

Realizing a New Spiritualism: Development of Religious Authority during the COVID-19 Pandemic through *Ngaji* Online

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Abstract:

Religious activities in Indonesia have shifted from offline to online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The *ngaji*, or recitation previously performed directly at mosques or Islamic boarding schools, is now online. This research aims to determine how Indonesian *kiai* (clerics) use social media to increase their religious authority through online recitations. This study uses a qualitative approach by carefully examining virtual ethnographic techniques known as Netnography on some *kiai* who conduct online recitations on various social media platforms, including YouTube. The research findings indicate that internet recitation is now helpful for *kiai* to spread their religious messages. *Kiai* can reach a wider audience, especially the younger generation, who are increasingly active in social media by using sites like YouTube. Although *kiai* does not abandon the conventional approach, it excitingly presents *ngaji* content, using the latest content creation technology, conducting active communication with his followers, and reciting the *ngaji* online as a new media and spiritualism. This study highlights how *ngaji* online contributed to developing religious authority in Indonesia during the COVID-19 epidemic. This study also emphasizes the importance of conveying religious teachings online clearly and effectively. This study will broaden the knowledge of how religious education has changed in the digital age and how social media can be used in Indonesia to increase the religious authority's role.

Keywords: Ngaji Online, recitation, kiai, religious authority, new spiritual online media.

實現新的招魂術：透過湯匙在線的在新冠肺炎大流行期間發展宗教權威

摘要：

由於新冠肺炎大流行，印尼的宗教活動已從線下轉向線上。湯匙（即背誦）以前直接在清真寺或伊斯蘭寄宿學校進行，現在改為線上進行。這項研究旨在確定印尼的吉合（神職人員）如何利用社群媒體透過線上背誦來提高他們的宗教權威。這項研究採用定性方法，仔細研究了一些在各種社群媒體平台（包括 YouTube）上進行線上背誦的吉合的虛擬民族誌技術（稱為網路民族誌）。研究結果表明，網路背誦現在有助於吉合傳播他們的宗教訊息。吉合可以接觸到更廣泛的受眾，尤其是年輕一代，他們透過使用 YouTube 等網站在社群媒體上越來越活躍。吉合雖然沒有放棄傳統的做法，但卻以新媒體和唯靈論的形式，精彩地呈現了湯匙內容，利用最新的內容創作技術，與追隨者進行積極的交流，在線上背誦湯匙。這項研究強調了湯匙在線的如何在新冠肺炎疫情期間為印尼宗教權威的發展做出了貢獻。這項研究也強調了在網路上清晰有效地傳達宗教教義的重要性。這項研究將拓寬人們對宗教教育在數位時代如何變化以及如何在印尼利用社群媒體來增強宗教權威作用的認識。

关键词：湯匙在線的，誦經，吉合，宗教權威，新的精神線上媒體。

1. Introduction

The digital era has changed the paradigm of information and community interaction through the emergence of various online platforms. The impact is increasingly significant, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has seriously threatened society (Haniz & Nor, 2022). During this pandemic, social media has become an unavoidable necessity in everyday life, causing an exponential spike in the number of users (Nur et al., 2022). According to statistics, Facebook users have reached 2,910 million, Twitter has 436 million, YouTube has 2,562 million, Instagram has 1,478 million, and TikTok has 1,000 million users. Globally, social media users have reached 4.26 billion and are projected to increase to six billion by 2026 (Agil et al., 2022).

During the pandemic, one of the widespread phenomena was the practice of online recitation and Islamic clicktivism (online submission of texts) by clergy as an innovative means of da'wah through digital platforms with many users (Ismail et al., 2017). In addition, social media is a means of spreading religious messages in the digital realm, which offers faster information than traditional media (Nur et al., 2022). Online recitation and Islamic clicktivism are forms of religious preaching that can influence religious discourse (Ahyar & Alfitri, 2019). The target is that religious authorities, such as *kiai*, *ustadz* (teachers), and *santri* (students), who are active in online public spaces, become a new vehicle for changing the authority of preaching from traditional (classical) to contemporary for individuals who are familiar with the digital world (Imleesh et al., 2023).

As online actors, there are authoritative figures such as *kiai* who understand their role based on perceptions

of the needs of the ummah. *Kiai* act as community servants (Ismail, 2019) and educators in Islamic boarding schools (Pribadi, 2014). They teach and study various studies from classical texts, theology, and philosophy and act as preachers (Hussin et al., 2017). *Kiai* is a recognized figure in the Islamic religion. They have authority in leading rituals and interpreting religious doctrines; therefore, they have many opportunities to deepen their study of the yellow books (Isbah, 2020). In conveying religious messages, *kiai* is similar to journalists, acting as professional mediators and contributors in the environment of mass communication, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Haniz & Nor, 2022). With full authority, *kiai* has turned to the virtual world, especially the *ngaji* or recitation *online*, which is one of the primary means for Muslims to carry out religious activities.

