective of women is in control of Salafi preachers, and thus signifies a conscious female negotiation in the preacher–disciple relationship. This scheme has proven to be effective in limiting the Salafi preachers' space in spreading their ideology to the members of the *majelis*.

(2) Along with its development, Majelis Sahabat Cinta is more attached to permanent *guru* (teachers) who adhere to the Shafi'i *madzhab* and to preachers of Ba 'Alawi descent. While at an earlier stage they were sharing issues related to Islamic law on their social media accounts from Salafi preachers, they now alter their preference of preachers by posting similar contents from Sufi-oriented Ba 'Alawi *ustadz* and *ustadzah*. We see here the significant role of *Ustadzah* Halimah Alaydrus, who is very active on social media and who has developed a close friendship with the leading woman of the *majelis*, Rima Nanda. Through their online and offline activities, the *majelis* has made an implicit statement that these male and female Ba 'Alawi preachers can provide assured answers related to Islamic law as well (Alatas 2018), and this negotiation, therefore, has resulted in a rejection of Salafism on the group level.

(3) The term *cinta* (love) in the name of Majelis Sahabat Cinta itself has conditioned its members to deal more with issues of the heart, which is closer to Sufi teachings. While in its earlier phase the *majelis* occasionally turned

to particular Salafi preachers, they now hold on to Sufism and some Sufi-oriented teachers who can also offer "the core of authentic Islam" (Howell 2010, 1033), albeit in a different way than that of the Salafis. The *majelis* argues that by establishing their learning with the Ba 'Alawi preachers they gain both knowledge and blessing because these preachers are descendants of the Prophet Muhammad; a lineage that cannot be found among other non-*sada* preachers. Interestingly, even though the *majelis* as an assembly had ceased learning from Salafi preachers since 2018, both online and offline, some members have continued to learn from them virtually. In this context, the negotiation of Salafism takes place in a more private space.

Incongruencies between Online and Offline Da'wa

The widening of the network of Salafi preachers is not without consequences. The Salafi *ustadz* and *ustadzah* have to leave their comfort zone of preaching their own beliefs inside their closed community to face Muslims of various backgrounds. In the case of Majelis Mutia, for example, its members are mostly young Muslim women who are media-savvy and who carry several characteristics and expectations towards the preachers that would not be found among women with a firm Salafi background. Requests for selfies, as mentioned above, exemplify a new demand on the part of the Salafi preachers that forces them to compromise the Salafi teachings if they want to enlarge their audience. This, in turn, has created incongruencies and, to some extent, ambivalence on the part of the Salafi preachers because they have to change their tone of *da'wa* between their online and offline appearances.

The online and offline *da'wa* of *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal illustrates this incongruency. In his online preaching on his YouTube channel (Rumaysho TV), for example, we find sermons ranging from dating and dress codes for Muslim women to the concept of *al-wala' wa al-bara'* (loyalty and disavowal), discussed above as an important character of Salafism. On the issue of relations between Muslim men and women, for example, he firmly argued that when a woman goes out of her house, she has to ask permission from her husband. Men and women should also avoid close interactions and that communication should only take place between a wife

and a husband. When a man sends a WhatsApp message to a woman, for instance, the woman should not reply to it. Or, if she chooses to reply she should respond by saying, "Please, contact my husband." (Tuasikal 2016).

However, in his offline engagements with the Majelis Mutia members, quite often *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal has to find a compromise between Salafi doctrine and their demands because these new audiences requested more contextual interpretations, as explained by the leader of the *majelis*:

> *Ustadz* Abduh has stated that when women go out of their houses, we have to ask permission from our husband. But, he never stated that we have to go with our male *mahram* (family members who are forbidden to marry each other). What he said was that it is good if we could do that, but we are now living in a different era. I think when *Ustadz* Abduh is talking to members of Majelis Mutia it is impossible [to be too strict]. I believe the *ustadz,* too, has to consider his audiences.[33]

Ustadz Abduh Tuasikal's decision to compromise with his audiences makes him different from other Salafi preachers. In discussing Islamic law related to women at Majelis Mutia, for example, only *Ustadz* Abduh's teaching could be accepted by the members because he shared a more general discussion of the law and did not give a too detailed explanation, which would have resulted in conveying stricter regulations to the members.[34] This method of preaching, as exemplified by *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal, has created incongruencies between online and offline *da'wa*.

The above case leads us to a further discussion on the relationship between online and offline preaching and its incongruencies. When *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal delivers his preaching at the *majelis*, it is usually recorded and later uploaded on his YouTube channel. Hence, what occurs offline becomes at least to some extent part of his online appearance, and what was negotiated by the audiences during the preaching becomes public knowledge, including that of the Salafi community at large. *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal realized this and stated that he was "ready" if other (Salafi) preachers were angry at him due to the

incongruencies of his *da'wa*.[35] Hence, such divides do not present a significant problem for him, because if looked upon carefully, some of his answers remain ambivalent. Answers like "yes, I have proposed some theories and I realize that they are often difficult to practice in Indonesia," or "yes, this is what I have to explain to you, but it is up to you to implement it," has opened up a "safe space" for both parties, the *majelis* members and the preacher. For the *majelis* members, these types of answers have given them options on how to implement his teachings. On the part of the *ustadz*, this has helped him to show to his Salafi community that he has tried his best to be consistent in delivering the Salafi teachings, even though, in reality, certain "pragmatism and flexibility in responding to the local context" (Pall and Pereiro 2020) has to be taken and that ambivalent statements have to be made to satisfy different target audiences.

The case of Majelis Sahabat Cinta offers a different analysis in explaining the incongruency of online and offline encounters because it centers more on its members rather than its preachers. Since 2018, as stated above, the *majelis* as an assembly had ceased learning from Salafi preachers, both online and offline. However, members of the *majelis* continue to learn from preachers of various backgrounds online, including the Salafis, while emphasizing that they found a more peaceful environment within the *majelis*. The reason given was that the preachers in the *majelis* offer a logical and more inclusive way of studying Islam, which does not force them to take their interpretation for granted.[36] These learning practices point to an incongruency as well, since the group has abandoned Salafi preachers regarding both their online and offline activities, while they privately follow some Salafi preachers' online da'wa.

For example, Rima Nanda, the leader of the *majelis*, continues to follow the YouTube channel of *Ustadz* Zaidul Akbar,[37] a Salafi medical doctor who is very active on social media. With around 205 thousand subscribers for his YouTube channel and 2.6 million followers on his Instagram account, he actively promotes herbal recipes for a healthy lifestyle based on the teachings of the Qur'an and the *Sunna*. Rima Nanda's reason for following this channel is that the recipes are easy to find and to practice. Her seemingly inconsistent choice in moving between offline and online *ta'lim* and between Ba 'Alawi and Salafi preachers, however, is not contradictive to her, as she explained:

"We are happy with our permanent preachers, especially with their teachings on theology and Islamic law, whereas information that we might access from social media are additional in nature."[38]

Conclusion

This article has discussed Muslim women in Indonesia, as represented by Majelis Mutia and Majelis Sahabat Cinta, their relationship to Salafi preachers and their teachings as well as the online–offline intricacies that are an important part of the religious negotiations that take place in digital realms. Compared to earlier accounts of the negotiation of Salafi teachings (Inge 2016; Pall and Pereiro 2020; Sunarwoto 2020), I have approached the subject differently by focusing on the religious practices of Muslim women who are not part of the Salafi community. I investigated the dynamics between online and offline *da'wa*, both from the perspectives of the assemblies' members and their preachers. A closer look at these dynamics revealed incongruencies and ambivalences that inform the religious activities of both the preachers and the members. These incongruencies provide opportunities for the members of the *majelis* to practice a "softer version" of Salafism and to even further negotiate between following the Salafi teachings and participating socially in offline and online life in ways that seem to contradict those teachings.

While the *majelis* communities conduct their studies offline, Islamic digital mediascapes are used to represent themselves online as well as to find suitable preachers and to initially learn about their teachings. Muslim women of both *majelis taklim* were not initially attracted to the Salafi teachings. Many of them came to the *majelis* with their life problems and hoped to find solutions. Only later they were attracted to the Salafi teachings, which were perceived as providing concrete answers to the members' daily issues. This has created a demand on the part of the Salafi preachers to preach beyond their closed community, even while this also can present challenges for them.

In the case of Majelis Mutia, the main challenges come from the members that negotiate the Salafi teachings. While it is true that they are influenced by the teachings, these women are able to select "their" Salafi preachers.

Inflexibility from the *ustadz* and *ustadzah* is unwelcomed by the *majelis*, and among those who are invited some of their teachings are modified or even rejected. Their clear statement that "even though they prefer Salafi teachings, they are not Salafis," decenters an identity approach to Salafism. All these negotiations have urged Salafi preachers to adjust their offline preaching strategy, which often created incongruencies and ambivalence as they moved between online and offline spaces. These incongruencies and ambivalence have further created opportunities for the members to interpret Islamic teachings according to their personal life situation.

As compared to Majelis Mutia, Majelis Sahabat Cinta emphasizes the need to control the themes of Salafi preachers. During the process of inviting these preachers to the *majelis*, the female organizers have to consult with their male permanent teachers who would digitally check the credibility of the preachers and their preaching before giving their permission. This process has shown a sharing of authority between the female organizers, who are middle-class women, and their male permanent teachers, which strengthens their position vis-à-vis the Salafi preachers.

In addition, they negotiate the Salafi teachings by involving a group of preachers with a strong Sufi background in their *majelis*. This choice of inviting female Ba 'Alawi preachers speaks against the common perception, which includes that of the Salafis, that authority in Islam is necessarily male and that women's roles are primarily domestic and not public (Kloos 2019). More importantly, these female Ba 'Alawi preachers have greatly influenced the *majelis* with regard to their offline and online activities. As a result, the Majelis Sahabat Cinta does not invite Salafi preachers to their *majelis* any longer and they also do not post Salafi preachers on the *majelis*' social media accounts anymore. The negotiation of Salafism has resulted in rejection at the group level, whereas on the individual level, members of the group might still follow Salafi preachers privately. The members of Majelis Sahabat Cinta claim that they take what is beneficial and leave what they regard as exorbitant from the Salafi preachers, emphasizing their sovereign position with regard to Salafi teachings.

The relationships between online and offline *da'wa* within the context of Majelis Mutia and Majelis Sahabat Cinta extend beyond a mere "complementation" and "co-constitution" (Hew 2018). My findings demonstrate that in their online and offline encounters with Salafi teachings, these women have actively assembled their own pious inspirations and found a pragmatic approach to everyday Islamic teachings in ways that suit their priorities and lifestyles. The proliferation of preachers and Islamic digital mediascapes have created a far more pluralized and optative religious landscape. This has greatly enhanced the women's ability to negotiate Salafi teachings, and it has allowed them to circumvent what is widely regarded as two of the most pervasive features of Salafism: subscription to a methodology of scriptural reading based on the scholarship and a *manhaj* of a recognized Salafi scholar, and disavowal of those who are non-Salafis often leading to social segregation.

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Notes

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[2] The term *Salafi* is derived from the Arabic *salafa*, which means to precede or to come to an end. The term *Salaf* means ancestors or predecessors. Hence, *al-Salaf al-Salih* refers to the "pious ancestors" or "pious predecessors," pointing to the followers of Prophet Muhammad from the first three generations. See Wahid (2014, 17–18).

[3] Although, several scholars, most recently Menchik (2016) and Mietzner and Muhtadi (2020), have challenged this idea of moderation as the key feature of Indonesian exceptionalism.

[4] *Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia* (HTI) is part of international *Hizbut Tahrir* movement that was founded in Palestine in 1953 by Taqiyuddin Al-Nabhani with the aim to establish a global caliphate. HTI was banned in Indonesia in July 2017.

[5] Felix Siauw and other preachers of his type, who can win the hearts of middle-class Muslim women, reflects a global trend that is related to the emergence of electronic and digital Islamic mediascapes. See, for example, Bayat (2010), Moll (2010), and Schulz (2015).

[6] The name *Dhuha* here refers to a specific prayer time around 8:00 to 11:00 a.m., suggesting the time when the *pengajian* takes place. They now refer to themselves as *Majelis Mutia*.

[7] Rully Surbakti, interview with author, October 16, 2014.

[8] Included in the lists are *Ustadz* Ransi Mardi Al Indragiri, *Ustadzah* Azizzah Ummu Yasir, and *Ustadz* Wira Mandiri Bachrun. The last two preachers were graduates of *Darul Hadith*, Dammaj, Yemen, which is a Salafi boarding school chaired by *Sheikh* Yahia al-Hajouri. Rully Surbakti, interview with author, July 10, 2017.

[9] Rully Surbakti, interview with author, July 10, 2017.

[10] Sita Nurhidayah (pseudonym), interview with author, February 19, 2016.

[11] Rully Surbakti, interview with author, July 10, 2017.

[12] *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal, interview with author, August 8, 2017.

[13] The center is a *Salafi* educational institution with close links to Islamic organizations in the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia.

[14] *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal, interview with author, May 23, 2016. Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) is one

of the notable Muslim theologians of the classical period. His thinking is often quoted in Salafi circles.

[15] Rully Surbakti, interview with author, July 10, 2017.

[16] *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal (2017), preaching on *Busana Muslimah* (Muslim Dress).

[17] See his YouTube channel (Hidayat 2018a; 2018b).

[18] *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal (2018a), preaching on *Bakti Istri pada Suami* (Wife's Devotion to Her Husband).

[19] *One Day One Juz* is an activity where someone is committing themselves to read *juz* (one section) of the Qur'an every day, which is organized online usually through WhatsApp. See, for example, Muslim (2017), Nisa (2018), and Slama (2017c).

[20] *Ustadz* Andi Ardiyan Mustakim, interview with author, March 2, 2017.

[21] Shafi'i *madzhab* is one of the four Sunni schools of Islamic laws, which is based on the teachings of Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Idris Al-Shafi'i (d. 820).

[22] Rully Surbakti, interview with author, July 10, 2017. *Muhammadiyah*, founded in 1912, and *Nahdlatul Ulama*, founded in 1926, are the two biggest mass Muslim organizations in Indonesia.

[23] Rima Nanda, interview with author, July 26, 2017.

[24] Rima Nanda, interview with author, July 26, 2017.

[25] Rima Nanda, interview with author, September 7, 2020.

[26] For an account of Indonesian female Ba 'Alawi preachers, see Husein (2021).

[27] *Ustadzah* Halimah Alaydrus runs her own *majelis taklim,* Muslimah Al-Ikhwan, in Jakarta. *Ustadzah* Aisyah Farid BSA is the head of Majelis Nisa Banat Ummul Batul in Jakarta. *Ustadzah* Muna Al-Munawwar is currently the vice principle of Ma'had Daarul Hasanat Nuruzzahro in Semarang.

[28] For the importance of the *hati* (heart) in online–offline preacher–follower relationships, see Slama (2017b).

[29] *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal (2018b), preaching on *Nasihat untuk Para Istri: Cara Mudah Wanita Masuk Surga* (Advice for Women: Easy Ways for Women to Enter Paradise).

[30] *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal (2018a), preaching on *Bakti Istri pada Suami* (Wife's Devotion to Her Husband).

[31] Rully Surbakti, interview with author, July 10, 2017.

[32] Sita Nurhidayah, interview with author, February 19, 2016.

[33] Rully Surbakti, interview with author, July 10, 2017.

[34] *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal and Rully Surbakti, interview with author, August 8, 2017.

[35] *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal and Rully Surbakti, interview with author, August 8, 2017.

[36] Rima Nanda, interview with author, September 7, 2020.

[37] Rima Nanda, interview with author, September 7, 2020.

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Reading the Digital Muslim Romance

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Abstract:

This article considers the practices of social formation on the online self-publishing platform Wattpad. Interactive and interfaced with other social media, Wattpad was founded in 2006 by Allen Lau and Ivan Yuen to facilitate self-publishing by well-known and emerging authors alike. Wattpad is popular among Malay readers and authors in Malaysia with stories clocking up millions of reads each. Most stories are aimed at women readers and preoccupied with themes of love and romance. However, this article turns its attention to the much-read Wattpad stories about forced marriage and romantic Islamic masculinity, the kinds of affordances Wattpad provides for Malay language authors and their readership, and the reading publics they cultivate. This article frames Wattpad as an archive of affect for vernacular religious engagement that mirrors the alternative spaces that women occupy as digital labourers and as agents of religious knowledge. It shows that digital spaces are affective spaces as much as they are domains that replicate and rewrite sharia-compliant gendered and religious relations offline.

Introduction

Critique of the invisibility and under-representation of women in digital cultures (Light 1999; Abbate 2012), primarily in computing, software engineering, and gaming, is typically taken as the principal agenda in the scholarly corpus on gender and technology. But Malaysian women have stood out as an anomaly in this body of literature as belonging to a sequestered techno-utopia unlike anywhere else (Lagesen 2008; see also

Mellström 2009). Driven by developmentalist goals and a visionary promise of the digital economy, state policies facilitated young women's access into higher education where they were encouraged to enroll in the fields of information and communication technology, inadvertently outnumbering men in university enrollment and graduation rates. Upon closer inspection, however, the "cyberfeminist utopia" that Vivian Lagesen (2008) alludes to, presumably with tongue in cheek, is anything but one. Perceptions towards work within the information and communication technology industries turned out to reinforce the gendered division of labour in the white-collar workplace. There is a preference among women for paid work in front of a computer in the office as opposed to the more "masculine" nature of "outdoor" work such as engineering on construction sites alongside working-class men. For these women, computer science and its occupational interiors replicate aspects of a "feminine" domain – secure, sedentary, and secretarial (Lagesen 2008, 18). As Lagesen's findings show, there is no escaping the intractable quandary of gendered labour that pervades even in the cyber world of computers. In the years after the advent of Web 2.0 women have emerged as productive and influential actors in the formation of digital intimate publics (Kanai 2018; Baulch and Pramiyanti 2018). It is a reflection more generally of Web 2.0's seemingly more "democratic" capacities, represented by interactive features fostered in blogging and social media platforms. However, we find a continuing trend in contemporary digital cultures that belies the cyberfeminist utopia that never was. As builders of content who often are either unpaid or under-compensated for their creative and "aspirational labour" (Duffy 2016), women's participation and influence in interactive digital cultures run up against and converge with the hallmarks of "women's work" in offline spaces, namely the reproduction of immaterial labour (Jarrett 2014).

This article considers how Muslim gender relations are reinforced and rewritten in vernacular digital discourses delivered as *dakwah*. Women have found ways to appropriate access to the mass media and emerge as influential agents of *dakwah* in Malaysia (Kloos 2019) and as similar illustrations in Indonesia show, younger women have taken up the mantle to propagate Islamic messages and teachings online (Lengauer 2018; Nisa

2018). However, insufficient attention is paid to the intersection of gender and labour in the networked practices of religious digital media considering the fact that the "internet is animated by cultural and technical labour through and through…" and firmly embedded in the development of a postindustrial society and its economic logic (Terranova 2000, 33). This article engages with the foregoing feminist critique of digital labour by demonstrating the affective foundations and labour that underpin the networked media practice of Islamic Wattpad love stories. Belonging to the wider repertoire of the romance industry, digital Islamic love stories on Wattpad fetch no more than a million online reads or "hits" by unique and repeat readers. In fact, the highest-rated stories are read between 100 thousand and 700 thousand times by online readers. Since its founding in 2006 by Canadians Allen Lau and Ivan Yuen, Wattpad's popularity has risen as a space for emerging and established writers to self-publish their work. With an estimated 40 million users every month (AFP Relax News 2015), Wattpad has not only grown from strength to strength but serves as a space for *vernacular* religious pedagogy and storytelling by under-represented social groups.

Here, the multifaceted meanings of the "vernacular" are offered to consider the conditions under which Islamic love stories on Wattpad are created and read. The vernacular has associations with the local, the "common" people, the "everyday" (Primiano 1995) along with the "mundane," "uncool" (Edensor et al. 2010), and even "pastiche" (Howard 2008). "Vernacular" and its meanings are called upon in this article to perform different kinds of work to address their modality in the realms of digital media, religion, and gender. The synergy of religion, gender, and the digital at the point of the "vernacular" is an opportunity for a critical reassessment of knowledge production and dissemination, both online and offline. The meaning of *vernacular* also expands beyond that of "folk" religious belief and practice that assumes an authentic, cultural indigeneity that exists in conjunction with "official" religion. Without reifying the binary of official and everyday religion, the vernacular should be seen as situated within a matrix of power rather than outside and separate from official institutions. Following this line of thinking, within an institution

are modalities of the vernacular that constitute the institution from the inside out. Thus, rather than operating outside "official" and "elite" institutions, the vernacular permeates through them. For instance, women's ritual practices related to the life course and sharing of religious knowledge may be dismissed and overlooked by religious authorities, but their social significance disrupts the artificial binary of institutional and everyday religion (Purewal and Kalra 2010). Practices that both reify institutional codes and have access to something beyond the control of the institutional yet operate within the assemblage of the institutional are characteristically a "hybrid of the institutional" (Howard 2008, 491). As the hybrid of the institutional, the vernacular might occupy spaces of the "everyday" and positions of marginality relative to one's gender, class, or ethnic identity but can still derive the legitimacy of institutions in ephemeral and precarious ways.

In a direction that departs from reinforcing the dichotomy of "new" and "old" media, this article builds on two lines of analysis: by drawing attention to how gender and affective labour blur the distinction between "new" and "old" media and between "official" and "everyday" religion by foregrounding their continuity. Related to this, it serves to further blur distinctions between online and offline narratives of Muslim gender relations. In the second line of analysis, this article frames Wattpad as an archive of affect for religious engagement that mirrors the alternative spaces that women occupy as agents of religious knowledge. It is consistent with other examples whereby "Islam is [seen] as a valuable resource for managing [women's] emotional lives" (Slama 2017; see also Hoesterey 2015 for affective exchanges between celebrity preachers and their female followers). This article proposes that the social-textual context of vernacular religion is a place for different types of digital labour performed by women and reinforces the necessity for emotion work in sharia-compliant gendered relations. This includes, but is not limited to, writing, reading, commenting, moderating, "liking," voting, and rating Islamic love stories made possible by the affordances (Gibson 1979) of the platform. I argue that affordances that allow for the creative and interactive reconstituting of gender relations are contingent upon the act of *working*

through emotions and a range of unpaid online labour[1]. In the next section, I demonstrate the ways in which orthodox, bureaucratic, and social-literary interpretations of love and emotions create conditions for romantic fiction writing and reading. This is followed by an elaboration on the affordances and socialities that Wattpad provides as an archive of affect and a discussion on the morphology of a typical digital love story delivered as *dakwah*.

Working through it: Emotionally driven free online labour

In an online survey[2] that details the preferences of romantic fiction readers, most of the respondents (78.9 percent) expressed interest in narratives depicting *cinta lepas nikah* (formation of love that occurs only after marriage), an implicit reference to forced or arranged marriage. Other responses filled in as individual replies included a preference for stories about "early marriage," "marital conflict," "hate later turning into love," "a strong and independent female character," and "the challenges of managing high costs of living." These highly emotive themes suggest a strong preference, often to the point of compulsiveness common amongst romance readers (Radway 1983), for *working through*, both in media content and interpersonal relations, struggles within the domains of intimacy. As I will show in this article, working through the personal coalesces with a range of free online labour such as writing, reading, commenting, up-voting, and rating Islamic love stories on Wattpad. These different types of online labour in turn furnish practices of self-expression, leisure, and religious knowledge-sharing.

Authors publish their stories on Wattpad through their free labour and are rewarded by a rating system. Similar to platforms that support the "sharing economy" (Vadde 2017), users on Wattpad can self-publish Islamic stories and educational content for readers who not only read but comment and rate or "vote" the content as a signal of their approval. Research on free digital labour have established the continuity between the voluntary labour of online content production, whether it is blogging or commenting on social media, and the unwaged domestic labour performed typically by

women (Terranova 2000; Jarrett 2014; Duffy 2016). The always "on" culture of mobile technology also signals the feminisation of work that has origins in women representing the reserve army of labour and whose efforts can be called upon all around the clock (Hochschild 1997; Gregg 2011). That women perform less glamorous, marginalised aspects of the digital economy, whether being exploited in the manufacturing of its hardware or erased altogether from its history, is nothing new. But in the neoliberalised landscape of the digital economy, women users have taken upon themselves to appropriate the grammar of digital interactivity and rebrand their under-compensated efforts as "aspirational labour" (Duffy 2016). Whereas the performance of free online labour perpetuates the hierarchy of value and exchange in the digital economy, what are the conditions that make unpaid digital labour possible, necessary, and even rewarding? To answer the foregoing question requires a conceptualisation of intimacy that crosses and blurs the lines between multiple spaces, online and offline, private and public (Gregg 2011) – an intimacy that is mobile, so to speak. As a platform that facilitates the reading and writing of stories on one's mobile device, Wattpad is best suited for the practices of mobile intimacy, whereby "the geographic and physical space is overlaid with an electronic position and relational presence, which is emotional and social" (Hjorth and Lim 2012, 478). But the mobile intimacy of Wattpad would not be possible without the exertion of emotion work that structures Muslim gender relations in Malaysia.

Emotion work is necessary to maintain the asymmetrical architecture of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in Malaysia. Coined by Arlie Hochschild in her early landmark study, emotion work is the effort involved "to change in degree the quality of emotion or feeling" (1979, 561) in social domains of intimacy. Gender relations in Malay society, as it is governed by the binary logic of *akal* (reason) and *nafsu* (passion; Peletz 1996), represent the basis for women's share of emotion work. According to this gender ideology, men's entitlement to roles of leadership and guardianship lies in their greater capacity to reason than women. As embodied vessels of emotion, women are regarded as spiritually weaker and vulnerable to temptation and supernatural influence (Ong 1987), placing the burden on

women to regulate their *nafsu* and those of men. Legal provisions that privilege Muslim men's sexuality have created friction with the cultural expectation that women regulate their emotions. Sharia reforms in Malaysia since the 1980s have facilitated men's access to contract polygamous marriage, initiate divorce from their wives, and claim shared matrimonial assets to support another wife (Mohamad 2011). These reforms have created further pressure on women to be *sabar* (show great emotional restraint) should their spouse desire another wife, among other demands. Objecting to a husband's marital "right" to polygamy and conjugal relations is tantamount to *nusyuz* (disobedience), a grave sin in Islam. Under these conditions, one imagines that love, although ubiquitous, does not come easy. In fact, these are the conditions that generate ambivalences, discontent, and divides about the place of romantic love in the lives of Muslim couples. There are several words that refer to "love" in the Malay language: *cinta*, *kasih*, and *sayang*, all with overlapping meanings denoting degrees of expression that are contingent on context. With love being the perennial preoccupation in local pop songs, poetry, television and film dramas, it would seem that the meaning-making practices surrounding "love" belong to a vernacular discourse of the everyday. But while these multiple terms exist in the Malay lexicon and love being "everywhere," there is a lack of emphasis on the significance of conjugal love in marriage in Islamic scripture (Musallam and Musallam 1983).

Love does not occupy a place of great importance in the bureaucratic Islamic discourse of marriage preparation courses compulsory for Muslim couples in Malaysia. Instead of sustaining the marital bond with romantic love, Muslim spouses are reminded that staying together involves meeting the terms of the marriage contract and responsibilities relative to their role as husband and wife (Mohamad 2020). A husband is obligated to provide maintenance (food, lodging, domestic expenditure) for his wife who fulfills a conjugal role (Ali 2010). The absence of love in marriage in orthodox Islamic discourse stands in stark contrast to the preoccupation with romance among Malay women. Vernacular love stories depicting everyday anxieties and priorities surrounding practices of intimacy outside

"official" discourse fill this void. Through them, sharia-compliant gendered relations are rewritten using cross-cultural popular material, Arabic loanwords, and points of affective engagement between authors and readers.

An archive of affect: Wattpad affordances and socialities

In a focus group discussion with readers of romantic novels at a bookshop in Kuala Lumpur organised one weekend in 2018, one participant, Siti, stood out for not being a great reader of print novels. She had attended the discussion along with her husband who seemed aware of her reading habits. But throughout the discussion, she remained guarded in her responses to questions about her reading practices and why Islamic romantic love stories appealed to her. She was, however, more forthcoming about the format of her reading patterns. Instead of physical copies of novels, of which she read very few, her reading practice was mediated through Wattpad on her mobile phone. Her preference for reading on her mobile phone is consistent with the founding impetus of Wattpad – to transform reading practices (Bold 2018) by facilitating access to self-published stories on mobile technology anytime, anywhere. Reading on her mobile phone also provided her with affective affordances such as discreetness and privacy when reading romantic fiction. Whether her reticence about sharing details of her media practices was related to the presence of her husband was hard to surmise at the time. But Siti's behaviour was not unusual. In interview responses with other readers, romantic fiction was an illicit pleasure best kept secret from family members. Siti's preferred mode of reading romantic fiction demonstrates Wattpad's affordances as mobile intimacy that are distinct from romantic fiction in print media. Every Wattpad story is published either as a standalone short story or serialised in multiple chapters. Its seriality firmly establishes its continuity with print traditions of a bygone era. Chapters that end with a tantalising cliffhanger only to be followed by a subsequent chapter in the future, recalling the 19th century commercial publishing approaches to the serialised works of Charles Dickens, settle the debate about Wattpad's fundamental newness as a media form quite apart from

"old" media once and for all (Bold 2018). Wattpad is, however, novel in other ways. Its mode of engagement belongs to a constellation of media moments that capture new media's intimacy, spontaneity, openness, and ephemerality that renders it novel and unprecedented. As a networked digital practice that combines the self-publishing capacity of blogging and the interactivity of social media, Wattpad is animated by the affective structures of "likes," votes, ratings, and rankings that influence author–reader engagement.

