

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

James Bourk Hoesterey

Emory University

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).

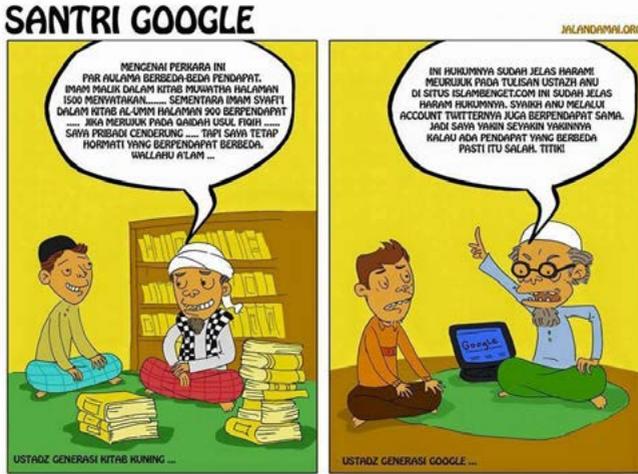


Figure 3: caption: Panel 1: “Religious teachers in the Era of *Kitab Kuning* [literally, yellow books, indicating the traditionalist approach of learning opinions of classical Islamic scholars]: Concerning this case, various religious scholars have differing opinions. On page 1500 in *Muwatha*, Imam 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).

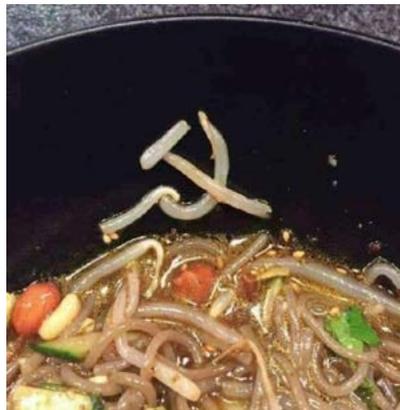


Figure 6: The image mocks conspiracy theorists who seem to be able to find communist symbols, such as the hammer and sickle, everywhere (NU GARIS LUCU 2019c).

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).

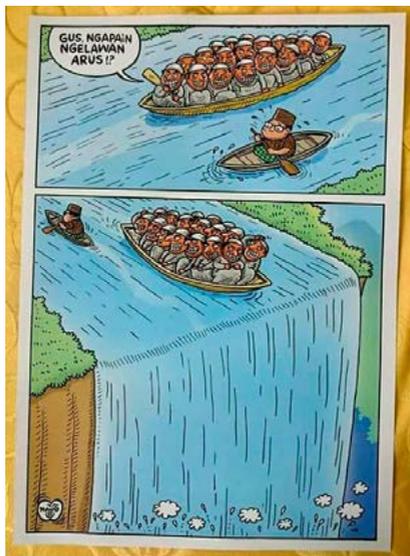


Figure 10: caption: “Gus, why are you going against the current?”
(Novriantoni Kahar 2017)

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).

**Baru kali ini kami tak bisa
melaksanakan Umroh karena
Covid. Biasanya, kami tak
berumroh karena tak punya Duit.**



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 Sardon (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. Sardon's piercing eyes appear to summon the viewer, though precisely what he hails or demands of the beholder is unclear. In this image, Sardon 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 Sardon'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: Sardon'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 visibility 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!*

References

- Althusser, Louis. 1972. *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Amalana, Muhammad Muhtam. 2019. Facebook photo, September 29. Accessed [January 4, 2020]. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10212316693111366&set=p.10212316693111366&type=3>.
- Barker, Joshua, Johan Lindquist, et.al. 2009. "Figures of Indonesian Modernity." *Indonesia* 87: 35–72.
- Berkey, Jonathan. 2001. *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Bush, Robin. 2009. *Nahdlatul Ulama and the Struggle for Power within Islam and Politics in Indonesia*. Singapore: ISEAS.
- Eickelman, Dale F., and Jon W. Anderson. 2013. *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- El-Ariss, Tarek. 2019. *Leaks, Hacks, and Scandals: Arab Culture in the Digital Age*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Fealy, Greg. 1998. "Ulama and Politics in Indonesia: A History of Nahdlatul Ulama, 1952–1967." PhD diss.,

Monash University.

Fealy, Greg. 2008. "Consuming Islam: Commodified Religion and Aspirational Pietism in Contemporary Indonesia." In *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, edited by Greg Fealy and Sally White, 15–39. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Fealy, Greg. 2018. "Trading Blows: NU versus PKS." *Indonesia at Melbourne* website, July 10. Accessed [April 24, 2021]. <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/trading-blows-nu-versus-pks/>.

