

## GUS BAHHA, SANTRI GAYENG, AND THE RISE OF TRADITIONALIST PREACHERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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**Abstract:** This research discusses the efforts of the old religious authority in Indonesia, particularly NU activists and preachers, to maintain its values amidst the substantial exposure of new online preachers. This study employs qualitative methods by observing *da'wah* on social media platforms: *Instagram*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *YouTube*. The sample of this research is the *da'wah* of KH. Bahauddin Nursalim (Gus Baha) through *Santri Gayeng's* social media accounts. This research argues that the online *da'wah* of NU, specifically Gus Baha and *Santri Gayeng*, is adequate and effective to compete with online Islamist activities, such as those from former HTI members. The success of *Santri Gayeng* is attributed to its strategy to implement *da'wah 2.0*, which maximizes visual aesthetics, communication skills, and marketing tactics, besides the use of Indonesian subtitles. These factors have attracted audiences comprising Nahdlatul Ulama members as well as former *jihadists* to Gus Baha's house to listen to and broadcast his lectures online. The response of traditionalist Islam groups through *Santri Gayeng* has two meanings; namely, it marks the engagement of NU followers in online *da'wah* interactions and enhances the characteristics of related moderate groups in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Gus Baha, *santri gayeng*, Nahdlatul Ulama, traditionalist Islam, online *da'wa*.

### Introduction

In the past two decades, Islam in Indonesia has transformed from a moderate to a more conservative representation.<sup>1</sup> A predominant

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Van Bruinessen, "Indonesian Muslims in a Globalising World: Westernisation, Arabisation and Indigenising Responses," RSIS Working Paper (Singapore: S.

indication of this change was the release of a *fatwa* by the Indonesian Council of Islamic Scholars (*Majelis 'Ulama' Indonesia*, MUI), which declared secularism, pluralism, and religious liberalism contradictory to the religion.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Nur Ichwan asserted that the MUI “shifted towards more puritanical and strictly literalist interpretation of the faith” in the Reformation era.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Najib Burhani argued that this conservative turn occurred in the second-largest Muslim organization, Muhammadiyah. This statement was based on his observation of competition between the progressive and the conservative groups within the four congresses of the organization in Aceh (1995), Jakarta (2000), Malang (2005), and Yogyakarta (2010).<sup>4</sup> The conservative side won ‘the battle’ by obtaining more votes and electing many of its figures to the national Muhammadiyah board in the 2005 congress in Malang. Indonesia’s largest Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), also somewhat experienced a similar condition. According to Jeremy Menchik’s work on godly nationalism, the NU could also be considered intolerant, particularly its stand against deviant groups, such as Ahmadiyah.<sup>5</sup>

Besides the above facts, the conservative turn in Indonesia was also emphasized by the emergence of new religious authorities, which contested the old ones through online media platforms.<sup>6</sup> These new

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Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, 2018); Martin Van Bruinessen, *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the “Conservative Turn”* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Piers Gillespie, “Current Issues in Indonesian Islam: Analysing the 2005 Council of Indonesian Ulama Fatwa No. 7 Opposing Pluralism, Liberalism and Secularism,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 18, 2 (2007): pp. 202–40.

<sup>3</sup> Nur Ichwan, “Toward A Puritanical Moderate Islam: The Majelis Ulama Indonesia and the Politics of Religious Orthodoxy,” in *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the “Conservative Turn,”* ed. Martin Van Bruinessen (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013): pp. 60–104. See also Muhammad As’ad, “Ulama in Indonesian Politics: Analysis on the Attitudes of The Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) on the General Elections,” *Akademika* 16, 1 (2022): pp. 75–90.

<sup>4</sup> Ahmad Najib Burhani, “Liberal and Conservative Discourses in the Muhammadiyah: The Struggle for the Face of Reformist Islam in Indonesia,” in *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the “Conservative Turn,”* ed. Martin Van Bruinessen (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013): pp. 105–44.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Menchik, “Productive Intolerance: Godly Nationalism in Indonesia,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (2014): pp. 591–621.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander R. Arifianto, “Rising Islamism and the Struggle for Islamic Authority in Post-Reformasi Indonesia,” *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and National Studies of Southeast Asia* 8, 1 (2020): pp. 37–50; Wahyudi Akmaliah, “The Demise of Moderate Islam: New

authorities were represented by preachers, who primarily promoted their religious views on social media.<sup>7</sup> Abdul Somad,<sup>8</sup> Adi Hidayat,<sup>9</sup> and Felix Xiau<sup>10</sup> are among the newly established preachers who can be considered more popular in recent times than preachers from the traditional religious authorities, namely Muhammadiyah<sup>11</sup> and NU,<sup>12</sup> the two most prominent Islamic organizations in Indonesia. These novel preachers have gained popularity due to their use of a marketing strategy that renders their preaching content more exciting and accessible to Muslims, especially youths.<sup>13</sup>

Regarding the decline of the old religious authority, Akmaliah<sup>14</sup> mentioned that Muhammadiyah and NU have responded to the rise of these new online preachers in varying ways. The reformist

Media, Contestation, and Reclaiming Religious Authorities,” *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 10, 1 (2020): pp. 1–24; D. M. Rohmatulloh and A. I. Marwantika, “Contesting #IslamNusantara on Instagram: A Shared Interest Pool,” *Wawasan: Jurnal Ilmiah Agama Dan Sosial Budaya* 6, 2 (2021): pp. 101–14.

