



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Aesthetics of authority: 'Islam Nusantara' and Islamic 'radicalism' in Indonesian film and social media

Schmidt, L.

DOI

[10.1080/0048721X.2020.1868387](https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2020.1868387)

Publication date

2021

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Religion

License

CC BY-NC-ND

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Schmidt, L. (2021). Aesthetics of authority: 'Islam Nusantara' and Islamic 'radicalism' in Indonesian film and social media. *Religion*, 51(2), 237-258.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2020.1868387>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)

Aesthetics of authority: 'Islam Nusantara' and Islamic 'radicalism' in Indonesian film and social media

Leonie Schmidt 

Media Studies Department, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT

In Indonesia, Islamic 'counter-terror culture' contests Islamic 'radicalization'. Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), takes a leading role in initiating counter-terror culture. Central to their initiatives are ideas about 'Islam Nusantara' (Islam of the Archipelago). This article analyzes two NU initiatives: (1) the documentary *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* (2015), which challenges how 'radical' groups interpret the Quran, and (2) the 'cyber warrior initiative' in which volunteers contest 'radicalism' on social media. The article explores how these initiatives construct 'counternarratives' that frame Islam Nusantara as antidote against 'radicalism' and analyzes how, in doing so, these initiatives negotiate the binary frame between 'moderate' and 'radical' Islam. The article proposes that *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* and the cyber warriors uphold this binary frame and that meanwhile, these initiatives are marked by an aesthetics of authority, which constructs traditional figures of Islamic authority as role models who can help protect the country against radicalism.

KEYWORDS

Islam Nusantara; counter-terror culture; Nahdlatul Ulama; media; Indonesia

Counter-terror culture in Indonesia

In 2014, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU; Revival/Awakening of Ulama), Indonesia's largest independent Islamic organization launched a global anti-extremism campaign. NU's stated goal is 'to spread messages about a tolerant Islam (*Islam toleran*) to curb radicalism, extremism and terrorism', which, it claims, 'often spring from a misinterpretation of Islamic teachings' (Varagur 2015). 'Tolerant Islam' here refers to Islam Nusantara ('Islam of the Archipelago'), a syncretic Javanese form of Islam. To curb 'radical' Islam (*Islam radikal*) and to promote Islam Nusantara, NU has embraced media. Two media initiatives form a prominent part of NU's anti-extremism campaign: the documentary film *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* (2015)¹ and the so-called 'cyber warrior' initiative.

The 90-minute documentary film *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* was produced by NU and explores the development of Islam in Indonesia. It includes interviews with Indonesian Islamic scholars, who systematically criticize ISIS' interpretations of the Qur'an and the

CONTACT Leonie Schmidt  l.k.schmidt@uva.nl

¹English title: The Divine Grace of East Indies Islam, produced by NU, al-Ma'had al-Dawali lil' Dirasaat al-Qur'aniyya, Majima Buhuts an-Nahdliyyah, Perhimpunan Pemangku Makam Auliya', and Gerakan Pemuda Ansor NU.

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

hadith. The ‘cyber warrior’ initiative aims to counter ‘radicalism’ online. Cyber warriors are volunteers who are trained by NU to contest terrorist organizations online with memes, comics, and videos. In a news article, Krithika Varagur (2016) explains that these volunteers call themselves ‘cyber warriors’, a play on ‘the Muslim Cyber Army’ (both groups use English names). The Muslim Cyber Army is a self-proclaimed Indonesian cyber-jihadist network, which uses hacking, fake news, and hate speech to impact government politics and push Indonesia in a more conservative direction (Juniarto 2018). Cyber warriors are often young Indonesians who spend hours a day promoting Islam Nusantara and challenging terrorist organizations (Varagur 2016). The content created by cyber warriors often features NU *kyai* (religious teachers in Islamic boarding schools) and *ulama* (religious scholars respected for their knowledge of Islam) in prominent roles.

Critics (Cochrane 2015; Varagur 2016) have praised *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* and the cyber warrior initiative for their potential to challenge ‘radical’ thought by constructing ‘counternarratives’. Tuck and Silverman (2016) define counternarratives as stories ‘that offer a positive alternative to extremist propaganda, or alternatively aim to deconstruct or delegitimize extremist narratives’ (2). In this article I ask: How does NU try to counter Islamic ‘radicalism’ and promote Islam Nusantara by means of the documentary film *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* and the cyber warrior initiative? And related to this main question, I ask: What kinds of narratives can be distinguished, what do these narratives tell about Islam, and how do these narratives construct ‘radical’ Islam in opposition to Islam Nusantara?

This article explores these questions by conducting a visual and narrative analysis of *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* and the cyber warrior initiative. I propose that these two initiatives are marked by what I call an aesthetics of authority. An aesthetics of authority is a specific aesthetic mode, which constructs and legitimizes a chain of religious authority. This chain forms the basis for the construction of counternarratives in which saints, *kyai*, and *ulama* feature as exceptionally inspirational authoritative figures, to which one needs to listen in troubling times as they become an antidote to extremist thought. This aesthetics, which comprises both (audio)visual and written elements, can be seen as underpinning an intervention of NU in the debate about the fragmentation of religious authority. A number of scholars (Hoesterey 2007, 2012; Turner 2007) have shown that there is a fragmentation of religious authority. In comparison to the end of the 19th century, religious authority is no longer the sole domain of the *ulama* (Kaptein 2004, 128). In Indonesia, new voices have recently entered religious debates, and they often differ from the formally trained religious authorities. These new figures of piety are largely self-trained, independent, and charismatic (Schmidt 2018a, 62). This means that people – including would-be-‘radicals’ – can now find their own information, for instance online, thereby bypassing traditional figures of authority. This article shows how through an aesthetics of authority, the initiatives (re)claim religious authority and restore the saints, *kyai*, and *ulama* as the most important sources of knowledge.

In studies of counternarratives, scholars have mostly focused on narratives that are aimed at deradicalization and are targeted at already ‘radicalized’ individuals (Grossman 2014). At the same time, (counter) terrorism researchers such as Christina Nemr (2016) and Cristina Archetti (2013) critically addressed that targeting ‘radicalized individuals with the right message is a waste of time’ (231). As Archetti explains:

The reason why ‘our’ narrative is not having any effect on the extremist mind-set is that ‘our message’ is filtered through a very different personal narrative, grounded in a specific constellation of relationships. In this perspective, communication, counter-intuitively, is most effective not directed at the terrorists or violent extremists, but *around* them (2013, 231, emphasis in original).

The two NU initiatives studied here are not specifically aimed at ‘radicals’, but at a (younger) NU audience. *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* is imagined to be of interest to all NU members. NU secretary general Yahya Cholil Staqful has stated that the ‘primary target is our common Muslim people’ (Siswo 2015). While imagined to be of interest to all NU members (Siswo 2015), it is significant that *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* was launched during the NU Youth Movement Congress. The documentary is distributed via YouTube, is spoken in Bahasa Indonesia, and is distributed with English and Arabic subtitles to also allow the documentary to inspire Muslims elsewhere and promote Islam Nusantara beyond Indonesia. It should be noted that the marriage of popular culture and Islam has not been easy, as it has been criticized as ‘15-minute Islam’ and ‘cool Islam’ (Schmidt 2018b, 8), and that there are complex negotiations underlying of the use of film technology by *santri*² Muslims (Huda 2012, 11). Islamic popular culture is however popular amongst Indonesian Muslims, particularly the younger generations. The cyber warrior initiative is explicitly aimed at a younger NU generation who often connect to each other, and to NU, via social media. The counternarratives constructed by these cultural practices are thus not aimed at deradicalization, but more proactively at raising public awareness, promoting discussion, strengthening societal resilience, and circulating discourses that contest terrorism among (young) NU members. By zooming in on these two media products, this article critically studies how such narratives are constructed. This helps to shed light on how actors (NU) envision solutions in specific local contexts (Indonesia). To undertake such a study, I will in the following first elaborate on NU and Islam Nusantara, whereafter I explain will elaborate on the notion of counternarratives and will critically analyze the two initiatives.