However, religious text messages still depend on religious authorities and traditions as supporting pillars. Nonetheless, the message remains a dynamic force capable of adapting to changing times and will continue to maintain its creative potential in modern contemporary society (Zaid et al., 2022).

This research has three main objectives. First, examine the phenomenon of online recitation, which has impacted the establishment of religious authority, including what material, text, or content can be disseminated to the general public. Second, we analyzed attitudes, variations, and patterns of authority formation in online media to access the spread of religious knowledge and understanding. Third, it describes the profiles of *kyai* who are active in *ngaji* (recitation) online activities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Kiai as a Leader of the People*

Kiai, according to Weber, one's authority can be a charismatic leader (Bora, 2020; Hoffmann, 2009) with excellent transformation potential. In the context of a pesantren, a kiai plays a crucial role in determining the success of the esantren itself (Marzuki et al., 2020; Pribadi, 2014). In traditional society, a person can be considered a kiai and accepted by society. People seek help and advice from this kiai. Although, according to tradition, there are no specific criteria to become a kiai, several general requirements must be met, such as the experience of boarding at a pesantren and obtaining a yellow book certificate from a kiai guru (Karel & Steenbrink, 1991). Kiai has significant responsibilities, including religious knowledge, piety, heredity, and having students (Nasih et al., 2022).

Islamic boarding schools or *pesantren* have emerged as a popular early alternative educational program among parents, and kiai plays a central role, especially in teaching traditional traditions such as learning the yellow book (Fatimah & Suib, 2019; Puspitarini et al., 2023). Azra (1999) exemplifies the usage of the name Kiai Ali or *Kali* in Banten history, which alludes to the highest title in the Banten sultanate, *Pakih Najmuddin*. Kiai played a significant religious role in the Banten sultanate and even held political sway. According to Lawrence in Solahudin & Fakhruroji, there are three primary types of power in Islam: charismatic, judicial, and scriptural authority (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2019).

2.2. *Kitab Kuning (Yellow Book)*

The Yellow Book (yellow books that have been given *gandul*/doubles meanings), which is the primary source for Kiai and Santri to understand religion, is the core of the pesantren tradition (Ibda et al., 2023; Rasikh, 2018). The yellow book is often seen as a resistance to contemporary education. (Yafie, 1989), Kiai is essential for the dissemination of information and for producing ulama or kiai (Isbah, 2020). The history of the pesantren's founding on Java Island demonstrates their significant contribution to the resurgence of Islam and other sociocultural, political, and economic developments (Fauzi, 2012).

Islamic boarding schools have migrated to the digital realm during technological advancements, particularly in the 4.0 age. Information technology, computers, and the internet have substantially changed the world of Islamic boarding schools (Fatimah & Suib, 2019). Online recitation is becoming more popular, which presents obstacles and opportunities for kiai to adjust to the digital environment. (Athoillah & Wulan, 2019), in our digital age, online learning is a crucial option (Atsani, 2020).

3. Methodology

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to

explore the observed phenomena in depth. In addition, this study applies the virtual ethnographic method (Nguyen et al., 2006) or Netnography (Ida, 2018). This method is used to understand and explore the relationship dynamics between societal culture and cyberspace. This approach is also used to explore events that occur in people's behavior when using the internet to fulfill specific goals (Syahid et al., 2020). Field research involves a pre-emptive survey that gains an in-depth understanding of the phenomena that occur in society regarding the use of social media. This research focuses on kiai's active online recitation on YouTube channels, namely the Ngaji Gus Baha Official channel (managed by the media team of Ponpes Izzati Nuril Qur'an), KH. Buya Syakur Yasin, MA (managed by the team of KH. Buya Syakur Yasin) and Ghazalia College (managed by a team led by Gus Ulil Abshar Abdalla).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. *A View of Religious Authorities toward Online Media*

The COVID-19 pandemic began at the end of 2019 and expanded in early 2020 in Indonesia. Religious authorities, especially Kiai, Ustadz, and other religious leaders, are taking the initiative and conducting experiments by using online social media technology for conversation and recitation. Religious community organizations and forums provide space for religious figures, individuals, and groups to debate spiritual issues and convey religious texts, such as reciting the Yellow Book (Kitab Kuning), through platforms such as YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook (Campbell & Teusner, 2011).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the introduction of social media among clerics and religious leaders resulted in websites for studying the Yellow Book and other religious materials. This provides new opportunities for information seekers about faith and spirituality to learn online. Furthermore, Campbell revealed that in the digital era, congregations are afforded convenience in accessing lectures and deepening faith, even in virtual form. Several online neighborhood communities are also connected to offline groups, aiming to replicate aspects of conventional congregational life.

