



RECONFIGURING RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY THROUGH LIVING ISLAM: CONTESTATION AND NEGOTIATION IN CONTEMPORARY INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

The growing prominence of living Islam has shifted scholarly attention from Islam as a normative textual tradition toward the ways in which religious teachings are interpreted, negotiated, and embodied in everyday social practices. Yet, less attention has been given to how these practices are shaped by competing claims to religious authority, particularly amid the coexistence of local Islamic traditions, transnational religious movements, and digitally mediated forms of religious leadership in Indonesia. This article examines the mutually constitutive relationship between living Islam and religious authority in contemporary Indonesia. Drawing on a qualitative-reflective review of empirical studies on Indonesian Muslim communities published between 2005 and 2025, the study analyzes the mechanisms through which religious authority is constructed, contested, and reconfigured across local, transnational, institutional, and digital contexts. The findings identify three interconnected dynamics. First, contestation between local Islamic traditions and transnational Salafi and tarbiyah orientations reshapes the legitimacy of ritual and communal practices, including debates over *bid'ah*, grave visitation, and Maulid Nabi celebrations. Second, the expansion of television and social media has reconfigured religious authority by enabling new preachers to accumulate legitimacy through media visibility, communicative competence, and digital popularity alongside, rather than entirely outside, traditional forms of scholarly authority. Third, intra-Muslim disputes over Prophetic genealogy (*nasab*), particularly claims associated with the Ba'Alwi lineage, demonstrate how genealogical, scholarly, social, and symbolic resources are mobilized to sustain competing claims to religious legitimacy. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that religious authority and living Islam are mutually constitutive: transformations in the sources and structures of authority generate changes in everyday religious practices, while changing practices simultaneously create new sites of authority contestation. The study contributes to scholarship on contemporary Islam by showing how religious authority in Indonesia is not simply transferred from traditional to modern actors but continuously reconfigured through interactions among textual traditions, social networks, institutional legitimacy, cultural capital, and digital media.

Keywords: Living Islam, religious authority, contestation, negotiation, transformation, Indonesian Muslim society

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, scholarship on living Islam has expanded significantly within contemporary Islamic studies (Mansur, 2017; Gusmian, 2019). This shift in



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scholarly orientation emerged partly as a response to earlier approaches that tended to treat Islam in predominantly normative and text-centered terms. From the perspective of living Islam, Islam is not understood merely as a set of abstract doctrines preserved in sacred scriptures and classical Islamic literature, but as a lived social reality that is continuously enacted and negotiated in the everyday lives of Muslims. This perspective emphasizes that religious meanings are never entirely fixed; rather, they are continually renegotiated through complex interactions among scriptural texts (*nash*), intellectual traditions, structures of power, and the agency of individuals and communities (Bowen, 2022).

However, discussions of living Islam cannot be separated from the question of religious legitimacy. Fundamental questions concerning who has the authority to interpret religious teachings, on what grounds such authority is established, and how that authority is accepted, negotiated, or contested within a community constitute a central concern in the study of religious practice (Zaman, 2021). In Islamic contexts, the absence of a centralized hierarchical institution analogous to the papacy creates considerable space for competing claims to religious authority. Virtually any individual or group who considers themselves to possess a more legitimate understanding of scripture and religious tradition may present themselves as an authoritative religious voice. The acceptance of such claims, however, depends heavily on social context, cultural capital, network relations, and the rhetorical strategies through which religious authority is articulated and performed (Asad, 2018).

In Indonesia, the dynamics of religious legitimacy are further complicated by several interrelated factors. First, Indonesia possesses an exceptionally diverse Islamic landscape, ranging from syncretic forms that incorporate pre-Islamic and local cultural practices to puritanical and scripturalist orientations influenced by Salafist currents originating in the Arabian Peninsula (Van Bruinessen, 2020). Second, following the collapse of the New Order regime in 1998, Indonesia's public sphere became increasingly open to a wide range of new religious actors, including television preachers, religious figures operating through social media, and transnational Islamic organizations (Fealy & White, 2018). Third, the digitalization of Islamic preaching has fundamentally transformed the ways in which religious authority is constructed and circulated. Religious preachers no longer necessarily require recognition from conventional institutions, such as *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school), in order to attract a substantial following. Through highly popular and widely circulated social media content, individuals can acquire millions of followers within a relatively short period of time (Howell, 2023).