Online media are known to enhance access but they sometimes function as barriers to "offline" media spaces. Similar to the subculture of feminist zines, Wattpad storytelling exists in conjunction and symbiotically with print romance as a "digitally networked practice" (Clark-Parsons 2017, 562). Predating the internet, zines experienced a revival during the early years of Web 2.0 when zine-makers publicised and distributed their work online. Although the internet is typically regarded as facilitating the reach of distribution in greater numbers and distances, it is, however, also a "boundary space" for some zine-makers who refuse to use the internet to share their work (Clark-Parsons 2018, 569). Zine-makers appropriate the boundary space (through disengagement) to restrict access to their work only to individuals with authentic interest and commitment to feminism and limit the exposure to harassment and abuse that feminist content is vulnerable to. Their disengagement from the internet is a different kind of reach: inwards into established communities rather than outwards into the wider (digital) world. Clark-Parsons's findings demonstrate that groups with a mission of social consciousness and change do not necessarily operate with an agenda of openness and converting others to the cause but may be more interested in consolidating existing terms of belonging. Unlike the material spaces of romance bookshops and bookfairs that facilitate and consolidate the formation of crowds, gatherings, and counter-publics, digital spaces like Wattpad have instead the potential to achieve "feelings of community" (Dean 2010, 22) rather than firm connective bonds. Despite these spatial differences, there are parallels between romance writing on Wattpad and its counterpart in print publishing. Authors typically start out as ardent readers and given the

casual, nonliterary register of the stories, entry into publishing is set to a low bar. Wattpad love stories share a long history with romantic print fiction that dates back to the publication of the first modern Malay language novel, *Hikayat Faridah Hanum* (The Story of Faridah Hanum) published in 1925 by the male writer and Muslim reformist Syed Syeikh al-Hadi. A story about forbidden love between a young man and a woman with intellectual aspirations, it is a literary landmark that equates women's access to education with social progress (Bahjat and Muhammad 2010). Malay fiction written from a woman's perspective, while few during the early postcolonial period (Izharuddin 2019), experienced a revival in the 2000s with the proliferation of small publishing houses and controversial fiction about sexual violence and forced marriage recast as romantic love stories (Izharuddin 2021).

Wattpad users do not belong to a fixed, predetermined community. Rather, they belong to multiple social formations or socialities in which digital consumption of romantic fiction is one of many forms of media formats they engage with. Readers will flit from one media form to another, making Wattpad just one more option out of the sheer confluence of media choice. As a personal archive of affect, Wattpad facilitates the accumulation, retrieval, and customised collection of Islamic love stories. Its function is consistent with Ann Cvetkovich's "archive of feelings" that grants access to "an exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves, but in the practices that surround their production and reception" (2003, 7). The building of a user-generated archive is powered by the dynamic affective relations that determine which stories are rated highly and have the highest number of readers. Without access to consultation with booksellers at bookfairs and bookshops on what to read, readers may browse from the list of stories on Wattpad organised by descriptive tags such as *cintalepasnikah* (love after marriage), *ustaz* (male Islamic teacher), *kahwinpaksa* (forced marriage), and *cinta* (love). Another important affordance is interactivity and its solicitation of direct engagement. Readers can leave comments and feedback next to the body of text, "vote" or rate a story, and chat with authors in private messaging streams. The

comments range from emotional reactions to questions for further clarification from the author to an editing inquiry. To maintain convivial relations with readers authors promptly respond to these questions and comments. Their responses concerning specific queries from readers about Arabic phrases or aspects of Islamic practice become spontaneous pedagogical or *dakwah* moments. For example, one reader left a question to ask the meaning of *uhibbukumfillah* in Haura Mawar's Wattpad novel *Fi Hifzillah Wahai Yang Dirindui* (May God Protect You, My Dear Beloved), to which the author replied, "I love you because of Allah" in Arabic.

Writing for *dakwah*, with a twist

An argument consistent with the key premise that religion should be understood "*as* mediation" (Engelke 2010; emphasis in original), in that religion and media are practices co-constitutive of each other, can be made for Islamic love stories on Wattpad. Writers of Islamic stories on Wattpad cast themselves as mediators of religious consciousness who, as enlightened "friends," remind their peers to stay on the "right" path of Islam. The romantic idiom and drama of their digital stories do not obfuscate this message but operate instead as a transparent medium for *dakwah*, which echoes the perceived capacity of other formats of technology, such as PowerPoint, to deliver Islamic teachings with greater clarity (Rudnyckyj 2009). Those who write Islamic Wattpad stories have lofty moral ambitions of transforming as many readers into good Muslims as possible. According to one author whom I interviewed, Nurul Raihanah, who has published a popular novel with over 600 thousand reads, Wattpad's affordances facilitate direct connection and interactivity with readers and enhance the dissemination of Islamic knowledge across borders and cultures. The only impediment to her mission lies in Wattpad's intrinsic infrastructure. Nurul Raihanah complains that Wattpad does not protect the status of self-published works as intellectual property, making them vulnerable to plagiarism and unauthorised translation into other languages.

Romance being their chosen genre for this mission indicates a keen competency relevant to a specific audience – young, Muslim, and female – and their needs. Many may write for *dakwah* without conventional credentials of Islamic authority, but their vernacular mode of raising religious consciousness unlocks access to multiple domains of intimacy, by directly responding to comments from readers and forming friendship groups on WhatsApp with readers where they share religious knowledge and romantic ideals from an Islamic perspective. These WhatsApp groups are welcomed by Muslim women who may feel excluded from institutional, male-dominated spaces of worship and seek spaces of informal religiosity that deploy a more accessible, everyday delivery of storytelling and Islamic messaging (see Van Doorn-Harder 2006 for informal prayer and Qur'anic recitation groups in Indonesia; and Frisk 2009 – their Malaysian counterpart). The productive trifecta of gender, Islam, and the media occurs in a context where the structure of Islamic authority in Southeast Asia is subject to reconstitution and contestation, giving an opportunity to less traditional forms of religious preaching to gain credibility. Women preachers have benefited from this shifting landscape of religious authority as they gain audiences along with legitimacy and celebrity hitherto enjoyed by men (see the role of professional credentials in the rise of popular female preachers in Malaysia by Kloos 2019). Popular women preachers speak primarily to an all-female audience and lend their expertise, either as health or legal professionals, to their oratorial presentations on issues that concern intimacy and everyday Islam. Mass mediation of their public profile, expertise, and talent for connecting with "ordinary" Malay women points to the "media turn" of practitioners of popular religion and the mass mediatisation of religious publics. But being women, their heightened visibility within these publics is both welcomed and contested.

Authors and readers alike engage with Islamic love stories as material that crosses the genres of fiction, popular religion, fan fiction, self-improvement, and semi-autobiography, exemplifying the limitations of categorical, generic, and conceptual boundaries of what counts as "religious." For instance, stories about polygamy and forced marriage are not mere fiction nor fantasy but are read as a kind of instructional

manual should readers find themselves in situations similar to the characters in fiction narratives. Some authors with a background in traditional Islamic education write authoritatively from experience semi-autobiographical narratives about life in an Islamic school and university. In some of these cases, the authors themselves are still studying in Islamic schools which, along with the bedroom (Kearney 2007), should be seen as an extension to digital spaces as sites of cultural production and contemporary girl culture. Their stories switch between multiple languages – predominantly Malay but peppered with English, Arabic, and even Korean, signalling their cross-cultural competencies and cosmopolitan aspirations. That Wattpad, unlike the multiple materialities of romantic print fiction (physical books, bookshops, and bookfairs), exists digitally does not make it a trivial media form or less "real." Emerging authors publish on Wattpad to launch a writing career and plant seeds for opportunities and potential success across other media. Establishing a reputation with readers with the hope of landing a publishing contract and a television adaptation deal is a common strategy. In Indonesia, popular Wattpad stories have been adapted to film and television, elevating self-published authors to the status of micro-celebrity. Integrated within the profit-making networks of social media platforms, self-publishing on Wattpad cannot be regarded as an heir to the subcultures of zines and chapbooks. Profit generated from advertising adjacent to free content by authors is accrued only to Wattpad. For that reason, as a media format, it is limited in its subversive potential. Nonetheless, within the constraints of Wattpad are micro-moments of bricolage and pastiche reminiscent of "poaching" in fan culture (Consalvo 2003) and countercultural copy–pasting media practices like zines (Zobl 2009). In startling examples that underline the cross-cultural embrace of South Korean popular culture amongst young Muslim women in Asia are fan representations of Korean pop stars in collages and as characters in Islamic Wattpad stories. Authors take advantage of Wattpad's multimedia affordances to stitch together within their text visual images of cross-cultural intimacy that authors of print publishing typically do not do. In these stories, authors cut, copy and paste visual stills and promotional photographs of celebrities of South Korean pop music, television drama and films as a visual representation and stand-in for their fictional Wattpad characters to create a bricolage of romantic fantasy (Figure 1).

Figure 1: A bricolage of cross-cultural romantic fantasy (Haura 2020).

Enthusiastic responses to these reconstructed images suggest an establishment of gendered reading competencies or "spectatorial girlfriendship" (Kanai 2018). Even though it speaks for a specific Western context, *spectatorial girlfriendship*, defined as the "shared familiarity with [specific cultural discourses] and affects of youthful femininity" (Kanai 2018, 61), helpfully describes the skills and techniques that structure the affective engagement with Islamic Wattpad stories. To put it simply, only fans will "get it." Furthermore, these digital appropriations of images from South Korean popular culture are repurposed to circumvent the problem of visually depicting Muslim couples in physical proximity and intimacy. In stories set in South Korea, representations of deeply pious young Muslim women in hijab who speak with a romantic appreciation for male South Korean pop stars, sing and recite lines from songs and scenes from South Korean television dramas show the extent of the Hallyu wave's globality across the Muslim world in Asia (see for example Nugroho 2014 for the phenomenon of Korean pop fandom in Indonesia). But it is a cross-cultural embrace that stops at Islamic identity and its practices.

South Korean women and men in Wattpad love stories, including fan representations of pop stars(!), find Islam profoundly compelling and convert to the religion when they encounter pious Malaysian Muslims. If mediation is about making the invisible visible (Engelke 2010), we find that *dakwah* and love are rendered visible, albeit conjoined and reconstituted, in the everyday vernacular mode of the romantic story and circulated through a range of affordances. To borrow a conceptual tool in classical approaches to folklore, the Islamic Wattpad love story is recognisable by its "morphology" or "a description of the tale according to its component parts and the relationship of these components to each other and to the whole" (Propp 1998, 72). They also demonstrate, to some extent, the departure of Islamic love stories from the familiar tropes of western romance. In the next section, the character of the *ustaz* as a key component of the Islamic love story demonstrates how the turbulent nature of love and women's emotions should be worked through the Islamic way.

The romantic *ustaz*: the vernacularity of Islamic intimacy

As a medium for *dakwah*, most Islamic Wattpad love stories are structured by the triangulated dramatis personae comprising the deeply religious *ustaz*, the wayward young woman, and their respective parents who are invested in their children's marriage. Of the three, the young *ustaz*, a male Islamic teacher, is the main dramatis persona around whom the social drama of illicit physical proximity and forced marriage are contended with and contested. The centrality of the *ustaz* is suggested in the titles of Islamic Wattpad stories: (*Suamiku Ustaz* [My Husband is an Ustaz]; *Mr. Ustaz, Miss CEO*; *Ustazku ROMANTIK*! [My Ustaz is Romantic!]; *Suamiku Si Ustaz Sweet* [My Husband is a Sweet Ustaz]; *Dia Ustazku* [He is My Ustaz]; *Cinta Ustaz Pelik* [An Ustaz's Strange Love]; *Hacker Ku Ustaz dari Egypt* [My Hacker is an Ustaz from Egypt]; *Suamiku Ustaz Korea* [My Husband is a Korean Ustaz]; *Ustaz Baru Tu Suami Ku* [That New Ustaz is My Husband]; *My Lovely Ustaz Kampung* [My Lovely Village Ustaz]).

Islamic Wattpad stories are moral tales for women. Coercion, harassment, and abuse are dramatic tropes that serve as overt warnings to female

sexuality and desires that go unchecked. The taming of the Malay woman, who must confront her emotions and work through them, takes place in relation to the *ustaz* whose professional capacity lends moral rectitude to his control of the female protagonist. The *ustaz*'s characterisation as a romantic hero is not only a sign of intensified Islamic aspirations and public performativity of piety, but an assertion of desire that finds expression in a confluence of multiple cultural trends (Izharuddin 2018). The *ustaz* as hero in Islamic media should not be seen as an expression of a pure distillation of Muslim masculinity removed from context but embedded in competing socio-mediated and globalised understandings of what it means to be a young and modern Muslim man (Barendregt and Hudson 2016; Nilan 2009; Izharuddin 2017; Eliyanah 2019). Responses to the online survey question on reader preferences for types of romantic leading men suggest interest in a range of masculinities based on their occupation. Business owners, lawyers, and medical doctors represented the majority of male characters enjoyed by readers of Malay romance novels (70–81 percent), followed by love interests who were university students (52 percent) and the *ustaz* and Islamic preachers (44 percent). But in the respondents' other answers were fishermen, street burger vendors, and farmers as romantic leading men that left them with a significant impression. Since the launch of the widely reported reality television show, *Imam Muda* (Young Imam) in 2010, the *ustaz* has emerged as a new kind of man that embodies modernity and religion (Stanton 2018). On *Imam Muda*, young men compete in a range of moral, technical, and theological challenges in a mass mediatised arena that blends modern sophistication with Islam. Following the footsteps of 21st century celebrities who rise to fame from the world of reality TV, the *ustaz* has earned glamour and adoration, particularly from women who regard him as an ideal husband (Barendregt and Hudson 2016). It is not unknown for women to respond enthusiastically to the oratorical performances of a male Islamic preacher at pedagogical events (Millie 2011), which highlights the intensity of female spectatorship under conditions where women's opportunities for public enjoyment and pleasure are more restricted than men.

"Love" in the Islamic Wattpad story occupies a turbulent place, torn in a struggle between heteronormative love and a love for God. A good Muslim

must constantly wrestle with the overwhelming power of romantic love that comes freighted with emotions and erotic desire (van Wichelen 2009). Thus, "love" is fundamentally dangerous, requiring the constant restraint of *ikhtilat*. An important social principle, *ikhtilat* is an Arabic-derived term for gendered segregation and the boundary between unrelated women and men from free and casual interaction. References to maintaining *ikhtilat* point to the anxiety that public spaces can generate where boundaries between unmarried Muslims are intangible and must be reinforced through social behaviour, placing the moral responsibility on individuals *in situ*. Readers encounter other words with Arabic origins, some for the first time, that refer to subjecthood related to marital status and practices that adhere to an idealised model of Islamic intimacy. These terms include *zauj* and *zaujah* for future husband and wife respectively, and *ajnabi* to refer to women and men who are eligible candidates for marriage. Pedagogical moments of the *dakwah* love story hinge on these kinds of terms and practices. The stories follow a particular narrative arc: a young wayward woman's life takes a dramatic turn when she is faced with the prospect of a forced marriage to an *ustaz*. Pivotal scenes punctuating the narrative push the romantic heterosexual couple into "accidental" intimacy and marriage. The female character accidentally tripping and falling into the arms of an *ustaz* is an emotionally turbulent moment that can incite forbidden desire. In a more consequential event, an elaborate plot to entrap the *ustaz* and the heroine into an intimate situation and falsely accuse them of illicit proximity leaves them with no choice but to marry. With a belief that the *ustaz* is a gatekeeper to a woman's eternal salvation, the heroine's parents are convinced a forced marriage is a small price to pay. Her brashness and free-spirited attitude towards romance are challenged and reined in by a marriage she strongly objects but proceeds with it anyway to please her parents. As a wife of an *ustaz* she is harassed and coerced into wearing the hijab, pray, and recite the Qur'an with diligence. What follows from this scenario are events that require the female protagonist to work through her emotions under the guidance of the *ustaz* and lead her to eventually fall in love with him. These scenes function to "test" the faith of the characters and for readers to work out how to morally conduct themselves when faced with the temptation to stray from the moral path.

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Informed by cultural frameworks of emotions, the *ustaz* embodies the bulwark against the overpowering nature of *nafsu* (desire) that is difficult to suppress without reason, morality, and piety. In happier moments, his emotional hinterland is portrayed as overlaid with tenderness and sensitivity, qualities publishers of romantic fiction argue are seldom found among Malay men "in real life." But he is not without flaws. An *ustaz* who is forced to marry a woman he does not love is emotionally abusive towards her. His violent mood swings are hard to predict and his wife must walk on eggshells to avoid his wrath. In these passages, readers respond with objections to his behaviour in their comments tagged to the text. Readers of *Dia Ustazku* [He's My Ustaz] reacted with alarm and disdain towards the behaviour of an *ustaz* who demeans and controls his wife's whereabouts outside the home: "Ugh this *ustaz*. If he's really an *ustaz* he would not behave this way. A real *ustaz* would speak with kindness and not with aggression towards his wife. [emoji: face with steam from nose]" Another reader agrees with the foregoing comment: "At the end of the day, we're all humans. Just look at all the badly-behaved young imams out there." By contrast, forced marriage is a dramatic narrative device towards which readers show no objection or distaste when given the opportunity to engage on Wattpad. Unlike the western romance where premarital intimacy is expected, forced marriage in an Islamic love story allows authors to portray scenes of intimacy under *halal* (permitted) conditions. Moreover, scenes of nonconsensual intimacy and sexual violence are not objectionable as marital rape is not recognised as a crime in Malaysia (Steiner 2019). Forced marriage is also a situation in which characters, especially women, must work through a range of emotions – anger, fear, and anxiety, feelings that must be resolved not just with love but also *sabar* (patience) and *pasrah* (stoic resignation). It would not be a stretch to presume that readers who identify with the characters work through similar emotions, too. For example, connecting with stories about forced marriage had been a means for Murni, a reader I interviewed, to come to terms with the aftermath of her own forced marriage, claiming that the stories give her strength to carry on as a single working mother.

Conclusion

A national agenda that pursues the promise of a techno-utopia that will fast-track the country into a futuristic knowledge economy has inadvertently created, and assisted by the global economy no less, a society reliant on forms of mobile intimacy and adept at appropriating digital archives of affect towards personal ends. But it is a vision of utopia that has yet to solve the labour inequality that underpins the digital economy. In the meantime, digital platforms like Wattpad rewrite and reinforce, distribute and amplify vernacular religious ideas about love and romantic Islamic masculinity to readers who perhaps feel short-changed by cultural and bureaucratic institutional frameworks of emotions and intimacy. This article offers a case for the definitional expansion of vernacular religion that plays out in the digital realms of "new" media and a critical consideration for the reproduction of digital labour and its gendered consequences. The offline contexts of digital labour will enrich our understanding and appreciation for "the social" that lies behind the online mediation of religion. In the case of Islamic love stories on Wattpad, the affordances of new media platforms provide opportunities for religious pedagogical moments and rewarding affective engagement in a context of emotional asymmetry. However, the conditions and work of popular religious engagement in these spaces replicate aspects of feminised labour – free, undervalued, and always "on." These are nevertheless mobilised in the dynamic relations that build the digital archive of affect made up of user-generated media moments. Ambivalences and discontent about romantic love are both conditions and remediated content in this networked digital landscape where the currency of new forms of Islamic authority and knowledge are necessarily social, emotive, and intimate.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

[1] The findings of this article are derived from a larger project on the social and material cultures of the Malay-language romance industry in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. Between 2016 and 2019, I collected more than a hundred responses from women who were part of the Malay romance industry as writers, readers, booksellers and publishers. They participated in a preliminary online survey, focus group discussions, and structured and semi-structured in-depth interviews. These audio-recorded and handwritten interviews were conducted face-to-face, others were via email, WhatsApp, and private messaging on Wattpad. Many of the participants have a heterogeneous approach to romantic fiction, reading and writing in print and online media, while a smaller number engage almost exclusively with Wattpad as authors and readers. The names of research participants have been changed to protect their privacy.

[2] In a small preliminary online survey conducted with 87 respondents in early 2016, nearly half were between ages 21 and 25 years old (44.5 percent), and about a third were still in tertiary education (65.5 percent). Most (32.2 percent) counted themselves as dedicated readers who finish on average more than eight romance novels a month. The preliminary survey was carried out to identify themes that readers seek in romance novels and included questions about recurring plot

devices and the typology of protagonists in Malay language romantic novels. "*Kahwin kontrak* [Contractual marriage]," "*kahwin paksa* [forced marriage]," and "sharia-compliant romance" were subjects that appealed to them and are notable in their popularity after the bestselling publication and controversial 2011 film adaptation of Fauziah Ashari's 2002 novel *Ombak Rindu* (Waves of Longing), a story about sexual violence and female sacrifice, revived and reinvented the Malay popular romance.

Mualaf Chic: Conversion and Mediation in Indonesian Pious Sociality

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Abstract:

Scholars of the visible rise of public forms of Islamic piety movements in Indonesia in the past two decades have noted its transnational character. Unsurprisingly, Arab inspiration has been prominent, as direct clerical influence and indirect aesthetic prestige. In this article, I suggest that another feature of this shared religious community relays a slightly different allure, that of accessing and domesticating foreignness through conversion and cosmopolitanism. I analyze this through examples from pious fashion celebrities who have large and passionate Indonesian audiences. Analyzing two genres, Indonesian pious celebrities who amplify their appeal through situating themselves in foreign settings, and foreign converts to Islam who have large Indonesian social media audiences because of their adoption of Muslim piety, I ask how the affordances of fashion facilitate a unique process of accessing the allure of the foreign that preclude its total domestication. I focus particularly on the example of Ayana Jihye Moon, a Korean woman whose conversion to Islam has created a substantial Indonesian fan base. Her "journey to Islam" suggests alternate circuits in contemporary Indonesian Islamic culture and by extension, the role of the foreign in Indonesian conceptions of authority.

"She is so humble," my Indonesian friend Dinny said. Speaking of her admiration for the Korean Instagram celebrity Ayana Jihye Moon in 2019, she continued, "she is so beautiful." And then, after a moment, another friend added, "she suffered so much, and took such risks to be a good

Muslimah." Comments like these highlight a potent intersection of piety and style that are at the heart of the booming pious fashion and lifestyle industries in contemporary Indonesia. Beauty and modesty produce prestige and wealth in the publicly pious environment of urban Indonesia, qualities that intensify in the primarily social media channels that fuse *dakwah* with capitalism. As this field, itself a vibrant and elite social scene, has become distinctively Indonesian, its transnational character may be less apparent. In this article, I suggest that the historically translocal character of Indonesian Muslim piety is particularly well suited to the celebration of cosmopolitan lifestyle that social media celebrity affords. Including an otherwise fantastical, frivolous, and feminine field broadens the transnational inspiration that saturates Indonesian experiences of Muslim piety beyond its understandable focus on Arab influence. Ayana's stardom highlights how aspiration blends hardship and glamour to remind followers that piety can be simultaneously difficult and fabulous. In what follows, I suggest that cosmopolitanism and conversion treat the foreign as a substance to be selectively mined. They emerge as thrilling affective partners, each amplifying the other in ways that play with alterity and domestication. Considered in the context of the global features of Indonesian pious celebrity, Ayana is an example of a new twist on a familiar figure: the chic *mualaf*, or chic convert.

Situating the foreign

Scholars of the visible rise of public forms of Islamic piety movements in Indonesia in the past two decades have noted its transnational character. Unsurprisingly, Arab inspiration has been prominent, as direct clerical influence and indirect aesthetic prestige. *Arabisasi* has been evident in formal educational, philanthropic, and clerical exchanges between Indonesia and the kingdom of Saudi Arabia as part of the kingdom's global strategy to export its influence through religious authority and oil wealth. Soft power, in this sense, integrates aesthetic, commercial, and intellectual fields into foreign policy so as to mitigate competing political threats via cultural influence. This approach is not limited to Saudi Arabia. For some majority Muslim countries, a new strategic terrain dubbed "moderate Islam" has

become a field in which to claim a future global role in the face of extremist movements such as ISIS. As Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid (2018) argue, Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, Morocco, and Indonesia each benefit from figuring Saudi Arabia's soft power initiatives as cultural and religious threats, and frame themselves as legitimate and historically authentic models of tolerance or sophistication. Taking soft power strategies such as these seriously can highlight apparently peripheral social fields, such as fashion or beauty, in transnational debates about global influence. Placing these fields closer to the center of our analytical frames, in tandem with their intermittent appearance in foreign policy, allows us to see the complex ways they animate elite anxieties about national autonomy and personal aspirations to cosmopolitanism. For pious Indonesian women, both celebrities and not, performing beauty across national borders is entirely consistent with religious aspiration.

Arab presence in Southeast Asia has long been contested. Arab, *qua* religious, style has been one of many translocal influences in the region. While Muslims around the world honor the fact that the Qu'ran was revealed in Arabic and that the Prophet Muhammad was an Arab man, in Indonesia, these facts have contributed to complex cultural transformations that reveal how politically and semiotically dense Arab connections have become. Historical analyses of Islamization in Southeast Asia have asked whether the arrival of Arab merchants in the 13th century was a process of "conversion or adhesion" (Reid 1988, 140), noting that simple recitation of the *syahadat* was not a definitive indication of conversion. Rather, the adoption of previously foreign dress and diet were more reliable signs of a religious revolution. Engseng Ho describes the imperial and mystical landscape of the Indian Ocean as one in which the translocal exchange of influences in food, dress, and affiliation facilitated otherwise distant relationships, marking descendants of Hadhrami travelers with genealogical links to the prophet (*sayyid*) as simultaneously cosmopolitan *and* minorities (2006, 305). These affiliations were later used by Dutch colonists in the Indies as categories of racial control, marking residents of Arab descent against *pribumi* and other "foreign Orientals" (*vreemde oosterlingen*) whose residence may have predated European rule but whose classification as

foreign foreclosed full membership in native life (Mandal 2018, 74). Thus segregated, Arabness itself framed Arab cultural life as a "fanatic" foil against which to pose apparently more moderate local Muslims.

By the early 20th century, the intersection of Arabness and Islamic critique informed its own "*umma* below the winds" (Laffan 2003), facilitating a religious foundation for resistance to colonial rule. These connotations have remained relevant in the recent period of religious purification over the past two decades. What began as student interest in the 1980s in discovering religious interpretation abroad as a way of critiquing authoritarian rule at home has now become a complex, sensory, and commercial landscape of global and local sources in a post-authoritarian era. In this landscape, Arab connections and style have been central features of the religious reformist and democratic *reformasi* movements. Although for many young activists, travel to the Middle East and facility with Arabic language and religious expertise signified substantial cultural capital, it has also fueled recent resentments. As Sumit Mandal (2011) argues, the rediscovery of Arabness has been central to national aspirations among some Southeast Asian Muslims to be considered essentially moderate. This narrative relies on a perception of the Muslim world as singularly centered in the Arab sphere, thereby assigning extremist and masculinist valences to an Arab essence and allowing peripheral Muslims to claim a more moderate stance by virtue of their ethnic and geographic distance (Lücking and Eliyanah 2017).

An expansive perspective on the role of foreignness and religious and political power is helpful here. It not only decenters an Arab focus but invites us to consider the aesthetic heart beating at the core of contemporary phenomena such as social media and religious celebrity. Seen in this light, foreignness is not simply a threat that must be domesticated, but a potency to harness and deploy, even in the service of generating new centers (cf. Steedly 1999). Southeast Asian patron–client relations have a long history of being produced and conserved through claiming people, or audiences, rather than territories (Heine-Geldern 1942; Tambiah 2013). Although this resonates with a similar logic at the core of socially mediated fame, it may also illuminate how conceptions of foreignness and potency intersect. As

Martin Slama (2020) has argued, recent religious and political initiatives in Indonesia have invoked historical patterns of selective deployment of foreignness as a long-standing local practice. In analyzing these forms of recruiting the foreign for local power it helps to recall that Southeast Asian kingdoms, some predating the arrival of Islam, rested on myths about foreign figures or "stranger-kings" (Braginsky 2015) whose power was anchored in their capacity to appear from outside, to arrive as a "supernaturally potent figure who enters a particular society and installs himself as ruler" (Slama 2020, 291). These figures did not reject the concept of a center. Rather, they configured it through themselves in ways that could only last as long as they were recognized as simultaneously foreign and legitimate. Foreignness was therefore an attractive mix of foreign and local, but one which was largely limited to male figures. For example, their authentication to local audiences in part relied on marrying local women.

Thinking of these dynamics through the concept of figures is helpful for teasing out how to think about the role of the foreign. A figure, as Joshua Barker, Erik Harms, and Johan Lindquist argue (2014), is both a unique individual and a familiar symbol, emblematic of an era or a moment. Building on James Siegel's (1998) idea of new types of sociality, types may precede and exceed any individual and therefore correspond less to any particular person, yet they circulate and resonate in ways that are powerful because they may also uncannily correspond to distinct individuals. Preachers, kings, descendants of the prophet, and we might also add, religious social media stars, are arguably figures in this sense. Each channel and translate power external to the self or to the region into personal power. Returning to the complex figure of the sayyid is illustrative here of stranger-kings and to a lesser extent the *kyai*, or local preacher, which Clifford Geertz (1960) described as a cross-cultural "broker." For example, a sayyid who has a large following (*habib*, literally "beloved") is beloved in part because of their capacity to draw an audience, and in part because of their figuration as a diffracted yet living presence of the prophet in the Indonesian present. Hadhrami descendants whose lives and families have been situated in the archipelago for generations may have "become Indonesian" and occupy a range of high-profile and respected

positions, yet this is arguably in part because of their status as still alluringly, partially foreign (Alatas 2011).[1]

Contemporary Muslim entrepreneurs, preachers, and, significantly, social media celebrities in Indonesia known as *selebgrams* (a portmanteau of *selebriti* and Instagram) traffic in a newly precarious but profitable arena of mediated piety which reanimates some of these origins in the power of the foreign. Each of these genres plays on the relationship of inspiration as a religious and productive concept that invites analysis of the prevalence of figures with active, attractive relationships with difference. Many of them are converts, minorities, mixed children of Indonesians and non-Indonesians, or people simply known for frequently traveling abroad. They relay embodied experience of the world outside of Indonesia to Indonesians. We might recognize these religious celebrities as wealthier and more public versions of what Fenella Cannell (1999) has described as the appeal that beauty pageant queens, spirit mediums, and performers in the Christian passion play hold among Bicolanos in the Philippines. As a person who possesses an unusual ability to attract a galaxy of powerful others, male transvestite beauty queens (*bakla*) intimately access alterity through its trappings, by wrapping a male body in glamourous femininity, and almost, but not perfectly, emulating American beauty standards. For these figures, embracing alterity is to fleetingly dance with the protective power of the other, sometimes at the personal risk of losing the self, but its efficacy only holds if that power remains undomesticated.

Considering these examples together accentuates the salience of appearance. Like the radiant beauty of the pageant queen, appearances do not simply reflect or signify some deeper or truer process of translation but are the very medium through which to access the external power that might protect and enhance the self. Again, this has historical origins. As John Pemberton has argued (1994), the social zone known as *cara* (fashion, manners, or style) became a technique by which royal families in colonial Java faced the foreign domination that was Dutch rule, by positioning Dutch clothing, accessories, and etiquette equally alongside their broader repertoire of available powerful tools such as batik and sacred heirlooms. This created

the twinned effect of simultaneously elevating and reducing Dutch style by making it both more spiritually potent in a Javanese sense and more nonsensical to Dutch colonial officials (1994, 67).