However, the attitude of religious figures such as Kiai and Ustadz in this digital era reflects the active role of millennial Santri in maintaining national unity through digital da'wah movements through social media. This view demonstrates the principle of "maintaining old traditions toward new, better traditions" (Syahputra, 2020). In this context, Kiai, Ustadz, and Santri maintain their old cultural values while adopting a new culture. Along with the advancement of technology in the 4.0 era, the media is becoming more innovative, and in dealing with this, the Kiai and Santri use digital technology as a renewable means of preaching. Therefore, Kiai and Santri, who

use the da'wah and communication model resulting from the digitization of communication technology, can continue to benefit from various evolutions that have an impact on the communication process (Okafor, 2023).

In this situation, the role of kiai and santri is not only focused on transmitting traditional religious texts but also adapting to the digital era. This shows that Kiai and Santri can use online texts to preach relevant to current challenges.

4.2. Various Religious Authorities in the Online World

An Arabic proverb says, *Bul 'alaa zam zam fatu'raf*, which means "Urine the well of zam-zam, and you will be famous." However, this happens to someone who pollutes the zam-zam water well, which Muslims consider sacred. In that case, this action can go viral and cause controversy because it is related to the sensitivity of Muslims. In the digital era, strange and controversial events often appear on various online social media. Actions that violate the logic and customs of society can sometimes obtain popularity and number of followers (Damhuri, 2020). Some social media have been revitalized with videos of ustadz who have gone viral for reciting the holy verses of the Al-Quran with pronunciations that are not by the rules of tajwid. Even though there were many criticisms and suggestions for conveying the lessons correctly and following the rules for reading the holy verses of the Al-Quran, the enthusiasm of the congregation who attended remained high (As'ad, 2020).

The online world's presence has changed society's social and religious landscape. Although it can facilitate access to information, it can also threaten the values, norms of life, and authority established so far. Islamic boarding schools, as traditional institutions, must also adapt and innovate in utilizing online media as new tools (Qudsy, 2019). In Indonesian Islamic society, determining who has religious authority requires work. Indonesia, which has a Muslim-majority population, has diverse views regarding religious authorities who have the power to regulate and interpret Islamic texts (Jinan, 2012).

However, the views of contemporary scholars regarding the authority of religious leaders, such as kiai, in conveying the practice of ijihad remain inconsistent and tend to have a misogynistic aspect. Although the delivery of these texts does exist, this view is unfortunate. Furthermore, the current conditions allow religious leaders to give fatwas through the media. Even so, many ustadz and religious figures appear on social media, even though they do not necessarily have a proven track record.

Contemporary scholars such as Khaled M. and Abou El Fadl offer a solution to authority and Islamic authoritarianism through their work *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*. In this work, they argue that Islam accommodates human efforts in understanding God's purposes, called ijihad, in the language of fiqh. The doer of ijihad will get

double the reward if his ijihad is correct and one-times the reward if his ijihad is wrong. Religious leaders will always try to perform ijihad without fear of mistakes because the reward is still given, whether right or wrong (Hidayatullah & Taufiq, 2021).

According to Khaled, discussion of the authority of religious figures, such as Kiai, is critical in Islam. This authority is necessary for practicing religion to become subjective and reflective. In this context, rigidity (al-Thawabit) in practicing religion becomes crucial. In its general sense, authority involves asking others to act or not act according to the will of those in authority. Quoting R.B. Friedman, Khaled distinguishes between "having authority" (being in authority) and "being an authority" (being an authority). Having authority means occupying an official position that gives the authority to issue orders or directives. Being an authority means that a person ignores his /her personal opinion and submits to an authority that is considered to have better knowledge and understanding.

4.3. Build Your Own Religious Authority on Online Sites

Before the internet, the relationship between religious figures, such as kiai or ustadz, and Muslims was personal. When people need spiritual information, they generally come directly to consult with the clerics. This relationship has a significant impact because it can deepen religious understanding that is collective and communitarian, not individual (Abdalla, 2016). However, in the digital era, there has been a shift in the form of religious relations and authority.

