Masyarakat, Kebudayaan dan Politik
ISSN: (Print 2086-7050) / (Online 2528-6013)
https://doi.org/10.20473/mkp.V38I12025.72-89

Grassroots perspectives of Javanese Muslims on local *kyai* figures versus Islamic preachers in religious television broadcasts

Pandangan akar rumput Islam Jawa terhadap figur kyai lokal versus penceramah dalam tayangan religi Islami pada media televisi

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Abstract

This study examines the views of grassroots Javanese Muslims in Wukirsari, Imogiri, and Yogyakarta toward the authority of local *kyai* and television preachers (*ustadz/ustadzah* on the screen). This study aims to analyze how advances in media technology change the pattern of Islamic knowledge transmission and challenge traditional religious authority. Using a critical phenomenological approach, this study examines how media exposure shapes public perception, elevating celebrity preachers through the appeal of popularity while marginalizing traditional *kyai* rooted in local pesantren and social relations. The findings show that television creates a form of *hyperreality* that simulates religious legitimacy through visual performance, so the boundaries between ulama based on scientific sanad and media-constructed religious figures become blurred. However, many local *kyai* demonstrate adaptability to the digital shift without losing their traditional authority or social closeness to the community. The novelty of this study lies in the understanding that the contestation between traditional and modern Islamic authority is not simply a change in the pattern of preaching but also a complex identity struggle in the digital landscape. This study shows that symbolic authority in Islam is increasingly mediated, negotiated, and contested at the grassroots level, influenced by cultural and technological heritage.

Keywords: Javanese Islam; local *kyai*; media reception; religious authority; television preachers

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji pandangan akar rumput umat Islam Jawa di Wukirsari, Imogiri, Yogyakarta terhadap otoritas kyai lokal dan penceramah televisi (ustadz/ustadzah layar kaca). Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis bagaimana kemajuan teknologi media mengubah pola transmisi pengetahuan keislaman dan menantang otoritas keagamaan tradisional. Dengan pendekatan fenomenologi kritis, studi ini menelaah bagaimana eksposur media membentuk persepsi publik, mengangkat penceramah selebritas melalui daya tarik popularitas, sekaligus memarginalkan kyai tradisional yang berakar pada pesantren dan hubungan sosial lokal. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa televisi menciptakan bentuk hyperreality yang mensimulasikan legitimasi keagamaan melalui performa visual, sehingga batas antara ulama berbasis sanad keilmuan dan figur keagamaan konstruksi media menjadi kabur. Meski demikian, banyak kyai lokal menunjukkan daya adaptasi terhadap pergeseran digital tanpa kehilangan otoritas tradisional maupun kedekatan sosial dengan masyarakat. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada pemahaman bahwa kontestasi antara otoritas Islam tradisional dan modern bukan sekadar perubahan dalam pola dakwah, melainkan juga pertarungan identitas yang kompleks dalam lanskap digital. Studi ini memperlihatkan bahwa otoritas simbolik dalam Islam kini semakin dimediasi, dinegosiasi, dan diperebutkan di ranah akar rumput yang dipengaruhi warisan budaya dan teknologi.

Kata Kunci: *Islam Jawa; kyai setempat; penerimaan media; otoritas keagamaan; penceramah di televisi*

Introduction

Religion is currently a tempting commodity. At least, this is the view (Yustati 2017). Religion seems to be traded (Sebastian 2019), becoming an item that generates a market through its adherents (Salehudin & Mukhlish 2012), becoming a patron for economic interests on the one hand (Rusydi et al. 2021) while, on the other hand, is the view that this is an ideological struggle (Wahyono 2001). Islam as a religious entity is always seen as closer to capitalists who make people a market for Islamized goods (Heryanto

2015), while other views state that this is an ideological structuring for broader interests that lead to formal power (Wahyono 2001). This debate gives rise to a patron relationship that opposes the patron and his relationship with their *clients*, later referred to as the people.

The boss-client relationship in Islam is the gateway to the dichotomy of *role models* seen in religious leaders. The term *patron client* usually relates to the relationship between a k*yai* and his students (Hermansyah 2022, Roiyan 2023, Fikri et al. 2024). In the local Islamic tradition, a local religious figure is a model always referred to in religious practices. Those known as *kyai* generally become leaders for followers of Islam in the regions (remote areas). These *kyai* have a closer sociological relationship with the people in their area (Rozaki 2021). They become heads or leaders of religious rituals, references to the community's religious issues, and a mainstay in fostering community spirituality. The dominant role of the *kyai* makes them have a special position in remote communities, especially in rural Java.

In Javanese Islamic society, *kyai* embody spiritual authority and sociocultural leadership, serving as a moral compass rooted in the tradition of pesantren (Woodward 2004, Beatty 2009). Sociologically, *kyai* act as mediators between sacred knowledge and the social life of society (Howell 2001) by combining inherited charisma and legitimacy (Geertz 1981, Fealy 2008). Anthropologically, they act as cultural intermediaries in transmitting religious teachings, able to adapt to modernity without losing their symbolic capital (Van Bruinessen 1995, Hefner 2000). Amidst the shifting media landscape, their position began to be questioned by popular preachers who did not have strong scientific ties (Hoesterey 2016, Kholili et al. 2024), but the *kyai* were still able to maintain their influence through relational ties with the community (Lukens-Bull 2005, Nisa 2018).

The existence of *kyai* is currently facing direct challenges or rivalries. The presence of media featuring role models and religious leaders has shifted the position of *kyai* consciously or unconsciously. The shift in the existence of various media platforms that present preachers/da'i (ustadz/ustadzah) through the media has become a patron relationship between local *kyai* and the community divided into clusters that do not strengthen but rather negate each other. This condition is understandable, considering that the variants of Islam that are formed come from different roots. Geertz's view of the anthropology of Javanese Islamic society, which is divided into *priyayi*, *abangan*, and *santri* (puritan) variants, provides a little help in understanding the problems that occur.

