

## *Kiai Kampung* and Traditional Islamic Orthodoxy: A Socio-religious Study of Mosque-based Authority in Rembang, Central Java, Indonesia

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### Abstract

The role of *kiai kampung* as local religious authorities in Indonesia has evolved dynamically in response to shifting socio-political landscapes and changing patterns of Islamic religious authority. This paper examines the role of *kiai kampung* as socio-religious agents in managing mosques and preserving traditional Islamic orthodoxy in Indonesia's Reform era. *Kiai kampung* effectively translates Islamic principles to grassroots levels as they influence social, religious, and political discussions through regular preaching and sermons (khutbah). The study uses field research to observe da'wah practices and institutional affiliations in Rembang, Central Java. Using the concepts of agency and cultural broker, this study finds that *kiai kampung* does not merely reproduce inherited traditions but actively reinterprets them in response to contemporary socio-political challenges. This study contributes to the idea that, besides *kiai kampung* promoting a distinct model of traditional orthodoxy, their affiliation with religious institutions enables them to shape local religious and political discourse while supporting government agendas aligned with Islamic values. This support is often expressed through sermons referencing classical religious texts, including tafsir, hadith, and tasawuf (Sufism). As grassroots leaders, *kiai kampung* also contributes to the institutional growth of *santri* communities in Indonesia's Reform era.

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*Peran kiai kampung sebagai otoritas keagamaan lokal di Indonesia telah berkembang secara dinamis sebagai respons terhadap pergeseran lanskap sosial-politik dan perubahan pola otoritas keagamaan Islam. Makalah ini mengkaji peran kiai kampung sebagai agen sosial-keagamaan dalam mengelola masjid dan melestarikan ortodoksi Islam tradisional pada era Reformasi di Indonesia. Kiai kampung secara*

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*efektif menerjemahkan prinsip-prinsip Islam ke tingkat akar rumput karena mereka memengaruhi diskusi sosial, agama, dan politik melalui khutbah dan khutbah rutin. Penelitian ini menggunakan penelitian lapangan untuk mengamati praktik-praktik dakwah dan afiliasi kelembagaan di Rembang, Jawa Tengah. Dengan menggunakan konsep agensi dan perantara budaya, studi ini menemukan bahwa kiai kampung tidak hanya mereproduksi tradisi yang diwariskan, tetapi juga secara aktif menafsirkan ulang tradisi-tradisi tersebut sebagai respons terhadap tantangan-tantangan sosial-politik kontemporer. Studi ini berkontribusi pada gagasan bahwa, selain kiai kampung mempromosikan model ortodoksi tradisional yang berbeda, afiliasi mereka dengan lembaga-lembaga keagamaan memungkinkan mereka untuk membentuk wacana agama dan politik lokal sambil mendukung agenda pemerintah yang selaras dengan nilai-nilai Islam. Dukungan ini sering diekspresikan melalui khutbah-khutbah yang merujuk pada teks-teks keagamaan klasik, termasuk tafsir, hadis, dan tasawuf. Sebagai pemimpin akar rumput, kiai kampung juga berkontribusi pada pertumbuhan kelembagaan komunitas santri pada era Reformasi di Indonesia.*

**Keywords:** *kiai kampung*; mosque; orthodoxy; post-Reform; Rembang

## Introduction

Though operating in limited areas, local religious authorities or *kiai kampung* play a vital role in shaping social and religious life; they perform as key figures with the command to interpret and mediate Islamic teachings and practices within their communities (Alatas, 2021). Their influence also defines local Islam's religious traditions and guides religious and social activities (Setiyani, 2020). As local agents, *kiai kampung* nurtures religious spaces such as mosques, *langgar* or *surau*, and local Islamic schools (*madrasah*). The mosque is the central platform for disseminating local Islamic values, religious practices, and political perspectives (Hilmy, 2018).

*Kiai kampung* is affiliated with orthodox religious institutions such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Indonesian Ulama Council/MUI), serving as grassroots agents (Amir, 2019). They act as administrators at the lowest branch level (*ranting*) and participate in *Lembaga Bahtsul Masail* (Institute for the Study of Religious Issues/LBH) at the sub-regency level. Having received traditional religious education in *pesantren*, *kiai kampung* maintains close ties to these institutions and represents local religious scholars (*ulama*) within their communities (Hadi et al., 2016).

