CREATING A JUST ISLAMIC SOCIETY IN INDONESIA:
A CASE STUDY OF THE WOMEN ULAMA AS PIOUS CRITICAL AGENTS AND PERFORMERS

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2. Abstract

This thesis offers a thematic analysis of the substantial reasoning and communicative strategies of the transnational grassroots Islamic feminist movement of KUPI in Indonesia. It suggests that KUPI's successes include changes made to national laws that have improved the wellbeing of women in Indonesia and seeks to find an explanation for these successes in KUPI's approach to instigating change. Previous work on KUPI has not yet addressed this question nor has it offered an analysis of the KUPI's narrative and the performative elements of their congresses. In an effort to do so, in this thesis the analytical lenses of pious critical agency and performance activism have been combined so as to find out what has allowed KUPI to impact the Indonesian Islamic community. These perspectives have been combined in a case study of KUPI's self-published documents and of video material of their 2022 congress. The suggestion that KUPI's relative success is due to the resonance of their narrative with a diverse Indonesian and international audience and their strategic use of performative elements offers tools for further analysis of other grassroots movements and creates the basis for research into the further development of the KUPI movement as well as into the degree of acceptance and moderation of their ideas in (transnational) religious landscapes. At the same time, the outcomes of this thesis can be useful for other movements who are attempting to increase their impact.

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4. Introduction

Rise up women *ulama*! That is the message communicated by a short video on Youtube introducing the *Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia* – (Indonesian Congress of Women Ulama).[1] The video introduces the audience to a movement known in Indonesia as KUPI or the women ulama. This movement contends that in the interest of a just society female Islamic religious scholars must be recognized as ulama. They state that many (Islamic) people tend to only consider men religious scholars in Islam (ulama), because female religious scholars have been broadly disregarded in history and are seldomly accepted in the organisational structure of socio-religious institutions and organizations in Indonesia.[2] The invisibility of female ulama in historical and present-day Islamic society has led many people to believe that ulama can only be men even though in fact there are many female ulama in Indonesia. It has made the term 'ulama' a "gendered [configuration] of authority".[3]

Convictions such as these are harmful for women, as ulama interpret religious texts such as the Quran – the holy book of Islam – and the *hadith* – the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad – and therefore substantially influence the lives of their religious community. The women ulama contend that if only men interpret religious texts regarding important issues in family and public life, women are more likely to be disadvantaged by those interpretations, as men are not always suited to take into account the social reality of women.[4] The women ulama argue that female religious scholars need to claim their space as ulama and publicly interpret religious sources to assure that religious norms take women's experiences into account. Examples of harmful practices following from disadvantageous interpretations as discussed by KUPI cover topics such as:

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[1] Aman Indonesia, "Introducing the Indonesian Congress of Female Ulama, KUPI: Rising Women Ulama (English Subtitle)", Youtube video, June 4, 2023, 6:22, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fn8uhPrT_AI.
[2] Aman Indonesia, "Introducing."
[3] Nolan Sargent, "Visiting Scholar Nor Ismah Talks Female Islamic Scholars and Discrimination in Indonesia," *Michigan Daily*, January 25, 2024, https://www.michigandaily.com/news/campus-life/visiting-scholar-nor-ismah-talks-female-islamic-scholars-and-discrimination-in-indonesia/.
[4] KUPI Team, *Congress of Indonesian Women Ulama: Official Documents on Process and Outcome*, ed. Keith Langham and Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, trans. Andy Yentriyani et al. (Cirebon: KUPI, 2017), 20-21, https://kupipedia.id/index.php/Khazanah; Muhammad Chabibi and Daniar Azilia Fanani, "Indonesian Women's Ulama And The Resistance Against Patriarchal Social Construction," *Jurnal Studi Gender dan Anak* 9, no. 2 (2022): 55-56, https://jurnaliainpontianak.or.id/index.php/raheema/article/download/1653/pdf.

testimonies of female witnesses as compared to those of male witnesses being considered of less value in penal procedures; and women being punished for having been raped.[5] KUPI therefore attempts to establish the presence and authority of female ulama so as to exert their influence on such harmful convictions and practices by for instance issuing *fatwas* – authoritative, non-binding religious opinions by religious scholars on topics related to Islamic ethics, practices and laws.[6]

The movement of the women ulama, KUPI, is the topic of this thesis. The women ulama movement consists of both male and female Islamic religious scholars who share the idea that interpretations of religious texts can only be just if gender, and therefore gendered experiences, have a central place in these interpretations.[7] It is a movement in which the forces of several Indonesian grassroots organizations for gender equity – originally Alimat, Fahmina, and Rahima, after the 2017 congress joined by AMAN Indonesia, and Gusdurian – have been combined in order to enlarge their impact.[8] They have also established cooperations with State Islamic University (UIN) Walisongo and Pondok Pesantren Hasyim Asy'ari. The women ulama organized their first congress in 2017.

This first congress (25 – 27 April, 2017) was remarkable in many ways. It served to establish the identity and authority of the women ulama, resulting in the *Pledge of Kebon Jambu on Women Ulama*, and to cover three specific topics through religious deliberations and decisions: sexual violence, child marriage, and nature destruction. They also discussed the substantive justice perspective in interpreting Islamic texts, and their methodology for religious decision-making[9] – both will be discussed in detail later in this thesis. This congress was the first of

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[5] KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 18, 63-66.

[6] Sargent, "Visiting Scholar;" Nor Ismah, "The Increasing Role of Women's Fatwa-making in Indonesia," *Melbourne Asia Review* 18 (April 2024), https://doi.org/10.37839/MAR2652-550X18.3.

[7] David Kloos and Nor Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism: The Indonesian Congress of Women Islamic Scholars and the Challenge of Challenging Patriarchal Authority," *History and Anthropology* 34, no. 5 (August 2023): 829, https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2023.2249495.

[8] Sabila Arwani and Mulawarman Hannase, "Kupi II Congress and Results of Religious Views on Contemporary Women's Issues in the Perspective of Islamic Anthropology," *Journal La Sociale* 5, no. 4 (2024): 914, http://dx.doi.org/10.37899/journal-la-sociale.v5i4.1223.

[9] Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, *Strengthening The Existence and Role of Indonesian Women Ulama: Post-KUPI Strategic Plan of Indonesian Women Ulama 2018-2022* (Cirebon: Fahmina Institute, 2018), 13https://kupipedia.id/images/2/2c/Buku_Renstra_KUPI_ENG.pdf; KUPI Team, *Official Documents*.

its kind to succeed in creating a dialogue between Islamic scholars and secular activists about women's rights in Islam and the role of female religious authorities in promoting women's rights.[10] Moreover, its results have been presented by the media and scholarly reports as remarkable and (relatively) successful.[11] Already during the congress, the Minister of Religious Affairs Lukman Hakim Saifuddin promised to revise Indonesian marriage law[12] and within five years after the congress two important legal changes had been made: the age at which women can get married has been raised from sixteen to nineteen and victims of sexual violence – including those in abusive marriages – have been granted legal protection.[13] As the movement has played a major role in setting the agenda and influencing political decision-making,[14] in this thesis these developments are considered successes of the women ulama in improving the wellbeing of women in Indonesia.

The second congress (22 – 26 November, 2022) was themed around "affirming the roles of women ulama in creating a just Islamic civilisation". It focused on paradigm and methodology for establishing religious views and consolidation of the KUPI movement. Other issues covered were problems in family life such as domestic violence, social challenges such as radicalism, and protecting women from rape-related pregnancy; women's leadership in challenging intolerant ideologies; and protecting the environment.[15]

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[10] Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 818.

[11] Melinda Holmes and Rosalie Fransen, "Heiresses to the Prophet: Women Religious Scholars Transforming Violent Extremism in Indonesia," *International Civil Society Action Network* (October 2021), https://icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Indonesia-Gender-and-Identity-Extremisms.pdf; Mirjam Künkler and Eva Nisa, "Re-establishing Juristic Expertise. A Historic Congress of Female Islamic Scholars," *The Newsletter* 79 (Spring 2018), https://www.iias.asia/the-newsletter/article/re-establishing-juristic-expertise-historic-congress-female-islamic-scholars; Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 822; Atun Wardatun and Abdul Wahid, "In Search of Autoethnography of Female Ulama: An Alternative Approach to the Study of Islamic Family Law," *Islamic Studies Review* 2, no. 1 (July, 2023): 32, https://doi.org/10.56529/isr.v2i1.123.

[12] Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 829.

[13] Aisyah Llewellyn, "Explainer: Why is Indonesia's Sexual Violence Law so Important," *Al Jazeera*, April 14, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/14/explainer-why-is-indonesias-sexual-violence-law-so-important; Tabita Diela, "Indonesia Raises Minimum Age for Brides to End Child Marriage," *Reuters*, September 17, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-women-marriage-idUSKBN1W212M/.

[14] "Background," About The 2nd KUPI Congress, KUPI, accessed April 24, 2024, https://kupi.or.id/latar-belakang/.

[15] KUPI, "Background."

The KUPI deserve more scholarly attention for a few reasons. Firstly, it is a movement which has come about in a political and religious landscape which, while it used to be characterized by tolerance and plurality, has seen a so-called 'conservative turn' around 2005. This will be discussed more elaborately in the next chapter. More recently, the country's president, Joko Widodo has arguably been safeguarding his own presidency by embracing populism, nepotism, and corruption while accusing political opponents or critics of his government of blasphemy.[16] Moreover, the influence of Islamist activists on local and national politics is increasing due to alliances built between these activists and established politicians.[17]

Secondly, it is in this political landscape that the KUPI, a relatively young movement that challenges established notions of authority in the religious landscape, has managed to develop rapidly from a single event to a transnational movement and has received great amounts of media attention within and outside Indonesia.[18] They have managed to forge alliances with prominent intellectual, religious and political leaders and have arguably played a role in bringing about changes in legislation, such as those mentioned before. Moreover, while they suggest major changes to conventional religious ideas which may challenge and destabilise the relations between men and women in Indonesia,[19] they seemingly have not been openly met with severe resistance by Indonesian (religious) authorities, as any evidence of the contrary is absent. It therefore appears that they are indeed relatively successful in bringing about change. Therefore, studying this movement, their narrative and their public endeavours

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[16] Alexander R. Arifianto, "Rising Islamism and the Struggle for Islamic Authority in Post-*Reformasi* Indonesia," *Trans-Regional and National Studies of Southeast Asia* 8, no. 1 (2020): 37, https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2019.10; Richard Javad Heydarian, "A Revolution Betrayed: The Tragedy of Indonesia's Jokowi," *Al Jazeera*, November 24, 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/11/24/a-revolution-betrayed-the-tragedy-of-indonesias-jokowi; "Scepticism As Gibran Rakabuming Raka Runs For Indonesia's Vice Presidency," *Al Jazeera*, February 5, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/5/scepticism-as-gibran-rakabuming-raka-runs-for-indonesias-vice-presidency; Kelly NG, "Joko Widodo: From Promising Democrat to Indonesia's Kingmaker," *BBC*, February 13, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-28422179; this also came forward in a conversation that I had with two highly-educated Indonesians living in the Netherlands, one of whom used to be active in Indonesian politics. They explained to me how they see the current political climate in Indonesia.
[17] Arifianto, "Rising Islamism," 46.
[18] Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 820.
[19] Nor Ismah, "Destabilising Male Domination," *Asian Studies Review* 40, no. 4 (2016): 505, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2016.1228605.

may lead to valuable insights for other religious feminist organisations or movements to learn from.

This thesis provides a critical qualitative analysis of the narrative and the performance of the KUPI based on their English publications about the 2017 congress as well as an interpretation of the video of the international conference that was part of the congress in 2022. The main question answered is *how can the successes of the women ulama in improving the wellbeing of women in Indonesia be explained?* The focus of this research question is therefore on the approach of KUPI towards instigating change. The research question has been subdivided into the following sub-questions: *What characterizes the substantive approach of the women ulama towards reinterpreting religious texts?* And w*hat communicative strategies do the women ulama use in their congresses so as to maximize their impact?*

This thesis argues that because the women ulama act out of pious critical agency, they have created a narrative that is acceptable to a diverse audience within Indonesia and beyond. At the same time, it argues that the performative value of different activities during the congresses brings across their message in a more powerful and memorable way, which maximizes their impact. In short, because of these two reasons the women ulama have managed to mobilize a community of Indonesians and internationals with diverse backgrounds[20] to act according to the ideals of essential gender equality and substantive justice, which is why they have been able to manifest real progress.

While KUPI has already received a great amount of scholarly attention, this project offers some new angles to the current academic debate. First of all, the analytical framework of pious critical agency has not yet been applied to the activities and narrative of the women ulama. Secondly, none of the existing publications about KUPI has offered an analysis of the performative and symbolic value of the various activities that were part of the international conference. Thirdly, this research project forms a bridge between the narrative and activities of the women ulama on the one hand and their communicative strategies on the

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[20] Andreea S. Micu, *Performance Studies: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2021), 94, https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.4324/9780429286377.

other hand. In other words, it focuses on how the women ulama attempt to mobilize people for a common cause. This is something that has not been focused on yet even though it could be of value to other grassroots movements that are trying to bring about change. Hence, the contribution of this thesis to the academic debate entails a detailed characterization of KUPI's approach through the analytical lenses of pious critical agency and performance activism. As such, it suggests a new way of analysing the endeavours and impact of grassroots organizations.

First, chapter five provides an overview of relevant literature regarding the political and religious landscape in Indonesia, gender roles and religious authority, and the KUPI itself. Chapter six introduces the theoretical framework followed by a critical discussion of the methods used in chapter seven. Chapter eight provides more background to the movement and approach of KUPI. Chapter nine captures the analysis of the substantive justice principle. After that, chapter ten analyses the importance of Islamic, national and humanitarian values for the movement. Chapter eleven offers an analysis of contrast between religious teachings and social reality as suggested by KUPI. Chapter twelve is focused around the concept of *silaturrahim* and the origins of strategic relations of the movement. Finally, chapter thirteen lists the main findings of this thesis and puts them in perspective.

5. Literature review

This chapter provides an overview of relevant literature regarding Islam, gender roles and (challenges to) traditional religious authority in Indonesia. It provides the socio-historical background in which the KUPI movement came about and it lists relevant findings of earlier works which shape the frame within which this project should be interpreted. Finally, it demonstrates the gap in the literature that this research is trying to fill.

5.1 Islam in Indonesia

Even though Indonesia is known as the country with the world's largest Muslim population, it is its plurality that makes Indonesia's religious context unique.[21] Nearly ninety percent of its more than 275 million citizens are Muslim. Nevertheless, Islam is not the state's religion and enjoys no special status in Indonesia.[22] The place and significance of religion in people's lives are highly influenced by factors that vary per social group and region, such as ethnicity, local history and proximity of communities to state institutions.

Popular Islam in Indonesia, the Islam of the normal people, is characterized by a Sufi basis that has been adapted to local law, beliefs, and practices.[23] In Indonesia specifically, Quranic exegesis – or *tafsir* – plays a central role in this localization of Islamic ideas. *Tafsir* is therefore not coincidentally one

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[21] Linda Rae Bennet, *Women, Islam and Modernity: Single Women, Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Contemporary Indonesia*, (London, New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005), 8, https://books.google.nl/books?hl=en&lr=&id=4YxZMlEg3tMC&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=indonesia+cultural+context&ots=N9CVeLnd5i&sig=NI8Okr5CMmQUU6qR2-Ekoay4SCE#v=onepage&q=indonesia%20cultural%20context&f=false; Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 11-12, https://monoskop.org/images/0/06/Geertz_Clifford_Islam_Observed_Religious_Development_in_Morocco_and_Indonesia_1971.pdf.

[22] Ishadi Soetopo Kartosapoetro, "Negotiating Mass Media Interests And Heterogeneous Muslim Audiences in the Contemporary Social-political Environment of Indonesia," in *Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia*, ed. Andrew N. Weintraub (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 22, https://psipp.itb-ad.ac.id/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Media-Culture-and-Social-Change-in-Asia-Series-Andrew-N.-Weintraub-Islam-and-Popular-Culture-in-Indonesia-and-Malaysia-2011-Routledge.pdf; Noory Okthariza, "Between the Internal Struggle and Electoral Rules Effect: The Challenges of Political Islam in a Democratic Indonesia," in *Society and Democracy in South Korea and Indonesia*, ed. Brendan Howe (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 40, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-06267-4.

[23] Andrew N. Weintraub, "Introduction: The Study of Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia," in *Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia*, ed. Andrew N. Weintraub (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 3, https://psipp.itb-ad.ac.id/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Media-Culture-and-Social-Change-in-Asia-Series-Andrew-N.-Weintraub-Islam-and-Popular-Culture-in-Indonesia-and-Malaysia-2011-Routledge.pdf; Bennet, *Women, Islam and Modernity*, 8.

of the main methods of the women ulama, beside *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and *fiqh* (relying on Islamic jurisprudence) in adapting Islamic ideas to the social reality of Indonesian women, as will be discussed later.