Islam Nusantara and NU

Almost 90% of Indonesia’s 250 million inhabitants identifies as Muslim. This community is often understood in terms of two orientations of Islam – traditionalist and modernist Islam – that are in a dialogical relationship (Schmidt 2018b, 9). ‘Traditionalist Islam’, also known as ‘Islam Nusantara’, ‘Javanese Islam’ is a Sufi-inspired orientation and is often generalized in NU discourse as ‘Indonesian Islam’, thereby ignoring the subtle differences between them. It is a hybrid form of Islam developed particularly on Java, since the 16th century, where it gradually mixed with *adat* (customary law), Hinduism, Buddhism, and Javanese mystical practices (Weintraub 2011, 3–4). Although it is often seen as exclusively ‘locally’ developed Islam, it is part of the global, through flows of information, people, and cultural forms. Already in the second half of the 19th century many Javanese went on the pilgrimage to Mecca, studied Islam abroad, and brought new ideas back to the archipelago (Kruithof 2014, 50).

²The terms *santri* and *abangan* are useful to identify fractions of the Muslim population in Java [...]. *Santri*, originally the students in religious schools (*pesantren*), now encompasses the wider category of the pious Muslims, whereas *abangan* refers to nominal Muslims’ (Ali 2007, 33).

Alongside traditionalist Islam, ‘modernist Islam’ developed. This version of Islam, sometimes also called ‘scripturalist Islam’ strives for literal interpretations. Modernists aim to purify their faith and desire an Islam that is free from cultural accretions. The organizations associated with these orientations of Islam (NU for traditionalists and Muhammadiyah for modernists) are the most influential Islamic forces in Indonesia. NU is, with an estimated 45 million members, *the largest* Sunni Islamic organization (Muhammadiyah has an estimated 29 million members). NU was founded in 1926 by Islamic theologians, who claimed to be the heirs of the *Walisongo*, the nine Sufi saints who are believed to have introduced Islam to Java.

Since 2015, NU has promoted Islam Nusantara as an alternative form of a ‘global Islam’, which according to NU, is dominated by Arabic or Middle Eastern perspectives. NU has started to promote Islam Nusantara as ‘moderate Islam’ (*wasathiyah Islam*, ‘middle way’ Islam), which they see as having the potential to counter Islamic ‘radicalism’. The term ‘Islam Nusantara’ has been in circulation for decades, and has been used by NU and Muhammadiyah, but NU has given the concept a far more specific focus, using it to extol the virtues of a culturally sensitive and predominantly Javanese Islamization and to reject what it sees as Arabized forms of Islam, such as Salafism and Muslim Brotherhood-style Islamism.

It should be noted here that the terms ‘radical’ and ‘moderate’ are contested terms. ‘Radicalism’ is usually seen as a threat to the multi-religious, multi-ethnic Indonesian nation (Cochrane 2015). The words ‘radical’ and ‘moderate’ rather loosely refer to a number of practices. One does not have to be involved in violent practices to be called ‘radical’. In public discourse, the degree of Indonesia’s Islamic moderatism is frequently determined by the ways in which Muslims approach the Qur’an and the hadith. Those who rely heavily on context in understanding the texts have been referred to as ‘moderate’ Muslims. On the other side, those who employ a literal or hardline approach can in public discourse be considered ‘radical’ (Hilmy 2013, 34). Both ‘radical’ and ‘moderate’ Islam thus have multiple, shifting meanings.

At its 2015 annual congress, NU officially adopted Islam Nusantara as a conceptual pillar, both domestically and internationally (Fealy 2018). To aid Islam Nusantara’s global promotion, NU has created a hub for international activities in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. NU has also established branches in Germany, France, the UK, Belgium, Russia, and Spain and works with the University of Vienna, which collects and analyses ISIS propaganda, to prepare responses to those messages (Cochrane 2015).

NU’s endeavor to promote ‘moderate Islam’ as an alternative to a perceived foreign threats Islam is not new, and must be positioned in a longer history. During the colonial era, the Dutch feared that pan-Islamic sentiments would fuel resistance (Burhanudin 2014, 30). The Dutch aimed their policies at restraining Muslim ‘fanaticism’ and sought to maintain order by emphasizing local beliefs (Kruithof 2014). ‘Moderate Islam’ has been an important part of foreign diplomacy for almost two decades. Hoes-terey (2020) observes that although ‘Indonesia is not an Islamic state, its politicians and religious civil society leaders have nonetheless incorporated religion into its foreign policy and public diplomacy agenda’ (194). ‘Moderate’ Islam here becomes part of a soft power approach to foreign policy (Nye 1990), which refers to coercing others through cultural exchange and shared political values to shape their attitudes

(Hoesterey 2020, 194). The role ‘moderate’ Islam plays in foreign policy is influenced by each political regime, international politics, and the agendas of domestic Islamic non-state actors – like NU – whose role in influencing foreign policy was made possible by democratization after the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998 (Umar 2016, 399). In this sense, the state is thus not the only actor to determine the image of ‘moderate’ Islam that is domestically and internationally communicated.

While under the administrations of Sukarno (1957–1966) and Suharto (1966–1998), Islam played a minor role (Umar 2016, 402), ‘moderate’ Islam, played a significant role in Indonesia’s foreign policy after 9/11. The global war on terror divided the world in an ‘us’ versus ‘them’, in allies and enemies of the US, and in ‘good’ Muslims and ‘bad’ Muslims (Mamdani 2002). This division between ‘good’ Muslims and ‘bad’ Muslims significantly transformed Indonesia’s foreign policy. Umar (2016) points out that after 9/11, Indonesia ‘as a country on the path to democracy [...] attempted to sell its moderate and democratic image of Islam to gain external support’ (401–402). The domestic and international promotion of ‘moderate’ Islam began after the 2002 Bali bombings (Umar 2016, 402). Following these attacks, then-president Megawati signed defence agreements with the US government, making Indonesia part of the US-led war on terror (Umar 2016, 419). She also started to promote ‘moderate’ Islam as the ‘official face of Indonesian Muslims’ (419). Under president Yudhoyono (2004–2014), the promotion of ‘moderate Islam’ as the main image of Indonesian Islam became top priority (402). During both presidencies, ‘moderate Islam’ was politicized: it was inserted into in a liberal democracy discourse, which reproduced notions of ‘good’ Muslims, those who fit in liberal democracy discourse, and ‘bad’ Muslims those who are against liberal democracy (402).

Indonesian Islamic organizations, like NU, also influenced foreign policy and thus the ways in which ‘moderate’ Islam became part of Islamic soft power. Hence, ‘moderate’ Islam was inflicted with local meanings as well. Umar (2016) observes that ‘even though the driving factor did not solely come from the “internal” discourse of Indonesian Islam, the growing expectation to articulate and promote moderate Islam has given momentum for some Islamic groups to involve themselves in the campaign’ (421). Hoesterey (2020) writes that Indonesian ‘moderate’ Islam is both championed for domestic consumption within Indonesia, ‘often as a reminder of the pride that Indonesians should feel about their everyday commitment to leading virtuous noble lives’, while at the same time it is ‘part of a broader diplomatic campaign that reflects Indonesia’s own geopolitical aspirations on the global stage’ (Hoesterey 2020, 198). The project of promoting ‘moderate’ Islam has thus been shaped by local agendas and international politics.