<sup>7</sup> Norshahril Saat and Ahmad Najib Burhani, eds., *The New Santri: Challenges to Traditional Religious Authority in Indonesia* (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Heidi Arbuckle-Gultom and Rheinhard Sirait, “Abdul Somad: Ustadz Jaman Now,” <https://www.newmandala.org/abdul-somad-ustadz-jaman-now/> accessed on April 21, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Quantum Akhyar Institute, “Sekilas Tentang Ust. Dr. Adi Hidayat, Lc., MA.,” <http://quantumakhyar.com/uah/> accessed on April 21, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Hew Wai Weng, “Piety, Politics, and the Popularity of Felix Siauw,” <https://www.newmandala.org/piety-politics-popularity-felix-siauw/> accessed on April 21, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> On Muhammadiyah see among others James L. Peacock, *Purifying the Faith: The Muhammadiyah Movement in Indonesian Islam* (California: Benjamin-Cummings Publishing Company, 1978); Muhammad As’ad, “The Muhammadiyah Criticism against Mawlid Tradition over Centuries,” *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 13, 2 (2019): pp. 350–72.

<sup>12</sup> A. Farichin Chumaidy, “The Jam’iyyah Nahdlatul Ulama: Its Rise and Early Development, 1926-1945” (MA Thesis, McGill, McGill University, 1976); Ismail Fajrie Alatas, Muhammad As’ad, and Fathurrochman Karyadi, “Sejarah Hubungan Habaib Dan Nahdlatul Ulama (NU),” *Tebuireng: Journal of Islamic Studies and Society* 2, 2 (2022): pp. 87–101.

<sup>13</sup> Hew Wai Weng, “Dakwah 2.0: Digital Dakwah, Street Dakwah and Cyber-Urban Activism among Chinese Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia,” in *New Media Configurations and Socio-Cultural Dynamics in Asia and the Arab World*, ed. Nadja-Christina Schneider and Carola Richter (Baden, Germany: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG, 2015): pp. 198–221; Hew Wai Weng, “The Art of Dakwah: Social Media, Visual Persuasion and the Islamist Propagation of Felix Siauw,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 46, 134 (2018): pp. 61–79.

<sup>14</sup> Akmaliah, “The Demise of Moderate Islam,” pp. 1–24.

Muhammadiyah tends to be calmer, while its traditionalist counterpart, Nahdlatul Ulama, is more reactive. Borrowing the term used by Mujiburrahman,<sup>15</sup> Akmaliah argued that organizations felt 'threatened' by the existence and activities of the preachers. However, Akmaliah's article lacks detailed information on the responses of the NU, mainly their online endeavors, either through establishing a new 'Islamic' website, YouTube channels, or other social media platforms. This research fills this gap by questioning the effort of the custodians of old religious authority, specifically NU activists and preachers, to maintain its values amidst the substantial exposure of new online preachers in Indonesia.

Qualitative methods were employed by observing *da'wah* on social media platforms, such as *Instagram*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *YouTube*, and interviewing a key informant. More importantly, this research focused on a traditional cleric affiliated with NU, KH. Bahauddin Nursalim (hereinafter referred to as Gus Baha), who expanded his *da'wah* program to encompass face-to-face, offline, as well as online religious gatherings. The appearance of Gus Baha in online media platforms played a significant role in protecting the teaching of traditionalist Islam, which is often criticized and judged as a heretic by several online preachers. This research chose to approach *Santri Gayeng*, which uses many of Gus Baha's sermons as sources for its *da'wah*. This community was selected as the primary data source because the group developed its image by spreading material and asserting its unique connection to the cleric. Presently, it is the only social media account authoritatively permitted by Gus Baha to permeate his preaching documentation online.

This research consequently argued that the response of traditionalist Islam groups in Indonesia, including NU, through Gus Baha's online *da'wah* activities shows the support of these followers for moderation in the religion. Meanwhile, the body of this research discussed Islamism, the rise of online *da'wah* in Indonesia, and the response of the NU to the Islamists' *da'wah*. The last section analyzed the success of Gus Baha and *Santri Gayeng* in conducting online *da'wah* on social media, followed by a conclusion.

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<sup>15</sup> Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened: Muslim-Christian Relations in Indonesia's New Order*, vol. 3 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).

## Islamism and the Rise of Online *Da'wa*

Islamism is defined as a commitment of Muslims “to political action that involves the implementation of activities considered an Islamic agenda.”<sup>16</sup> Arifianto described the varieties of Muslims who embraced this idea and categorized them as conservative and hard-liners or radical Islamists.<sup>17</sup> The former encourages implementing Islamic values into legislation, while the latter abandons democracy and prefers intimidation and violence to achieve its objective. Both of these entities have long existed in Indonesia. One of the earliest conservative Islamists is Masyumi, a transformation of *Majelis Islam A'la Indonesia* (MIAI),<sup>18</sup> which was established before the Indonesian independence as an umbrella for many Islamic organizations. After Soekarno and Hatta declared independence, Masyumi became a political party and maintained its conservative view.<sup>19</sup> Radical Islamists can be traced back to a group called *Darul Islam*, an organization established in 1948 triggered by the disappointment of Muslim figures, notably Kartosuwiryo, in the Indonesian government. Under his leadership, *Darul Islam* envisioned establishing an Islamic state.<sup>20</sup>

In Suharto's New Order regime, Islamism declined due to the government's two-pronged Islamic policy. The president accepted Muslim's promotion of personal piety but opposed its politicization.<sup>21</sup> This policy shifted in the last decade of the Suharto era when he turned to Islam by supporting the ICMI (Association of Indonesian

<sup>16</sup> James P. Piscatori, *Islam, Islamists, and the Electoral Principle in the Middle East*, ISIM Paper (Leiden: International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World, 2000), p. 2; Donald K. Emmerson, “Broadening Representation,” in *Islamism: Contested Perspectives on Political Islam*, ed. Abbas Barzegar and Richard Martin (2010), p. 134.