Indonesian Islam used to be characterized as pluralist, tolerant, and culture-oriented.[24] These ideas came forward in Clifford Geertz' work (1968), an influential anthropologist who studied Islam in Indonesia extensively,[25] and have influenced many scholars' ideas about Indonesian Islam since. Many see evidence for a liberal and pluralist Islam in Indonesia in the public support of prominent Muslim leaders for a strong civil society and for cooperation with non-Islamic communities. This is exemplified by Abdurrahman Wahid, chair Indonesia's biggest Islamic organization Nadhlatul Ulama (NU) between 1984 and 1999 – after which he was elected for presidency – who opposed the idea of an Islamic state and supported the establishment of liberal NGOs.[26]

However, some interesting developments are taking place in the dynamic religious landscape of Indonesia. Islamist political parties such as the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS, *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera*) have been enjoying considerable popularity more recently, especially among pious Muslims in the lower middle class. On top of that, a growing number of middle-class Indonesian women who do not support Islamist political parties are demonstrating support for Islamic orientations by dressing piously and eating halal food. Moreover, they actively try to become better Muslims by gathering knowledge about Islam and implementing Islamic teachings.[27]

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[24] Jeremy Menchik and Katrina Trost, "A 'Tolerant' Indonesia? Indonesian Muslims in Comparative Perspective," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Indonesia*, ed. Robert Hefner (London: Routledge, 2018), 391, https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.4324/9781315628837.

[25] William D. Schorger, Review of *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*, by Clifford Geertz, *American Anthropologist* 72, no. 1 (February 1970): 123-124, https://www-jstor-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/stable/2798148?seq=1.

[26] Menchik and Trost, "A 'Tolerant' Indonesia?" 391; Martin van Bruinessen, "Introduction: Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam and the "Conservative Turn" of the Early Twenty-First Century," in *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the "Conservative Turn"*, ed. Martin van Bruinessen (Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 2013), 2, https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1355/9789814414579; Eva F. Nisa, "Muslim Women in Contemporary Indonesia: Online Conflicting Narratives behind the Women Ulama Congress," *Asian Studies Review* 43, no. 3 (2019): 436, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2019.1632796.

[27] Minako Sakai and Amelia Fauzia, "Performing Muslim Womanhood: Muslim Business Women Moderating Islamic Practices in Contemporary Indonesia," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 27, no. 3 (2016): 230, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2015.1114243.

5.2 New Order regime and *Era Reformasi*

Historical developments such as the New Order regime and the reform era have been of great influence on the religious landscape of Indonesia.[28] Haji Muhammad Soeharto's authoritarian New Order regime (1966-1998) actively promoted Islam and penalized atheism.[29] At the same time, Soeharto disapproved of the idea of an Islamic state, marginalized political Islam,[30] and supported the secular Indonesian state ideology of Pancasila.[31]

Contrasting strongly with Soeharto's New Order regime, the *Era Reformasi* (reform era) constituted a period of radical reform and democratization with a focus on the rule of law, human rights, and diversity in politics and discourse.[32] The increased freedom in the political landscape of the first post-Soeharto years presented an opportunity for interreligious conflict, jihadi movements and other so-called radical Muslim groups, and terrorist attacks.[33] However, the appearance of religion-inspired conflicts has by now largely come to an end.[34]

Though, this period also resulted in some more lasting developments that influence present-day Indonesian Islam. One of those developments is that transnational Islamic movements have started to play a role in the public debate in Indonesia. Another important development took place within the established mainstream national organizations Muhammadiyah and NU in which

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[28] Claudia Seise, "The Transformational Power of Barokah and Silaturahmi in Muslim Indonesia," *International Journal of Islam in Asia* 1, no. 2 (March 2021): 193, https://doi.org/10.1163/25899996-01020001.

[29] Rachel Rinaldo, *Mobilizing Piety: Islam and Feminism in Indonesia* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2013), 42-43, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199948109.003.0002.

[30] Anak Agung Banju Perwita, *Indonesia and the Muslim World: Islam and Secularism in the Foreign Policy of Soeharto and Beyond* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007), 158, https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy-ub.rug.nl/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=434087&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[31] Michael Morfit, "Pancasila: The Indonesian State Ideology According to the New Order Government," *Asian Survey* 21, no. 8 (August 1981): 838-851, https://doi.org/10.2307/2643886; Martin van Bruinessen, "Introduction," 1-2; Rinaldo, *Mobilizing Piety*, 38.

[32] Tim Lindsey, "20 Years After Soeharto: Is Indonesia's 'Era Reformasi' Over?," Pursuit, The University of Melbourne, last modified May 20, 2018, https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/20-years-after-soeharto-is-indonesia-s-era-reformasi-over; Tim Lindsey, "Post-Reformasi Indonesia: The Age of Uncertainty," Indonesia at Melbourne, last modified May 4, 2018, https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/post-reformasi-indonesia-the-age-of-uncertainty/; Moch Nur Ichwan, "Towards a Puritanical Moderate Islam: The Majelis Ulama Indonesia and the Politics of Religious Orthodoxy," in *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the "Conservative Turn"*, ed. Martin van Bruinessen (Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 2013), 60, https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1355/9789814414579.

[33] Van Bruinessen, "Introduction," 2.

[34] Van Bruinessen, "Introduction," 2-3.

conservative and fundamentalist currents have become more influential than the liberal and progressive forces which used to be dominant.[35]

This, among other reasons, is why the idea of an extraordinarily tolerant Indonesian Islam should be nuanced. Scholars have observed a 'conservative turn' in 2005, when many of those liberal ideas which used to characterize the *Era Reformasi* were rejected by, among others, Muhammadiyah and NU and the more liberal leaders were removed from the boards of these organizations. Nevertheless, to this day, Muhammadiyah and NU are still considered important forces in shaping Indonesia's pro-democracy civil society.[36] Around the same time, the Indonesian Council of Ulama (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia,* MUI) issued various *fatwas*, authoritative opinions by Islamic scholars, to declare "secularism, pluralism and religious liberalism (…) to be incompatible with Islam".[37]

It has been therefore argued by some that the *Era Reformasi* ended somewhere between 2005 and 2010 and that new political and societal issues are negatively influencing Indonesia's civil society. One of the most relevant issues for the topic at hand is rising religious intolerance. Another critical issue is the (self-)censoring of defenders of pluralism and minority rights that is taking place caused by defamation laws – which serve the political elite well - and accusations of blasphemy successfully made by political (Islamist) groups.[38]

This short overview of characteristics of and developments in Islam in Indonesia has served to paint the picture of the socio-historical situation in which the women ulama have arisen. One can conclude from this that there is not one "Indonesian Islam", as, indeed, its main characteristic is its plurality. It is in this highly pluriform religious landscape in which worries have arisen though about the increasing popularity of fundamentalist or conservative ideas that the women ulama decided to take on a role on the national stage.

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[35] Van Bruinessen, "Introduction," 3.
[36] Menchik and Trost, "A 'Tolerant' Indonesia?" 402.
[37] Van Bruinessen, "Introduction," 3-4.
[38] Lindsey, "20 Years."

5.3 Indonesian Muslim womanhood

Notions of womanhood in Indonesia have been influenced by various factors, such as the focus of Indonesian Islam on motherhood and other domestic roles of women, one's sociocultural background, and images of womanhood as propagated by the state, often idealizing the self-sacrificing, submissive woman.[39] Arguably, state ibuism combined with a trend of Islamization resulted in a new – repressive – social construction of womanhood.[40] Islamization is in this context used to refer to the development that hard-line Islamist groups, fundamentalist thought and political Islam are gaining ground.[41]

During the New Order period, Soeharto introduced the gender ideology of state ibuism. This ideology has had a major impact on gender roles and power structures to this day: "[d]uring the New Order period, gender relations and gender roles were an important dimension of state control. Men and women had clearly defined roles that reinforced particular constructions of identity. Importantly, the public and private spheres were clearly – and artificially – separated, with women's roles confined largely to the private sphere. The ideal New Order woman was a mother, wife and household manager." [42]

These hierarchical gender roles informed the division of power in Indonesian society, leading to "asymmetrical structures of power", as Soeharto considered the nation a family that needed to be protected from outside dangers. Men and women clearly had their own roles to play in protecting the state: men played theirs in public life with political power and women were in charge of the private (family) life and excluded from politics.[43]

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[39] Julia I. Suryakusuma, "Is State Ibuism Still Relevant?" *Inside Indonesia* 109 (July-September 2012), https://www.insideindonesia.org/is-state-ibuism-still-relevant; Rinaldo, *Mobilizing Piety*, 35.
[40] Suryakusuma, "Still Relevant?".
[41] Saskia Eleanora Wieringa, "Islamization in Indonesia: Women Activists' Discourses," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32, no. 1 (Autumn 2006): 1, https://www-journals-uchicago-edu.proxy-ub.rug.nl/doi/epdf/10.1086/505274.
[42] Kathryn Robinson and Sharon Bessel, "Introduction to the Issues," in *Women in Indonesia: Gender, Equity and Development,* eds. Kathryn Robinson and Sharon Bessel (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), 3, https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1355/9789812305152-toc.
[43] Jane Ahlstrand, *Women, Media and Power in Indonesia* (London: Routledge, 2021), 1, https://www-taylorfrancis-com.proxy-ub.rug.nl/books/mono/10.4324/9781003083252/women-media-power-indonesia-jane-ahlstrand.

The New Order regime's gender ideology in which strictly defined forms of feminine and masculine identities served the regime's developmentalist agenda is also known as "state ibuism".[44] With *'ibu'* being the Indonesian word for 'mother', the idealized image of women revolved around motherhood. It has been argued that this ideal image of womanhood has never been completely dismantled, even though there arguably is space now for women to develop themselves beyond the image prescribed by state ibuism.[45] However, with the term "neo-ibuism" it has also been suggested that women in present-day Indonesia are only allowed to be active in the public sphere when their role in the family is actively emphasized as well.[46]

Around the 1980s however, women's rights activism got a boost. Activist NGOs for women's rights, such as Kalyanamitra and Solidaritas Perempuan, were created by women who had taken part in feminist conferences.[47] It has even been argued that in the 1990s these activists became the "backbone of a democratic reform movement", leading towards the *Era Reformasi*.[48] Platt et al. confirm that the E*ra Reformasi* "created a space for increasing Islamization" since the increase in freedom led many Indonesian to question what a 'true' Muslim was for them, resulting in a heightened sense of piety and more social control on Muslim morality.[49] More specifically, it can be argued that this heightened sense of piety influenced the image of a 'good' Indonesian (Muslim) woman by focusing more on women's sexual morality – i.e. being a virgin until marriage and only having sexual affairs within marriage[50] – and to the importance of the

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[44] Julia I. Suryakusuma, *State Ibuism: The Social Construction of Womanhood in the Indonesian New Order* (Depok: Komunitas Bambu, 2011); Julia I. Suryakusuma, "The State and Sexuality in New Order Indonesia," in *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia*, ed. Laurie J. Sears (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) 92-119.
[45] Robinson and Bessel, "Introduction," 4.
[46] Muhammad I. Kabullah and M. Nurul Fajri, "Neo-ibuism in Indonesian Politics: Election Campaigns of Wives of Regional Heads in West Sumatra in 2019," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 40, no. 1 (March 2021): 136-155, https://doi.org/10.1177/18681034219890.
[47] Rinaldo, *Mobilizing Piety*, 54.
[48] Rinaldo, *Mobilizing Piety*, 48, 70; Rachel Rinaldo, "Pious and Critical: Muslim Women Activists and the Question of Agency," *Gender and Society* 28, no. 6 (December 2014): 832-833, https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243214549352.
[49] Maria Platt, Sharyn Graham Davies, and Linda Rae Bennett, "Contestations of Gender, Sexuality and Morality in Contemporary Indonesia," *Asian Studies Review* 42, no. 1 (2018): 4, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2017.1409698; Nelly Martin-Anatias, "On Being A "Good" Indonesian Muslim Woman: An Autoethnography," *Human & Society* 43, no. 4 (2019): 351-374, https://doi.org/10.1177/0160597618814872.
[50] Martin-Anatias, "An Autoethnography," 360; Bennett, *Women, Islam and Modernity*, 19.

heterosexual marriage.[51] Referring to her own experiences as a young Indonesian Muslim woman who spent her study years in the United States, Nelly Martin-Anatias demonstrates the entanglement of Indonesian norms and values with Islamic ones with regards to the Indonesian image of a 'good woman' in that "[m]arriage is a significant element of [Indonesian] women's Muslimness and Indonesianness" and that the foundations for this idea are found in Islamic sources, such as the Quran and the *hadith*, and structurally reinforced in daily life. [52]

Interestingly, even though the ideal picture of a woman presents a submissive wife playing a key role in her family that is headed by her husband, Indonesian women are relatively visible and active in the public domain as many of them are educated and work outside the home in order to be able to meet the needs of their households. This requires them to negotiate between traditional Islamic and Indonesian values and their daily reality and sometimes leads to moderation of their Islamic values.[53] Although Islamic teachings in Indonesia do not necessarily confine women to the domestic sphere, women who have a paid job often do find their Muslim womanhood challenged since domestic tasks are generally seen in Islam as the natural role of women.[54]

Another complicating factor for Indonesian (working) women is the fact that most male-dominated Islamic authorities in Indonesia, the most notable among which is probably the MUI, tend to propagate the more conservative Islamic teachings regarding the position of women in the public and domestic sphere. As such, in spite of the fact that Indonesian women have relative freedom and mobility, they are prevented from gaining actual power or autonomy as long as religious and state authorities keep propagating such patriarchal gender ideologies. This has also been referred to as the "gender paradox".[55]

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[51] Martin-Anatias, "An Autoethnography," 359-361.
[52] Martin-Anatias, "An Autoethnography," 359-360.
[53] Sakai and Fauzia, "Performing," 244.
[54] Sakai and Fauzia, "Performing," 229-230.
[55] Rinaldo, *Mobilizing Piety*, 34-35.

5.4 Challenges to traditional religious authority in Indonesia

Traditionally, religious authority was in the hands of (male) leaders of the mainstream Islamic organizations Muhammadiyah and NU as well as individual ulama (Islamic religious scholars). These ulama are usually men. Being an *alim* (singular form of *ulama*) in Indonesia is closely entangled with mastering *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence on which *Shariah* law is based).[56] Another organization with has been of great influence on shaping Islam in Indonesia and whose authority is evident due to its prerogative of issuing *fatwas* is the MUI.[57] Even though all these organizations have women at important positions within their organizational structure, such as within or at the head of their scholarly forums (Muhammadiyah and NU) or fatwa committee (MUI), the organizations themselves are still dominated by men and, as a result, gender perspectives are usually not a part of their interpretation of religious sources.[58]

A clear example of this is the treatment of women who become a victim of rape. Victims of sexual violence in Indonesia are often considered to have 'invited' or caused the sexual violence. This results in victim blaming with often severe consequences for the victim, such as psychological issues, rejection from one's social communities, and even criminal charges.[59] Especially if the rape happens within a marriage, it is often commonly understood that a wife's body belongs to her husband, an assumption which is, according to the women ulama, informed by "cultural and religious views".[60] It is because of the influence ulama have in Indonesia on socio-religious affairs, but also economic and political issues that they are in a position to bring about change to issues such as the one described above,[61] even if they are not directly involved in law enforcement.

More recently, the authority of mainstream organizations Muhammadiyah and NU, who have always had great grassroots followings, has

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[56] Ismah, "Destabilising," 493.

[57] Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 833.

[58] Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 833; Ismah, "Destabilising," 493.

[59] KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 55-56.

[60] KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 55-56.

[61] Inayah Rohmaniyah, Samia Kotele, and Rr. Siti Kurnia Widiastuti, "Reclaiming an Authority: Women's Ulama Congress Network (KUPI) And A New Trend of Religious Discourse in Indonesia," *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 11, no. 3 (May 2022), 63, https://doi.org/10.36941/ajis-2022-0068.

been in decline, because new authorities have entered the stage.[62] One reason for this is the difficulty with which millennials at universities are confronted when they want to become a part of their university affiliate groups of those organizations, which tend to recruit new members from within existing organizational networks.[63] Another factor adding to students' discontent is that the organizations' close ties to Indonesian politicians and government officials reveals that they are "part of the establishment".[64] On top of that, other Islamic authorities who use more modern (social) media through which they disseminate their religious ideas attract middle-class millennials. Because of such discontent among the younger Muslim community, various clerics and activists have started their own organisations which they use to spread their often very conservative religious views and thereby to challenge conventional religious authority. [65]

Even though the women ulama do not fit this trend with regards to the ideas they communicate, they do so with regards to how they try challenge traditional authorities. They are using both traditional and new ways of disseminating their ideas, such as organising learning circles (traditional) and online international seminars (modern) to create a new community of progressive Muslims who are trying to improve the position of women in Indonesia so as to establish a more just society.