The differences in views, especially those held by the *Abangan* and Puritan Islamic groups, continue not only in religious practices but also contain strong ideological elements. The *Santri* or *Putihan* group considers Islam to be an ideology with a long-term goal of implementing Islamic law comprehensively in national life (Wahyono 2001). The *Abangan group*, on the contrary, considers Islam to be normative values that do not need (are mandatory) to implement Islamic law and places religion as nothing more than a religious value, not as an ideology to be fought for.

This opposing view manifests clearly in the society of Wukirsari, a village in the Yogyakarta Special Region, where people adhere strongly to ancestral traditions through various ritual ceremonies. These traditions, resilient in the face of televised Islam, are not merely cultural performances but are deeply spiritual practices that structure communal life and religious expression. Ceremonies such as *selapanan* (a ritual for newborns), *slametan* (communal prayer for safety), and *bersih dusun* (village cleansing rituals) serve as meaningful embodiments of *Javaneseness* (*kejawen*), an inherited identity that intertwines spiritual beliefs, cosmology, and social solidarity. This local religiosity is not only persistent but often stands in implicit contrast to the normative Islamic discourse broadcast by celebrity ustadz/ustadzah on national television.

While televised religious figures often advocate a puritanical or text-based Islam that emphasizes uniform rituals and centralized religious authority, local traditions in Wukirsari express a more plural, experiential, and community-based spirituality. The introduction of religious messages through media, particularly those that discredit local rituals as *bid'ah* (heresy), can contradict the values embodied in

traditional practices. Field data suggest villagers negotiate its content through their own cultural filters, demonstrating their agency and adaptability, rather than simply accepting or rejecting televised da'wah. Many show a clear emotional and symbolic attachment to *kyai kampung* (village religious leaders), who not only perform religious guidance but also serve as custodians of local cosmology and ritual life. This subtle resistance and selective reception point to a deeper dynamic of authority negotiation and media decoding in the everyday life of Javanese Muslims.

Therefore, this study is significant for understanding how religious media content is received and reinterpreted in a culturally rich setting like Wukirsari. It sheds light on how local traditions such as *selapanan* and *bersih dusun* shape the audience's response to televised Islamic preaching. By doing so, the research reveals the broader dynamics of authority negotiation and media decoding in the everyday life of Javanese Muslims, and how these dynamics are influenced by the community's unique blend of local and modern religious authorities.

The opposite phenomenon is observed in the rise of celebrity ustadz/ustadzah on television. In contemporary Islamic literature, these figures are described as religious authorities who blend Islamic tradition with the tools and aesthetics of modern media. They preach (da'wah) verbally and influence public opinion through digital platforms such as television and social media (Campbell 2010a, Cheong 2017). In the era of religious mediation, their authority increasingly intersects with the logic of popularity and visual appeal (Fakhruroji 2015, Slama 2017). This gives rise to the notion of the television ustadz as a new public figure whose presence is shaped by religious content and media performance. Programs featuring these preachers often emphasize core Islamic messages such as tawhid (the oneness of God), while presenting them through entertainment-driven formats that attract a mass audience. The emergence of celebrity ustadz/ustadzah reflects their hybrid role as spiritual guides and screen personalities.

At the same time, television as a medium actively constructs new religious authority through visual and performative strategies. Unlike traditional religious leaders whose legitimacy rests on sanad (religious genealogy) and community endorsement (Hidayat 2023, Yazid et al. 2023), many television preachers derive their influence from stage presence, media charisma, and alignment with popular tastes (Kuncoro 2021, Gao et al. 2024). These figures are mediated and curated by television producers, turning them into symbols of religiosity that are both marketable and ideologically appealing. While they play a dual role (as transmitters of religious knowledge and performers in the media sphere) it remains unclear whether this dual role is truly embraced or merely tolerated by Muslim viewers. The urgency of this research is underscored by the need for empirical data on audience reception to determine how such figures are negotiated in everyday religious life.

This study delves into uncharted territory, investigating how Javanese Muslim audiences respond to the dual role of television ustadz/ustadzah as both spiritual authorities and media celebrities. It seeks to answer the question: Do local Muslim communities accept, negotiate, or resist the mediated authority presented through television religious programming? By focusing on audience reception in a specific Javanese context where traditional Islamic authority remains influential, this research contributes to broader scholarly discussions on Islamic media, authority, and the transformation of da'wah in the digital era.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative design with a critical phenomenology approach. This approach enables the researcher to explore informants' subjective and intersubjective experiences while considering the sociocultural contexts that shape their perspectives on religious figures. Drawing on Guenther's (2020) conceptual framework, critical phenomenology allows for a reconstruction of lived experience and a simultaneous examination of the political, social, economic, and cultural power relations that condition such experiences.

The scope of this study is limited to religious broadcasts on television, with participants drawn from Javanese Muslim communities that still maintain traditional Javanese practices, classified within Clifford Geertz's typology as Abangan Islam. The research was conducted over a significant two-year period 2022-2024, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics and changes in the participants' perceptions. Involving ten purposively selected informants, these individuals were chosen based on their active consumption of religious television broadcasts, yet they, in practice, express a stronger affiliation with the authority of local *kyai* than with media-based ustadz/ustadzah figures.

Data were collected primarily through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and ethnographic note-taking. The analytical process followed a multi-stage thematic analysis. First, the researchers identified recurring patterns and significant expressions related to how participants perceive and interpret religious authority on television versus in local traditions. Second, these themes were contextualized using emic categories from Javanese Islamic cosmology and cultural practices. This emphasis on the role of Javanese Islamic cosmology and cultural practices in the research process will make your audience feel connected and engaged. Third, through a critical phenomenological lens, the study examined how the reception of religious messages is embedded in unequal power structures and symbolic legitimacy.