The current president Joko Widodo (2014–present) supports NU and Islam Nusantara. Although NU is an independent organization, it has strong ties to the government. As Greg Fealy (2018) explains,

NU has a record number of members in cabinet while it enjoys close relations with the president [...] NU receives money from the state. In a move to buttress his support within the Muslim community the president has assiduously cultivated NU. (Fealy 2018)

President Widodo ‘has not expressed the same zeal as his predecessor for religious diplomacy abroad’ (Hoesterey 2020, 210), but has used global forums to promote Islam

Nusantara as an antidote to ‘radicalism’. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has incorporated aspects of Islam Nusantara into their programs (Fealy 2018), and ‘the concept of moderate Islam now guides a domestic policy to combat radicalization among Indonesian Muslims’ (Hoesterey 2020, 210). Within NU itself not everyone agrees with the promotion of Islam Nusantara. Buya Yahya, a conservative NU *ulama*, has for instance argued that Islam Nusantara is ‘a form of “liberal Islam” that seeks to replace the fundamental Islamic teachings’ (Arifianto 2016).

(Counter)narratives about ‘moderate’ and ‘radical’ Islam

Before analyzing what kinds of counternarratives are constructed in *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* and the cyber warrior initiative, it is important to look more closely at the term (counter)narrative itself.

Media scholar Jonathan Bignell (2004) points out that narratives are usually understood as stories. In the realm of media, a narrative is ‘an ordered sequence of images and sound that tells a fictional or factual story’ (86). As the term ‘counternarrative’ already reveals, this specific kind of narrative only make sense in relation to something else, namely to the things it is countering. Counter-terrorism scholars Tuck and Silverman (2016) define counternarratives as stories ‘that offer a positive alternative to extremist propaganda, or alternatively aim to deconstruct or delegitimize extremist narratives’ (2). Although this definition has normative connotations that I do not uncritically adopt, I argue that the term ‘counternarratives’ is useful to shed light on how the two initiatives imagine solutions, and to analyze the reactive nature of these narratives.

What is important is that narratives are social constructions. Sociologist and media scholar Stuart Hall (1997) explains that we produce ‘meaning’ through language. This means that we make sense of our identity, of who we are, through language (Hall 1997, 3–4). ‘Meaning is constantly being produced and exchanged in every personal and social interaction in which we take part’ (Hall 1997, 3). Media, as social and discursive expressions and constructions also produce meanings, which people can ‘consume or appropriate to give them value or significance’ (Hall 1997, 3–4). In *Critical Approaches to Television* (2004), Leah Vande Berg stresses: ‘human beings construct their understandings of themselves and their lives, their immediate environments, and even worlds outside their direct experience, through stories’ (198). By using narratives, people construct coherence in the world and guides for living within it. And since narratives are central to how we understand the world, ourselves, and others, they are according to Vande Berg: ‘important avenues toward understanding a society’s culture – how it sees itself valuatively and characterologically, where it sees itself coming from and tending toward’ (2004, 198). Narratives thus give insight into the ways in which a society envisions itself and others – and therefore merit critical study. Counternarratives not only provide insight into the ways a society envisions itself and others, but also how the communicator (NU), envisions solutions to the things the narratives are countering.

Narratives, in being human (re)constructions of the world, can never be objective or neutral, but are always ideologically charged. Like any other narrative, a counternarrative should be seen and analyzed as a specific subjective (re)construction of the world, its inhabitants, its cultures and religions. This is what I aim to do here when analyzing how in *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* and the cyber warrior initiative counternarratives are

constructed through (audio)visual and textual techniques – such as sound, cinematography, commentary, and editing – I will pay attention to how Islam features in their counternarratives.

I suggest that *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* constructs a counternarrative by setting ‘local’ ‘moderate’ Islam Nusantara apart from a perceived ‘foreign’ ‘radical’ Wahhabi Islam, thereby upholding a binary frame of ‘radical’ versus ‘moderate’ Islam. One of the differences between Islam Nusantara and ‘foreign’ Islam according to *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* is self-knowledge and self-discipline. The documentary frames these as important teachings of Islam Nusantara. It suggests that self-discipline and self-knowledge make someone a ‘good Muslim’ and that these qualities prevent violence. *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* however does not elaborate on how to exactly know/discipline oneself. I suggest that the cyber warrior initiative does so by advising followers to work on themselves – to be (come) ‘good’ Muslims. By distinguishing between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Islam, I suggest that the initiatives do what Mamdani (2002) has warned against: ‘differentiating good Muslims from bad Muslims, rather than terrorists from civilians’ (766), which turns religious experiences into political categories. As I will propose, religious experience becomes the basis on which Islam Nusantara-supporting *kyai*, *ulama*, and Muslims themselves are made responsible for protecting a ‘peaceful’ practice of Islam.

Rahmat Islam Nusantara: saints and sinners

The documentary film *Rahmat Islam Nusantara*, produced by NU, explores the history of Islam in Indonesia. The film shows how Indonesian Muslims today remember the so-called *Walisongo* (nine saints) movement, which is believed to have precipitated the development of Islam in the archipelago. In the film, Indonesian Islamic scholars, particularly those affiliated with NU, explain how the teachings of these nine saints are central to Islam Nusantara, which according to the documentary stands for peace and tolerance (Siswo 2015). As these scholars explain the theology and origins of Islam Nusantara, they also denounce Islamic State and Wahhabi fundamentalism by explaining why their interpretations of religious texts are wrong. The film was well received in Indonesia and has gained international critical acclaim from cultural critics of *The New York Times* (Cochrane 2015), *The Australian* (Alford 2015) and *The Huffington Post* (Varagur 2015) and has been praised as ‘a Muslim challenge to the ideology of the Islamic State’ (Cochrane 2015).

I propose that *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* is marked by an aesthetics of authority. I suggest through its narrative and visual practices, the documentary constructs a binary opposition between ‘local’ Indonesian Islam and ‘foreign’ Wahhabi Islam. This binary opposition works to create a counternarrative in which Islam Nusantara is seen as an antidote to ‘radicalism’, and in which there are two aspects of Islam Nusantara that specifically challenge ‘radicalism’. These are: Islam Nusantara’s presumed adaptability to local circumstances and its emphasis on self-knowledge and discipline. *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* connects these aspects to the legacy of the *Walisongo* and creates a chain of religious authority. It constructs the *ulama* as authoritative figures who can pass on the legacy and knowledge of the *Walisongo*. Viewers are encouraged by *ulama* to adopt the *Walisongo* as their role models and work on themselves to improve their self-knowledge as the documentary suggests that self-discipline makes one a ‘good

Muslim' and prevents violence. In this way, not only *ulama* are held responsible for the practice of peaceful Islam, but also viewers themselves.

Rahmat Islam Nusantara constructs an opposition between 'local' Indonesian Islam and 'foreign' Wahhabi Islam on two narrative levels, first on the level of its overarching narrative, and second, on the level of the different segments within that larger narrative. On the level of the overarching narrative, the documentary uses *wayang* to tell and structure its story. *Wayang* is classical Javanese puppet theater. Like a *wayang* narrative, the documentary narrative consists of different segments. Every segment in the documentary is introduced through displaying *wayang* puppets. In these introductions, the documentary uses puppets from the Mahabharata, a Sanskrit epic of ancient India. The core story of the Mahabharata is a war story, a dynastic struggle between two families (the Kaurava and the Pandava) for the throne of the kingdom. The Mahabharata characters themselves symbolize the battle between the opposites of good and evil, and between Godly and demon-like behavior. In its introductions, *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* consistently links good and evil Mahabharata *wayang* characters to different interpretations of Islam. The power-hungry Duryodhana is for instance linked to Wahhabi Islam, whereas the Pandavas are linked to Islam Nusantara. By basing its main narrative structure on the Mahabharata *wayang* story, a story of good and evil, *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* makes this binary opposition central to the very way it is telling its story. The documentary thereby sets up a dramatic and schematic framing of local Islam Nusantara and foreign (Wahhabi) Islam, even before explaining what these entail.