It can be a challenge for Islamic authorities to suggest changes to traditional interpretations of Islamic texts and laws, partially due to the role of Muslim religious leaders as "guardians of the tradition".[66] Although ulama are considered to be responsible for disseminating Islamic teachings, solving religious problems, and catalysing social change,[67] Muslim ethics have been known to be resistant to change since the idea of change in itself is sometimes regarded as

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[62] Arifianto, "Rising Islamism," 41-43; Pieternella van Doorn-Harder, "Translating Text to Context: Muslim Women Activists in Indonesia," in *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*, eds. Masooda Bano and Hilary E. Kalmbach (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 417, https://brill-com.proxy-ub.rug.nl/edcollbook/title/20131;

[63] Arifianto, "Rising Islamism," 41-42.

[64] Arifianto, "Rising Islamism," 42.

[65] Arifianto, "Rising Islamism," 41.

[66] Ebrahim Moosa, "The Ethical in Shari'a Practices: Deliberations in Search of an Effective Paradigm," in *Pathways to Contemporary Islam: New Trends in Critical Engagement* ed. Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 239, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvv417f6.

[67] Rohmaniyah, Kotele, and Widiastuti, "Reclaiming an Authority," 62.

problematic by piety-minded Muslims.[68] Proposing alternative interpretations at such a fundamental level such as who these religious leaders should or can be, could therefore lead to resistance among many believers. It will be argued throughout this thesis that this is part of the reason why the women ulama use not only religious reasoning, but also performative strategies to bring across their ideas to a diverse audience.

5.5 Female religious leadership

KUPI is part of long struggle in Indonesia for gender equality, which is said to have been started by women (and men) from the *pesantren*, an Islamic boarding school in which men and women can enjoy extensive training in Islamic sources.[69] Although their studies in the *pesantren* enable many Indonesian women to study *fiqh*,[70] women are still seldomly accepted in the men's world that is religious leadership.[71] Whereas these institutions used to be male-dominated, the presence of women as students, teachers and sometimes even as leaders in *pesantren* has increased.[72] Regardless, *pesantren* still adhere to patriarchal values and structures, which is demonstrated by the fact that male leaders are usually prioritised over female leaders when it comes to leadership succession. The *pesantren* also teach about gender relations from the *kitab kuning* (the yellow book, a compilation of classical Islamic texts and commentaries), which is known to contain patriarchal ideas.[73] Nevertheless, within the given structures, the *pesantren* do provide opportunities for Indonesian women to obtain relevant skills and experiences to become more

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[68] Ebrahim Moosa, "The Ethical," 239-240.
[69] Nisa, "Conflicting Narratives," 438.
[70] Rachel Rinaldo, review of *Women Shaping Islam: Reading the Quran in Indonesia*, by Pieternella van Doorn-Harder, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77, no. 1 (March 2009): 157, https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1093/jaarel/lfn103.
[71] Ismah, "Destabilising," 493.
[72] Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 823.
[73] Eka Srimulyani, *Women from Traditional Islamic Educational Institutions in Indonesia: Negotiating Public Spaces* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 135-136, https://www-degruyter-com.proxy-ub.rug.nl/document/doi/10.1515/9789048516216/html#Chicago; Ismah, "Destabilising," 505.

visible in the public sphere. It must be noted though that having support in this from their male counterparts (*kiais*) plays a decisive role in gaining authority.[74]

It has been argued that the high number of women specializing in Islam, be it in Quranic recitation, preaches or interpretation, is what makes Islam in Indonesia unique.[75] Because of such opportunities for women, Indonesia has relatively many female preachers, activists with thorough Islamic knowledge and professors at Islamic universities.[76] It is especially their ability to rely on *fiqh* that allows such religiously-educated Indonesian Muslim women to "produce more gender-sensitive interpretations, allowing for rethinking of conventional practices, such as polygamy".[77]

5.6 KUPI

The KUPI's official methodology for interpretation of religious texts is the *mubādalah* approach. This progressive approach based on a framework of mutuality between men and women allows them to reinterpret texts from the Quran and the *hadith* that conventionally lead to the idea that women are subordinates to men.[78] Its core is the idea that religious texts such as those in the Quran cannot serve as the basis for domination of men over women, hegemony or tyranny and that "God's creation in this world is monotonous and unethical if viewed with only one (man) perspective".[79] In practice this means that religious texts are interpreted based on their "universal and cross-gender meanings," even if a text is specifically directed at one gender.[80] Nevertheless, KUPI strongly adheres to the two sexes in their interpretations and does not consider postgenderism to have any textual or philosophical basis.[81] The *mubādalah*

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[74] Srimulyani, *Negotiating Public Spaces*, 136; Pieternella van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam: Reading the Qur'an in Indonesia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 173-175, https://rug.on.worldcat.org/oclc/811410305.

[75] Rinaldo, *Mobilizing Piety*, 35; Van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam*, 2.

[76] Van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam*, 173-175; Van Doorn-Harder, "Text to Context," 415.

[77] Rinaldo, review of *Women Shaping Islam*, 158.

[78] Akhmad Arif Junaidi, "*Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia* (KUPI) and *Mubādalah* Approach in Interpreting the Gender Biased-Qur'anic Verses," *Sawwa: Jurnal Studi Gender* 18, no. 1 (April 2023): 1-24, https://doi.org/10.21580/sa.v18i1.17269.

[79] Junaidi, *Mubādalah* Approach, 5.

[80] Rohmaniyah, Kotele, and Widiastuti, "Reclaiming an Authority," 64.

[81] Iffatin Nur and Reni Puspitasari, "Postgender Fiqh: The Views of MUI's and KUPI's *Ulema* on Postgenderism from *Maqāṣid Sharī'ah* Perspective," *Jurnal Hukum dan Pranata Sosial* 18, no. 1 (2023): 152-176, http://doi.org/10.19105/al-lhkam.v18i1i.7313.

approach was introduced by Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, founder of the Fahmina Institute, one of the main organisations behind the KUPI.

Even though the women ulama claim to have organized *fatwa* deliberations and this has been extensively publicized on in the news as well as in academics, they have actually called them religious decisions. As mentioned, issuing *fatwas* is the prerogative of the MUI which is why in the end the KUPI made the strategic choice not to claim the right to issue *fatwas* as well, which would have probably caused tension between the MUI and KUPI.[82] This demonstrates that the term *fatwa* itself implicates a certain authority and that for the women ulama constructing their authority and introducing their religious reasoning should be done cautiously. Interestingly, almost all news reports and academic publications used for this thesis have ignored this important nuance, referring to the KUPI's religious decisions as *fatwas*.[83]

Kloos and Ismah have analysed the 2017 congress as a site of performance and contestation. The form in which the women ulama disseminate their ideas, including the congresses themselves, the preparatory activities and their presence in the press can be regarded as a performance to attract attention to matters of (gender) injustice and patriarchy and to demonstrate the women ulama's religious authority in order to establish it.[84] In that regard, Kloos and Ismah suggested that the staging of the congresses illustrated that religious authority, like justice, "must be *seen* to be done" (emphasis in original).[85] They claim that the KUPI have created a platform for women and men from various backgrounds and regions to interact and discuss religious norms that influence the wellbeing of women, by challenging traditional religious authority as well as discussing more substantive issues of child marriage and sexual violence.[86] In their analysis, they already focused on the significance of the chosen locations as a site of exchange, as site selection for congresses is an important strategy in

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[82] Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 833-834.
[83] Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 834.
[84] Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 830.
[85] Quoted in Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 830; Carl Death, "Summit Theatre: Exemplary Governmentality And Environmental Diplomacy in Johannesburg And Copenhagen," *Environmental Politics* 20, no. 1 (January 2011): 2, https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2011.538161.
[86] Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 838-839.

conveying activist messages.[87] In short, they argue that the 2017 conference was held at the Pondok Pesantren Kebon Jambu al-Islamy in Cirebon as Cirebon was likely to be more accepting of KUPI than other places, due to Fahmina being rooted in Cirebon with a good network of local *pesantren*. Furthermore, organizing their first conference at a *pesantren* led by a woman *nyai* Masriyah Amva who "[combines] traditionalist credentials with feminist and pluralist convictions",[88] was arguably a way for the women ulama to demonstrate the acceptance female religious leadership in the *pesantren* culture and convey an image of authority.[89] This thesis takes some of the points made by Kloos and Ismah as a starting point and furthers their analysis of the performative value of elements of both congresses.

It appears from this literature review that religious leadership in Indonesia and KUPI have received and are currently receiving much attention in academics. What existing publications have failed to do yet is offer a thorough analysis of why precisely the women ulama have been able to instigate concrete changes in legislation, and why precisely the women ulama seem to be successful in mobilizing a transnational community consisting of men and women that accept the statement that women can be ulama. That is what this thesis attempts to get a grasp off by focusing on both the motives that inform the women ulama's actions as communicated in their narrative as well as the strategies they employ to maximize the impact of their message. As such, this thesis suggests a new combination of analytical lenses so as to find out what distinguishes KUPI from other movements or organizations.

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[87] Naoko Shimazu, "Diplomacy as Theatre: Staging the Bandung Conference of 1955," *Modern Asian Studies* 48, no. 1 (January 2014): 234-242, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24494187; Ruth Craggs and Martin Mahony, "The Geographies of The Conference: Knowledge, Performance and Protest," *Geography Compass* 8, no. 6 (2014): 420-421, https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1111/gec3.12137; Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 831.
[88] Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 831-833.
[89] Nisa, "Conflicting Narratives," 437.

6. Theoretical framework

While the previous chapter provided an overview of relevant literature regarding the women ulama as well as the historical and socio-cultural context in which this movement emerged, the current chapter suggests a theoretical framework from which to approach the research question *how have the women ulama been able to improve the wellbeing of women in Indonesia.* This thesis takes as its beginning point various elements of the international conferences organized during the KUPI congresses as well as the narrative of their self-published English documents they used to describe their endeavours in preparation of and during the congresses so as to analyse the (performance) value of their actions as pious critical agents. This chapter therefore provides a discussion of agency in feminist theory so as to understand the origins and application of pious critical agency and an exploration of some basic ideas from performance activism studies.

6.1 Agency in feminist theory

Agency is a key, though disputed concept in feminist theory.[90] It is often defined misleadingly simply as 'the ability to act'. However, its exact meaning depends strongly on one's cultural context, as one's ability to act is always strongly influenced by dominant norms, institutions, and power structures that vary in each situation.[91] The concept can also be defined more elaborately as "the capacity of a person (or other living and material entities) to intervene in the world in a manner that is deemed, according to some criterion or another, to be independent or relatively autonomous."[92] It is often paired with words such as autonomy, free will, and choice and it is the opposite of acting according to habits or instincts which follow logically from "external structural forces".[93] Considering that it always exists in social interactions which are defined by hierarchies in for instance gender, class, or race, or at least in one's relationality

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[90] Lois McNay, "Agency," in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, eds. Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 39, https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199328581.001.0001.
[91] McNay, "Agency," 41.
[92] McNay, "Agency," 40.
[93] McNay, "Agency," 40.

to the world around them, it is a concept that is not usually theorized on outside social contexts/ as a preexisting concept.[94]

From the 1990s onwards acts were usually considered agentic if they were acts through which an individual *resisted* social or structural constraints. Judith Buthler, an influential scholar on gender and identity claimed that by not conforming to existing images of gender – for instance with regards to clothing or behaviour – an individual demonstrates agency through resistance. These ideas have nevertheless been criticized extensively, as they are essentially rooted in Western liberal contexts and are therefore not suitable for cross-cultural analyses, as they do not do justice to other ways in which women can be agentic.[95] It is the assumption that any woman desires freedom and liberation that becomes problematic in nonsecular, gender-traditional religious contexts[96] – i.e. those religions in which men and women are considered to be existentially different from each other and to have different roles that complement each other.[97]

The highly politicized discussion about Muslim women's clothing demonstrates this point well, as veiling is considered a symbol of patriarchy and oppression of women,[98] as well as a symbol of Islamism and radicalization[99] in many predominantly Western academic (and political) settings. Such views fail to capture the possibility that the choice to veil symbolize Muslim women's liberation from Western cultural norms,[100] or that it is a conscious decision to present oneself as a pious subject, or to demonstrate modesty.[101] This example demonstrates that many academic discussions about Muslim women's piety problematically fail to acknowledge that expressions of Islamic piety can be

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[94] McNay, "Agency," 41-42.

[95] Kelsey C. Burke, "Women's Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions: A Review of Four Approaches," *Sociology Compass* 6, no. 2 (2012): 124-125, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2011.00439.x.

[96] McNay, "Agency," 47.

[97] Burke, "Women's Agency," 123.

[98] Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 195, https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1515/9781400839919-009.

[99] Sahar Amer, "The New Horizons of Piety," in *Pathways to Contemporary Islam: New Trends in Critical Engagement* ed. Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 265-269, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvv417f6.

[100] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 195.

[101] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 195; Amer, "New Horizons," 265-269.

agentic. This is where pious agency and pious critical agency present an opportunity.

6.2 Pious agency and pious critical agency

Saba Mahmood strongly criticized the notion of agency as resistance and offered an interpretation based on her fieldwork with Muslim women in Egypt, that agency can exist in pietist practices directed towards creating a meaningful role for themselves "within the terms of their culture".[102] She therefore understands agency as a capacity to act that strongly depends on context and that is usually located within power structures. She argued that the pious subjects of her study demonstrated a form of agency that was not oriented at achieving liberation and therefore not in line with the general definition given to agency in Western feminism.[103] Instead, they demonstrated agency by interpreting the Quran at times unconventionally with the intention of living up to the high standards of piety they imposed on themselves and which were met with resistance by various of their male family members.[104] Mahmood called these individuals' efforts to live piously pious agency.

Derived from pious agency is the concept *pious critical agency*, a form of agency of religious women who value their religiosity intrinsically while criticizing conventional understandings of religious texts so as to achieve politicized goals, such as women's rights or wellbeing. This is, arguably, exactly what the women ulama do, as will be demonstrated throughout this thesis. In that sense this critical position towards one's religion is not so much a sign of rebellion or a move towards liberation as it is an action meant to improve one's own and others' piety through reinterpretation of conventional norms. Rachel Rinaldo, a cultural sociologist, coined this concept based on her ethnographic fieldwork with women activists from Rahima, a Muslim women's rights NGO that is one of the main organisations behind KUPI, and Fatayat NU, NU's women's organization.[105] Some key aspects of pious critical agency are political

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[102] McNay, "Agency," 47.
[103] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety,* 13.
[104] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 155-158.
[105] Rinaldo, "Pious and Critical," 831.

consciousness and the intention to reform religion through critical interpretation in public spaces that are not merely religious spaces.[106] Rinaldo defined PCA as "the capacity to engage critically and publicly with religious texts".[107] This, according to Rinaldo, constitutes the way in which piety and agency of religious women intersect when they consciously use critical interpretation of religious texts in the public sphere synchronically as religious subjects and with the intention of improving their position as a woman. Rinaldo's fieldwork led her to conclude that "Islamic piety here does not conflict with feminism but is being used for feminist aims". Nevertheless, she does not communicate an essentially instrumentalist view on religion, since she also stipulates how important it was to the women she studied to be good, pious Muslims. It is exactly this two-way relationship between agency and piety that forms the analytical lens for the current research project, since this is a relatively new way of looking at religious feminisms.

6.3 Pious critical agency and the women ulama

The analysis that follows will demonstrate that pious critical agency (PCA) is a useful analytical framework from which to study the impact of the women ulama on the wellbeing of women in Indonesia. This way of studying their narrative and actions for an analysis of the extent to which the women ulama call for change so as to improve their religion from within existing religious structures. This is likely to demonstrate to what extent their reasoning resonates with a religious community, hence how effective their call for change is within this community. Underneath this idea lies the assumption that it is of relevance that these women act as Muslim actors in a predominantly Muslim environment and that they are demonstrating piety while establishing an alternative interpretation of certain religious texts, since this allows them to challenge the dominant narrative by suggesting a new conviction which is still within the limits of the thinkable (for

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[106] Rinaldo, "Pious and Critical," 829.
[107] Rinaldo, "Pious and Critical," 829.

many). This is an essential factor for successfully introducing potential alternative convictions in any society.[108]

PCA is an especially useful lens to analyse the narrative of the women ulama in their self-published documents, as it allows for a critical analysis of the most essential parts of their reasoning, such as the substantive justice perspective, the values that form the core of their argumentation, and the problems they perceive in the current reality as compared to what it should be like in a just society. Applying PCA to the content of the KUPI's narrative allows for textual analysis to find out to what extent their sense of piety is at the basis of their agency.