<sup>17</sup> Arifianto, “Rising Islamism and the Struggle for Islamic Authority in Post-Reformasi Indonesia.”

<sup>18</sup> Mizan Sya'roni, “The Majelis Islamil Ala Indonesia (MIAI): Its Socio-Religious and Political Activities (1937–1943)” (McGill University, 1998); Muhammad As'ad, “Mengapa Jepang Memilih Hadratussyaikh: Analisa Sejarah Ditunjuknya KH. Hasyim Asy'ari Menjadi Ketua Masyumi,” *Tebuireng: Journal of Islamic Studies and Society* 1, 1 (2020): pp. 85–103.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Van Bruinessen, “Genealogies of Islamic Radicalism in Post-Suharto Indonesia. Southeast Asian Research,” *Southeast Asian Research* 10, 2 (2002): pp. 117–54.

<sup>20</sup> Cees van Dijk, *Rebellion Under the Banner of Islam: The Darul Islam in Indonesia* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981); Ciara Formichi, *Islam and the Making of the Nation: Kartosuwiryo and Political Islam in Twentieth-Century Indonesia* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> William Liddle, “The Islamic Turn in Indonesia: A Political Explanation,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 55, 3 (1996): pp. 613–34.

Muslim Intellectuals) establishment in the 1990s. This political decision was the turning point for Islamists after a prolonged restriction from the government. The fall of the ruler in 1997, through the *reformasi*, was marked by the removal of the limitation on the freedom of expression and press, thereby enabling the Islamists to reappear and operate freely. Their revival was highlighted by various indications, including the desire to reinstall the Jakarta Charter through parliament,<sup>22</sup> the call for *jihad* to Moluccas Island by the *Laskar Jihad* paramilitary group,<sup>23</sup> bomb attacks by *Jamaah Islamiyah* in several cities,<sup>24</sup> the growing influence of *Hizb Tahrir Indonesia* (HTI),<sup>25</sup> and the rampant *shariah* by-laws in many municipalities and districts. These indicators highlight an increase in the activities of Islamists in the nation. Martin van Bruinessen<sup>26</sup> described this situation as a conservative turn. A recent Islamist activity was the 212 movement, a rally against the former Governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok).<sup>27</sup> This protest influenced the political landscape of the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial and 2019 national elections.

Several factors have strengthened the impact of Islamists in the Indonesian public sphere, particularly in politics. One of the most critical factors is the use of the internet to disseminate their views to the public.<sup>28</sup> The works of Hew Wai Weng<sup>29</sup> extensively describe the success of Felix Siauw and his *da'wa* activity in promoting the

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<sup>22</sup> Nadirsyah Hosen, "Religion and the Indonesian Constitution: A Recent Debate," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 10, 2 (2005): pp. 117–54.

<sup>23</sup> Noorhaidi Hasan, "Faith and Politics: The Rise of the Laskar Jihad in the Era of Transition in Indonesia," *Indonesia* 73 (2002): pp. 145–69.

<sup>24</sup> ICG, "Indonesia Backgrounder: How The Jemaah Islamiyah Terrorist Network Operates" (Jakarta/Brussel: International Crisis Groups, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, "Reviving the Caliphate in the Nusantara: Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia's Mobilization Strategy and Its Impact in Indonesia," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, 4 (2010): pp. 601–22.

<sup>26</sup> Van Bruinessen, "Indonesian Muslims in a Globalising World"; Van Bruinessen, *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam*.

<sup>27</sup> Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman and Prashant Waikar, "Fear and Loathing: Uncivil Islamism and Indonesia's Anti-Ahok Movement," *Indonesia*, 106 (2018): p. 89–109.

<sup>28</sup> Merlyna Lim, "Freedom to Hate : Social Media , Algorithmic Enclaves , and the Rise of Tribal Nationalism in Indonesia," *Critical Asian Studies* (2017): pp. 1–17.

<sup>29</sup> Weng, "Dakwah 2.0; Weng, "The Art of Dakwah," pp. 61–79.

superiority of the caliphate system through an online platform.<sup>30</sup> Other Islamists, such as the *Salafis*, massively used new media even before the *Hizb Tabrir*. This is indicated by the Laskar Jihad or Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI) website, which has been active since the early 2000s.<sup>31</sup> Other online *Salafi da'wah* platforms are *Radio Rodja*,<sup>32</sup> *Al-Madinah*, and *Darussalaf*.<sup>33</sup> Its activities are also rampant on the social media company Yufid, which mainly promotes Salafi religious thoughts and practices through websites, Android and iPhone apps, and Youtube.<sup>34</sup> These online activities show the swift adaptation of Islamists to new media, particularly the internet. The trend of online *da'wah* has two important indications, namely the emergence of Islamists as a new religious authority and the evident conservative turn of Islam in Indonesia.

