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Communal Salafi Learning and Islamic Selfhood: Examining Religious Boundaries through Ethnographic Encounters in Indonesia

Abstract: *Over the past 30 years, the translocal Salafi movement has expanded rapidly across Indonesia. Propagating a strict 'literal' interpretation of Islam, Salafis place strong emphasis on separating themselves from un-Islamic (non-Salafi) society. However, the daily implementation of such rigid boundaries remains rife with tension, depending less on Islamic scripture and more upon how adherents interpret it in a given time and place. A reflexive approach to ethnography provides a unique tool to examine and make visible these anxieties, placing the ethnographer at a vantage point to observe the communal interactions through which religious ethics are given meaning. By reflecting upon my study of the al-Hasanah mosque in Yogyakarta, I describe the ways my informants and I negotiated each other's presence and how this illuminated the struggles to create a Salafi selfhood and modern religious ethic.*

Key Words: Salafism, Reflexive Ethnography, Indonesia, Religious Ethics, Communal Learning, Hisba, Islamic Identity

Introduction

When Lukman,¹ a young university student, decided to join a series of Salafi Islamic lectures at the *al-Hasanah* mosque in Yogyakarta, he was welcomed with enthusiasm, but also a mixture of censure and gentle guidance. His newfound acquaintances were keen to befriend him, though never failed to point out his un-Islamic habits. In those initial weeks, Lukman could do little right. The way he prayed, used religious terminology, and dressed were all wrong. Lukman didn't seem to mind the constant corrections. As he was new to the city, he welcomed the opportunity to meet co-religionists his own age. He embraced the comments too, expecting to be remonstrated every now and then, believing it was all part of his religious edification. As Lukman's time in the mosque continued his outward appearance changed. His goatee grew longer, his trousers became shorter (as Salafis avoid wearing trousers below the ankle), and his familiarity with religious preachers became more intimate. His outward social attitude shifted too. Lukman began replicating the practice of pointing out the mistakes of others. Indeed, as he told me, this focus on correction was attributed to the need to enforce *hisba* (the commanding of right and forbidding of wrong), a concept that defines Salafi social interactions both inside and outside the movement. Lukman could not, it became apparent, be considered a true follower of the Salafi *manhaj* (method) if he did not abide by it.

Lukman's experiences allude to the ever-present need amongst Salafis to correct others through the medium of verbal remonstration. Aiming to literally emulate the *Salaf al-Salih* (which they regard as the first three generations of Muslims) in order to return to a true and original understanding of Islam,

¹ Lukman, as with all names within the paper, is a pseudonym.

Salafis urge followers to constantly guard themselves against un-Islamic influences. Society, they believe, is full of such threats, and only by accepting Islam without contextualisation can one return to a ‘true’ and timeless Islam of the Prophet. In order to do so one must adhere to a rigid set of socio-conservative religious norms. This includes upholding *al-wala’ wa-l-bara’* (allegiance to Islam and renunciation of unbelievers), a principle that is used to divide society into those who follow ‘true’ Islam and those who do not. Such a division does not solely act as a barrier though, but becomes – as Lukman’s experience outlines – a form of trial for individual members, who must prove the purity of their *niat* (intentions) by overcoming corrupting forces and rebuking the malpractices of others.

Hisba, and *al-wala’ wa-l-bara’* encapsulate principles that guide one’s search to become truly *mukmin* (pious) and a recognized member of the pure Islamic community. Yet, the implementation of tenets is rarely a matter of simple application or a linear process of self-transformation. Principles are given meaning not just through references to Islamic scripture, but via the communal efforts to enforce them in every day circumstance. Intense discussion is required in order to adapt them to a broader set of social considerations within one’s locality.² I aim to expand upon this point to explain how a Salafi inspired subjectivity is constructed in relation to one’s social surrounding. By examining the modalities through which informants came to apply religious injunctions in relation to the non-Salafi world, I argue that Salafi norms are as much, if not more, dependent on horizontal relations (that is between individuals) as they are on one’s efforts to adhere to religious tenets as dictated to them by Salafi scholars. Meaning is given form through social context, existing on a landscape (Reed, 2011) which determines how, when, and where specific interactions can or cannot arise. Accordingly, the principle line of enquiry within this paper is to understand the communal nature of Salafi piety, specifically how activists juxtapose the distinction between the religious and non-religious worlds within intra-movement social interactions.

My point of departure is the ethnographic experience, examining what it can tell us about how Salafis navigate the challenges posed by non-Salafi encounters. By elaborating upon my ethnography within the *al-Hasanah* mosque in Yogyakarta during the month of Ramadan, I infer that ethnography provides a unique interpretative experience through which to understand the social nature of religious ethics. Indeed, although Salafis continually insist on the need to segregate oneself from ‘non-Muslim’ corruptions in their writings and lectures, I found the majority of activists’ forthcoming and welcoming despite the fact I was a non-Muslim. I was not an abstract observer to them, as my presence was accepted on grounds that I too was on a journey of religious learning - albeit one of an academic nature. But like Lukman my interactions were tempered with constant scrutiny, and my own mistakes were also discussed publically. It is this intersubjective nature of fieldwork that provides a unique viewpoint from

² My use of locality here build on the work of Massey who defined it as ‘*the spaces that define the everyday world of individuals, not merely spatially but also through a set of social interactions that create both coherence and difference*’ Massey D. (1994)

which to better examine how religious boundaries and identities are created, maintained and given meaning.

