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Indonesian *Pesantren* and Community Social Change: Moderate Islam's Use of Media and Technology for Nonformal, Community-Based Education

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Keywords: *pesantren*, media, technology, nonformal learning, community, Indonesia

Abstract: This study extends previous research, attempting to better understand *pesantren* (Indonesian, Islamic boarding schools) by examining factors facilitating the adoption and application of new media and technology in their broader, community-based educational initiatives.

Introduction

After the September 11th terrorist attack, there were numerous reports from the media and international organizations noting the role of Islamic education in “breeding terrorism.” These reports often linked *madrasa*, or Islamic boarding schools, with members of the Taliban or Al Qaeda, implicating the schools in promoting violent and extremist views and providing a training ground for terrorist activities (Pohl, 2009).

Global news reports also had an impact in Indonesia, changing the national media's perception concerning Islamic schools known as *pesantren*. The 2002 bombing in Bali and the 2009 explosion at the Australian Embassy in Jakarta, both of which involved Indonesian Islamic terrorists, seemed to confirm the accusation that *pesantren* were indoctrinating students with extremist views. Since that time, one Indonesian Islamic leader, Abu Bakar Baasyir, has been the focus of intense media scrutiny, further impacting public perception of Indonesian Islamic schools (Mills, 2012).

Despite these allegations, previous studies have shown that *pesantren* have played a part in enhancing both Indonesia's system of public education (K-12) and in aiding the nation's broader economic development (Geertz, 1960). Pohl (2009) noted that *pesantren* in Indonesia are different from religious schools in Pakistan or Afghanistan, and that *pesantren* have actually helped to bring about progressive social changes in Indonesia.

Purpose and Significance

This study extends previous research, attempting to better understand *pesantren* by examining their broader community-based educational initiatives. In particular, it examines how *pesantren* have responded to negative media reports through active participation in the process of social change. To that end, this study focuses on *pesantren*'s use of media and technology—moving beyond the use of these tools for classroom instruction and examining their broader application as an outlet for community engagement and education.

Within adult education, spirituality has become the focus of a growing body of research—a discourse largely concerned with the “individual's quest for meaning” (English & Gillen 2000, p. 1). Such discussions, however, have largely abandoned reflection on traditional religious practice and meaning making—particularly concerning religion's continuing sociological and political roles. As Ó Murchú notes, spirituality may well precede religion in the human experience (1997, p. vii); nevertheless, how religion (and its subsequent spiritual

dimension) is played out, debated, affirmed and contested in social spaces remains a critical international issue.

Such learning has generally been seen as “nonformal”—taking place outside of formal educational institutions yet maintaining some of the trappings of formal instruction, often including learning objectives, and a sustained and systematic approach. Technological innovations have had a wide impact on such nonformal initiatives, including those engaged in by religious organizations.

Methods

The findings of this study are based on a combination of site visits and qualitative interviews. Interviews (and accompanying site visits) were conducted with ten leaders of schools from four different cities in Indonesia: Jakarta, Bandung, Surabaya and Palu. Each interview lasted from 30 to 90 minutes, depending on whether information redundancy was reached. The interviews were conducted in the native Indonesian language, and recorded with a digital sound recorder. The sessions were translated into English during the transcription process.

Analytic induction was used to analyze the transcripts. Analytic induction consists of scanning the transcripts line-by-line for themes and categories, developing a working schema from examination of initial cases, then modifying and refining on the basis of subsequent cases (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). To enhance trustworthiness, the analysis included participants’ words and descriptions. These actual words will provide the primary evidence that the reader can use to assess the validity of the study and provide the reader a basis for accepting, rejecting, or modifying the study’s findings (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984).

Findings

Figures differ on the current number of *pesantren* in Indonesia. In a 2007 report, Australian Aid (Ausaid) noted that there were 40,000 *pesantren* across the country, with about 4,000 owned by the state (Australian Aid, 2007). However, a more recent study by the Ministry of Religion stated only that there were in excess of 25,875 *pesantren* in Indonesia (Kementerian Agama Indonesia, 2011).

In August 2004, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) invested \$157 million over a 5-year period to enhance the quality of *pesantren* instruction (Sharp, 2005). In addition, the Australian Agency for International Development (AUSAID) has assisted *pesantren* (especially those located in poor communities) in closing the educational gap between public schools and Islamic institutions. Through a local organization, the Learning Assistance Program for Islamic Schools (LAPIS), Ausaid helped to provide needed teachers in subjects such as English and math (Australia Aid, 2007). Their actions were in recognition that *pesantren* have been the main educational destination for many of Indonesia’s poorest children (Clarke & Feeny, 2007).