6.4 Performance activism

Studying the KUPI congresses and their other endeavours – commentaries, preparatory activities, presence in the media – through a performance activism lens allows us to take a look at the symbolic meaning and impact of specific elements of the congresses and the possible strategic thinking underneath these elements. It arguably does more justice to the thoughtful preparation and organizing behind the KUPI movement than does the PCA perspective alone. This analytical lens turns the conferences into performances as well as performance sites, the women ulama into performers, and the participants into an audience.[109] This is not to say that the conferences *are* performances, in this thesis they will merely be studied *as* performances. In fact, it will be suggested in this thesis that while the conferences are part of the women ulama's actions undertaken to be a better Muslim woman by engaging critically and publicly with religious sources (PCA), and that most of their substantive reasoning stems from this desire, various elements of the conference have a clear performative value that makes these actions more impactful.

It will be demonstrated that the performance activism lens is a valuable complement to the PCA lens, as this lens can lead to conclusions not only regarding substantive reasoning as the PCA framework does, but also regarding

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strategy and impact. In other words, many choices made by the women ulama regarding why they recite certain verses from the Quran or why they decided to have the Indonesian national anthem as well as a *shalawat* sung at the international conference make sense from a PCA point of view. However, combined with a performance activism lens, such choices can be understood as the result of strategic considerations intended to maximize the impact of the congresses in terms of mobilizing a community. Therefore, combining pious critical agency and performance activism as analytical lenses for this thesis allows us to understand the symbolism of and strategies behind the conferences as well as the substantive reasoning.

While "[all] forms of activism can be studied *as* performance" (emphasis in original), these conferences are especially suitable to study as performances considering that the events were heavy with symbolism and aesthetic elements, such as the performance of the *Warak Nhendhog* dance and the *Ratoeh Jaroe* dance.[110] The success of activist performances is understood to be strongly dependent on how well the activists use symbols as a way to communicate their message in a way that speaks to people's hearts and minds.[111]

Elsewhere Kloos and Ismah have argued that KUPI must not only be seen in light of its outcomes, i.e. their written statements and media coverage, but also in light of its function as a meeting place.[112] They analysed the 2017 conference as a performance and a site of exchange and suggested that the conference has played a key role in its transformation from an "intellectual enterprise into an impactful social movement". They claimed that the 2017 KUPI conference constitutes a platform and a meeting place for Islamic feminists, secular activists, and intellectuals to speak up in debates about gender, religion, and patriarchy, and to share their experiences and ideas regarding these topics. Human geographers Craggs and Mahony suggested that conferences offer important spaces for political, economic and environmental paradigms to develop in as well as spaces in which one can perform power and protest through

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110 Micu, *Performance Studies*, 87.
111 Micu, *Performance Studies*, 88
112 Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 821.

visibility. They therefore consider conferences to be closely intertwined with questions of politics and power.[113] They also consider constructing consensus "a deeply social process, dependent not only on shared knowledge but on mutually understood norms, shared standards of evidence and occasional acts of exclusion."[114]

The power-ladenness of conferences and the social nature of consensus building are amongst other things visible in language use, due to the ability/ capability/ characteristic of language to exclude certain participants.[115] This is a point that will be elaborated on more extensively in the analysis. Craggs and Mahony's article inspires to analyse actions, symbols and persons in terms of power, inclusion and exclusion and (performance of) legitimacy.

Their findings have been an inspiration for this thesis. This thesis deepens their argument in that it zooms in on elements of both conferences as performances and that it focuses on the conferences not so much as a place of exchange, but as an example of performance activism that deserves more scholarly attention. On top of that, it is the combination between the lenses of PCA and performance activism that has not been made before which distinguishes this research from previous work.

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113 Craggs and Mahony, "The Geographies," 415.
114 Craggs and Mahony, "The Geographies," 418.
115 Craggs and Mahony, "The Geographies," 416.

7. Methodology

As discussed in the previous chapter, the question that this thesis is trying to answer focuses on how the successes of the women ulama in improving the wellbeing of Indonesian women can be explained. This chapter introduces, justifies, and critically reviews the methods used for this research.

7.1 Method

The objective of this research – which is to understand why the actions of the women ulama have led to concrete improvements in the wellbeing of women in Indonesia – required a breakdown of the narrative brought forward in their self-published documents as well as an analysis of various activities of the congresses and their potential symbolic meanings. The research material for this thesis was therefore formed by documents published by KUPI in which they described the process of the first congress and its results[116] and their strategic plan after the 2017 congress on how to consolidate the movement;[117] various parts of their website about i.e. their vision and mission[118] and their history;[119] and a four-hour video of the entire international conference that formed the beginning of the 2022 congress.[120] These data were interpreted and analysed in the context of relevant literature.

Among other factors, the absence of clear variables and numerical data in the research question required a qualitative research design. In a constructivist worldview meaning of actions is constructed based on their social and cultural relevance. [121] The analysis in this thesis of the actions and impact of the women ulama within their socio-cultural context will show the reader why it coheres with a constructivist worldview.

The case study method was found to be the most appropriate research method. A case study allows for the study of a variety of sources such as

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[116] KUPI Team, *Official Documents*.

[117] Kodir, *Strategic Plan*.

[118] "KUPI Vision and Mission," About KUPI, KUPI, accessed July 11, 2024, https://kupi.or.id/visi-misi-kupi/.

[119] "History and Background of KUPI," About KUPI, KUPI, accessed July 11, 2024, https://kupi.or.id/tentang-kupi/.

[120] UIN Walisongo Semarang, "Opening Ceremony, Movement of KUPI & Plenary I of International Conference KUPI II 2022," streamed live on November 23, 2022, Youtube video, 4:42:04, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnN2N30e7mk.

[121] John W. Creswell, *Research Design, Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2018), 6, https://spada.uns.ac.id/pluginfile.php/510378/mod_resource/content/1/creswell.pdf.

documents, interviews, and observations, to obtain in-depth knowledge of a single contemporary phenomenon within its context and of the meaning that those involved have attached to it.[122] As mentioned, for this research project, different kinds of sources were analysed in order to understand, based on their narrative and activities during the congresses, how the women ulama have been able to improve the position of women in Islamic communities in Indonesia.

Even though conducting interviews is usually part of case study research,[123] practical limitations such as finances and a language barrier have stopped me from conducting interviews. Nevertheless, many of the publications used for this project were based on interviews with persons from the movement. Additionally, the sources used for this research have their own advantages as well. Firstly, the fact that they are (partially) in English provides a valuable insight into their narrative, acts, and symbolism specifically targeted at a wider, international audience. Moreover, while the document on process and outcomes was published as an "official dossier" and as a "primary reference for all stakeholders to learn about the process and results of the KUPI" providing valuable insights in their methodology, strategy, and narrative, the video of the international conference is a valuable source to see what actually happened during one specific part of the congresses. While the used documents are static and were written with the intention of having them published for an international audience, the video displays a well-thought out and well-rehearsed though not completely controllable event of human interaction. The combination of this source material has therefore allowed me to triangulate data from the documents with findings from the video.[124]

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[122] Dawson R. Hancock, Bob Algozzine, and Jae Hoon Lim, *Doing Case Study Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006), 9-10, https://student.cc.uoc.gr/uploadFiles/192-%CE%A3%CE%A0%CE%91%CE%9D104/HANCOCK%20and%20ALGOZZINE%20Case%20Study%20Research%202 02.pdf; Robert Kuo-zuir Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2014), 11, 18, https://www.google.nl/books/edition/Case_Study_Research/FzawIAdilHkC?hl=nl&gbpv=1&dq=Case+Study+ Research:+Design+and+Methods&printsec=frontcover; John Gerring, "What is a Case Study and What Is It Good for?" *The American Political Science Review* 98, no. 2 (May 2004): 342, https://www.jstor.org/stable/762b19ab-1c12-3a5a-914a-c3b15e8a382d?read-now=1&seq=2.

[123] Yin, *Case Study Research*, 11.

[124] Yin, *Case Study Research*, 18.

The first and main text of analysis is *Congress of Indonesian Women Ulama: Official Documents on Process and Outcome*. This book summarizes in 190 pages the most important outcomes of the first congress and the route that led to those, including how KUPI made decisions regarding the details of the congress (such as its location) and more substantial matters such as the religious reasoning behind their plea for equality between men and women as well as the opening and closing statements of the first congress.

The second document of analysis is called *Strengthening The Existence and Role of The Indonesian Women's Ulama: Post-KUPI Strategic Plan of the Indonesian Women's Ulama 2018-2022*. This 117-page result of several strategic planning meetings includes a breakdown of KUPI's vision and mission, their strategic planning and a list of concrete activities as implementation of the results of the first congress. It therefore provides context about the identity of the movement and about how they challenge or accept existing power structures now that they have become an entity of themselves.[125] Furthermore, the KUPI's texts about their history and background were used to interpret the meaning of their actions within their self-reported context.

While the documents about their strategy and their history and background were mainly used to put the findings of this research into perspective, the process and outcomes document was analysed as following. To start with, the document was thoroughly read to establish how KUPI characterize their movement and to determine which themes form the core of their narrative. Themes which appeared consequently throughout the whole book were 'substantive justice for women', the reinforcement of 'Islamic, national, and humanitarian values', and discrepancies between ideals or purposes of Islam and the social reality in Indonesia. The analysis therefore follows the structure of these three themes. After that, the document was read again to find out how the women ulama refer to and rely on their religion as substantiation for their ideas. This part of the analysis therefore required a breakdown of the use of Quranic verses, the *hadith*, and opinions of influential Islamic scholars, but also

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[125] Kodir, *Strategic Plan,* 9.

references to Allah and Muhammad and the higher goals of Islam. Lastly, the theoretical framework was applied to the results of the above readings so as to establish what role pious critical agency plays in the substantive approach of the women ulama and to determine the performative value of their communicative strategies.

The analysis of the video started with taking notes of several close viewings of the video during about the different activities organized during the international conference. Points of interest were for instance: who does what during the conference? At which moments do they switch between languages? Which elements are of a strictly religious nature and which elements do also showcase (regional) cultural characteristics? After this, the most interesting yet understudied elements were further interpreted to establish their potential (symbolic) meaning and communicative purpose.

7.3 Application of theoretical framework

In order to answer the research question of this thesis the discussed analytical lenses have been combined. For each element of the analysis the following consideration was made: which analytical framework is applicable to this element? Most elements which provided an insight in the substantive approach of the women ulama, for instance textual elements such as the text of the *shalawat* song, were analysed from a pious critical agency angle while most elements which demonstrate communicative strategies – for instance symbolism and visual imagery – were analysed from a performance activism point of view.

For instance, the way in which the women ulama elaborated on the substantive justice perspective that is at the basis of their reasoning was evidently more suitable for textual analysis from a pious critical agency angle, since that part of the book explains what religious basis the women ulama have for their substantive justice reasoning. However, the substantive justice perspective was also communicated through the performance of the *shalawat musawa*, a song of praise for the Prophet Muhammad. This element of the conference could therefore be analysed from both the pious critical agency angle – text and religious basis – and the performance activism angle – symbolism and

impact. Other elements, such as language switching throughout the conference made more sense from a performance activism lens and have therefore only been analysed from that angle.

7.4 Limitations

This study naturally has various methodological limitations. One of the most important and obvious limitations of this case study is that its outcomes are not representative for and generalizable to other units of study.[126] In this case, the findings regarding the impact of the women ulama in bringing about social change are very much embedded within their socio-historical context. While this makes it impossible to apply the findings of this study directly to other movements with similar objectives, the findings do present valuable lessons on how a movement could use its context to have a positive impact.

The case study also has few procedural constraints, which could result in sloppy research.[127] Although this is a valid point, this relative procedural liberty created opportunities for this thesis such as to use different kinds of available source materials. Furthermore, the analysis of the main text has been done following a clear system, as described earlier in this section.

The issue of researcher subjectivity is another methodological challenge which occurs in every type of research. [128] Instead of acting as though this is not the case for this project, my sympathy for the courage and cause of KUPI should be acknowledged.[129] In order to avert tunnel vision, others have read the material several times to give feedback on that particular aspect.

Closely intertwined with researcher subjectivity is confirmation bias. In order to decrease the risk of confirmation bias as much as possible, findings have been triangulated with existing literature and several types of source material and discussed with fellow students.

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[126] Gerring, *"Case Study,"* 348; Yin, *Case Study Research*, 15.

[127] Yin, *Case Study Research*, 14.

[128] Piet Verschuren, "Case Study as a Research Strategy: Some Ambiguities and Opportunities," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 6, no. 2 (2003): 133-134, https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1080/13645570110106154.

[129] Steven J. Taylor, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Guidebook and Resource* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Incorporated, 2015), 184, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/rug/detail.action?docID=7104054.

Lastly, no direct observation or interviewing has taken place for this project. Besides the video of the international conference, the source material for this project consisted of notes, blogposts, news articles and literature written by others who were at the congresses. While this has been a challenge, extensive use of all kinds of materials about the conferences and the video of the international congress enabled me to form an adequate view of the movement. Moreover, presence at the congresses or contact with the women ulama could have increased my sympathy for them.

This section has introduced and critically discussed the methodology of this thesis. In order to find out how the women ulama's successes in improving the wellbeing of women in Indonesia can be explained, a case study has been carried out based on several self-published documents of KUPI and a video of the international conference that was part of 2022 congress. Even though the case study method has its limitations, this research method fit best with the purpose of the research and it was the most feasible option. It has become apparent from this section that it is essential to remain aware of limitations of this research method such as researcher's bias, confirmation bias and sloppiness, and that, where possible, measures must be taken to limit their consequences. With all of this taken into account, the analysis was carried out and has been reported on in the next sections.

7.5 Structure of the analysis

The following chapters argue that KUPI have obtained successes in improving the situation of women in Indonesia for two reasons: first of all, as pious critical agents they have created a narrative that resonates with its target audience – members of the moderate and progressive Islamic community in Indonesia[130] – because they rely on religious sources and history to substantiate their claim that women can be ulama and that it is in the interest of a just Islamic society to recognize this. Second of all, they have been able to improve the wellbeing of

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[130] Nisa, "Conflicting Narratives," 437.

women in Indonesia due to their strategic performance during the congresses through which they have succeeded in forming and mobilizing a community in pursuit of a just Islamic society for all.

The following chapters present an overview of different elements of the narrative and congresses of the women ulama which have been analysed through the lens of pious critical agency, performance activism, or both. Chapter eight introduces the analysis by providing further background of the movement and their approach. The analysis has a thematic structure. Key themes of their narrative that have been focused on are the substantiation of the substantive justice principle (chapter nine), the values that are the core of their narrative (chapter ten), and the incongruity they perceive between the religious teachings and the social reality in Indonesia (chapter eleven). Key elements of the congresses that have been further analysed are the *shalawat musawa* (chapter nine), the *Warak Ngendhog* dance, the *Ratoeh Jaroe* dance, and the regular language-switching (chapter ten). Chapter twelve focuses on the strategic and performative value of *silutarrahim*.

8. KUPI

This chapter provides an overview of key aspects of KUPI so as to give an insight in their identity and approach. It seeks to explain how KUPI's identity as a grassroots transnational movement and their goal to create and mobilize a community to improve the wellbeing of Indonesian women inform the movement's approach to public interpretation of religious texts. This chapter therefore lays the groundwork for the analytical chapters that will follow.

8.1 The KUPI movement

The name *Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia* (Indonesian Women Ulama Congress) refers to the movement behind the congresses that obtained most of its shape after the 2017 congress. The women ulama are not a formal organization with a permanent organization structure or formal representation. They are a synergy of like-minded individuals and organizations; a network-based movement that is mainly built on its adherents' drive and efforts to pursue the objective of "affirm[ing] the values of Islam, nationhood and humanity".[131] Any individual or institution that shares its philosophy is explicitly invited to collaborate in pursuing its objectives. This movement, as its name suggests, is therefore always in motion. However, future KUPI congresses must include as its organizers the organisations Alimat, Fahmina and Rahima so as to guarantee that its original mission, vision and values are upheld in all congresses.[132]

8.2 Objectives as driving force

The movement's objectives are its driving force. KUPI's ultimate objective is what they call the "realization of a just and prosperous society, and free from all forms of social injustice, especially gender-based".[133] In order to achieve that, they argue that they need to be publicly recognized as authoritative ulama first, which is why obtaining public recognition for their existence and role in strengthening communities is their intermediate goal. [134]

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[131] Kodir, *Strategic Plan*, 13, 17,
[132] Kodir, *Strategic Plan,* 14, 17.
[133] KUPI, "KUPI Vision and Mission."
[134] Kodir, *Strategic Plan*, 13.