My analysis goes further than solely reflecting on the ethnographic encounter however, and aims to analyse the significance attached to the communal nature of Salafi learning. They exist a broader plane of interactions through which Salafis interpret and give meaning to their religious identity. This is not to imply that Salafi learning is not also deeply private, but rather that the application of a Salafi ethic occurs in a wider web of interdependencies that come to define one's identity; a relationship that Al-Mohammad refers to as an ethics of 'being with' (Al-Mohammad, 2010). The nuances of a Salafi identity were rife with ambiguity and so require the interjection and confirmation of one's co-religionists. A religious subjectivity is thus not based solely on internalising Salafi dictums, but reconciling one's pious intent with external social considerations. This paper aims to draw out the social connections that make this possible and, by doing so, underline how efforts to 'become pious' are far more fluid than proponents of Salafism may wish to believe. Indeed, the non-Salaf social world remains ever-present, and it is the ethnographic experience that renders this visible.

Reflexive Ethnography and Salafi Ethics

Although this paper is predominantly concerned with communal efforts that constitute Salafi inspired ethics, it is necessary to briefly provide an understanding of the Salafi interpretation of Islamic faith. Scholars have, quite rightly, emphasised that a major character of Salafi Islam lies in the enforcement of strict socio-conservative boundaries that segregate Salafis from other Muslims or non-Muslims (for example, see edited volume by Meijer (2009). Arising from a small group of students and academics at the Hadith department of the Islamic University of Madinah in Saudi Arabia during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Salafism – as understood in this paper - purportedly aims to return followers to an interpretation of religious tenets in order to emulate the *manhaj Salaf al-Salih* or methodology of the pious ancestors (which they define as the first three generations of Muslims, or the *Sahabah*, *Tabi'un* and *Tabi' al-Tabi'in*). They do this by referring to an understanding of *tawhid* (monotheism) that builds off the work of Muhammad Bin Abd' al-Wahhab (1703-92), adherence of the Athari *aqida* (creed) as promoted by Muhammad al-Shawkani (d 1834) and dedication to the strict study and application of Hadith, as was stressed by the 20th century scholar Shaykh Muhammad al-Din al-Albani (1914-1999).

This definition of Salafism follows a growing corpus of literature that defines it as a particular translocal religious social movement (Bonney, 2011; Hasan, 2006; ICG, 2004; Koning, 2007; Meijer, 2009; Ostebo, 2011; Pall, 2013). Salafism is a diverse movement that, in Indonesia, has flourished over the past 30 years, establishing a network of educational institutions (Wahid, 2014), radio stations (Sunarwoto, 2016) and, more recently, social media/internet business ventures (Chaplin, 2018; Nisa, 2013). Importantly, it has no one organisational hierarchy, but depends on numerous networks that

include a global array of donor and educational institutions, the most prominent of which are located in the Arabian Peninsula. It is, rather, a social movement based on a particular interpretative paradigm, which Escarcega eloquently defines as a '*set of assumptions, concepts, values and practices that pertain to a specific yet non-bounded worldview of an imagined community of actors*' (Escarcega, 2013: 134).³

For Salafis, an important part of this paradigm is an emphasis on separating 'good' and 'evil' through *hisba* (the commanding of right and forbidding of wrong) and *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* (allegiance to Islam and renunciation of unbelievers). This latter concept is a key part of their *aqida* (creed) and a prerequisite on becoming part of the 'saved' Islamic group which they believe themselves to be.⁴ *Al-wala' wa-l-bara'* not only acts as a barrier through which Salafism is meant to avoid being 'diluted' through interactions with non-Islamic concepts, but also becomes a form of trial for individual members, who must prove the purity of their *niat* (intentions) by avoiding corrupting forces – thus demonstrating their love and fear of Allah (*taqwa*). The stress on purity and renouncing unbelievers is evident in the volumes of Salafi literature which is dedicated to deriding the practices of other faiths and non-Salafi Muslims. As Shavit points out, *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* is a constant theme of Salafi scholars who evoke it to dissuade Muslims from becoming friends with non-Muslims, or adopting any practices that may represent the West (Shavit, 2014: 72).

In Indonesia, *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* has led to a range of Salafi literature that cautions against local Islamic tradition and Javanese mysticism such as the *ramalan Joyoboyo* (Javanese zodiac), alternative medicines, spells, *ziarah* (grave visits) and visiting the *dukun* (spiritual healer) – all of which are labelled as forms of *syirik* (idolatry) contravening the unity of Allah (HASMI, 2011). Unsurprisingly, these accusations have been met with a high degree of hostility from Indonesia's home-grown (non-Salafi) Islamic scholars. Those affiliated with the country's largest Islamic organisation, the Nahdlatul Ulama, have, for example, trained their members on to how to counter Salafi doctrine (NUOnline, 23 January 2012). As several of Nahdlatul Ulama's leading scholars argue, Salafism (and Islamic movements from the Middle East more broadly), are an active threat to the values of what they term to be the historical and scholastic traditions of *Islam Nusantara* (Archipelagic Islam) (for more information, please see Hosen (2016). Compared to the peaceful nature that they believe defines the spread of Islam across Southeast Asia, they argue that Salafism as inherently intolerant at its core, aiming to erase centuries of local Islamic tradition.