There are various types of *kiai*: *kiai tarekat*, who focus on spiritual life; *kiai pesantren*, who manage religious institutions; *kiai dakwah*, who concentrate on public preaching; and *kiai politik*, who are involved in politics (Sukanto, 1999). In contrast, *kiai kampung* are local religious teachers, community leaders, and cultural brokers. They mostly work as farmers or small merchants, limiting their authority to their immediate community. Despite this, they are respected locally for their religious knowledge and social-political influence (Fauzi, 2012).

Historically, in Indonesia, *kiai kampung* have been key agents in nurturing traditional Islamic beliefs and the religious life of the *ummah* (Islamic community) (Dhofier, 1999). The term *kiai* generally represents the *ulama*, who hold the authority to interpret the prophetic tradition (*al-waratah al-anbiyā'*) and are mandated to guide the *ummah* not only in religious concerns but also in social and political affairs, acting as servants of the people (*khādim al-ummah*) (Ichwan, 2013). Dhofier (1982) concluded that their role is crucial in preserving the orthodox ideology of *ahl as-sunnah wa al-jamā'ah* within Javanese society.

Throughout Indonesian Islamic history, *ulama* has played diverse and significant roles (Husein, 2021), serving as government advisors and leaders in political and religious education (Burhanudin, 2012). In Java, *kiai kampung* has been central to mosque leadership since Islam's early introduction. While the spread of Islam in Java closely relates to the nine saints (*Walisongo*) (Ahimsa-Putra, 2012), *kiai kampung* also made important contributions by adapting Islamic teachings to Javanese culture, gradually shaping local Islamic traditions and practices (Asrawijaya, 2022).

During the Islamic Kingdom, *kiai kampung* was employed by the Javanese sultanates to help govern the people and manage territorial control. They were granted authority to oversee mosques as extensions of sultanate power. However, their influence was geographically limited and hierarchically subordinate to *kiai ageng*, *kiai kaum*, or *pengulu*, who managed the *Masjid Agung* (grand mosque) and advised the sultan (Azra, 2017). Under the Soeharto regime, the role of *kiai kampung* in preserving

traditional-orthodox Islam was reinforced through the establishment of state-backed religious bodies such as the MUI, which issued fatwas and delivered *tausiyyah* (Islamic sermons) based on traditional perspectives (Ichwan, 2016). Seen as religious authorities, *kiai kampung* became crucial intermediaries in conveying Islamic teachings to local communities through mosques. This role persisted after the fall of Soeharto, as the Reform era opened greater freedom for public expression and expanded space for diverse Islamic ideas to circulate in mosques (Hoesterey, 2008).

Reconnecting *kiai kampung*, mosques, and Islamic political views in the Reform era reopened the discourse on traditional Orthodox religious authority in Javanese society. This discussion is primarily due to the contested nature of mosques, which often undergo ideologization and privatization by the religious institutions or organizations that control them (Taufik, 2018).

Given their strong affiliation with major religious institutions, this paper investigates the agency of *kiai kampung* in preserving traditional Islamic orthodoxy. It examines how they function as local representatives of institutionalized religious authority. This study adopts a sociological-anthropological perspective, drawing on Anthony Giddens' theory of agency (Giddens & Sutton, 2014) and Clifford Geertz's concept of cultural broker (1970). Within this framework, *kiai kampung* is seen as active agents who do not simply reproduce the inherited structure of Islamic tradition but also navigate socio-political change through religious institutions such as mosques.

According to Giddens and Sutton (2014), social actors can act reflectively and shape the structures in which they are embedded. In this context, *kiai kampung* reinterprets Islamic orthodoxy inherited from pesantren and religious organizations like NU and MUI, adapting those teachings to the needs of local Muslim communities in the Reform era. Geertz's concept of the cultural broker describes figures mediating between traditional religious values and emerging social transformations. Village *kiai* performs this intermediary role between pesantren (as centres of religious knowledge production) and grassroots communities (as knowledge users). They bridge normative Islamic discourse and the pragmatic needs of village society.