This binary opposition is also constructed on the level of the individual segments. In what follows, I suggest that *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* constructs two discourses. First, a discourse is constructed in which 'foreign' Islam is seen as a colonizing force, which threatens 'local' cultures, while Islam Nusantara adapts to 'local' cultures. This discourse frames Islam Nusantara's alleged adaptability as a key to challenging what the documentary sees as 'radical' Islam, and ultimately holds *ulama* responsible for further adapting Islam to contemporary times.

This discourse is specifically constructed when *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* discusses the (early) spread of Islam, and when it discusses how Muslims should approach formal worship. When comparing the spread of Islam in the Arab Middle East and in Indonesia, Islam Nusantara is constructed as a naturally tolerant form of Islam. Significantly, the scene that explains the spread of Islam begins with a shot of a sign that reads 'Selamat Datang' (welcome) – suggesting that Indonesia is open and welcoming. Subsequently, we see Yahya Cholil Staquf, a *kyai*, talking about the arrival of Islam in Indonesia. He explains:

The arrival of Islam did not evoke resistance among the inhabitants of the East Indies Archipelago, because the Nusantara civilization was already long accustomed to foreign cultures and religions. When something new arrived from afar, people would study it – adopting what they liked [...]. Muslim proselytizers could relax and engage in dialogue with the reality of Nusantara society.³

While he speaks, we see Indonesian Muslims engaging with Buddhist heritage and Chinese temples in Indonesia. These shots strengthen the claim that Indonesian Islam

³The quotes in this article follow the English subtitles.

is open and tolerant to ‘other’ cultures/beliefs. The picture that is painted here differs strongly from how the documentary represents the arrival of Islam elsewhere, hence how it represents ‘foreign’ Islam. As the *kyai* continues:

I say this by way of comparing Islam Nusantara with the Islamic civilization that emerged in the Arab Middle East and its various offspring [...] Military conquest invariably preceded the introduction of Islam itself. [...] Islam burst forth as a military and political overlord and it was precisely in the name of Islam that Arab tribes justified their rule.

This time, the documentary intersperses the *kyai*'s speech with a painting of Muslims holding swords, while they are standing over slaughtered bodies. *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* here adopts familiar stereotypes of Islam and marks ‘foreign’ Islam as violent. Mamdani (2002) stresses that we cannot read Islamist politics as an effect of Islamic culture or civilization, just like we cannot see ‘Western power’ as the result of ‘Western culture or civilization’ (766). These scenes however frame (Islamic) cultures and civilizations as enabling ‘open’ or ‘violent’ interpretations of Islam.

Subsequently, the documentary uses these two different kinds of histories to further set the practices of Islam Nusantara apart from practices of ‘foreign’ Islam. This becomes apparent when the documentary discusses how the *Walisongo* introduced Islam to Indonesia. This is discussed by Mustofa Bisri, who appears often in the film. Bisri, commonly known as Gus Mus, is a famous *kyai*, and the head of Pondok Pesantren Raudlatuth Thalibin, an Islamic school in Rembang, Central Java. He is a prominent NU member and was asked by former Indonesian president Wahid (1999–2001) to run for NU chairman, which he declined. Gus Mus discusses the arrival of Islam in Indonesia as follows:

The *Walisongo* [...] dove right into the midst of society and [embraced] local cultures and infused them with even greater wisdom. [...] [They] conveyed the essence of Islamic teachings, never thinking that religion should be confined to the rules of Islamic law or formal worship while abandoning moral and ethical integrity.

Here, the alleged openness of Islam Nusantara is contrasted with the assumed confines of formal worship. The documentary not only suggests that formal worship is confining, it also constructs it as outright dangerous when the documentary shows a clip of ISIS fighters killing people, and then shows a NU scholar speaking at a conference in Central Java. He comments:

What justifies their [ISIS'] behavior? According to the rules of *fiqh* [Islamic jurisprudence], their imam has the right to choose: he may execute, he may ransom, he may enslave prisoners. This provision exists within *fiqh*. [...] we may implement this provision and butcher people, according to the rules of *fiqh* that still exist today. This is a problem.

By crosscutting between ISIS fighters and the speech of the scholar, the documentary suggests that literal interpretations of Islam can lead to violence – and that *fiqh* allows for this to happen. This suggestion helps to construct NU as an organization that adapts Islam to a ‘contemporary’ world. While the documentary links literal interpretations to violence, it offers Islam Nusantara’s adaptability as a ‘solution’ to ‘radical’ Islam, and moves responsibility for adapting Islam to the NU *ulama*. The documentary shows the NU scholar stating:

NU authorized the development of new systems of thought, just as the classical *ulama* developed their own methodologies in accord with the conditions [...] of their times. [...] Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, the ISIS caliph, suddenly proclaimed that: ‘as caliph and imam, I’m restoring the classical Islamic laws that govern slavery’. [...] They now enslave women [...]. The rationale for Baghdadi’s actions still exists within our own *fiqh*. This is a heavy responsibility for NU *ulama*. What exactly does it mean that we need to rethink *fiqh* within the context of our contemporary world?

Islam Nusantara’s alleged adaptability is here thus constructed as a key to challenging what it sees as ‘radical’ Islam, and the documentary holds NU *ulama* responsible for protecting a peaceful practice of Islam. Hence, this discourse draws a line between ‘bad’ ‘foreign’ Islam, which colonizes local cultures, and ‘good’ Islam Nusantara, which adapts to local cultures.

In the following, I suggest that another discourse is constructed in *Rahmat Islam Nusantara*. Central to this discourse is a binary opposition between destruction and preservation of Islamic heritage. The documentary constructs Wahhabi Islam as a destructive force, while it constructs Islam Nusantara as respectful. I also propose that the documentary makes Muslims responsible for protecting a peaceful practice of Islam.

When introducing Islam Nusantara and ‘foreign’ Islam, *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* shows the *wayang* character King Whelgeduwelbeh and his Vizier. Below the *wayang* character, a text appears that states that these figures ‘symbolize that confused thought leads to destructive behavior that violates religious teachings and rips apart the fabric of a humane social order’. In the subsequent scene, it becomes clear that ‘confused thought’ here refers to Wahhabi Islam. The scene shows NU *ulama* Habib Luthfi bin Yahya. Habib Luthfi, as he is commonly known, is the chairman of MUI (Indonesia’s top Muslim clerical body) Central Java, the national chairman of the Association of Recognized Sufi Orders, and a prominent and respected figure within NU. He was even listed among the top 50 in the 2017 publication of *The 500 Most Influential Muslims*, a report published by The Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre in Jordan which ranks the most influential Muslims in the world. In this scene, he says:

I cannot lie about the profound concern I feel when historical sites associated with our beloved Prophet [...] historical sites where he himself walked and lived, as did his companions, have nearly vanished from the face of the earth. The question arises: what authentic data will future generations of Muslims have about Islam’s early history [...]?

The documentary intersperses the *ulama*’s speech with shots that show what religious heritage looks like before and after Wahhabi’s destroyed it. The documentary shows the grave of Siti Aminah (the Prophet’s mother), the shrine of Siti Khadijah (the Prophet’s wife), and the graveyard of the Prophet’s companions before and after their destruction by Wahhabi troops.

These scenes differ strongly from the documentary’s portrayals of contemporary Islam Nusantara practices. One practice that is particularly singled out is *ziarah*. *Ziarah* is popular among NU followers and refers to the practice of visiting graves and tombs of important people, whether religious/political figures or family members. It is believed that a visit to a grave puts the visitor in a relationship with the power of the deceased, which lingers there (Fox 2002, 165). *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* particularly zooms in on visits to tombs of the *Walisongo* saints.

