



## Transformative Islam and Peasant Independence: Experiences from an Indonesian Village

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**Abstract:** Indonesian peasants have been dependent on market forces and global phenomena since the establishment of the New Order (1966), and this has been detrimental to their welfare. However, this phenomenon has long been ignored by scholars, and thus the government has received little feedback regarding the creation of fairness and justice in agricultural management. This study, thus, seeks to empower farmers by transforming their traditional understanding of Islam into a transformative one. This study involved participatory action research, cycling twice through five strategies: imparting knowledge of transformative Islam, cultivating new understandings, developing strategic action plans, implementing these action plans, and reflecting/gathering feedback for further action. This study finds that peasant empowerment can be realized by transforming their religious understandings, and that the five strategies identified above can be employed fruitfully. At the same time, this study provides important feedback to the government and academics, offering a means of sustainably and systematically empowering farmers in Indonesia and around the world, thereby changing their fates and creating justice in agriculture.

**Keywords:** Agriculture; Peasant Empowerment; Transformative Islam

**Abstrak:** Petani Indonesia telah bergantung pada kekuatan pasar dan fenomena global sejak berdirinya Orde Baru (1966), dan hal ini telah merugikan kesejahteraan mereka. Namun, fenomena ini telah lama diabaikan oleh para akademisi, dan dengan demikian pemerintah tidak banyak menerima masukan terkait penciptaan kejujuran dan keadilan dalam pengelolaan pertanian. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini berupaya memberdayakan petani dengan mengubah pemahaman tradisional mereka tentang Islam menjadi pemahaman yang transformatif. Penelitian ini melibatkan penelitian aksi partisipatif, yang dilakukan dua kali melalui lima strategi: memberikan pengetahuan tentang Islam transformatif,

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menumbuhkan pemahaman baru, mengembangkan rencana aksi strategis, mengimplementasikan rencana aksi tersebut, dan merefleksikan/mengumpulkan umpan balik untuk aksi selanjutnya. Studi ini menemukan bahwa pemberdayaan petani dapat diwujudkan dengan mentransformasi pemahaman keagamaan mereka, dan bahwa lima strategi yang diidentifikasi di atas dapat digunakan dengan baik. Pada saat yang sama, studi ini memberikan masukan penting bagi pemerintah dan akademisi, menawarkan cara untuk memberdayakan petani secara berkelanjutan dan sistematis di Indonesia dan di seluruh dunia, sehingga dapat mengubah nasib mereka dan menciptakan keadilan di bidang pertanian.

**Kata Kunci:** Pertanian; Pemberdayaan Tani; Transformasi Islam

## Introduction

Peasants' difficult and challenging lives are a historical and sociological fact. Often viewed as existing at the bottom of society's hierarchy, they face significant structural hurdles in their efforts to improve their lives (Stoler, 1977; Purwandari, 2011). Frequently ignored, marginalized, and ignored by society, it is not uncommon for them to organize themselves to resist change (Kartodirjo, 2013; Scott, 1986; Hart, 1986) and oppose injustices that hinder their efforts to better their lots in life. At the same time, however, peasants generally lack the power and capacity to overcome the problems that they face, and they are often unable to effectively mobilize the resources they do possess. Religion—which should provide guidance in navigating life's challenges—is understood textually, leaving it unable to act as a transformative force. As such, it is necessary to offer peasants a new understanding of religion, one that views it as a force capable of promoting change among peasants themselves and within the agricultural sector in general.

To date, peasant studies have approached the matter using three perspectives. *First*, peasants have been seen as 'enclaves' with their own unique ways of life that distinguish them from other members of society (Matenga & Hichaambwa, 2017; Mudimu, Zuo, & Nalwimba, 2020). *Second*, studies have seen peasants as existing within a power structure that discriminates against them and excludes them from progress and development (Bezner Kerr, 2013; Cantor, 2010; Corbera, 2012; Feischmidt & Szombati, 2017; Fortin, 2011; Gilbert & Afrizal, 2019; Großmann, 2017; Han et al., 2011; Kenney-Lazar, 2012; Kruijt, 2011; Montefrio, 2017; Ngok, 2012; Song et al., 2018; Sugden & Punch, 2014; Vélez-Torres et al., 2019; Vera Delgado & Zwarteveen, 2008; Xu, 2019). Indeed, Gibbons et al. (1989) show that modernization has even framed peasants as supporting the development of urban areas and their upper-class residents. *Third*, studies have investigated state and non-governmental organizations' institutional role in raising peasants out of poverty and subjugation (Aminah et al., 2015; Bahua et al., 2016; Baranauskiene et al., 2011; Blattman et al., 2013; Cohen-Blankshtain et al., 2013; Elizabeth, 2016; Goldman et al., 2016; Jakimow, 2012; Liu & Wang, 2019; Pinheiro Machado Brochner, 2014; S & K, 2011; Sätre, 2014; Schneider, 2011; Shobha & Kala, 2015; Sianipar & Widaretna, 2012). All three perspectives ignore the spiritual potential of peasants, failing to consider religion as a possible solution.