Therefore, establishing authority and credibility has a central place in their narrative, as illustrated by their repeated reference to legitimacy of KUPI and its outputs. In constituting their authority as ulama, the women ulama argue that the definition of the word *alim* does not list requirements only men can fulfil: i.e. religious leaders who have thorough knowledge and understanding of Islamic roots, who behave themselves nobly and who provide guidance to others within their communities.[135] In doing so, they refer to the Quran (*Surah Fatir*, 'the Originator'*)* which speaks of ulama "who must be of great integrity and fear only Allah SWT".[136] As such, it is a gender-neutral term.[137]

8.3 Their approach

The women ulama arguably question conventional interpretations regarding topics that affect women's wellbeing and suggest 'new' interpretations that are more advantageous to their wellbeing. In doing so, the purpose of religious norms forms the cornerstone of their interpretation. However, the suggested interpretations are hardly ever really new, as the women ulama also rely on opinions of authoritative ulama from the past. For instance, in their religious deliberations about child marriage, they give an overview of the severe consequences of child marriage for the young brides and grooms, arguing that child marriage correlates to higher numbers illiteracy, maternal mortality and infant mortality as well as that children in child marriages and their offspring more often than not suffer.[138] They rely on relevant religious texts from the Quran and the *hadith*, such as Quran *Surah ar-Ruum* ('The Romans') 30:21, to contrast the above consequences of child marriage with the intended purposes of marriage – which is to get "peace of the soul" "on the ground of compassion".[139] They also consider opinions of eminent ulama from the past, such as Abdullah ibn Syubrumah – a prominent scholar of the *salaf* – who stated that a father can only marry his daughter if she is an adult and has given her consent[140] and

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135 KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 15-16; Rohmaniyah, Kotele, and Widiastuti, "Reclaiming an Authority," 64.
136 KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 16.
137 Ismah, "Destabilising," 494.
138 KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 90-93, Arwani and Hannase, "Kupi II Congress," 916.
139 KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 94.
140 KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 97-98.

various articles of the Indonesian Constitution (e.g. article 28B(2): "Every child has the right to survive, grow, an develop, as well as the right to protection from violence and discrimination"),[141] so as to arrive at their recommendations. These include the statement that the law against child marriage is mandatory and that various parties –parents, families, the Government, and the State – are responsible for seeing to proper execution of this law.[142]

The above example demonstrates that the end-oriented reasoning of the women ulama is in accordance with a so-called renewalist transformation in Muslim intellectualism that has been observed over the past half century.[143] The end-oriented approach to Islam maintains that piety is found in one's efforts to live according to the "spirit of Islam" and requires continuous coordination between daily reality and the goals of Islam, i.e. creating a just society.[144] This renewalist transformation moves away from an Islamic ethics based solely on Islamic law and towards the integration of Islamic legal rules and the "higher aims of the law".[145] The women ulama are therefore a beautiful example of Islamic intellectualism developing into a highly contextualist intellectualism in which ethical behaviour is thought to consist of Islamic legal rules looked at from an empirical lens informed by knowledge about present-day society.

8.4 Space for dialogue

With the preparatory activities and the congresses, the women ulama created a site for dialogue between civil society agents, creating valuable networks for the movement's future. In preparation of the congresses, the women ulama have undertaken various activities aimed at "facilitating a dynamic dialogue between religious understanding and the reality of women's lives", such as a writing contest and pre-congress workshops in which they discussed the

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[141] KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 99.

[142] KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 103-105.

[143] Robert W. Hefner, "The Best and Most Trying of Times: Islamic Education and the Challenges of Modernity," in *Pathways to Contemporary Islam: New Trends in Critical Engagement* ed. Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 119-121, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvv417f6.

[144] Mohsen Kadivar, *Human Rights and Reformist Islam*, trans. Niki Akhavan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 11-12, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474449335.

[145] Hefner, "The Best," 119-121.

definition and role of the women ulama and which social issues they should engage with.[146] As such, they have created a space for dialogue about Islamic norms regarding the position and wellbeing of women.[147]

The women ulama are not the first to take the stage to create a space to express their moral agency. Various Islamic artists have dedicated performances to the objective of establishing a dialogue about issues regarding the Islamic community worldwide, such as veiling and individuality of women. Among other examples of artists expressing their agency by creating a space to question the arguably simplistic and reductionist view with which Muslims women are regarded, are *The Hijabi Monologues*. This performance uses storytelling to make the audience look beyond a woman's headscarf at the individual life stories of Muslim women.[148]

While there are obviously significant differences between such artistic groups and the women ulama in terms of what they engage with and in what form, the abovementioned artists have used their capacity to 'take action in the world' by creating a site for contestation in similar ways as the women ulama. What distinguishes the women ulama from the abovementioned artistic groups, is that they use this site for public and critical engagement with conventional interpretations of religious sources to improve two things which are closely intertwined according to the women ulama: the morality of the Islamic community and the wellbeing of women in Indonesia. By doing this both in smaller groups in preparation of the two conferences as well as with a larger audience during the actual conferences, they have done exactly what Moosa argued to be "[one] of the greatest challenges for contemporary Muslim intelligentsia": they have created a space for both women and men to question traditional interpretations of religious sources "without fear of reprisal".[149]

This chapter served to provide an overview of the movement itself, their objectives and their approach towards questioning conventional interpretations. The next chapters offer an analysis of specific elements from their narrative and

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[146] KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 33-34.
[147] Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 821.
[148] Amer, "New Horizons," 266-277, 279.
[149] Moosa, "The Ethical," 259.

the congresses so as to establish how the women ulama have been able to improve the wellbeing of women in Indonesia.

9. Substantive justice for women

9.1 *"Tawhid"* implicates essential equality

KUPI's argumentation about substantive justice is characterized by pious critical agency, as they engage critically and publicly with religious texts and conventional interpretations of those texts to substantiate the substantive justice perspective. Their understanding of essential equality between men and women as a religious norm that pious Muslims must uphold results from their interpretation of Quranic teachings and Islamic history as well as critical engagement with conventional interpretation and application of religious norms that have often resulted in patriarchal structures and domination of men over women. In that context, the women ulama invoke the principle of t*awhid* or *tauhid* as a principle that forbids patriarchy, since this teaching requires equality between men and women.[150]

The principle of *tawhid* is generally known as the fundamental principle of Islam.[151] The importance of this principle can be further exemplified by the words written on *Spirit of Islam*, a website that seeks to provide spiritual guidance to Muslims: "[as] the seed is to tree, so is *[tawhid]* to Islam. Just as the tree is a wonderfully developed extension of the seed, so is the religious system of Islam a multi-faceted expression of a single basic concept."[152] The teaching of *tawhid* emphasizes God's uniqueness and unity of God at the same time. It can even be argued that, according to this principle, it is "unicity that defines divinity."[153] While this concept itself is not explicitly found in the Quran, it is expressed throughout the Quran with the phrase 'there is no God but God'.[154]

The women ulama translate this teaching as "God is merely the Almighty Allah" and claim that, in order to be able to live up to the standard that this concept sets, equality between men and women is necessary, as submission to

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[150] KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 11.

[151] John R. Bowen, *Muslims Through Discourse: Religion and Ritual in Gayo Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 100, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv173f009; Malise Ruthven, *Islam: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 57.

[152] "The Concept of Tawheed," Spirit of Islam, accessed August 23, 2023, https://www.spiritofislam.co.in/spiritnew/index.php/the-concept-of-tawheed#.

[153] Ruthven, *Islam*, 57-58.

[154] Ruthven, *Islam*, 57.

anyone else than Allah is a humiliation of humanity.[155] As such, the teaching of *tawhid* presupposes that all man are equal before God, which is also a prevalent explanation of the principle in the literature and on websites for religious guidance.[156] Based on this statement of equality, the women ulama renounce all forms of domination and oppression, such as patriarchy that arguably allows for oppression and humiliation of women. [157]

Further substantiating this argumentation for essential equality of men and women, they rely on the history of the prophets. During the time of the Prophet Mohammad for instance, Arab *jahiliyah* (uncivilized) society was strongly characterized by patriarchy. During this period, the humanity of women was questioned, allowing for women's oppression. Based on this, the women ulama recognize the need in patriarchal societies to confirm the humanity of women "on the basis of faith".[158] They therefore rely on various teachings from the Quran to prove that women are indeed unequivocally human beings, thus should not be oppressed. For instance, *Surat al-Mu'minuun* 23:12-14 states that "women do not come from men" and that men and women were created "from the same material and process". As such, the main argument against oppression of women (their humanity), which was also invoked by the Prophet and his advisors, has a strong basis in Islamic sources.[159] As such, KUPI claim that treating women fair and well is a religious norm that must be upheld by pious Muslims.[160]

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[155] KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 17.
[156] Sumanto Al-Qurtuby, "The Islamic Roots of Liberation, Justice, and Peace: An Anthropocentric Analysis of the Concept of "Tawhīd"," *Islamic Studies* 52, no. 3/4 (Autumn-Winter 2013): 318, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43997226; Ferhat John, "Tawhid and Social Justice: An Islamic Perspective," *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)* 9, no. 6 (June 2021): 737-744, https://ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT2106811.pdf; Yousuf Ali, "Al-Tawhid and its Effects on Man's Life," *Jurnal Usuluddin* 23 (2006): 21, https://ejournal.um.edu.my/index.php/JUD/article/view/4237/2084; "Tawhid and Social Justice," The Islamic Society of UNSW, accessed August 23, 2023, https://isoc-unsw.org.au/2018/08/09/tawhid-and-social-justice/; Leyelle Mosallam, "The Importance of Social Justice and Equality in Islam," Arab America, accessed August 23, 2023, https://www.arabamerica.com/the-importance-of-social-justice-and-equality-in-islam/.
[157] KUPI Team, *Official Documents,* 18.
[158] KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 18.
[159] KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 19
[160] KUPI Team, *Official Documents,* 18-19.

9.2 Substantive justice principle

Nevertheless, they engage with the principle of equality between men and women critically by invoking the substantive justice perspective. This perspective entails five main guidelines with regards to the interpretation of religious rules and norms: Firstly, they claim that religious texts are in dialogue with reality and that religious teachings which are not a 'Final Goal' – such as essential equality between men and women – "must be addressed as a temporary matter whilst preparing enabling conditions for achievement of the 'Final Goals'" – such as substantive justice for women.[161] Furthermore, it includes interpreting religious teachings contextually, so as to consider the social reality of women as "individuals, Muslims, citizens of Indonesia and of the world" as social reality differs strongly from the time of the Prophet Muhammad. This is not new. Classical jurists also engaged with identifying religious norms from revelationist teachings and translating these into lived realities. Some even argue interpretations and applications of norms that lead to oppression and violence are the result of a lack of proper translation of religious norms into contextual lived realities.[162] Next, it relies on the values of nationhood and humanity as essential values with which Islamic values should be compatible, arguing that applying Islamic values can never result in inhumanity or national disunity. The fourth principle emphasizes that individual piety and structural piety should be developed synchronically, as they are closely entangled. Lastly, the women ulama state that any method for interpreting religious teachings must consider the biological and social characteristics of women.[163]

Although the women ulama challenge conventions by suggesting alternative interpretations to religious texts, their approach towards establishing religious norms is embedded in Islamic intellectual history. This arguably increases their narrative's resonance with the Islamic community. The reasoning based on which the women ulama arrive at the substantive justice principle to some extent corresponds the way in which influential Muslim scholars from the past interpreted Islamic law (*shari'a).* This is what scholars nowadays call the

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[161] KUPI Team, *Official Documents,* 20-21.
[162] Moosa, "The Ethical," 244.
[163] KUPI Team, *Official Documents,* 21.

anthropology and sociology of Islamic law. Scholars such as al-Mawardi (d. 1058) – an Muslim judge and jurist who publicized on political theory and ethics in Islam[164] – and Ibn Aqil (d. 1119) – a liberal-minded Hanbali scholar who argued that a governments' policies needed to cohere with the purpose of the revelation[165] – used a purpose-ended and value-based approach to law. Similarly, the women ulama argue that interpretations of Islamic rules can never be not in accordance with the principle of *tawhid* or with important values such as (substantive) justice. As such, they have not invented a new way of thinking about Islamic teachings. Instead, they are following in the footsteps of great and influential Islamic thinkers from the past which allows them to rely on the authority of those thinkers.

The substantiation of the substantive justice perspective in itself demonstrates pious critical agency for three reasons. First, as demonstrated above, it highlights that *tawhid* is at the basis of the entire narrative of the women ulama because it is the core of all Islamic teachings. Second, it shows that being pious and spreading piety is seen as the way in which women can and should be liberated from unfair treatment oppression. As discussed, the women ulama argue that living according to the religious norms as interpreted by them necessarily bans oppression from society and leads to substantive justice. Third, they argue that it is the duty of a pious Muslim in one's observance of Islamic norms to uphold the substantive justice principle, they create a space to discuss this and they substantiate it with religious textual fragments.

9.3 *Shalawat musawa* as an expression of *tawhid*
If the substantive message of KUPI itself is not enough to mobilize the community to act in accordance with the substantive justice principle, the performance of the *shalawat musawa* during the international conference that marks the start of the 2022 congress further motivates them to do so. The s*halawat* m*usawa* was

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[164] Moosa, "The Ethical," 236; "Al-Mawardi," Britannica, last modified July 11, 2007, https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Mawardi.
[165] Moosa, "The Ethical," 243; "Ibn Aqil," Britannica, last modified July 20, 1998, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ibn-Aqil.

performed by the State Islamic University Walisongo Student Choir. It followed their performance of the Indonesian national anthem. *Sholowat*, more commonly written as *shalawat*, is a kind of prayer that Muslims sing to ask for blessing and salvation of the Prophet.[166] There are different kinds of *shalawat*, the one performed at the conference is called *shalawat musawa. Musawa* translates to "equality and honesty in relationships".[167] After invoking blessings upon Muhammad and all who believe in the oneness of God, the lyrics highlight the necessity for men and women to coexist and collaborate in a harmonious and just relationship, referencing their creation by Allah 'from one and the same self.'

Similar to the reasoning behind the substantive justice perspective, the lyrics to this *shalawat* communicate that a just life for men and women follows from a proper implementation of the *tawhid* principle. The entire lyrics to the *shalawat* are listed in the slide in figure one in Arabic, Bahasa Indonesian, and English. This slide was presented at the international conference during the performance of the *shalawat*. The first stanza "Oh Allah, please bless and grant the safety to the Prophet Mohammad endlessly – and his companions and whoever has oneness with God" is a sentence that is often heard in Indonesia at religious events and lectures before or after prayer.[168] The second stanza, which says that men and women were created from the same element, references an interpretation of the creation of men and women as found in verse one of *Surah An-Nisa*' ('the Women'). It implies that men and women's creation from the soul of the one and only God forbids oppression, as the only entity to which people can be subordinates is Allah.[169] This idea is further elaborated on in the final part of the *shalawat*. The third and fourth stanza describe the required harmony between men and women: a society can only be prosperous if men *and* women work hard, and a society can only be fair if it is just for both men *and* women. In

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[166] Eni Zulfa Hidayah et al. "Sholawat Musawah: The Concept of Equality Between A Good Life (Hayatan Thayyibah) and A Fair Life (Hayatan 'Adilah)," *Fenomena: Journal of the Social Sciences* 21, no. 2 (July-December 2022): 218, https://fenomena.uinkhas.ac.id/index.php/fenomena/article/view/126/75.
[167] Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, "Shalawat Musawa," Kupipedia, accessed June 28, 2024, https://kupipedia.id/index.php/Shalawat_Musawah.
[168] Kodir, "Shalawat Musawa."
[169] Hidayah et al. "Sholawat Musawah," 222-223.

other words, while both men and women must be involved in creating a good society, both must also experience its benefits in order for it to be just.[170]

This *shalawat* was written in 2001 by Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir at the request of Rahima. It was written to be sung at Rahima's training days for ulama as an Islamic and Arabic substitute for the English song *We Shall Overcome.*[171] Thus while the *shalawat* was not written by the women ulama themselves, it is a product of pious critical agency of one of their main organizers as it is a declaration of belief and piety created as a medium through which discussions about religious norms and gender justice can be started.

Figure 1: Lyrics to the Shalawat Musawa as presented at the international conference. The English lyrics read: "Oh Allah, please bless and grant the safety to the Prophet Mohammad endlessly – and his companions and whoever has oneness with God." (Repeated twice, first sung by the female singers, then by the male singers, then by the entire choir). "Allah has created both (men and women) from one and the same self" (not repeated) – "then he created from both mankind (men and women)" (repeated once by all). Truly, we will never be able to witness a prosperous life – without the hard work of all of us, men and women (repeated twice, first sung by the female singers, then by the male singers, then by the entire choir). "Seriously, we can never get a fair life" (not repeated) – "without justice for all of us, men and women" (repeated once by all). These lyrics are repeated once more. UIN Walisongo Semarang, "Opening Ceremony," 00:38:07.

9.4 *Shalawat musawa* as a performance

While focusing on the origins and meaning of this *shalawat* offers valuable insights in its entanglement with KUPI's narrative, analysing this song as a form of

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[170] Kodir, "Shalawat Musawa."
[171] Kodir, "Shalawat Musawa."

performance activism illuminates that the song contains several communicative strategies to increase its impact.