### The Response of Traditionalist Islam and the Emergence of Gus Baha

This section explains the response and influence of traditionalists, such as the preachers affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama, on online *da'wah* in Indonesia.

Some Islamic websites affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama include NU Online ([www.nu.or.id](http://www.nu.or.id)) and Islami.co ([www.islami.co](http://www.islami.co)). They represent traditionalist Muslim thinking, particularly the former, which is the official website of the NU. Although *Islami.co* has no official ties with the organization, its founder is related to NU due to his position as the former director of the official site and one of the current chairpersons of the group.

NU Online was established in 2003 by *Lembaga Ta'lif wan Nasyr* (LTN), the under-bow institution of NU, which focuses on publishing books, etc. In 2003, the central board took over the website to cover

<sup>30</sup> See also Muhammad As'ad, "Penetrasi Dakwah Islamisme Eks HTI Di Indonesia: Studi Netnografi Dakwah Felix Siauw & 'Yuk Ngaji' Di Media Sosial," *Jurnal Komunikasi Islam* 11, 1 (2021): pp. 33–63.

<sup>31</sup> Merlyna Lim, "Islamic Radicalism and Anti-Americanism in Indonesia: The Role of the Internet," *Policy Studies* 18 (Washington: East-West Center, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Ayang Utriza Yakin, "Salafi Dakwah and the Dissemination of Islamic Puritanism In Indonesia: A Case Study of the Radio of Rodja," *Ummuna* 22, 2 (2018): pp. 205–36.

<sup>33</sup> Sunarwoto, "Salafi Dakwah Radio: A Contest for Religious Authority," *Archipel* 91 (2016): pp. 203–30.

<sup>34</sup> Chris Chaplin, "Salafi Activism and the Promotion of a Modern Muslim Identity: Evolving Mediums of Da'wa amongst Yogyakarta University Students," *Southeast Asian Research* 26, 1 (2018): pp. 3–20.

NU branches' activities all over the country. A decade later, Islami.co was founded in 2013 by Mohamad Syafi' Ali, the director of NU Online at the time. His inclination toward traditional Islam, especially Nahdlatul Ulama, is visible in the website manifesto, which describes the founder's deep connection with *Pondok Pesantren*,<sup>35</sup> a traditional educational institution closely related to this Islamic organization. The absence of websites that represented his religious values after migrating to Jakarta led to the establishment of *Islami.co* with colleagues.<sup>36</sup>

Wahyudi Amaliah revealed that popular Islamic websites were mainly from the new religious authorities until 2017, and only a few were affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama, namely NU Online and Islamic.co.<sup>37</sup> According to Alexa and Similarweb, these websites formerly ranked 3rd and 10<sup>th</sup>, respectively, highlighting their influence compared to other platforms. These highest positions were held by *portal-islam.id* and *eramuslim.com*. However, NU-affiliated websites have been in the top three since 2020. The first is NU Online, followed by *bincangsyariah.com* and *Islami.co*.<sup>38</sup> The changes in their rankings denote the effort of the NU to compete in online *da'wah* activities. Its strategy has proven successful, as NU-affiliated websites rank as the three highest online dakwah movements in Indonesia since the first establishment of such a platform in 2003.

The popularity of Islamist groups on the internet has also led to the emergence of several figures or online *da'wah* communities, such as Gus Miftah, Arus Informasi Santri Nusantara, Dunia Santri, and Santri Design Community.<sup>39</sup> Another phenomenal NU-affiliated scholar is KH. Bahauddin Nursalim, famous by the nickname Gus Baha. He was born in Rembang, Central Java, on March 15, 1970, and was fathered by a Qur'anic scholar, who taught students to memorize the Holy

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<sup>35</sup> Zamakhsyari Dhofier, *The Pesantren Tradition: The Role of the Kyai in the Maintenance of Traditional Islam in Java*, Monograph Series Press, Program for Southeast Asian Studies (Tempe, Arizona: Program for Southeast Asia Studies, Arizona State University, 1999).

<sup>36</sup> Mohamad Syafi' Ali, "Kenapa Aku Bikin Islami[Dot]Co?," <https://islami.co/kenapa-aku-bikin-islami-dot-co/> accessed on October 21, 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Akmaliah, "The Demise of Moderate Islam," pp. 1–24

<sup>38</sup> RedaksiIB, "100 Situs Islam Indonesia, NU Online Peringkat Pertama," <https://ibtimes.id/100-situs-islam-indonesia-nu-online-peringkat-pertama/> accessed on October 21, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> D. M. Rohmatulloh, "Digital Santri: The Traditionalist Response to the Religious Populism Wave in Indonesian Islam," *Asian Studies, The Twelfth International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS 12)* 1 (2022): pp. 601–8.