Although historically and socially varied, these examples emphasize attention to the foreign that seeks a balance between domestication and admiration. In the highly capitalized, digitized, transnational yet affectively intimate context of contemporary social media, skilled practitioners craft new alloys of national and transnational references to create new forms of community with thrilling new codes of belonging which also emphasize appearances. Male and female preachers alike can selectively access the celebrity universe of the selebgram. Celebrity preachers who can deftly deploy a mix of global and personal semiotic references can enhance their status, endear themselves to followers, and potentially convert that visibility into income (Kloos 2019; Millie 2017; Slama 2017). For example, celebrity preacher Abdullah Gymnastiar mixed Sufi references to love and beauty with declarations of affection for his wives and quotations from American self-help figures (Hoesterey 2016) until his followers abandoned him in the wake of his second marriage in 2006. Similarly, Felix Siauw uses Arabic phrases, textual references to Qur'an and hadith, slang Indonesian, and evocative images to craft a reputation as a "casual but dogmatic" preacher using visual persuasion in the service of Islamist proselytizing (Hew 2018, 61).[2]

Many of these figures emphasize their conversion status as evidence of their journeys and therefore their unique capacity as conduits for others' transformative *hijrahs*. By citing the C. E. 622 migration in which Muhamad and his followers fled Mecca for Medina, these celebrities narrate otherwise personal or idiosyncratic life changes in a genealogy of recognizably epic movements out of sinful pasts and into more vigilant, pious futures. Siauw in particular stands out as a Chinese Indonesian convert (Hew 2012), yet even preachers who were raised Muslim, such as Gymnastiar, Arifin Ilham, Jefri al-Bukhari and Yusuf Mansur have presented their personal biographies as conversion narratives. Repeatedly retelling their conversions has at least two effects: it highlights the transformative potential of Islam (even in the

absence of traditional religious training) and emphasizes outsider status by holding the past in permanent relief with the present (Burhani 2020; Howell 2008). Rather than erasing a sinful past, hijrah stories underscore that past, reanimating conversion as positive life change while recalling the life that preceded it. Reminding disciples and fans alike of a celebrity preacher's pre-conversion life may seem counterintuitive, but it is arguably essential to their appeal. It maintains their insider status as outsiders.

Female *selebgrams* in particular, typically fashion designers or influencers, mix image and affect to summon and cultivate audiences that share features common to those of religious discipleship. Feminine public figures in this genre may not be religious experts per se, but pious lifestyle stars, modeling enthusiasm for piety and beauty in equal measure. As influencers, their employment and reputations are intimately enmeshed, their capacity to affect their followers algorithmically informing their compensation. What they sell, however, is both material and immaterial. This combination, what Annisa R. Beta (2020) describes as a unique form of dakwah, emphasizes a sense of intimacy and a general sense of "feeling" close to their followers. Some of the world's best-known Muslimah influencers are Indonesian, even as their global audiences consider them more Muslimah than Indonesian. In part because of their reliance on Instagram, but also because of their intersection with the appearance-focused orientation of the fashion and beauty industries, these women rely heavily on the ability to post photographic content that conveys a vision of them as both pious and cosmopolitan (cf. Abidin 2016).

Consider Dian Pelangi, whose Instagram account boasts over five million followers. Dian selectively shares glimpses into her life via her social media channels, promoting her clothing and headscarf lines, her sponsoring brands, her family, and her global travels. If that intimacy converts access to private aspects of an influencer's life into public affection, it is equally in conversation with a parallel cosmopolitanism. In July 2020, Dian shared previously unseen photos and video of the moment she and her husband watched her home pregnancy test turn positive in a hotel room at the Ritz Carlton hotel in "Jerusalem, Palestine" in December 2019 (Figure 1).

Images such as these share the joy she and her husband felt long before their news was public while situating her in a circuit of travel that many Indonesians may imagine as part of their religious universe, even if they cannot personally visit (Lücking 2019). Indeed, her decade-plus celebrity began as a teenager, posting outfits-of-the-day to her blog, composed of global brands such as Zara or H&M in combination with an accent piece of her own design and set in a variety of locations such as her home, her school, and importantly, her travels to Australia, Egypt, and around Indonesia. Although she is a globally recognized celebrity, her primary motivation in producing images set in global capitals has been for her Indonesian audience (personal communication, March 6, 2014). In tandem with these glamourous settings, her accompanying texts and styles telegraph humility and sincerity, qualities that are highly valued in a crowded and commodified visual economy, in turn creating economic value.

Figure 1: Dian Pelangi sharing her positive pregnancy test from December 2019, in the Ritz Carlton Hotel, Jerusalem, Palestine with her Instagram audience (Pelangi 2020).

The "release of affects" (Spyer and Steedly 2013, 26) images can generate in conditions of intensely mediated contemporary life thus initiate, as Karen Strassler (2020) has argued, a circuit of demands between images and audiences. Emphasizing this dynamic requires us to engage the "fantasy of transcendence" that images evoke (Morris 2009, 6), the dream that they exist beyond the vernacular or the foreign, beyond translation itself.

Imagining an Indonesian center

Situating fashion and celebrity in these broader questions of foreign and national sources of power invites us to consider the role of a range of institutions in Indonesia that are invested in the possibility of making Indonesia a new center on the world stage. Imagining an Indonesian center involves exactly that, imagination, harnessed to initiatives designed to achieve these dreams. Among the most prominent in the past decade have been formal and informal strategies by the Ministry of Religion, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Indonesia's largest Islamic organizations, *Nahdlatul Ulama* and *Muhammadiyah*, to position Indonesia as a global leader in "moderate Islam." Nahdlatul Ulama especially took up this challenge by actively promoting "*Islam Nusantara*," a concept which emerged in the months leading up to the organization's 2015 annual congress, which was organized around the theme of the unique correspondence between broad Muslim values of inclusivity and specifically Indonesian qualities that preceded and now enhance Islam's presence in the region (Sahal and Aziz 2015). Framed in the language of soft power, Nahdlatul Ulama representatives asserted that Indonesia is the legitimate inheritor of a uniquely tolerant, friendly, and diverse orientation to theology and community because of its archipelagic, connective, and "in-between" geographic and cultural roots. Islam Nusantara's focus on resilience, gentility, and compassion have been strategic in domestic efforts to quell radicalization in Indonesia and have been publicized by Indonesian foreign diplomatic efforts in the US and Egypt (Hoesterey 2018).

Although apparently peripheral to this agenda, a closer analysis suggests that women's bodies and appearance have been a deliberate, although marginalized,

feature of this mission. Presenting Indonesia as the worlds' largest majority Muslim country, yet one where modestly attired women remain *anggun* or elegant illustrates how women's appearances are summoned to serve as evidence of Indonesia's religious moderation. Feminine beauty garbed in Indonesian textiles and taste implies an antidote to other genres of pious femininity, particularly Gulf-style abayas, that are presumably less friendly and less moderate. This approach brings together two key state goals, often expressed through competing ministries, around global Islamic leadership: foreign diplomacy and economic development. Positioning Indonesia as the *kiblat*, or center of the modest fashion industry, hoped to reorient the higher value design roles associated with Western fashion centers via clear reference to Islamic geography (Tempo 2016; Republika 2019). It also underscored how appearances are alternately saturated with intense moral valences or dismissed, as the context demands.

The creation of a new government bureau in Indonesia in 2015, the *Badan Ekonomi Kreatif* represents the most formal expression of new development strategies around soft skills in Indonesia. This initiative celebrates a national cultivation of creativity that requires rendering the non-technical into the technical, so as to facilitate the insertion of otherwise messy cultural and economic forms into global assemblages. Now a subsection of the Ministry of Tourism, it situated the post-development hyperbole of "creative classes" (Florida 2002) and the "4th industrial revolution" (Schwab 2017) in the particular context of religiously spectacular Indonesia. At the center of this new initiative is fashion, representing 56 percent of the creative economy and now seen as a potential driver of national development, alongside more muscular industries like oil or mining.

Modest fashion has been particularly high profile in these campaigns, in an attempt to lead the fastest growing sector ($300 billion) of the global garment industry (Usher 2018). Women's labor in the mass garment and textile industries is thus harnessed to the feminized, and often the female staffed world of fashion design. The rhetoric of Indonesia as the kiblat of the modest fashion world predates the formation of Badan Ekonomi Kreatif but has now been integrated into its broader fashion agenda emphasizing

diversity and beauty as uniquely Indonesian. Further, fashion shows have become features of the foreign diplomatic and cultural budgets for Indonesian embassies. Consular offices in Los Angeles and Houston, in the US, and embassies in Amman, Moscow, New York City, Paris, and Seoul have regularly hosted fashion shows featuring modest fashion designers over the past decade.

Although Indonesian diplomatic and economic initiatives dovetail in their optimism about the potential for fashion to achieve multiple national goals, they face well-known barriers to entry for non-Western creatives in the global fashion system. Like many countries with large export-oriented garment industries, Indonesia has struggled to achieve credibility as a source of fashion design and remains associated with low-waged fast fashion production. The system may celebrate creativity and even elevate eccentric individuals as unique specimens of genius, yet nonetheless reproduces a map of centers and peripheries (Leshkowich and Jones 2003). Designers in global capitals are recognized as autonomous authors of artistic expression inspired by global travels, while the peripheries outside of those capitals are undifferentiated raw cultural materials feeding a system which Minh-Ha Pham argues rests on "racial plagiarism," (2017).[3] For designers and influencers in Indonesia, this landscape has created opportunities and barriers, some of which can produce national boundaries that prevent the sort of transnational influence these initiatives aim to transcend. While asked to perform indigeneity abroad, they may find that it is less effective in attracting Indonesian consumers, who want to see global aesthetics available at home. Being either unable or unwilling to suit those rules may limit their access to state funding.

Let us return to examples of how individual designers and influencers have navigated this demand for presenting versions of Indonesian beauty abroad and access to the foreign at home. As Dian Pelangi's global reputation has grown, her travels have become a mix of personal and sponsored, by Wardah Cosmetics and the Indonesian government. Wardah, an Indonesian skincare company that is branded as *halal* (although almost all personal care products in Indonesia are halal given the Muslim majority market) and "for Indonesian

women," invests heavily in key "brand ambassadors," of which Dian is one of the most prominent. These ambassadors are Indonesian actresses, designers, singers, or other celebrities whom Wardah sends abroad for extensive photoshoots to produce content for the brand's advertising and for the celebrities' social media channels. Borrowing from the language of foreign diplomacy, these ambassadors fuse their own faces with the face of the company in the service of promoting a genre of modest beauty that is friendly, global, beautiful, and, importantly, Indonesian.

A brief reading of the styles these ambassadors display in foreign settings reveals how cosmopolitanism and inspiration intersect in ways that selectively borrow from the broader fashion industry's rhetoric of aesthetic inspiration, divine inspiration, and her customers' aspirations to both upward mobility and increased piety (cf. Fealy 2008, 29). When presenting collections outside of Indonesia, Dian has opted for looks that emphasize local textile traditions such as *batik* and *songket*, in effect celebrating the officially ecumenical aesthetic narrative of diversity and tolerance. Yet fashion shows for consulates and embassies are primarily marketed to and attended by the Indonesian diasporic community, offering them a reflection of Indonesia yet rarely expanding the audience beyond the national. In addition, shows that are hosted in formal show calendars typically emphasize Indonesia as a site of ethnic diversity and handmade clothing (Indonesian Agency for Creative Economy (BEKRAF) 2019).

These trips have provided inspiration for Dian's domestic collections in Indonesia. For example, her October 2018 collection was inspired by her September 2018 visit to New York as a Badan Ekonomi Kreatif and Wardah sponsored designer to New York Fashion Week. Although the textiles she showed in Jakarta were created through wax-resist dying, and therefore technically batik, the overall style was inspired by the Drake song "Nice for What" which she felt had been the sonic backdrop to her weeklong visit to New York City. Her use of black, baseball caps, and logoed sashes combined to evoke an edgy street style, rather than Indonesian tradition (Figure 2). Similar examples include modest fashion designers Anandia Putri of IKYK (an abbreviation for "I Know

Figure 2: Dian Pelangi's Fall 2018 runway show, October 2018, Jakarta,
inspired by her trip to New York City a month earlier (Salsabila 2018).

You Know," a bit of dialogue from the US TV show "Friends;" @ ikyk2011) and Rani Hatta (@ranihattaofficial), both of whom have openly embraced urban styles from Japan and Korea, countries with limited historical relationships with Islam (Figure 3). Both designers claim that the monochromatic, athletic, and pyramidal forms of the Korean *hanbok* and Japanese *kimono* are inherently more modest than either the sheer and form-fitting Indonesian *kebaya* or the trendy versions of modest wear prominent in Indonesia. Both argue that what might seem like either androgynous or even masculine styles are in fact more feminist than Indonesian styles. Both use black and neutral tones in their collections, yet distinguish their color choices from associations with black abayas. Both set many of their fashion shoots in Korea and Japan with local models and have devoted, non-Muslim customer bases there (Jones 2018). Yet neither have received as much funding or recognition from the Indonesian state, in part because their looks are insufficiently recognizable as Indonesian. Their use of imported textiles and apparently foreign shapes make them less valuable ambassadors for a uniquely Indonesian version of Islamic modesty. In short, what they are exporting is not as easily recognizable in the narrative of Islam Nusantara because they appear to be importing foreignness, rather than exporting Indonesian aesthetic moderation.

Figure 3: IKYK 2017 Fall collection, inspired by the Korean *hanbok*
(Jakarta Fashion Week 2018).

One could easily interpret the allure of the foreign in many of these examples as a fawning affection for the non-Indonesian. Considering the fact that Indonesia represents one of the largest markets of Korean state investment in exporting popular culture, these examples might seem like simple evidence of the success of those strategies. In what follows, I suggest we consider a more complex interpretation. How might fashion generate the kinds of affordances that make fantasy and worship partners in mediation? How might style itself be the border that mediates the "alien character" (Rutherford 2003, 23) of the foreign without domesticating it?

The pleasures of difference

Wardah's newest and perhaps most talked-about brand ambassador is not Indonesian. Twenty-four-year-old Ayana Jihye Moon is a Korean citizen, resident of both Seoul and Jakarta, and teenage convert to Islam. She manages an Instagram account (@xolovelyayana, "Proud Korean and Muallaf") with three million followers and a YouTube channel. She posts variously in Bahasa Indonesia, English, Arabic, and Korean across her social media sites.

She is sponsored by four major Indonesian companies and is a frequent guest speaker on celebrity talk circuits like HijrahFest. As she tells her

hijrah in her 2020 biography, written in Indonesian and published in Jakarta, she grew up in South Korea as a daughter of an upper middle-class family who was committed to educating her well (Moon 2020c). Their plans were consistent with a period in Korean history during which wealthy families could expect their children to benefit from Korea's rise to global prestige following the Asian Financial Crisis of the late 1990s. National development plans targeted technological prowess and popular culture, presenting Korea as a model of modernity in Asia. Although this period has produced precarity and pressure among Korean youth (Jung 2017; Rea 2018), when viewed from afar, Korea appears as an example of centrally guided national development which supports a wide array of industries, from cars to music, positioning Korean popular culture as the soft power component of a complex project designed to establish Korea as an admirable, independent country in spite of limited natural resources. Simultaneously recognizably Korean and yet lacking obviously traditional references, Korean popular culture appears to have achieved an elusive developmental goal. Launched as a "wave" (*hallyu*) by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 1997, Korean music, fashion, beauty products, and general youth cultural style has therefore been no less central to Korean modernity than its industrial accomplishments (Huat and Iwabuchi 2008). As Ayana's fame has grown, she has become a more visible representative for both Indonesian and Korean diplomacy. On January 27, 2020, she was formally hosted at the Korean embassy in Jakarta by the Korean ambassador, recognizing her unique, hybrid ambassadorial role. Inversely, Ayana completed her first *umroh* in November 2019 through the auspices of the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, even though she is not a citizen (Figure 4).

Indonesia appears to be an example of a country where Korea's cultural export strategy has succeeded. SM Entertainment Group, the powerhouse studio credited with promoting Korean TV and musical content, opened an office in Jakarta in 2018 dedicated to facilitating fan relations. Korean dramas and music offer Indonesians a world that is predominantly feminine, populated by female stars, androgynous male stars, and female fans. Yet, as Bart Barendregt and Lusvita Nuzuliyanti have argued (2018), K Pop in particular has created a genre of fandom in Indonesia that feeds a sense

Figure 4: "Marriage booklet…No! Vaccination booklet."
Ayana's preparation for *umroh* in 2019 (Moon 2019a).

of feminine community, with fans reinforcing their devotion to their stars and each other. Co-opting the language of religion itself, fans refer to visiting Korea as pilgrimages, borrowing the terminology of religious achievement (using the terms *hajj* and *ziarah*), and view their affection for secular performance as consistent with their own piety. Indonesian religious tourism companies increasingly offer tours to Korea, in addition to the Middle East and Turkey, adding Korea to a global circuit of sacred leisure destinations. Conversely, the growing Indonesian diaspora in Korea has produced a large secondary market for Indonesian Muslim preachers who can earn substantial honoraria meeting with Indonesian expatriates.

Figure 5: One of Ayana's first photographic introductions
as a "Korean Muslim," (Moon 2017).

Yet Ayana's popularity complicates that interpretation. She is neither a singer nor an actor. Rather, her appeal lies in the idea that she ostensibly rejected much of what Korean modernity offers. She describes how, as a teenager, she read as much as she could about Islam and the Middle East, finding it difficult to access resources from Seoul. She found Islam a soothing release from the stress of education and Korea's competitive culture. Using the Internet, she quickly found herself drawn to photos of women in hijab and was more enthusiastic about the Indonesian styles than those she saw in Iran or elsewhere (TRANS7 OFFICIAL 2018). She became interested in Indonesian pious celebrities, such as Dian Pelangi and Ria Miranda, as icons of pious beauty. These women later facilitated her introduction to the selebgram universe. After secretly applying for and winning a university scholarship for study at University Teknologi Malaysia, she informed her parents she would be moving there. Their dismay was founded, she says, in her secret conversion to Islam at 16, following nine years of curiosity and study. She describes Korea as an "atheist" society where Islamophobia is widespread, making Islam her first and only religion. Unable to wear a hijab in high school, she was determined to follow through with her plans to study abroad even though her parents refused to support her financially, in an attempt to force her to rethink her conversion. In spite of the ease with which she privately converted, she says she did not fully feel Muslim until she was able to begin wearing a hijab, and that was only after she began living in a majority Muslim country. She credits Islam with transforming her personality from fragile and "sensitive" to now confident and "positive" (Hijrahfest Official 2019).

The affordances of beauty and fashion

Ayana's hijrah has therefore involved much more than a simple conversion story, but rather a transformation entailing religious and cultural training. She continues to study Arabic and Indonesian, placing her fascination with Indonesia in the same field as her attraction to Islam. Indonesian talent scouts invited her to visit Indonesia in 2017, following the release of photos and videos of her in Malaysia wearing hanbok and hijab together (Figure 5). In 2018 she replaced Inneke Koesherawati as a Wardah brand ambassador,

a celebrity known for having "converted" from young sexy actress to covered mother. The other Wardah sisters (*kakak/adik*) welcomed her into their social media circuit in a series of coordinated, friendly events, including domestic trips and celebrating *lebaran* with Dian Pelangi's extended family (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Ayana celebrating *eid* Indonesian style in 2018, at Dian Pelangi's family home (Moon 2018a).

Wardah's late 2020 lush brand video commemorating the company's 25th anniversary emphasized its hybrid global and Indonesian orientation with the theme "Your Beauty is Ready to Face the World" (WardahBeauty 2020). In it, the ambassadors appear as tourists in Indonesia and around the world and perform as scientists in Wardah's Jakarta laboratories. Ayana appears strolling through a traditional Korean neighborhood wearing hanbok and hijab (Figure 7). Dian Pelangi appears taking a bow at the end of her New York Fashion Week show in 2019.

Figure 7: Ayana appearing as a 2020 Wardah ambassador in Korea. "Hello world, what's new with you?" (WardahBeauty 2020)

In describing her fascination with Ayana's journey, my friend Dinny particularly admired Ayana's humility about her beauty, "Her face is already instantly popular because she has the Korean style of beauty that Indonesian women love, but it is only prettier with hijab," she added, reinforcing the popular position that Indonesian women enhance their beauty by covering. "It's like she has the best of both! She has struggled, but she appears flawless." Many of the comments on Ayana's social media posts simply exclaim "You are so beautiful!" What Alvaro Jarrin (2017) describes as the affective transformation that beauty industries promise applies well here, highlighting how soft power initiatives have exported Korean bodily aesthetics along with beauty products. Embodied and intimate, beauty underscores the material and immaterial qualities of longing for transformation that Ayana illustrates. Her Instagram posts signal her awareness of this fascination and regularly explain that her appearance is the result of spiritual commitment rather than cosmetic intervention. In one Instagram post from 2018, she reminded fans that her natural eye color is brown, that she only wears tinted lenses for "work," and that her skin seemed to be lightening as a result of wearing a jilbab and covered clothing (Figure 8). This is in spite of the fact

that one of Wardah's primary lines is called White Secret. If soft power can involve strategic uses of femininity, it is helpful to consider that Wardah's chosen look for Ayana is the makeup line which the company's branding calls, in English, *soft* and *flawless*. In Wardah's brand palette, softness refers to pastel-colored clothing and makeup colors that emphasize perfection in the form of pale skin and pink lip colors. It contrasts with some of the darker colors in their broader palette but is also, according to the company's former head of PR, their most popular color scheme (Oktavia, personal communication, July 31, 2017). The softness of the highly polished and almost monochromatic faces in the promotional aesthetic echoes similar features in the Korean beauty industry, projecting a story of religious moderation (*wasatiyah*) through luminous, flawless femininity.[4]

Figure 8: Muslim dress enhancing soft, pale, flawless beauty (Moon 2018b).

The narrative progression linking hijrah with pastel softness is especially apparent in a series of interviews Wardah produced in 2019. In them, Ayana was interviewed by Dewi Sandra, a fellow Wardah brand ambassador also known for her hijrah from the world of entertainment and for her cosmopolitan upbringing as the daughter of a British father and Indonesian mother. Sandra's pre-hijrah image as a hip hop and R&B singer who favored dark colors and bold bodily performances. Sandra frequently speaks at religious festivals alongside preachers such as Felix Siauw. In the Wardah

interviews, both Sandra and Ayana wear Wardah's distinctive pale blues and meet in a pastel-hued café (WardahBeauty 2019). The conversation unfolds in a mix of Indonesian and English, while Sandra invites Ayana to share her hijrah story and her dreams about a possible future Indonesian husband while tasting Indonesian sweets. As Ayana compares each dish to its Korean parallel, Sandra announces that Ayana has become a "real Indonesian." By professing a taste for Indonesian food, gratitude for her Wardah sisters, and enthusiasm for modest fashion, she appears as a beautiful curiosity, converting Indonesian fascination with Korean culture into a figure who adores Indonesia (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Dewi Sandra interviews Ayana about her *hijrah* and her taste for Indonesian food (Moon 2019b).

Ayana's charm, however, is more than simply a goal for others to achieve, but rather an example of how hard yet rewarding religious transformation can be. Her conversion is therefore a mix of glamour and suffering, eliciting from her fans both admiration and sympathy. If, as Talal Asad (1996) has argued, conversions are not simply about changing religions but about "converting to modernity" itself, we might rethink the urge to read her account as simply an example of syncretic hybridity. Her conversion story appeals as an inversion. Attempting to acquire fluency in a new national

setting, even while remaining a "proud Korean," reorients the apparent hierarchy of Korea as a more advanced society than Indonesia. Indeed, although she is beginning to develop business relationships in Korea, her income is largely based on commercial relationships and consumer devotion in Indonesia. To quote Dinny again, "She has suffered such hardship. Her parents rejected her. She is still struggling to learn Indonesian and speaks with such a cute Korean accent." Conversion here entails more than religious change. The fantasy of joining a "translocal community of co-religionists" through conversion (Keane 2006, 114) also entails training oneself into a new habitus and new tastes, themselves sensory acts of translation. One of the consistent crowd-pleasers in her frequent television interviews in Indonesia is her impulsive exclamation of "Masya Allah!" to which her interviewers or fans respond in kind, situating them in a call and response community of fellow travelers on a journey to religious competency. Her vlogs on YouTube convey the small delights and challenges of navigating daily life in Seoul as a Muslimah. She shares videos of her shopping, doing laundry, and cooking, allowing her followers to witness the pleasure of mastering a set of skills and rules that are familiar to them but not to her. She is also active in lobbying for more halal business, more prayer rooms, and more mosques in Seoul. Celebrating her first Ramadan outside of Indonesia in 2020, she described the difficulty of finding halal food and remaining healthy, which followers repeatedly describe as "inspiring." These examples elicit a pleasurable reversal by making Indonesians authorities in pious practice, a delight, given their frequent dismissal by Arab religious authorities as lax. Further, displaying the inconvenience of living a pious life in a non-Islamic environment doubly mediates her foreignness, downplaying her Korean-ness in favor of her Muslim-ness. This, in turn, can motivate even more religious commitment. As Dinny explained, if Ayana can fast under such difficult conditions, certainly "I should be able to do it, too. We should try to support her from afar."

These examples prompt us to revisit how the worlds of beauty and fashion generate particular affordances in the broader persuasion of dakwah. Rather than ask whether or not commodification and dakwah can coexist, Ayana's conversion highlights how they work together. Her story is equal

parts discovery of a new life philosophy through Islam and attraction to the beauty and elegance of modest fashion displayed on the glamorous social media celebrities whose company she now keeps. Conversion and cosmopolitanism emerge as partners in the fantasy of a world of followers. Fashion's own foundation in the production and circulation of fantasies of self-expression makes it especially amenable to the promise of a radically remade self. Similarly, her points of inspiration reinforce a narrative prominent among Indonesian modest fashion designers that creative and divine inspiration are not contradictory processes, and that self-cultivation through creativity is a form of worship (*dzikir*) itself.

Figure 10: Big sister Ayana welcoming her younger brother into Indonesian Islam, signaling a new coronation (Moon 2020a).

Ayana's story, therefore, illustrates to Indonesian fans of pious celebrities that appearances are a fundamental and legitimate component of their religious practice. They may feel this is a fact, but in the dense and vibrant context of Indonesian media life, they also face skepticism about their sincerity in being visibly pious (Jones 2010). Visible piety remains semiotically ambiguous, appealing to some yet threatening or even sinful to others because of its potential for ostentatious display (*riya'*; Husein 2017). Ayana's enthusiasm for Islam and Indonesia, via her enjoyment of modest

fashion, is therefore in dialogue with a nostalgic strain of Indonesian public culture which claims that earlier generations of reformist youth who courageously "converted" to a religion in which they had been raised in the face of parental disapproval (Brenner 1996) were more sincere practitioners of dakwah than the current generation whose fashionable motivations are presumed to be superficial. Further, her apparent lack of self-consciousness about her beauty reinforces a preference among fans of modest fashion that modesty is both technical, as in covered, and characterological, as in humility. Her convert's enthusiasm for perfecting her comportment informs her celebrity charm, reminding her followers that the parallel promotional logics undergirding advertising and proselytization can be harmonious.

Perhaps no detail persuades Ayana's fans of her commitment to dakwah more than the fact that her high-school-aged brother Aydin converted to Islam in March 2019. He fasted with her during Ramadan 2020 and appears in many of her Instagram photos. Like her, he has begun to adopt small aesthetic changes that suggest his version of Islam will be Indonesian in flavor, including a *peci* hat, *baju koko* and the occasional sarong (Figure 10). These appear as tools akin to her own modest dress in assisting in the much more complex aspect of conversion that requires new subject formation. In displaying that process publicly, literally *sharing* the experience of discovery, proselytization and the pleasure of creating new aesthetic and affective arenas coalesce in the figure of the transnational convert. Digital mediation may have facilitated the debates about piety and sincerity in Indonesia, but it is also unsurprisingly harnessed as an antidote to those same debates. This context has produced the conditions in which a figure like Ayana becomes uniquely compelling, linking pity for her short-term suffering to admiration for her new wealth, beauty, and fame.

Celebrity access to the foreign thus complicates who and what now counts as centers and peripheries, in part by focusing our analytical gaze on femininity. While foreignness in this arena can be mined, the act of creating new resemblances may also require new domestications. As Ayana herself blushingly admits in interviews, she receives frequent marriage proposals on social media inviting her to settle down with

an Indonesian husband for an Indonesian future, an option she has so far declined. Considered in the history of regional genres of power, figures like Ayana suggest a new kind of "stranger-queen," an outsider whose potency relies on her ability to refuse full domestication. This form demands she preserve her foreignness while smilingly facing her Indonesian fans. As much as Ayana savors Indonesian Islam, and as much as Indonesian Muslims enjoy her love of them, she may ultimately hold a mirror up to Indonesia itself more than to the world (Figure 10).

Considering the role of the foreign in these aesthetic projects prompts other questions. If piety requires access to the cosmopolitan, what aesthetic logics become untranslatable? Whose expressions do not make sense in a landscape of visual dakwah? Whose fantasies no longer fit in an affective universe that demands display? Whose versions of modesty refuse to be made visible?

They may not be on social media and they may not be spectacular, but they may be just as pleasurable.

Figure 11: Ayana's green room, behind the scenes shooting Wardah video content and professing her love of Indonesia (Moon 2020b).

Acknowledgements

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Notes

[1] Notably, being marked as foreign does not always confer attractive allure in Indonesia. For example, critics of Habib Rizieq Shihab, leader of the hardline Islamic Defenders Front, argue that he is out of touch with authentic Indonesian religious tastes, in spite of his large following. Ethnicity also figures in the dismissal of other others in Indonesia, most evident in the complex erasure and stigmatization of Chinese Indonesians who have been required to assimilate through taking on Indonesian family names and generally de-emphasizing their difference, even if they have converted to Islam. Relatedly and tellingly, converts from regions of Indonesia that are considered essentially other, such as Papua, do not experience the same degree of adoring celebrity, suggesting that their otherness is less available for a kind of domestication that rests on admiration.

[2] As Kenneth George (2009) and Webb Keane (2018) each argue, facility with Qur'anic Arabic in Indonesia is both an appealing medium for worship and an anxious site for potentially mishandling sacred language.