To fill this gap, this article focuses specifically on how new and contextual modes of religious learning can be used to create independence and transform peasants' lives. It seeks to answer three important questions. *First*, how can peasants' knowledge be used to provide a transformative force? Using the case of Munggut Village, this question will be answered by investigating the effect of transformative Islam on farmers' knowledge. *Second*, how does new knowledge lead to greater independence amongst peasants? This question will be answered by investigating how peasants use their knowledge to mobilize themselves. *Third*, how does peasants' new awareness influence their action plans and efforts to assert their independence? In this case, the action plans of peasants in Munggut Village are understood as tools through which they empower themselves and create a collective bargaining force.

This article departs from the argument that teaching transformative Islam to peasants can provide them with a transformative vision and guide them towards taking action to realize greater independence. After peasants are imparted with knowledge regarding the connection between Islam and everyday issues such as drought, seed shortages, pest control, produce sales, and chemical fertilizers' long-term effects on soil, they are able to achieve a new understanding of agriculture's environmental effects and organization's important contributions to independence and competitiveness. In the case of Munggut Village, this new understanding led to peasants keeping owls, revitalizing organic agricultural practices, using village funds for independent agricultural programs, and establishing their own civil society organization to overcome shared challenges. Through such activities, peasants were able to work towards three important goals: building their capacity, revitalizing the food and agricultural sector, and improving organizational capacity. Ultimately, peasants developed action plans to continue their activities even after the study concluded.

Rural studies, once prominent, seemingly stopped in the late 1980s. After important works were published by Hart (1986, 1998), Hüsken (1989a, 1989b), and Gibbons et al. (1989), few studies provided an in-depth and comprehensive examination of peasants' status in Indonesia's increasingly market-driven social system. This article, thus, seeks to fill a significant gap in the literature by showing how transformative Islam can be used to realize peasant empowerment and independence. Research was conducted at Munggut Village, East Java, which was chosen as representative of a village that has become increasingly subordinate to and dependent on national and global market forces. Such dependence is the main focus of this study, including its discussion of peasants' opportunities to escape structural inequality and religion's role in social transformation. Religion, as will be shown by this study, offers peasants the power to assert their independence and free themselves from the shackles that damper their search for prosperity.

This study employs Participatory Action Research (*PAR*), using qualitative approaches to collect data from the administrators of Peasant-Association-Groups (*Gabungan Kelompok Tani, Gapoktan*), consist of six peasant associations, which each association responsible for 400-member peasants. Secondary data, meanwhile, were collected through a review of the village's archives and government documents. Four forms of triangulation were used for verification: method triangulation, inter-researcher triangulation, data source triangulation, and theory triangulation. All four forms of triangulation were used to accommodate peasants' special characteristics, including their particular approaches to expressing themselves and their experiences. The peasants' willingness to work with the researchers, meanwhile, facilitated efforts to overcome issues experienced in the field. Data were collected through four approaches: observation, experience-sharing, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions.

Interviews were conducted with thirty farmers, representing each of the six peasant groups. Respondents were selected through purposive sampling, with four criteria: respondents had to be at least twenty years old, have progressive ideas and visions for agriculture, be willing to work with the researchers, and be respected by their communities.

Collected data were subsequently analyzed using ethnographic content analysis to reveal the content communicated manifestly and latently. Analysis was a three-stage process. *First*, the researchers identified the content of peasants' utterances, including their difficulty dealing with global pressures and market forces. *Second*, the researchers explored the disempowerment experienced by peasants throughout the agricultural process, from plantation to sale. *Third*, peasants were asked to use signification (interpretation) to understand the collected messages. As this study employed a participatory action research approach, significance was created at every stage. Knowledge was imparted, awarenesses were cultivated, action plans were developed and implemented, and results were ascertained through reflection.