Pesantren have also moved to include a wider audience, expanding beyond their original work with secondary school students to include those participating in higher education and community-based initiatives. Recent studies have noted *pesantren* participation in community initiatives including health services, religious affairs (including the promotion of religious tolerance), and economic development (Pohl, 2009, Fadhali Robby, 2011, Dauer, 2013). While this research project uncovered similar areas of focus, special attention was paid to the role of technology and new media in these community-based activities. The themes identified in this research address both the factors that facilitate *the adoption* of technology and factors related to

the application of technology as a tool for the promotion of more moderate or “modern” forms of Islam (Dauer, 2011, para. 6).

Factors Facilitating the Adoption of Technology

Very often, one of the great impediments to the educational use of technological innovations is fear of its unanticipated impacts. This appears to be particularly so when considering its use by religious organizations that see the possibility of “losing our identity” in a wave of enticing yet destabilizing information. This is clearly the case for many of the participants in this study. With that in mind, two strong themes emerged regarding the adoption of technology as an educational tool by Indonesian *pesantren*.

The communal nature of pesantren: key traditions in a changing world. Since their formation in the 1880s, *pesantren* have continued to evolve. Specifically, there have been three changes significant to this discussion: the inclusion of female students, the inclusion of college students (*pesantren* have traditionally been focused on junior and senior high school instruction), and an expansion of educational content and pedagogic approach.

The change in approach has been fueled, at least in part, by an expansion of institutional goals—moving beyond the traditional emphasis on Islamic teaching and knowledge, to include instruction in the sciences and other content areas taught in public schools. One participant noted that, “They [*pesantren*] teach their students not only religion but also scientific knowledge. More and more *pesantren* also teach their students the use of technology so they can be ready to be good citizens when they leave school.”

The forces driving this evolution are largely related to external factors such as the social and political realities in Indonesia that have impacted all sectors of society including Islamic education. But this evolution has been facilitated by *pesantrens*’ embeddedness in their wider communities—a tradition that has remained unchanged since their inception in the 19th century. As one participant noted, “We have an open policy (*terbuka*). We also involve members of the community on our board and they can participate in decision making. We’re not exclusive and this is indeed one of the important characteristics of *pesantren*.” Said another, “Both *pesantren* and community work hand-in-hand...inseparably.

The embeddedness of *pesantren* in their community context is noted here as it relates strongly to the issues that follow, including the schools’ sensitivity to local issues and the willingness to rethink their educative role in light of these changing dynamics. As Pohl (2009) noted, “integral elements of the *pesantren* tradition, including the study of classical texts and the *pesantren*’s community orientation provide the foundations upon which theory and praxis of a pluralistic and democratic society are affirmed” (p. 146).

The powerful role of pesantren leadership in engaging the wider world. Today, many *pesantren* have adopted the use of technology and media in their classrooms and beyond. They provide computer labs where students and teachers conduct research and actively use virtual worlds and social networks.

In part, *pesantren* leaders have influenced these technological advances. Some have earned their university degrees, and many continue their higher education affiliation as teaching faculty. Those who live in larger Indonesian cities have even gone so far as to set up their own media outlets, providing news and information not only for students but also for the community. Many believe that embracing media and technology simply facilitates their efforts to continue

learning. Said one participant, "I have the motivation to learn. I am a teacher myself. I teach in higher education, so I have to make sure that I gain more knowledge every day. I make sure to access the Internet to read more information about my field because the Internet is faster than print media. It's just me. I think everybody should learn technology, not avoid it; otherwise, they will be left behind."

For some of the participants, the broader acceptance of technology was clearly facilitated by the importance of these leaders in Indonesian society. One participant noted that, "We're very open for changes related to science and technology for example. We're not afraid of adopting western thinking as long as it's beneficial. In our education, for example, we adopt many western theories in education, teaching materials; we take a lot from the West. In our school, for example, we provide materials that western schools also provide." Such responses resonate with community residents who see *pesantren* leaders not only as teachers of Islam but also as role models (Hasbullah, 2012) for their willingness to engage the wider world.