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach using a case study design to investigate the religious and social practices of village *kiai* in managing mosques and promoting traditional Islamic orthodoxy. Rembang Regency, Central Java, was purposively selected due to its strong traditional Islamic base and well-established pesantren networks. Although geographically distant from Indonesia's political centre, Rembang plays a significant role in its religious and political dynamics—an influence rooted in its historical position as a coastal gateway for the early spread of Islam in Java. Recently, Rembang has been home to *pesantren*, both modern and traditional. There is a record of 570 mosques spread across 14 sub-districts in Rembang. The affiliation of these 570 mosques links to different religious institutions such as NU, Muhammadiyah, LDII, Lamkari and others; however, NU still plays a significant role in these areas.

Two primary methods to compile data were participatory observation and in-depth interviews. Observations were conducted by attending and following religious activities at five mosques led by *kiai kampung*, namely Darussalam Mosque in Sedan, Baiturrahman in Pamotan, Jami' Darussalam in Sarang, Al-Islah in Kragan and Baiturrahman in Rembang, with a focus on classical Islamic book recitations (such as Tafsir, Hadith, and Tasawuf) and community religious programs. For in-depth interviews, there were 23 (twenty-three) key informants, including *kiai kampung* serving as mosque leaders, NU local figures, and sub-district and district-level MUI officials.

From the data, this study took five mosques along with the *kiai kampung* nurturing the mosque (head of *takmir*) in Rembang as the locus of study. In order to gather observation data, The author followed the religious activities of *Kiai kampung*, who had routine programs that preached Islamic classical books such as Tafsir, Hadith, and Tasawuf. They were Darussalam Mosque in Sedan, Baiturrahman in Pamotan, Jami' Darussalam in Sarang, Al-Islah in Kragan and Baiturrahman in Rembang. Besides following the routine preaching, the researcher interviewed the *kiai* to clarify the teaching. The data were analyzed thematically, identifying narrative and social patterns that reflect the agency of village *kiai* in transmitting orthodoxy and mediating between

religious institutions and grassroots communities. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation and member checking with key informants.

The central thesis is that *kiai kampung* serves as an agent of religious institutions and organizations in Rembang, helping the community develop a deeper understanding of traditional and "orthodox Islam." This perspective places Islam—particularly the preserved traditions of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*—as the ideological foundation for interpreting the faith. While rooted in the Qur'an and Hadith, *kiai kampung* has effectively contextualized these teachings to address the needs of the local Muslim community.

The orthodoxy of *kiai kampung* stems from pesantren-based education and their close ties with state religious bodies such as MUI and Dewan Masjid Indonesia (Council for Indonesian Mosque/ DMI). By navigating mosque activities, they play a key role in shaping modern expressions of orthodox Islam at the community level.

### The Mosque as a Site of Socio-religious Contestation

In Islamic history, mosques have always been closely tied to power dynamics, reflecting broader social and political relationships (Kurniawan, 2014). Their presence often signifies the influence of religious organizations, specific ideologies, and social identities. Thus, mosques are not merely sacred or apolitical spaces—they have long served as instruments to promote religious ideas and reinforce power relations (Afdillahi, 2016). To regulate mosque affairs, the Ministry of Religious Affairs established the Indonesian Mosque Council (*Dewan Masjid Indonesia*, DMI) on June 22, 1972, which later led to the formation of the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI). The regulation reflects the state's strategy to extend its influence through official religious institutions, positioning mosque governance at the forefront of religious and political engagement.

In modern Indonesia, the expansion of religious movements has increasingly used mosques as strategic sites for organization and dissemination. In the 1970s, university students began participating in the *Campus Islam* da'wa movement, using campus mosques as centres for religious propagation.

After the political shift during the Soeharto regime in the 1990s, Saudi Arabia provided substantial funding that strengthened the development of the Salafi youth movement. By 2010, the Center for the Study of Religion and Culture (CSRC) at UIN Jakarta documented the widespread use of mosque pulpits to promote political activism (Khairullah, 2020), including the spread of radical Islamic narratives and extremist interpretations of jihad. In Bekasi, such ideological influences in mosques disrupted social cohesion and contributed to community fragmentation (Taufik, 2018).