[3] Pham describes designers in the US and Europe as co-opting distinct minority aesthetics that are the result of precise histories of oppression, such as dreadlocks or blackface, for collections that feature white models and gain cachet for appearing to be diverse.

[4] While whiteness resonates at least partly here with racial difference, and hence foreignness, as Ayu Saraswati argues (2013), whiteness in Indonesian conceptions of beauty should not be confused with a longing for Euro-American racial identity. Rather, the fact that Indonesian categories of beauty have shifted over time from a classically romantic preference for yellow skin to lighter skin tones should be read as signifiers for cosmopolitaneity in general.

Ambivalence, Virtual Piety, and Rebranding: Social Media Uses among Tablighi Jama'at in Indonesia

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Abstract:

Advanced smartphone technology and easy access to the internet have contributed to the embeddedness of social media in the daily lives of many Indonesians. However, among conservative Muslims, social media are regarded as potentially harmful, and their use is largely discouraged. The article discusses the ambivalence that characterizes social media usage within the Tablighi Jama'at, *an Islamic reformist movement known for its missionary activities. Many Tablighis believe that social media potentially imperils their faith as it provides access to a wide range of non-Islamic content, a perspective that has led to restrictions on smartphone use and internet access. Yet, as this article highlights, several social media platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook, are widely used among Indonesian Tablighis as they consider these platforms as a means to improve the efficacy of their face-to-face preaching and to display their pious practices as well as their personal transformations to a more pious self. In addition, their virtual piety goes hand in hand with attempts to rebrand their movement by countering negative stereotypes and by trying to position themselves as legitimate Islamic player in Indonesia.*

Introduction

One afternoon in 2017, a friend drove me to Temboro for the first time.[1] We parked our car in a spacious field across an old building with a board displaying the words "*Pondok Pesantren Al Fatah* [Islamic Boarding School Al Fatah]"[2] hanging on one of its walls. I walked over to four students who were standing nearby to ask them about the location of the *istiqbal*

(reception). I was surprised when one of them responded by asking in return, "are you from Grabcar?[3]" This response instantly made me question my concept of typical, traditional Islamic boarding schools that supposedly strictly regulate the use of mobile phones or any other means of modern communication technology – the internet had clearly already become a part of the daily lives of the people in Temboro, a village that has come to be known as a national center of Tablighi Jama'at[4] in Indonesia. This first encounter certainly challenged the representation of Tablighi Jama'at as a movement rejecting Western inventions in general, and technological development in particular, a representation that circulates widely among Indonesian Muslims.

While living in the village for my ethnographic research, I often met Tablighis who criticized the use of the internet and the technology that goes along with it. Some elderly or religiously more conservative even forbade it as *haram* (forbidden) since it might imperil the Islamic faith. Nevertheless, when I typed "Jamaah Tabligh" in the search engines of my Facebook and Instagram accounts, I instantly found many accounts belonging to Indonesian Tablighis. In addition to uploading pictures from missionary tours, these Tablighis use social media to preach and to keep in touch with their fellows, like many other Indonesian Muslims do (Barendregt 2012; Slama 2017a). Although there is a considerable amount of academic literature on Tablighi Jama'at (e.g., Metcalf 1993; Sikand 2002; Noor 2012; Bustamam-Ahmad 2015; Kahn 2016), no attention has been paid so far to how the movement deals with the increasing role of social media in everyday life and religious life in particular. Therefore, this article seeks to address the question of how, in contemporary Indonesia, Tablighis negotiate the use of social media, between prohibition and taking part in digital piety.

Tablighi Jama'at was found in India in 1927 by Maulana Ilyas, a Deobandi seminary graduate, as a response to the emergence of Hindu revivalists and Christian missionaries in the region. The ideology of Tablighi Jama'at was influenced by the traditions of the earliest Islamic reformist thinkers in India, such as Shah Waliu'llah and Sayyid Ahmad.[5] Therefore, the Tablighi shared ideas with other Islamic reformist groups that also emerged in the

19th and 20th centuries, aiming, for instance, to create a faithful Muslim community based on the Koran and the Hadith. However, the Tablighi differed from other reformists who believed that Islamic society could only be shaped through engagement with political activism. Tablighi Jama'at took an apolitical stance (Metcalf 2003; Sikand 1998, 2002; Pieri 2015) and developed the methods of the Prophet Muhammad for spreading Islam through face-to-face preaching (what in Indonesian is referred to as *dakwah cara nabi*), known as *dawat* in India and Pakistan. In this article, I use the term *missionary tour* instead of face-to-face preaching, since the majority of Indonesian Tablighis that I met during my fieldwork used the word *khuruj*[6], *gerak* (literally, moving), or *keluar* (literally, going out), followed by the number of days that they had spent preaching, to refer to their missionary activities.

Spread throughout more than one hundred and fifty countries and with adherents from various sociocultural backgrounds, Tablighi Jama'at practices are influenced by local contexts (see Noor 2012; Janson 2014; Pieri 2015). However, both the method and the practice of the missionary tour invented by the founder are still central to the movement. According to Tablighi Jama'at's doctrines, the missionary tour represents its most sacred practice. Each Tablighi is required to take part in the tour and to practice each of its steps precisely, without substituting it by any other means of preaching. To obtain Islamic virtue, one must follow the way of the Prophet: an unmediated, devotional, and collective practice in preaching Islam, reflected in the Tablighi Jama'at's missionary practices. This differentiates Tablighi Jama'at from other Islamic reformist groups, which tend to be strict on the content of religious doctrines, yet rather more flexible with regard to preaching methods (Kahn 2016, 97).

In Indonesia, Tablighi Jama'at was introduced by a small group of Indian and Pakistani missionaries through two different routes: one which started in Medan in 1952, and the other in Jakarta in 1955 (Noor 2012). Institutionally, Tablighi Jama'at in Indonesia does not have a clear standpoint on the use of social media. This is unlike the Tablighi Jama'at in Pakistan, for instance, that strongly criticizes other Islamic reformist groups for actively engaging

with mass media and social media in the name of religion (Kahn 2016). However, if we consider the position of the Tablighi Jama'at Indonesia through the attitudes of two of its prominent figures – for example, the leader of the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) Al Fatah in East Java and the leader of the *pesantren* Krincing in Central Java[7] – it is apparent that the use of the internet is not recommended. In the boarding schools led by these two Islamic leaders, the use of cellular phones and other electronic devices is forbidden. These devices are considered distracting for students and it is feared that such technologies could possibly lead to moral chaos since many feeds on the internet contain un-Islamic content.

The different takes on the use of social media that coexist within the Indonesian Tablighi Jama'at are also related to the different socioeconomic and ideological backgrounds of its members. A loose organizational structure has allowed the membership of Tablighi Jama'at to be open to any Sunni Muslim who commits to taking part in a missionary tour or is just interested to join the Tablighi's *bayan* (religious sermons). Thus, the group not only consists of rich and poor, lay and religious Muslims but also members from different Islamic traditions like the Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. Such an organizational framework has, on the one hand, facilitated Tablighi Jama'at in recruiting new members, but on the other hand, it has created ambivalence in relation to some practices, and this is particularly true for the use of social media.

"No worries, this is break time anyway"

The fact that the Tablighi Jama'at movement has grown to such an extent in the village of Temboro is unusual, as the movement is tightly intertwined with a *pesantren*, an institution of religious education in the village. This proximity between the *pesantren* and the Tablighi Jama'at contradicts the nature of the movement, which aims at moving the dissemination of Islamic teachings away from religious educational institutions to the involvement of lay Muslims in preaching Islam (Metcalf 1993). Presumably, the first contact that the village had with Tablighi Jama'at happened around 1984 when a group of missionaries from India and Pakistan visited *pesantren* Al

Fatah during their mission in East Java (Suparta 2009). Kyai[8] Mahmud – the leader of *pesantren* at that time – eventually decided to join Tablighi Jama'at after visiting the headquarters in Delhi in the early 1990s and learning that he and the founder of Tablighi Jama'at shared a Sufi bond[9]. In fact, the Sufi dimension of Tablighi Jama'at, like the virtues of *dhikr* (remembrance of God) and the *ikhlas-i niyyat* (sincerity of intention), partly explains why this movement was warmly welcomed by traditionalist Muslims in Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries.

The rapid development of Tablighi Jama'at in Temboro has also gained international attention. In 2017, a mosque belonging to Al Fatah was appointed as one of the national *markaz* (centers) by the Indian headquarters of Tablighi Jama'at. Its role is to help the national *markaz* in Jakarta to organize missionary tours. In addition, as a national *markaz*, the Tablighi Jama'at committees in Temboro also have the authority to send missionary groups internationally. The village also becomes an entrance gate for foreign Tablighis to conduct missionary tours in Indonesia. During my fieldwork in 2019, for instance, I recorded that up to four different groups of foreign missionaries arrived in this village within a month.

The involvement in transnational missionary tours certainly has prompted Tablighi Jama'at in Indonesia to have a more flexible approach to the use of technology. There are also pragmatic reasons. In terms of the passport application process, for example, the Tablighi had no choice but to engage with the online application system that the Indonesian government recently put in place. In relation to this, the *markaz* Temboro created a special committee called the *maktab foreign*[10] to assist Tablighis who are illiterate with the online system and to support people needing a visa application or purchasing a flight ticket. In addition, according to Isya, the administrator of the *maktab foreign,* the existence of the internet nowadays has also sped up the organization of missionary tours abroad, especially regarding the process of obtaining the permit from the Indian headquarters to send a missionary group to another country. In the past, such coordination involved a lengthy process, involving letters sent via postal mail, but nowadays, Isya explains, the process is more efficient as the whole communication takes

place via email. Although the internet has helped the members of Tablighi Jama'at organize their movement, the use of technology like mobile phones remains strictly regulated in Tablighi religious programs, as I will illustrate below.

When I joined a three-day missionary tour with a small group from the village, in the morning before we left, like others before us, we gathered in a small circle to listen to the *bayan hidayah* (religious sermon) of a senior Tablighi member, instructing us about things to do before leaving Temboro for our place of mission. One of the things he emphasized in his sermon was that we were to devote our whole time to Allah: to pray and invite people to the mosque. He encouraged the group to leave any worldly matters at home, including not having any contact with family, in order to keep the intention of the missionary tour:

> The world is only temporary; the afterlife is forever. Some practices in the next three days will be blessed and we will gain rewards from Allah as long as we keep our concentration away from the worldly errands. If we have mobile phones, these are best left at home, so we won't check them many times, be anxious about what could be happening at home, or be updating friends with news. This will only lead to a waste of our three days.

Since it was my very first time joining a mission with a group from this village, my expectation was that its members would obey the rules, as instructed. However, during our tour, I found that some Tablighis disregarded the advice of their elder, brought their smartphones along and used them during leisure time. Pak[11] Ud (in his forties), an entrepreneur, came over to me as I was lying on the floor during the afternoon break. On his smartphone, he showed me a picture of a village in a mountainous valley somewhere in Switzerland and, knowing that I was pursuing a PhD in Switzerland, asked me if it was a real village. He then went on to ask me about goods from Switzerland that might have the potential for trade in Indonesia. He told me a friend of his had successfully traded imported sweets from Turkey and Malaysia. He then opened his Facebook, scrolled

to his friend's name, and showed it to me to make sure that I knew what he was talking about. Feeling awkward, I looked to my left and right, and then whispered to him "Is it okay for us to talk about something non-religious like this and access a smartphone during our tour?" He answered casually, like nothing had happened: "No worries, this is break time anyway."

On several missionary tours that I joined, I found Tablighis using their devices quite like Pak Ud. Some of them quietly played with their smartphones, but others accessed them in very obvious ways. Pak Din (in his forties), another example, is an experienced Tablighi who had been to India and had just recently returned from a 40-day missionary tour in Cambodia. He was appointed as an *ameer* (leader) for our three-day missionary tour. As an *ameer*, he was a role model for other Tablighis in the group in terms of his adherence to *adab* (moral conduct) during the missionary tour. However, he had his mobile phone with him during the mission and would leave the mosque for personal errands. When he used his phone, he showed no signs of awkwardness in the presence of others. Sometimes, he shared content of the news he had accessed from WhatsApp or showed videos from YouTube to the other Tablighis around him.

I assumed everyone in the group was aware that Pak Din's attitude was contradicting the *adab khuruj* that had routinely been voiced before we departed for a mission, but that they had chosen not to complain in order to avoid conflict, which is also part of the *adab khuruj*. Tablighis who appeared to be uncomfortable when Pak Din used his mobile phone would not comment, but instead, practice *dhikr* (remembrance of God), or simply leave for *wudhu* (ablution) and then go inside the mosque. One Tablighi in the group that I knew to have a different attitude than Pak Din regarding the use of mobile phones was Mas[12] Idris (in his thirties). Although younger than Pak Din, he had actively joined numerous missionary tours, including to India and the Philippines. In one conversation, I had a chance to ask him about his WhatsApp status during one of his missions that said "*off tiga hari* [off for three days]." He explained that he never brought his mobile phone on a missionary tour and felt he needed to inform his friends by publishing such a status so that they would understand if he did not respond to any of

their messages or calls during that period. For him, following a missionary tour is an attempt to "*nge-charge iman* [charge one's faith]," ironically using an expression that is generally used for technological devices. To him, worldly matters, like family and mobile phones, have to be left for a moment, simply because they could distract him from worship. While the female, middle-class Indonesian Muslims that Martin Slama has written about use their smartphones to "*nge-charge hati* [charge the heart]" by connecting with a preacher in order to seek guidance (Slama 2017b), Mas Idris, on the contrary, temporarily suspends his access to his smartphone to "charge his faith." In both cases, however, Indonesian Muslims use the metaphor of the battery to talk about the heart (or the faith), which, when empty, needs recharging to get its energy back.

Islamizing social media

In order to seek more answers concerning whether Indonesian Tablighis are also active social media users – and if so, how they deal with its uses – I expanded my research to the platforms Facebook and Instagram. Finding an account that belongs to a member of Tablighi Jama'at on those two most popular social media platforms in Indonesia is not a difficult task. I entered the keywords *Jamaah Tabligh*[13] and *Khuruj* in the search engines and found that many accounts have been established using a combination of these three words, be it by groups or individuals. I decided to begin with the private Facebook group of *Jama'ah Khuruj*[14]. This account has more than 27 thousand members (in June 2020), with daily posts from its members sharing photos, videos, Koran or Hadith verses, information on Tablighi Jama'at, and posts about Islam in general. Meanwhile, on Instagram, I began my online research with an account named *dai_dakwahtabligh* which has more than 61 thousand followers. As I write this article, the *dai_dakwahtabligh* (2020) Instagram account has posted as many as 4,444 posts[15]. In contrast to Facebook groups, which usually allow their members to post content on the page, the content on Instagram, although designed for the public, is posted by the account's owner. People following *dai_dakwahtabligh* on Instagram can only press "like" or "comment" under the content provided.

The circulation of photos of missionary tours and other Tablighi Jama'at practices, either on Instagram or Facebook, proves that not all Tablighis leave their smartphones at home during missionary tours. As discussed in the previous section, the use of smartphones can lead to silent tension within missionary groups. The tension I witnessed never escalated into an open public conflict since both parties usually do their best to display some sort of wisdom by trying to understand each other. They agree that the missionary tour is a time to *menyatukan hati* (unite the hearts) of the Tablighis, so they resort to various ways of minimizing conflict. For example, they use the expression "*pecah hati* [breaking hearts]" to describe a conflict in this situation.

During our mission with the small group from Temboro, as I mentioned, some Tablighis had brought along their mobile phones. Most of them seemed to use their mobile phones in secret and only during free time, not when they were engaged with the religious programs. Tablighis who used their phones would usually do so in the cooking area or stand alone somewhere on the porch of the mosque. Tablighis who oppose the behavior would try to stay calm and quiet and act like they never saw it. On one occasion, Ustad Tanwir (50 years old), a senior Tablighi who is against mobile phone usage during the mission, whispered to me as he observed from afar Wawan smoking his cigarette and playing with his mobile phone on the mosque porch:

> Look at him. He actually knows that smoking[16] is harmful and that bringing along mobile phones is forbidden, since it brings more *mudarat* [disadvantages] than *manfaat* [advantages]. But he still insists on bringing it. Well, we know better, but it's best to stay calm. He'll slowly realize as he gets direction from Allah. We don't warn him right away, or he'll get offended and doesn't want to join us *keluar* [missionary tour] again.

The tension that can arise over the use of social media is highlighted in content uploaded by Tablighis on their social media. Through their posts on Facebook, they seem to be justifying the use of social media for Islamic

purposes. Their posts have the intent of legitimating their views to both non-Tablighis and Tablighis who oppose social media usage. For example, such posts can be seen on their Facebook accounts:

> To preach religion (*berdakwah*) is worship, but the means used for delivering it should not be a *bid'ah*[17] according to religious terms. Like the use of a microphone to make a voice louder, Facebook and email can replace letters; religious sermon videos […] All of these are means (*washillah*) of worship: not replacing the worship itself. That is called *mashlahatul marsalah*.[18]

This excerpt of a long post by a Tablighi argues against a group of Muslims that prohibit the use of any technological advancement, including telecommunication tools. As these tools did not exist in the past, they are considered as *bid'ah* by some literalist Muslims. Thus, the point of this long post was to highlight that social media are media that can be used for preaching Islam, just like the letters that were used by the Prophet Muhammad as a medium for preaching Islam. On other Facebook accounts, Tablighi also legitimate their mobile phone use by quoting a statement by the prominent Islamic figure Habib Ali Masyhur that has been translated into Indonesian:

> Do realize that mobile phone is something easy to carry in the world, but it will become heavy in the afterlife. So, use your mobile phones for your religion, for the sake of your own everlasting happiness in the afterlife (Al-Habib Ali Masyhur – Mufti Tarim).[19]

Mualimin emphasized the use of smartphones for something good and useful, something religious, in order to obtain merit that may lead to heaven. Similar posts by Tablighis are easily found on Facebook. In such posts, Tablighis assert that for a Muslim, Facebook or other social media platforms can lead to the field of merit, the so-called *pahala jariyah*[20], or can become a *dosa jariyah* (source of sins). Figure 1 engages with these themes with the slogan *Pahala jariyah, atau dosa jariyah?* (the field of

merit, or the source of sins?). This perspective assumes that a social media account can still be accessible to the public, even after someone has passed away. If during his or her life a Muslim posted good things (according to Islam), the posts will still be leading the readers to something good, even after death. Therefore, they will still obtain blessings. On the other hand, if someone posts something bad or harmful by Islamic standards, and if those posts negatively influence people, that person will continue to sin, even after death.[21]

Figures 1 and 2: Screen capture of a Tablighi's posts on Facebook, June 3 and 6, 2020.

Exploring Facebook accounts reveals yet another tension among Tablighis on the question of how to use social media without violating Islamic morality. Indeed, those Tablighis who are active online seem to agree that the use of social media is allowed as long as it is for "posting Islam."[22] There are ongoing debates concerning the question of whether displaying self-portraits or people's photos is allowed[23], but also about other practices that violate Tablighi Jama'at ethics regarding "*amr bil-ma'ruf wa nahi 'anil munkar* [enjoining the good and forbidding the evil]," such as involvement in political discussions, arguments about different *mahzab* or *ulama*, and gossip. Arguments regarding "selfies" are more frequently found among female Tablighis – for example in Figure 2, which states "*saudariku jangan upload fotomu* [my dear sister, don't upload your photos]." Social media users that voice strong disagreement with women who post selfies, even when they wear a hijab and veil, are easy to

find online. Some of them criticize self-portraits on the grounds that these photos are shared by the women to make themselves visible in public, which is a contradiction to the initial purpose of wearing the hijab itself – to cover particular parts of the body from others (see Jones 2017).

Virtual piety and rebranding the movement

The use of social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook to propagate Islam and the *Sunnah* (behavioral concepts; the way of life of the Prophet Muhammad), indicates that at least some Tablighis are not passive internet users. When promoting the Sunnah*,* many use up-to-date graphic designs, intended to attract wider Muslim audiences. Mualimin's Facebook page, for instance, is dominated by posts with animated pictures or vectors that support verses from the Koran or Hadiths. In the middle of February 2020, this account uploaded a picture (Figure 3) of a man with a long beard combined with the caption "*memelihara jenggot adalah perintah nabi* [growing one's beard is the Prophet's order]." To give religious legitimacy, he also recited *Hadith Sahih Muslim* (Book 1, Hadith 69) about the command for Muslim men to shorten their mustaches but let their beards grow long. In May 2020, similar to Mualimin's Facebook account, another Tablighi account also promoted the Sunnah through a social media post. He posted a picture of a man's hairstyle (with only eyebrows drawn in the facial part) along with Hadith verses, narrated by Muslim and Bukhari, about the hairstyle of the Prophet Muhammad and Prophet Isa (Figure 4).

Figures 3 and 4: Screen capture of a Tablighi's posts on Facebook, February 4 and May 28, 2020.

The Facebook and Instagram accounts belonging to Tablighis reveal that some were already using both social media platforms long before they devoted their lives to this religious movement. One example is a Facebook account with the name Abidul, whose photo history indicates that he has been actively posting on social media since 2010. It was evident that this account belonged to a Tablighi because of the use of various Tablighi Jama'at terms and symbols. Interestingly, the content that can be considered typical for Tablighi Jama'at only started flooding his Facebook page at the end of 2016. The content posted from 2010 until 2016 was in complete opposition to the values of the Tablighi Jama'at. In this period, Abidul often posted photos wearing casual t-shirts, posing with women (without hijabs), sitting in a pub with bottles of vodka on the table. Hence, for Tablighis like Abidul, social media seem to provide the perfect space to build a conversion narrative, popularly known as *hijrah*[24] among Indonesian Muslims.

The conversion narrative is stored on Facebook's history, and a friend can easily peruse the account owner's journey of obtaining *hidayah* (enlightenment) and finally changing from an *ahli maksiat* (expert in sinning) into an *ahli ibadah* (expert in worship). The narratives themselves are strengthened by the use of the "before" and "after" conversion photos. Tablighis with tattoos, such as on the Facebook accounts of Ahmad and Ibrahim, have documented their conversions in particularly manifest ways. Both regularly upload photos wearing Muslim clothes, but their arms full of tattoos are still on display. I went through Ahmad's Facebook profile, opened one photo, and skimmed all the comments under the posts. The majority appreciated his current look and left comments such as "*tetap istiqamah, bro* [stay faithful, brother]."

For Tablighis, the concept of piety is defined as a form of obedience to God, which is manifested in their responsibility to do missionary tours. In this sense, Tablighis like Ahmad and Ibrahim generate virtual piety on Facebook by consistently posting photos or short videos of them in the middle of missionary tours to places as far away as India and Bangladesh. Also interesting from both Facebook accounts are the photos and videos displaying the account owners giving sermons in religious congregations.

Such posts are combined with citations of Hadith verses, which not only strengthen the narrative of the account owners in redefining their image from sinful Muslims to pious ones but also display virtual piety by showing that they are religiously knowledgeable.

Using social media to display one's conversion to a pious Muslim is also popular among public figures that have become Tablighis. Sakti, who is now popularly known as Salman Al-Jugjawy, for example, used to be a famous musician who quit his music career long ago to focus on religious activities. A few months after he quit his band *Sheila on 7*, he suddenly appeared with a new name and a completely changed appearance, more in line with Islamic fashion. The moral logic following his *hijrah* certainly has similarities to the case of the Tablighis with tattoos that I just discussed: a nominal Muslim has become a pious one. Yet, he also framed his *hijrah* within Tablighi Jama'at's moral logic by leaving behind all the worldly matters (abundant money from music) for the sake of happiness in the afterlife. He began to actively join missionary tours, hosted a religious program on TV, and in 2015 he also started posting Islamic themes on social media. Although he was never formally trained in Islamic theology, he slowly began to enjoy his popularity as a tele-*da'i* (Muslim preacher), through which his *hijrah* inspired Muslim youth and his celebrity status reflected the broader rise of Islamic revivalism in Indonesia over the last few decades (see also Hoesterey 2008; 2016)[25].

The proliferation of *hijrah* stories on social media confirms Slama's (2017a) point that the advances of internet technology in the last two decades have brought about new online religious practices among Muslims in Indonesia. In the case of Tablighis, the posts related to missionary tour activities, such as the *jaulah* (a group's visit to people's houses) or the journey to their destination, implicitly communicate communal pious experiences. Some pictures are also intended to convey Tablighi Jama'at morality, for instance when a pious experience involves struggles and sometimes can only be obtained through sacrificing time initially reserved for family or work. In April 2019, a Facebook group named *Khuruj Indonesia* posted photos of a missionary somewhere on a tour (Figure 5). One of the photos focused

on a Tablighi wearing a backpack, walking across a river with his right hand holding a *melon gas* (a green gas cylinder for a stove weighing five kilograms), while his left hand was hugging the thick book of *Fadhilah Amal* (one of the compulsory books of Tablighi Jama'at). The photo itself tells already a story of obstacles that Tablighis must face in propagating Islam. The account holder chose to add the following caption:

> Tablighi Jama'at is a weirdo … he is unpaid but is willing to cross the river tirelessly, hike up the hills and down again to deliver God's religion […] A man will usually collect money, but he prefers to spend wealth in the way of God. He leaves with some money, and goes home without any.[26]

Figure 5: Screen capture of a Tablighi's post on Facebook, April 2, 2019.

Figure 6: Screen capture of a Tablighi's post on Facebook, October 4, 2019.

It is undeniable that social media have provided a space for Tablighis to communicate their faith, but these online religious practices also hold the risk of *riya'* – an act of showing off (Husein and Slama 2018). When reading through the comments under various Tablighi posts, however, I did not find any comments accusing them of *riya'*. This might be the case because *riya'* is often understood as being "invisible;" it is a relationship between each individual and God. Thus, in addition to God, only the person themselves knows whether his or her online religiosity is a genuine practice of worship or merely aimed at receiving praise from others (Hoesterey 2016, 180). In fact, the anxiety of committing *riya'* is also developed by the conscious feeling that there are other people who are always observing and who will not hesitate to judge whether an act of worship displayed in public is considered as *riya'* or not (Husein and Slama 2018, 90). However, when replying to comments containing compliments, Tablighis seem to be aware of the potential of *riya'* and anticipate it with more humble comments. They try to avoid that their posts are received as *riya'* by replying in ways that suggest they do not deserve to get such compliments and write, for instance, "*doakan semoga tetap istiqomah* [pray for me to stay committed to the good deeds]" or "*masih terus belajar* [I am continuously learning]." Meanwhile, many Tablighis also avoid *riya'* by responding to compliments with Islamic expressions like "*subhanallah*" or "*masyaallah*" that mean that all this happened because of God's will.

Posting Islam, for some Tablighis, is a means to give advice to themselves in order to stay motivated and to seek self-improvement. Additionally, they hope that their posts on social media will influence other Muslims in general, and other Tablighis in particular, to keep up their good deeds. This thought is similar to a Facebook post of a Tablighi who plays with a homonymous caption "*kami bukan ustadz, kami hanya ustat* [we are not teachers–religious experts; we are just '*ustat*'[27]]." This statement is strengthened by another post of his which reads: "someone's faith is not measured from their Facebook account, a good status is not an intention to show off that 'we are the most or the best at something,' but simply as a self-reminder, and to hopefully motivate anyone who reads it, to be a better person" (see Figure 6).

These expressions of virtual piety go hand in hand with attempts to counter negative images of Tablighis that are widespread in Indonesian society. Reminiscent of other Islamic players' efforts to rebrand Islam and themselves by using electronic and digital media as well as marketing strategies, as James Hoesterey (2016) has shown in his analysis of the celebrity preacher Aa Gym, Tablighis also use social media to portray their movement in a positive light. For example, their postings can be read as a response to the accusation that they possess only shallow religious knowledge[28]. Responses to such accusations, through public religious debates or seminars, are difficult to find, as one of the ethics of the movement is to avoid speaking about *khilafiyah* (differences in arguments, perspectives, and attitudes). However, social media have become an alternative tool to ward off any suspicion towards Tablighis as a result of current public stereotypes. The Instagram account of *dai_dakwahtabligh*, for example, often uploads short videos of preachers belonging to other Muslim groups (such as Salafists), or of national Islamic figures talking about the importance of respecting the diversity of *manhaj*[29] among fellow Muslims.

Figure 7:
Screen capture of a Tablighi's post on Instagram,
September 15, 2018.

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Apart from the above concerns, members of the Tablighi Jama'at have also regularly been suspected of terrorism by the broader public, mainly because of their performative attributes (white loose robe combined with their pant legs raised above ankles, flowing beards, and known as a rather closed group).[30] Here, social media play a significant role in providing other Muslims with transparency regarding the Tablighi Jama'at movement. Tablighis also respond on social media to this accusation by proclaiming similarities to some national Islamic figures, for instance by posting excerpts of Aa Gym's or Ustad Abdul Somad's religious sermons. In addition, Tablighis also upload photos that narrate their relationship with the state, such as photos showing celebrities, retired army generals, the police, or other state bureaucrats involved in Tablighi Jama'at programs. The movement's harmonious relationship with the state is also displayed in photos showing Tablighi members involved in religious sermons in front of convicted criminals in prisons[31] (see Figure 7). Such photos certainly contradict both deviant and terrorist group stereotypes that have long haunted the Tablighi Jama'at and show, without needing any captions, that Tablighi Jama'at has been accepted by the Indonesian state. The transnational Islamic movement is thus at least partly rebranded as an Indonesian one.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, social media have been continuously shaped and reshaped by Muslims, making them into a socioreligious sphere with various kinds of Islamic content. Yet, the use of social media to perform certain forms of piety and–or worship can also cause ambivalence and even anxiety within the Muslim community (Husein and Slama 2018). For Tablighi Jama'at, the absence of a clear policy on social media usage from the headquarters in India or their Indonesian leaders has led to ambivalence and disagreement amongst members. Those who are more conservative are restricting social media use due to its wide range of non-Islamic content which they regard as having the potential to trigger moral chaos and create an addiction that may lead to Muslims neglecting their religious duties. This perspective, however, certainly does not reflect the voice of every Indonesian Tablighi. Others have displayed obvious engagement with social media platforms, such as

Instagram and Facebook, by posting their Islamic practices. This group may refute the conservatives by arguing that the various Islamic content that one can find online today has reshaped social media into something suitable for Islamic purposes: every Muslim can potentially learn to be pious through social media. Nevertheless, given the lack of agreement among Tablighis on how to approach social media, their relationship with the online world often remains informed by the ambivalence that one can observe in the ways some Tablighis try to reconcile their offline proselytization activities with their uses of digital platforms.