Against this background, this article addresses three central questions. First, how is religious legitimacy socially constructed within the practices of living Islam in Indonesia? Second, in what forms do struggles over religious authority become visible, particularly in the relationship between local and transnational forms of Islam and between conventional ulama and emerging religious actors in the digital sphere? Third, what are the implications of these struggles over authority for transformations in religious practice and the emergence of social fragmentation among Indonesian Muslim communities?

This article adopts a qualitative-reflective approach based on a systematic review of scholarly literature addressing the dynamics of religious authority in Indonesia between 2005 and 2025. The sources examined include indexed journal articles, academic dissertations, scholarly books, and relevant research reports. The discussion begins by outlining the theoretical framework, followed by an analysis of competing forms of authority between local and transnational Islam. It then examines the transformation of religious authority in the digital era and concludes by discussing the broader implications of these developments and presenting the study's conclusions.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design. This approach was selected because it enables an in-depth examination of complex and meaning-laden social realities as experienced and interpreted by actors in the field (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study draws on data generated through participant observation, documentary analysis, and the examination of religious and social discourse. Participant observation was conducted by engaging directly with various religious and social activities, including *pengajian* (Islamic study circle), meetings of religious institutions, customary rituals, and social interactions in both public spaces and social media environments. Documentary analysis covered a range of religious and public documents, including fatwas issued by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), recommendations of the Interreligious Harmony Forum (FKUB), *bahtsul masail* (Islamic legal deliberation) decisions of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), *tarjih* (jurisprudential adjudication) decisions of Muhammadiyah, *ceramah* (religious sermons) delivered by *tuan guru* (Islamic teacher and religious leader) and circulated through social media, as well as reports published by local media outlets. The combination of these methods was intended to generate a comprehensive understanding of the cyclical patterns of religious activities and the changing dynamics of social relations throughout the year.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which comprises three concurrent analytical activities: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data condensation was conducted through thematic coding following the procedures proposed by Saldaña (2016). The coded data were subsequently organized into thematic matrices, conceptual maps, and chronological narratives to facilitate the identification of recurring patterns, relationships, and shifts in religious authority. Conclusions were developed progressively through an iterative process in which emerging interpretations were continuously compared with and verified against the available empirical evidence.

In addition, this study employs Fairclough's (2013) model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine religious fatwas, institutional recommendations, and social media content. The analysis operates across three interrelated dimensions. The first dimension concerns the textual level, focusing on lexical choices, grammatical structures, and rhetorical strategies. The second examines discursive practice,

particularly the processes through which discourse is produced, circulated, and consumed. The third addresses sociocultural practice, examining how religious discourse is connected to broader structures of power as well as political and economic relations. By integrating qualitative case study methods with Critical Discourse Analysis, the study seeks to examine not only how religious authority is articulated but also how it is negotiated, legitimized, and contested within the broader social and digital contexts of Indonesian Islam.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Religious Authority as a Socially Constructed Phenomenon

Theologically, Islam does not possess a formal, centralized, and hierarchical structure of religious authority. The relationship between individual Muslims and God is understood as direct, without requiring an intermediary imam or priest endowed with exclusive religious privileges. This principle is grounded in the belief that every Muslim bears individual responsibility before God on the Day of Judgment, as stated in the Qur'an, Surah Al-An'am 6:164, which affirms that no person shall bear the burden of another's sin (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019). Nevertheless, the absence of a single center of authority does not imply that all interpretations are regarded as equally valid. Muslim communities still require mechanisms through which reliable interpretations can be distinguished from unreliable ones and accepted understandings from those considered deviant (Zaman, 2021).