The documentary shows a keeper of a shrine, who explains that *Walisongo* shrines are visited by thousands every day. We see shots of the shrines being maintained by professionals, shots of people putting flowers on the graves, and shots of people kissing the sites. Islam Nusantara and its followers are thus framed as utterly respectful to religious heritage, which stands in strong contrast with the Wahhabi destruction of religious sites. Although it is impossible to make claims about the intentions of the makers or about the ‘effects’ that this kind of editing may have without conducting a solid production or audience analysis, the sharp contrast between utter destruction and utter respect for holy sites seems to appeal to emotions.

The documentary creates a binary between ‘foreign’, ‘bad’ Islam and a ‘good’, ‘local’ Islam Nusantara, it constructs Islam Nusantara’s saints, the *Walisongo* as the ultimate role models for ‘good Muslims’. As Gus Mus says:

Saints are consistent in their virtuous behavior [...] Through saints we may approach God, by loving the saints, and adopting them as our role models and only then engaging in the struggle (*jihad*) on God’s path (guided by their example), so that we may attain a state of true happiness.

Here, the *Walisongo* are constructed as role models. One aspect of their teachings is specifically highlighted as important: self-knowledge and self-discipline. In the documentary, the section that discusses the saints’ teachings is introduced by an image of the *wayang* characters Baladewa and Puntadewa, who according to the documentary ‘symbolize the search for divine knowledge through the path of right action and self-discipline’. The documentary then shows a number of *kyai*, who establish the *Walisongo* as having an extraordinary degree of self-knowledge. One *kyai*, named Yahya Cholil Staquf, is for instance shown, saying:

What is most conspicuous about the teachings we’ve inherited from the saints is their great wisdom regarding ‘the development of the soul’. [...] Saints have achieved a remarkable degree of self-knowledge, or intrapersonal intelligence.

Hence, while the first quote establishes *kyai* and *ulama* as role models, this quote states that the most important thing for Muslims to take away from their role models’ teachings is self-knowledge. People can ‘develop their soul’ through self-knowledge. Significantly, the documentary subsequently links self-knowledge to ‘good’ practices of Islam and sees it as antidote to ‘bad’ practices of Islam. As Gus Mus says:

People were taught, first and foremost, to be fully human, and thus humane. This differs from most contemporary *da’wa*, which encourages people to embrace religion before they’ve become fully human. When inhumane people practice religion, they bring their personal defects to the practice of religion itself.

While he is speaking, the documentary shows images of ISIS’ destruction. In this way, the documentary dehumanizes Wahhabis and frames self-knowledge as an antidote to ‘bad’ practices of Islam, and specifically to violence. Wahhabis are not only dehumanized through the way the documentary represents them solely as being destructive, but Wahhabis are also dehumanized through visual means. In *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* Wahhabis are not given a face or a voice (for instance no interviews are included). When the film refers to Wahhabis, machines (bulldozers, machine guns) often visually represent them. When *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* does show Wahhabis, the documentary often shows

them as group in a single shot, and not as individuals. Their faces are obscured most of the time, because the archival footage used is of poor quality. Hence, *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* does not show them as identifiable individual people, but rather Wahhabis are shown anonymous destructive masses. It should be noted that the documentary often collapses the categories of ISIS-supporters and Wahhabis.

Rahmat Islam Nusantara thus creates a binary opposition between ‘local’ Indonesian Islam and ‘foreign’ Wahhabi Islam and between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslims. While doing so, the film visualizes and implicitly constructs and legitimizes the chain of religious authority. The documentary first shows references to the Prophet and his family, then to the *Walisongo*, and subsequently to contemporary Indonesian *ulama*. And since the *Walisongo* are constructed as role models for people, it is here not just *ulama* who are held responsible for the practice of peaceful Islam, but also Muslims themselves. They are encouraged by *ulama* to adopt the *Walisongo* as their role models, learn from their teachings, and work on themselves to improve their self-knowledge as the documentary suggests that self-discipline makes one a ‘good Muslim’ and prevents violence. *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* however does not elaborate on how to exactly work on oneself. I suggest that the cyber warrior initiative does so by advising followers to work on themselves.

Cyberwarriors: Islam Nusantara Kyai and Ulama as role models

In a bid to counter ‘radicalism’ online, cyber warrior volunteers are being trained by NU (Varagur 2016). Volunteers are taught photo and video-editing skills, and are taught how to optimize posts for social media (Schmidt 2018a, 34). Cyber warriors are free to create their own images – in terms of what they show. They mostly share their content on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, where they have between 100.000 and 750.000 followers. Most cyber warrior accounts publicly state their NU affiliation on their profile, while others do not claim any formal affiliation, but their content often explicitly promotes NU and Islam. Compared to the documentary, NU thus has less control over the counternarrative that is constructed.

In the following analysis, I explore the three most active (most posts and responses per day) and most followed cyberwarrior social media accounts: IslamRahmah (@ikwanrembang – 416.000 followers)⁴, AlaNU (@ala_nu – 701.000 followers)⁵, and CYBER Ansor Media (@ansor_jatim – 214.000 followers).⁶ These accounts are mostly popular among teenage Indonesian Muslims. The accounts state in their profile description that they are members of the ‘Cyber Troop’ network, the network of cyberwarriors. Over a five-month period (1 September 2016–1 March 2017), data were collected from these three accounts, for a total of 1814 posts.⁷ More than half (1309 posts) of all the posts (1814) on cyberwarrior accounts consists of memes and (digitally altered) images of Islam Nusantara *kyai* and *ulama*. Therefore, I focus on these posts. Elsewhere (Schmidt 2018a), I have shown how the cyber warrior initiative constructs *kyai* and *ulama* as

⁴See <https://www.instagram.com/ikhwanrembang/> and <https://www.facebook.com/ikhwanrbg/> (accessed 1 August 2018).

⁵See https://www.instagram.com/ala_nu/ (accessed 1 August 2018).

⁶See https://twitter.com/ansor_jatim?lang=nl/ (accessed 2 August 2018).

⁷Data was collected using the Instagram Hashtag Explorer, Twitter Capture, and Netvizz tools.

stars and how such posts give way to a governmental politics. Here, I focus on these posts to analyze how counternarratives are constructed and how the binary between ‘good’ ‘moderate’ and ‘bad’ ‘radical’ Muslims identified in *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* is also produced on the selected cyber warrior accounts. I argue that through images of Islam Nusantara *kyai* and *ulama*, cyberwarriors construct a counternarrative that is marked by an aesthetics of authority. In this counternarrative, a chain of religious authority is created and legitimized. The place of the *kyai/ulama* in this chain frames them as authoritative role models whose legacy shields the country from ‘radicalism’, while people are encouraged to model their behavior after these figures, to be(come) ‘good’ or better Muslims, who help to protect the nation from ‘bad’ Muslims. While doing so, the cyber warrior initiative defines what kinds of behavior makes someone a ‘good’ Muslim. The aesthetics of authority is here underpinned by three types of tropes: (1) threat, (2) exceptional authority, and (3) inspiration.

Threat

The ground for construction of Islam Nusantara *kyai/ulama* as role models through an aesthetics of authority is laid through the trope of ‘threat’. This trope recurs on the accounts and points out who are considered to be ‘bad’ Muslims while constructing the idea that Indonesia is under threat and finds itself in a state of danger.

Two presumed threats are specifically singled out on the accounts of cyberwarriors: interreligious tensions and ISIS. Figure 1 provides an example of a post that helps construct the idea that ISIS presents a threat to Indonesia. The post shows Gus Mus, whose portrait is digitally superimposed on an image that shows burning wreckage while police officers hold up a protective shield. The word *jihad* is added in black. The accompanying text added by the account moderator reads (@ikhwanrembang, 16 January 2017):

The danger of ISIS ... Did you know that ISIS is moving into Indonesia and the Philippines? Lately, more young Indonesians feel attracted to the form of jihad that is promoted by them.