## Results and Discussion

This study finds that contextual approaches to religion can transform peasants' lives and create independence, as evidenced by three factors. *First*, peasants obtained a more transformative understanding of agriculture. *Second*, peasants obtained a new awareness of independence and its importance. *Third*, peasants' new awareness pushed them to create an action plan for achieving independence. These factors will be discussed in detail below.

### Transformative Agriculture

After peasants were taught transformative Islam, their views of agriculture changed. Peasants obtained new knowledge. *First*, they learned of the close correlation between Islam and agriculture, including the importance of using agriculture to realize Islam's goals of upholding religion, the soul, the mind, honor, and property. They learned how certain activities went against these goals, such as when seven peasants in Padas District and three peasants in Munggut Village died while using electricity for pest control. Other activities, meanwhile, reflected Islam's teachings and furthered its goals; take, for example, peasants' efforts to preserve water, protect the environment, and practice organic agriculture. *Second*, peasants learned about organic fertilizers, including the processes through which such fertilizers are produced and the benefits of such fertilizers for their crops. They saw that organic fertilizers could reduce costs, thereby providing peasants with more income.

*Third*, peasants were shown new, environmentally friendly, approaches to pest control that protected the food chain. Peasants had long ignored the food chain and its importance in wet-field agriculture, and thus they were shown that the excessive hunting of predators (owls, snakes) had contributed to an explosion in the rat population. This disrupted the ecosystem and threatened peasants' livelihoods. Peasants were then reminded of the importance of restoring the food chain by reintroducing predators to the wet rice field ecosystem and stopping their culling of predators. Several peasants were sent to Telogoweru Village, Demak Regency, where residents had begun keeping owls as a means of pest control. Participants were shown how to keep barn owls (*Tyto Alba*), as well as the best means of making habitats for them. *Fourth*, peasants were taught about chemical fertilizer's effects on soil and its fertility. To achieve the same results, an increasingly large amount of chemical fertilizers had to be added every year; if they used the same amount, harvests would decrease in size.

*Fifth*, the peasants of Munggut Village obtained knowledge of water management and its importance. They recognized that the massive exploitation of water resources for agriculture was correlated with deforestation, as well as the drying of wells and springs and the reduced carrying capacity of the land. Peasants were thus shown the importance of collecting rainwater, using it for agriculture rather than letting it flow directly to the river. Peasants were also shown that mape trees (*Inocarpus fagifer*) and benjamin figs (*Ficus benjamina*) could be cultivated to increase the carrying capacity of the land. With this knowledge, imparted using a transformative Islam approach, the peasants of Munggut Village increasingly recognized that Islam promotes independent agriculture. They saw that Islamic values were deeply embedded in agriculture, and thus became increasingly dedicated to their livelihoods.

### **New Understandings**

Transformative Islam provided peasants with greater awareness of independence, showing them that it could be manifested from within themselves. The researchers sought to provide peasants with participative and imaginative activities that were imbued with Islamic values, through which peasants improved themselves and developed innovative approaches to agriculture. Peasants also shown how organic agriculture could be used to reduce costs, reinforce peasant organizations, develop agricultural technologies, and improve water management. Ultimately, through these activities, new paradigms emerged in local society.

*First*, peasants became aware that Islam teaches them to love life, in all its forms, and to ensure its continued existence. It also rejects all beliefs and actions that detrimentally affect living things and the resources they require to survive. *Second*, peasants became increasingly aware of the degradation of their natural environment. Furthermore, they realized that inaction on their part would result in their livelihoods and even their village itself becoming unsustainable.

*Third*, peasants became aware of the importance of institutionalization. They recognized that organizations were important in ensuring the distribution of labor, developing programs, controlling pests, and managing water resources, as well as in digging wells and installing water pumps. Fourth, peasants became aware that government support would be important for ensuring that their agenda was realized. Such support could take the form of policies or regulations, or funding through the village subsidy program. They thus realized that it was necessary for them to work with the village government to implement their programs and realize their goals.