³ Escarcega's notion of a paradigm builds off the work of Thomas Kuhn. Kuhn T. (1970)

⁴ They would quote a Hadith that Muhammad had stated '*My nation shall disband into 73 different sects. All of them will be in the Hellfire except one. They said, 'Who are they, O messenger of God?' He replied, '[They are those who follow] what I and my Companions are upon [today].'* In another narration he replied, '*the Jama'a [group].*' In yet another narration he replied, '*al-Sawaad al-A'zam* [the greatest numbers, or the greatest darkness]

Al-wala' wa-l-bara doesn't completely prohibit interactions between Salafis and non-Salafis however. Although befriending non-Salafis may not be permissible, there remains a need to spread the Salafi message through *da'wa* (propagation), which activists consider to be *Fard al-ain* (an individual obligation), as well as enforce *hisba*, which Salafis classify as *hisba bi-l-kitaba* (through writing) and *hisba maydaniyya* (on the ground). This means that Salafis are allowed to interact with non-Salaf as long as the aim is to convert them or correct behaviour, and they are certain that such interactions will not negatively influence their own faith (Shavit, 2014: 76). Indeed, the Salafi scholar Fawwaz bin Hulail bin Rabah As-Suhaimi explains that within *da'wa* one can engage with local customs through the framework of *was'a'il adiyah* (normalities in a given area) and *was'a'il ta'abbudiyah* (methods of practice), although one must be vigilant so as not to accidentally adopt any custom that is considered a non-Islamic innovation (As-Suhaimi, 2007: 164-170).

The combination of *al-wala' wa-l-bara*, *hisba* and *da'wa* therefore remain constant points of reference on a spectrum through which Salafis come to define their interactions both amongst themselves and the non-Salafi world. However, Salafis in Yogyakarta define principles less through scholastic reasoning and instead through the prism of how one must come to 'live' Islam in the modern world. This inevitably includes a need to navigate the different positionalities of the ethnographer and interlocutor – a process that illuminates the important communal dynamics of Salafi learning. Indeed, I have often asked myself why, as a non-Muslim male of European nationality, I was given permission by Salafis to observe their daily lives, and what this meant in terms of how one demarcated between the non-Salaf and Salafi worlds. Obtaining permission by subjects to conduct interviews, and participate in events, was considerably simple despite the emphasis Salafis place on separating themselves from the impure world. But creating more substantial engagements was far more complex given the Salafi insistence to justify everything through religious tenets.

Interlocutors stressed that my research was permissible as it was a form of *da'wa* that could lead me to Islam through *Hidayah* – or guidance from Allah – even though I stressed I was not interested in converting.⁵ Nonetheless, *Hidayah* acted as a mechanism through which participants justified my presence and participation, and bridged between interacting with me and remaining 'pure' to the message. However, I quickly became aware that meanings could be altered and corrected over time, shifting as the relationship between myself and interlocutors became more intimate. For instance, when I began my research, interactions were warranted on the basis of Islamic scripture and the need to proselytise towards me, but as the research developed, interactions would occur and only then be justified via religious terminology after the fact. As small as this shift was, it raised perplexing question as to how religious boundaries could be relaxed and even re-defined. A further crucial factor that

⁵ A concept that is defined as 'God-given guidance to guard humans against their natural tendency to follow their own whims and to go astray. This guidance is believed to have been primary provided in the form of the *Qur'an*' Esposito JL. (2003)

informed these relationships was that, despite being a foreign non-Muslim, I had spent considerable time in Indonesia, and speak the national language fluently. Further, I was a fellow at an Islamic university, and so familiar with socio-cultural norms, had a basic understanding of religious tenets, and a keen interest in socio-political debates within Yogyakarta. This created a degree of alterity and rapport with interlocutors who, aside from illuminating their religious positions with me, would also talk at great length about their own university experiences. This helped build more substantial relations over time.

My initial requests to conduct an ethnography were thus not met with either hostility or rejection, but intrigue as to what could be gained by seeing how social meanings surrounding Salafism informed daily lives. Interlocutors allowed me into lectures, as this would provide me with *Hidayah*, but as my time with Salafis grew more intimate, I also came to spend time in their houses, schools and businesses. These experiences led me to witness the contentions between Islamic orthodoxy, modernity and belonging that are at the heart of the Salafi movement. My experience was both highly specific, relating to interactions interpreted by a non-Muslim in Yogyakarta, but also insightful in examining the interdependencies through which religious motivations were discussed and Salafism given meaning. It was, furthermore, a reflexive and interpretative experience that, echoing Reed, exists on a 'landscape of meaning' that intersect the conscious and unconscious understandings agents have of themselves and the world (Reed, 2011). My ethnographic approach was therefore built upon the interpretative epistemological model explained in Reed's *Interpretation and Social Knowledge* (Reed, 2011) and through the broader concept of 'working epistemics' discussed within a special edition of *Ethnography* dedicated to Reed's work (Voyer and Trondman, 2017). As proponents of this reflexive position argue, if one wishes to truly be interpretative, one must aim to reconstruct these landscapes of meaning (Voyer and Trondman, 2017). Understanding that questions pertaining to 'what is going on' are, as Benzecry stresses, 'more a horizon of intelligibility than a potential to be fulfilled' (Benzecry, 2017).

I'm not the first to focus on Islamic piety and the contentions experienced by pious Muslim's when navigating their interactions within contemporary society, nor the only one to underline the role of a non-Muslim researcher within an ethnography of Islam. Rich works have provided insight into the significance of ethnographic interpretation. For instance, Deeb, when describing her encounters with interlocutors amongst Beirut's Shi'a community, describes how shaking-hands with her - a female researcher - was avoided ostensibly on religious grounds by several of her interlocutors, but also problematized by others on reasons of wanting to be perceived as modern (Deeb, 2006). Picking up on the contention between Islamic orthodoxy and social pressures, Fadil, in her research amongst Muslim women in Belgium, further asserts that moral imaginaries that guide Islamic practice (or non-practice) can often find justifications through the development of hermeneutical frameworks that reflect contextual sensitivities (in this case of Belgium, this is liberal-secular) (Fadil, 2009). Salafism is no different. As De-Koning argues in relation to Salafi communities in the Netherlands, moral reasoning

and self-understanding is more ambivalent than many Salafi scholars would like to admit, criss-crossing between a range of tensions that exist between Muslim, Dutch, and non-Muslim identities (Koning, 2013).