Figure 1. Image posted on Facebook (@ikhwan_rembang, 16 January 2017).



Figure 2. Image posted on Instagram and Twitter (@ikhwanrembang, 6 November 2016).

[...] Keep looking around carefully; if you see anyone flirting with these ideas, you need to discuss it with them. You can protect Indonesia from such terror and suffering.

The post not only suggests that ISIS is on its way to Indonesia, but also places the responsibility for the safety of the nation on the shoulders of people by asking them to ‘keep looking around carefully’ and to talk to others who might be flirting with ISIS’ ideology. It thus distinguishes between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslims.

Figure 2 addresses interreligious tensions as a threat to a peaceful public order. These kinds of posts are often shared on cyber warrior accounts. Figure 2 depicts a drawing of Abdurrahman Wahid (commonly known as Gus Dur⁸). Gus Dur, who passed away in 2009, served as Indonesian president from 1999–2001, was a *kyai*, and a vocal supporter of Islam Nusantara. Gus Dur’s ancestors helped to found NU, and Gus Dur himself served three terms as NU chairman. In 1999, he was the first Indonesian president to be elected through a people’s vote. The following text, a quote by Gus Dur, is added to the drawing: ‘Glorifying humanity means glorifying its creator. Dehumanizing and humiliating humanity means degrading its creator’. (@ikhwanrembang, 6 November 2016) The text that the moderator has added reads: ‘Radical Islam is degrading fellow Indonesians, honest Christians with whom we share this beautiful country. It would have made Gus so sad to see Indonesia in this state’ (@ikhwanrembang, 6 November 2016). The drawing was posted on 5 November and can be seen as referring to the Ahok demonstrations⁹ in Jakarta a day earlier, which in public discourse were understood as a dispute between Chinese/Christians and Muslims.

⁸The nickname Gus Dur is derived from ‘Gus’, a common honorific for a son of *kyai*, and from short-form of *bagus* (meaning both ‘good’ in Bahasa Indonesia and ‘handsome lad’ in Javanese).

Posts such as Figures 1–2 thus suggest that Indonesia is under threat from several forces, most notably interreligious tensions and foreign ‘radicalism’. ISIS (in Figure 1) and Ahok demonstrators (in Figure 2) are collapsed into one category and are here particularly constructed as ‘bad’ Muslims. The trope of threat identified in these posts legitimizes the existence of the cyber warrior accounts and makes way for the trope of ‘exceptional authority’, which construct Islam Nusantara *kyai/ulama* as the only true sources of religious authority in dangerous times and as ‘good’ Muslims, ‘saviors’ of a divided Indonesia under threat.

Exceptional authority

The notion that Islam Nusantara *kyai/ulama* are the only true sources of Islamic authority is on the accounts constructed through the image of them having died. On the accounts of cyber warriors, the trope of ‘exceptional authority’ often constructs Islam Nusantara *ulama* as possessing a unique talent. I propose that such images show key aspects of the aesthetics of authority and show how the idea of *kyai/ulama* as the only true religious sources of Islamic authority is produced on the social media accounts of cyber warriors.

Figure 3 shows the workings of an aesthetic of authority. It shows how written text and visual elements work together to construct a chain of religious authority in which *ulama* become (like in *Rahmat Islam Nusantara*) ‘inheritors’ of Allah’s and the Prophet’s knowledge. While in *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* the *Walisongo* formed the link in the chain between the Prophet and the *ulama*, here the *ulama* are constructed as the direct



Figure 3. Image posted on Instagram and Facebook (@ikhwanrembang, 31 October 2016).

⁹In October and November 2016 an estimated 50,000–200,000 people took to the streets of Jakarta to protest against the then governor of the capital Basuki ‘Ahok’ Tjahaja Purnama. The protesters accused the Chinese Christian governor of blasphemy and demanded his imprisonment. The November protest descended into violence as night fell with demonstrators hurling missiles at security forces, who responded with tear gas and water cannons.

inheritors of such wisdom. Figure 3 shows a digitally altered picture in which five *ulama* who have died, are placed on a cloud that is drifting in a starry universe. This visual construction underlines that the *ulama* are no longer among us and suggests that they are in paradise. The deceased *ulama* in the picture are all well-known *ulama* in Indonesia: from left to right, As-Sayyid Muhammad bin Alawi Al-Maliki (1946–2003), Muhammad Zaini Abdul Ghani (1942–2005), Hasyim Asy’ari (1875–1947), Muhammad Said Ramadhan al-Buthi (1929–2013), and Munzir Al-Musawa (1973–2013). Above their heads, the words ‘Inheritors of the Prophet’ are written, and below a quotation from the hadith interpreted by Imam Bukhari (a well-known hadith expert)¹⁰ is added, which reads (@ikhwanrembang, 31 October 2016):

Allah does not leave his followers without *ilmu* [an all-embracing term covering Islamic theory, action, and education], but calls upon *ulama* to convey His knowledge. Thus if there are no longer *ulama* left, people will find their leader among the dumb people. They will be led without *ilmu*, will get lost and will be misled. HR Bukhari.

This quotation not only establishes *ulama* as the conveyers of Allah’s vision but also constructs them as a ‘dying breed’. This is suggested by literally showing five deceased *ulama* and placing them in paradise as well as by stressing this that there might be a moment in the future in which *ulama* are no longer around (‘if there are no longer *ulama* left’). The text that the moderator of the Instagram account has added to the post further strengthens this framing of *ulama* as a ‘dying breed’ (@ikhwanrembang, 31 October 2016):

The death of *ulama* is a big disaster, because along with their departure, knowledge [*ilmu*] disappears from the earth. Without it, mankind will behave like animals. The stack of books will no longer bring us any benefit, because books cannot replace the function of the clergy. [...] May Allah always bless us to give long life to *ulama* and give us a successor when they pass away.

The statement by the moderator addresses the death of these important *ulama* as a disaster. Their succession is constructed as a possibility, but not as a given. By underlining their exceptionality, the post thereby stresses the value of *ulama* and encourages admiration for them as unique religious authorities.

Inspiration

The trope of exceptional authority thus constructs *kyai/ulama* as the true sources of religious authority – thereby making them into figures to admire. How is this construction a counternarrative? I suggest that cyberwarriors try to encourage people to model themselves after the *kyai/ulama* and be(come) ‘good’ ‘moderate’ Muslims, who can counter ‘bad’ ‘radical’ Muslims. A recurring trope of ‘inspiration’ is identified in posts of cyberwarriors. This trope works in a threefold way. First, posts ascribe assumed personality traits to *kyai/ulama*. Second, by doing so, they make them agents of tolerance, diversity, and moderation – aspects for which Islam Nusantara is often praised. Posts do so in a way that responds to the problems – ‘radicalism’ and interreligious tensions – that were constructed by the trope of threat. Third, posts encourage users to model themselves after Islam Nusantara *kyai/ulama* by offering followers advice on how to behave

¹⁰*Hadith* are reports describing the life and actions of the Prophet.

and be(come) ‘good’ or ‘better’ Muslims, who are self-confident, tolerant, open-minded, and who learn from interactions with fellow Indonesians.

Figures 4–6 provide examples. The post in Figure 4 shows Gus Dur as a ‘cool guy’, wearing gold chains, of which one states that he is ‘THE GUS’. He is recognizably dressed as an Indonesian Muslim, wearing a green – the color of Islam – hoodie and a *peci*, a Muslim cap, which in Indonesia also has secular nationalist connotations. The text in the image is a quote by Gus Dur and reads: ‘It doesn’t matter what your background is, if you can do something good for other people, people will not ask what your religion is, what your ethnicity is, what your background is’ (@ikhwanrembang, 27 November 2016). The caption that accompanies this image reads (@ikhwanrembang, 27 November 2016):

In this moment, when different groups in society seem to clash, we need to remember what Gus once said: ‘Pluralism must be accepted without differences’. Gus embraced people of other religions. He stressed that religion, ethnicity, and class do not matter. We can carry on in Gus’ spirit. Invite people of other backgrounds and religions into your house, share a meal, get to know them, offer a helping hand. Your life will be better for it.