In Madura, local *kiai* have used mosques to mobilize communities in violent attacks against the Shiite minority, including the burning of Shiite mosques and the forced displacement of residents. Similarly, in West Nusa Tenggara (NTB), mosques have become arenas of political contestation targeting Ahmadiyya and other religious minorities, such as the Wetu Telu community (Ahnaf & Salim, 2017). In these contexts, mosques are no longer solely places of worship but have shifted into spaces for asserting dominance and even legitimizing violence. In Yogyakarta—often regarded as Indonesia's most tolerant city—mosques have been increasingly instrumentalized for political activism. The rapid proliferation of mosques has, in some cases, facilitated mass mobilization and discriminatory actions. As Gaffney (1994) notes, these incidents reveal how mosques can be powerful tools to shape and mobilize societal structures.

This phenomenon is not entirely new; it has deep historical roots. Throughout Islamic history, mosques have been highly contested spaces—serving as places of worship and as centres of social and political engagement. From the beginning of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad used the mosque for various purposes, including prayer, preaching, and even military planning. This multifunctional role continued until the caliphate period, when mosques were used for coronation ceremonies, symbolically linking divine authority to political power. The enduring Sunni-Shia rivalry also showed in the mosque identity and control competition. Hodgson (2009) observed that during Islam's expansion across the Arabian Peninsula, ruling dynasties built mosques as symbols of authority and dominance. Political control was often asserted

through the management of sermons (*khutbah*) and religious discourse, firmly establishing mosques as instruments of political legitimacy.

During the Arab conquest and sectarian milieu, mosques served as a place to legitimate religious and political ideology. Under the Abbasid and Umayyad dynasties, mosques served as centres of power, where religious discourse was carefully controlled to support political stability. Sermons (*khutbah*) and congregational preaching were used to advance the ruling dynasty's agenda—promoting its ideological stance while discrediting opposing or “subversive” views. Political leaders ensured that imams aligned with state ideology, transforming the mosque into a tool for political consolidation (Fathi, 1981).

Across the Islamic world, mosques and preaching have played a vital role in driving social and political transformation (Gaffney, 1994). The idea about reformation and social movement in Egypt and Islamic Arabian countries during the Arab Spring was disseminated through mosques. Far beyond being sacred spaces for worship, mosques functioned as political hubs for mobilizing grassroots action and cultivating future leaders for broader Islamist agendas. Tayob (1999) emphasized that historically, the *khutbah* has been a powerful tool in shaping social emotions and inspiring collective movements.

In Rembang, mosques have become highly contested and ideologized spaces. In Pamotan village, two mosques affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah settle side by side, each representing differing religious practices. Although both organizations are known nationally as proponents of moderate Islam, their rivalry is pronounced at the local level. According to the *takmir* (mosque managers) of both mosques, this proximity is necessary due to differences in religious practices, such as determining the start and end of Ramadan, the number of *tarāwih* prayers, and other ritual activities. As a result, despite being in the same village, the two mosques reflect distinct religious orientations and institutional affiliations. This local polarization symbolizes a broader contestation between religious organizations and positions the *kiayi kampung* as local agents navigating and representing these wider ideological divides.



Such contestation, for instance, is represented through the activities managed by the *kiai kampung*, who is also the head of the *takmir* (mosque manager). For instance, in many villages in Rembang where *kiai kampung* is affiliated with NU, the mosque program is rich with traditional rites, such as *selametan*, *kenduri*, etc. Indeed, the learning model also maintains the Qur'anic learning method through the *Baghdadi* model, which emphasizes phonetic utterance. This condition is different from the *kiai* affiliated with Muhammadiyah, who used the *qirā'ati* model, which emphasizes the speedy ability to read the text and the fact that there are fewer traditional rites in the mosque. Regardless of these regular activities, the mosque served as a site to study religious knowledge, which supports, propagates, and represents the nature and episteme of the affiliated religious organization- the institution.