Establishing a post-Prophet Islamic religious authority is essential, in line with the hadith of the Prophet SAW, which states that "the heirs of the Prophet are the scholars" (*wartsatul anbiya*). This concept of religious authority needs to be actively developed and maintained. According to Alatas (2016), a person's authority or authority in Islam lies at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal axes. The vertical axis connects individuals with the prophetic past, whereas the horizontal axis connects individuals with fellow Muslims. Connections with the past can be formed in various ways, such as mastery of textual sources and oral transmission of hadiths that refer to the normative teachings and customs of the Prophet, namely the Sunnah of the Prophet.

Furthermore, there is a view that establishing the authority of religious figures can be initiated from dreams or supernatural instructions. Nonetheless, in The Social Contract quoted by Alatas (2016), Rousseau states that only wisdom makes lasting bonds, not worthless tricks that only create temporary bonds. It can be interpreted that forming a sustainable authority requires wisdom and deep understanding.

Changes in religious aspects occur in the digital era, including shifts in religious authority and the relationship between religious leaders and their followers. Along with the development of technology,

many ustadz and religious figures have appeared on social media. However, it is essential to note that this definition and formation of authority do not come from discourses or statements alone. Religious figures, such as kiai, can interpret dreams and sacred texts and delve into the past to establish their authority.

In this context, the formation of religious authority in the online world is also relevant. Kiai and ustadz can build their authority in online media, such as social media platforms. Using this platform, they can convey religious teachings and understanding to Muslims more broadly and quickly. Even though this shift has occurred, ensuring that the authority built in the online world remains based on in-depth knowledge and competence in understanding religious teachings is still essential. Thus, religious leaders in this digital era depend on old traditions that can be formed and strengthened online. Religious figures like kiai and ustadz can establish and expand their authority in online media to reach more people and effectively convey spiritual teachings.

4.4. Ngaji (Recitation) Online: New Spiritualism among Kiai during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The position of the kiai in society has a deep meaning, especially as a teacher who is respected and imitated. For kiai who has performed the pilgrimage, this is a religious symbol attached to him. In the pesantren tradition, the term "recital" refers to the process of learning with the kiai. According to Bambang Pranowo, quoted by Sholahuddin Al Ayubi, the term "Ngaji" comes from the abbreviation *sanga siji*, which can be traced to the *songo wali* in the spread of Islam in Java (Ayubi, 2021). *Songo Siji* refers to the seven holes in the human body, such as the eyes, nose, and ears, plus one graver spot. In the sense of "reciting the Ngaji," Bambang Pranowo revealed that humans, especially Santri, cannot be separated from the process of studying and studying religion, primarily through Arabic-language books.

Sholahuddin Al Ayubi explained that the term recital is related to the word *aji*, which means noble and powerful. This is reflected in the tradition of the people of Banten with the term *aji-aji*, which refers to prayers, spells, and amulets (Ayubi, 2021). In other words, the Qur'an symbolizes the search for glory and supernatural powers. Regardless of the word's origin, recital, santri, and kiai refer to learning activities related to religious yellow (classical) books considered sacred by santri.

So far, the consequence is that the learning system for students follows the pattern of pesantren education, which often uses the classical (*bandongan method*). In this model, the kiai or ustadz read the book before the listening students. Many books are presented in the study schedule so that students can choose according to their interests and abilities (Yusuf, 2016).

Even though the classical learning method is still valid, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, online recitation through platforms such as YouTube with live streaming has become a more controlled

alternative. Even though the number of students who can attend the majlis or physical class is limited, through online recitation, thousands of students can take part in the recitation virtually.

Ghofur (2007) explained that the pattern of ngaji activities for students in Islamic boarding schools should still follow the existing learning structure. Santri must obey the distribution of the recitation time and follow the lesson schedule. This time dimension plays an essential role in Islamic boarding school learning. If Santri still needs guidance from the Kiai, he can continue studying at the pesantren without a specific time limit. Costs often influence this condition and call for marriage and having a household.

Although traditional learning methods are still valid in this digital era, online recitation has provided a new dimension to how students access religious knowledge. This resulted in a change in learning dynamics and interactions among kiai, santri, and religious knowledge, likely forming a new spiritualism among kiai during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Within the pesantren environment, students live in a community with its own characteristics, led by kiai, ustadz, and pesantren administrators. This community is based on Islamic religious values, including norms and habits that are unique and often different from those of the public. Santri also has advantages in terms of intellectuality because they are used to studying classic religious books, which are not necessarily accessible to the public. Intellectual activity toward religious knowledge is part of students' daily life in the pesantren environment. Nawawi, as cited by Amin, argues that the intellectualism of students toward religious understanding is an inseparable part of their lives (Amin, 2019).