The conclusion-drawing process involved continuous reflection and dialogical engagement with the data, allowing for emergent interpretations that privilege the informants' voices rather than imposing fixed theoretical constructs. Rather than aiming for generalization, this study seeks to offer a thick description and nuanced understanding of how traditional Javanese Muslims respond to mediated Islamic authority. This nuanced understanding, which is a key contribution of the study, will leave your audience feeling enlightened and informed. The findings contribute to scholarly discussions in media studies, anthropology of religion, and Islamic studies by demonstrating how global media representations of Islam are appropriated, negotiated, or resisted within specific cultural lifeworlds. The characteristics of informants can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1.
Characteristics of research informants

Initials	Gender	Age	Occupation
AGS	M	55	Local community figures
MJN	M	61	Shadow puppet craftsman
NUR	F	48	Batik, Housewife
BHR	M	33	Farmer Youth group member *(karang taruna)*
MJN	M	62	Shadow puppet craftsman
KBT	F	54	Batik, Housewife
SRN	M	56	Farmer Village elder
PGH	M	32	Shadow puppet craftsman
NRH	F	48	Batik, Housewife
MRJ	M	52	Farmer Village elder

Source: Created by author

Table 1 introduces a group of informants from Abangan Islamic backgrounds in Wukirsari, whose livelihoods are rooted in traditional occupations such as farming, batik craftsmanship, and wayang-making. These professions are a reflection of the cultural and spiritual lifeworlds of Javanese Islam. While gender was not a selection criterion, the focus was on individuals whose experiences are crucial in understanding how local religious subjectivities interact with and respond to televised Islamic authority.

Results and Discussion

In contemporary Indonesia, the proliferation of religious messages through television and digital media has significantly altered the landscape of Islamic authority. These transformations, which do not occur in a vacuum, intersect with pre-existing religious structures, local traditions, and community practices deeply rooted in cultural memory and everyday life. Nowhere is this more visible than in rural Java, where the social fabric is still significantly influenced by the presence of local *kyai*, pesantren-based religious systems, and ritualized Islamic practices. This section provides an in-depth analysis of how grassroots Muslim communities (specifically in Wukirsari, Imogiri, Yogyakarta) negotiate the interplay between traditional religious authority and the media-mediated figures of celebrity ustadz, with a particular emphasis on the pivotal role of media in this negotiation, intriguing us with the power dynamics at play.

Our study, drawing from critical ethnographic fieldwork and framed by Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory and symbolic resistance frameworks, seeks to understand how religious authority is maintained, contested, or redefined locally. The findings show that rather than entirely replacing traditional institutions, media-based religious discourses are recontextualized by rural Muslims in ways that reflect the power of affective bonds, local cosmologies, and socio-cultural identities. This recontextualization of media-based religious discourses enlightens us about the adaptability of cultural practices. The following subsection presents these findings, focusing on the embeddedness of Javanese Islamic practice and how it continues to shape religious meaning in the era of media saturation.

Grassroots Javanese Islam

In various literature, Javanese Islam is known as Muslims who still maintain traditions (Woodward 2004), syncretic Islam because it combines religion with local Javanese traditions (Nakamura 2012), those who preserve ancestral traditions with Hindu-Buddhist characteristics (Ricklefs 2014), or non-fanatical Muslims (Wahyono 2001). In rural Java, they still dominate the existence of Islam, which is combined with Javanese traditions. They are referred to as grassroots Javanese Islam, who demographically have kinship ties with the Javanese ethnic group and have beliefs that Abangan Islam characterizes. Java is considered a social identity that does not fade with religion. In this case, Java is a social and cultural entity that cannot be lost when Islam enters and is embraced by the community.

The presence of this Javanese variant of Islam is widely opposed by those who adhere to Puritan Islam. They consider that Javanese Islam is not religious following the place of origin where Islam was revealed, namely the Arabian Peninsula. This starting point refers to religious texts that state that Islam was revealed as a guideline to improve human morals as a whole and is not separated by sociological or geographical aspects. Therefore, they believe the Islamic approach must be historically understood where Islam was revealed. The term "Arabization" then emerged as a label for this white Islam group. The reference they set distorts a bias that Islam first came down to Arab society, which culturally has differences between those in the archipelago (Indonesia) and Arabia itself.

This Javanese Islamic group is also better known as traditional Islam, which, according to Geertz (1981), has strong communal ties, lives in villages, and makes a living as simple farmers. They are a grassroots Islamic group that lives and still survives (exists) to this day. In almost every corner of the Special Region of Yogyakarta, for example, this Javanese Islamic community symbolizes the presence of Javanese sociological identity that cannot be easily changed into puritanical Islam. The area studied in this article is in Wukirsari Village, Imogiri Sub-district, Bantul Regency, Special Region of Yogyakarta.

The results of the researcher's investigation prove that the Wukirsari community is closer to the Javanese Islamic tradition. One form is the grand pengajian event that is routinely held there. The pengajian is a form of expression of the religiosity of the Wukirsari community as a manifestation of love and in order to hope for intercession on the last day. From 2015 to 2024, based on information the author obtained from local community leaders, AGS (55) stated that almost every month, there is a Rabu Pon pengajian, either organized by the village government or by community organizations around Wukirsari.

This enduring religious practice reflects what Geertz (1960) described as the syncretic integration of Islam with local Javanese values, where religious traditions are embedded in everyday cultural forms. The monthly pengajian is not merely a spiritual ritual but also an institution of social and symbolic renewal. It affirms not only religious piety but also communal identity, generational continuity, and the enduring relevance of traditional authority figures like the *kyai*. These events manifest what Turner (1969) conceptualized as liminal spaces, periodic communal gatherings that produce communitas and reaffirm the sacred in social life.

The Wukirsari community widely practices this kind of religious celebration tradition. MJN (61 years old), a community leader and administrator of the local prayer room, stated:

> "Every Wednesday Pon is like a permanent agenda here. Sometimes, the pengajian is held in the village hall, sometimes in residents' homes or mosques in turns. Usually, the one who comes is a local Kyai, and the congregation can be hundreds. This is not just a pengajian but also a means of socializing with the residents. The village government also fully supports it." (Informant MJN).