Religious authority may be understood as the capacity of an individual or institution to influence the beliefs, attitudes, and conduct of others in matters pertaining to religion. Such authority rests on the community's recognition that the person or institution concerned possesses the requisite knowledge, integrity, and legitimacy to speak on behalf of the religious tradition (Zaman, 2021). Within Islamic contexts, the sources of religious authority are highly diverse. They may include mastery of sacred texts and Islamic disciplines such as *fiqh* and *tafsir*, recognized chains of scholarly transmission (*sanad*), reputations for piety and ascetic or modest lifestyles, claims of descent from the Prophet Muhammad, positions within established religious organizations, and rhetorical competence as well as proficiency in mass and digital media (Van Bruinessen, 2020).

One of the most influential theoretical perspectives for understanding religious authority in Islam is offered by the anthropologist Talal Asad. In his essay *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, first published in 1986 and subsequently reproduced in various edited volumes, Asad conceptualized Islam as a discursive tradition (Asad, 2018). From this perspective, a practice or statement cannot be considered Islamic merely because it makes textual reference to the Qur'an or Hadith. Rather, its Islamic character is constituted through its connection to historically established forms of legitimacy, modes of reasoning, and recurring practices that link the present to an authoritative Islamic past.

The concept of discursive tradition is particularly useful for examining religious authority because it demonstrates that legitimacy does not reside in the text itself.

Rather, authority is constituted through the ways in which texts are interpreted, explained, transmitted, and taught within particular social contexts through recognized chains of transmission. A *kiai* (Islamic religious leader) in a *pesantren*, for instance, derives his authority not simply from his knowledge or memorization of the Qur'an, but also from his ability to establish the connection between his interpretations and a scholarly tradition that has been transmitted across generations. Such continuity is maintained through teacher–student lineages documented in biographical and scholarly works on Islamic scholars (Van Bruinessen, 2020). Conversely, a Salafi preacher may construct religious authority by challenging or bypassing particular chains of inherited interpretation and appealing directly to foundational Islamic texts without relying on the mediating authority of classical interpretive traditions (Wahid, 2022).

Another highly relevant theoretical perspective for examining struggles over religious authority is Pierre Bourdieu's framework of field, capital, and practice. Although Bourdieu did not write specifically about Islam, his conceptual framework has been extensively adopted by scholars of the sociology of religion. From a Bourdieusian perspective, the religious domain can be understood as a religious field, a structured social space governed by its own rules and forms of competition. Within this field, diverse actors, including *kiai*, *habib* (a religious authority traditionally associated with Prophetic descent), preachers, activists, and political figures, compete for symbolic capital in the form of recognition, legitimacy, and authority (Bourdieu, 2020).

Symbolic capital within the religious field can be accumulated through various means. Extensive knowledge of religious teachings constitutes a form of cultural capital. Social networks and relationships with prominent religious figures generate social capital. Recognition as a descendant of the Prophet represents a genealogically grounded form of symbolic capital. Persuasive rhetorical skills and personal charisma may likewise function as important sources of authority. Similarly, institutional positions within state religious structures can provide access to resources and forms of officially sanctioned legitimacy (Bourdieu, 2020). From this perspective, struggles over religious authority should not be regarded as abnormal or pathological phenomena. Rather, competition is a constitutive feature of social fields. What varies is the intensity, form, and outcome of such competition, all of which depend substantially on the particular structure and configuration of the field itself.