Besides its primary function as a religious place of worship, the mosques also became a place to form cadres for the younger generation. They were educated through internalizing the tradition, such as reading *barzanji* and *dziba'*, two collections of Arabic poems to commemorate the virtue of the Prophet, as well as conducting various communal rites. More important are mosques preaching Islamic classical books, such as tafsir and hadith. This role means that in the mosques, *kiai kampung* embeds the value of Islam, and they educate students according to their visions for the future. For this role, mosque and *kiai kampung* are two subjects of discourse that shape the future of Islam, for they were taking a significant position in nurturing the religious understanding of the children.

These mosque activities in Rembang affirm that for the local communities at the grassroots level, mosques become important areas for protecting their religious identities and political interests. Through these roles, *kiai kampung* becomes an important agent for protecting religious communal identity. Indeed, mosques have become an important site for protecting and disseminating religious values and norms. Hence, this paper argues that mosque and *kiai kampung* in Rembang is contested for it is protecting the idea of traditional and orthodox Islam based on *Ash'ariyyah* and *Maturidiyyah* in theology and *Shafi'iyyah* school in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Through these roles, religious organizations such as NU and

Muhammadiyah also vigorously protect their affiliated mosques from any attempts to infiltrate religious ideas and activities that oppose their religious and political views (Nasikhin et al., 2022).

### **Institutional Network and Political Patronage of *Kiai kampung* in the Post-Reform**

In the anthropological academic tradition, the lexical term *kiai* refers to the "honoured" or the "respected." The term applies to the proper name of a person as a symbol of honouring and respecting their role in social and religious life. Generally and historically, the *kiai kampung* was classified as "*santri*," which Geertz (1970) described as a traditional Islamic group of wealthy peasants and merchants who adhered to practising Islamic laws and doctrine. This social category is also mentioned by Marshal Hodgson, describing the *santri* as the "scripturalist perspective" or "normative" Islam, which was the opposite of "mystical" Islam (Nurish, 2021).

Here, Hefner (2020) noted that modern Indonesia is significantly affected by the *santrinization* process, especially after Abdurrahman Wahid, also known as Gus Dur, a *santri*, became the 4th President of Indonesia. Following this deep process of *santrinization*, which caused a severe decline of *abangan* religious groups, is a wide commitment to Islamic activities. Religious activities such as practising regular praying, fasting during Ramadan, asking for *fatwa*, and consuming "Islamic products" were regular activities of Indonesian Islam in the Reform era (Yudha et al., 2024). It shows that *santri* has successfully penetrated Islam into the social and religious life. Interestingly, as Islamic religious life is rising, the political campaign for the implementation of *Sharia* has seriously declined. Regardless of this paradox, *santri* has brought Indonesia more Islam than before.

Besides, as a "*santri*," *kiai kampung* was located as a representation and agent religious institution, for they play the same role in maintaining the *ummah*. They closely connect to the Ulama religious institutions of NU and MUI and the *pesantren* in the surrounding areas. Locating *kiai kampung* as an agent means they can produce, modify, criticize, and communicate ideas.

During the *Orde Baru* (New Order) Era, they were positioned as translators to compromise government projects and Islamic ideas to their community. Geertz called this role a "cultural broker, " or "agent," whose role is negotiating different interests of religion and nationality.

As an agent, *santri* desires to maintain their authority in the continuity of this religious institution. The agency has long historical roots, and the development of Islam in Indonesia is inseparable from the role of the *santri* community and the agency of *Kiai kampung*. The first role is the demand for the establishment of a state based on religion, which manifested through the first pillar of Pancasila or "Belief in One Supreme God" and its extension, "with the obligation for the adherents of Islam to carry out Islamic law" which is known as the seven words. Within this phase, the Ministry of Religion was also established and dedicated to unifying so-called Islamic affairs throughout Indonesia (Hefner, 2009).

Interestingly, the ministry was only controlled by mainstream Muslims due to large followers and to stabilize state control at the grassroots level. Following this is the massive establishment of Islamic political parties to adopt the aspiration of a state based on Islamic law (*Shari'ah*) (Ichwan & Slama, 2022). A significant party, such as Majelis Syuro Muslimin Indonesia (Consultative Congress of Indonesian Muslim or "Masyumi") and NU, gained a significant ballot. The success of Islamic parties was supported by *kiai kampung*, who worked at the lowest level and had been propagated in supporting the Islamic political agenda. However, Masyumi was banned for supporting the Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia (PRRI).