First of all, it must be noted that the lyrics of the *shalawat musawa* were depicted during the performance in Arabic, Indonesian and English. In contrast, the lyrics of the Indonesian national anthem, which was performed by the same choir right before the *shalawat musawa* seemed to be only presented in Indonesian. This arguably demonstrates that it was more important to the women ulama that the entire audience understand the content of the *shalawat musawa* than that of the national anthem. A possible reason for is that even though national unity and nationhood are important pillars of the narrative of the women ulama, the *shalawat musawa* literally contains their core message that a just society requires a harmonious relationship between men and women.

Nevertheless, by inviting the audience to participate in the performance of the national anthem, this element of the congress was arguably used to activate the audience so as to make them more receptive of the upcoming elements of the conference by uniting them in a sense of pride and harmony. During the performance of the national anthem, the female conductor was turned towards the audience and the audience was asked to stand up for the national anthem. While this is not uncommon during a performance of any

national anthem, it did explicitly constitute the act of transforming the audience into participants and it arguably created a contrast with the *shalawat* during which the conductor was turned towards the choir (as depicted in figure two).

Figure 2: Performance of the Shalawat Musawa, conductor is turned towards the choir. UIN Walisongo Semarang, "Opening Ceremony," 00:36:41.

Although the audience of any congress are to some extent performers, "as their role lends credence to (…)

and forms an integral part of the iconography of the conference,"[172] this act that turned the audience into performers can also be understood as an attempt to impact hearts and minds[173] with a sense of community for all and national pride specifically for Indonesians.

Hence, it can be considered a strategic move with which the women ulama tried to appeal to those who were already sympathetic to their endeavours and to make sceptics more receptive of their message right when the conference started. Importantly, while the narrative of the KUPI may suggest overall agreement among the different parties at the congresses, substantial differences of opinion about for instance whether secular activists or *nyai* (female religious leaders) are better-suited to understand the situation in their communities revealed a fundamental struggle for (religious) authority within the movement.[174] It is therefore understood that a major objective of the various elements of the conferences was to create a sense of community and harmony.[175]

If the national anthem performance was meant to make the audience more sympathetic to and receptive of the messages of KUPI and to create a sense of community and harmony among the audience, the *shalawat musawa* arguably was intended to achieve the same in a different way. As discussed, *shalawat* is a form of worship. Worship is considered to be able to bring about strong emotions in those engaging in it and it can bring expression to internal spiritual quests as well as to "public social and political discourse."[176] It is therefore understood here that besides its spiritual function that has been discussed before, this shared act of worship has the social function of creating a sense of shared norms or purpose.[177] The audience, which had just had the experience of standing up together to listen to and/ or sing the Indonesian national anthem now find themselves as spectators of and possibly even participant in a public act of

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[172] Shimazu, "Diplomacy as Theatre," 234.

[173] Micu, *Performance Studies*, 97.

[174] Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 830-836.

[175] Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 838.

[176] Bowen, *Muslims Through Discourse*, 290-293.

[177] Craggs and Mahony, "The Geographies," 418.

worship together with others who may be from other regions, countries, religions, socio-economic status, etc.

Moreover, the form in which the message of the *shalawat* is communicated arguably creates a sense of empowerment, the idea that "men and women 'can improve society together'".[178] They communicate this for instance through the use of repetition in the *shalawat* as laid out in figure one. The first and third stanza of the *shalawat* are sung first by the female singers only, then by the male singers, after which the entire choir repeats them. This may be a way to indicate the beauty and strength of men and women in harmony. On top of that, while the first stanza is started by the female singers only, the final stanza is repeated twice by the entire choir. This may indicate that improving the wellbeing of women in Indonesia is not just a women's struggle, it is everybody's struggle. Besides, it could also indicate that only if men and women join forces in this journey, that they will be able to achieve the best result. It is just one of the many ways in which the women ulama use both content and form to strengthen their messages and in this case create a sense of urgency towards working together on this.

Besides, the *shalawat* conveys a very message, as discussed before, that is communicated in such a way that is likely to stick with the people. Firstly, the lyrics to this *shalawat* are familiar to the Indonesian audience, since they are much used in religious gatherings and because about half of its diction uses vocabulary from the Quran.[179] Secondly, this short text with familiar vocabulary has much repetition. It is therefore probable that the Arabic-understanding part of the audience will memorize this text easily.[180]

The above demonstrates that it is not just in their self-published documents that the women ulama demonstrate a substantive justice perspective. While the analysis of the substantive justice perspective as presented in the documents arguably illustrates that it is pious critical considerations that this reasoning is based on, an analysis of how this perspective is brought to life during

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[178] Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 838.
[179] Hidayah et al. "Sholawat Musawah," 223.
[180] Hidayah et al. "Sholawat Musawah," 223.

the events corroborates the conclusion that the women ulama have arguably also instrumentalized communicative strategies so as to make their message stick with the audience and create a sense of shared norms and objectives.

10. Strengthening Islamic values, nationhood, and humanity

10.1 Nationhood and humanity alongside Islamic values

As touched upon shortly in the previous chapter, the women ulama centralize the values of humanity and nationhood in their application of religious teachings to any social reality.[181] The whole book about the process and outcomes of the 2017 KUPI congress, revolves around these values of humanity and nationhood in combination with references to 'Islam' or 'Islamic values'. The following extract from the first chapter of the book on process and outcomes demonstrates this well:

> Today, Indonesia has witnessed many women ulama actively contributing to affirming *Islamic values, nationhood, and humanity*. It is time for women ulama to consolidate themselves to strengthen their clerical capacity, meet each other, and then move together to build the *civilization of Islam, the nation and humanity* with male clerics, state authorities, and all other elements of civil society. Thus, the existence of women ulama needs to be further strengthened to foster their roles for *Islam, the nation and humanity*, and to provide real contribution to the handling of various real-existing problems through the synergy among women themselves and between women ulama and the relevant stakeholders. Women ulama are also expected to *revive the spirit of Islam, justice, equality, nationhood, and humanity* into the minds and actions of people and society, as well as state law and policy. (Emphasis added).

The women ulama evidently identify their mission as strengthening Islamic values, as well as nationhood and humanity, and they feel that their role in this process is bringing together a united movement of women ulama that can revive these values in the people and society. It is part their *raison d'être*. This implies that they relate having a strong Islamic value system with the opportunity for the nation and humanity to thrive.

Examining the place of these values in the narrative of women ulama through an anthropocentric understanding of the concept *tawhid* – which

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[181] KUPI Team, *Official Documents,* 21.

suggests *tawhid* to create the conditions for a just and peaceful society – favours the interpretation that the emphasis of the women ulama on reinforcing these values can be considered a further demonstration of pious critical agency. [182] Because Islamic values, nationhood and humanity are strongly intertwined in their view of a just Islamic society, disseminating their views and creating sites for dialogue about as well as a support base for their ideas is what they consider needs to be done to integrate these values. In that sense, their efforts to reinforce Islamic values, nationhood and humanity arguably have their origins in the fundamental Islamic teaching and are therefore part of their efforts to live piously and spread piety.

Elements of this anthropocentric understanding of *tawhid* are also presented in *The Pledge of Kebon Jambu on Women Ulama*, a statement about the existence and roles of women ulama, one of the results of the 2017 KUPI congress. In the pledge, they state that one of their missions as ulama – "heirs of the Prophet who carry *tawhid* missions" – is to "liberate human beings from the servitude to those other than Allah, to perform good deeds (*amar ma'ruf)* and forbid the evil *(nahi munkar)*, to consider all humans human, and to improve righteous moral conduct *(akhlak mulia)* for the sake of brining grace to the universe".[183] It is clear from this extract that the women ulama consider their *tawhid* missions to help create a just society in which humans show good behaviour towards each other and to the world around them. Their self-identification as a "*rahmatan lil 'alamin* Islamic movement", which means so much as an Islamic movement that provides grace to all mankind and the environment, again emphasizes this element of their mission.

Another reason why the values of nationhood and humanity are prominently present in the KUPI's narrative could be that they focus strongly on the social reality in which Muslims try to uphold the religious standards of Islam. The social reality of the women ulama themselves is that they are citizens of Indonesia, a

[182] Al-Qurtuby, "Islamic Roots".
[183] KUPI Team, *Official Documents,* 46.

nation that has had a bloody struggle for its independence[184] in which the constitution is the highest legal source. This citizenship comes with the responsibility to act bound by the Indonesian Constitution and in such a way that the nation's aspirations are not harmed.[185] Simultaneously, their explicit attention for these values and the Indonesian Constitution alongside Islamic norms and values could in fact be explained as a strategic choice to demonstrate their contextualist approach to piety and thereby identify themselves in the spectrum of Islamic organizations and social movements in Indonesia. It clearly positions them against conservative Islamists who have tried to make the case that shariah law supersedes national law in legality and morality.[186]

10.2 Nationalist values as a strategic performance

It is however more likely that the focus of the women ulama on values such as nationhood and humanity is at least partially a strategic move that brings the KUPI's objectives in line with those of the political elite, a move which is therefore meant to break down resistance on the side of the political elite. Kloos and Ismah have argued elsewhere that the international character of the movement and its congresses does not in any way undermine its domestic agenda. By creating "a narrative of success" they attempt to turn "their progressive agenda from a political liability – because challenging the mainstreaming of Islamic conservatism – into a source of national pride".[187] Kloos and Ismah consider nationalist symbolism and imagery throughout the congresses to showcase this intention, as it focuses the attention of the global audience on the fact that it is Indonesian women who are arguably successfully challenging patriarchy,[188] which has as such been framed as a universal enemy.[189]

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[184] A thorough historical overview of the anti-colonial struggle and nationalism in Indonesia is provided by George McT. Kahin, *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.7591/9781501731396.

[185] KUPI Team, *Official Documents,* 46.

[186] Robert W. Hefner, "The Religious Field: Plural Legacies and Contemporary Contestations," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Indonesia*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (London: Routledge, 2018), 213, https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.4324/9781315628837; Kathryn Robinson, "Female Ulama Voice a Vision for Indonesia's Future," New Mandala, last modified May 30, 2017, https://www.newmandala.org/female-ulama-voice-vision-indonesias-future/.

[187] Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 830-831.

[188] Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 830-831.

[189] Micu, *Performance Studies*, 91.

The repeated claim of the KUPI that strengthening Islamic values, nationhood and humanity are part of their objectives creates the dramatic frame of a global struggle within which the women ulama have become heroic figures.[190] Hence, a source of national pride instead of a threat to those in power.

In spite of this frame, regular switching between English and Bahasa Indonesian during the congresses reveals that above all, KUPI serve a domestic agenda.[191] Language has the potential to include and exclude certain groups of people,[192] for instance those who do not understand English or Bahasa Indonesia. Interestingly, even during the international conference – which, as its name suggests, specifically targeted an international audience – key elements, such as the welcoming remark by professor Imam Taufik (UIN Walisongo University), the speech of *nyai* Badriyah Fayumi (head of the KUPI *musyawarah* council), and the opening speech of the vice governor of Java were in Bahasa Indonesian. While this could be explained by the possibility that some or all of these persons do not speak English, which has not been verified for this project, it nevertheless draws the attention that of these speeches only the welcoming remark of professor Imam Taufik was (partially) translated in English and presented on the slides during his speech. As such, it can be argued that the choice has been made by the organizational committee to translate some speeches to English and leave others in Bahasa Indonesian. This indicates that even though the international conference has the purpose of creating an international community, the main interest of the women ulama is improving the wellbeing of *Indonesian* women, hence a domestic agenda.

As mentioned, it is not only in their narrative that Islamic, national and humanitarian values are centralized and aligned with each other. Further analysis will demonstrate that, during the conferences, musical elements such as the performances of the *Warak Ngendhog* Dance as well as the *Ratoeh Jaroe* dance suggest that in their efforts to establish a just society for men and women, they

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[190] Micu, *Performance Studies*, 91.
[191] Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 830-831.
[192] Craggs and Mahony, "The Geographies," 416.

rely strongly on the concept of a harmonious nation. Existing structures and cultural traditions are therefore to some extent relied on instead of challenged, in an effort to speak to and create a positive attitude among the audience regarding the ideas of KUPI. As such, the women ulama's actions are in dialogue with established norms and hierarchies.[193]

10.3 Musical performances

In a similar way as the Mexican *Zapatista* movement – a movement that protested strongly against the privatization of indigenous lands in Mexico and whose endurance is often explained by their ingenious "use of performative strategies to appeal to a national and international global audience"[194] – the women ulama demonstrate the ability to organize performative events in which they bring together powerful symbols from both (regional) Indonesian culture(s), Islamic, and popular culture, and in which they make strategic use of their ties with established organizations, such as NU, MUI, and Muhammadiyah, and authoritative persons in Indonesia.[195] Like the *Zapatistas,* the women ulama use songs, dances, speeches, and other performative elements as communicative strategies in their congresses through which they attempt to speak to a broad and diverse audience. Two songs and dances in particular will be discussed in detail here.

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[193] Rinaldo, *Mobilizing Piety*, 21.
[194] Micu, *Performance Studies*, 93.
[195] KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 5.

10.3.1. *Warak Ngendhog*

The *Warak Ngendhog* Dance is centred around the figure of the *Warak Ngendhog*, a mythological creature with characteristics of a dragon, a camel, and a goat (see figure three). It is widely known as a cultural icon of the city of Semarang, Java.[196] The *Warak Ngendhog* is generally considered a unifying symbol of the three main ethnic groups in Semarang: the
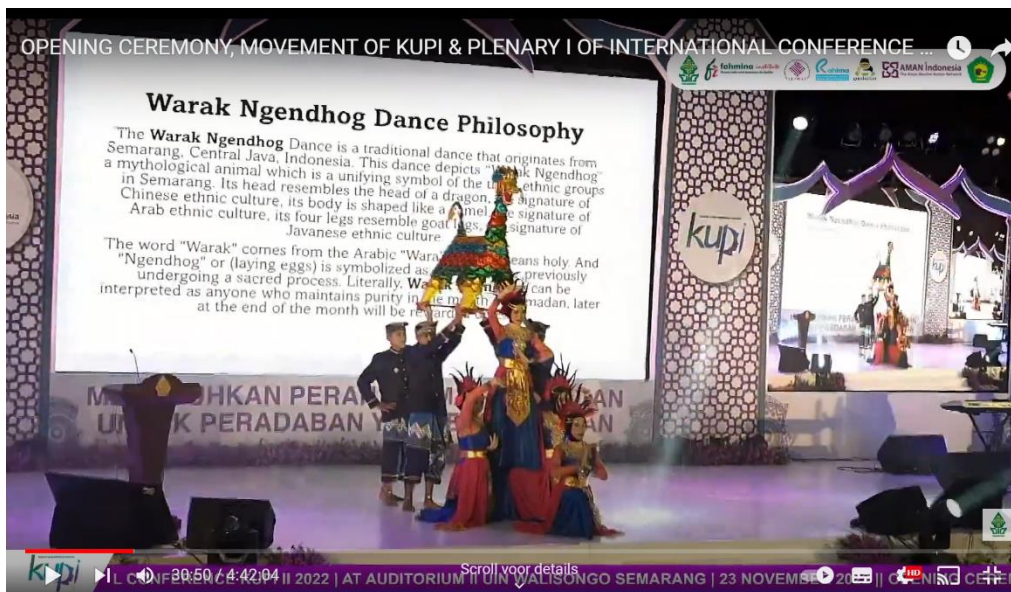

Figure 3 Warak Ngendhog performance. The slide reads the following text: "The Warak Ngendhog Dance is a traditional dance that originates from Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia. This dance depicts "Warak Ngendhog", a mythological animal which is a unifying symbol of the three ethnic groups in Semarang. Its head resembles the head of a dragon, the signature of Chinese ethnic culture, its body is shaped like a camel, the signature of Arab ethnic culture, its four legs resemble goat legs, the signature of Javanese ethnic culture. The word "warak" comes from the Arabic "Wara'I" which means holy. And "Ngendhog" or (laying eggs) is symbolized as a reward after previously undergoing a sacred process. Literally, Warak Ngendhog can be interpreted as anyone who maintains purity in the month of Ramadan, later at the end of the month will be rewarded on Eid." UIN Walisongo Semarang, "Opening Ceremony," 00:30:50.

Javanese, the Chinese, and the Arabs.[197] It functions as the mascot of Semarang and more specifically of the *Dugderan* Festival. This festival was started in 1881 in an effort to reunite the three ethnic groups of Semarang who had been divided as a result of colonization. As such, it was created as a festivity for all to mark the beginning of the Ramadan.[198]

While its shape represents these three ethnic groups in one mythological creature and thereby arguably spreads a unifying message among the people of Semarang, its name, *Warak Ngendhog*, reveals its original function, which was to motivate people – especially children – to practice fasting during the month of the Ramadan.[199] '*Warak*' comes from the Arabic word '*Wara*', which means

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[196] Kharisma Ayu Febriana, Yulianto Budi Setiawan, and Firdaus Azwar Ersyad, "Warak Ngendhog Commodification as a Kind of Creative Industry in Semarang City," *Jurnal the Messenger* 11, no. 1 (January 2019): 29, http://dx.doi.org/10.26623/themessenger.v11i1.925.