At the same time, however, this knowledge did not immediately provide peasants with independence. Independence could not simply be limited to the individual level; it had to be understood and realized collectively. Changing the hearts and minds of peasants was necessary to promote further transformation. Likewise, replacing normative and textual understandings of religion (which are generally a contextual) with transformative and contextual ones can significantly inform how religious teachings are understood and used to achieve solutions to everyday problems. In the context of Munggut Village, the most tangible transformation was realized after peasants learned that Islam obliges them to uphold their religion, soul, mind, honor, and property. They promised to stop using electricity as a means of pest control, as well as to abandon the usage of environmentally detrimental approaches to agriculture. Furthermore, they recognized that organic—rather than chemical—approaches to fertilization and pest control could improve soil fertility in the area.

## Action Plans

These new understandings led peasants to develop a series of action plans. *First*, they initiated a series of capacity-building programs that would enable them to independently overcome challenges. These programs included, for instance, visitations to two villages where peasant organizations had successfully empowered themselves: in Kandri Subdistrict, Gunung Pati District, Semarang City, and in Telogoweru Village, Demak Regency. Recognizing the importance of using water sustainably, rather than simply exploiting this important resource, they also worked to revitalize local reservoirs and plant trees to improve water retention. Such efforts were understood as a first step towards achieving greater sustainability in Munggut Village, which—owing to widespread deforestation—had long been plagued by drought. Over time, this action plan also called for changes in planting patterns.

Third, respondents sought to improve their organizational capacity. They recognized that Munggut Village's peasant associations had long served as distributors and brokers. In the former capacity, they had become part of the system that exploited peasants for cheap labor and produce. In the latter capacity, meanwhile, peasant associations acted as middlemen for government aid programs, including those that distributed agricultural technologies. When these associations created proposals to access government assistance, their plans were often lacking; consequently, any assistance received from the government could not be optimally used to improve peasants' welfare or ensure the sustainability of their agricultural activities. Respondents focused their capacity-building activities on transformative activities, such as cultivating a greater awareness of the injustices in the agricultural system. Capacity-building activities were also oriented towards improving peasants' awareness of the importance of controlling seed and fertilizer supplies, as well as improving their bargaining power when setting product prices and advocating for their own interests in the public and private sectors.

These action plans, developed by the peasants of Munggut Village, were taken as manifestations of the ideals of transformative Islam and designed to create change at both the individual and the structural levels. These action plans, as well as their realization after the conclusion of field research, also show that transformative Islam can be used by peasants to create independence and promote sustainability. The peasants of Munggut Village began using more independent, efficient, and competitive agricultural methods, and ultimately organized themselves into a collective action group known as BETA. It is through this organization that peasants improved their ability to bargain with the State and with the private sector.

Since it was first popularized in Indonesia by M. Dawam Raharjo, Muslim Abdurrahman, and Kuntowijoyo in the 1990s, the concept of transformative Islam has yet to fundamentally transform the lives of marginalized Muslims such as farmers and fishermen (Baharuddin, 2009; Nurdin, 2013). As such, this study has attempted to explore how transformative Islam can be used to effectively empower peasants. It has found that, by implementing the concepts and tenets of transformative Islam, peasants can be raised from disempowerment and brought towards independence. Through a five-stage process—imparting knowledge of transformative Islam, cultivating new understandings, developing strategic action plans, implementing these action plans, and reflecting/gathering feedback for further action—they were provided a new understanding of Islam. This, in turn, guided them towards an understanding of how agriculture correlated with Islam's obligation for all Muslims to uphold their religion, soul, mind, honor, and property, and how this obligation cannot be realized without

empowerment. Ultimately, peasants gained a strong desire to develop action plans that could shed the shackles of subjugation, such as by establishing an organization (the aforementioned BETA) to protect their bargaining power.

This study builds on the concept of transformative Islam, which emerged in Indonesia as a means of addressing the inequalities that had emerged as a result of the country's developmentalist policies (Gellert, 2019; Rahman, 2001). Such a goal has not, however, been realized, and efforts by activists such as Dawam Raharjo and Adi Sasono have been marginalized since Indonesia's political reform began. After more than two decades, the historical and structural inequalities in Indonesia's agricultural sector have yet to be addressed. Injustice remains widespread, and capital-holders have more opportunities than all other Indonesians. Peasants, farmers, and other marginalized communities must struggle against the pressures of three forces: the hegemony of the market, the inconducive climate caused by global warming, and unfavorable government policies (Vandermeer, 2013). Inequality has not only continued, but become even more prevalent. As such, and its goals continue to be important, and will remain so for the foreseeable future.