The post first describes the presumed inspirational character of the late Gus Dur, then transforms it into a solution to conflict, and finally places responsibility for the resolution of conflict in the hands of followers. It does so by encouraging followers to carry on in Gus Dur’s spirit and connect with people of other backgrounds. This is not just cast as



Figure 4. Image posted on Twitter (@ikhwanrembang, 27 November 2016).



Figure 5. Image posted on Facebook (@ikhwanrembang, 22 December 2016).

beneficial to the individuals ('life will be better'), but can also intervene in a moment in which interreligious tensions allegedly divide Indonesia.

In addition to tolerance, 'religious moderation' becomes part of Gus Dur's online representation. Here, 'religious moderation' – although it remains unclear what moderation entails – is specifically framed as a solution to 'extremist' Islam and is thus not only constructed as 'good' Islam, but also as a practice is imagined to counter 'radical' Islam. [Figure 5](#), posted on Facebook, also shows Gus Dur, this time with a quotation that reads: 'Islam is a peaceful religion, and extremists twist it'. The post is accompanied by the following text, in which, followers are encouraged to counter 'radical' thought themselves (@ikhwan_rembang, 22 December 2016):

Gus had a moderate interpretation of Islam, he knew that it is peace, good Islam is love. Be on the right side here. Let a correct interpretation of Islam fight radical thought, and let it

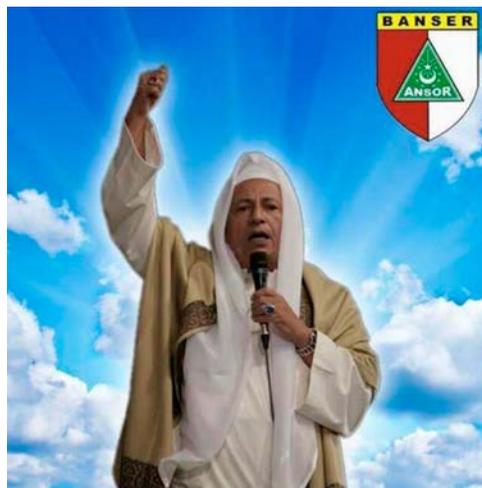


Figure 6. Image posted on Facebook (@ikhwanrembang, 29 October 2016).

oppose the violence we have seen in the past year [referring the Ahok demonstrations]. Correct others if they have wrong ideas, they could ruin our religion.

Like in the documentary *Rahmat Islam Nusantara*, responsibility placed in the hands of people, specifically those of moderate Muslims, as the post relates ‘moderate interpretation of Islam’ to a ‘correct’ interpretation, hence communicating a very specific and narrow idea of what is ‘right’ or ‘good’ Islam. These Muslims are then instructed to correct others who do not think or behave in a ‘good’ ‘moderate’ way. By framing Gus Dur’s, and by extension NU’s, interpretation of Islam as an antidote to ‘the violence we have seen in the past year [referring to the Ahok demonstrations]’, this interpretation is set apart from that of other organizations, particularly those who have participated (e.g., FPI) in the protests and who are here accused of being violent.

Figure 6, posted on Facebook, uses a similar tactic. The image shows Islam Nusantara *ulama* Habib Luthfi with his fist in the air. The aesthetics portray him as a strong, powerful, and confident figure: because of the low-angle perspective, one looks up to him, and he literally shines bright. In the top-right corner is the logo of Banser (Barisan Ansor Serbaguna Nahdlatul Ulama), the autonomous NU body that is engaged in humanitarian and security missions across the archipelago. The accompanying text reads (@ikhwan_rembang, 29 October 2016):

Do not be proud if you are part of those who call for *jihād*. [T]ake advice from Habib Luthfi bin Yahya, who said: ‘If the *jihād* is being led by a sense of revenge, it is not *Jihād li ‘ilā‘i kalimatillah* [elevate the word of Allah], but nothing more than just hate. He knows the difference. Make sure you know what you are talking about [...] ask a respected teacher, so that you can be confident in your convictions too. When you feel angry, never engage in hate, make yourself useful, for instance by keeping the country safe.

This post depicts Luthfi Habib bin Yahya as a confident scholar, while pointing to one of his qualities (religious knowledge) as prevention for hate. The post gives people advice on how to gain religious knowledge, so that they can achieve his confidence themselves. The post also plays into frustrations that followers might have and can be read as directing people to Banser to use their anger in a ‘good’ way.

Through memes and other digitally altered images of Islam Nusantara *kyai* and *ulama*, cyberwarriors create a counternarrative to Islamic ‘radicalism’. This counternarrative favors Islam Nusantara and promotes what its adherents often call its key characteristics – tolerance, diversity, moderation, although it never becomes clear what moderation exactly entails. The counternarrative that is constructed imagines ‘good’ Muslims as self-confident, tolerant – another term that is not further clarified – open-minded and social people, who are themselves seen as responsible for countering ‘bad’ ‘radical’ Muslims.

Discussion

The two NU initiatives, *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* and the cyberwarriors, are marked by an aesthetics of authority, which constructs and legitimizes a specific chain of religious authority. This forms the basis for the construction of counternarratives in which *Walisongo* saints, *kyai*, and *ulama* are constructed as inspirational role models, to which one needs to listen in troubling times, and who become an antidote to extremist thought.

People are encouraged to model themselves after the saints, *kyai* and *ulama* to counter the assumed threats of ‘radicalism’.

Narratives, in being human (re)constructions of the world, are never neutral, but are always ideologically charged. The counternarratives constructed here too show specific subjective (re)constructions of the world, represent specific practices as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, and define who has (or should have) religious authority, and who is responsible for countering ‘radicalism’.

The counternarratives constructed here take a stance on the issue of religious authority. In the context of the earlier-discussed fragmentation of religious authority, the counternarratives (re)claim religious authority and restore the saints, *kyai*, and *ulama* as the most important sources of knowledge. The initiatives also hold *kyai*, and *ulama* responsible for what they see as the necessary practice of adapting Islam to a contemporary world. In the case of the cyber warriors, social media also allows for corrosion of religious authority. The cyber warrior accounts are not managed by *kyai* and *ulama*, but instead by volunteers who cut and paste (assumed) quotations of *kyai* and *ulama*, capture their ideas in short messages. Religious authority can in this way be corroded (Schmidt 2018a, 63).

While reflecting on religious authority, the counternarratives create an opposition between different interpretations of Islam, which they frame as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Islam, and which are practiced by ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslims. They uphold a binary between ‘moderate’ and ‘radical’ Islam as they frame ‘foreign’ Islam as ‘bad radical Islam’, and Islam Nusantara as ‘good moderate Islam’ – without detailing what ‘moderation’ entails. Posts by cyberwarriors encourage people to adopt Islam Nusantara’s constructed values – such as tolerance and open-mindedness – and be(come) ‘good’ ‘moderate’ Muslims who help counter ‘bad’ ‘radical’ Islam. An imagined shared religious identity grounded in Islam Nusantara support here thus becomes the basis on which Muslim citizens are collectively held responsible for protecting a peaceful practice of Islam. In this sense, the initiatives articulate the global war on terror discourse that has played a role in defining ‘moderate’ Islam in Indonesia. But we can also understand the upholding of a ‘moderate’ and ‘radical’ binary from a local context, and should see it in the context of the challenges that the current Islamic landscape in the archipelago and recent developments in Indonesian Islam are posing to NU. The fall of the Suharto regime and its restrictions on freedom of expression have led to the emergence of new Islamic organizations that challenge both NU and Muhammadiyah. Simultaneously internal divisions have in recent years emerged within NU. These internal divisions have meant that Indonesia’s largest Muslim organizations present at times conflicting or unclear positions on issues such as the rights of followers of local or traditional faiths, LGBTQ Indonesians, and the rights of minorities within Islam (Syarif 2019).