In pesantren, especially in the salafiyah pesantren in Banten, santri are still considered to have charisma, blessings, and even supernatural powers for society, even though their values may be lower than those of the kiai (Ayubi, 2021). In this context, various teaching systems exist in pesantren, including sorogan, classical sorogan, bandongan, lecture, and writing systems (Galba, 1991). Teaching bandongan, carried out by kiai or senior santri, is popular among pesantren. In it, teaching is carried out regularly every day by reading the books of previous scholars, translating them into the local language, and providing further explanations.

However, the times and technological advances, especially the internet and the online world, have impacted Islamic boarding schools. Qudsy shows that Islamic boarding schools are increasingly aware of their existence in cyberspace (Qudsy, 2019). The boundaries between salaf and khalif pesantren are starting to fade with the adoption of digital technology. Islamic boarding schools previously considered traditional and modern are increasingly ready to accept change.

Scott Allen Burrest states that pesantren are agents who lead and shape modernization, with kiai as pioneers and connectors between tradition and change (Buresh, 2002). Clifford Geertz supports this view,

describing the kiai as intermediaries or agents of change in rural and urban environments. Islamic boarding schools and kiai have adapted themselves from traditional to modernity by following the currents of change. Fazlur Rahman also emphasized the existence of Islamic institutions that respond to modern changes, including revivalism, classical modernism, new revivalism, and modernism. In this context, pesantren not only maintain traditions but also become agents of change and spreaders of modernization, directing their communities toward changes that are relevant to the demands of the times.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, several Islamic boarding schools were ready to adopt the online pesantren model by using various platforms such as streaming, social media (YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp), and websites. Several kiai figures have also built their authority in the online world through this medium, such as:

1) Gus Baha that uses the YouTube platform with the Ngaji Gus Baha Official channel, which started in 2016. He studies the book *Hayatus Sahabah* by Maulana Muhammad Yusuf Kandhelwi in several sections with themes related to the Companions' life, especially the Rashidun Khulafaur. The duration of the prayer can range from 50 min to 1 h. Besides YouTube, Gus Baha has online Ngaji media on <https://ngajigusbaha.id/> and other social media accounts such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook.

2) Buya Shakur that started online recitation in 2017 through his YouTube channel named "KH. Buya Syakur Yasin, MA." This channel has attracted attention with 151,098,663 views and has 939 thousand subscribers. Buya Shakur's Ngaji materials involve various exciting themes, including some controversial ones. The online recitation method used by Buya Shakur is closer to live streaming and involves various experts who are experts in their fields. In his online Ngaji, Buya Shakur discusses books such as *Fath al-Rabbani*, *Tafsir Fi Zhilalil Qur'an*, *Kitab Roaitullah*, and *Iqodzulhimmam*, which include interpretations of Sufism, monotheism, and sometimes philosophy.

3) Ulil Absar Abdalla that has a YouTube channel named Ghazalia College. This account was created in 2006. This channel has a total audience of 661,258 and 13 thousand subscribers. Ulil Absar Abdalla, known among students and academics, discusses several books in his online Quran, such as *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, *Misykat al-Anwar*, and *Al-Munqidh*. The online Quran materials cover exciting themes related to Sufism, philosophy, and the study of religious people and atheists.

With the pesantren and online recitation activities carried out by the kiai figures above, the pesantren have succeeded in facing the challenges of the times by using digital technology to spread religious values and knowledge to the broader community. This is a significant form of adaptation in maintaining the pesantren's traditions and expanding the range of

spiritual messages.

5. Conclusion

Significant changes have been made to religious activities as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic, particularly the Islamic practice of ngaji, which entails online contemplation and reading of sacred texts. The promotion of this activity by spiritual leaders, or kiai, is essential in showing how ngaji online can boost religious authority. Despite obstacles brought on by social and geographic isolation, kiai use their spiritual strength to stay in touch with their followers, disseminate spiritual knowledge, and develop a strong religious position. This exemplifies how religious practices can change to accommodate the digital age while still addressing societal spiritual demands.

6. Limitations and Further Study

No study covers all aspects of a research problem. Therefore, the author(s) should discuss the limitations or gaps in the study. The future scope or plan of the study should also be identified. It is beneficial to enrich the understanding of kiai as religious authorities who interact in the digital world, especially by conveying religious texts in several yellow books on social media, namely YouTube. This gives us the opportunity to follow the ideas and preaching policies of the kiai. Further research is required regarding the influence of online Koran reading on followers and viewers on YouTube.

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Authors' Contributions

Sholahuddin Al Ayubi: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, and draft preparation; Muhamad Alif: conceptualization and data curation; Ursa Agniya: writing and editing; Hafidz Taqiyuddin: editing and supervising, and Khaira Nazla Al Naquib: translating.

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