Gruber, Christiane, and Sune Haugbolle. 2013. "Introduction." In *Visual Culture in the Modern Middle East: The Rhetoric of Image*, edited by Christiane Gruber and Sune Haugbolle, ix–xxvii. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Hasan, Noorhaidi. 2012. "Islamist Party, Electoral Politics, and Da'wah Mobilization Among Youth: The Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) in Indonesia." *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 6 (1): 17–47.

Hew, Wai Weng. 2018. "The Art of Dakwah: Social Media, Visual Persuasion and the Islamist Propagation of Felix Siauw." *Indonesia and the Malay World* 46 (134): 61–79.

Hirschkind, Charles. 2001. "Civic Virtue and Religious Reason." *Cultural Anthropology* 16 (1): 3–34.

Hoesterey, James B. 2013. "Is Indonesia a Model for the Arab Spring? Islam, Democracy, and Diplomacy." *Review of Middle East Studies* 47 (2): 157–165.

Hoesterey, James B. 2016. *Rebranding Islam: Piety, Prosperity, and a Self-Help Guru*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Hoesterey, James B. 2017. "Sincerity and Scandal: the Cultural Politics of 'Fake Piety' in Indonesia." In *Piety, Celebrity, Sociality: A Forum on Islam and Social Media in Southeast Asia*, edited by Martin Slama and Carla Jones. *American Ethnologist* website. Accessed [November 8, 2017]. <https://americanethnologist.org/features/collections/piety-celebrity-sociality/heart-to-heart-on-social-media>.

Husein, Fatimah. 2017. "The Revival of Riya': Displaying Muslim Piety Online in Indonesia." In *Piety, Celebrity, Sociality: A Forum on Islam and Social Media in Southeast Asia*, edited by Martin Slama and Carla Jones. *American Ethnologist* website. Accessed [November 8, 2017]. <https://americanethnologist.org/>

features/collections/piety-celebrity-sociality/heart-to-heart-on-social-media.

Iqbal, Asep M. 2020. "Challenging Moderate Islam in Indonesia: NU Garis Lurus and its Construction of the 'Authentic' NU Online." In *Rising Islamic Conservatism in Indonesia*, edited by Leonard C. Sebastian, Syafiq Hasyim, and Alexander R. Arifianto, New York: Routledge.

Izharuddin, Alicia. 2017. *Gender and Islam in Indonesian Cinema*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kraidy, Marwan M. 2017. *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Kumparan News. 2019. "Dakwah Garis Lucu NU-Muhammadiyah [The Propagation of NU-Muhammadiyah Funny Brigades]." *Kumparan* website, January 11. Accessed [July 4, 2020]. <https://kumparan.com/kumparannews/dakwah-garis-lucu-nu-muhammadiyah-1547175616360531881/full>.

Mandaville, Peter. 2007. "Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge: Pluralizing Authority in the Muslim World." *Theory, Culture & Society* 24 (2): 101–115.

Menchik, Jeremy. 2019. "Moderate Muslims and Democratic Breakdown in Indonesia." *Asian Studies Review* 43 (3): 415–433.

Moll, Yasmin. 2012. "Storytelling, Sincerity, and Islamic Televangelism in Egypt." In *Global and Local Televangelism*, edited by Pradip Ninan and Philip Lee, 21–44. New York: Saint Martin's Press.

Moll, Yasmin. 2018. "Television is not Radio: Theologies of Mediation in the Egyptian Islamic Revival." *Cultural Anthropology* 33 (2): 233–265.

Nisa, Eva. 2017. "The Allure of 'One Day One Juz.'" In *Piety, Celebrity, Sociality: A Forum on Islam and Social Media in Southeast Asia*, edited by Martin Slama and Carla Jones. *American Ethnologist* website. Accessed [November 8, 2017]. <https://americanethnologist.org/features/collections/piety-celebrity-sociality/heart-to-heart-on-social-media>.

Novriantoni Kahar (@novri75). 2017. "Kenapa almarhum Gus Dur dulu sering melawan arus umat? Kartun ini memberi penjelasan yg sangat kuat [Why did the late Gus Dur often go against the current? This cartoon provides a strong explanation]!" *Twitter* post, November 3, 4:40 a.m. Accessed [April 14, 2018]. <https://>

twitter.com/novri75/status/926293012069543936?lang=ca.

NU Garis Lucu (@NUGarislucu). 2019. "Maaf, tulisan itu dari bio kami, bukan quote dari Gus Dur. Sekadar mengingatkan, ferguso [Sorry, that phrase is from our bio, not a quote from Gus Dur. Just a reminder, ferguso]." *Twitter* post, January 1, 9:10 a.m. Accessed [February 29, 2020]. <https://twitter.com/nugarislucu/status/1080013441010565121>.