Despite these disagreements over social media usage, some Tablighis seem to enjoy using Instagram and Facebook as sites of virtual piety where they communicate their faith, display their Islamic practices, and narrate their own conversion to being a pious Muslim to a broader public. The feeling of ambivalence is mitigated by these Tablighis through reflection on how to use social media without violating Islamic moralities and how to navigate social media to comply with Tablighi Jama'at's ethic of "*amr bil-ma'ruf wa nahi 'anil munkar* [enjoining the good and forbidding the evil]." Thus, their virtual piety is not simply a display of their own pious lives online but is also always part of the attempt to preach Islam to other Muslims through the promotion of the *sunnah* (Prophet's traditions). They are aware though that preaching Islam via social media can never replace their conventional offline *khuruj* (missionary practice). Preaching via social media is rather viewed as a new form of religious expression that can widen the opportunities for individuals to perform good deeds. In other words, social media is defined by those Tablighis that use them as an additional *pahala jariyah* (field of merit) as they believe that their posts could influence someone who saw them to become a "better" Muslim, for which the Tablighi who is responsible for the posts would be rewarded in the afterlife.

Individual Tablighis have also capitalized on the nature of social media as means of communication to engage in virtual piety and display their identity as pious Muslims. This particularly applies to those Tablighis who have undergone a significant personal transformation after joining the movement. These online representations of personal transformation go hand in hand

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with attempts to rebrand Tablighi Jama'at as an organization. Posting content about Islam that contains Tablighi Jama'at's practices, such as images of their annual preaching to convicted criminals in prisons or short videos of their leader's religious sermons, can bring a kind of transparency to the movement and provides insights for other Muslims who may be skeptical about it. Such posts can be read as a strategy to counter negative images that are circulating in the Indonesian public sphere, such as suspicions concerning the movement's alleged relationship to transnational terrorism or purported theological deviance. The transparency displayed in social media also invites other Muslims who might refuse to be associated with the movement when they encounter Tablighis in offline everyday life to connect with them. In this sense, just as social media use can cause various anxieties, ambivalences, and tensions among Tablighis, it can also be used to ameliorate national anxieties about the extent to which Tablighis are indeed Indonesian Muslims.

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Notes

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two anonymous reviewers. This article has benefited from the generous comments and critical insights of Dr. Martin Slama and Dr. James Hosterey at various stages of the writing process.

² All translations are by the author unless stated otherwise.

³ *Grabcar* is a transportation service platform similar to Uber.

⁴ In some literature, this movement is called *Tablighi Jamaat* – without apostrophe in the word *Jamaat* (Kahn 2016). In Indonesia, people often call the movement *Jamaah Tabligh* (literally: group of conveyors [of Islam]).

⁵ The ideology, however, tolerates Sufi practices like Dhikr and follows the Hanafi school of law, yet is flexible to the three other Islamic jurisprudences (see Metcalf 2003; Reetz 2006; Pieri 2015).

⁶ *Khuruj* is derived from Arabic and means "going out." The term *khuruj* is specifically used by Tablighi Jama'at to refer to their missionary tours, visiting Muslim communities for periods like three days, forty days, four months, or one year. During the *khuruj*, Tablighis are required to stay in mosques and move on every three days.

⁷ Both *pondok pesantren* are actually rooted in a traditionalist Islamic current represented by Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia.

⁸ Islamic teacher or scholar who often becomes a spiritual guide or a model Muslim for his students and community.

⁹ Throughout his life, Kyai Mahmud was a *mursyid tarika* (guide or teacher of a Sufi order) of *Naqasabandiyah-Khalidiyah*. This title was inherited by his son, the late Kyai Udzairon who was also known as a member of the *syuro* (consultative committee) of Indonesian Tablighi Jama'at.

¹⁰ *Maktab* is an Arabic term for office, while the word *foreign* is used to refer to the international setting. Broadly speaking, the *maktab foreign* is responsible for international relations, either relating to the departure of "local" groups or to the welcoming of foreign missionary groups.

¹¹ *Pak*, literally "father," is a respectful form of address in Indonesia.

[12] *Mas*, literally "elder brother," is a respectful form of address in Indonesia, especially in Java.

[13] As mentioned earlier, *Jamaah Tabligh* is an Indonesian emic term for this movement. By using this term in the search engine, many Indonesian accounts appeared.

[14] I use the actual name of the Facebook group or Instagram accounts that are open for public in this article, while I made it anonymous for all personal accounts – both with private and public access, in order to keep the privacy of the accounts' owners.

[15] Although not every day, the account's owner regularly posts content on Instagram. The content is a combination of his own photos and reposting other Tablighis' posts.

[16] Smoking prohibition, observed by most of the Tablighis in Temboro, is in line with the perspectives of the *kyai*s in Al Fatah boarding school. They consider it *haram* (forbidden or unlawful) because it harms the human body, something of God's creation; thus, if we harm others or ourselves, we are harming God.

[17] A religious innovation that is not rooted in the Islamic canonical texts and is thus considered a sinful act.

[18] This refers to *maslahah mursalah*, which means something that brings goodness or advantages and is in line with Islamic law. Abidin, 2019, *Facebook* post, November 14, accessed [June 4, 2020].

[19] Mualimin, 2020, *Facebook* post, March 25, accessed [June 7, 2020].

[20] The term *pahala* literally means divine reward or merit, while *jariyah* literally means flowing or running. In Islam, when someone dies, their good deeds come to an end, yet they could still gain divine reward if they have a righteous child who prays for them; or if a person donated for building a mosque, they can continue receiving rewards as long as the mosque is still used for praying.

[21] This understanding of the afterlife is based on *Hadith Riyad al-Salihin* (Book 1, Hadith 174): "If anyone calls others to follow right guidance, his reward will be equivalent to those who follow him (in righteousness) without their reward being diminished in any respect, and if anyone invites others to follow error, the sin, will be equivalent to that of the people who follow him (in sinfulness) without their sins being diminished in any respect," which is reinterpreted in the current context to address the uses of social media.

[22] Martin Slama (2017a) coined the expression *posting Islam* to refer to digital piety, that is, posting textual or

visual material with a religious theme on social media.

[23] There are also some Tablighis who forbid posting photos that contain images of themselves, people or animals (or anything with a soul) by narrating other Hadiths of al-Bukhari and Muslim, suggesting that creators or distributors of such content will be tormented in the afterlife.

[24] *Hijrah* literally means migration or emigration. This term refers to a specific event of the prophet Muhammad's migration (C.E. 622), from Mecca to Yathrib (Medina), together with his faithful Muslims, in order to escape persecution. In Indonesia*, hijrah* in the past two decades has been popularly used as a term to refer to a lay Muslim who has become faithful. For example, if a female Muslim formerly did not wear a hijab but then decided to do so, she and her friends would consider this performative shift as a *hijrah.*

[25] This *hijrah* story is similar to that of Derry Sulaiman, who used to be a guitarist in an Indonesian heavy metal band. After quitting, he became even more famous as a TV host of an Islamic program called NGOPI (having a coffee), which is an acronym for *Ngobrol Perkara Iman* (talking about faith).

[26] Khuruj Indonesia, 2019, *Facebook* post, April 2, accessed [September 16, 2020].

[27] *Ustat* refers to *usaha untuk taat*, or those attempting to be faithful and obey the religious rules.

[28] Other common stereotypes of Tablighi Jama'at voiced by opponent groups is that they are *ahli bid'ah* (experts on *bid'ah*) or theologically deviant.

[29] *Manhaj* refers to the methodology of receiving, analyzing, and applying knowledge (Islamic Terminology 2011).

[30] However, see also the news on online media about a convicted church bomber in Yogyakarta who was a former *santri* (student) in one of the boarding schools affiliated with Tablighi Jama'at (Ika Fitriana 2018).

[31] Sending Tablighi to preach in jails in some regions is a regular agenda of Tablighi Jama'at in Indonesia. In East Java, Tablighi Jama'at also regularly sends their preachers to give religious sermons at some institutions affiliated with the state.

Online *Halal* Dating, *Ta'aruf*, and the Shariatisation of Matchmaking among Malaysian and Indonesian Muslims

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Abstract:

Halal *(permissible according to Islamic law) matchmaking and anti-dating campaigns and businesses have mushroomed since the 2000s in Indonesia and neighbouring Malaysia. In Malaysia, the* Soul Seekers *of* Marriage Conference *was established in 2008 and* Halal Speed *Dating was launched in 2014. In Indonesia,* Rumah Taaruf MyQuran *(MyQuran's House to Get to Know Each Other) was founded in 2014 and Indonesia* Tanpa Pacaran *(Indonesia Without Dating) in 2015. In both countries, the presence of the internet and social media platforms coincided with Islam playing a greater role in public life. The thriving presence of Sharia-compliant matchmaking businesses using advanced communication technology signifies both the strengthening of conservativism and the manifestation of the growth of contemporary Muslim publics. This article will focus on the role of the internet and social media in Sharia-compliant matchmaking. Islamic theological doctrine stipulates that the Prophet Muhammad emphasised marriage as half of religion, denoting the importance of marriage to guard the chastity of Muslims. Therefore, the* halal *matchmaking and* ta'aruf *(getting to know each other) business have a flourishing market. The border between* halal *and non-*halal *online transactional matchmaking is, however, contestable. Online* halal *matchmaking also invites greater nuances in understanding the freedom and agency of Muslim women.*

Keywords:

Online, halal dating, gender, women, Malaysia, Indonesia

Introduction

The Islamic resurgence and upsurge in religious observance in Malaysia and Indonesia since the late 1970s and early 1980s can be seen from varied

expressions and habits of piety (Peletz 2013; see also Sloane-White 2017). Contemporary Muslim concern for piety has increasingly led to efforts to establish a *halal* (permissible according to Islamic law) lifestyle, including the presence of online *halal* dating and online-cum-offline *halal* matchmaking. These two majority Muslim countries in Southeast Asia have constantly witnessed transformations in Muslim marriage patterns. Jones (1981), in his studies on patterns of Muslim marriage and divorce in Malaysia, portrays the changes which occurred from 1950 to 1981. He records that in Peninsular Malaysia from around 1950 onwards the average age of marriage for girls was around seventeen, while in the 1970s, the average age was around twenty or twenty-one (1981, 259, 265). Historically, arranged marriage was one of the prevalent practices for finding a spouse in both countries, which eventually was tied with the occurrences of child marriages (Jones 2010, 3; Nilan 2008, 69; Nisa 2011, 808). Jones (1981, 261) also argued that long before 1950, in Peninsular Malaysia it was the norm, especially for women living in rural areas. Arranged marriages and early marriages were associated with tradition and love marriages with modernity and nationalism (Boellstorff 2004, 377; Jones 2004, 516). It is noteworthy that parent-arranged marriages were a significant contribution to the high number of divorce rates (Jones 1981, 263). Milner (2008, 190) argues that one of the main reasons for divorce was a lack of freedom in choosing a marriage partner.

What about the most current phenomenon in finding Muslim spouses? Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among organisers of online *halal* matchmaking initiatives, this article looks at current trends in choosing a marriage partner among Muslims in Indonesia and Malaysia. Besides digital ethnography, the fieldwork was conducted in Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya and Jakarta between 2015 and 2019. The primary data sources were collected through participant observations and interviews. Observations were made during events organised by the platforms *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers*. This article approaches social media anthropologically, not only as institutions, and communicative practices, but also as cultural products that mediate social, political, economic, and religious activities.

In 2000, Helland introduces "religion online" referring to using online mediums to provide information, and "online religion" referring to the practising of religion online, such as online religious rituals and online religious communities. Further, while responding to criticism against his typology, he reformulates *online religion* and *religion online*, emphasising that the separation has become blurred (Helland 2007; Nisa 2019; Slama and Barendregt 2018). The dichotomy is untenable, especially because "doing" religion online can take varied forms. More importantly, today's divide between online and offline for many users hardly exists. Slama and Barendregt argue that within the context of Muslim piety in Southeast Asia there is, "a novel constellation of interfaces, that is an online/offline mix of relationships facilitated by new media […]" (2018, 19). This study also analyses the complexity of "doing" online–offline *halal* matchmaking and the selection of a marriage partner. Theological references used by the platforms in this study, especially the concepts of *halal* and Sharia compliance, signify their caution in copying non-*halal* web-based dating sites and mobile dating applications. They strive to facilitate *halal* online matchmaking by ensuring that not only the information shared online is *halal* but also that the entire matchmaking process can be considered as "doing" online–offline *halal* by its participants, their families, and the Indonesian and Malaysian Muslim publics in general.

The cases presented in this article, *Halal Speed Dating*, *Soul Seekers*, *Rumah Taaruf MyQuran* (MyQuran's House to Get to Know Each Other), and *Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran* (Indonesia Without Dating), remind us of the growth of anti-Tinder-like platforms offered to cater to believers from various religious traditions. In recent years, the number of religious-based matchmaking apps has been growing, such as *Collide*, *ChristianMingle*, *JDate*, *CROSSPATHS*, and *Jfiix*. Muslim web-based dating sites and mobile dating applications are also thriving, such as *Singlemuslim* created in 2000 (United Kingdom), *LoveHabibi* in 2009 (European Arabs), *Ishqr* in 2013 (United States), *Muzmatch* in 2014 (United Kingdom and Bangladesh), *Salaam Swipe* in 2015 (Canada), and *Minder* in 2015 (United States; see Ali *et al.* 2019, 11; Bunt 2009, 105; De Rooij 2020, 6; Rochadiat, Tong and Corriero 2020, 150–151).

The application Tinder, which launched in September 2012, has been one of the most popular mobile dating applications globally (see Duguay 2017). Given Indonesia and Malaysia are considered to be "conservative" about dating, some young people in these countries have also been hesitant in welcoming Tinder (Valentina 2019). The growth of new publics, especially Muslim publics, in both countries since the late 1970s is evident from the increasing number of young Muslims wanting to accentuate their religiosity and has boosted anti-Tinder initiatives. Ong mentions that in the 1970s the *dakwah* (*daʿwa*, in Arabic, or proselytising) movement in Malaysia gained significant appeal with young, educated Malaysians (1995, 147–148; see also Peletz 2013, 607).

The current emergence of *hijrah* (religious transformation to become better Muslims) movements in Indonesia is a manifestation of a specific type of public Islam in Indonesia. The *hijrah* movements, which often have a special connection with various Islamic and Islamist movements, emphasise a return to what they perceive to be an Islamic lifestyle, including the replacement of dating with *ta'aruf* (*taʿāruf*, in Arabic, or getting to know each other) before marriage. Young Muslims initiating the *hijrah* movements, who campaign for *ta'aruf* and *halal* matchmaking, also clearly denote a fragmentation of religious authority in achieving what they believe is *al-maslaha al-ʿāmma* (common good) for public Islam. Following Eisenstadt's "multiple modernities," Salvatore and Eickelman (2004, xi) argue that the Muslim publics are born from articulations on Islam in public spheres which encompass varied initiatives and that new media is important in this context.

Studies on matchmaking platforms, including web-based dating and mobile dating applications, often emphasise how these platforms enable greater personal agency, especially for Muslim women who are often represented in the West as oppressed and backward (see Abu-Lughod 2006). There are nuances, however, in understanding female submission and agency in a broader discussion of religion and gender. Scholars – like Mahmood (2001), McNay (2018), and Werbner (2018) – for example, have focused on understanding agency in the capacity to act and make decisions. Mahmood

argues that agency should be seen "as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (Mahmood 2001, 203). Others have criticised those who often see women as oppressed subjects of their religious cultures (Abu-Lughod 2013). The brains behind the platforms in this study are mostly men who hold strict understandings of Islam pertaining to marriage without dating. The agency of women participating in these platforms can be seen throughout the process of online–offline *halal* matchmaking. Their "capacity for action," to borrow Mahmood's phrase (2001), began the moment they decided to register themselves online.

The presence of communication technologies, the internet and social media platforms has the potential to challenge authority and hegemonic gender relations (Nisa 2019). Scholars whose work focuses on technology, such as phones and mobile phones, have raised this issue (see Doron 2012). The liberating and empowering aspects of these technologies have been seen as "disruptive," especially within patriarchal communities (Doron 2012, 419). Doron, in his study of mobile phone use in North India, explicates how "the mobile phone is viewed as an *object of distrust*, unless it is monitored by the husband and family. This distrust arises because of the flow of 'inside' information to the outside world […] may threaten the reputation and honour of the household" (2012, 425). The perceived liberating and empowering aspects of *halal* matchmaking platforms in my study are also prominent.

Online–Offline Halal Matchmaking Platforms

On December 26 and 27, 2015 in Malaysia, I attended a fancy *dakwah*[1] event organised by transnational non-governmental organisation *Mercy Mission*, which was founded in the United Kingdom in 2007 and in Malaysia in 2011 (Nisa and Saenong 2018, 49). What struck me the most was a programme during this event called *Halal Speed Dating*, an event which I had never heard of (see Figure 1).

Eva F. Nisa

Figure 1: Segregated entrance for male and female *Halal Speed Dating* participants (photo: author).[2]

The Halal Speed Dating was initiated in 2014 by a network of friends Zuhri Yuhyi, Norhayati Ismail, and Syed Azmi. It began when Zuhri and Norhayati teased Azmi who was still single. This led them to come up with an idea of not only helping Azmi but also other Malay Muslims to find spouses through a *halal* matchmaking program. Zuhri had insider experience of *halal* matchmaking. In 2012, he met his wife, Munirah Tunai – who also became involved in *Halal Speed Dating* – on another *halal* matchmaking platform. The couple married merely four months after their first meeting at a *halal* matchmaking event. Another founder, Norhayati, also met her husband through unconventional means: one of the earliest online and chatting platforms, *mIRC*.

During that event, I learnt that *halal* matchmaking was a new trend in Malaysia. At the same event, I discovered a bazaar booth called *Marriage QA*, owned by *Marriage Conference* (see Figure 2), which is another platform that offers marriage-related services, including a *halal* matchmaking service called *Soul Seekers*. *Marriage Conference* was founded in 2008 by Sajid Hussain. Hussain was born and raised in the UK and is also known as the "Marriage Maestro." Hussain contends that "the value of marriage has been eroded over time. Today […] it becomes common especially among Muslims where life has become more accepting in terms of dating, in terms of cohabiting, but

not marriage."[3] This phenomenon led him to create *Marriage Conference*, which he believes "can save the *umma* [Muslim community globally]."[4] He adds that since its establishment in 2008, *Marriage Conference* has been the leading Islamic marriage service provider. Based in Malaysia, *Marriage Conference* has organised events in various countries, including Turkey, Pakistan, Australia, and South Africa.[5]

Figure 2: *Marriage Conference* Booth

In 2017, Indonesia was rocked by the scandalous presence of *Partai Ponsel* (Cellphone Party) offering "*halal*" virginity auctions and "*halal*" secret marriage services under its programme *nikahsirri.com*. In 2021, Indonesians were offended by the presence of the short-lived platform *Aisha Wedding* which offered polygamy, secret marriage, and child marriage services. *Partai Ponsel* and *Aisha Wedding* are platforms that were inspired by the thriving initiatives to help Muslims find marriage partners. For example, the two other platforms in this study, *Rumah Taaruf MyQuran* and *Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran,* were founded in 2014 and 2015 respectively (see Figure 3). Although these initiatives are not related structurally, *Rumah Taaruf MyQuran* and *Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran* are part of a broader movement of the *ta'aruf* trend, and similar to Malaysia's *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers*, they signify an increasing presence of the *halal*isation of the Muslim lifestyle.

The presence of these online–offline *halal* matchmaking platforms reflects how global capitalism has attracted creative Muslims, including those of conservative strains, to adopt, adjust, and appropriate global products and initiatives, such as web-based matchmaking sites and mobile dating applications, to cater to the needs of contemporary Muslims. People in the business emphasised the concept of *halal* and non-*halal* (*haram*) as the main difference between their online–offline matchmaking business and conventional, non-*halal* platforms. This phenomenon aligns with what Rudnyckyj calls "Islamic spiritual economy" referring to a merging of "religious ethics" and "economic practices" (2009, 106; see also Hoesterey 2012, 39; Sloane-White 2017). Sloane-White, in her study on the Muslim capitalist experience, also reminds us to try to understand "[…] not only how the spread of global capitalism transforms the lives of Muslims and is transformed by them but how capitalism in this setting empowers the spread of Islam" (2017, 3).

Figure 3: *Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran*'s offline event

Halalisation of Matchmaking in Malaysia: Soul Seekers and Halal Speed Dating

Malaysia has witnessed a rising number of delayed marriages and resultantly singlehood. Yet, being single and unmarried has been considered an anomaly

in Malaysia, particularly among Malay Muslim women (Saili and Saili 2018, 80). Therefore, the pressure to marry is high, given that marriage is deemed a religious act in Islam, a combination between ʿibādah (act of devotion, the interaction between God and the believer) and muʿāmalah (dealings among human beings). Some well-educated mature women are even willing to be second, third, or fourth wives due to the pressure to be married and become a mother (Razif 2021, 9–10). The basic ruling of marriage in Islam is *sunnah* meaning those who abandon it are not sinful, yet those who conduct it will gain rewards. It can change into *wājib* (obligatory) for those who have strong sexual urges and are afraid of committing *zina* (adultery and fornication) if they do not marry. Verses in the Qur'an and a number of *ḥadīth* mention the importance of *nikāh* (marriage)*,* which have made it difficult for unmarried Muslims to neglect this practice. The Qur'an in *sūrah* (chapter) *Ar-Rūm* (30:21), for example, states, "and among His wonders is this: He creates for you mates out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you: in this, behold, there are messages indeed for people who think!"[6] In addition, a well-known *ḥadīth* says, "marriage is my *sunnah* [path or tradition], whoever disregards my *sunnah* is not from me [my nation]." Another *ḥadīth* narrated by Anas, one of the companions of Prophet Muḥammad, states he had said: "when a person gets married, he has perfected half of the religion; and he should fear Allah in the other half." This verse and *ḥadīth* provide a theological basis for anxiety about marriage. Syahidah (pseudonym), a 36-year-old participant of one of these *halal* matchmaking platforms, for example, says, "we all know that in Islam marriage is *sunnah,* right? I am already 36, so the pressure is high."[7] Syahidah's concern was also shared by all of the participants in this study, including their families who support them in this marital pathway initiative. Evidently understanding the nature of their market, mainly urban middle-class Muslims, the founders and staff of the *Soul Seeker*, *Halal Speed Dating*, *Rumah Taaruf MyQuran*, and *Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran* also often refer to these religious injunctions during interviews, in public statements and on their websites.

Most women who I interviewed complained about having limited time to find a potential spouse. Many of them were also worried about the pressure of being

single which usually came from their families. Although social media has had a liberating effect enabling them to find a spouse online, it is still crucial to receive parents' *restu* (approval), inherent in the idea of *birr al-wālidayn* (kindness and respect to parents) or filial piety. Noraida (pseudonym), 39 years old, says, "I am very busy every day. After working, I do not have time to do anything else. My family are worried seeing me single, but how am I able to find a husband then?"[8] The strong stigma of being single is reflected in two infamous terms used to designate unmarried women in the country, *anak dara tua* (*andartu*, or old virgin) and *anak dara lanjut usia* (*andalusia*, or old maiden). The common assumption is that unmarried women become old virgins and old maidens either because they are *tak laku* (not sellable) or *jual mahal* (playing difficult; Saili and Saili 2018, 80; in Indonesia see Smith-Hefner 2019, 99).

The state also plays an important role in ruling public morality. For Muslims in Malaysia, dating is subject to punishment. This pertains to the law of *khalwat* (illicit close proximity between genders) which is part of a regulation relating to sexual propriety applied only to Muslims under Syariah criminal laws. *Khalwat* is prohibited due to the assumption that it will lead to *zina,* thus, for precautionary measures, it has been deemed illegal since the beginning of the 20th century (Mohamad 2020, 171; see also Ismail 2016, 908). Every state in Malaysia has its own version of *Syariah Criminal Offences* which covers the *khalwat* ruling. *Syariah Criminal Offences* (Federal Territories) Act 1997, which is often regarded as the model by the federal government (Hui 2017, 169), for example, stipulates in section 27 "Khalwat":

> Any-
>
> (a) man who is found together with one or more women, not being his wife or *mahram*[9]; or
>
> (b) woman who is found together with one or more men, not being her husband or *mahram,*
>
> in any secluded place or in a house or room under circumstances

which may give rise to suspicion that they were engaged in immoral acts shall be guilty of an offence and shall on conviction to be liable to a fine not exceeding three thousand ringgit or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years or to both.[10]

This kind of ruling, in addition to the broader spirit of Shariatisation in the country, opposes conventional dating as it is deemed to be violating Islamic law principles.

We are not a dating service!

This statement can be found on *Soul Seekers'* website and is often mentioned by *Soul Seekers* founder and staff. Similarly, *Halal Speed Dating* emphasises that they are not a dating service. Both *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers* highlight that they offer a Sharia-compliant or *halal* platform for Muslims. They accentuate their *halal* approaches as their main difference from other Muslim web-based dating sites and Muslim mobile dating applications. It is noteworthy that *Muzmatch*, one of the popular mobile dating applications for Muslims, also often refers to the concept of *halal* in its jargon, for example, "*Halal,* is it me you're looking for?" The age range of participants also overlaps, mobile dating application users are usually between 16 and 34 years of age (Rochadiat, Tong and Corriero 2020, 144), and *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers* participants between 20 and 35[11]. *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers* try to balance the online and offline processes carefully. The online platforms mostly serve as the participant's doors to showcase their profiles to *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers*, which then allows invitations to the main offline events. The process of selecting a spouse does not happen online because participants do not have access to the details of others. They do this to maintain their *halalness*.

The same as other web-based dating sites and mobile dating applications, the processes of both *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers* begin from online registration. Users complete a profile form requesting personal information, such as gender and date of birth; career information, such as occupation, income and career plan; and spouse preferences, such as marital status

and spouse age preference. In *Halal Speed Dating* there are also questions pertaining to prayers and donning of the *hijab* (veil) asking the participants to choose among "I pray 5 times a day; try to pray 5 times a day; I do the Sunnah [recommended] prayer as well;" for *hijab* "I wear a Hijab; I DON'T wear a Hijab; I TRY to wear Hijab." To cater to the needs of those who want to have a polygamous marriage, there is a set of polygamy questions: "I am a wife. Looking for another wife for my husband; I am a Married man. Looking for a second wife etc.; I DON'T mind being in a Polygamous marriage; […] I prefer Monogamy." The *Halal Speed Dating* team reviews all profiles to decide how many participants they will invite to the offline matchmaking event. Here lies the main difference between mobile dating applications and *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers*, where offline events are the core of the matchmaking programme. During the offline events, *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers* gather selected participants from their online platforms into one big meeting room (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: The *Halal Speed Dating* participants come to the face-to-face main event.

Both platforms do not provide participants access to pictures of other participants and their contact numbers. Thus, there is no communication and no meeting before the offline matchmaking. During the main events, all participants are numbered. Thus, they do not know each other's name and they cannot exchange contact details during or after the events. They are provided with a select amount of time to speak to each other and are then required to cast a ballot of their selected candidates. At the end of the event, the team collects the forms and contact the candidates who match.

Although *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers* share many similarities, there are internal contestations on what *halal* online matchmaking looks and sounds like. Both platforms use the concepts of *halal* and Sharia-compliant often interchangeably. According to *Halal Speed Dating*, the aspects that make them *halal* or Sharia-compliant are that they do not allow *haram* (impermissible) elements during the face-to-face event, such as flirting, touching, or exchanging contact details. In addition, the key to the Sharia-compliant platform is that they make it compulsory for every female participant to be chaperoned by a parent, relative, or a friend. This is in order to prevent *fitna* (temptation leading to unlawful behaviour).

Soul Seekers has criticised *Halal Speed Dating*'s practice, analogising it as "*halal* pork or *halal* alcohol"[12] signifying that the platform does not offer the true teaching of Islam by mixing permissible and impermissible matchmaking practices. They especially question the term "dating" in *Halal Speed Dating* arguing that their platform is different, "we offer a pathway to marriage not to dating."[13] *Soul Seekers* differentiates themselves from *Halal Speed Dating* by emphasising that: First, during *Soul Seekers*' event, the participants are grouped into five men and women and supervised by the facilitators. Different from *Halal Speed Dating*, they are not allowed to have a one-on-one direct discussion (see Figure 4). Second, as part of its wider project on educating Muslims in building a happy family, *Soul Seekers* participants, who have to pay 99 MYR, are obliged to attend a conference delivered by preachers from the *Soul Seekers* circle. The contestation also signifies that *halal*isation is not monolithic. This aligns with Peletz's argument on the complexity of the processes of Islamisation in Malaysia that is not monolithic (2013, 625).

The agentic capacity of the participants, including female participants, can be seen clearly in the first phase of the selection process when they decide to use the platform and submit their applications. Under the umbrella of Shariatisation and *halal*isation, *Soul Seekers* and *Halal Speed Dating* require family involvement in the following phases of the process. Rizwan (pseudonym), a 64-year-old man who accompanied his son, shared his feelings about *Halal Speed Dating*: "I did not know about this earlier. My son told me. I like this kind of format because there is no *khalwat* (close proximity). I will

recommend this to my friends, especially if my son is *berjaya* [successful] this time."[14] Outside the venue of *Halal Speed Dating*, while waiting for the event, I met Raihana (pseudonym), a 66-year-old lady accompanying her daughter Noorayna (pseudonym). She shared her feelings: "I am accompanying my daughter. I am nervous now. I did not have this before. But, now is different. Insya Allah [God willing] she will meet someone who prays five times a day diligently. I do not want to have a son-in-law who does not pray."[15] *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers* can be regarded as part of the Sharia craze that encourages every aspect of Muslim life to align with what they believe is Sharia-compliant. This refers to the zeal of these Muslims to return to what they believe is the true path of Islam. Although there is internal contestation between the two platforms, the way they have "monopolised" the terms *halal* and Sharia have been successful in gaining support from the wider Malaysian public. The presence of chaperones signifies how the changing practice of finding a spouse has been responded to positively by the older generation or the participants' parents. Indeed, the Shariatisation or *halal*isation of online matchmaking reflects the deindividualized trend of spouse selection in the latter phase of the matchmaking selection process.