Book. His father's expertise in memorization shaped Gus Baha's early education, as he had memorized the Qur'an as a teenager. Subsequently, he was sent to *Pondok Al-Anwar*, Sarang, Rembang, to learn Islam under the guidance of KH. Maimun Zubair, a charismatic scholar and nationally recognized political activist of Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP). In *Pesantren Al-Anwar*, he learned and completed many books from various disciplines, including hadith studies, Islamic laws, and Qur'anic interpretations. After graduating from *Pondok Pesantren Al-Anwar*, Gus Baha lived in Yogyakarta in 2003, where he rented a house and taught Islam by reciting *kitab kuning* in front of students.<sup>40</sup> This was the beginning of his popularity and followers, two of whom were mentioned frequently in his sermons: Kang Rukhin (Masrukhin) and Mustofa. In 2005, the preacher returned home to Rembang to replace his father at Pondok Pesantren LP3IA while still teaching in Yogyakarta once a month.<sup>41</sup>

Subsequently, Gus Baha was considered an authoritative figure in religion. This is emphasized by his appointment as the Chief Committee of the Correction of Quranic Text (*Ketua Tim Lajnah Mushaf*) with other experts in Quranic studies, including Quraish Shihab, by Universitas Islam Indonesia (UII). He was also appointed as a scholar of Qur'anic exegesis by *Dewan Tafsir Nasional*.<sup>42</sup>

### ***Santri Gayeng and Systematic Da'wa Management***

In an interview conducted by Najwa Shihab, Gus Baha denied the use of social media platforms, such as the internet<sup>43</sup> or *Whatsapp*, let alone a *da'wa* management team like Abdul Somad with the *Tafaqquh*

<sup>40</sup> *Kitab kuning* (english means yellow books) is arabic text used by teachers at pondok pesantren to teach students. More reading about this topic see Martin Van Bruinessen, "Kitab Kuning: Books in Arabic Script Used in the Pesantren Milieu: Comments on a New Collection in the KITLV Library," *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land-En Volkenkunde* 146, 2/3 (1990): pp. 226–69; Martin Van Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren, Dan Tarekat* (Yogyakarta: Gading Publishing, 1999).

<sup>41</sup> Iip D. Yahya, "Kisah Gus Baha: Nasab, Perkawinan hingga Karir Intelektual," <https://alif.id/read/iip-d-yahya/kisah-gus-baha-nasab-perkawinan-hingga-karir-intelektualnya-b215367p/> accessed on 21 April 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Arif Rahman Hakim, "Biografi Gus Baha', Mufassir Dan Faqihul Qur'an Indonesia," <https://peciham.org/biografi-gus-baha-mufassir-dan-faqihul-quran-indonesia/> accessed on April 21, 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Najwa Shihab, "Lebih Dekat Dengan Gus Baha (Part 1) | Shihab & Shihab - YouTube," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDspKy-JHNU> accessed on 21 April 2021.

Team, Adi Hidayat with Akhyar TV, and Felix Xiauw with *Yuk Ngaji*. This contradicts the virality of his preaching videos in cyberspace, particularly on Youtube, where there are many accounts and videos of Gus Baha. Of these accounts, *Santri Gayeng* was at the forefront of promoting these sermons on Youtube and other social media platforms. The success of this group is due to three reasons: professional account management, permission from Gus Baha's family, and the association of *Santri Gayeng* with Pondok Pesantren Al-Anwar. These three factors, alongside the establishment and online dakwah activities of *Santri Gayeng*, were discussed in the following section.

*Santri Gayeng* was established in January 2018 under the guidance of KH. Maimun Zubair to become the campaigning team in charge of the candidacy of Ganjar Pranowo and Taj Yasin in the 2018 Central Java Governorship Election (Pilgub).<sup>44</sup> Employed initially as a political campaign team, the group was formed in Rembang and all Central Javanese districts using the Pesantren Al-Anwar Alumni Association (HIMMA) network. With more than 50 thousand alumni spread across many regions, it was formed quickly in 35 districts and cities in Central Java. As part of HIMMA, Gus Baha and his younger brother (Gus Umam) are members of the *Santri Gayeng* structure in the Rembang Regency.<sup>45</sup>

After Ganjar-Taj Yasin won the election, Santri Gayeng became a *da'wa* movement. Their strategy initially involved uploading preaching videos of Al-Anwar teachers on social media, which was unsuccessful because the preaching were not adequately archived or had poor audio quality.<sup>46</sup>

On returning home from Sarang one day, the *Santri Gayeng* social media administrator, Rumail Abbas, stopped by the residence of Gus Baha to discuss. After discovering his brother, Gus Umam had 60 gigabytes of preaching videos and audio documentation, Abbas requested permission to upload these documents on the internet.<sup>47</sup> It took six months for the organization to convert from a political to a

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<sup>44</sup> Interview with Rumail Abbas, Semarang, 6 April, 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Rumail Abbas, Dakwah Digital dan Geliat Santri Online, Zoom Interview, October 4, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iN3DEY-L8Gk>.

<sup>47</sup> Rumail Abbas, "Maksud Terselubung 'Santri Gayeng' Populerkan Ngajinya Gus Baha Nursalim," <https://mojok.co/rum/esai/maksud-terselubung-santri-gayeng-populerkan-ngajinya-gus-baha-nursalim/> accessed on 21 April 2021.

*da'wa* movement. After the preparations were made and the media files were available, *Santri Gayeng* officially launched its *da'wa* Youtube channel in January 2019. The first video was uploaded on January 8, 2019, entitled: “*Gus Baha: Salat Jangan Kelamaan, Bisa Merusak Islam!*.”<sup>48</sup>

During the observations and interviews with Rumail Abbas, at least three factors distinguished *Santri Gayeng* from other social media accounts owned by traditional Muslim groups. These are the use of Indonesian subtitles, the authoritative relationship between *Santri Gayeng* and Gus Baha, and the existence of a creative and supportive team.