The *second* was during the Soeharto period, when Islamic religious groups and the government had successfully eradicated the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). However, the government had no intention to restore Islamic religious groups such as Masyumi and NU as a political party. Within this phase, religious organizations should follow a government role that consolidates all religious parties into one, the United Development Party (PPP), which also gained significant voters in multiple general elections. In the rural areas, *kiai kampung* was intimidated and even persecuted for voting for

the government's party of Golongan Karya (Golkar), segregation the so-called "Islamic group" and "nationalist groups" (Ichwan, 2013).

In the Reform era, Islamic groups were fragmented into small Islamic political parties. Besides PPP, which previously existed as the only Islamic political party, there were also the National Awakening Party (PKB) and Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) (Muhammad, 2021). Interestingly, these parties still utilize the role of *kiai kampung* to gain more supporters and voters. In East and Central Java, the success of PKB in gaining a significant number of voters has much to do with its strong relationship with NU and utilizing the agency of *kiai kampung* at the grassroots level. However, PKS gained more support in West Java due to its role in managing the mosque and cadre among the urban youth (Kusmayadi et al., 2016).

In the Rembang regency, the *kiai kampung* is strongly affiliated with the PPP, which is considered the only party based on Islamic ideology. In the Reform era, the power of PPP seriously declined in many areas, but in Rembang, its power is still remarkable. The political pattern between *Kiai kampung*, *kiai pesantren*, and *kiai politik* has shaped the mutual network that *kiai* plays in religious, cultural, social, and political areas. By supporting another *kiai* in the electoral votes, the role of *kiai kampung* becomes a significant agent for linking their agency to the patronage of political Islam and religious development.

Likewise, the local government of Rembang also allocated a specific amount of aspiration funds to support the establishment of mosques, *langar* or *surau*, madrasah, and religious organizations' programs. Various programs benefited religious organizations, such as giving incentives for *kiai kampung* to teach the Qur'anic institution and madrasah, and supporting the religious institution through various community development programs. According to a report from the Regional Development and Planning Agency of Rembang in 2022, around 15% of legislative body aspiration is allocated for supporting religious programs such as rebuilding mosques and madrasah and supporting religious programs (BPS Kab. Rembang, 2022).

The condition in Rembang reflects the current government's relationship with religious institutions. Indonesia, in general, has gradually shifted to affirm

and support Islamic religious groups. It is by recognizing the role of *santri* at the national level through "*Hari Santri* (Santri Day)" and allocating special funds for *santri*'s education. In other words, the political behaviour at the national and local levels has changed toward religious institutions. In Rembang, in particular, it affects the view of the *kiai kampung* as important agents in education, politics, and society. Most importantly, they were engaged with the community at the grassroots level and could navigate the religious and political outlook of the community.

In the context of Rembang, the role of *kiai kampung* had extended beyond religious matters, encompassing various aspects of social, cultural, and political life. From these recent developments, the local government and *kiai kampung* have been involved in religious affairs in which the government provides them benefits in exchange for their loyalty. It links the local government and *kiai kampung* into the patron-client relationship. Within this relationship is *kiai kampung*, inclining toward Islamic orthodoxy and the freedom to express their views and appeal to religious institutions.

### Navigating Traditional Orthodox Islam through Regular Preaching

In the Indonesian political context, the role of *kiai kampung* as an agent of religious organization and Ulama Institution is crucial and significant. They can drive the people at the grassroots level and as a local actor, navigating religious, social, and political issues. The dynamic of this role is based on the political situation and the interest in protecting the *ummah* based on the ideology of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*. During the New Order, when the political situation was not beneficial for Islamic leaders, *kiai kampung* was actively in the campaign against the government's decision that was contrary to Islamic norms and values.