Grounding *Ta'aruf* in Indonesia

The two platforms studied in Indonesia are: (1) *Rumah Taaruf MyQuran* (*RTM*) founded by Tri Wahyu Nugroho which aims to provide an online–offline *halal* platform for Muslims who want to get married without dating; (2) *Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran* (*ITP*) created by La Ode Munafar with participants ranging between 25 and 35 years of age. Their opposition towards dating and their focus on *ta'aruf* before marriage can be regarded as a continuation of the *ta'aruf* initiatives zealously supported by conservative movements in the country (Nisa 2011, 808). An example is the Tarbiyah movement, a *dakwah* movement inspired by *al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn* (the Muslim Brotherhood) in Egypt which later gave birth to the Islamist party *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* (the Welfare Justice Party). Indeed, the founders of RTM and ITP have a strong connection with the *dakwah* movement. Tri began to understand *ta'aruf* when he studied at Institut Teknologi Bandung (Bandung Institute of Technology) in an Electrical Engineering Programme. He recounts, "I also know my wife

from my mentor" through *ta'aruf* before he finally married her in 2008. The Tarbiyah *ta'aruf* inspired him to create RTM. La Ode Munafar understood *ta'aruf* from high school, when he was active in Rohis (Kerohanian Islam or Islamic Spirituality). Rohis is a *dakwah* focus of the Tarbiyah movement for high school students, in which Tarbiyah activists are active in spreading their influence to secondary students, especially through Islamic mentoring programmes.

Within the Tarbiyah Movement dating is forbidden and *ta'aruf* is the norm (see also Smith-Hefner 2019, 37). Creating the family of the Tarbiyah Movement is their commitment. In 2006, its political vehicle *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera*, for example, created a programme called *Tarbiyah Aliyah* (Family Education) and BKKBS (the Welfare Family Counselling Bureau; Savitri and Faturochman 2011, 65). Religious homogamy within *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* is aimed at creating what they believe as a *dakwah* family who can work together to spread the movement's *dakwah* and to cement group identity and cohesion (see also Nisa 2011, 797). Within the Tarbiyah Movement, matchmaking has usually been facilitated by *murabbi* (male mentor) and *murabbiyah* (female mentor), at least during the early phase of the presence of this movement.[16] This involves exchanging personal data, curriculum vitae, and, sometimes, pictures.

Through the influence of Rohis activities by the Tarbiyah Movement, Munafar admits that his mission is to help others break up with their girlfriends or boyfriends. His concerns about the dangers of promiscuity, the increasing number of abortions, as well as the forbidden relationships between married men and women in Indonesia are some of his stimuli to initiate ITP. Munafar's ITP has popularised the *ta'aruf* trend, especially among young Muslims who want to perform *hijrah* or to "return to Islam," including Rohis and campus *dakwah* activists. ITP uses various channels for its online *dakwah* campaigns, including Instagram with 970 thousand followers[17], Facebook Fan Page followed by 502 thousand[18], Facebook Group with 861.4 thousand members[19], YouTube with 7.17 thousand subscribers[20], Twitter with 5 thousand followers[21], Telegram with 1.70 thousand subscribers[22], Line, and WhatsApp groups. The way Munafar uses these platforms resonates with Madianou and

Miller's concept of polymedia. Madianou and Miller argue that polymedia not only refers to an environment of abundant media resources but "[…] it is how users exploit these affordances in order to manage their emotions and their relationships" (2013, 172). This, for example, can be seen from the way Munafar used various avenues to adjust to diverse contexts, namely, to continuously create strong opinions to influence public hearts and minds to believe that "dating can ruin the future of Indonesian young generations."[23] In the name of *dakwah,* ITP has a routine WhatsApp *kajian* (Islamic study circle) on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Munafar asks ITP members to share or broadcast the contents of the ITP *kajian* in their social media accounts to create public opinion to counter the mainstream dating culture. He carefully crafts the ITP to reach its objective of cementing public opinion. This includes carefully mapping the target audience, most notably young Muslims, and prudently scheduling the posting frequency. Munafar recounts, "every day, we have a target of 1k additional followers on Instagram […] On Instagram, the slowest gap between posts is one hour."[24] Besides online activities, ITP also organises offline activities, such as seminars, giveaway bulletins and free books, as well as conducting rallies against dating culture in the country. The presence of ITP through its various channels can be regarded as an important door for many *ta'aruf* initiatives in Indonesia to flourish, like those of RTM. The online and offline campaigns of *ta'aruf* and "no dating in Islam" are also supported by the presence of public figures who conduct *hijrah* to become better Muslims, such as Teuku Wisnu, Dewi Sandra, Arie Untung, Dimas Seto, Oki Setiana Dewi, Zaskia Sungkar, Irwansyah, and Vebby Palwinta (see Nisa 2019, 445).

Looking closely at the matchmaking procedure adopted by RTM we can also see a strong influence from the Tarbiyah movement.[25] RTM asks its participants to submit their short bio – without names, contact numbers, and social media accounts – and they will select the bios and number them so that they can be uploaded to their website. Tri understands the controversy of providing a picture in this *halal* matchmaking scheme, however, he argues, "long time ago, I used to hide the picture from the bio. But after long consideration, there is a humanistic side that they want to see the prospective match too, in particular, their face."[26] If there is a match, then they can ask each other

further questions via email, followed by a direct face-to-face meeting with the presence of a mediator. If they both agree to continue, they can introduce each other's family and their close circle of friends and colleagues. This kind of practice can be regarded as a more organised online-cum-offline version of Tarbiyah *ta'aruf*. Similar to *Soul Seekers* and *Halal Speed Dating*, RTM's later phase of *ta'aruf* also involves parents' *restu* in order to honour parents and parents' rights in Islam.

Halal Online and Women's Agency?

All the platforms in this study claim that they follow Sharia rulings, that their initiative is *halal* or Sharia-compliant. The varied interpretations of *halalness* and contestation regarding what is *halal* are prevalent in this context. *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers* try to limit themselves to create online mediums which serve as tools for their main offline matchmaking events. RTM, on the other hand, facilitates the choosing of prospective spouses online and early interactions between candidates also occur online. RTM's version of Sharia compliance can be seen from the place of offline *ta'aruf* which are mostly mosques. Indeed, mosques are widely known as a central hub of Tarbiyah activities and campus *dakwah* activities in general. Tri mentioned that around 70–80 percent of offline *ta'aruf* are held in mosques. The *halal* aura can be seen from the procedure of offline *ta'aruf* in which the mediator asks the man to read the Qur'an. Tri says, "the aim is to find out the ability of the man to read the Qur'an. Usually women want to be *diimami* (led in the prayer) by their husbands."[27] To maintain its Sharia-compliant mechanism, RTM allows a maximum of six months after the offline *ta'aruf* to arrange a marriage. Tri states, "we will not allow someone to participate in this *ta'aruf* who is planning to arrange the marriage next year."[28] This is maintained to differentiate between their *ta'aruf* platform and Muslim mobile dating applications. These varied practices of *halalness* reflect not only the different interpretations of *halalness* but also signify how Muslims produce varied *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) when facing new conditions.

Looking closely at the practice of *halal* matchmaking on these platforms, analysing the position of women is especially important. Women's participation

in these *halal* matchmaking platforms exceeds the participation of men in both countries. In RTM, for example, they usually have two hundred male participants and nine hundred female participants. At the same time, studies on online dating, internet chatting, and mobile literacy, including those of Muslim women, often mention how these activities signify women's freedom, agency, and expression of self (Ali *et al.* 2019, 2; Bennett 2005, 101; Doron 2012, 418; De Rooij 2020, 15; Slama 2010, 316). De Rooij contends, "the concept of courting, and in turn, love and marriage, whether initiated online or offline, is related to the postmodern discourse on freedom and agency" (2020, 15). Slama uses the term "agency of the heart" referring to the way users of online chats are "raising personal problems, having a heart-to-heart talk, opening up emotionally" (2010, 323). In contexts where gender mixing is strictly regulated, like through the anti-*khalwat* policy in Malaysia and "no dating culture" among conservative Muslims in Indonesia, *halal* online matchmaking challenges the assumption that women living within strict Muslim lifestyles are unable to exercise their agency. These liberating and empowering aspects of the technologies can be perceived as disruptive, especially within strong patriarchal communities. In the context of *halal* matchmaking, the disruption is evidence through women's greater control over spouse selection and interactions made possible via participation on the platforms.

Women's agency can be seen clearly in *Halal Speed Dating*, *Soul Seekers*, and RTM in the stage when they register to be the participants of *halal* matchmaking and to navigate the strict protocols upheld by their community and religious group. A careful analysis of this practice, however, invites us to think carefully about the complexity of the notion of agency. Adding to this complexity, online dating, online marriage services, *ta'aruf*, and no dating campaigns initiated by Muslims with conservative understandings of Islam and gender relations, have become significant problems faced by progressive Muslim women's activists and Islamic feminists when combating violence against women (Nisa 2018, 301). This is due to the presence of varied key players in online dating and online marriage services practising illegal business, such as online unregistered *siri* (secret) marriage, "virginity auctions" initiated by *nikahsirri.com*, and child marriage by *Aisha Wedding*.

In addition, the growth of online *ta'aruf* campaigns, such as Munafar's ITP, has encouraged the spread of early marriage practices which has become the main concern of women's movements in the country (Nisa 2020, 83). The *ta'aruf* and online early marriage campaigns like *@gerakannikahmuda* (@earlymarriagemovement, 434 thousand Instagram followers)[29], *@beraninikahtakutpacaran* (@daretomarryfearofdating, 145 thousand Instagram followers)[30], and *@dakwahjomblo* (@singleMuslim's *dakwah,* 613 thousand Instagram followers)[31], have garnered significant online and offline popularity, amidst the country's long battle against early marriages and the rise of divorces.

The notion of women's agency might be questioned when the mediators play an important role in the process of matching, especially in the case of RTM. Tri mentioned that mostly men request the detailed personal information of the female candidates first. RTM then forwards it to them. If a man likes a female candidate, then RTM will contact the selected woman, if not then they will not contact her. The selected woman can accept the invitation to get to know the man better by asking some questions via email, or she can refuse him if she feels they do not match. Tri argues that this arrangement signifies that "men are winning to choose, while women are winning to refuse them."[32] This might seem that women do not have full capacity to exercise their agency due to patriarchal norms guiding this practice. This aspect of submission has become one of the conundrums in the study of women and religion. The assumption that women are oppressed due to their submission to patriarchal systems or in the context of this study, patriarchal aspects of mate selection, is a misunderstanding. Many scholars have challenged this kind of assumption and emphasised how religious practices might facilitate new forms of agency and how women's agency or agentic capacity can be expressed in their participation in religious movements and patriarchal religious systems (Mahmood 2001; McNay 2018; Werbner 2018). Thinking about agency as a synonym for resistance according to Mahmood, "[…] sharply limits our ability to understand and interrogate the lives of women whose desire, affect, and will have been shaped by nonliberal traditions." (2001, 203).

Therefore, following the "rule of the game" in RTM by not nominating the man is also the manifestation of these women's agency. Many of them believe that this practice indeed can save their dignity so that they do not have to experience shame from early rejection. Salamah (pseudonym), a 25-year-old participant, recounts her story:

> I like the system in RTM. I think it is great to let the men choose first, but the decision is in our [women's] hand. Whether we want to continue or not. Rather than we inform RTM that we like this and that men, but then when the RTM as the mediator contacts them they all reject our offer for *ta'aruf*.[33]

Many women share Salamah's view. The system for them saves them from feeling "rejected" at the early stage of *ta'aruf*. Thus, for these women, participating in this kind of initiative enables them to exercise their agency. Analysing their agency should consider the contexts in which their choices are made.

Conclusion

While earlier studies have shown positive trends in the increasing age of marriage in Malaysia and Indonesia, especially in the urban context, nowadays both countries face the complicated and often contradictory trend of difficulties in finding marriage partners, particularly for women, and the gradual transformation from parent-arranged marriage to the choosing of a spouse by individuals through the assistance of advanced technology. This study demonstrates the ambivalence of the process of marriage partner selection through *halal* online–offline matchmaking. The platforms might be seen as a push to completely individualised marriage partner selection, but in fact, it does not totally individualise the entire process. Indeed, the platforms' *halal* or Sharia-compliant labels signify the importance of deindividualizing the process, which is apparent in the later stages of the process through parent's *restu* as the manifestation of Islamic filial piety or *birr al-wālidayn*.

The resurgence of piety, evident in increasing rates of public religious expression as a manifestation of growing Muslim publics, has facilitated the growth of online early marriage campaigns as well as *halal* online matchmaking services. The mushrooming of web-based dating sites and mobile dating applications is considered by many as indicating the agency of women and youth (see e.g., Ali *et al.* 2019; De Rooij 2020). However, the fact that *halal* matchmaking is initiated in the name of Sharia compliance often complicates the understanding of the notion of agency. The submission of women to patriarchal norms, which is embedded in these platforms and is reflected in the whole process of mate selection, might be confused with a lack of agency. Aligning with the views of scholars who have challenged this understanding of agency as a synonym for resistance to domination, their agency, however, can be seen in their capacity to act and navigate patriarchal norms upheld by the platforms. Indeed, the agency of these women is beyond total submissiveness, as mentioned by Mahmood, which can involve cultivated virtues of shyness and feminine passivity. These platforms demonstrate women's ability to outstrip their shyness and take control of marriage partner selection.

This article also demonstrates how the presence of these *halal* online–offline matchmaking platforms and their emphasis on being different to mobile dating applications to strengthen their *halal* position reflects long-standing debates about the relationship between religion, religious communities, economic life, and the online world. The concerns of using the terms Sharia-compliant and *halal* signify the ongoing spirit of the Shariatisation of Muslim lifestyles and the expansion of Muslim capitalist experiences in both countries. At the same time, the presence of these platforms using religious language demonstrates the incessant competition over legitimate interpretations of Islamic teachings.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

[1] I label this fancy *dakwah* because it was held in a world-class international venue, *Putrajaya International Conference Centre*, and designed to cater to the needs of urban middle-class to upper-middle class Muslims.

[2] All photos in this article were taken by the author.

[3] Sajid Hussain, 2015, interview with author, December 27, Putrajaya International Conference Centre.

[4] Sajid Hussain, 2015, interview with author, December 27, Putrajaya International Conference Centre.

[5] The transnational aura of *Marriage Conference* can also be seen from its invited speakers in every event they organize. Sajid also admitted that he intentionally invited more international than local speakers, such as those from the United Kingdom, South Africa, and Canada.

[6] This is taken from Muhammad Asad's translation and explanation of the Qur'an (1980).

[7] Syahidah, 2017, interview with author, January 5, Suria KLCC.

8 Noraida, 2015, interview with author, December 28, Bangsar Village.

9 *Mahram* refers to members of one's close relatives with whom marriage would be considered *haram* (impermissible) or a state of consanguinity precluding marriage.

10 Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 559, Part IV - offences relating to decency, section 27, Khalwat, 1997. http://www2.esyariah.gov.my/esyariah/mal/portalv1/enakmen2011/Eng_act_lib.nsf/f0a1dd6010da414b48256815001bd4fc/ec9f2cc63ff92e5fc8256826002d1760?OpenDocument.

11 Munirah, 2015, interview with author, December 27, Coffee Shop Bangsar.

12 Sajid Hussain, 2015, interview with author, December 27, Putrajaya International Conference Centre.

13 Sajid Hussain, 2015, interview with author, December 27, Putrajaya International Conference Centre.

14 Rizwan, 2015, interview with author, December 26, Putrajaya International Conference Centre.

15 Raihana, 2015, interview with author, December 26, Putrajaya International Conference Centre.

16 Nowadays, there are some occurrences in which those whose parents are the first generations of this movement also engage in *dakwah* family matchmaking by introducing their children to the children of other cadres.

17 This is per April 20, 2021, 9:50 p.m. (see Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran 2021a).

18 This is per April 20, 2021, 9:51 p.m. (see Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran 2021b).

19 This is per April 20, 2021, 9:58 p.m. (see Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran 2021c).

20 This is per April 20, 2021, 9:49 p.m. (see Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran 2021d).

21 This is per April 20, 2021, 9:59 p.m. (see Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran 2021e).

22 This is per April 20, 2021, 9:55 p.m. (see Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran 2021f).

[23] La Ode Munafar, 2016, interview, August 30, Jakarta.

[24] La Ode Munafar, 2016, interview, August 30, Jakarta.

[25] Although the role of the Tarbiyah Movement is important in popularising a (strict) *ta'aruf* culture, other conservative movements, such as Tablighi Jama'at and various Salafi movements are also staunch supporters of *ta'aruf* (see Nisa 2011).

[26] Tri Wahyu Nugroho, 2016, interview, May 17, Jakarta.

[27] Tri Wahyu Nugroho, 2016, interview, May 17, Jakarta.

[28] Tri Wahyu Nugroho, 2016, interview, May 17, Jakarta.

[29] This is per April 20, 2021, 10:18 p.m. (Gerakan Nikah Muda 2021).

[30] This is per April 20, 2021, 10:19 p.m. (Berani Nikah Takut Pacaran 2021).

[31] This is per April 20, 2021, 10:20 p.m. (Inspirasi Dalam Berhijrah 2021).

[32] Tri Wahyu Nugroho, 2016, interview, May 17, Jakarta.

[33] Salamah, 2018, interview with author, June 21, Jakarta.

Emerging Islamic Representations in the Cambodian Muslim Social Media Scene: Complex Divides and Muted Debates

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Abstract:

This article explores the characteristics and structure of the Cambodian Muslim social media scene and considers what they tell us about the sociopolitical setting of the country's Muslim minority. It focuses on how the relationship between Islamic actors of the Cambodian Muslim minority, that is, groups, movements and institutions, and their offline environment shape their online representations and proselytization activities. It particularly considers the observation that theological debate is almost absent in this Islamic social media scene compared to that of other Southeast Asian Muslim societies and attempts to find answers to the question of why this is the case. The article particularly examines the Facebook pages of various Islamic groups and explains the sociopolitical factors and language politics that inform the ways in which they formulate the contents and style of their posts. It shows how the close connections between the political and the religious fields in an authoritarian setting, where the state strongly discourages social discord, have the effect of largely muting debates on social media.

Keywords:
Cambodia, Islam, social media, divides

Introduction

The multiplicity of actors within Cambodia's Muslim minority has led to competing efforts to define what a good Muslim is – efforts that are now increasingly made on social media. In addition to the creation and maintenance

of web pages by many Islamic organizations, there is increased use of platforms such as Facebook which permit many more noninstitutional voices to be heard as they permit individuals who are not particularly tech-savvy to easily create a profile free of charge.* The formation and organization of this online Islamic public forum bear careful study, as it is a very recent phenomenon in Cambodia[1], and it affords researchers the opportunity to observe the processes by which religious life finds expression online.

Most scholarly attention has been paid to the emergence and role of social media in Southeast Asia's preaching economy (Hew 2015; Slama 2017; Nisa 2018b) and the manifestations of ideological and theological arguments and cleavages on these platforms (Nuraniyah 2017; Schmidt 2018; Nisa 2018a; Slama and Barendregt 2018; Husein and Slama 2018). Yet, most of the research is concerned with Indonesia and to a lesser extent Malaysia, while focus on Mainland Southeast Asia is missing. Therefore, our discussion on how the complex relationship between Islamic actors of the Cambodian Muslim minority and their offline environment shape their online proselytization activities intends to contribute to filling this lacuna.

This article also adds to the emerging scholarly literature on Islam in Cambodia. Scholars have focused on the history, socioreligious divisions, and Islamic movements in the community. There are a number of studies that have scrutinized the Islamic religious landscape, its cleavages and divides, and the dynamics and competition of Cambodian Islamic movements (Collins 1996; Blengsli 2009; Bruckmayr 2017; 2019; Pall and Pérez 2020). However, these studies comprise little consideration of *da'wa* (online proselytization).

Most of the scholars of Muslim social media activism in Southeast Asia explore lively scenes of debates between the various Muslim groups (especially Weng 2015; Nuraniyah 2017; Schmidt 2018; Slama 2020), while the Cambodian Muslim social media scene is rather silent in this respect. In this article, we raise the question of why the competition in the Islamic landscape offline is to a much lesser extent reflected in the emerging Muslim social media scene.

Mapping the Contemporary Cambodian Islamic Scene and its Complex Divides

Background and historical development

Muslims are a minority in Cambodia, representing approximately 400–800 thousand people in a nation of 16 million. Of these, roughly three-quarters are ethnic *Cham*, an Austronesian speaking ethnic group who migrated to Cambodia from the southern coasts of contemporary Vietnam. The rest are mostly descendants of Malay traders who settled in the country generations ago and adopted the Khmer language. These are commonly called *Chvea,*[2] and despite sharing a religion with the Cham, each ethnic group considers itself distinct from the other (Collins 1996).

There are Muslim communities throughout the country, with the Cham being more numerous in areas north and east of Phnom Penh and the Chvea being the dominant group south of the capital. The entire Cham population of Cambodia is Muslim with the vast majority being Sunni and largely following the *madhhab* (Shafiʿi legal school). Approximately ten percent of Muslims belong to the *Krom Kan Imam San* (Community of Imam San) which follows a separate Islamic tradition that interprets the teachings of the religion in the context of their Cham heritage (Bruckmayr 2017). In addition to these groups, there are smaller numbers of Shiʿi and Ahmadi Muslims in the country (Stock 2020).

The Islamic practices of most Cambodian Muslims greatly resemble those of Muslims in the Malayan Peninsula and Sumatra. This is a result of a sweeping process of cultural change that Bruckmayr (2019) calls *Jawization*. Starting from the second half of the 19th century, most Cambodian Muslims adopted Malay as the language of religious instruction, the Shafiʿi *madhhab* that is dominant in the Southeast Asian region and a body of Shafiʿi religious literature written in Malay (Bruckmayr 2019, 86–89). A relatively minor segment of Cambodian Muslims was influenced by the Islamic reformism of Egypt in the early 20th century. The objective of the reformist Islamic movement was to enable the direct interpretation of scripture free from the bond of legal schools and the related scholarly traditions in order to match Islam with modernity (Bruckmayr 2019, 124–153).

The Krom Kan Imam San remained outside these religious trends, however, resisting both Malay and Middle Eastern influences and continuing to follow a synthesis of Islamic and Cham traditions and practices which includes a different form of prayer performed by the religious elite on Fridays, healing rituals and the inclusion of spirit possession ceremonies in their religious practice (Pérez 2012, 121–188). Cham manuscripts written in both Arabic and Cham in the Indic Cham script are central for their ritual practice and religious instruction (Bruckmayr 2017, 214–217). This community takes its name from Imam San, a 19th-century religious leader who is venerated as a saint with his birthday commemorated at his grave on Oudong mountain, which is also the resting place of past Cambodian monarchs.

The evolution of Cambodian Muslim religious life was severely disrupted under the murderous *Khmer Rouge regime* (1975–79). Most religious leaders were killed and much of the religious infrastructure including mosques and Islamic schools were destroyed. Many of the villages were razed and the inhabitants displaced and resettled elsewhere in order to break up their communities (Osman 2012).

While some reconstruction already started almost immediately after the 1979 defeat of the Khmer Rouge by the invading Vietnamese, it accelerated after the withdrawal of the UN Transitional Authority in 1993. It was then that many NGOs became established in Cambodia, including several Islamic charities from Malaysia and the monarchies of the Persian Gulf. These NGOs, besides providing humanitarian help and assisting Muslims in rebuilding their religious institutions, also carried out missionary work in connection to transnational Islamic movements. As a result of their activities, a religious scene of unprecedented variegation has developed in the past decades among the Cambodian Muslims.

Islamic actors in Hun Sen's regime

Islam in Cambodia is institutionalized and well-integrated into the structure of the state, which is dominated by the ruling *Cambodian People's Party*. Prime Minister Hun Sen has been in his position since

1984 when he became the leader of the Vietnam sponsored socialist regime, the *People's Republic of Kampuchea* (1979–89). Although during the UN Transitional Authority mandate a multiparty parliamentary system was created, since the second half of the 1990s the Cambodian People's Party has been dominating the Cambodian political scene (Strangio 2014 89–109).

The regime maintains a network of patron–client relationships that evolved from its dominance of the rural areas. Since the creation of the People's Republic of Kampuchea in 1979, the party (until 1991 under the name of *Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party*) has managed to keep its cadres in the rural communes who played key roles in creating a system of handouts and surveillance (Un 2005, 213–24). Starting from the 1990s, the Cambodian People's Party attracted most of the business community to its patronage networks. Today tycoons who have been granted favorable state contracts are expected to make large donations to the Cambodian People's Party. Public servants are required to make donations to Cambodian People's Party's Working Group which are then used to carry out development projects to win the sympathy of the rural population (Milne 2015).

Patronage and cooptation characterize the regime's relationship to religion as well. In the case of Buddhism for example, which is followed by the majority of the society, the leading figures of the main factions are patronized by the Cambodian People's Party. Temples receive generous donations from politicians and businessmen attached to the ruling party in exchange for political quietism and keeping monks critical to the regime in line (Guthrie 2002; Strangio 2014, 199–205; O'Lemmon 2014).

The situation for Muslim groups in the country is similar to them, getting access to state institutions and resources and foreign Islamic NGOs being able to launch projects in the country with the approval of national authorities. In exchange, Cambodian Muslim actors can be counted on to support the Cambodian People's Party during elections, refrain from oppositional activities and keep intracommunity frictions to a minimum. This latter is particularly important, as one of the bases of the regime's legitimacy is that it

is the key to stability and peaceful development in Cambodia (Strangio 2014, 84, 98, 114).

There is a single Mufti in the country who, in principle, represents the entire Sunni population. Oknha Kamaruddin bin Yusof was appointed to the position in 1996 by Prime Minister Hun Sen with whom he enjoys a good working relationship. The Imam San community is headed by the *Ong Gnur* Mat Sa and possesses separate religious and educational institutions from the majority Sunnis.

The main source of the Mufti's influence as the highest-ranking official in the state's Islamic bureaucracy among the Cambodian Muslims is his access to the Cambodian ruling elite. The latter ensures that projects initiated by the Mufti enjoy state support. The Mufti also oversees the Annikmah school network and has a good relationship with Malaysian benefactors, which considerably increases his standing among the Muslim community. The Annikmah network is made up of a number of madrasas that use Malay as a language of study and implement the curriculum of *Yayasan Islam Kelantan*, a school network maintained by the government of Kelantan, one of the member states of Malaysia (Blengsli 2009, 189–190). Being a large organization, Annikmah provides the Mufti with a pool of supporters and the resources to support and promote Muslim leaders who fill important positions as religious functionaries and bureaucrats in the country's Islamic institutional system. The Mufti also has strong ties to several Malaysian private donors and NGOs. Through these contacts, he is able to provide his clients with financial resources to carry out various charity and religious activities.

Since the 1990s, a vast number of foreign NGOs (mostly nonreligious) have become established in Cambodia. In fact, with around three thousand NGOs, the country has one of the highest numbers of NGOs per capita in the world (Domashneva 2013). Several of these are Islamic organizations based in the Gulf monarchies and Malaysia. These Muslim NGOs often serve as gateways for Cambodian Muslims to become acquainted with transnational Islamic movements. The *Muslim Brotherhood* established its presence when the Kuwaiti charity *Rahma International* started its activities in Cambodia in the

mid-2000s.[3] Rahma International has a multistory headquarters in Phnom Penh, which supervises 25 boarding schools that provide education to around five thousand students. It also maintains two dormitories in Phnom Penh where 140 male and female Muslim university students can live for free while pursuing their studies. Rahma International has also established several clinics in rural Muslim villages – these are also open to Khmer Buddhists.

Unlike the Salafis (discussed later), the Muslim Brotherhood in Cambodia stays away from politics almost entirely. As Rahma International's director explained to the authors, the movement's priority is breeding a number of well-educated cadres who in time can be leading members of the Muslim community. Involvement in politics will be more feasible once there is a strong organization available with solid human resources.[4] That said, Rahma International has a good relationship with the authorities. For example, if the charity opens a clinic, school or housing area for poor people Cambodian officials appear to give their seal of approval as well as to receive thanks for their facilitation of the project[5] (Fresh News 2018).

Jama'at al-Tabligh (or *Tabligh* as it is commonly called) is perhaps the most popular Islamic movement in Cambodia. Its origins go back to 1920s British India but they have since spread worldwide. The Tabligh movement is hierarchically organized, and each member has to spend three days of the month on a *khuruj* (proselytizing tour). The movement's goal is to re-Islamize society by urging Muslims to pay more attention to the example of the Prophet and make more earnest efforts in the maintenance of ritual practices (Noor 2012).

The Tabligh appeared in Cambodia in 1989, after the departure of the Vietnamese troops, when Sulaiman Ibrahim, a Cham who joined the movement in Malaysia in the 1980s returned and began proselytizing. His efforts were financially supported by Malaysian donors, and also Cambodians who resided in the United States (Collins 1995, 94–95). This material support enabled the Cambodian Tabligh to establish a major center in Phum Trea in Tbung Khmum province. The movement quickly grew and today it dominates the Muslim religious landscape of several provinces.

Tabligh communities in Cambodia are closely connected to Malaysia and the Malay speaking parts of South Thailand, with Tabligh members from these areas frequently perform *khuruj* in Cambodia, and many Cambodian Tabligh travelling to Southern Thailand and Malaysia for religious studies in Yala, Kelantan, and Terengganu.[6] Since the movement avoids any kind of interference in Cambodian politics the government also grants freedom for its networking activities in the country.

Despite being known as a puritan and reformist movement, Tabligh Jama'at's pool of supporters mainly come from the conservative, Shafiʻi *madhhab*. The reason for Tabligh's appeal in this community goes back to both the movement's emphasis on global Islamic brotherhood and the acceptance of certain popular religious practices among Cambodian Muslims, such as celebrating the *mawlid* (Prophet's birthday).

Salafism is the second largest Islamic movement after Tabligh. It appeared in Cambodia in the early 1990s when a number of Gulf-based Islamic NGOs set up educational and proselytizing networks in the country (Pall and Pérez 2020). Salafis advocate a literal interpretation of the Qur'an and the *Sunna* (prophetic tradition), and they privilege direct interpretation of canonical hadith without subordinating their judgments to any particular juridical tradition (Gauvain 2012; Pall 2018). Therefore, Salafis generally regard rituals and religious practices which are not explicitly mentioned in the scripture as illegitimate innovations. They insist that Muslims need to break with the customs and rituals they consider their ancestors to have added to the religion. While Salafism may appear ideologically rigid in principle, they have demonstrated a willingness to be pragmatic in the face of the exigencies of the social and political context. Although Salafis often discourage political participation, in Cambodia, in order to secure political favor and autonomy for their institutions, they mobilize voters for the Cambodian People's Party during elections (Pall and Pérez 2020, 261).