Living Islam: From Text to Practice

The concept of living Islam, along with its related formulation living Qur'an, represents a relatively recent development in Islamic studies in Indonesia. The term began to gain prominence among Indonesian scholars of Qur'anic studies and Qur'anic interpretation in the early 2000s. Its emergence was partly a response to approaches to Islamic studies that had become excessively text-oriented while paying insufficient attention to the social dimensions of religious practice (Mansur, 2017). According to M. Mansur, widely regarded as one of the pioneers of this field, living Qur'an refers to the phenomenon through which sacred texts become “alive” within communities. To

describe the Qur'an as "alive" means that it is not merely recited and memorized, but also reflected upon, enacted, and incorporated into everyday life as a source of guidance (Mansur, 2017). Over time, the study of living Islam has expanded beyond the Qur'an to encompass the Hadith, works of Islamic jurisprudence, Sufi texts, and other forms of religious literature. Islah Gusmian identifies at least four dimensions through which living Islam can be examined. The first is the oral dimension, referring to the regular recitation of sacred texts, whether collectively, as in *khataman Al-Qur'an* (Qur'anic completion ceremonies) in *pesantren* or *majelis taklim* (community-based Islamic learning groups), or individually, as in the practice of *dhikr* (remembrance of God) and *wird* (devotional remembrance of God). The second is the aural dimension, which concerns sacred texts as objects of listening, such as listening to *murattal* recitations of the Qur'an for spiritual calm and emotional consolation. The third is the written dimension, exemplified by Qur'anic calligraphy displayed on household walls or amulets containing selected Qur'anic verses. The fourth is the performative or behavioral dimension, in which sacred texts are embodied through everyday conduct and religious practices (Gusmian, 2019).

An important point, however, is that practices of living Islam never emerge in a vacuum devoid of authority. Every religious practice—whether the performance of particular forms of *dhikr*, the observance of communal *selamatan* (a communal ritual of prayer and thanksgiving) rituals, or particular modes of dress—draws upon forms of authority recognized by the communities that practice them. A Muslim who regularly recites Surah Yasin on Friday mornings, for example, does not necessarily do so because the verses of the surah explicitly prescribe such a practice. Rather, the practice may be grounded in the belief that the Prophet Muhammad or respected Islamic scholars established or exemplified it as a legitimate devotional practice (Mansur, 2017). Similarly, a Muslim woman who wears a wide or loose-fitting headscarf may do so because she regards a particular scholar's interpretation of the obligation to cover the *awrah* as more authoritative or trustworthy than the interpretations of other scholars who permit the face to remain uncovered (Mahmood, 2021).

Thus, living Islam and religious authority can be understood as two interconnected dimensions of the same phenomenon. Living Islam refers primarily to the practices through which religious teachings are embodied in everyday life, whereas religious authority concerns the sources and mechanisms of legitimacy that underpin those practices. When religious authority is contested, practices of living Islam may likewise undergo transformation. Conversely, changes in living Islam practices can serve as sensitive indicators of shifts in religious authority from one group or interpretive community to another (Bowen, 2022).

Contesting Religious Authority: Local Islam versus Transnational Islam

The competition between forms of Islam commonly characterized as local Islam or Islam Nusantara and transnational Islam represents one of the most visible manifestations of struggles over religious authority in Indonesia. The roots of this

tension, however, are not new. They can be traced back at least to the beginning of the twentieth century, when Islamic reformist movements such as Muhammadiyah, established in 1912, and Persatuan Islam (Persis), founded in 1923, began to criticize conventional religious practices that they regarded as having been compromised by *bid'ah* (religious innovation), *khurafat* (superstitious beliefs), and *tahayul* (superstition or magical beliefs) (Van Bruinessen, 2020).

The intensity of this tension increased considerably in the post-Reformasi period. Several factors contributed to this development. The first was the expansion of political openness and freedom of association following the Reformasi era. This new political environment enabled transnational Islamic organizations to operate more freely than they had under the New Order regime, which had maintained strict controls over Islamic activism. The second factor was the growing number of Indonesian students pursuing Islamic studies in the Middle East, particularly in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Egypt. Many returned not only with religious knowledge but also with religious orientations that tended to emphasize greater textual fidelity and scriptural literalism. From this perspective, some forms of local Islamic tradition were regarded as having been excessively influenced by syncretic practices (Van Bruinessen, 2020).