### *The Use of Indonesian Subtitles*

Many traditional Muslim preachers deliver their sermons in Javanese because most NU followers reside in East and Central Java. Hence, the use of Javanese as the instructional language of the Pondok Pesantren teachers, as well as while preaching in communities, is unsurprising. Another reason is that the institution uses the *pegon* script, which is “a modified Arabic transcript for writing Javanese, Madurese, and Sundanese,” in its religious books to teach students.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the employment of Javanese to teach students at boarding schools and preach in communities is justified.

This also applies to Gus Baha, whose videos on Youtube are majorly in Javanese. This means the *pesantren* tradition conveyed through generations and centuries is still performed by the cleric. However, the video uploaded for the first time on January 8, 2019, by *Santri Gayeng* bears a stark difference from other similar Youtube accounts. The difference is the inclusion of Indonesian subtitles to help viewers who do not understand Javanese. This is undoubtedly a game changer for this platform compared to other *dakwah* accounts affiliated with *pesantren* and NU, most of which are without Indonesian translation. It also precludes the disadvantage caused by the absence of subtitles for NU's *da'wah* account, which limits its audience to only viewers who understand Javanese.

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<sup>48</sup> Santri Gayeng, “Gus Baha: Salat Jangan Kelamaan, Bisa Merusak Islam! | Terjemah Indonesia - YouTube,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMX0PLubMWk> accessed on 21 April 2021.

<sup>49</sup> Edwin P. Wieringa, “Pegon,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, (Leiden: Brill, 2021), [https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/\\*-COM\\_46-150](https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/*-COM_46-150) accessed on 21 April 2021.

*Santri Gayeng* can be considered one of the first *da'wah* accounts to upload a video of Gus Baha in Javanese using an Indonesian subtitle, and this has resulted in an impressive effect. Rumail Abbas reported a positive response to the subtitled videos, stating that a joke translated from Javanese was generally understood and laughed at by 98 out of 100 viewers.<sup>50</sup> This excellent signal became a standard rule that every uploaded video must have an Indonesian translation. This is comparable to other accounts, such as “Kalam – *Kajian Islam*,” which uploaded a video of Gus Baha preaching with several other *kiais* in the Nahdlatul Ulama provincial office of East Java (PWNU). The video has more than one million views, highlighting the audience's enthusiasm. However, a comment expressed a lack of understanding of the lecture, which was delivered in Javanese.<sup>51</sup> This is an example of the downside of social media accounts affiliated with NU and pesantren. Although the content may be interesting for the viewers, the sermons were not coherent to persons who did not understand Javanese.<sup>52</sup> *Santri Gayeng* changed this situation by creating an innovative and new trend of providing Indonesian subtitles to religious preaching delivered in Javanese, in this case, the sermons of Gus Baha.

#### *Authoritative Relations with Gus Baha*

The second factor influencing the success of *Santri Gayeng* was the branding of the authoritative relationship with Gus Baha. As explained earlier, the group was founded using the Al-Anwar Alumni Association (HIMMA) network, of which this figure is also a member. In addition, Santri Gayeng received permission from Gus Umam or the family before uploading Gus Baha's videos and audio to social media. This was done to prevent provocation or clashes with another cleric or *kiai* and ensure his lectures were not misused.

Rumail Abbas stated that this authoritative relationship was “sold” to convince the viewers of their official representation of the cleric on the internet.<sup>53</sup> This will ensure persons interested in his lectures would

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<sup>50</sup> Abbas, Dakwah Digital dan Geliat Santri Online.

<sup>51</sup> Kalam - Kajian Islam, “Gus Baha, Gus Reza Lirboyo Dan Gus Kautsar Ploso Ngaji Bareng Di PWNU Jatim,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpfjvkvip34> accessed on 4 March, 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Muhammad As'ad, “Dakwah ‘Smart’ vs Dakwah Konvensional,” <https://news-detik.com/kolom/d-4594814/dakwah-smart-vs-dakwah-konvensional> accessed on 4 March, 2021.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Rumail Abbas, Semarang, 6 April, 2021.

go to *Santri Gayeng's* social media accounts. One piece of evidence of this authoritative relationship was the inclusion of the group's logo in one of Gus Baha's lectures. This occurred during his invitation to preach by Grab Holdings, a company known for transportation and food delivery services, on January 10, 2021.<sup>54</sup> In the video, *Santri Gayeng's* logo was printed on the banner, serving as a sign of a special relationship with Gus Baha that was unique from other similar da'wah accounts. Another example of their close relationship occurred in the last seven days of Ramadan in 2021 when the creative team of Santri Gayeng recorded an exclusive video of Gus Baha at his Pondok Pesantren of LP3IA at Kragan, Rembang.<sup>55</sup> In the uploaded video, the cleric was declared an advisor for the group, which initiated the lecture.<sup>56</sup>

### *Professional Management*

The third factor is the use of rigid and systematic professional management. In August 2020, one year after its operations began, *Santri Gayeng* had five employees: two translators, two graphic designers, and one administrative staff. They were all paid professionally according to the Rembang Regency Minimum Wage (UMK) of IDR 1.8 million per month.<sup>57</sup> The funds to finance this team were from Google AdSense. Using Social Blade to track social media statistics and analytics, the monthly YouTube account income was between 423 to 6,800 dollars, which was roughly estimated to be IDR 6 million to 90 million at an exchange rate of IDR 14,500. In an interview, Rumail Abbas stated that Santri Gayeng's monthly income from Youtube is around IDR 20-30 million.<sup>58</sup> Currently, the platform has eleven employees, and the Youtube revenue is inadequate to foot

<sup>54</sup> Santri Gayeng, "Ngaji Dahsyat 2021: Gus Baha Bersama Grab [Video] - YouTube," <https://www.youtube.com/> accessed on 10 April, 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Santri Gayeng, "Gus Baha Terbaru: Jika Salah Tauhid, Perbaiki Dengan Pengajian Ini - YouTube," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFSYM74fPyI> accessed on 1 April 2022.