This local adaptation of ritual, which is relational and performative in nature, stands in contrast to the mediated religious experience offered by celebrity ustadz on television or YouTube. As Hoover (2006) has argued, while media expands religious access, it also transforms religious meaning and authority. However, as this study shows, the community continues to value religious experience that is tangible, immediate, and anchored in lived relationships. This statement was also strengthened by the confession of Mrs NUR (48), a member of Muslimat NU, Wukirsari, who stated: *"We from Muslimat often help coordinate the Rabu Pon pengajian, especially if a women's organization holds it. This tradition has been around since I was little and is still lively until now."* The involvement of Muslimat NU reveals the gendered dynamics of religious tradition, showing how women's religious organizations function as cultural custodians who preserve and transmit Islamic practices across generations (Fealy & White 2008).

Another informant, BHR (33), a Youth of Karang Taruna and Religious Event Volunteer, also stated:

> "I am often asked to help as a committee or part of the documentation. Interestingly, even though many people now watch preaching on TV or YouTube, the Rabu Pon event is still in demand. Moreover, it feels closer and more touching because you can meet the kyai directly. Many young people are also participating now." (Informant BHR).

This testimony provides evidence of a localized digital-religious hybridity. As Campbell & Tsuria (2021) note, while digital media reshapes the space of religious interaction, it does not always displace traditional authority but may be recontextualized within it. In this context, youth participation indicates a generational shift that maintains traditional values while utilizing contemporary tools, such as documentation or digital dissemination, to support religious events.

The community and the kelurahan government routinely work together to organize events to increase religious values while establishing strong relationships between communal members and the community and the *kyai*, their role model. Importantly, one informant emphasized the increasing role of youth, showing that tradition in Wukirsari is not static. Instead, it evolves as a site of negotiation between the sacred and the modern, between communal intimacy and the broader reach of digital Islam. Thus, the case of Wukirsari illustrates a resilient form of religious life that resists full commodification or digitization by maintaining symbolic, affective, and spatial intimacy with traditional authority. Rather than shifting toward a media-centric religious identity, the community retains its relational religiosity, rooted in bodily presence, intergenerational cooperation, and cultural embeddedness.

The closeness of the grassroots of Javanese Islam to *the kyai*

Sociologically, the Wukirsari Javanese Muslim community is very close to their *kyai*. *Kyai* are those who are considered to have skills in the aspect of religious knowledge (Rosita 2018), have noble character

(Mustapa 2017), or can also be highly respected community figures (Susanto 2007). A *Kyai* has a very honorable position in Javanese Muslim society. The role of *kyai* is not only as an imam (leader) in carrying out worship rituals but also as a place to ask questions for people experiencing problems (Nasikhin & Yani 2014) or those who ask for advice. Therefore, they are role models or figures where the community refers to everything in the community's daily life.

The title Kyai used to be assigned to religious figures who had completed traditional passantran education (Takdir 2018). In Arabic, *kyai* can be equated with ulama, which refers to people who master religious knowledge well (Arifin 2012). The closeness between the *kyai* and the community has been established and going on for a long time, from generation to generation. *Kyai* families will usually produce *kyai* offspring, and so on. From this closeness, people feel a strong bond with the figure of the *kyai*. The *Kyai* is always there in joy and sorrow and helps the community with difficulties. In various *slametan* ceremonies of birth (selapanan), marriage (maintenance), or death, a *kyai* will always be present as the leader of the ritual and as a figure respected by the Javanese Islamic community, especially those at the grassroots.

Informant MJN (62), a wayang craftsman and regular village recitation congregation, stated:

> "The kyai here not only teaches us to recite the Koran but is also a place to confide in our lives. If we have family problems, are sick, or want to start a business, we usually ask for prayers or advice from him. We feel calmer after visiting him. The kyai is like a second parent to us." (Informant MJN).

During this time, KBT (54), the administrator of the village Islamic study group, informed us:

> "The ustadz on television is good, but the village kyai is the one who truly understands our lives. He understands the customs and the character of the people here. Moreover, what is important is that he does not just give lectures but also attends every community event, from Italian to harvest. He is not just a religious teacher, but a social leader as well." (Informant KBT).

BHR (33) stated:

> "The younger generation still respects the kyai because of his multifaceted role. We often discuss heavy matters such as morals and even local politics. Even though times have changed, trust in the kyai remains strong because he is consistently present and humble." (Informant BHR).

This relationship is what gave rise to the term *boss client*. In other words, *patron-client* is a symbiotic relationship between a patron with a higher position and a *client* with a lower position in a power relationship (Ma'arif 2010). The *kyai* provides protection, direction, and wise advice according to his position as a figure who is considered to understand religion better. At the same time, the community gives its loyalty to followers or followers who always follow what the *kyai* says. This pattern continues continuously, although not within an exploitative power relationship framework, as in partisan politics.

Ulama/*kyai* and scientific authority

The term "ulama" etymologically comes from the word" 'alim," which means someone who has in-depth knowledge (Yusuf 2019). In Islam, this term refers to individuals with scientific authority in various Islamic fields, such as fiqh, tafsir, and hadith. Unlike terms such as "mutagen" (a pious person) or "abiding" (worship expert), ulama does not simply refer to a person's level of piety. However, instead of the capacity of knowledge, they possess it (Rahman 2020). Therefore, ulama is associated not only with spiritual aspects but also with intellectual ones. In Islamic history, ulama began to develop as an institution during the Umayyad Dynasty (661-750 AD). The government's need for specialists in Islamic law led to the birth of the institution of *qadhi* (judge), which became the forerunner of the ulama group (Hallaq 2005). The *qadhi* had the main task of formulating Islamic law that developed in early Muslim society.

In the 2nd century Hijriah, two main variants emerged in the ulama environment: *ra'yi* experts and hadith experts (Zaman 2002). *Ra'yi* experts prioritized rationality in determining law, while hadith experts emphasized the importance of hadith as the primary source of Islamic law. This difference in approach illustrates the dynamics in the development of Islamic legal thought in the classical period. In the 3rd century, Hijriah, a Sufi group emerged that emphasized the spiritual aspect and mystical approach to understanding Islam. The emergence of Sufism was a response to the luxury development in Muslim society at that time and criticism of ulama, which focused more on the legal aspect than spirituality (Schimmel 1994). This group considered that the virtue of an ulama lies in the mastery of knowledge and spiritual closeness to God.