A third factor was financial support from charitable and Islamic missionary organizations based in the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Such funding contributed to the establishment of Salafi-oriented *pesantren*, affiliated mosques, and scholarship programs. Through these institutional and educational networks, religious orientations associated with Wahhabi and Salafi interpretations were disseminated in systematic ways (Hasan, 2019).

It was within this broader context that Martin van Bruinessen introduced the concept of Arabization. The term refers to systematic processes, whether deliberate or unintended, through which diverse local Islamic traditions are replaced or reconfigured in favor of more standardized forms of religious practice oriented toward the Middle East and characterized by relatively literalist approaches to sacred texts (Van Bruinessen, 2020).

Supporters of Islam Nusantara, particularly within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), have viewed this development as a significant challenge. The perceived threat concerns not only cultural diversity but also Indonesian Islamic traditions that have developed over centuries through a dialectical interaction between Islamic teachings and local cultural knowledge. At the 33rd NU Congress in Jombang in 2015, NU formally advanced the concept of Islam Nusantara. The concept was proposed as an alternative framework emphasizing the distinctive historical and cultural character of Islam as developed in the Indonesian archipelago, while asserting that such localized forms of Islam are no less authentically Islamic than forms associated with the Middle East (Pribadi, 2023).

The competition between local and transnational forms of Islam can be observed in various regions of Indonesia. In Banten, for example, a region historically associated with resistance to Dutch colonial rule, popular religious practices have incorporated a range of syncretic elements. These include strong reverence for jawara figures and sacred graves. Subsequently, Salafi groups operating in the region have openly criticized practices such as grave visitation (*ziarah kubur*) and public

celebrations of the Prophet's birthday (*Maulid Nabi*). In response, traditional kiai and NU activists in Banten have mobilized efforts to defend what they regard as distinctive Bantenese Islamic traditions inherited from previous generations (Pribadi, 2023).

In Madura, the competition has taken a somewhat different form. Madura is widely known as a *santri* (Islamic student living in *pesantren*) region with a deeply rooted *pesantren* tradition. Here, the struggle concerns not only ritual practices but also competing claims over the intellectual legacy of prominent Madurese scholars, particularly Kiai Kholil of Bangkalan. Salafi-oriented groups have sought to demonstrate that Kiai Kholil's teachings were compatible with Salafi orientations by emphasizing his attention to the Qur'an and Hadith and his criticism of practices regarded as *bid'ah*. Traditional NU circles, however, have contested this interpretation. They emphasize instead Kiai Kholil's engagement with Sufism, reverence for *wali* (Islamic saints), and communal religious practices, precisely those dimensions that have often been questioned or criticized by Salafi-oriented groups (Pribadi, 2023).

One particularly revealing manifestation of this competition concerns claims of Prophetic descent, commonly referred to as *nasab* (genealogical lineage). In Indonesia, one of the most prominent groups associated with such claims is the Ba'Alwi family or lineage. Its members claim descent from the Prophet Muhammad through Imam Husayn, with ancestral origins in Hadramaut, Yemen. In a controversial publication, Imaduddin Utsman Al-Bantani systematically challenged the historical basis of the Ba'Alwi genealogical claims. He argued that the genealogical structure connecting the lineage to the Prophet Muhammad emerged only in the ninth century of the Hijri calendar, approximately 550 years after the death of the figure identified as their ancestor, Ahmad bin Isa (Al-Bantani, 2021).

The significance of this case, however, lies less in determining the historical validity of the genealogical claim than in examining how such a claim is maintained and mobilized as a basis for religious authority. Al-Bantani identifies three strategies through which the broader Ba'Alwi network has maintained the claim. The first involves metaphysical or transcendental legitimation, including the circulation of narratives about dreams in which the Prophet Muhammad allegedly confirms or validates their status. The second involves the repeated articulation of genealogical claims through *majelis taklim*, *pengajian*, and published works. Such repetition may contribute to what social psychology describes as the illusory truth effect, whereby repeated exposure to a claim can increase its perceived truthfulness. The third involves the construction of relatively exclusive social networks through practices such as endogamous marriage and systems of mutual protection and patronage. Within these networks, loyalty and reverence toward *habib* figures become closely intertwined with collective identity (Al-Bantani, 2021).