[197] UIN Walisongo Semarang, "Opening Ceremony," 00:27:40 – 00:31:00; Febriana, Setiawan, and Ersyad, "Warak Ngendhog," 32.

[198] "Dugderan: A Tradition of Welcoming Ramadan in Semarang City," Article, Parawisata Provinsi Jawa Tengah, last modified March 30, 2022, https://visitjawatengah.jatengprov.go.id/en/article/dugderan-a-tradition-of-welcoming-ramadan-in-semarang-city.

[199] Febriana, Setiawan, and Ersyad, "Warak Ngendhog," 34 – 36.

'holy'. '*Ngendhog*' means 'laying eggs'. Hence, it communicates the message that those who follow the rules of the Ramadan will be rewarded on the day of *Eid*. Considering the above, the *Warak Ngendhog* on the stage of the international conference arguably constitutes at the same time a symbol of harmony towards the audience and an encouragement to live in accordance with Islamic norms.

The place of the *Warak Ngendhog* dance in the international conference implicates that it represents the core message of the women ulama. As it is the first element of the international conference, the event literally starts off with a celebratory performance centred around a regional cultural symbol. Moreover, it encapsulates the official welcome to two prominent figures of the state of Indonesia, the vice governor of Central Java H. Taj Yasin Maimoen and the rector of the State Islamic University (UIN) Walisongo prof. dr. Imam Taufiq. In fact, they form the centre of a procession, opened by the female dancers of the *Warak Ngendhog* routine and closed by the male dancers who carry the *Warak Ngendhog* creature (see figure four). They walk towards their seats accompanied by the same music that is played during the performance. On top of that, it precedes a performance of the Indonesian national anthem by the State Islamic University Walisongo Student Choir.

It could be argued that the entrance of these two persons directly followed by the *Warak Ngendhog* figure is a kind of visual imagery used to symbolize the support of the vice governor and the rector of the university for both messages of the *Warak Ngendhog*.[200] In that way, they are associated with the KUPI's call to the audience to unify themselves for a common cause in spite of potential differences of opinion and/ or backgrounds,[201] and at the same time with the call to the audience to live according to religious norms such as the Ramadan. Similarly, the choice to have this performance directly followed by a performance of the national anthem could be an attempt to further define the scope of unification beyond the women ulama movement to include the Indonesian nation.

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[200] Shimazu, "Diplomacy as Theatre," 244.
[201] Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 830-836.

Figure 4: Entrance of the vice governor of Java and the rector of UIN Walisongo State University followed by the Warak Ngendhog. *UIN Walisongo Semarang, "Opening Ceremony," 00:26:32.*

10.3.2. *Ratoeh Jaroe*

Similarly, the *Ratoeh* (or *Ratoh*) *Jaroe* dance can be interpreted to be a communicative strategy intended to create a sense of community and an optimistic spirit among the audience regarding KUPI's efforts to improve the wellbeing of women in Indonesia. The *Ratoeh Jaroe* dance is the first element of the first plenary session. The performance on stage consists of young women engaging in rhythmic, synchronous and up-tempo clapping combined with hand and arm movements to the rhythm of percussion and singing usually provided by two to three *syahi* – musicians who also act as vocalists[202] – who are located outside the dance formation.[203] However, in this specific performance they might also be using a recording of the *syahi*, since there are no *syahi* visible in the video. The women are in sitting position. At times the dancing women accompany their moves with high-pitched shouts and singing. It is another originally regional cultural dance that contains a message of harmony and

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[202] Karine Wangsaputra, "The Value Behind Art: What It Actually Tells Us," in *Proceeding International Conference FKI-XI 2021 Indonesian Art Spirit: Cultural Ecosystem and Diversity*, ed. Nani Sriwardani (Bandung: Sunan Ambu Press, 2021), 96-97, https://lppm.isbi.ac.id/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/prosiding-fki_merged_compressed_watermark.pdf#page=102.

[203] Maho A. Ishiguro, "Ratoeh Jaroe: Islam, Youth, and Popular Dance in Jakarta, Indonesia," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 51 (2019): 76, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48564254; Cut Nana (@Tjoet), "Ratoh Jaroe Dance From Aceh," Steemit blogpost, n.d., https://steemit.com/art/@tjoet/ratoh-jaroe-dance-from-aceh.

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empowerment through its use of rhythmic sounds and accompanying movements of the dancers. This message is fully embraced by KUPI as the dance was introduced by the host with the following words: "This beautiful and harmonious dance inspires us that even though we have different gender, different colour, and in this movement, we have different roles and actions, we can still be together and gather our forces. May we find the beauty in harmony in our movement."

Ratoeh Jaroe is a type of dance that is based on Acehnese traditional seated body-percussion dances to which modifications have been made in terms of for instance speed, aesthetics, songs, and movements.
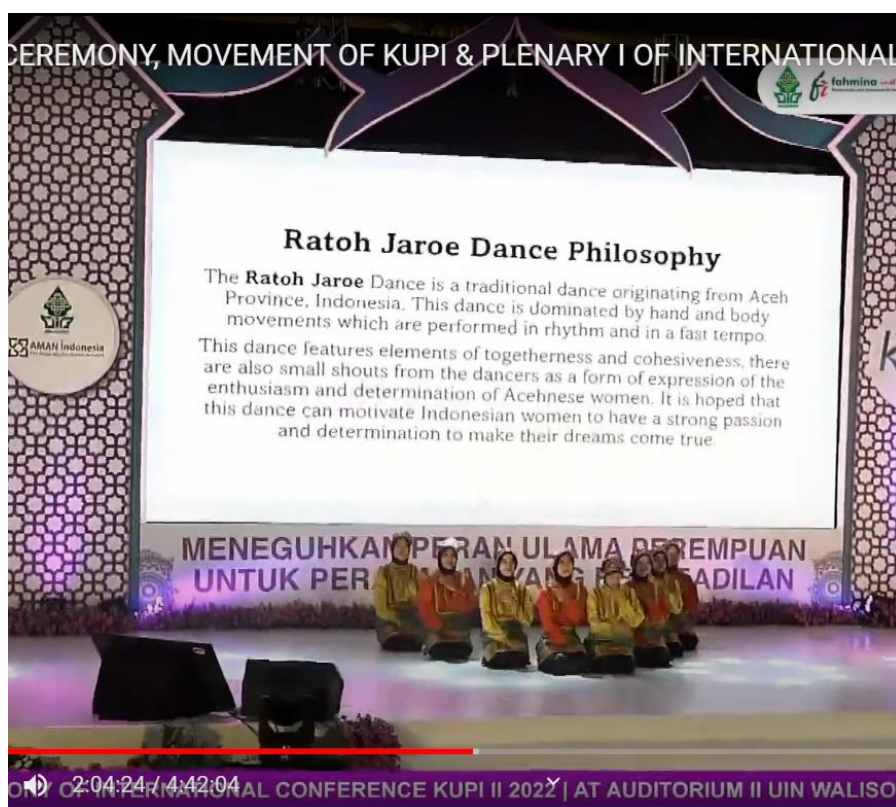

Figure 5: The Ratoh Jaroe *Dance performance. The slide reads the following text: "The* Ratoh Jaroe *Dance is a traditional dance originating from Aceh Province, Indonesia. This dance is dominated by hand and body movements which are performed in rhythm and in a fast tempo. This dance features elements of togetherness and cohesiveness, there are also small shouts from the dancers as a form of expression of the enthusiasm and determination of Acehnese women. It is hoped that this dance can motivate Indonesian women to have a strong passion and determination to make their dreams come true." UIN Walisongo Semarang, "Opening Ceremony," 02:04:24.*

Because of that it is an example of *kreasi baru*, a 'new creation'.[204] It is seen by many as a counterpart to the traditional *Tari Saman* dance, a dance form *Ratoeh Jaroe* was inspired by that only men can do.

Besides it being a demonstration of the elegance, harmony and determination of Acehnese women, [205] it is also considered an expression of

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204 Ishiguro, "Ratoeh Jaroe," 76-77, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48564254.
205 Wangsaputra, "The Value," 97.

rebellion, as it was especially created for women to be able to dance in a way that used to be men's prerogative as well as because *Ratoeh Jaroe* songs often communicate histories of war and (de)colonization.[206] This is not surprising, considering that the decolonization period constituted an increase in women's movements, emancipation, and nationalist movements,[207] themes linked to the *Ratoeh Jaroe* tradition. On top of that, these songs usually contain praise for Allah as the original sitting body-percussion dances were used to spread Islam throughout Indonesia.[208] Its origins in (Sufi) devotional practices is still visible in the synchronicity of the movements, the movements themselves and the fact that the dancers are in sitting position.[209] This dance form is therefore considered to "[bring] national values into an art that will be easier for millennials to absorb".[210]

     Ratoeh Jaroe is a very popular dance form throughout Indonesia, especially in Jakarta. Some even use the term "*Ratoeh Jaroe*" exclusively to refer to the "Jakarta Style" sitting dances, a slightly different kind of *Ratoeh Jaroe* in which elements of other coastal dances have been incorporated.[211] The Jakarta Style sitting dance are a popular extra-curricular activity for young girls in most high schools in Jakarta[212] and it was performed at the opening ceremony of the Asian Games hosted by Indonesia in 2018.[213] This type of performance is beloved at national and international events because of the unity it displays – which symbolizes harmony between different cultures in Indonesia – and the teamwork it requires among the dancers.[214]

     Considering that "the success of activist performances [depends] on how well they manage to create or use certain symbols in order to convey a message

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[206] Wangsaputra, "The Value," 97; Sarah McCaffery, "Exploring Dance From Aceh, Indonesia," Asia Society, accessed 26 June, 2024, https://asiasociety.org/exploring-dance-aceh-indonesia.

[207] Arwani and Hannase, "KUPI II Congress, 908.

[208] Murtala Murtala, Alfira O'Sullivan, and Paul H. Mason, "Artistic Expressions And Ethno-cultural Identity: A Case Study of Acehnese Body Percussion in Indonesia," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Ethnicity*, ed. Steven Ratuva (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 1958, https://link-springer-com.proxy-ub.rug.nl/referencework/10.1007/978-981-13-2898-5; Wangsaputra, "The Value," 97.

[209] Ishiguro, "Ratoeh Jaroe," 95.

[210] Wangsaputra, "The Value," 97.

[211] Murtala, O'Sullivan, and Mason, "Artistic Expressions," 1974.

[212] Ishiguro, "Ratoeh Jaroe," 78, 87.

[213] Murtala, O'Sullivan, and Mason, "Artistic Expressions," 1960.

[214] Murtala, O'Sullivan, and Mason, "Artistic Expressions," 1960; Ishiguro, "Ratoeh Jaroe," 77.

that appeals to and impacts hearts and minds,"[215] it is not surprising that the women ulama chose exactly this dance to be performed at the international conference. First of all, it is an originally regional product that has gained national and international fame; as such it can be considered a source of national pride for both the 'regular' audience and officials. Therefore, a dance such as this one is likely to create a positive attitude among the audience. At the same time, it is a very popular dance form among young Indonesian girls, the population group that is likely to benefit most from the endeavours of the women ulama. Secondly, it is a dance that can only be performed by women and it has been specifically designed as such out of protest against a similar dance that was only intended for men to do. There is a very strong analogy between the coming about of this dance and the actions of the women ulama as they are trying to revise the term *ulama* to also designate women. Therefore, this dance arguably symbolizes the struggle women – be they dancers or religious scholars – go through to be able to do the same things as men. Thirdly, similar to the *Warak Ngendhog* dance, this dance calls for harmony. In addition to that, this dance brings across a message of protest and determination as communicated by the text on the slide in figure five and the hosts' words. It shows that Indonesian women can be multiple things at the same time: elegant and determined, feminine and authoritative, a mother and an *alim*. Lastly, this dance form is based on and contains elements of other seated body-percussion dances that were used to spread Islam throughout Indonesia. As such, it symbolizes the pious character of the women ulama.

In short it can be argued that musical elements constitute a characterizing communicative strategy of KUPI, used to bring across messages of harmony, unity and empowerment in a way that appeals to a diverse audience so as to maximize the impact of their messages. They do this by carefully choosing the most appropriate songs and dances that can be interpreted to have symbolic meanings about for instance the importance of harmony among the community and empowerment; by choosing songs and dances that carry in them messages of a

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[215] Micu, *Performance* Studies, 88.

religious nature as well as other messages; and by having authoritative figures 'carry' such performances so as to strengthen such messages.

11. Tension between religious teachings and social reality

Another prevalent aspect of the narrative of the women ulama is that they create a space to question harmful practices and social constructs – ideas created and accepted by the people in a society – which are according to them erroneously believed to have a religious basis that justifies it. They demonstrate pious critical agency by creating the space to question such constructs and by critically engaging with the religious fundaments based on which harmful practices, such as domination of men over women, are accepted.

As discussed, Islam in Indonesia is inextricably linked with Indonesian culture and thus extremely diverse, probably even more so than in most other Islamic countries.[216] This could be a reason for KUPI's elaborate engagement with examples of contrasts between, according to them, religious values – such as justice and equality – and social constructs such as domination and patriarchy. Based on the idea that religious values should never lead to behaviour that harms humanity, justice, and unity of the nation, the focus of the women ulama on the discrepancy between these religious values and the corruption of those in Indonesian society is a call to their fellow Indonesians to live piously by upholding religious standards and resist cultural or political practices which conflict with these standards. In doing this, the women ulama act according to their responsibility as ulama to uphold the integrity of the Muslim community in Indonesia.[217] The following excerpt illustrates this:

> Equating victims of rape to people that engage in *zina* voluntarily contravenes the example set by Allah SWT who did not punish, but rather pardoned women who were forced into *zina* (QS. an-Nuur, 24:33). (…) The tyranny that befalls victims of rape also occurs because the value of a female's witness is <u>socially constructed</u> as being worth half a male's witness, or in the case of criminal trials, being worthless. The result is, rape victims cannot become witnesses to the

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[216] Geertz, *Islam Observed*, 10-13.

[217] Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, "Regaining the Islamic Centre? A Malaysian Chronicle of Moderation and its Discontents," in *Pathways to Contemporary Islam: New Trends in Critical Engagement* ed. Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 184, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvv417f6.

crimes that have befell them. This is despite the fact the Quran has already

established that the value placed on a witness

testimony is the same for males and females. This is established through the

case of *li'aan-* where a husband who accuses his wife of *zina* without proof can

swear an oath five times as proof off her *zina*, at the same time the wife may

also swear an oath five times to cancel the accusation of the husband (QS. *an-*

Nuur, 24:6-9). Unfortunately, although the case of *li'aan* is also related to

adultery, the equal value of a man's and woman's witness is only applied in the

case of *li'aan* alone.[218] (Emphasis added).

As follows from the excerpt, the women ulama contrast the value of a female's

witness in Indonesia with how they think it was intended by Allah as

substantiated by a verse from the Quran. In addition to that they refer to *hadith*

to demonstrate that also the Prophet once believed a woman who had been

raped, declared that she had not committed *zina* and instead sentenced her

rapist with a severe punishment. They also rely on statements of authoritative

figures from the past, such as Umar bin Khattab, one of the Prophet's main

advisors and the second caliph after Mohammad, who also believed a victim's

testimony of being raped.[219] They demonstrate through end-oriented

interpretation that this socially constructed difference in value of a female's

witness as compared to a male's witness is not in accordance with Islamic

teachings. Instead, as they argue, this imbalance follows from the unequal power

relationship between men and women in Indonesia in which women are often

blamed and punished for being raped as they are generally regarded as sources

of temptation.[220] Hence, they point out the discrepancy between "the example

set by Allah who did not punish, but rather pardoned women who were forced

into *zina*" and the daily reality in Indonesia in which "women victims of violence

[are] revictimized for the 'good name of a family' or family honour."[221]

Using multiple authoritative Islamic sources to support their religious

opinion is characteristic of the way in which women generally construct their

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[218] KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 74.
[219] KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 74-75.
[220] KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 73.
[221] KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 74.

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religious opinions or fatwas. Their opinions are arguably better-founded because they rely on various (religious) sources and do not hold on too tightly to opinions of other Islamic scholars. [222] In addition to that, it can be argued that this multi-source methodology makes the women ulama's opinions less susceptible to such socially-constructed gender-biased interpretations of religious texts.