In Indonesia, ulama are often associated with the term "*kyai*", who has a role as a leader of the person and teacher of yellow books. The social function of a *kyai* in rural communities is not only limited to religious teaching but also includes the role of an advisor in various aspects of life, such as matchmaking, dispute resolution, and traditional medicine (Van Bruinessen 1994). Ulama in Indonesia have different characteristics from those in the Middle East. In the archipelago, ulama tends to combine elements of fiqh, tasawuf, and local wisdom in their preaching. This can be seen in the practice of religious orders and traditions such as collective dhikr and collective pengajian. Ulama in Indonesia also has an important role in social and political movements, especially in the struggle for independence and in the formation of the Islamic education system in pesantren (Azra 2004).

In the classical era, the authority of scholars was built through a system of direct transmission of knowledge from teacher to student (Hallaq 2005). A scholar gained the legitimacy of his knowledge through the process of *talaq* and the granting of ijazah as proof of the continuity of knowledge with the previous generation. This system ensured that Islamic knowledge was transmitted authoritatively in an unbroken chain. The development of printing technology in the 15th century AD changed the pattern of transmission of Islamic knowledge. Printing enabled the distribution of classical books in large numbers so that access to Islamic literature was no longer limited to the madrasah or pesantren environment. This impacted the shift in scholars' authority, where Islamic knowledge was no longer exclusively monopolized by those who had direct relationships with authoritative teachers (Zaman 2002).

In the modern era, the ulama faces challenges from Muslim intellectuals educated in secular universities. These intellectuals no longer rely on traditional methods of understanding Islam but on academic studies based on a historical-critical approach. As a result, the ulama's claim to authority in interpreting Islam has begun to be questioned. The democratization of access to classical books, including through translation into local languages, has further weakened the authority of the ulama as exclusive guardians of Islamic knowledge (Eickelman & Piscatori 1996). The development of digital technology has further changed the structure of religious authority. The Internet and social media provide a platform for anyone to discuss Islam without having to have formal scientific legitimacy.

The phenomenon of "digital preaching" has allowed new ustaz to gain popularity through television screens and social media, even though they do not have a deep Islamic educational background (Campbell 2010b). If you are there, you will be a Muslim community member and be able to see them for a long time. However, this also challenges traditional ulama in maintaining their authority. As religious authority becomes more open and distributed, claims of knowledge based on sanad and direct transmission from teachers begin to lose relevance in most contemporary Muslims' eyes (Hefner 2021).

Media, religious authorities, and celebrity preachers

Since the beginning of the 21st century, television has developed into a dominant medium that has profoundly influenced human life. Its pervasive presence in every corner of the household has made it more than just a means of communication; it has become an integral part of everyday human experience. With its ability to present broadcasts 24 hours non-stop, television is not just a means of conveying information but also a dominant agent in forming collective consciousness. In this context, television has a much stronger penetration power than conventional ideologies that have so far relied on authoritative figures.

In the discourse of media theory, the concept of *media imperialism* that developed in the 1960s highlighted how television functions as an instrument of colonization of consciousness (Thussu 2018). Unlike economic-political imperialism involving physical presence and structural domination, media imperialism works through the distribution of ideology and cultural values that influence people's perceptions of reality. In line with this, the concept of cultural imperialism also emerged, marking a shift in dominance from the material aspect to the symbolic realm (Madianou 2019). In other words, people are increasingly accustomed to living in a world of images constructed by television, making the reality that they experience something filtered through the media's lens.

As Figure 1 illustrates, MNCTV's heart cleansing event is a significant example of how Islamic preaching in Indonesia often blends spiritual guidance with popular media formats. More than just a medium, television has become a culture in itself, which academics call *television culture* (Lotz 2018). This television culture is in line with the main characteristics of postmodernism, namely the transformation of reality into images and the fragmentation of time into a series of recurring present moments. Baudrillard (2017), in his idea of hyperreality, explains how the excessive flow of information creates a simulation that eliminates the boundaries between the real and the imaginary. In this condition, television does not merely represent reality but creates a new reality that exists in itself. This phenomenon can be observed in how television programs shape people's perceptions of social life. For example, the *Music Television (MTV)* channel that aired from 1995-2015 in Indonesia has created a generation immersed in a stream of rapidly changing images without forming a coherent narrative. This gives rise to a *multiphonic experience*, where individuals enjoy visual pleasure without connecting various pieces of information into a larger meaning (Couldry & Hepp 2017).

Figure 1.
MNCTV's heart cleansing event with Mamah Dedeh and Irfan Hakim
Source: MNC Media (2022)

One of the significant impacts of television culture is the aestheticization of life. In the simulation paradigm, everything can be transformed into a spectacle, including previously considered sacred aspects. In this context, Jameson (2020) describes this phenomenon as "a depthless aesthetic hallucination" that blurs the distinction between reality and fantasy. For example, celebrities are positioned as entertainment figures and role models in the entertainment industry in religious life. Conversely, religious figures are increasingly packaged in entertainment to increase public appeal. Baudrillard (2021) uses the metaphor of a "black hole" to describe how final values are absorbed into media simulations, making religion no longer outside the media representation system but rather an integral part of popular culture. In this situation, religious values are no longer the result of profound reflection but are commodified into consumer products that can be presented as infotainment.

Figure 2 depicts a celebrity preacher on MNCTV, who is a prime example of the significant influence of media personalities in shaping contemporary Islamic authority in Indonesia. With the increasing penetration of television in everyday life, the phenomenon *of celebrity preachers* has emerged as a new

form of religious authority. If religious scholars' authority was previously determined by mastery of classical Islamic knowledge, religious credibility is increasingly determined by the extent of a preacher's media reach. They are present on various platforms, from conventional preaching programs to *reality shows* that explore their personal lives, creating a hybridization between the figures of scholars and entertainers. This phenomenon shows that the media is not just a tool for conveying religious messages but also an actor who plays an active role in shaping and reproducing religious authority. This process ultimately replaces the traditional position of religious authority, which was previously more based on formal educational institutions and established religious communities (Campbell & Tsuria 2021). Furthermore, television has replaced the role of religion in various aspects of life by creating standards of behavior, morality, and lifestyle that society follows.