Briefly stated, these studies underline the ambiguity and anxiety involved in reconciling between Islamic orthodoxies and contemporary social dilemmas, and it is the aim of this paper to offer further elaboration upon this topic by foregrounding the reflexive ethnographic experience. In particular, I focus on the interdependencies between individual Salafi adherents to argue that social relations between Salafi followers not only create a recognised and shared Salafi identity, but provide mechanisms to solve potential contradictions between religious scripture and modern life in a given context. I thus see Salafi selfhood as lying within a greater web of interdependencies and intercorporealities pertaining to human existence; a relation that Al-Mohammad has defined as an ethics of 'being with' (Al-Mohammad, 2010). Echoing Al-Mohammad, I argue a Salafi life becomes possible through and with other individuals, as the enmeshment between beings indicates '*not only that our existential coordinates are eccentric but so too are our ethical coordinates and responsibilities*' (Al-Mohammad, 2010: 441).⁶

In forming this line of argumentation, I should point out that I shifted my initial theoretical approach. When I began my study, I approached religious reversion through a Foucauldian theorisation on subjectivity, and so focused on private efforts of ethical self-transformation (For example, please see (Frisk, 2009; Mahmood, 2005). However, I quickly became aware of the social interdependencies that complicate how one creates, defines and maintains a Salafi lifestyle – as well as the constant tribulations involved in relating to the non-Salafi world. There is a need to move beyond an effort to understand 'self-mastery' (Retsikas, 2013) and - to echo Deleuze's critique of Foucault - reconcile the 'inside' (one's ethical transformation) with the 'outside' involved in subject making (Isin, 2012: 77). In fact, Deleuze reminds us that subjectivisation continues to create itself and change its nature. He notes a multitude of 'folds' involved in one's subjectivity, including the understanding of the material form of ourselves, relations between forces, to knowledge, and to the outside (ideas of death or salvation for instance) (Deleuze, 2016).⁷ The differing rhythms, variations and interactions between these aspects constitute the modes of one's subjectivisation (Blanchot, as referenced in (Deleuze, 2016: 86).

The need to bring the outside back inside is also noted by Al-Mohammad, who utilises Deleuze's concept of 'folding' to underline how the formation of a specific 'selfhood' lies within a greater web of

⁶ I am aware that a web of relationships through which one's ethical coordinates are defined include more than just those of a similar religious disposition (parents, siblings, teachers etc can all play a role). Yet, within this article, I will look at the relationships between religious activists almost exclusively.

⁷ This very brief description of Deleuze's work on subjectivity and folding refers directly to his assessment of Foucault's work. However, it should be noted that he also takes up the issue of folding in his work on Leibniz. For further information, please see Deleuze G. (1993).

relations pertaining to human existence (Al-Mohammad, 2010). Building upon this, I believe that the creation of a Salafi identity must account for the people, events, expectations and experiences that are grounded within a given context and locality (Woods, 2012: 446). Accordingly, through the process of ethnography, and its reflexive nature, I became aware of the necessary communal debates and relationships that allowed religious activists to interiorise the world that surrounds them, and that influence the constitution of religious principles and truths. An ethics of 'being-with' provides a grounding to such an enquiry, taking greater stock of the ways in which a Salafi life becomes possible through and with other individuals. By treating the application of religious tenets less as moments of self-transformation, and instead instances through which the outside is brought back inside, we can better understand the broader personal challenges and communal relations involved in negotiating one's existential coordinates.

The Al-Hasanah mosque

I now turn to my own ethnography and particularly to my observations during the month of Ramadan 2012 (1433) at the al-Hasanah mosque in Yogyakarta. It was but one segment of a broader one year ethnography amongst Salafi Islamic activists across several mosques, schools and offices within the city. As I quickly became aware, mosques – and the lectures held within them – acted as 'obligatory points of passage' (Callon, 1986) through which all Salafis had to pass. Somewhat in parallel to their own spiritual journey, my ethnography followed a similar path, as I was invited to observe and participate in these lectures, only after which – once I was deemed trustworthy – was I able to observe wider social outreach efforts. Mosques are more than centres of learning, introspection and prayer however, they are prime locations where the Salafi doctrine is transformed into sustained but inevitably diverse sets of principles that defined communal action. They are spaces of cultural and social tension (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013), where global Islamic resources are translated and given.

The mosque, as a physical space, exists within a given locality that influences the spatial, political and cultural forces that act upon it and its constituents. As a city with a large student population, Yogyakarta has proved fertile ground to recruit relatively young and well-educated individuals into Salafism. The al-Hasanah mosque, located within the proximity of Yogyakarta's largest university, is highly coveted amongst Salafi preachers. Its linkages to the movement have become well known, not least as the mosque is also home to the offices of a student Salafi radio station. Given this student orientation, Salafi activism in Yogyakarta differs from Salafism in other parts of the archipelago though. Yogyakarta activists stress the need to expand Salafism and Sharia business through education and new philanthropic ventures, pushing an interpretation of Salafi Islamic identity that envisages itself as 'pure' but also modern, upwardly mobile and aspirational. Despite the city being the centre of the politically active Salafi *Laskar Jihad* (Jihad Brigade) during the early 21st century, this strand of Salafism – when compared to the cities of Solo, Bandung or Makassar – is relatively apolitical and quietist (for more

information on *Laskar Jihad*, please see Hasan (2006). Unlike Solo or Makassar which have both frequently been the site of Islamic political activism (including violent jihadism and vigilantism), Salafis in Yogyakarta have relatively few links to vocal Islamic activists or politicians.