NU GARIS LUCU. 2015a. "Silahkan Share !!! [Please share !!!]." *Facebook* photo, April 20. Accessed [February 28, 2020]. <https://www.facebook.com/nugarislutju/photos/pb.888118014544114.-2207520000./896460420376540>.

NU GARIS LUCU. 2015b. "Hidup Lucu [Live humorously]." *Facebook* photo, September 11. Accessed [January 4, 2020]. <https://www.facebook.com/nugarislutju/photos/pb.888118014544114.-2207520000./964593370229911>.

NU GARIS LUCU. 2015c. "Hayo Siapa yang dulu pernah potong rambut model begini ? InsyaaAllah mereka tergolong orang orang yang Kreatif (slight smile emoji) [OK, who has ever cut their hair like this before? God willing they are part of e creative group of people]." *Facebook* post, April 12. Accessed [January 4, 2020]. <https://www.facebook.com/NUgarislUCU/photos/a.1583831908562343/1592901800988687/>.

NU GARIS LUCU. 2015d. *Facebook* photo, March 16. Accessed [January 4, 2020]. <https://www.facebook.com/NUgarislUCU/photos/a.1577892315822969/1577892322489635/>.

NU GARIS LUCU. 2015e. "PENGUMUMAN PENTING : HIMBAUAN DARI YLKI untuk warga NAHDLIYYIN ... UNTUK BULAN INI SUPAYA BERHATI HATI JIKA BELANJA DI INDOMARET. SEKIAN. [Important announcement: An appeal from YLKI (Indonesian Consumers Foundation) for NU members... to be extra careful this month if you shop at Indomaret]." *Facebook* post, April 7. Accessed [January 4, 2020]. <https://www.facebook.com/NUgarislUCU/photos/a.1583831908562343/1590457377899796/>.

NU GARIS LUCU. 2015f. "Alhamdulillah, setidaknya tahun ini bisa ganti alasan. Semoga wabah segera berlalu dan dimampukan kita semua kesana. Amieen [All praise to God. At least this year we can change our excuse. May this plague (Covid) end immediately and may we all be able to go there. Amen]." *Facebook* post, December 31. Accessed [December 31, 2020]. <https://www.facebook.com/NUgarislUCU/photos/a.1594028390876028/2942245282720992/>.

- NU GARIS LUCU. 2018. "Wahjoe Sardono dikenal publik Indonesia sebagai komedian. Namun, jarang yang mengetahui perihal sikap dan pemikirannya [... Wahjoe Sardono was known by the Indonesian public as a comedian. Nevertheless, seldom do they know his thoughts and perspectives ...]." *Facebook* post, January 15. Accessed [June 22, 2021]. <https://www.facebook.com/NUgarisLUCU/photos/a.1583831908562343/2071853366426859/>.
- NU GARIS LUCU. 2019a. *Facebook* photo, July 2. Accessed [December 17, 2021]. <https://www.facebook.com/nugarislutju/photos/pb.888118014544114.-2207520000..2371058676250033/?type=3&theater>.
- NU GARIS LUCU. 2019b. "Jangan ragu jangan malu, terutama bagi remaja dan pemuda untuk mengaku NU (three heart-eyes emojis) [Don't be hesitant, don't be embarrassed, especially for those adolescents and youth to acknowledge you are NU]." *Facebook* photo, June 30. Accessed [October 19, 2020]. <https://www.facebook.com/nugarislutju/photos/pb.888118014544114.-2207520000..2367251743297393>.
- NU GARIS LUCU. 2019c. "Kuyyy Gaes, silahkan dimakan bihunnya. Menu wajib sebelum 1 Oktober neehhh (three smiling-face-with-smiling-eyes emojis) [OK guys, go ahead and eat the noodles. Obligatory menu before October 1]." *Facebook* photo, September 29. Accessed [January 4, 2020]. <https://www.facebook.com/NUgarisLUCU/photos/a.1594028390876028/2528797054065819/>.
- NU GARIS LUCU. 2019d. "'Peminum Bir' bisa diganti dengan 'pezina', 'pengghibah'... dst #Jumatmubarak ['Beer drinker' can be replaced with 'sinner', 'gossiper' etc. #HappyJumat]." *Facebook* photo, November 29. Accessed [January 4, 2020]. <https://www.facebook.com/NUgarisLUCU/photos/a.1583831908562343/2585292181749639/>.
- NU GARIS LUCU. 2020. "Ungkapan yang merendahkan perempuan, tak selayaknya mendapat tempat di ruang public [Words that belittle women have no place in the public sphere]." *Facebook* post, March 10. Accessed [January 4, 2021]. <https://www.facebook.com/NUgarisLUCU/photos/a.1583831908562343/2681373155474874/>.
- NU Online (@nu_online). 2017. "Jika kamu memusuhi orang yang berbeda agama dengan kamu, berarti yang kamu pertuhankan bukan Allah, tapi agama. #GusDur [If you make enemies of those with a different religion than you, that means you are not worshipping God, but religion]." *Twitter* post, June 7, 4:21 a.m. Accessed [June 4, 2020]. https://twitter.com/nu_online/status/872639568855433216.
- Nuraniyah, Nava. 2020. "Divided Muslims: militant pluralism, polarization and democratic backsliding."