Figure 2.
Ustadz Soleh Mahmud (Solmed) from MNCTV
Source: Talk Show tvOne RELOAD (2023)

As television becomes an integral part of daily life, the emergence of celebrity preachers signifies a significant shift in religious authority. Traditionally, the authority of religious scholars was rooted in their mastery of classical Islamic knowledge and recognition within established educational and communal frameworks. However, the credibility of these scholars is now increasingly influenced by their media reach and visibility in the contemporary media landscape. Celebrity ustadz and ustadzah are now visible across a variety of platforms, from formal preaching programs to reality shows that reveal their personal lives. This blurring of the lines between religious scholar and entertainer is a clear indication that media is not just a conduit for religious messages, but an active participant in the creation, shaping, and reproduction of new forms of religious authority. This process effectively displaces traditional authority, which was once anchored in formal institutions and longstanding religious communities, with media-driven standards of behavior, morality, and lifestyle.

Despite these shifts, *kyai* in rural communities such as Wukirsari do not necessarily feel threatened by this transformation. Many maintain authority through deep-rooted social and cultural ties that media figures cannot replicate. Moreover, some *kyai* have strategically begun to engage with media platforms, selectively utilizing television and digital media to complement their traditional roles rather than replace them. This strategic use of media highlights a pragmatic adaptation rather than a wholesale capitulation to media logic. Thus, rather than viewing media as an antagonistic force, *kyai* often perceive it as an additional resource for religious communication, while their core authority remains grounded in relational proximity, cultural embeddedness, and moral exemplarity. This coexistence underscores a layered religious field in which media and tradition interact dialectically, producing a complex landscape of authority rather than a zero-sum displacement.

In recent decades, the emergence of celebrity ustadz and ustadzah, especially on Indonesian television, has become an interesting phenomenon in the landscape of Islamic preaching. Their presence not only functions as a conveyor of religious teachings but also as a public figure who greatly influences people's opinions and lifestyles. Some prominent names in this category are Ustadz Solmed, Mamah Dedeh, and Ustadz Yusuf Mansur. Ustadz Solmed, whose real name is Sholeh Mahmoed Nasution, was born in Jakarta on July 19, 1983. Since he was young, he has shown talent in preaching, as evidenced by his success in winning a national speech and lecture competition at the Istiqlal Mosque in 2000. This Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University of Jakarta graduate is known as a preacher and an actor who starred in popular soap operas such as *Pesantren and Rock n' Roll*. His presence in the world of television is increasingly known through the program "Kata Ustadz Solmed" on SCTV, which packages preaching in a lighter format that various groups easily accept. One informant, MRJ (52), stated: *"Celebrity ustadz can make religion look attractive, but we still need kyai here. TV ustadz sometimes feel distant, only appearing on the screen. Village kyai who are present daily are the ones we trust more."*

Mamah Dedeh, or Dedeh Rosidah, born on August 5, 1951, in Ciamis, is one of Indonesia's most well-known female preachers. Her straightforward and humorous preaching style makes her popular with television viewers, especially mothers. Her name skyrocketed through the Mamah and Aa program on Indosiar, where she delivered Islamic material in meaningful but straightforward language. As a Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta graduate, Mamah Dedeh has proven that women's role in preaching can have a broad influence through mass media. On the other hand, Ustadz Yusuf Mansur is present as a preacher figure who is known for his call to charity and spiritual motivation. Born on December 19, 1976, in Jakarta, he became widely known through his books and lectures, emphasizing the importance of giving charity to obtain blessings in life. Ustadz Yusuf Mansur is also active in Islamic education by establishing the Daarul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School, which focuses on memorizing the Qur'an. Apart from preaching on television, he often appears at various seminars and studies broadcast via digital media.

The phenomenon of celebrity ustadz and ustadzah shows how television and digital media have effectively spread Islamic preaching. Their presence not only enriches the religious landscape in Indonesia but also reflects how religion and pop culture can interact to form a more inclusive Islamic narrative that is easily accessible to the broader community. What is more important is that the narrative of religion as a commodified entity has found its truth. This problem is what brings religious distortion from the sacred to merely a desire to fulfil needs that have economic value.

Despite the widespread commodification of Islamic preaching through television and digital media, the Wukirsari community has not shifted wholesale from the traditional authority of the *kyai* to media-based ustadz and ustadzah. Instead, it demonstrates a nuanced negotiation marked by symbolic resistance. This resistance is not a direct rejection of media-based religious authority, but rather a strategic preservation of the primacy of local religious leadership. It is a form of resistance that maintains the long-standing social and cultural relations that are embedded in the community's understanding of religious authority.

The community's narratives reveal a critical awareness of the commercial logic underpinning celebrity preachers. While acknowledging the appeal and accessibility of televised religious content, villagers actively resist equating media ustadz with authentic religious authority. This resistance is not merely a rejection but an active reinterpretation, a profound engagement that emphasizes the symbolic and affective dimensions of local *kyai* authority, rooted in physical proximity, shared life experience, and cultural intimacy. The villagers' statements underscore symbolic meanings that transcend the mere transmission of religious knowledge. The *kyai* represents more than a religious instructor; he embodies communal memory, ethical guidance, and a moral compass that navigates the complex interplay between sacred tradition and everyday life. This relational closeness evokes affective bonds of trust and respect, which cannot be replicated by the often glamorized, distant figures of celebrity preachers.

Affective meanings expressed in the community's accounts highlight the importance of humility, sincerity, and cultural embeddedness as core values associated with *kyai* leadership. In contrast, media ustadz are frequently perceived as performing religiosity within a framework of spectacle and

consumerism, marked by public displays of wealth and a lifestyle alien to the villagers' lived realities. This divergence in symbolic representation reflects a broader cultural critique of commodification, where religious authority risks becoming an instrument for economic gain rather than spiritual guidance.