Currently, the backbone of the Salafi movement is the network of 33 religious schools throughout the country maintained by the Kuwaiti *Jamaiʻyyat Ihya' al-Turath al-Islami* (Society for the Revival of Islamic Heritage). These

schools provide both religious instruction and the Cambodian national curriculum and are popular because the instruction is considered to be of good quality (Pall and Pérez 2020, 249–254). Due to the numerous graduates of these school networks and the proselytization activities of the Salafi religious specialists, there is an emerging community of Cambodian Muslims, who might not subscribe completely to all the rulings (such as the prohibition of listening to music, prohibition of smoking), nevertheless, they sympathize with its literalist approach and the rejection of following a *madhhab*, read Salafi religious literature and prefer to learn Arabic and English rather than Malay (Pall and Pérez 2020, 258). This essentially divided Cambodian Sunnis into two major categories: traditionalists, or those who follow a *madhhab* (overwhelmingly the Shafi'i)[7], and the sympathizers of the Salafis.

Most of the religious specialists or *ustaz* who do not identify with either the Tabligh or Salafi movements are products of either Malaysian or local educational institutions which follow the Shafi'i *madhhab*. The former are usually traditional *pondoks* (madrasas that only teach a religious curriculum based on Shafi'i books), state colleges or Islamic private schools. The latter are typically schools of the Annikmah network. Some *ustaz* have received university degrees in Malaysia, or from al-Azhar in Egypt with scholarships mediated by the Mufti.

The Cambodian Muslim Social Media Scene

Among Cambodians in general, Facebook is by far the most popular social media platform with a more limited Instagram and Twitter presence.[8] The Cambodian government practices surveillance of social media. Reportedly, Facebook posts critical of the government have led to arrests (Cambodian Center for Independent Media 2017, 10). Local leaders such as village chiefs in the rural areas also survey the social media activities of the inhabitants of their settlement in order to prevent oppositional activities and social discord (Jack et al. 2021, 15–16). Cambodian Muslim groups and institutions also primarily use Facebook to disseminate their information and organize events online.

Interestingly, the divisions of the online sphere among the Muslim minority do not map onto the disposition of religious communities on the ground. Salafis are by far the most active on social media followed by the numerically much smaller Imam San. The Tablighi Jama'at, by contrast, have only a minimal online footprint (for reasons that are discussed in more detail below). Our research uncovered one explicitly Tabligh related Cambodian Facebook page which was a travelogue of proselytizing trips, and which has not been updated since 2017. This does not mean though that Tabligh members do not observe the social media scene. They often have private Facebook accounts and some of them regularly follow the online activities of their main opponents, the Salafis.[9]

Government institutions, such as the office of the Mufti operate numerous Facebook sites. Yet, these sites are rarely concerned with issues related to belief and religious practices. Rather, they update the community with the most recent sociopolitical developments concerning Cambodian Muslims and announce their successes in attracting foreign aid and realizing development projects in their community. These include schools and wells built, medical services offered in the countryside and disaster relief for villages stricken by floods.

One obvious feature of the Facebook activities of Cambodian Muslim groups is that communication is largely unidirectional. Active Facebook discussions and debates occur rarely, and if they do, the postings touch issues of ritual worship such as the *mawlid* (celebration of the birthday of the Prophet). In the following sections, we will examine some popular Salafi and Imam San Facebook sites, and the ongoing online debates on the *mawlid*, as well as the online absence of the Tabligh.

Salafis on social media

According to Salafis, the Muslim population of Cambodia is deficient in its practice of religion. While most in the community know how to pray and fast, they carry out their religious obligations incorrectly. This includes basic aspects of the religion, such as conducting prayer in the way prescribed by the

Shafiʻi *madhab*, and not the way which Salafis regard correct.[10] Other examples of "deviation" that Salafis identify are *ziyarah* (pilgrimage to the graves of saints) and the celebration of the *mawlid* (Prophet Muhammad's birthday). As the majority of Muslims belong to the Cham ethnic group, Cham traditions, such as spirit possession rituals, are also a target of the Salafis.

As several Salafi *ustaz* expressed, outright and direct criticism of the abovementioned practices would be counterproductive and would only lead to violent confrontations like the Tabligh–Salafi clashes of the 1990s and early 2000s. At that time, groups of Salafis and Tabligh followers were competing for influence in the Muslim majority areas. In many cases, they attempted to take over mosques from each other in violent means and expel each other from villages and urban districts. The violence severely tarnished the image of Muslims in front of the Khmer Buddhist majority, and it took a long time and serious effort from the Mufti to reconcile the parties.[11]

Understandably, most Muslims want to prevent confrontations from erupting in the future. Furthermore, the ruling Cambodian People's Party, which heavily disapproves of intra-Muslim confrontations[12], is an important source of patronage for Salafis. Although many Muslim leaders themselves might not be active users of social media, they can be expected to be kept abreast of events in the online sphere by their more tech-engaged assistants or family members.

As Ustaz Ahmad, a young Salafi preacher, has explained in an interview, directly debating with the older generations is counterproductive. Salafis are better off spending their energy and resources by reaching out to the young and more educated generations who use smartphones and social media.[13] According to him, young people should be educated on how to live an Islamic lifestyle and their "incorrect" practices should be replaced by the ones described in the scripture. The Salafi Facebook groups reflect these attempts. Instead of explicitly voicing political or critical statements towards other Muslim groups their focus is directing Cambodian Muslims to transform their lifestyles and daily religious practices. These Facebook groups are usually

run by an NGO or an individual who can be linked to an NGO. The postings are overwhelmingly focusing on matters of faith, correct religious practice, food, and social life.

The Facebook group run by a Saudi funded NGO, the *Islamic Educational Forum*, is a good example here. Islamic Educational Forum was established by Ustaz Muhammad bin Abu Bakar, based in Siem Reap, a graduate of the Islamic University of Medina. He receives funding directly from the Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs from which he is able to pay the salaries of nine other preachers who live in different regions of the country and carry out various preaching activities.[14] When they give a lecture somewhere in Cambodia, it is often posted on Islamic Educational Forum's Facebook page. The topics reflect debates and discussions that are current in the Muslim community or addressed by the preachers of Islamic Educational Forum in their offline religious lessons.

As an example, Islamic Educational Forum published the hadith (Figure 1):

Figure 1: "Satan flees the house where Surat al-Baqara is read"
(Islamic Educational Forum 2020a).

A Khmer langue explanation is provided to the Arabic text that makes people aware that Satan is indeed real and can cause "weird things to happen in people's houses."[15] Muslims can prevent him from entering their homes by frequently reciting verses from Surat al-Baqara. Two other posts teach Muslims what kind of *du'a* (prayer) and *hadith* to recite before sleeping, arguing that they receive merit for doing this. Citing a hadith, another post urges parents to frequently say "*barak Allah fik* (God bless you)" to their children in order to speed their recovery when they are sick.

Another Facebook group is *Muslim Stung Treng* (a reference to a province in the north of Cambodia). The site is run by Salafi *ustaz* who, like Islamic Educational Forum, frequently posts hadith quotations with Khmer translations. He also posts videos where he speaks about issues such as Muslim parenting practices. The images of this page are rather interesting as the posts often include photos that obviously have been taken in Gulf countries (Figure 2). As Pall and Pérez (2020, 258) show, in the Cambodian Salafi discourse, visitors from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are often presented as exemplary Muslims due to their dress, public behavior, and use of the Arabic language.

Figure 2: Praying Muslims in the Gulf (Muslim Stung Treng 2020a).

The Salafi sites also offer advice regarding the proper Muslim diet; what to eat and how to consume the meal in an Islamic way. For example, both Islamic Educational Forum and Muslim Stung Treng publish video lectures on what is haram and what is halal to consume (Islamic Educational Forum 2020b). They also publish numerous *hadith* quotations regarding what to do before, during, and after consuming the meals (Muslim Stung Treng 2020b).

In short, Salafis mostly focus on religious conduct in their social media discourse and employ an excavation of the prophetic tradition to define what the ideal Homo Islamicus should look like and urge the believers to fully embrace the scripture in order to achieve this ideal.

Proponents of Cham tradition

Many Muslims who participate in transnational Islamic movements tend to distance themselves from Cham traditions and customs and replace them with "proper" Islamic teachings. Yet others, primarily the members of the Imam San community, argue for the retention and cultivation of Cham language and culture. While identifying as Muslims, they often voice that they do not consider "the religion as practiced by Arabs and other foreigners" to be more correct than their own[16] but hold that their own particular, and in many cases unique, Islamic practices are also legitimate.

In fact, this community has been shaped by engagement and debates with Sunni Muslims. The establishment of the institutional framework and the striving for state recognition is a result of the fear of the members of the community that the expansion of Islamic movements and schools of thought will result in the disappearance of the Islamic tradition of the Imam San.

In the past three decades, an educated class has begun to emerge among the Imam San, much as it has in other Muslim communities. Some of these young university students and graduates became concerned about the consequences of Islamic preaching on not only their religious but cultural identity as well. As we have described in the previous section, both the Tabligh and the Salafis urge the Cham to get rid of most of their

cultural artifacts in order to join the *umma* in a pure state. Some of these Imam San youth began organizing for the protection of their identity about two decades ago (Pérez 2012, 72–79).[17] Their activities included organizing museum visits, discussion groups, and promoting religious and cultural events. They soon became active on social media as well.

The Facebook pages launched by this movement regularly post images of traditional Cham celebrations and rituals, and also present the translations and explain the meaning of old manuscripts. Interestingly, the text of the posts is almost exclusively in Khmer. This is because the Imam San do not study Arabic or Malay in the same way as other Muslims in the country, and while they mostly speak the Cham language among themselves, they tend to use the Khmer language in written communication. They learn Khmer at school and not Cham, which is not yet even properly standardized, therefore, they are in most cases literate only in Khmer, and in some cases English (which is obligatory to learn at school).

Several posts published recitations of ancient Cham poems which are basically codes of conduct for men and women. The *Kaboun Ong Chen* (The Law of Men) and other similar poems teach the Cham how to live a virtuous life. Popularizing these poems aims to take out the wind from the sails of Sunni Muslims in their quest to convert the Imam San and inform the latter that the Imam San tradition also provides elaborate instructions regarding an ethical conduct of life. Other posts include images about rituals such as the *mawlid* (see Figure 3) or *mawlid phnom*, the commemoration of the founder

Figure 3: Imam San *mawlid* procession (Cham Kan Imam San of Cambodia 2020).

of their community, Imam San. The explanations are exclusively in Khmer, and they always call for the Imam San followers not to forget their heritage. (Cham Kan Imam San of Cambodia 2018–20).[18]

Some of the Cham who are not Imam San followers but Sunni Muslims also strive to promote the use of the Cham language and some of the Cham traditions, but these activities are strongly connected to religious communication and education. The main online forum for this is *Cham's Language and Communication* (2013). It is unclear who are the administrators of the site, but seemingly Cambodian and Vietnamese Cham Sunnis, and those who live in Malaysia, North America, and western Europe are active in posting on it. The cover photo of the page suggests this attempt to include the Sunni Cham living in multiple nations. Five abstract human figures stand next to each other and above them, in speech bubbles, it is written in five different languages that "I like to speak Cham language [*sic*]" (Figure 4).

Figure 4: The cover photo of Cham's Language and Communication Facebook page
(Cham's Language and Communication 2018).

The page overwhelmingly appears to be a forum of traditionalist Muslims without the involvement of either Salafis or Imam San. Many of the posts are translations of Qur'an verses and religious texts into the Cham language written in Jawi, a version of the Arabic script modified to accommodate the Cham language, very similar but not identical to the Jawi script used to write Malay. Not all of the posts are religious. Some are related to Cham grammar, culture, and food. The Islam related topics

include religious lectures of traditionalist Sunni Cham scholars from Cambodia, Vietnam, and Malaysia, and Qur'an commentaries in Cham.

These abovementioned Facebook pages also do not contain much criticism against other Islamic groups and those who consider the Cham traditions un-Islamic also rarely make a comment voicing their opinion. This has the same reason why the Salafis do not debate the traditionalists and the Tabligh openly: the attempt to avoid confrontation and the losing of state patronage. Salafis and Tabligh members for example often live side by side with the Imam San or Sunnis who are proponents of the Cham traditions. They might recognize each other from Facebook comments, which could lead to discord.

Contentious issues

Debates on social media are relatively few but do occur from time to time, mostly around the issue of the *mawlid* (the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad). *Mawlid* is highly contested in the contemporary Muslim world. In the premodern era, the majority of Muslim scholars regarded it as *bid'a hasana* (praiseworthy innovation) and they only criticized certain elements of the festivities such as drinking wine or prostitution (Schielke 2007, 326). Mawlid became a contentious issue in the 19th century, especially in Egypt, during the struggles for creating modern nation-states. Intellectuals at that time argued that a modern nation needs a rationalized system of belief and worship and for them, *mawlid* represented backwardness (Schielke 2007, 328–339).

Islamic reformists, as outlined above, recommended restrictions of the way *mawlid* could be celebrated (Schussman 1998, 229–230). However, Salafis today entirely forbid the celebration arguing that the Prophet himself did not celebrate his own birthday. Their position is that *bid'a hasana* does not apply in matters of worship, therefore there is no legitimate foundation for this event (Lauzière 2015, 6, 10). Unlike Salafis, *madhhab*-based Muslims mostly regard *mawlid* as permissible, although scholars do not necessarily agree on the way celebrations should be performed (Schussman 1998).

In contemporary Cambodia, *mawlid* is in the center of intra-Muslim cleavages. For the Imam San community, the Prophet's birthday is one of the most important yearly religious events (Pérez 2012, 128–132). The *mawlid* remains important to traditionalist Sunni Muslims although their mode of celebration now more closely resembles what is typical in the Malay world, that is, a communal meal accompanied by prayers and in some cases a religious procession. Today, whether or not a Muslim celebrates *mawlid* is a common litmus test for distinguishing Salafis from the rest (Stock 2016, 791; Bruckmayr 2019, 190–191, 330).

Unlike in the case of other issues where the opinions of the Islamic groups differ, in the case of the *mawlid,* Cambodian Muslims do not entirely keep silent on Facebook. It is the most visible religious event for the Cambodian Muslim public. As several reformist minded Cambodian Muslims expressed, not raising their voice to the *mawlid* would be something like denying their religion and identity, even if they can look over other issues.[19]

The most spectacular among the Cambodian *mawlid* celebrations is held by the Imam San community, which involves a procession to the mosque rather than the simple communal meals common in traditionalist Muslim communities that observe *mawlid*. *The Cambodian Muslim Center*, an NGO focusing on publishing the current social and cultural developments of Muslims in the country,[20] posts every year on *mawlid* celebrations on its Facebook page. An especially interesting set of photos was posted during *mawlid* in 2015 on the Imam San celebrations (Figure 5). In one of the photos, a number of men are

Figure 5: Carrying traditional Cham cake during a 2015 Imam San mawlid celebration (Cambodian Muslim Media Center 2015).

carrying the traditional Cham *mawlid* cakes. Beside them, an apparently Sunni Muslim woman is walking with a headscarf resembling the ones used in Malaysia or the Middle East and not what Imam San women usually wear.

The appearance of a Sunni Muslim in a photo of an Imam San *mawlid* or other rituals is not necessarily unique. While the main Sunni movements and schools of thought intend to get rid of Cham traditions, many Sunni Cham are actually reluctant to give up their traditions. Nevertheless, the posting of the photo sparked a debate especially between Sunnis who are proponents of celebrating the *mawlid*, and those who are against it. (Cambodian Muslim Media Center 2015)

Interestingly, several apparently Sunni Muslims left encouraging comments such as "ancient traditions well preserved" while others called the celebration deviant or entirely not part of Islam. While some argued that the *mawlid* is not mentioned in the Qur'an and Sunna, others answered that Muslims around the world "follow the scripture but also have their culture," therefore, there is nothing wrong with the Imam San *mawlid* celebrations. Another commenter wrote that what the Imam San followers are doing in the picture is making a sacrifice, which is only permissible in Islam during *'aid al-adha*. Someone replied that in fact what is happening in the picture is not sacrifice and asked: "Is sharing cakes and having fun a sacrifice to you?" (Cambodian Muslim Media Center 2015)

A Cham Muslim woman accused the Imam San that they are just following blindly whatever tradition they inherited. An apparent Imam San follower urged the woman to study Cham scripts, as "religious matters are elaborated in Cham manuscripts. No blind following is going on there." (Cambodian Muslim Media Center 2015).

A similar debate happened on another *mawlid* post published by the Cambodian Muslim Media Center in 2020. In Raka, an overwhelmingly Shafi'i village in Kampong Cham province, young educated Malaysian *hakim* (Muslim village chief in Cambodia) introduced a style of *mawlid* celebration that resembles the way the Prophet's birth is commemorated in Malaysia.

During the event, a procession occurs where the believers dress in traditional Cham dress and go around the village chanting and playing music. After prayer and a *ceramah* (sermon) in the mosque, the consumption of lavish meals follows in one of the community spaces of the village (Cambodian Muslim Media Center 2020). This style of *mawlid* celebration is very different from the usual ones in Cham Sunni villages and urban districts since the latter is rather modest with the members of the community coming together in the mosque and then in the house of each other for consumption of food.

Over two hundred comments appeared in just a few hours under the post that consisted of a photo report on the Raka *mawlid* event. There were a number of Salafi arguments presented against the *mawlid*, and those who defend this kind of celebration responded. Others, however, while they saw celebrating the *mawlid* acceptable, criticized the way it was celebrated. They argued that there are indigenous Cham ways to celebrate and there is no need to import something like this from Malaysia.

Staying offline: the Tabligh

A cursory comparison of the presence of Islamic institutions and organizations in Cambodia on the one hand, and their levels of activity in the online world on the other, quickly reveals the glaring near-absence of the Tabligh in the latter. Although the Tabligh are the most influential Islamic movement in the Cambodian countryside, they have made few attempts to take advantage of online platforms to promote their message. This can be explained by the characteristics of their priorities and preoccupations.

For Tabligh, face-to-face preaching is of central importance. In fact, having a physical presence in the Muslim communities where they are preaching and sharing their daily lives provides the raison d'être of the movement. As Arsalan Khan (2018, 57) puts it, "in order to be efficacious, however, dawat[21] must be conducted in precisely the form that it was conducted by the Prophet and his Companions. In other words, the method (*tariqa*) or form of dawat is itself sacred."

In Cambodia, participants of Tabligh arrive from a range of countries, such as Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan to carry out *khuruj* in Muslim communities. Usually, they fly into Phnom Phenh and then either take the southwest route towards Kep, Kampot, and Koh Kong before crossing to Thailand or go northwards to Kampong Cham, Tbung Khmum, Pursat, and Battambang.[22] Wherever they stop, the men collectively stay in the local *markaz* (center) or a mosque while the women stay in someone's house.

Besides providing religious instruction and reminders to observe one's religious obligations, the Tabligh preachers immerse themselves in the more mundane aspects of local life – preparing food with locals, visiting homes, and counselling people on worldly matters, just as, according to them, the Prophet did (Khan 2018, 57). This type of proselytization is hardly replaceable with social media activities, and this might explain why Cambodian Tablighis have a scarce Facebook presence as participants of the movement, even as many of them maintain personal pages (see also the article of Kuncoro about the social media uses of Indonesian Tabligh in this special issue; 2021). Because of this, Tabligh does not have a significant role in the complex politics of Cambodia's Muslim social media scene.

Discussion and Conclusion: Debates and their Absence

Unlike the Tabligh, Salafis are exceptionally active online worldwide. In fact, they were the pioneers of carrying out *da'wa* online well ahead of other, even larger Muslim groups (Iqbal 2014). For Salafis *da'wa* means chiefly transmitting uncorrupted knowledge; the way the *salaf* (pious ancestors, the first three generations of Islam) believed and practiced Islam. To do this any vehicle is acceptable including online tools.

The use of social media to disseminate information about religious belief and practice by the Salafis contrasts sharply with what one encounters on the Facebook pages of traditionalist Muslims. Traditionalist Facebook pages like those pages associated with national-level Muslim intuitions, such as the Office of the Mufti, are more likely to present recent challenges and achievements in economic and social development in Muslim communities.

This is no wonder since the Mufti's power lies in his connections to the prime minister of Cambodia and his dense social networks in Malaysia which enables him to implement development and educational projects.

Furthermore, the Mufti has also positioned himself as a person who unites the Cambodian Muslim community and has made efforts to bring the Salafis and the Tabligh under the umbrella of the establishment (Mohan and Sonyka 2014). This may make it counterproductive to publish theological positions on social media that might alienate some segments of the Muslim community (perhaps the Salafis, as the Mufti himself is Shafi'i and known to be close to the Tabligh).

The Muslim Brotherhood also has not set up any Cambodian *da'wa* oriented websites. Only Rahma International has a site that consists of sporadic posts about news related to their humanitarian activities in the country. These usually include photos and short commentaries about opening a school, distribution of food – the kinds of development-focused presentation of the organization common among traditionalist Muslims. The reason is that the Brotherhood has not announced its presence as a movement in Cambodia since they are still in the early phases of building up their network in the country.[23] As observers of the Muslim Brotherhood elsewhere explain, the movement puts its main emphasis on having a robust organization. Proselytization among the larger population only starts when a solid nucleus of this organizational structure has been established (al-Anani 2016, 99–117).

Cambodia's Islamic social media scene, which has only recently become a significant phenomenon, shows different dynamics from its counterparts in Indonesia and Malaysia. The most striking difference lies in the fact that theological debates are almost missing. This invites us to consider why this should be the case despite the existence of a diverse and fragmented Islamic scene in the country. The answer goes back to the interpenetration of Cambodia's religious field by the state and the ruling party and the latter's treatment of a minority religion.

The Muslim minority in Cambodia has to deal with an authoritarian setting in a country with a violent history where Muslims were particularly affected. The political and the Islamic fields are closely connected; Islam is institutionalized, and the Islamic establishment and the different groups depend on the patronage of the ruling elite. The latter legitimizes its rule by the claim that it assures social harmony in a country with a recent history of extreme violence. Intra-Muslim dissent or clashes would weaken this narrative, keeping social harmony in the interest of all Islamic actors in order to avoid coming under suspicion or investigation, and stay in the good graces of the Cambodian People's Party. This complexity is made manifest in the online realm because of the surveillance of social media posts by the state and religious authorities as part of these broader efforts to maintain the state narrative of order and social harmony.

Those who proselytize online tend to limit themselves to general issues without reference to the other Islamic groups in the country with which they disagree. Salafis concern themselves with how Muslims should conduct their lives in accordance with their understanding of the scripture. The Imam San focus on preserving and reviving their religious traditions on social media, while some Cham Sunnis strive to preserve the Cham language written in Arabic characters. All of this occurs without the direct criticism of one group by another with the notable exception of *mawlid* which does inspire serious and at times heated debate with Salafis and their sympathizers post critical comments and traditionalist Muslim respond in kind. These debates neither resulted in offline clashes nor prolonged online war of words and thus seem to be tolerated by the regime.

Not all Islamic groups have a significant online presence. The Tabligh privilege the face-to-face method of proselytization as conducted by the Prophet, and for this reason have shown little interest in expanding their *da'wa* online. This may change however as COVID-19 travel restrictions make this type of interaction impractical or impossible. As for the Muslim Brotherhood, it sees its activities in Cambodia as being in a building phase with a focus on the implementation of humanitarian projects rather than online *da'wa*.

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We can conclude that for now, debates on Cambodia's social media scene remain largely muted and are superseded by unidirectional forms of communication. Nevertheless, the theological divides in the community that potentially could become reflected in the online sphere clearly do exist, as they do in other Southeast Asian countries with a sizable Muslim population, but for the moment the close connection between the political and the religious fields decreases the expression of diverse opinions on social media.

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Notes

[1] For example, Cambodia's Facebook usage exploded only recently. In 2013, only one million Facebook accounts existed and most of them were owned by urban users. With the recent expansion of mobile data networks this number increased seven times by 2018 (Vong and Hok 2018; Chunly 2019).

[2] It derives from the Malay term *jawi* which means Malay.

[3] Rahma International carries out the overseas charity activities of the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood, which is centered around the *Islamic Reform Society* (Freer 2018, 7–9, 46, 52–53). The authors conducted several interviews which proved Rahma International's affiliation to Islamic Reform Society. For example, the latter's headquarters host the offices of Rahma International whose members and employees are also affiliated to Islamic Reform Society. Series of interviews and observations with authors, 2010–18, Kuwait.

[4] Interview with authors, May 5, 2017, Phnom Penh.

[5] Interview with authors, May 5, 2017, Phnom Penh.

[6] Series of interviews with authors, May and July 2017, Kampot, Phnom Penh, and Battambang.

[7] We use the term *traditionalist* following the self-definition of *madhhab*-based Muslims (Sedgewick 2020, 121).

[8] In 2020, there were 9.2 million Facebook accounts in Cambodia compared to 600 thousand Instagram and 271 thousand Twitter accounts (Kemp 2020).

[9] Group of Tabligh members, 2019, interview with authors, December 3, Kampong Chhnang.

[10] The most referred source in this respect by the Salafis is Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani (2004).

[11] Series of interviews with authors, May 2017 – November 2019, Cambodia.

[12] One of the sources of Cambodian People's Party's legitimacy to rule is keeping the peace and

social harmony in Cambodia after a violent 20th century.

[13] Online interview with authors, October 25, 2020.

[14] Former student of Ustaz Muhammad bin Abubakar, 2020, online interview with authors, October 24. This is also common knowledge among Salafis in Cambodia whom the authors extensively interviewed between 2017 and 2019.

[15] This might be a reflection to the traditional Cham concept of Satan, which is frequently metaphorical, especially among the Krom Kan Imam San. Imam San follower, 2020, online interview with authors, November 23.

[16] Group of Imam San followers, 2019, interview with authors, December 3, Ou Ruessei.

[17] One of the leading figures of the movement, 2020, online interviews with authors, October 15 and November 17.

[18] The English texts on the Cham Kan Imam San of Cambodia's Facebook page are automatic, often unintelligible translations from Facebook.

[19] Series of interviews with authors, November–December, 2020.

[20] *The Cambodian Muslim Media Center* is an NGO which does not represent a specific school of thought. We encountered Salafis, Tabligh members, and traditionalists among its employees. Its director, Sles Nazy, is an integrative figure who regards providing news on Islam in Cambodia and connecting Cambodian Muslims to overseas charity organizations (regardless of ideological background) as his main mission. Sles Nazy, 2017, interview with authors, May 4, Phnom Penh.

[21] This is the term used in Pakistan for *da'wa*.

[22] Series of observations and interviews with authors, 2017–19, Cambodia.

[23] Officials of Islamic Reform Society and Rahma International, 2018, interview with authors, January 15, Kuwait.

Tracing Digital Divides in Indonesian Islam: Ambivalences of Media and Class

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Abstract:

The article examines questions of the digital divide from a religious perspective. It asks about the consequences of unequal access to and limitations on uses of social media among Indonesian Muslims with regard to their Islamic practice and sociality. The article concentrates on two phenomena: Islamic preachers and their affective-cum-economic relationship with their followers who are often organized in Islamic study groups; and online Qur'an reading groups that are frequently part of this Islamic preacher economy. Both examples point to the ambivalences that are present in Indonesia concerning economic inequality, social belonging, the uses of new media as well as the meaning of the term class *as such. The article considers how these ambivalences are coming to the fore in the context of the introduction of new media and how class boundaries are renegotiated and reintroduced in Islamic online realms. From the discussion of the two examples and the ambivalences that become apparent through them, the article concludes that mediated religiosity that demands a strong presence on social media platforms is largely a middle-class affair in Indonesia being articulated in ways that are partly reminiscent of offline class distinctions and their ambivalences.*

This article starts its analysis with observations of unequal access to and limitations on uses of social media and the internet among Indonesian Muslims.[1] This phenomenon has generally been identified as the digital divide and allows for looking at the consequences that this divide has for how Islam is practiced and organized in Indonesia today. Despite continuing

investment in communications infrastructure and a growing number of Indonesians that are online, access remains unequal – mainly because of geographical location or economic constraints or both (Lim 2018). Economic hardship in particular is limiting access among lower-class Indonesians, who almost exclusively rely on their mobile phones to use the internet. As digital apps become increasingly data-intensive, and because phones require a prepaid purchase of a finite amount of data, the phrase "*pulsanya habis* [my phone credit has run out]" has become a familiar expression. It describes the unfortunate situation in which one cannot and may not be able to go online for days or weeks because one simply lacks the money to buy new credit. In light of the huge popularity of social media in Indonesia that have become the preferred tool for communicating religious messages among Islamic figures and ordinary Muslims alike (Slama 2017a), being able to use them is therefore also a question of capital ownership and thus of class differences, making them also zones of social distinction and hierarchy.

Tracing digital divides in Indonesian Islam, as this article attempts to do, thus urges us to investigate Islamic practices as they occur on or are facilitated by social media through a lens that is sensitive to socioeconomic inequalities and how they have evolved in the last decades in Indonesia since what scholars have called the digital divide has multiple dimensions and is certainly not limited to questions of access alone (Servon 2002; Ragnedda and Gladkova 2020). Considering these conditions, one is tempted to ask about the concrete ways in which the digital is dividing society and what effects this has on the religious life of Indonesian Muslims. Can we speak of a digital divide in Indonesian Islam? If yes, this must be something that has only recently come into being – along with the rise of the internet and social media – and raises the question of how an Islamic digital divide intersects with the broader socioeconomic divisions that characterize Indonesian society, and what new forms of community or exclusion this intersection produces. To answer these questions, I will consider the religious uses of social media in Islamic contexts in Indonesia in light of the fact that some Indonesian Muslims are frequently online, while others stay partly or entirely religiously offline. The article thus asks how particular features and uses of social media facilitate religious practices and how this relates to the different positions that Indonesian Muslims occupy in society.