Throughout the book on process and outcomes of the 2017 KUPI congress, numerous examples of contrasts between religious teachings and the arguably wrongful application of those teachings in the daily reality in Indonesia are found. The most prominent of those examples is undoubtedly related to the existence and authority of female ulama, an aspect which gets much attention in their books as well as in the conferences. Female ulama have had an influential role in Islamic society since the time of the Prophet Muhammad as advisers of the Prophet and teachers of historical and religious scholarship. Therefore, Islamic civilization has been built by male and female ulama.[223] Nevertheless, the KUPI claim that the role played by most female clerics who were involved in shaping the history of the Indonesian state, by being involved in the anticolonial struggle against the Dutch for instance, has not received any attention in the historiography of Indonesia.[224] Moreover, they argue that the strong decline in the number and position of female ulama was not caused by an innate incapability of women to have influential positions nor was it based on religious teachings. [225] According to them, this decline was caused by socio-cultural factors and political changes, such as patriarchal views which had a strong basis in, for instance, the Abbasid dynasty. [226] By providing several of these examples the women ulama attempt to demonstrate that the decline in number and position of female ulama in the history of Islam was another way in which socio-cultural and political practices conflicted with religious teachings about equality

[222] Sabine Waasdorp, "Feminist Fatwas: How Female Islamic Scholars Influence the Religious Landscape in Indonesia," News, Universiteit Leiden, last modified January 2, 2023, https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/news/2023/01/feminist-fatwas-how-female-islamic-scholars-influence-the-religious-landscape-in-indonesia.

[223] Umma Farida and Abdurrohman Kasdi, "The 2017 KUPI Congress and Indonesian Female 'Ulama'," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 12, no. 2 (December 2018): 137, http://dx.doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2018.12.2.135-158.

[224] KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 14.

[225] KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 9-11.

[226] KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 10.

between men and women as well as about the original definition of the word *ulama*.

This way of reasoning, which characterizes their narrative, arguably constitutes a call to their fellow Indonesian Muslims to live piously by remaining critical towards harmful effects of supposedly Islamic norms and values, as they could in fact be social constructs informed by cultural norms and practices.[227] Even though it is not explicitly stated, this element of their narrative can be understood as a call to Muslim communities to keep undertaking *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) instead of relying too strongly on the opinions of authoritative scholars.

Throughout the book they attempt to illustrate, as others have argued as well, that patriarchal practices are social constructs that do not follow from the Islamic religion.[228] This type of argumentation is arguably another expression of pious critical agency, as it shows their attempt "to be virtuous religious subjects through a critical approach to religion".[229] It indicates that the women ulama believe that true Islam does not support violence against women or restrictions of women's rights.[230] At the same time, it demonstrates that the women ulama are encouraging their fellow Muslims to live in accordance with Islamic standards as they follow from the Quran and the *hadith* while keeping a critical attitude with regards to the roots and effects of these standards as they are being shaped in Indonesia.

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227 Taufik Hidayatulloh and Bahro Syifa, "Analysis Study of the Movement of the Indonesian Women's Ulama Congress (KUPI) in Against Sexual Violence and Child Marriage," *Journal of Sharia, Tradition, and Modernity* 2, no. 2 (2022): 130, http://dx.doi.org/10.24042/smart.v2i2.16044.
228 Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019), 3,
https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/rug/detail.action?docID=5702581.
229 Rachel Rinaldo, "Pious and Critical," 829.
230 Rachel Rinaldo, *Mobilizing Piety*, 86.

12.Constructing authority through *silaturrahim*

As discussed shortly in the context of the *Warak Ngendhog* dance, the women ulama strategically instrumentalize their ties with established organizations such as NU, MUI, and Muhammadiyah, as well as high-ranking Indonesian officials and authoritative intellectuals. The way in which the women ulama have created these connections, through *silaturrahim,* is characteristic of the Indonesian culture, yet has a basis in Islam. S*ilaturrahim* (arguably based on the Arabic word *silaturahmi*)[231] is an Islamic practice that is based on various verses in the Quran as well as several *hadith*, but which is in fact a strongly localized concept unique for Indonesia and the greater Nusantara region.[232] The concept can be defined as "keeping family and kinship ties" meaning so much as consciously strengthening ties with the community that goes beyond family and friends.[233] It usually finds expression in visiting others, being visited by someone else, phone calls, e-mails, and other forms of contact. What distinguishes *silaturrahim* from regular visits and contact is the intention of doing *silaturrahim*. It is mainly done by the Muslim community in Indonesia and widely understood in that community, but it also appears in the non-Muslim community, which shows that it is not only a religious practice, but very much a localized practice as well.[234] Seise has studied local and localized Islamic concepts and practices in Indonesia such as *silaturrahim*. She describes the concept as a "religiously motivated form of social interaction through which (…) translocal relations are maintained on various scales". As such,

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[231] There is no consensus on the internet as to whether the Indonesian concept *silaturahmi* can be equated to the Arabic concept *silaturrahim* as it is found in Islamic textual sources. Claudia Seise equates the two concepts and claims that using one or the other does not change its meaning. She does so in various of her publications, such as the one referenced below as well as in: Claudia Seise, "The Potential of Localized Islamic Concepts in the Human Sciences: The Example of *Silaturahmi* for the Field of Diplomacy," *Nusantara: An International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 3, no. 2, (December 2021): 38-56, http://dx.doi.org/10.6936/NIJHSS.202112_3(2).0002. However, a search on the internet (fora and non-scholarly articles) shows that not everyone agrees to this. An example of this can be found on the forum Quora.com where Eko Fadhillah states that there is no textual basis for the word *silaturahmi*, and that many Indonesians mistakenly base their understanding of and reference to *silaturahmi* on the concept found in textual sources (https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-Quran-Arabic-concept-of-Silaturahmi-in-Indonesian-society-When-I-Google-Silaturahmi-I-can-only-find-Indonesian-sources). Important is that the women ulama have used both words interchangeably, implying that they rely on both its basis in the Quran as well as the local embeddedness of the concept.

[232] Seise, "Transformational Power," 191-196.

[233] Seise, "Transformational Power," 196.

[234] Seise, "Transformational Power," 196.

the practice can create both formal and informal ties between persons, institutions, and movements.[235]

A characterizing feature of *silaturrahim* is its transformational power: it can bridge divisions between people who practice Islam differently and even between people of different faiths.[236] In Indonesia, it is highly undesirable to turn down an invitation to *silaturrahim.* Because of this, *silaturrahim* has the ability to bring people with different ideas together.[237] With this in mind, it will be argued here that the way in which the KUPI engaged with the practice of *silaturrahim* is a strategic choice with which the women ulama try to use the connections resulting from *silaturrahim* to legitimize their authority.[238]

As the women ulama have stated themselves, KUPI is highly dependent on the support of "the strong Indonesian Islamic traditional social network", consisting of boarding schools and the established organizations.[239] In preparation of the congress, KUPI has visited numerous Islamic authorities, such as the chairman of MUI, senior persons from NU and Muhammadiyah, and senior figures from Islamic boarding schools; as well as representatives of the government including the Vice President of Indonesia and the Minister of Religious Affairs.[240] These visits have arguably resulted in declarations of support from many of those who had been visited, which has been of much influence on the acceptance of KUPI by the people and their willingness to be a part of KUPI.

KUPI strategically instrumentalizes these connections by having important persons play a role in the congresses at strategic moments. As discussed, an example of this was the official welcome at the start of the 2022 congress of the vice governor of Java and the rector of UIN Walisongo, encapsulated by the *Warak Ngendhog* performance. Another example of this strategic use is the remarkable closing speech of the 2017 congress by the Minister of Religious Affairs in which he promised to start the legislative process of reviewing the Marriage Act with the intent to raise the minimum age for marriage and a

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[235] Seise, "Transformational Power," 197.
[236] Seise, "The Potential," 44.
[237] Seise, "Transformational Power," 205.
[238] Craggs and Mahony, "The Geographies," 420.
[239] KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 29.
[240] KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 29-31.

declaration of support to open special *Ma'had Ali* (Islamic boarding school based religious colleges) for women so as to increase the number of female scholars in the Ministry of Religious Affairs.[241] In a similar way the international conference of the 2022 congress was opened by a speech of the rector of UIN Walisongo University after which the congress itself was opened by a speech of the vice governor of Java. In this way, KUPI arguably encapsulates their performances and messages in authoritative declarations of support to symbolize their own competency and authority.[242]

At the same time, as such events "are intimately connected to questions of power"[243] it can be argued that there is powerful symbolism in the fact that these important *men* were invited by this relatively new, feminist movement to be present and speak at the congresses. As such, they were guests at the congresses and were expected to be grateful for being invited and to behave according to the host's expectations.[244] This arguably forms a contrast with the traditional hierarchies in Indonesia and demonstrates that the women ulama are now a force that needs to be reckoned with.

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[241] KUPI Team, *Official Documents*, 141-142.
[242] Craggs and Mahony, "The Geographies," 422.
[243] Craggs and Mahony, "The Geographies," 415.
[244] Craggs and Mahony, "The Geographies," 422.

13. Conclusion

This thesis has revolved around the topic of Islamic feminist activism in Indonesia. More specifically, it has been attempted throughout this thesis to find an explanation for the relative successes of the KUPI movement in improving the wellbeing of women in Indonesia. It has therefore focused on both the substantive approach of KUPI towards bringing about change and their communicative strategies, so as to find out what elements of their approach have been essential in achieving concrete improvements for the wellbeing of women, such as the raise of the minimum age for marriage and legal protection for women in abusive marriage. This chapter will list the most important results of this thesis, critically revise them and suggest angles for further research.

13.1 KUPI's sociohistorical context

The first chapters of this thesis have provided an overview of the sociopolitical context in which KUPI came about. It has been demonstrated that Islam in Indonesia is pluralist with a strong focus on civil society and embedded in local cultures. [245] Nevertheless, it has also been established that Islamist forces are gaining territory. [246] While women enjoy a considerable degree of mobility in Indonesia, the image of a good women still revolves around motherhood, arguably a residue of state ibuism. [247] Furthermore, Indonesia's *pesantren* constitute opportunities for specialization in Islamic and Quranic studies for women. [248] However, due to their gender, it is difficult for women to be publicly accepted as ulama. [249] In this context KUPI has been created as a cooperation between several women's rights NGOs in Indonesia.

13.2 Research focus

Relatively quickly, KUPI started receiving considerable attention in the international media who caught on to their 'narrative of success';[250] they managed to establish durable contacts with high-ranking officials and

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[245]. Weintraub, "Introduction," 8.

[246] Arifianto, "Rising Islamism," 41-43.

[247] Robinson and Bessel, "Introduction," 3.

[248] Nisa, "Conflicting Narratives," 438.

[249] Ismah, "Destabilising," 493.

[250] Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 820.

authoritative organizations in Indonesia; they were the first to organize a congress of this kind and size about women's wellbeing in Indonesia in which women publicly claim the title of ulama; and they have manifested concrete results. As such, the research question of this thesis has been: *how can the successes of the women ulama in improving the wellbeing of women in Indonesia be explained?* This research question's focus has been on the substantive and communicative approach of the women ulama, which is why the sub-questions were: *what characterizes the substantive approach of the women ulama towards reinterpreting religious texts?* And w*hat communicative strategies do the women ulama use in their congresses so as to maximize their impact?* A case study analysis has been carried out so as to study the narrative of the women ulama in their self-published English documents and the communicative strategies as presented during the international conference. Both substance and communicative strategies have been analysed through the lenses of pious critical agency and performance activism so as to find out why the narrative of the women ulama resonates with a diverse audience and how they try to maximize their impact.

13.3 Results

The results can be summarized as following. The substantive approach of the women ulama arguably has the following characteristics. It has been established that the themes substantive justice for women; reinforcement is Islamic values, nationalism, and humanity; and contrasts between religious norms and social constructs or cultural practices form a red threat throughout KUPI's narrative. They consequently rely on end-oriented contextualist reinterpretation of Quranic verses and *hadith*, supported by the opinions of authoritative scholars from the past to demonstrate that patriarchy and any other form of domination of men over women is fundamentally in conflict with the values of Islam. And they embed their ideas in a frame of nationalist interests, arguably to bring their agenda in line with that of the political elite so as to be able to make use of the through *silaturrahim* established alliances with Indonesian officials in performing their identity as authoritative ulama.

The communicative strategies they instrumentalize so as to maximize their impact can be summarized as following. The example of the *shalawat musawa* demonstrates that the women ulama extensively utilize musical elements throughout their congresses to bring across their substantive message clearly and memorably. Other musical elements such as the *Warak Ngendhog* dance and the *Ratoeh Jaroe* dance demonstrate that they also rely on cultural iconography in musical performances to create powerful symbolism and imagery, so as to bring across messages of equality and harmony between men and women and within the movement, and women's empowerment embedded in an image of national or regional pride. The impact of this is arguably that such performances awake in the audience a sentiment of community and shared purpose which can lead to mobilization.

By creating a space and a transnational community in which activists from diverse backgrounds can meet each other and discuss their ideas, the women ulama have fulfilled an essential need of activists engaged with questioning traditional interpretations of Islamic sources.[251] As the women ulama's actions are arguably informed by pious critical agency, they have constructed a narrative that is at least partially acceptable to a dominantly Islamic audience. Since being a good Muslim is their starting point for improving the wellbeing of women in Indonesia and therefore religious sources are their main textual basis to which they have applied a contextual end-oriented interpretation, their story resonates with many of the moderate and progressive Muslim community in Indonesia as well as feminist activists.

Pious critical agency is visible in many of the women ulama's actions, such as the public critical interpretation of religious texts with the intention to improve the Islamic community in Indonesia, and it characterizes their narrative in their consistent reliance on religious sources to substantiate the claim that a just Islamic society can only be achieved if Muslims remain critical of traditional interpretations that allow for oppression of and violence against women. Hence,

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[251] Moosa, "The Ethical," 259; Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism," 821.

they frame critical engagement with religious interpretations as a duty for a good, pious Muslim.

Considering the above, other movements can learn from the way in which the women ulama have created a narrative of success that is at least acceptable for many Indonesians (not only women, also men and also those in positions of power) and from the tactics they have employed to make their message stick and to create a sense of community and a shared goal among the audience, even though opinions within the movement may still vary.

13.4 Contribution to academic debate

As discussed, KUPI has already been extensively publicized on – especially their methodology and substantive approach to interpreting religious texts and establishing the legitimacy and authority of female ulama has been thoroughly researched. The 2017 congress has also been analysed as a performance before.[252] However, the approach of thesis, in which the analytical lenses of pious critical agency and performance activism have been combined, is an innovation to the existing publications. At the same time, an extensive analysis of several elements of the congresses had not yet been performed. This thesis contributes to the current academic debate regarding Islamic feminism (in Indonesia) in that it suggests that feminist actions informed by pious critical agency potentially have more impact in Muslim-majority communities than actions that simply reflect a religious feminist angle. If combined with a well-thought communication's strategy that addresses the cultural context of the movement properly, such actions have a high potential for having the desired impact on their field of interest. Furthermore, it suggests that the endeavours and effectiveness of grassroots organizations can be better understood if analysed from a performance activism angle, as this angle allows for a proper regard for the cultural context in which a movement operates and the extent to which such a movement uses cultural symbols to strengthen their message.

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[252] Kloos and Ismah, "Siting Islamic Feminism."

13.5 Suggestions for further research

For this thesis, not all elements of both congresses have been analysed. A selection has been made based on the relevance for this project. As such, this thesis has laid the groundwork for further research into all the elements of the congresses. Such a project would make this work more meaningful and provide a broader overview of the strategies of the women ulama. Especially if a temporal lens is added to the analysis, one would be able to study the development of KUPI's ideas and strategies over time. In this thesis, this has not been a point of attention. A comparative analysis of the two congresses might provide valuable insights into how the movement has developed since its creation and how this is visible in their narrative and during their activities, such as subsequent congresses. As establishing authority of the women ulama has been deemed the intermediate goal of KUPI, much of what they do and say is oriented towards that goal. Depending on how the movement develops, it may be valuable to do a comparative analysis of the ways in which KUPI has constructed their authority over the years, as this may indicate to what extent they have become accepted as authorities in Indonesia. Finally, even though KUPI is a transnational movement, relatively little attention has been paid to how their ideas have landed and been further developed in the countries' members of the KUPI movement. The results of this thesis could serve as the basis for a comparative analysis of the adjustment of KUPI's ideas to other religious and national contexts. This could provide valuable insights in how a transnational movement finds expression in different contexts.

Finally, even though it has been suggested that the KUPI have obtained successes in the form of legal modifications regarding the wellbeing of women, their positive presence in the media and their ability to mobilize a movement, their success can and should be researched in terms of popular acceptance of their religious narrative, because only if a substantial part of the Islamic community in Indonesia starts accepting their ideas, will they be able to actually gender injustice in Indonesia. Therefore, it is suggested here to focus future research on the receiving end of the congresses and documents, through interviews with the audience of future congresses or activities and an elaborate (discourse) analysis

of Indonesian and English articles about KUPI, written by both their proponents

and opponents, as well as the Indonesian government.

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