There are very real political considerations at the heart of the Yogyakarta Salafi community's reluctance to make any hostile intervention within the public realm. The city is ruled by the Sultan of Yogyakarta, whose authority is tied to local Islamic traditions; practices that Salafis believe to be based on *bi'da* (unIslamic innovations). Salafis are unwilling to openly contest his Islamic credentials, in part due to the fact that the majority of interlocutors (at least in my study) did not originate from the city, but also because scholars did not wish to upset local preachers or political institutions. It was advantageous to remain on the side of local authorities, as government bodies provide Salafi schools with funding, while allowing Salafi preachers to operate on university campuses with relatively little scrutiny. These calculations were certainly beneficial in the case at the al-Hasanah mosque, a mosque I had been aware of throughout my fieldwork, but had – prior to the month of Ramadan – spent relatively little time in. It was only after the sudden cancellation of a lecture series during Ramadan, that one interlocutor suggest I participate in an on-going month-long special lecture series there. He provided me with the contact detail of Ahmad, who was managing a series of lectures at the al-Hasanah mosque over the fasting month.

The al Hasanah mosque was neither particularly big nor grand, but a somewhat run-down building located at a busy intersection next to the city's largest university. Its outside walls were covered in an old layer of green paint and rusting barbed wire, and the design was not inspired by Middle Eastern architecture (as many 'new' mosques constructed by Salafi activists are) but more akin to the multi-layered and red-roofed mosques traditional to Java.⁸ Its green colour attested to its origins as a mosque affiliated to the Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic organisation, although the advisory board consisted of people loyal to the Salafi doctrine since the early 2000s.⁹ During the month of Ramadan, the al-Hasanah mosque was buzzing with activity. There were up to six lectures a day, ranging from one-hour study sessions aimed predominantly at university students, to 15-minute reflections after prayers that were geared towards the wider public. Many of the longer lectures were broadcast live on a Salafi radio station situated behind the mosque. Activists also dedicated the final ten days of Ramadan to living and studying in the mosque. This practice is known as *i'tikaf*, and its importance to Salafi enthusiasts was considerable. As one preacher told his audience during one sermon at the mosque, in contemporary society people were often too busy to *i'tikaf* despite the fact it gave the equivalent award as 1,000 months of prayer.

⁸ For further information on the politics of Mosque architecture, see Wai-Weng H. (2014).

⁹ Zuhri notes the different colours of different Islamic organisations in his own fieldwork. See Zuhri S. (2016).

Ahmad managed the daily running of the mosque. He was a serious yet open individual in his late 30s who had been associated with the Salafī movement since the late 1990s. Ahmad was not a native to the city nor did he come from a particularly religious background. As Ahmad told me, it was during his time as a student that he truly came to follow the *manhaj Salaf al-Salih*, noting the influence and friendship of a popular campus preacher in his reversion. He admitted that his expertise lay not in scholastic knowledge but in *da'wa*—particularly amongst students from the nearby universities. In 2007, he had established an online radio station, becoming one of several individuals involved in spreading Salafī information through religious businesses, commodities and services. His activities, both at the radio station and at the mosque, were financed through a combination of small monthly donations from individual followers and larger funds channelled via the city's established Salafi foundations. Ahmad himself received only a basic salary for these activities, topping up his finances by running a boarding house for Muslim women that he had constructed on a plot of land adjacent to his family home. Assisting Ahmad during this month were several volunteers from a local student Salafi foundation, whose offices were located less than a kilometre north of the Al-Hasanah mosque and who I had been observing over the previous several months. During Ramadan, there were almost always 10-20 members of from this foundation in attendance, ready to assist Ahmad when necessary.

Despite my position as a non-Muslim researcher, I experienced little difficulty in obtaining permission from Ahmad and his colleagues to observe activities at the Al-Hasanah mosque. This was in no small part due to the rapport I had previously built with several preachers and activists during my years' fieldwork. Ahmad had noted that he had heard about my research from a friend who managed a local student Salafī foundation that I had spent significant time with. He thus welcomed my presence on the basis that it was a form of *da'wa* for him, but remained unsure as to what my true intentions were; he was suspicious of anyone involved in the non-Islamic social sciences or humanities (*ilmu sosial*). Ahmad argued that such knowledge was 'secular' and had a tendency to worship human ideas rather than religion, and as such would be overly biased against Islam. He nonetheless believed that I should learn about true Islam, and come to understand that it wasn't violent, as he believed it was stereotyped in the West. Indeed, he expressed his hope that if I was honest and shown *Hidayah* then my study would move me closer to converting. However, there were several prerequisites I had to follow. Ahmad stated I must join others in fasting, and attend all lectures and participate in learning alongside the audience, lest I distract those present from their own religious learning. Further, I was able to join part of the *i'tikaf* session at the end of the month.

Al-Hasanah's program consisted predominantly of religious lectures that aimed to stimulate correct religious practice. These lectures provided spaces through which bonds between audience members and preacher were formed, but also acted as forums through which Islamic tenets – in their most literal form – were transmitted. Topics included *tawhid* (monotheism), *aqida* (creed), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *akhlak* (morals), *adab* (culture), Qur'an and Hadith studies. This variety was important, as enthusiastic

adherents were encouraged to attend lectures on all topics. However, regardless of the theme of lectures, the social narrative remained relatively similar, stressing that society is corrupt and one must embrace Islamic practice to ensure one is both moral and fully-informed. There were constant references to the concept of *al-wala' wa-l-bara*, and the need to individuals to separate themselves from non-Islamic influences if they wished to truly be part of the 'saved' Islamic group. My presence at these lectures did little to dampen the sharp emphasis on these principles, or from preachers verbalising references to a hostile secular or Christian West. For example, one preacher explicitly told his all-male audience that while he believed university education to be important, the students needed to guard themselves from mixing with women and non-Muslims on campus.