Yet these more recent manifestations of social inequality that this article attempts to unearth are embedded in articulations of class tied to Indonesia's socioeconomic and political history that is characterized by the production of ambivalence with regard to both media uses and the question of class difference. Ambivalence refers here to widespread uncertainties about where to locate oneself and others in Indonesia's societal structure and how to identify and denote social inequality. It also comprises the uneasiness that Muslims can feel when addressing Islamic authorities online or when encounters between Muslims with different class backgrounds take place in digital realms. Such notions of ambivalence about class and socioreligious hierarchy are of particular relevance for this analysis because they appear in the context of people's engagement with social media platforms that themselves can become arenas where ambivalence is rearticulated or informs the religious practices of Indonesian Muslims. For example, ambivalence about the effects of online piety can correlate with or even amplify a certain murkiness around social distinctions. Ambivalences of class and media usage thus can be interconnected and fuel each other. At the same time, as the examples discussed in this article also suggest, ambivalence can quickly evolve in its dissolution being superseded by clarity when class boundaries are reaffirmed, especially in reinscribing lower-class character to poorer Muslims, which in turn can generate parallel ambivalences about how to deal with this social divide. The following section attempts to trace these dynamics of ambivalence in their historical and contemporary dimensions pointing to the digital divide's interconnections with Indonesian offline developments in Islam and beyond.

Divides, media, and ambivalence

Since the 1980s, when its continuing rise started, Indonesia's Muslim middle-class has attracted the attention of a great number of scholars.[2] This rise exhibits a combination of forms of Islamic piety with patterns of consumption and the display of urban lifestyles. These earlier entanglements between Islamic practices and assertions of class positions help us to understand how today new forms of Islamic practice did not neutralize class

differences in Indonesia but in many cases rather reinforced them. Particularly instructive in this regard is the emergence of gated communities or *kompleks perumahan* that are exclusively reserved for Muslims, that is, middle-class Muslims, who can afford to buy a house there. These Muslim gated communities, as Hew Wai Weng (2018a) has observed, are not only equipped with spare time facilities but also with mosques that are used for a variety of religious activities. While gated communities are essentially exclusive areas surrounded by fences and walls and guarded by security personnel, the existence of mosques inside them can generate ambivalence about the extent to which the area should be secluded from neighboring *kampung* (lower-class quarters). Hew (2018a, 208) observed debates among inhabitants of the Muslim gated communities as well as between them and their lower-class neighbors about who is allowed to use the mosque of the gated community, that is, if and when to "open the gate," such as for the Friday prayer. Hew (2018a, 209) speaks of a "gentrification process" that "may exacerbate forms of inequality in which poor Muslims […] may be marginalized, though not completely excluded."[3]

With regard to the evolution of forms of class-based religiosity, one might additionally mention the uses of hotels and resorts for religious gatherings as well as elite and middle-class homes as sites where *majelis taklim* (Islamic study gatherings) and *pengajian* (recitations of the Qur'an) take place (Hasbullah 2000; Abaza 2004). Pilgrimages inside and outside Indonesia, notably the *hajj* and *umroh*, are also increasingly divided by class, since middle- and upper-class Indonesians can book tours with specialized travel agencies that provide a range of services and extra comfort (Heryanto 1999). These inequalities are of course not completely new phenomena since social hierarchies have for long been reflected in religious practices in Southeast Asia. What is new is the scale on which current forms of distinction occur with ever more Indonesian Muslims having reached middle-class status and being able to "consume Islam" (Fealy 2008), as class – following Pierre Bourdieu (1986; 1991) – is always a combination of types of capital (economic, social, cultural) and religion can be added as another type to the equation. Economic capital, for example, thus can be converted into religious capital by Indonesian Muslims and vice versa, as

Islamic preachers also illustrate. As a result, the market for religious services is continuously growing catering to the needs of middle- and upper-class Indonesians.

At the same time, as Carla Jones (2012, 148) has argued, the Indonesian term for middle class, *kelas menengah*, is imbued with ambivalence. In the 1980s and 1990s, when the term *kelas menengah* increasingly became part of public discourse, it has often been associated with gendered forms of conspicuous consumption, which is partly still the case and makes Indonesians that, from a material point of view, would qualify as middle-class uncomfortable with fully identifying with the category. Jones (2012, 153) points out that consumption along with family and gender are central to "discourses of distinction" and "that social differences are conceived and constituted through these categories." While middle-classness is associated with consumption that can be conceived as excessive and, when it is combined with the display of piety, even as sinful (Husein and Slama 2018), it is based on wealth that is often also of an ambivalent nature. Jones (2018) refers to widespread practices of corruption in Indonesia and the circulation of capital with dubious origins that makes people unsure whether someone has acquired his or her wealth by legal means. In other words, what makes the category of middle class so ambivalent is that it is not clear whether someone's middle-class lifestyle is based on illicit activities or not (2018, 193).

Whereas Jones' analysis of Indonesian middle-classness concentrates on gendered spheres of consumption and the public gaze on material arrangements of the domestic realm, for Emma Baulch (2020, 49) "popular music and the broader consumer culture it inhabited were as crucial as was the press to the making of middle-classness." Baulch (2020) also goes further back in time to the 1970s where she locates the beginnings of the construction of a middle-class readership by pop music magazines. Crucial for her analysis is the distinction that these magazines make between *kampungan* and *gedongan*, the former term referring to *kampung* (lower-class neighborhoods) and the music genres that are popular there, such as *dangdut* (a kind of Indonesian folk music of mixed origin), and the latter to

gedong (bigger buildings) where middle- and upper-class people live and work that listen to Western and Indonesian pop music. This example shows that – in contrast to the topic of wealth and its origins examined by Jones – middle-classness and social distinction as such seem to be constructed more unambiguously and smoothly with reference to cultural products such as music in Indonesia. This holds also true for new technologies and their uses that can quickly acquire an image of belonging to different segments of society. Baulch (2020, 167) observed, for example, that SMS, the short message service that became popular with the introduction of mobile phones, is a frequent topic in *dangdut* songs indicating its lower-class image as a technology that has long been surpassed by messaging apps, such as WhatsApp, Telegram, LINE, et cetera, that people usually have downloaded on their smartphones today. As we will see later in this article, however, certain media cannot only have a clear class image but can generate ambivalence and even anxiety due to their uses by people with different class backgrounds.

Our discussion of the ambivalences of the concept of class in Indonesia would be incomplete, however, without considering the country's political history, including its ideological contestations. After the destruction of the political left in the mid-1960s and the ban on any Marxist-inspired ways of seeing the social world during Suharto's New Order regime (1966–98; Farid 2005; McGregor 2016), social inequalities have often been addressed in a highly technocratic language – and continue to be perceived so until today, pointing to the persistent ideological legacy of the Suharto era (Aspinall and Fealy 2010). For example, apparent inequalities are called *kesenjangan sosial* (literally, social gap), reflecting the discourse on various "gaps" introduced by development agencies such as the World Bank (see also Jones 2012, 148). Technocratic language avoids terms like social class, making economic distinctions either unspeakable or at least seem ambiguous. Nevertheless, the word *class* as such has not completely vanished from public discourse. As outlined above, it actually reappeared from the late 1980s onwards, when the *kelas menengah* (the middle class) was discovered as an agent of economic advancement and later as a bearer of democratization and user of new communication technologies. These imaginaries were

closely linked with visions of Indonesian society that is able to reconcile science and technology with Islamic piety expressed in the twin concepts "*iptek"* and "*imtaq*," standing for *ilmu dan teknologi* (science and technology, abbreviated *iptek*) and *imam dan taqwa* (faith and devotion, abbreviated *imtaq*; Amir 2009, 85). The idea that *iptek* and *imtaq* should be in harmony in a modernizing Indonesia informed an "Islamic techno nationalism" and visions of an "Islamic information society" (Barendregt 2009; 2012).

These concepts resonate with early optimistic imaginaries of the internet as a catalyst for social equality and inclusion that were based on the assumption that, if digital divides can be bridged and everybody has access to the online world, offline inequalities will ultimately disappear as well. In Indonesia, such hopes were particularly popular in the post-Suharto period in the early 2000s, when political and technological change coincided (Hill and Sen 2005). However, twenty years later, following and partly exceeding the global trend, Indonesia has not become more equal pointing to growing income disparity and concentration of wealth, despite the growth of the segment of society that is considered middle-class (Gibson 2017). This became particularly apparent during the coronavirus pandemic (SARS-CoV-2), for example, when Islamic organizations, such as *Nahdlatul Ulama*'s youth wing *Gerakan Pemuda Ansor*, started to offer public Wi-Fi points for school children who could not join distance learning from home because of the lack of internet access (see Asyathri 2020). This example of an Islamic organization's response to the problem of unequal access to digital realms brings us back to the digital divide and its manifestations in Indonesia's field of Islam.

The Islamic preacher economy and its digital divides

Social media are used by Indonesian Muslims in a variety of ways, often being integrated into religious environments that were already there before the growing popularity of online communication (Slama 2017a). Instructive examples are the spread of *majelis taklim* (Islamic study gatherings) across Indonesia, especially among urban middle-class Muslims, and the rise of

the *ustadz* (the Islamic preacher) as a central figure of Islamic authority in the last decades (Abaza 2004; Winn 2012; Millie 2017). These examples are closely linked since Islamic preachers often receive a considerable portion of their income from preaching at middle- and upper-class *majelis taklim*. At the same time television was – and still is – central for the production of celebrity *ustadz* that function as role models for the many more locally operating preachers (Hoesterey 2016). Today, the preachers, both celebrity and the more local type, are on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, LINE, Telegram, et cetera, trying to increase their following in sometimes creative ways (Hew 2018b; Nisa 2018a; Husein 2021). As I have argued elsewhere in more detail (Slama 2017b), using social media has become part and parcel of Indonesia's Islamic preacher economy. Especially middle- and upper-class Indonesians expect from "their" preachers to be available online and to give them advice concerning not only theological questions but also private issues and emotionally charged problems, such as having an unfaithful husband, a rebelling teenager child, et cetera.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that preachers of a modest origin or of an older age initially might not have owned a smartphone or a tablet. In such a case, it can happen that middle- and upper-class Muslims provide the *ustadz* with such a device. Ustadz Hasan is a good example in this regard who is a teacher of Islamic religion in a high school in South Jakarta receiving a modest salary. Additionally, he runs several *majelis taklim* and teaches adults private lessons, some of whom are Jakartan celebrities. When I met him, he proudly told me that his iPad was given to him by his followers. At the same time, he continues to preach at *majelis taklim* that are attended by lower-class Muslims in mosques in South Jakarta. Preaching among people from all walks of life, Ustadz Hasan distinguishes his followers in the following way:

> Middle- to upper-class people use media. Middle- to lower-class people talk directly, *face-to-face* [English in original]. Middle- to lower-class people seldom use media. But those who are critical are those who have education. Lower-class people accept what you say.

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> They are not interactive. Communication is one way, whereas with middle- to upper-class people communication is usually two ways.[4]

This quote invites a more detailed analysis, especially the expressions: *kelas menengah ke bawah* and *kelas menengah ke atas*, which I have translated as "middle to lower class" and "middle to upper class." This translation, however, tends to miss a crucial point that perhaps becomes clearer if one opts for a more literal translation, namely "middle class downwards" and "middle class upwards," which highlights what these expressions actually do. They suggest a picture of an Indonesia as if it is inhabited mainly by middle-class people and some others who are located a bit below or a bit above this middle class.

Ustadz Hasan did not invent these terms, of course; he just used these popular expressions which indicate the ambivalence that informs the representation of class divisions in Indonesia – a mildly put reference to socioeconomic hierarchies that stands in the tradition of the discovery of the middle class under the developmentalist Suharto regime and its simultaneous denial of class divisions that I have briefly referred to above. Interestingly, this euphemistic language that leaves the impression that middle-classness is within the reach of everyone stands in stark contrast to the very clear division Ustadz Hasan's account makes with regard to groups of Muslims and their media practices. In other words, what Ustadz Hasan is describing here is a divide in Indonesia's Islamic preacher economy that reserves preachers' online accessibility and the ability to engage in a dialogue with them for their well-to-do followers.

There are several reasons why lower-class Indonesians largely stay offline when it comes to the communication with preachers. The most obvious ones are economic constraints, to which I have alluded to in the introduction of this article, and social media illiteracy, although the latter phenomenon is rapidly declining in Indonesia. Another reason is connected to how lower-class Indonesians, especially those with a traditionalist Islamic background, perceive Islamic authority, especially to the question of how one should pay *hormat* (respect) to these authorities, involving a whole set of not

only linguistic but also bodily expressions that can only be adequately performed in offline life.[5] Lower-class Indonesians, lacking the economic and cultural capital that middle-class Indonesians possess, might not be confident enough to break with offline etiquette by simply sending a message on WhatsApp, for example. They instead prefer to choose the offline way of meeting Islamic authorities where they can pay respect to the preachers in an appropriate way without potentially undermining hierarchies.

At the same time, the offline availability of preachers is an even scarcer resource than their online presence which means that lower-class Indonesians often have to wait long until they can convey their problems to the preacher and might have to come several times to the house of the preacher until he is at home and has time to receive them, whereas the same preacher might answer messages sent via social media by his middle-class followers that are also the main source of his income much more quickly. As has become clear from my interviews with middle-class Muslim women, they treat their relationships with religious authorities much as consumers, by demanding responses if not answers from their preachers on the same day or on the next day at the latest. In some instances, they expect preachers to pay attention to them almost in real time. The preachers, in turn, are not always happy about how they are approached online. They often find their followers being impolite when asking them direct questions on social media, especially if they demand a quick and comprehensive response from them (see Slama 2017b).

Although preachers like to complain about their middle-class followers, they tend to overcome their followers' online misbehavior with a good sense of humor. At the same time, their accounts – like the one of Ustadz Hasan – gives us an idea of what it means to engage in two-way communication and how much time they have to spend online. Ustadz Hasan's account also exemplifies what has changed in Indonesia's Islamic preacher economy with the introduction of social media. Although earlier forms of mediatized Islamic proselytization in Indonesia utilized images and sound to prevent boring their followers with dry monologues and to provide

sensuous and emotional experiences (Hoesterey 2008; 2016; Rudnyckyj 2010), what they had to offer was largely one-way communication as well. In contrast, the dialogic features of social media and messaging apps in particular enable more intellectually critical and emotionally intimate exchanges with Islamic authorities. According to Ustadz Hasan, these are experiences that are reserved for middle- and upper-class Muslims. Thus, when we seek to trace digital divides in Indonesian Islam, it is not sufficient to concentrate on the issue of access to the digital realm alone, but on how particular features and uses of social media facilitate the religious practices of one group of Muslims with a higher-class position more than the ones of others with a lower-class position.

Interestingly, the rigidity of socioeconomic divides and hence the lack of class mobility that is reflected in Ustadz Hasan's account with regard to his followers do not seem to apply to the preachers themselves. Whereas preachers like Ustadz Hasan, who comes from a modest background, can climb the social ladder through their preaching activities and their online presence, the followers are categorized as either belonging to the group that demands two-way communication, or they are not. The preachers can rise in tandem with the media they use, that is, if they can adapt their preaching and proselytization efforts to the dynamic popularity of different social media platforms and apps and if they are able to use the latter in ways that their middle- and upper-class followers appreciate. The Islamic sociality of social media affords their social mobility, whereas their followers remain divided with one side having self-consciously seized religious digital realms and the other struggling not only with economic restraints but also with the ambivalences that the encounter of traditionalist concepts of Islamic authority with new media can cause. As a result, middle- and upper-class Muslims have privileged access to preachers and the personal Islamic guidance that they provide as part of an affective economy in which time is a particularly scarce resource. Yet these patterns of exclusion in the Islamic preacher economy do not constitute the only examples for traces of a digital divide in Indonesian Islam, as the following account of an online Qur'an reading group indicates.

Qur'an reading groups and their digital divides

Reading the Qur'an is a central practice for Muslims that has been ritualized in manifold ways in the Islamic world, including in Indonesia where one finds a variety of this practice that ranges from local *pengajian* (Qur'an reading groups) and the above-mentioned *majelis taklim* study groups, of which Qur'an reading can be a central component, to public Qur'an reading contests that are supported by the state (Gade 2004; Doorn-Harder 2006). With the growing popularity of social media in Indonesia, Qur'an reading has taken yet another turn and has found new expressions in online fora. As analyzed by Eva Nisa (2018b), it has even given birth to an Islamic social movement called ODOJ, which stands for *One Day One Juz*, referring to the practice of reading one *juz* (chapter) of the Qur'an every day. ODOJ runs a website, Facebook and Twitter accounts, and boasts more than 100 thousand members (see ODOJ 2021). It uses messaging apps to organize Qur'an readers in groups of thirty people that all commit to reading the chapter of the Qur'an that is assigned to them, which means that the whole group reads the thirty chapters of the Qur'an every day and every member of the group will complete reading the Qur'an every month. Stressing discipline and commitment, the members of the groups oblige themselves to report to the group every evening whether they have managed to read their chapters or whether they have failed (see also Slama 2017a). Moreover, as Nisa (2008b, 32) has observed, the ODOJ movement has its roots in student activist circles with an urban middle-class background that are ideologically close to Indonesia's version of the *Muslim Brotherhood*, the so-called Tarbiyah movement that led to the establishment of the *Prosperous Justice Party* (PKS).

However, reading the Qur'an in groups in the ODOJ way, that is, reading one chapter every day and being connected through messaging apps, is not restricted to the ODOJ movement, but has become popular more widely in Indonesia since preachers have adopted the ODOJ method as well and started to organize groups among their followers (Slama 2017a). This also applies to Ustadz Husein, another preacher from Jakarta, who runs several WhatsApp and Telegram groups for his followers who practice ODOJ.

Every day he distributes lists on these apps that assign the chapters of the Qur'an to the group members. Ustadz Husein has introduced strict rules for his WhatsApp and Telegram groups that forbid sharing any information to the groups aside from whether one has read one's assigned chapter of the Qur'an or not. The groups are led by coordinators, mostly family members and friends of Ustadz Husein, that take care of organizational matters.

Since there are sometimes issues to discuss that do not necessarily have to occupy Ustadz Husein, the coordinators of the groups have formed their own Telegram group.[6] In this group, in addition to discussions about technical and organizational issues, a lot of casual conversation and joking goes on as well. Yet sometimes issues of socioeconomic inequality also become a topic. For example, one day a group coordinator received a message from one of her group members with whom she had experienced gaps in communication. She proceeded by forwarding the following message to the group:

> I'm happy that I can join the Qur'an reading group, but I cannot guarantee that I will always have phone credit to report. I hope you understand, I'm a widow raising three children. My income is sometimes not enough to purchase credit.[7]

This message was then hotly discussed in the group of the coordinators, especially the question of whether coordinators should respond by purchasing mobile phone credit for group members if the latter cannot afford to do so by themselves.[8] At first glance, doing so would be a humane and religiously charitable act, as it would facilitate the piety of a group member. Indeed, at the beginning of the discussion, the group coordinator who forwarded the message was inclined to help out, but another group coordinator changed her mind by arguing that purchasing credit for group members would open the group up to potential fraud if the practice spread by word of mouth and people would then capitalize on their benevolence. Those who sometimes cannot purchase credit, he asserted, are "lower-class people." He used the word *orang kampung*, people from lower-class neighborhoods, who – he suggested – will tell their neighbors and friends and then people will join the

Qur'an reading groups just to get their mobile phone cards topped up. This argument seemed to have convinced most members of the group, and it was agreed that they would not pay for their group members' communication costs.

However, it would be wrong to conclude from this example that the coordinators and members of Ustadz Husein's Qur'an reading groups are not socially committed. Rather the contrary is the case, as their sense of piety often entails being engaged in social activities. Sometimes, their Telegram group itself becomes a charity. For example, when the house of a group member's neighbor burnt down, the member asked his friends in the group to join him to help his neighbor to rebuild the house; and after a short while, a considerable sum was raised. In such cases, members are expected to donate, which reflects broader changes in Indonesia's Islamic charity landscape that increasingly relies on online forms of organization and propagation in order to attract middle and upper-class donors. In fact, giving *sedekah* (voluntary donation, in addition to *zakat* – obligatory donation) has become part of the lifestyle of middle-class Muslims that appreciate the quick and transparent processing of their contributions enabled by the digitalization of Islamic charities (Kailani and Slama 2019).

These two examples invite comparison, given that in the first case of the widow lacking money for purchasing mobile phone credit the group members came to the conclusion that they should not donate, whereas in the second case it was not a problem at all. As contrasting these examples reveals, this was not a question of one's ability to help but of the class relationship between donors and receivers and how this relationship is conceptualized by middle-class Indonesians. Whereas the neighbor was a person close to one of the group members who then also handed over the money and reported in the group – by posting pictures, for example – about the progress that was achieved thanks to the donations, the widow was quickly associated with an anonymous mass of lower-class Indonesians, the *orang kampung*, who are suspected of utilizing the noble practice of Qur'an reading to get their mobile phone costs paid.

Whereas we have discussed how ambivalent notions of class and class differences can be in Indonesia, there are categories, like the *orang kampung*, that have a rather fixed meaning and can entail lasting social consequences, such as not receiving aid in the digital space of an online Qur'an reading group. By determining that members of the group have to report every day, which means that they have to be online every day and cannot afford a period of time where their mobile phones are not connected to the internet, these groups define their digital space as being reserved for only those Muslims who have the financial means to fully participate in Indonesian online realms. The example shows how economic inequality finds its expression in a digital divide that generates concrete, unambiguous manifestations of this divide in the field of Islam. Ambivalence, however, lies at the roots of this divide. What is central here is the ambivalence that the presence of lower-class Indonesians in particular digital spaces can arouse among middle-class Muslims, exemplified by the widow and her motives for her Qur'an reading that one might never really know. In other words, the middle-class organizers of the Qur'an reading groups, whose own access to piety rests on access to material and spiritual resources, can never be sure whether the desire of an *orang kampung* to access pious sociality is based on honest piety or economic need and expectations.

That this ambivalent perception of lower-class Indonesians held by middle-class Indonesians becomes apparent in a digital realm like these online Qur'an reading groups is not a coincidence. It is in these online spaces where class boundaries have to be renegotiated since digital divides in Indonesia are in most cases not defined by the complete exclusion of lower-class Indonesians from the digital, but by the partial or limited access to it. As we have seen, the widow owns a smartphone and was able to download messaging apps and open accounts on social media platforms, but she might not be able to use these applications every day. The use of the technology as such is thus not enough to mark class boundaries; rather it is the ways and intensity of usage that is crucial in this regard. Compared to this example, the case of the ill-fated Muslim that was befallen by a fire disaster is relatively uncomplicated. This is first of all an offline affair where the person that is in need of help is clearly identified as the neighbor

of one of the group coordinators who lives in a middle-class neighborhood in Jakarta. He is not an *orang kampung* and thus can also be trusted that he will use the donated money for its actual purpose. No class boundaries had to be reestablished here. The online aspect of this case is merely that the messaging app was used to raise money following the pattern of Islamic online charities in which middle-class Muslims like to engage. Thus, what the case of the Qur'an reading widow – contrasted with the one of the neighbor of the group coordinator – indicates is that particular online fora of Islamic practice and sociality can be defined as middle-class realms deemed distinct from the religious life of the lower classes.

Conclusion

By tracing digital divides in Indonesian Islam, I concentrated on two widespread and interconnected phenomena, that is, the proliferation of Islamic preachers and their affective-cum-economic relationships with their followers who are often organized in *majelis taklim* (Islamic study groups); and online Qur'an reading groups that are frequently (but not always) part of this Islamic preacher economy when preachers also run these groups for their (mainly) female followers. I should emphasize here that this article is an initial analysis of Indonesia's Islamic digital divides, and which arguably illuminates potential future questions as much as it answers them. Nevertheless, the examples provide fruitful ground for drawing first conclusions that will hopefully inspire further investigation. Based on more general observations about social inequality and the digital divide among Indonesian Muslims, the examples allowed us to work out how digital divides can expand into other kinds of divides, including unequal access to piety itself, that then manifest in Islamic practice and sociality. However, as the article also reveals, this is not a straightforward process, since social inequality based on uneven distribution of wealth is imbued with ambivalence in unique ways in Indonesia which continues to reverberate in Islamic digital realms. Considering this, in this concluding section, I revisit the two examples to elucidate out how social divides, digital divides, and their Islamic manifestations can be connected.

While the digital divide was initially conceptualized in terms of access to digital realms, the article's first ethnographic example that is organized around the account of an Islamic preacher's view of his diverse followers indicates that through social media, middle-class Muslims have found new ways to gain access to preachers (and vice versa). In this segment of society, Islamic consultation increasingly takes place online generating new temporalities of affective exchanges. Many preachers in contemporary Indonesia find themselves in a situation that requires them to meet the needs of their middle-class followers by being available online and by responding to messages swiftly if they want to be successful. The popular phrase among middle-class Muslims – "*saya punya ustadz* [I have a preacher]" – indexes this dynamic. Muslims who can claim to "have their preachers" enjoy the presumption of access, not just in person at religious events, but effectively on-call through their online availability and through the expectation that preachers serve and tend to their followers. By contrast, as Ustadz Hasan's comment suggests, this relationship does exist for lower-class Muslims, who are expected to simply receive religious authority, at the time and choosing of the preacher. Their diminished capacity to be online reduces their access to preachers as well as increases their discomfort in online religious communication, as Islamic digital realms can represent spaces of ambivalence due to economic and cultural constraints. They are arguably left behind because of their disadvantage in these new forms of Islamic online sociality.

Being left behind is a form of social exclusion, which brings me to the second example: the online Qur'an reading group and its approach to dealing with the digital divide. The latter becomes apparent through the person of the widow who cannot pay for her mobile phone costs, and thus cannot go regularly online, which means that she cannot participate in the online Qur'an reading group and other religious online activities. Moreover, she cannot participate in what members of these groups are also expected to do, namely donating to people in need. Her intention to join a group of regular social media users and charity donors, while she had to inform the latter that she might not be able to pay for her online costs, was quickly interpreted as a result of her identity as an *orang kampung*, rather than the sincere desire of a woman seeking to improve her religious practice, leading the group

members to decline her expression of need. Due to class-based assumptions about the sincerity of intent lower-class people and their media practices become here a source of ambivalence. The *orang kampung* appears in this example as the person who could undermine noble intentions of enhancing Islamic practice by claiming to seek piety while actually being guided by short-term material interests. In contrast to the ambivalence concerning the potentially dubious origin of the wealth of the middle- and upper-classes that we have discussed in the introduction following Jones (2012), what arouses strong feelings of ambivalence here is the apparent lack of money of the lower-classes for engaging in Islamic online sociality. The tense relationship between privation and piety, therefore, lies at the heart of what we can call an Islamic digital divide.

As these examples show, paying attention to socioeconomic inequalities and how they are perceived means looking at mechanisms of exclusion in Indonesia's Islamic online realms. It means looking at how the digital divide becomes an Islamic digital divide. It urges us to investigate how class distinctions are reconceptualized in Indonesia today with the introduction and spread of new online religiosities. Moreover, such an approach also provides insight into how forms of communication in Indonesia's field of Islam is associated with class distinction, with lower-class Muslims being located on the receiving end of one-way, mostly offline communication channels, whereas middle- and upper-class Muslims are deemed equal partners of two-way communication enabled by today's messaging apps. Raising one's voice and engaging in a dialogue is associated here with the realm of the digital that is in turn conceptualized as a loosely defined space of the middle and upper classes to which people who are categorized as "middle class downwards" or as inhabitants of the *kampung* are not meant to belong. Those being perceived as *kampungan* are thus not expected to participate in particular new online religiosities.

Despite the ambivalences that inform the construction of classes and social divides in Indonesia, such mechanisms of exclusion have clear effects, since they decide over the belonging to religious communities and the participation in religious practices. Interestingly, and not unlike the

gedongan–kampungan distinction in the field of Indonesian popular music as analyzed by Baulch (2020), perceptions of class that rely on media uses generate rather unambiguous results and it becomes seemingly easy to tell who is allegedly qualified for playing a part in Islamic digital realms and who is not. Yet while this issue seems to be settled on the ideological level, *in praxi* things can be more complicated. New media generate new spaces in which class boundaries still have to be inscribed, and it is exactly at this point where the notion of ambivalence, understood as both an economic and affective condition, becomes important for our analysis again. In fact, the examples in this article have shown that media uses are imbued with ambivalence, whether it is ambivalence felt by lower-class Indonesians about how to relate to Islamic authorities online or the ambivalence that emerges among middle-class Muslims when they discuss lower-class Muslims' pious online practices. In the latter case, class distinctions spur debates about who should belong in these new digital spaces, such as whether one should financially support lower-class Muslims in order to be online, which is reminiscent of the discussions in Muslim gated communities on whether to open the doors for the Friday prayers to lower-class neighbors who live in the adjoining *kampung* (Hew 2018a). In both cases, however, the outcome of this encounter with ambivalences is that lower-class Muslims do not and are not expected to take part in these forms of online piety, which indicates how Islamic digital divides can come into being.

The examples discussed in this article thus suggest that the ambivalences generated by media practices and the new Islamic digital realms add to the long-standing ambivalences that characterize class relations in Indonesia, generating forms of exclusion that are novel and at the same time reminiscent of older forms of distinction. The article thus understands the digitization of religious life as part of a broader technology-driven transformation that builds on and seems to exacerbate prior social inequality in Indonesia. This investigation also points to the lived murkiness of class, of the circulation of wealth itself, and of class-related suspicion. However, when ambivalences of media and class meet in the field of Indonesian Islam, paradoxically but not surprisingly the consequences are less ambivalent than explicit in the concrete spaces of online Islamic sociality and practice. Similar to offline

spaces of urban Indonesia questions of belonging, hierarchy, and authority did not have to wait long until being discussed and answered. That is also why, in spite of the fact that online services, cost, and access are improving in Indonesia, the Islamic digital divides that this article has traced might endure or change alongside the broader transformation of digital platforms which tend to heighten, rather than flatten, social inequalities.

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Notes

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[2] For a literature overview see Jones (2018) and for a broader Southeast Asian perspective see Hefner (2010).

[3] For the colonial predecessors of today's spatial segregation according to class in Indonesia see Colombijn (2013).

[4] Ustadz Hasan, 2014, interview with author, August 10, Jakarta.

[5] For discussions about how an Islamic leader can or should be respectfully approached on social media in the context of an Indonesian Sufi community that mainly consists of followers of *Nahdlatul Ulama*, Indonesia's major traditionalist Islamic organization, see Alatas (2017).

[6] I am grateful to the preacher whom I call Ustadz Husein here who has allowed me to join one of his ODOJ groups as well as the group of the coordinators. Since these are closed groups, I refrain from using real names in this section.

[7] *Telegram* group, March 10, 2015.

[8] This is technically very easy in Indonesia where one can send data credit to other users if one has their phone numbers. No bank transfer of money is needed.