The responses to Al-Bantani's criticism further illustrate the dynamics of competition over religious authority. Rather than directly countering his historical arguments through new evidence from reliable primary sources, some supporters of the Ba'Alwi lineage have reportedly responded through ad hominem strategies directed at Al-Bantani personally. These responses have included allegations of hidden motives, jealousy, or even foreign affiliations intended to undermine Islam. Others have

emphasized that the authority of *habib* figures rests not exclusively on genealogical descent but also on religious knowledge, piety, and the spiritual blessings (*barakah*) associated with their lineage (Al-Bantani, 2021). This case illustrates that, in struggles over religious authority, rational-historical argumentation alone may be insufficient to transform established patterns of communal loyalty. Social relationships, networks of affiliation, and deeply embedded affective and intergenerational bonds can play an equally significant role in sustaining particular claims to religious legitimacy.

Transformation of Religious Authority in the Digital Era From the Mosque to the Television Screen

One of the most significant transformations in Indonesia's religious authority landscape has been the shift in sources of religious reference from traditional ulama rooted in *pesantren* and mosque-based communities toward the emergence of new preachers whose authority is largely mediated through mass media, particularly television. This development became increasingly visible in the early 2000s, alongside the liberalization of the broadcasting industry following the collapse of the New Order regime. The relaxation of state controls over broadcasting contributed to the proliferation of numerous national and local private television stations competing for audiences (Fealy & White, 2018).

Television preachers such as Aa Gym, Mamah Dedeh, Yusuf Mansur, and Abdul Somad constructed their public authority through mechanisms that differed substantially from those traditionally associated with ulama. Their legitimacy did not necessarily depend on extensive mastery of *kitab kuning* (classical Islamic texts) or lengthy chains of scholarly transmission. Instead, they relied heavily on effective communication skills, engaging presentation styles, appealing public personas, and strong personal branding. They also demonstrated an ability to connect religious teachings with the everyday concerns of Indonesia's urban Muslim middle class, including family relationships, financial matters, stress, personal well-being, and the search for identity and meaning (Howell, 2023).

This development is frequently discussed in terms of the commodification of religion, referring to the process through which religious teachings and practices are packaged, marketed, and consumed as commodities within capitalist markets. Religious messages may be presented alongside celebrity guests, commercial advertising, background music, and visually engaging production techniques (Fealy & White, 2018). Greg Fealy identifies aspirational pietism as an increasingly influential mode of religiosity among Indonesia's Muslim middle class in the post-Reformasi period. This orientation reflects a desire to embody and display piety while simultaneously remaining modern, successful, socially fashionable, and integrated into broader social life. Television preachers responded to these aspirations by offering forms of Islamic religiosity that were accessible, affirmative, and less demanding of radical transformations in lifestyle (Fealy & White, 2018).

The Digital Revolution and the Disintermediation of Religious Authority

If television shifted the locus of religious authority from the mosque to the television screen, social media has brought about a more radical process of disintermediation. In the age of social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Telegram, virtually anyone with an internet connection and a smartphone camera can position themselves as an *ustadz* or religious preacher. Unlike traditional religious institutions, these platforms do not require aspiring preachers to undergo formal certification or obtain recognition from established religious authorities before reaching a large audience (Slama, 2020).

This development has profound implications for the configuration of religious authority. First, it has contributed to the fragmentation of religious audiences. During the television era, preachers still had to compete for limited broadcasting slots on a relatively small number of national television networks. In the social media era, by contrast, individual preachers can establish and manage their own channels, enabling them to cultivate communities of followers without having to pass through the institutional gatekeeping mechanisms of the television industry. Religious audiences have consequently become more dispersed and increasingly organized around individual figures, themes, and digital communities.