Social demarcations were mostly via a combination of religious and contemporary examples. Abu Muslim held a series of morning lectures that were arguably the mosque's most popular. A graduate of the Islamic University of Madinah, Abu Muslim ran a Salafi Ma'had (religious school) located in South Yogyakarta. He was widely liked, and his lectures revolved around the study of Qur'anic verses. The audience – with Qur'ans in hand – would follow him as he quoted *juz* (verses) and explained what they meant in terms of religious duty. Topics included charity, *taqwa*, death and *ikhlas* (morality). During his lectures, Abu Muslim would not refer to one *juz* but, after explaining one reference, would then link to further quotations so as to re-affirm and back up his argument. For instance, during a lecture on the topic of heaven and death, which he began with reference to Sura Al-Imran 185¹⁰, before linking it to Sura Al-Nisa 132¹¹ and Sura Al Mu'minin 35.¹² The main point he reflected upon was the need to be prepared for *hari kiamat* (judgment day), and that only those with true *taqwa* – which he had elaborated on in the previous lecture - could go to heaven. This meant more than ensuring one followed correct practices, but necessarily extended to one's external conduct with one's peers. Abu Muslim remonstrated the audience for mixing with non-Muslims or those who didn't respect their faith, as they could never truly be *ikhlas* – a topic that he would address in greater detail in the subsequent lecture. Non-Muslims, he argued, were corrupting agents that would tempt one into practices that would cause question as to whether one could enter heaven or not.

Abu Muslim's style was charismatic, mixing his content with references to contemporary issues, even using colloquial phrases to get his message across. Indeed, on one occasion he stated that Christians and Jews, being people of the book who refused Mohammad as the final messenger, were *kepala keras* (stubborn) – which brought the audience to laughter. Yet, his lectures also provided an emotive platform

¹⁰ Sura Al-Imran 185 states 'Every person will taste death and you will be paid in full only on the Day of Resurrection. Whoever is pushed away from the First and admitted to the Garden will have triumphed. The present world is only an illusory pleasure.' (2010) *The Holy Qur'an*.

¹¹ Sura Al-Nisa 132 states 'Yes, Indeed, everything in the heavens and the earth belongs to God, and He is enough for those who trust in Him.' *ibid*.

¹² Sura Al-Mu'minin 35 states 'How can he promise you that after you die and become dust and bones you will be brought out alive?' *ibid*.

from which the audience was meant to begin a deeper engagement with Islam. Delivered in an almost sing-song style, where the intonation of Abu Muslim's voice rose and fell as he was moving on from point to point, it intended to infer an understanding of how to *live* Salafism and be a member of the true religious community. The way Abu Muslim linked between *juz* but also between topics drew the audience into his emphasis on the complete connectivity between Islam and the world. This was reified via references to the audience as the *Jama'ah* (religious community) or *majelis* (council) who must separate themselves from the immorality of Indonesian society. Abu Muslim was clear that true Islam required one to live by its major tenets; a particular part of which was keeping interactions with non-Salafis to a minimum. This was reinforced through an emphasis that the audience itself held a responsibility towards each other to ensure Islamic precepts were adhered to and friendships were built upon religion. As I explain in the final section however, this was far from a simple process of remonstrating one's peers, but often lead to communal debates as to how one should define and apply religious tenets. It is to these social efforts that I now turn.

Hisba and Communal Learning

Abu Muslim's reference to the audience at the *majelis* was symbolic of the communally orientated concern with religious ethics. An obsession with aligning every practice to the apparent deeds and saying of the Prophet Muhammad meant activists would talk at length about micro-practices. For example, during over the month, we would discuss how best to sleep (on your right side with your right arm tucked under your head), or enter a mosque or house (right foot first). It was such an obsession that underpinned the reasons why Lukman, as mentioned in the introduction, was constantly corrected. Yet, as much as preachers lectured on the need to accept Islam without context, the networked nature of the mosque as a space where global doctrine was transplanted into local socio-political concerns implied a need to carefully discuss exactly how one applied Islam once one left the mosque. Further, enforcing *hisba maydaniyya* (verbally explaining why someone is doing something wrong according to Islam) necessarily brought one's own agency into play. One had to take an active role in defining religious boundaries and this depended on discussion, agreement and engagement amongst one's peers. How one came to demarcate the ethical boundaries of a Salafi identity was rife with ambiguity that required the interjection and conformation of co-religionists. It is how these interdependencies inform Salafi subjectivity that I am concerned with here.

It was during Abu Muslim's lectures that I first met Lukman, a thin 23-year-old with thick glasses, who had recently enrolled in a Master program in Chemical Engineering at one of the city's most prestigious university. Having recently arrived from South Sumatra, Lukman was using this opportunity away from home to pursue his desire to 'become a better Muslim'. By his own accord, his family was only nominally religious, and his knowledge of Islam was self-taught. As such, he saw this as a perfect time to increase his involvement in Islam. As he told me when we first met, '*many people think Yogyakarta*

is a city of intellectual learning...they are right, but there is Islamic learning here too.' His drive to learn about religion clearly held deep private characteristics (as he could often be seen studying and had come across the lectures on his own account) but there was an intrinsically social element to it, which he tacitly acknowledged given the mosque lectures were a perfect place to make new – and properly Islamic – friends. Yogyakarta, was a 'new start' for him, a place to re-make himself and pursue his ambition to prepare himself for a PhD, and find friends with similar interests. As he lamented, his friends back home were either '*not interested in religion or attracted to political Islam*', often reluctant to practice Islam unless it was linked to political developments or protest.