<sup>56</sup> Another evident of close relationship of Gus Baha and Santri Gayeng can be seen when the latter joined the gathering at the former's pondok pesantren at LP3IA. The more about the gathering see Official LP3IA, "(Live) Santri Gayeng Mengaji || Gus Baha' - YouTube," [https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=04TH\\_dhqlhk](https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=04TH_dhqlhk) accessed on 1 June 2022.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Rumail Abbas, Semarang, 6 April, 2021.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

their salaries of around IDR 240 million a year. This led to two major attempts to cover the shortfall, namely selling t-shirts and crowdfunding, which contributed to settling the production costs of the page. The generated funds were enough to pay the employees as well as purchase equipment, such as a laptop and digital camera, for audio and video production. Also, the social buzz was used for its crowdfunding initiative, which generated IDR 49 million within three months.<sup>59</sup> According to Rumail Abbas, this amount was sufficient to increase the operational costs of *Santri Gayeng* for several months.<sup>60</sup> Besides AdSense, t-shirt sales, and crowdfunding, sponsorship was another source of income for the team. Abbas explained several previously partnered companies, such as *Bank Mandiri* and the Financial Services Authority (OJK), sponsored the platform in return for social media consultations. Hence, the group receives enough income from these collaborations to meet operational costs.<sup>61</sup>

These three factors above, differentiation, the authoritative relationship between Santri Gayeng and Gus Baha, and professional and well-organized management, are some initiatives of the traditionalist group to compete with the dakwah of the Islamists. Abbas gave these arguments on two occasions, particularly in October 2020 and April 2021. In the first interview, the scholars at the Al-Anwar Islamic Boarding School were reported to start a *da'wah* initiative to counter the new religious authorities. He gave an example of Abdullah Ubab Maimun, who established a *da'wah* radio channel to oppose *Radio Majelis Tasir Al-Qur'an* (MTA). For Abdullah Ubab Maimun and his family at Al-Anwar Islamic Boarding School, new religious authorities, such as the MTA, did not have a clear religious qualification. The above dakwah program inspired Rumail Abbas to develop Santri Gayeng.<sup>62</sup> In the second interview, Abbas emphasized that the change from a political institution to a dakwah program was inseparable from his ambition to permeate an alternative narrative to combat the strong influence of the *da'wah* initiative of new religious authorities. Due to his understanding that the public was attracted to these new faiths, *Santri Gayeng* was developed as an alternative preaching program to motivate Indonesian Muslims to continue

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<sup>59</sup> On Santri Gayeng in Social Buzz see <https://sociabuzz.com/gayengco>

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Rumail Abbas, Semarang, 6 April, 2021.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Abbas, *Dakwah Digital dan Geliat Santri Online*.

watching and listening to *da'wah* programs of old religious authority or the traditionalists at *Pondok Pesantren*.<sup>63</sup>

### ***Santri Gayeng and Da'wa 2.0***

Theoretically, the use of Gus Baha's lectures by *Santri Gayeng* as a medium of dakwah to counter the new religious authorities resulted from the fragmentation and emergence of new preachers following the impact of novel technologies, such as the press or the internet.<sup>64</sup> The internet is currently the primary medium used by the new preachers to establish themselves as religious authorities.<sup>65</sup> Sociologist Bryan S. Turner stated that the internet had a reasonably broad impact, particularly on religious authorities, where the newer generation of preachers had the power to 'destroy' traditional groups.<sup>66</sup>

This led to attempts by the old religious organizations, such as *keiai* in Pondok Pesantren, to reclaim their authority, which is currently attributed to the new generation of preachers. Dakwah 2.0, which was proposed by Hew Wai Weng as a solution, has been implemented by Gus Baha and Santri Gayeng. Three qualities are practiced: visual aesthetics, communication (such as question and answer sessions), and marketing strategies.

The first quality is visible from the efficient methods employed by the creative team of *Santri Gayeng* in arranging Gus Baha's videos. The platform's database consists of the cleric's recorded religious lectures at the Pondok Pesantren Izzati Nuril Qur'an in Bantul, Yogyakarta. It contains about 60 gigabytes of recorded lectures, which can be used as virtual preaching material for the next five years. The recordings are divided into small parts and processed into videos with attractive graphics. This strategy seems successful due to the increasing number of subscribers, as Santri Gayeng achieved 384 thousand subscribers in April 2021. As a result, the page was given the Silver Play Button by Youtube; a category conferred on creators with a minimum of 100

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Rumail Abbas, Semarang, 6 April, 2021.

<sup>64</sup> Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003); Jon Anderson, "New Media in the Muslim World," *ISIM Newsletter* 5, 39 (2000); Göran Larsson, *Muslims and the New Media: Historical and Contemporary Debates* (England: Ashgate, 2011).