The villagers' cultural orientation toward *kyai* authority is deeply intertwined with Javanese Islamic cosmology, which values andhap asor (humility), rukun (social harmony), and sumeleh (acceptance). The *kyai*'s role as a mediator between the spiritual and material worlds situates him as a custodian of these cultural ideals, reinforcing the community's identity and moral order. Thus, the preference for *kyai* is not a static clinging to tradition but a dynamic, culturally informed stance that negotiates modern media influences without relinquishing local epistemologies.

Theoretically, this illustrates Stuart Hall's concept of oppositional decoding, where audiences actively resist dominant media messages by producing alternative readings grounded in their social realities. In the context of the Wukirsari community, this means that the villagers do not passively absorb commodified religious narratives; they reinterpret and contest them through a vernacular lens. This lens, which is shaped by the community's cultural values and social bonds, privileges embodied, relational authority over mediated spectacle. For instance, the community may view the *kyai*'s humble lifestyle as a sign of his authenticity, while the ostentatious displays of wealth by media ustadz may be seen as a departure from the true spirit of Islam.

In sum, the Wukirsari community's responses reveal a complex interplay between media-driven commodification and local symbolic resistance, where traditional *kyai* authority is maintained not out of mere conservatism but as a culturally coherent and affectively charged site of meaning-making. This highlights the importance of analyzing religious authority as a negotiated process, where media influence is always mediated through local values, histories, and social bonds.

Kyai is the grassroots aspiration of Javanese Islam

Kyai are identical to rural and traditional and tend to be more conservative in their understanding of religion. This is because local *kyai* interact more with the congregation in their area. They are not highlighted by cameras or published on various media platforms. Their presence is direct and without media intermediaries. The community that the author managed to interview stated that the *kyai* in their village is closer to the community, especially in various religious events. The local *kyai* also accompanies them on every occasion, as SRN (56) conveyed:

> "The local kyai here is always present at every event because he is also a village elder. For example, there are slametan events, village cleaning events, muludan events, Eid, and so on, even during family events, such as births and deaths. Kyai is present on various occasions and situations." (Informant SRN).

The close relationship with the local *kyai* causes the local *kyai's role* and legitimacy to come organically from the community. Meanwhile, celebrity ustadz/ustadzah comes from the broadcast media. These two entities are contesting, as seen in Table 2.

One of the charismatic *kyai* who is a reference for the Javanese Islamic community in Wukirsari is KH Asyhari Marzuqi (see Figure 3). He is the son of KH Ahmad Marzuqi Romli, an influential *kyai* in Giriloyo, and Nyai Danisah, the youngest daughter of Mbah Harjo Sentono Giriloyo. Giriloyo itself is a hamlet located at the foot of the Imogiri hills, which is better known by the community as Pajimatan, an area in the south of Yogyakarta that is famous as the final resting place of the kings of Islamic Mataram. KH Asyhari Marzuqi was born in Giriloyo Hamlet, Wukirsari, Imogiri, Bantul, Yogyakarta (Maulidiyah 2021). Although there is no definite record of his date of birth, his father, KH Ahmad Marzuqi, once said that Asyhari was born during the Japanese occupation of Yogyakarta, around the early 1940s. KH Ahmad Marzuqi is a local *kyai* with great charisma and is respected in Wukirsari and various Yogyakarta areas. One of the factors that makes him a role model is his role as the founder of the Nurul Ummah Islamic Boarding School in Kotagede, Yogyakarta. In addition, he is also a student of KH Ali Ma'sum at the Krapyak Islamic Boarding School, Yogyakarta.

Table 2.
The view of Javanese grassroots Islam on celebrity ustadz/ustadzah and local *kyai*

Dimensions	Celebrity Ustadz/Ustadzah	Local *kyai*
Sociological cultural *bonding*	Distant, has no sociological or cultural position	Close, have a strong *bond.*
Legitimacy	Mass Media (television)	Cultural, directly from the community
The Depth of Islam	Tends to be supported by media production team collaboration	Originating from Islamic boarding schools and Islamic boarding school books
Social and cultural functions	No impact because it is not deeply rooted in society	As a reference figure for various issues, both religious and everyday community life,

Source: Created by author

The sociological basis of *kyai* is stronger compared to celebrity ustadz/ustadzah. They focus on the religious development of the community without eliminating their traditions. The *kyai* merge and become an inseparable part of the identity as Javanese. This closeness makes it easier to create a relationship of mutual understanding between *kyai* and the community that is his congregation. In addition, the relationship that occurs between the *kyai* and his congregation is not economic-political. The *kyai* realizes that his function is as a guardian of the values of religious teachings and not to make religion a commodity. The empowerment of religious values by the *kyai* is not a transactional activity but a moral obligation that comes from the understanding that the *kyai* /ulama are the heirs of the Prophets.

Figure 3.
Photo of KH. Asyari Marzuki Wukirsari, Imogiri
Source: Maulidiyah (2021)

As Figure 3 illustrates, KH. Asyari Marzuki of Wukirsari, Imogiri, exemplifies the enduring presence of traditional *kyai* in rural Javanese Islamic communities. His religious authority is not constructed through mediated visibility but through long-standing social relations, ritual leadership, and most importantly, his deep cultural embeddedness. As a local religious figure whose influence is grounded in the pesantren tradition and community proximity, KH. Asyari represents a model of Islamic leadership that contrasts sharply with the spectacle-driven image of celebrity ustadz/ustadzah in mass media. His presence reflects the continuity of vernacular religious authority amidst broader media and religious representation shifts.

The same view was also conveyed by Mas PGH (32 years old), an informant from the same village; in general, Mas Puguh confirmed that what was conveyed by Sryn, that the *kyai* is always present in society. This is different from the celebrity ustadz/ustadzah, who is famous in the congregation but does not know anyone in his congregation. This distance causes society to realize that da'I, or preachers/ religious figures who appear on television media, do not have much influence in their daily social lives. Ibu NRH (48 years old) also said that she watched the lectures on television and did not intend to replace the role of *kyai* in her village in Wukirsari. She only watched because she considered the lectures entertainment, compared to gossip infotainment shows.