In *Democracy in Indonesia: From Stagnation to Regression?*, edited by Thomas Power and Eve Warburton, 81–100. Singapore: ISEAS.

Pemimpin Goblok. (@Zulkifilubis71). 2019. “Ceramah almarhum KH. Hazim Muzadi pada tahun 2012, ternyata benar terbukti Bagaimana menurut anda [Sermon by the late K.H. Hazim Muzadi in 2012 has apparently been proven true. What do you think]?” *Twitter* post, December 4, 11:03 a.m. Accessed [May 14, 2021] <https://twitter.com/Zulkifilubis71/status/1202272308338888705>.

Schmidt, Leonie. 2018. “Cyberwarriors and Counterstars: Contesting Religious Radicalism and Violence on Indonesian Social Media.” *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 5 (1–2): 32–67.

Schulz, Dorothea. 2012. *Muslims and New Media in West Africa: Pathways to God*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Siegel, James T. 1998. *A New Criminal Type in Jakarta: Counter-Revolution Today*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Slama, Martin, and Bart Barendregt. 2018. “Online Publics in Muslim Southeast Asia: In Between Religious Politics and Popular Pious Practices.” *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 5 (1–2): 3–31.

Slama, Martin, and Carla Jones. 2017. “Piety, Celebrity, Sociality: A Forum on Islam and Social Media in Southeast Asia.” *American Ethnologist* website. Accessed [November 8, 2017]. <https://americanethnologist.org/features/collections/piety-celebrity-sociality>.

Slama, Martin. 2020. “Imagining Indonesian Islam as a Centre: New Mediations and Old Concepts of Power.” *Archiv Orientalni Supplementa* XII: 273–300.

Smith-Hefner, Nancy J. 2007. “Youth Language, *Gaul* Sociability, and the New Indonesian Middle Class.” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 17 (2): 184–203.

Spyer, Patricia, and Mary Margaret Steedly. 2013. “Introduction.” In *Images that Move*, edited by Patricia Spyer and Mary Margaret Steedly, 3–40. Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press.

Steedly, Mary M. 2013. “Transparency and Apparition: Media Ghosts of Post-New Order Indonesia.” In *Images that Move*, edited by Patricia Spyer and Mary Margaret Steedly, 257–293. Santa Fe: School for

Advanced Research Press.

Strassler, Karen. 2009. "The Face of Money: Currency, Crisis, and Remediation in Post-Suharto Indonesia." *Cultural Anthropology* 24 (1): 68–103.

Strassler, Karen. 2020. *Demanding Images: Democracy, Mediation, and the Image-Event in Indonesia*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Wahid, Abdurrahman. 2000. *Melawan Melalui Lelucon* [To Counter through Jokes]. Jakarta: Tempo.

Wijaya, Pungkit. 2017. "Merawat 'Dakwah' Garis Lucu [Taking Care of the Funny Brigade Propagation]." *Detik News* website, July 21. Accessed [July 28, 2017]. <https://news.detik.com/kolom/d-3568538/merawat-dakwah-garis-lucu>.

Yamin, Kafil. 2017. "Menjerat Habib Rizieq dan pembubaran FPI [The entrapment of Habib Rizieq and the Disbanding of FPI]." *Portal Islam* website, February 1, 2017. Accessed [February 28, 2018]. <https://www.portal-islam.id/2017/02/tips-menjerat-habib-rizieq-membubarkan.html>.

Notes

¹ I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their incisive comments, critiques, and suggestions. I am also grateful to Martin Slama who offered insightful comments on multiple drafts. I am especially indebted to colleagues and audiences at several institutions where I began to work out my interpretations and understandings, especially the *State Islamic University-Syarif Hidayatullah*, the *State Islamic University-Sunan Kalijaga*, *Gadjah Mada University*, *University of Florida*, *Leiden University*, the *Indonesian Institute of Sciences*, and the *Australian National University*. Greg Fealy provided much-appreciated encouragement and well-deserved criticism of an early draft. Conversations with Savic Ali and Hamzah Sahal helped me to think through the idea of humor as religious ethos and to better appreciate the shifting landscapes of Islamic online worlds in Indonesia. Finally, I am grateful to the administrators at NU Garis Lucu for sharing their perspectives and granting permission to use these images. Of course, all shortcomings are my own.

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.