Lukman had learnt about the lecture series from a poster in a nearby Salafi bookstore, and had begun turning up during the first week of Ramadan. When he entered, he knew no one, but quickly began befriending other similar aged male participants, and joining them in setting up the lectures or preparing the food at the end of the day when we would break fast. He formed an intimate bond with Arya, a third year undergraduate student who was from West Java and had been active within Salafi study circles for over three years. Arya was a confident and enthusiastic individual who had a wispy beard, and who dressed in a white flowing *jalabiyaa* (long robes). By nature of being in the movement longer than Lukman, Arya's religious knowledge was greater, but he emphasised that one should not stop learning – describing *taqwa* as a constant effort to improve oneself. Islamic education was, in his opinion, almost cyclical, dependent on constant correction and awareness of oneself. As Arya and Lukman became close, Arya would guide Lukman in his religious studies, recommending what he should read, and correcting his behaviour. For instance, he encouraged Lukman to avoid *isbal* (trousers below the ankle), pray with his feet touching the participant next to him (as is the way in Salafism) and recite Qur'anic injunctions correctly.

Lukman, Arya, and I were regulars at Abu Muslim's lectures, often sitting in together at the front of the mosque. Over the month, we would freely talk about university study, life, or the finer details of Abu Muslim's lectures, often mingling all these topics together. One defining feature of our interactions – and those within the mosque more generally – was continuous debate, and public criticism, of how one correctly applies Salafi practices. I was not exempt from corrections, as Arya, Lukman and their co-religionists were keen to show me what 'true' Islam meant. When mistakes were corrected this was often communicated as friendly pointers, but inferred greater meaning as to how religious knowledge was disseminated and acted upon. For example, early one evening I was publically corrected when I broke fast by eating soup with the spoon in my left hand (as I am left handed). My mistake was spotted by Ahmad, who made the initial public objection, stating the left hand to be unclean. Yet, it was immediately followed by a kind pointer by a fellow preacher that using the left hand to eat or drink was also more dangerous for your health, as, given your heart was centred to the left of your chest, the action of lifting your left hand was more likely to disturb the flow of blood around your body. This led to murmurs of agreement from some, but an interjection from Arya, who cautioned that while this was

perhaps the case, we couldn't accept this practice on medical grounds less it led to wider contextualisation of practices that must be accepted unquestionably in Islam.

The abovementioned conversation shows the public dynamic of *hisba* as well as how such issues could catalyse deeper conversation as to the reasons why something must be followed. It also alludes to the tension between doctrinal and worldly reasoning that was never far from the surface. A more significant example of this occurred during the *i'tikaf*. One evening I was dressed in short cotton trousers (comfortable to fall asleep in) that coincidentally didn't fall below my ankle. Arya suddenly commended me for this, as these trousers avoided *isbal*. In response, I replied how a (non-Salafi) friend had commented that avoiding *isbal* had been, during the time of the Prophet, a way of ensuring one remained clean and did not cover one's clothes in mud. I was quickly chastised by Arya, as such reasoning, he claimed, was *Mu'tazilah* (reference to 8th century Muslims who engaged with Hellenistic philosophy). Arya noted that one shouldn't follow things because they had logical justification. He added that too often logic led to bad practice and a confusion of Islamic knowledge with that of mystical or non-Islamic sources, as in Indonesia where society had been corrupted by liberal thinking and mysticism. Lukman, who had joined us halfway through this exchange, chimed in that, as Abu Muslim has said in a lecture two days prior, true *taqwa* inferred one must embrace Islam without question or contextualization.

Verbal *hisba* was therefore characterised by juxtaposing the need for Islamic purity against an impure world. In order to emphasise the difficult struggles involved, one tactic used by those conducting *hisba* would often be to cloak their remarks in comments concerning their own difficulties. Ahmad once remonstrated against me for reading the Oxford University Press edition of the Qur'an late one night. Although I followed along in Indonesian, during several nights of the *i'tikaf* I would switch to this English edition when I was tired. Yet, when Ahmad spotted me, he examined the translation and stated that it could not be considered correct as it lacked the original Arabic text, which should appear next to any translated text if it were considered proper. He then noted that it was by cutting such corners that *sesat* (deviant) Islamic interpretations entered people's mind – as no one could verify whether the text was authentic. Sensing I was going to interject, he quickly followed this up by a lengthy talk on the need to follow religion correctly, even when this was difficult. He brought up his previous love for heavy metal, and with an almost conspiratorial excitement he talked about how he played guitar and missed it, but also his resolve to stick to his religion lest he contribute to poisoning Indonesia's youth.

These exchanges emphasise my own experiences in being corrected, but also allude to the inter-subjective nature and dependency on real world experiences through which religious tenets gain qualification. As I became aware of the significance of these encounters, I began to further examine the ways interlocutors discussed, agreed upon and then applied an understanding of what religious engagement meant within their lives. Mistakes provided insight into the conscious efforts through which

religion was meant to dominate every part of one's social interactions, but also the social tension in which these efforts exist. Adherents could use *hisba* to affirm their own position within the movement, as stories concerning how much one had personally given up were important tropes to garner authority amongst one's peers. Ahmad's story of his love for heavy metal was not a one-off, but a frequent example he brought up on numerous occasions. He used it to increase the credentials of his own religious journey, but it also served the deeper purpose of building empathy with others by showing an awareness of the real world and the temptations of non-Salafi influences. In these exchanges, religious tenets may have been given an air of permanence, but were never separated from the non-Salafi world conjured up and reflected upon through social interactions. It was such horizontal relationships, and the experiences they were built upon, that gave religious doctrines social meaning.