<sup>65</sup> Akmaliah, "The Demise of Moderate Islam," pp. 1–24

<sup>66</sup> Bryan S. Turner, "Religious Authority and the New Media," *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, 2 (2007): pp. 117–34.

thousand subscribers. The page also has the best graphics quality compared to other Youtube accounts that upload Gus Baha's videos.

The second feature of *da'wah* 2.0 is communicative religious lectures through question-and-answer sessions between the congregation and the preacher. This feature is the hallmark of new religious authorities, particularly since printing technology was introduced in the archipelago in the early 20th century. Several Islamic reformism magazines, such as *Al-Manar* in Egypt, *Al-Imam* in Singapore, *Al-Munir* in Padang, West Sumatra, and *Suara Muhammadiyah* have the same feature. This communicative style eroded the influence of the old religious authority dominated by traditional Indonesian scholars with the Syafi'i school of thought.

A similar situation occurred during the contemporary era, where online preachers, such as Felix Siau, Abdul Somad, Adi Hidayat, Khalid Bassalamah, etc., created religious question-and-answer sessions that were highly demanded by their congregation. This was different from the conventional preaching methods employed by *kiai* or ustaz from Pondok Pesantren, who used *kitab kuning* as material without accepting question-and-answer sessions.

Gus Baha is different from most traditional preachers because he accepts questions from the audience. Examples of this occurrence are his lecture at the Islamic University of Malang (Unisma), Sultan Agung Islamic University (Unissula), Semarang, and *Ma'bad Aly* Situbondo. The cleric always provides question-and-answer sessions in these three places.

The third characteristic of *da'wah* 2.0 was the use of a marketing strategy. Gus Baha does not own official social media accounts, unlike Ustaz Abdul Somad or Ustaz Adi Hidayat. This issue was resolved by introducing Santri Gayeng as a 'representation' of Gus Baha on the internet. This strategy, along with the provision of Indonesian subtitles, the depiction of its authoritative relationship with Gus Baha, and systematic and well-structured management, has successfully attracted followers and subscribers. By August 2020, Santri Gayeng had gathered a reasonably large social media following of 260,999 followers on Facebook, 88,320 on Twitter, and 185,495 on Instagram. These accounts were managed from two places, namely Semarang and Pondok Pesantren Al-Anwar in Sarang, Rembang. Of the eleven employees of Santri Gayeng, one person functions as a super admin of all the social media accounts. By adhering to these three qualities of



*da'wah* 2.0 posited by Hew Wai Weng,<sup>67</sup> Santri Gayeng has been successful in getting viewers and listeners of its channels. Hence, the platform has been able to compete with Islamist groups using this concept, improving their video-audio quality, and employing a marketing strategy. The success story of this channel marks the decisive engagement of NU followers in online *dakwah*. It enhances the characteristics of moderate traditionalist Islamic groups in Indonesia in online media, which were previously dominated by Islamist groups, such as former HTI members, including Felix Xiauw, *Yuk Ngaji*, and others.

## Conclusion

This article attempts to examine the effort of the custodian of the old religious authority, NU, in maintaining its values amidst the substantial exposure of new online preachers in Indonesia. The explanation above shows that Islamists have successfully used the internet to enhance their views since the post-New Order era publicly. This includes Felix Siauw with his *Yuk Ngaji* team, Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia, and the *Salafis*, which are some examples of Islamists who maximize digital media to propagate their messages through radio stations, Youtube channels, and websites.

Generally, NU scholars and members have been reactive to this situation by publishing websites and creating as many digital enterprises as possible to compete with their Islamist counterparts. Two websites, namely NU Online and *islamico.co*, have been able to compete with Islamists digitally in the past decade and are now among Indonesia's five most visited Islamic websites. This is a triumph, as Islamist channels dominated the internet traffic and ranked top among the ten Islamic websites in the country. This reactive attitude was enhanced after Gus Baha went viral through a digital platform created by *Santri Gayeng*.

Three key strategies make *Santri Gayeng* and Gus Baha successful as the representation of the old religious authorities in digital spaces, with viewership reaching thousands. These are the excellent quality of visual aesthetics, good communicative sessions with the audience, and exceptional marketing of Gus Baha's preaching content, which are part of the "*Da'wah* 2.0" tactic proposed by Hew Wai Weng.<sup>68</sup> Other

<sup>67</sup> Weng, "Dakwah 2.0," pp. 198–221.

<sup>68</sup> Weng, "Dakwah 2.0"; Weng, "The Art of Dakwah," pp. 61–79.

factors that made this cleric suddenly viral and loved by his audience are the use of Indonesian subtitles, the authoritative relationship with *Santri Gayeng*, and the existence of a creative, supportive team. These factors have attracted audiences comprising Nahdlatul Ulama members as well as former jihadists to Gus Baha's house to listen to and broadcast his lectures online.

These efforts have portrayed the old religious authority, particularly NU preachers, as decisive, capable of attaining substantial influence through online platforms and competing with their Islamist counterparts. These attempts are proof of two beneficial impacts. First, the decisive engagement of NU members in online *dakwah*, as shown by the massive number of online followers and viewers. Second, this online *da'wah* has given NU preachers exposure that provides a good advantage by enhancing the characteristics of moderate Islam to a broader audience. []

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