Disagreement is part of managing large, democratic organizations. ‘NU [...] however achieved [its] status and influence through efficient internal consolidation and by presenting a coherent narrative to the public’ (Syarif 2019). Here the constructed counternarratives and the binary between ‘moderate’ and ‘radical’ Islam serve different interests. First, the social media promotion of Islam Nusantara helps to communicate a clear coherent narrative to the public about what NU stands for today. Second, the promotion of ‘moderate’ Islam Nusantara not only helps NU to set itself apart from (‘new’) competing (Islamist) organizations, but it also (implicitly) associates these organizations with terrorism and (the foreign threat of) ISIS. Associating these organizations with

terrorism and the foreign threat of Islamic radicalism (such as ISIS) consolidates ‘moderate’ Islam Nusantara as having a long-standing tradition of ‘safeguarding’ Indonesia’s independence and stable democracy – both locally and internationally – against alleged threats of Islamic ‘radicalism’.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research is funded by a Veni grant (275-45-008) from Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek.

Notes on contributor

Leonie Schmidt is Associate Professor in Media Studies in the Media Studies Department at the University of Amsterdam. She is the author of *Islamic Modernities in Southeast Asia: Exploring Indonesian Popular and Visual Culture* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

ORCID

Leonie Schmidt  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5215-048X>

References

- Alford, Peter. 2015. “Nahdlatul Ulama: Indonesia’s Antidote to Islamism’s Feral Fringe.” *The Australian*, December 11. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/nahdlatul-ulama-indonesias-antidote-to-islamisms-feral-fringe/newsstory/f6f2bba635a1883a0e38d0d6c0d961c8>.
- Ali, Muhamad. 2007. “Categorizing Muslims in Postcolonial Indonesia.” *Moussons. Recherche en Sciences Humaines sur L’Asie du Sud-Est* 11: 33–62.
- Archetti, Cristina. 2013. “Narrative Wars: Understanding Terrorism in the Era of Global Interconnectedness.” In *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations*, edited by Alistair Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, 218–245. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Arifianto, Alexander Raymond. 2016. “Islam Nusantara: NU’s Bid to Promote ‘Moderate Indonesian Islam’.” RSIS Commentary, May 17. <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co16114-islam-nusantara-nus-bid-to-promote-moderate-indonesian-islam/#.XAUZgieNyu5>.
- Bignell, Jonathan. 2004. *An Introduction to Television Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Burhanudin, Jajat. 2014. “The Dutch Colonial Policy on Islam: Reading the Intellectual Journey of Snouck Hurgronje.” *Al-Jāmi’ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 52: 25–58.
- Cochrane, Joe. 2015. “From Indonesia, a Muslim Challenge to the Ideology of The Islamic State.” *The New York Times*, November 25. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/27/world/asia/indonesia-islam-nahdlatul-ulama.html>.
- Fealy, Greg. 2018. “Nahdlatul Ulama and the Politics Trap.” *ANU*, July 18. <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/news-events/all-stories/nahdlatul-ulama-and-politics-trap>.
- Fox, James. 2002. “Interpreting the Historical Significance of Tombs and Chronicles in Contemporary Java.” In *The Potent Dead: Ancestors, Saints and Heroes in Contemporary Indonesia*, edited by Henri Chambert-Loir, and Anthony Reid, 103–116. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

- Grossman, Michele. 2014. "Disenchantments: Counterterror Narratives and Conviviality." *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 7 (3): 319–335.
- Hall, Stuart. 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*. London: The Open University and Sage Publications.
- Hilmy, Masdar. 2013. "Whither Indonesia's Islamic Moderatism? A Reexamination on the Moderate Vision of Muhammadiyah and NU." *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 7: 24–48.
- Hoesterey, James B. 2007. "The Rise, Fall, and Re-Branding of a Celebrity Preacher." *Inside Indonesia*, 90 (Oct.-Dec.). <http://www.insideindonesia.org/weekly-articles-90-oct-dec-2007/aa-gym-02121580/>.
- Hoesterey, James B. 2012. "Prophetic Cosmopolitanism: Islam, Pop Psychology, and Civic Virtue in Indonesia." *City & Society* 24: 38–61.
- Hoesterey, James B. 2020. "Islamic Soft Power in the Age of Trump: Public Diplomacy and Indonesian Mosque Communities in America." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 31: 191–214.
- Huda, Ahmad Nuril. 2012. "Negotiating Islam with Cinema: A Theoretical Discussion on Indonesian Islamic Films." *Wacana* 14: 1–16.
- Juniarto, Damar. 2018. "The Muslim Cyber Army: What Is It and What does it Want?" *Indonesia at Melbourne*, March 10. <http://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/the-muslim-cyber-army-what-is-it-and-what-does-it-want/>.
- Kaptein, Nico J. 2004. "The Voice of the Ulama: Fatwas and Religious Authority in Indonesia." *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 125: 115–130.
- Kruithof, Maryse. 2014. "Shouting in a Desert. Dutch Missionary Encounters with Javanese Islam, 1850-1910." PhD diss., Erasmus University Rotterdam.
- Mamdani, Mahmood. 2002. "Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism." *American anthropologist* 104 (3): 766–775.
- Nemr, Christina. 2016. "Strategies to Counter-Terrorist Narratives Are More Confused Than Ever." *War on the Rocks*, March 15. <http://warontherocks.com/2016/03/strategies-to-counter-terrorist-narratives-are-more-confused-than-ever/>.
- Nye, Joseph S. 1990. "Soft Power." *Foreign Policy* 80: 153–171.
- Schmidt, Leonie. 2018a. "Cyber Warriors and Counter-Stars: Contesting Religious Radicalism and Violence on Indonesian Social Media." *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 5: 32–67.
- Schmidt, Leonie. 2018b. *Islamic Modernities in Southeast Asia: Exploring Indonesian Popular and Visual Culture*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Siswo, Sujadi. 2015. "Indonesia's Largest Muslim Group Joins Battle Against Radical Islam." *Channel NewsAsia*, December 10. https://www.libforall.org/lfa/media/2015/channelnewsasia_Indonesias-largest-Muslim-group-joins-battle-against-radical-Islam_12-10-15.pdf.
- Syarif, Ahmad. 2019. "The politics of fighting intolerance." *Indonesia at Melbourne*, March 12. <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/the-politics-of-fighting-intolerance/>.
- Tuck, Henry, and Tanya Silverman. 2016. *The Counter-Narrative Handbook*. London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue.
- Turner, Bryan S. 2007. "Religious Authority and the New Media." *Theory, Culture & Society* 24 (2): 117–134.
- Umar, Ahmad Rizky Mardhatillah. 2016. "A Genealogy of Moderate Islam: Governmentality and Discourses of Islam in Indonesia's Foreign Policy." *Studia Islamika* 23 (3): 399–433.
- Vande Berg, Leah, et al. 2004. *Critical Approaches to Television*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Varagur, Krithika. 2015. "World's Largest Islamic Organization Tells Isis to Get Lost." *The Huffington Post*, December 2. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/indonesian-muslims-counter-isis_us_565c737ae4b072e9d1c26bda?guccounter=1.
- Varagur, Krithika. 2016. "Indonesia's Cyber Warriors Battle ISIS with Memes, Tweets, and Whatsapp." *The Huffington Post*, September 6. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/Indonesia-isicyberwarriors_us_5750779ae4b0eb20fa0d2684/.
- Weintraub, Andrew. 2011. *Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia*. London & New York: Routledge.