Discussions would not necessarily end in agreement, but often in compromise. One of the most significant debates amongst students concerned how to interact with one's parents and fears that they would have a hostile reaction to one's new Salafi faith. Lukman, for example, had mentioned to me that he did not tell his parents he was conducting *i'tikaf*, as this would lead them to suspect his new-found piety. He was not alone in his fears, as I noticed a colleague of his who also attended Abu Muslim's lectures and was clean-shaven. I asked him one evening why this was so, and he lamented that he used to have a beard, but that he was forced to shave it off once his dad had seen it, and accused his son of 'looking like the terrorists on TV'. As beards are a religious requirement for Salafis he didn't know what to do. Yet, he did not turn to religious texts for an answer – as he already knew the obligatory nature of growing a beard – but instead, approached his co-religionists within the mosque study circle. By his own account, his colleagues conferred with him at length before one friend offered a solution; why not follow his father's demand for now, but try and convince his father otherwise through *da'wa*? Although not everyone agreed, the individual in question believed such a compromise did not mean he was less-religious in any way. What was important was that he was consciously aiming to live by Islam – and even if his interpretation wasn't perfect, he had brought it to the community to gain a form of acceptance.

Salafi activists may thus attempt to apply their faith to every aspect of their daily lives, but this necessarily occurs in a field of other demands, social pressures and influences. They are sons, daughters, students and professionals as well as pious Muslims, and the creation of a religious self always reflected a recognition of these social pressures. Further, talk of the ills of society and need to separate oneself from them didn't always square with the growing affinity between myself and al-Hasanah's audience. One evening, Arya and Lukman dropped in at my house on their way back from several errands at a nearby *pesantren* (religious school), and we talked at length about conduct towards non-Muslims and boundary-making. This conversation began as a reflection on Abu Muslim's lecture mentioned earlier in this paper. I enquired as to what they made of a comment he had made that only true Muslims could be *ikhlas*. Lukman was quick to agree with this, stressing that while he was happy to have personal

relations with non-Salafis, it was only those who shared a similar religious belief that he could truly trust and be considered ‘friends’. Arya, sensing the unease of this statement, qualified Lukman’s comment, arguing that it did not imply that we could not all remain friends, but rather that Muslims needed to be more aware of how they conducted themselves and who they trusted. He continued jokingly that while I may be ‘stubborn’ (in reference to Abu Muslim’s comments), I was also learning about Islam and it was important that I was allowed to do so. What was important, he concluded, was intent; both my intent to learn (academically) about Islam, and his to foreground Islam regardless of the temptations and challenges experienced along the way.

At the time, I was not entirely convinced in Arya’s response, as it neither aligned to what lecturers had been saying nor what I had read within Salafi literature. Yet, when taken into consideration with the communal nature through which the Salaf and non-Salaf worlds are frequently navigated, it made sense. Enforcing Salafi principles were not necessarily clear-cut, and shifted in relation to arising concerns and challenges. Engaging with a researcher such as myself, who – although not Salafi - was learning and participating in the movement, had no simple answer. Further, given our shared experience as university students/researchers, there remained a degree of commonality. Instead, as with the above-example of their clean-shaven colleague, solutions were based on real-world and timely considerations. Religious boundaries were as much about intention and gaining recognition of one’s intent by one’s peers, as they were about references to Salafi tenets. They were navigated through intra-movement relations. Boundaries were context specific, communal and subject to change. By analysing the social dynamics of *hisba*, we can thus shed light as to one mechanism through which Salafis reconcile the *outside* within the *inside* of one’s subjectivity (Deleuze, 2016). How one’s practices were accepted or rejected by one’s colleagues, and how such reasoning was qualified gives meaning not just to one’s Salafi identity, but to the outward conjectures of the movement more broadly. Local anxieties, Islamic discourses, and power imbalances between peers were all brought together in order to define a particular Salafi ethic of ‘being-with’ (Al-Mohammad, 2010). Further, it is an ethnographic approach that renders these contentions visible.

Conclusion

By offering insight into how Salafis learn and apply religious principles within Yogyakarta, this paper aims to contribute to a rich and lively scholastic debate concerning the ethnography of Islamic piety. In particular, I emphasise that religious identity is neither devoid of context nor total, but rife with ambiguity as agents come to apply, contest and justify their religious choices. As argued, the evocation of a Salafi subjectivity is not solely project of internal self-transformation, but relates to the creation of a communal ethics that define how one navigates between Salafi doctrine, contemporary society and a religious identity.

In following this line of argumentation, I aim to make two contributions to empirical studies of contemporary Islamic movements. Firstly, an ethnographic approach renders visible the process through which religious boundaries are contested and gain acceptance. Within lectures Salafi scholars may be quick to describe their piety as pure and decontextualized, but ethnography allows us to see the communal debates and relationships that allow activists to navigate between Salafi practices and the world around them. Through a mixture of religious, moral and practical reasoning, interlocutors debated – often heatedly and at great length - as how best to assert their Salafi identity within contemporary society. This points to a second interlinked finding; that a Salafi subjectivity is linked to an ethics of ‘being-with’ (Al-Mohammad, 2010). In order to gain acceptable interpretations as how best to deal with non-Salafi individuals and contexts, individuals would rarely rely on Salafi teachings alone; instead rationalising ethical choices through a web of social interdependencies. These relationships allowed them to find solutions as how best to navigate the social world, and display their intent to live a pious lifestyle to others. Echoing Deleuze, there is thus a need to take greater stock of the multitude of ‘outside’ forces involved in subject making (Deleuze, 2016). By treating the application of religious tenets less as moments of self-transformation, and instead as processes through which an ethics of ‘being-with’ is given significance, we can therefore better understand the broader communal relations through which a Salafi subjectivity becomes possible and meaningful.

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