Second, social media algorithms tend to reinforce what is commonly described as an echo chamber, in which users are repeatedly exposed to content that corresponds to their existing preferences, beliefs, and ideological orientations. Such algorithmically reinforced environments may intensify selective exposure, reduce encounters with competing viewpoints, and create conditions conducive to polarization and the amplification of more extreme positions (Slama, 2020).

Third, the speed at which information circulates through social media frequently exceeds the capacity of established religious institutions to provide timely clarification, verification, or counter-narratives. Misleading or inaccurate religious claims can therefore achieve viral visibility before authoritative institutions have an opportunity to respond. Once widely circulated, repeated exposure to such claims may contribute to their perceived credibility and facilitate their acceptance as religious truth. Fourth, traditional models of religious authority characterized by hierarchical and paternalistic relationships have become increasingly difficult to sustain within digital environments that are comparatively more decentralized, interactive, and contestatory. On social media, a *kiai*, for example, can be directly challenged, criticized, or debated by ordinary users who disagree with his or her religious interpretation or fatwa (Wahid, 2022).

Nevertheless, traditional ulama have not simply remained passive in the face of these transformations. Some have adapted by incorporating social media into their religious outreach strategies in order to extend the geographical and demographic reach of their *dakwah*. Younger NU-affiliated *kiai*, for instance, have become increasingly active on YouTube and Instagram, adopting more informal, accessible, and contemporary communication styles while continuing to ground their interpretations in classical Islamic texts and established traditions of religious scholarship. They also maintain explicit connections between their interpretations and recognized scholarly

chains of transmission (*sanad*). This development suggests that transformations in religious authority do not necessarily entail the disappearance of traditional forms of authority. Rather, digitalization may produce processes of reconfiguration, adaptation, and hybridization, through which established forms of religious legitimacy are reformulated and strategically articulated within new media environments (Wahid, 2022).

Implications for the Transformation of Religious Practices

The competition and transformation of religious authority described above have direct implications for the practices of living Islam within Muslim communities. These transformations can be observed in several dimensions of everyday religious life, as outlined below.

First, everyday ritual practices have undergone significant shifts. Among groups influenced by Salafi movements, for example, practices such as reciting the *qunut* supplication during the dawn prayer (Subh/Fajr), performing *talqin* for the deceased, and conducting *tahlilan* on the seventh, fortieth, and hundredth days following a person's death have increasingly been abandoned or discouraged. Such practices may be regarded as *bid'ah* (religious innovations) because they are considered to lack a sufficiently established precedent in the practices of the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions (Wahid, 2022). Conversely, practices regarded as more closely aligned with the Sunnah, such as performing eleven rather than twenty-three *rak'ahs* during Tarawih prayers and raising the hands during supplication rather than merely wiping the face afterward, have increasingly been adopted.

Second, communal socio-religious practices have also undergone transformation. *Selamatan* rituals traditionally practiced among Nahdliyin (NU members) communities to mark occasions such as childbirth, marriage, or moving into a new residence have increasingly been abandoned or discouraged among more purist-oriented groups. Such groups may argue that inviting people to share food on these occasions lacks a sufficiently strong basis in Islamic teachings. In their place, they may organize regular *pengajian* or Islamic study sessions that place greater emphasis on the study of classical Islamic texts and mutual exhortation toward virtuous conduct (*amar ma'ruf*) (Pribadi, 2023).

Third, changes have occurred in dress practices and bodily appearance. Among Salafi-oriented groups and hijrah communities, for instance, men may be encouraged to wear trousers that fall above the ankles (*celana cingkrang*), grow beards, and refrain from shaving them. Women may be encouraged to wear the niqab, which covers the face, and gloves that cover the backs of the hands. Such practices are understood by adherents as forms of Sunnah that should be followed because they are believed to have been exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad and his wives (Slama, 2020).