Likewise, transformative Islam remains relevant for marginalized communities, as they continue to face significant structural inequalities even two decades after the fall of the New Order. Peasants perceive the results of Indonesia's political reform as deviating from its initial goal of creating an agricultural system that promoted justice and welfare. Instead, they see it as having reinforced the dominance of capital-holders, who have worked with government officials and other power-wielders to create an oligarchy (Achwan, 2013; Fukuoka, 2015). Many informants indicated that Indonesia's political reform had not changed their lives in the slightest (interview with Informant 1–7). Likewise, several scholars have shown that the oligarchy shows no signs of ending, and that its agents have continually reaffirmed their hegemony over Indonesian politics, economy, society, and culture (Achwan, 2013).

One of this study's key innovations is its focus on religion's potential to improve peasants' lives and increase their independence. No studies have doubted peasants' marginalization in Indonesia (Borras, 2009), and as such the decision to use participatory action research to investigate peasants' activities was a rational one. This study, recognizing the religious nature of Indonesian society, sees religion as having the potential to create social change. In this, it differs significantly from the majority of the literature, which has seemingly forgotten earlier efforts to implement transformative Islam in Indonesia. Likewise, it differs from early proponents of the concept, whose activities between the 1970s and 1990s were limited to discourse and discussion (Halid, 2005). Unlike other academic efforts to empower peasants (Borras, 2009; Gilbert & Afrizal, 2019), which concentrate on using commodity diversification to empower farmers and even suggest that they seek new livelihoods, this study has shown that agriculture can continue to provide peasants with necessary income—so long as new approaches are used. Finally, unlike previous research into transformative Islam, this study has reached beyond the conceptual, using this framework for peasant empowerment.

This study has shown that marginalized communities can be transformed by providing them with new and contextual understandings of religion. As such, this study recommends that transformative Islam and its five strategies be incorporated into government empowerment programs for farmers and fishermen. At the same time, it is also necessary for the government to develop policies that promote justice and prosperity in the Indonesian agricultural system. Likewise, this study recommends that

religious scholars incorporate transformative Islam into their sermons and teachings. Such an approach is necessary to reorient public views of religion, thereby laying the necessary foundation for reorienting religious beliefs, creating new understandings of religion, developing action plans, implementing said plans, and reflecting on these activities.

## Conclusion

This research has shown that transformative Islam can effectively guide peasants towards independence, and that its implementation can result in sustainable action and empowerment. In the case of Munggut Village, this has been realized through three main approaches: capacity-building for peasants, water management, and organizational capacity-building. Together, these actions have enabled peasants to escape the capitalist trappings of the global market. Peasants' individual capacity was developed through focus group discussions and comparative studies, while their organizational capacity was expanded through focus group discussions and training sessions. Water management, meanwhile, was implemented by revitalizing local reservoirs, introducing new cultivation techniques, and planting trees to increase the soil's carrying capacity.

To ensure that their activities continued even after fieldwork concluded, peasants also established an organization—BETA—to consolidate their activities and ensure their continued realization. They also used this organization to exchange information, creating and actively maintaining virtual discussion groups to facilitate their activities. Where individual members experience problems, these issues are acknowledged by administrators and discussed by members and by experts in the field. Group discussions have thus contributed to developing a new, more transformative approach to agriculture.

As such, this study has supported the assumptions of transformative Islam, at least within the context of peasant communities. For instance, the peasants of Munggut Village worked collaboratively to build owl habitats, which they installed in their fields with their peers. They recognized the danger of using electricity as a means of pest control, and thus acknowledged that it went against the teachings of Islam.

At the same time, however, the limitations of this study must be recognized. Owing to the limited time available for research, only seven months, the long-term structural effects of changes in peasants' behaviors have not been observed. Likewise, as this study has focused on one village, its results cannot be generalized to apply to other villages with different characteristics. As such, further participatory action research is necessary to better understand how peasants can become more independent and how they can improve their bargaining position. It is also necessary to investigate the potential for implementing transformative Islam in other marginalized communities, including amongst fishermen and laborers.

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