Factors Related to the Application of Technology

As importantly, many recent technological innovations can directly address issues critical to modern *pesantren* educational practice, thus impacting the selection and application of these tools. In this regard, form and function are intimately intertwined, with implementation linked closely to the outcomes *pesantren* seek to achieve.

A commitment to independence. The economic independence of *pesantren* has created strong bonds with their communities. Many schools have created their own businesses, including media outlets that provide both educational programming to local residents and income to the school. *Pesantren Daarut Tauhid* in West Java, for example, has both radio and TV stations (Solahuddin, 2008). The popularity of the school's leader, Gymnatsiar, has been driving their engagement with the wider community. Indeed, for a fee, subscribers can even receive daily religious text messages from Gymnatsiar (Muchtari, 2005). Many *pesantren* are also now equipped with computer labs and internet kiosks/cafés that serve the surrounding community.

These innovations serve both to provide financial support for the organization and as an outlet for discussions related to *pesantren* initiatives and their relation to Islamic teaching. As such, media outlets play a powerful role in connecting the *pesantren* and their values to the community and its basic needs.

A commitment to transparency and tolerance. The *pesantren* leaders interviewed for this work were especially aware of the negative images that emerged in wake of the Bali bombings in 2002. They admitted that more radicalized, *pesantren* existed; insisting, however that the number of supporters for these institutions was very small. As importantly, they noted what they saw as the characteristics of these more conservative schools, focusing specifically on their insularity from the community and their rigid interpretation of religious doctrine. Said one, "Generally these kinds of *pesantren* don't publish their curriculum... They believe that a nation, our nation, has to be an Islamic nation. They believe that decisions should all be based on Islam. What is important for us is to maintain our faith and values in Islam, not merely to hold onto symbols." Said another, "Most conservative *pesantren* are isolated from their community. Most of the time, people don't like such *pesantren*. We're aware of this threat. The only way to make us alert for radicalism is that the community also needs to be aware and involved in *pesantren*. We need to do that..."

Some people continue to believe that most *pesantren* are focused on *salafi* education (Islamic-based knowledge and training); while, in fact, *pesantren* have widely embraced more secular curriculum and the inclusion of a broad cross-section of their communities' in school planning. One participant stated that,

If it [pesantren] started to be exclusive, generally people would start to wonder (laughs) and ask why; and they become curious. They might guess there must be something wrong. We're very open. We even include local government on advisory boards, so that they know what's going on and there is no suspicion toward us. The community also knows our programs very well. We have nothing to hide. Both government and the community know us inside out and are involved in our work.

Another effort noted by interview participants is in the monitoring and understanding of both *pesantren* leaders and their students. Better communication can help misunderstandings that occur with the outside world. This would include greater communication with and through the media as well. Said one participant,

Media need to be utilized to report the diversity in pesantren. Whether there is a terrorist act or not, the media should pay attention to pesantren and report what's going on. Terrorism is not based on acts that suddenly happened. There has to be some roots that initiate such actions. When I say that western countries need to assist pesantren, I am not saying financial assistance. This can be information exchange or cultural exchange, meaning that there has to be some understanding that both the West and pesantren have about each of their cultures. They can introduce their culture to us; we can also introduce our culture to them. We need to understand each other.

Conclusion

This paper has spent little time discussing the specific technologies employed by Indonesian *pesantren* in their educational efforts, as these tools are similar to those used throughout the world—Facebook, Twitter, blogging, podcasts and the like. Instead, it has focused on the unique cultural factors that have helped to facilitate the adoption and application of these tools in an often contentious and misunderstood field of practice—Islamic boarding schools. The continuous efforts of the participants in this study to engage their surrounding communities and adapt to local traditions are distinctive features that make these schools different from similar institutions in other countries with predominantly Muslim populations.

Indonesian *pesantren* have evolved within strong communal contexts; changing yet being changed by social, political, and cultural realities. The participants in this study have remained sensitive to the capacities and challenges inherent in new media and modern technologies. Smartphones provide an elegant example of this struggle—technology that can both connect and isolate; technology that is increasingly robust in its communicative power yet inherently difficult to control or direct for religious purposes.

As extremist organizations grow more sophisticated at utilizing new technologies to access current and potential followers, the importance of more moderate voices following suit has never been greater (Hasan 2013). *Pesantren* represent an established and highly regarded system of Islamic education that can present a strong counter-narrative to the extremist, anti-intellectual portrayals most common in modern media.

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