Fourth, patterns of social interaction may also change. More purist-oriented groups may restrict their social relationships with individuals or communities whose religious practices they regard as inconsistent with their interpretation of Islam. They may, for example, decline invitations to weddings or family gatherings involving relatives who continue to practice certain local religious traditions. In some cases, they

may also distance themselves from communal activities such as collective neighborhood work (*gotong royong*) when such activities are perceived as being associated with practices considered *bid'ah* (Pribadi, 2023).

Fifth, changes can be observed in spiritual orientations and practices of supplication. Groups influenced by *tarbiyah* and *Salafi* movements tend to place greater emphasis on supplications derived directly from the Qur'an and Hadith. They may reject supplications formulated by later Islamic scholars when these are perceived as lacking a sufficiently authoritative chain of transmission. They may also adopt a more rationalized understanding of supplication, viewing *du'a* as an expression of human effort, spiritual orientation, and dependence on God rather than as a guarantee that a particular request will necessarily be granted (Slama, 2020).

Taken together, these transformations demonstrate that changes in religious authority are not confined to theological debates or institutional competition. They are translated into concrete changes in the everyday practices through which Muslims interpret, embody, and negotiate Islam. In this sense, transformations in living Islam provide an important empirical lens through which shifts in religious authority can be observed at the level of everyday religious life.

CONCLUSION

This article has critically examined the dialectical relationship between living Islam and religious authority in contemporary Muslim societies, with particular attention to the Indonesian context. Three principal findings emerge from the analysis.

First, religious authority should not be understood as a fixed theological essence that exists independently of social processes. Rather, it is a socially constructed form of legitimacy that is continually negotiated through complex mechanisms. These mechanisms include mastery and interpretation of sacred texts, recognized chains of scholarly transmission, personal charisma, claims of genealogical descent, institutional positions within religious bureaucracies, and control over mass and digital media. The theoretical framework combining Talal Asad's concept of discursive tradition with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the field provides a productive analytical lens for understanding the fluid, multilayered, and relational nature of religious authority.

Second, struggles over religious authority take place across two major fields. The first concerns tensions between local Islam, particularly Islam Nusantara, which tends to accommodate and incorporate local traditions, and transnational Islamic orientations, including Salafi and *tarbiyah* movements, which generally place greater emphasis on scripturalist and purist interpretations. These tensions are manifested in debates over practices considered *bid'ah*, grave visitation (*ziarah kubur*), celebrations of the Prophet's birthday (*Maulid Nabi*), and competing claims concerning Ba'Alwi *nasab* or genealogical lineage. The second field concerns the transformation of authority from conventional ulama rooted in *pesantren* institutions toward new religious actors operating through television and social media. This transformation has fundamentally altered the configuration of religious authority because recognition can increasingly be acquired through digital visibility and popularity rather than solely through mastery of *kitab kuning* and established chains of scholarly transmission.

Third, struggles over and transformations in religious authority have direct consequences for practices of living Islam within Muslim communities. Changes can be observed across multiple domains, including everyday rituals (*qunut*, *tahlilan*, and *talqin*), communal religious practices (*selamatan* and *pengajian*), modes of dress and bodily appearance (*celana cingkrang*, beards, and niqab), patterns of social interaction (participation in social invitations and communal work), and spiritual orientations and practices of supplication. These transformations demonstrate that living Islam and religious authority constitute two interconnected dimensions of the same social process: changes in one are likely to generate corresponding transformations in the other.

This study has several limitations. First, it relies more heavily on the existing scholarly literature than on primary field data. Future research could employ sustained ethnographic and participant-observation approaches across different Indonesian settings to investigate more closely how grassroots actors negotiate religious authority and practices of living Islam in their everyday lives. Second, the study focuses primarily on intra-Muslim struggles over religious authority, while interreligious dynamics involving Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism receive limited attention. Future research could therefore broaden the analytical scope by examining how religious authority is negotiated and contested within Indonesia's religiously plural public sphere.

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