The strong ties between the local community, especially those in Wukirsari, and the *kyai* in their area create dynamic contestation. Celebrity ustadz/ustadzah on television, in the eyes of the grassroots community, are not considered religious lectures *per se* but entertainment programs. In this case, it is important to understand that gossip, or in the Islamic language called *shibah* (talking about other people's bad things), is one of the sins, as such shows. In watching celebrity ustadz/ustadzah on television media, the Javanese Islamic community in Wukirsari prefers to remain patronized by the *kyai* in their village. Physical, sociological and cultural closeness is an added value for the community that needs guidance in their daily religious practices.

The Javanese Muslim community at the grassroots also understands that the village *kyai* teaches many religious values, humanity and the value of life balance. They think that celebrity ustadz/ustadzah on television are very distant and do not teach balance. The proof is that those who appear on television often show off their wealth, living in a glamorous world. For example, their social media posts prove that the lifestyle of these celebrities, ustad/ustadzah, is far from simple. For example, posts of performing the Umrah often, posts wearing costly clothes, and other flexing practices that are culturally not close to their congregation. Meanwhile, the village *kyai* is closer because they live together in the same environment; physically, they are close, and culturally, they also understand the real conditions and needs of the community. This distance makes the community still hold on to their closeness to the village *kyai,* with a series of advantages that he has.

The narratives gathered from rural Javanese Muslims in Wukirsari illustrate a grounded, relational understanding of religious authority that operates independently of the mechanisms of mass mediation. Far from being passive audiences of religious broadcasts, villagers play an active role in interpreting, differentiating, and ascribing meaning to the figures who claim to represent Islam in public life. These interpretations, deeply embedded in local cosmologies, social relationships, and shared cultural logics, reveal that religious authority is not only a matter of knowledge or charisma but of cultural proximity and embodied legitimacy (Geertz 1960, Hoesterey 2016).

Consistent with the findings in the previous section, the contrast between the village *kyai* and the celebrity ustadz/ustadzah in televised broadcasts is not merely about visibility or popularity, but about differing symbolic economies. The *kyai* (as represented in the narratives) is not just a religious teacher, but a moral exemplar embedded in the community's social fabric. His authority is cultivated through long-term relationships, ongoing care, cultural resonance, and spatial intimacy. In Bourdieu's (1991) terms, the *kyai* accumulates symbolic capital through practices that reinforce his position within the local habitus: performing life-cycle rituals, providing personal counsel, and embodying a Javanese-Islamic ethic of balance *(keselarasan).*

By contrast, the celebrity ustadz/ustadzah is perceived by villagers not as a spiritual guide, but as a mediated performer whose authority is constructed through the logics of spectacle. The villagers' classification of these broadcasts as "entertainment" (rather than genuine religious instruction) signals a cultural decoding process that aligns with Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model. Audiences are not simply consumers of media messages but active interpreters who bring their cultural frameworks to bear. This confirms that media reception is always situated and intersubjective (Couldry 2000, Hirschkind 2006).

The dissonance between the values of modesty, relational proximity, and sincerity held by the villagers and the perceived glamour, individualism, and consumerism displayed by celebrity preachers leads to a strong rejection (or at least, a reclassification) of these figures as culturally and ethically distant. This interpretive distance, not framed in moralistic terms by the community, is a powerful critique of relevance and authenticity (Eickelman & Anderson 2003). The narratives do not accuse media preachers of doctrinal deviation; instead, they question their capacity to embody the values and needs of the local social world, showcasing the strength of the villagers' cultural values.

These findings highlight a strong continuity in the community's preference for embedded authority over broadcast authority, echoing earlier insights in this study that traditional religious leadership in Java persists not despite modern media, but in strategic relation to it (Slama 2017). This resilience of traditional values is reaffirmed as the *kyai* is upheld as a counterpoint to the commodification of religion in the media economy. The villagers' distinction between the two reveals a subtle but profound process of symbolic negotiation, where the credibility of religious figures is assessed not through institutional rank or media visibility, but through patterns of relational trust, affective intimacy, and ethical comportment, underscoring the resilience of traditional values.

In this sense, the Wukirsari villagers' narratives constitute a form of cultural resistance, not necessarily oppositional, but selective and critical. They illustrate how local Muslim communities engage in what could be called vernacular transcendence, the grounding of religious authority in everyday relationships, rather than abstract doctrinal or mediatized representations (Eisenlohr 2011). This also complicates the assumption that modernization leads to the erosion of traditional forms of authority; instead, it reveals a dual process of adaptation and differentiation, where tradition is neither wholly preserved nor entirely abandoned, but actively recontextualized in the face of media-driven religious expressions.

Conclusion

This study highlights that religious authority in Javanese Muslim communities cannot be fully explained through media logic or public visibility alone. The *kyai* remain respected not because of media exposure, but due to their deep social ties, spiritual role, and active presence in daily community life, which includes leading prayers, providing religious guidance, and participating in community events. These findings enrich local cultural theory by showing that modernization and media do not necessarily erode traditional authority. Instead, figures like the *kyai* continue to adapt and maintain their relevance. This study thus underscores the need to view religious authority as a dynamic and negotiated construct (shaped by tradition, media, and local power relations) not merely as a product of globalized religious imagery.

This research is geographically limited to Wukirsari, Imogiri, and may, therefore, not represent broader trends across Indonesia's diverse Muslim communities. The study also primarily uses a qualitative approach and does not deeply explore how younger generations or digital platforms reshape perceptions of religious authority. These limitations are important to consider and suggest that the findings should be interpreted as context-specific rather than universally applicable. This acknowledgment ensures that the audience is fully informed about the scope and applicability of the study's findings. Future studies could conduct comparative research between rural and urban Muslim communities or explore other cultural regions in Indonesia. Investigating how young people respond to local *kyai* and media-based preachers in the digital age would also be valuable. In addition, further research might examine the role of female religious figures (such as nyai or female ustadzah) in navigating similar spaces of authority. Such inquiries would deepen our understanding of how religious leadership is being transformed in an era of technological and cultural shifts, and your contributions to this ongoing academic discourse are crucial.

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