The conditions were different in the Reform era, where *kiai kampung* could speak up freely about religion and social and political conditions. Bruinessen (2013), in his study about the 21st-century Islamic movement, signalled the so-called "Conservative Turn." It is the idea that certain religious groups have slightly moved towards stricter interpretations of Islam and are

more conservative about morals and the distinction between true and false. It also marks a semantic shift of religious expression in Indonesia, characterized by a scriptural turn or tends to be more orthodox (allegiance to a normative doctrine). The fundamental characteristic of modern orthodoxy is seeking Islamic classical answers to modern problems, such as morality, which must be rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah, and following the path of a pious ancestor (*salaf al-sālih*).

Bruinessen and Nur Ichwan (2013) labelled modern orthodoxy as an attempt to deliver a more puritanical interpretation of Islam and the demand of practising Sharia (Islamic law). By investigating the growth of the Islamic Puritan group, Martin presumes that the Islamic group attempts to take over the state by establishing an Islamic society. To succeed in the agenda, the Islamist religious group utilizes regular preaching to spread the authentic form of Islam and to navigate the tension between conservatism and reform while still maintaining the core principles of orthodox Islam. Ichwan mentioned this condition as puritanical moderate Islam in which moderate religious institutions are going to be more Puritan during the Reform era.

However, the characteristic of *kiai kampung* orthodoxy in Rembang differs from modern Islamist groups investigated by Martin. Although *kiai kampung* highlighted the identity of being the *ahl as-sunnah*, which followed *Sunni-Syafi'i* school only and was prone to the idea of *salaf as-sālih*, they were rejecting the idea of Islamic conservatism propagated by Salafism. It means *kiai kampung* in Rembang navigated their preaching of Islamic classical books, classified as traditional orthodox Islam. It refers to the normative orientation of Islam but in the form of tradition. Using classical books for preaching, *kiai kampung* explains the meaning of the text through the language and parables understood by local communities and insists that their audience follow the traditional and normative teaching.

Being traditional is different from being Puritan, for it still understands the textual sources as an inspiration for being pious religiously but still adopting the local values and the inherited tradition. It also emphasizes the rich spiritual and personal life of human relation with God. In the field research

around the mosques in Rembang, the daily routine of *kiai kampung* is reciting varied classical Islamic books, such as reciting the hadith of *Arbaʿin Nawawi* written by Imam Nawawi, *Tafsīr al-Jalālain* written by Jalāluddīn al-Suyūṭī, and *Tanbih al-Ghāfilīn* written by Abu Laits al-Samarqandi. Their regular audiences are around 40 to 60 people. Most are X generation (around 40-55 Years Old), and only a few are millennials (aged 25-40 Years Old). The significance here is that all preaching was Javanese, with the normative values of Islam internalized through community religious practices.

Following traditional orthodoxy, *kiai kampung* in Rembang also rejected the literalist interpretation of Islam. They were skilled in interpreting the historical context of the text of the hadith and the Qur'an while navigating the understanding traditionally. They also criticized the idea of liberalism, Wahhabism, and Salafism and opposed their religious ideas and traditions. The idea of being *ahl al-sunnah* and following the path of *salaf al-ṣāliḥ* is understood through nurturing the social condition of *the ummah* and guiding the *ummah* to the right path of Islam traditionally.

Being traditional orthodox Islam also means *kiai kampung* is also practising traditional religious ideas and interpreting the text based on the ideas of Islam as well as including Sufism and tradition. The traditional orthodoxy here must not be compared to the puritanical outlook of Islam rejecting Sufism belief. In his preaching on *Tanbih al-Ghāfilīn* every Wednesday after Isya', *Kiai Qushairi*, a preacher and a cleric in Pamotan, emphasized at every beginning of *majlis* (preaching):

"All knowledge is from God, given to the author; before we read the book, we shall deliver *al-Fātiḥah* to the author for the sake of *barakah* (blessing). So, we could take the knowledge, and it is becoming *berkah*." (Qushairi, personal statement, November 22, 2023).

The sentence above functioned at the onset of preaching, in which the *kiai* will recite *al-Fātiḥah* to the book's author, asking for a blessing. The action maintained the tradition, entailing that *kiai kampung* trained in the knowledge of traditional orthodox Islam, which made the tradition plausible. Parallel to the tradition is the deep Islamic knowledge and the relation

between *kiai kampung* to the religious institutions such as *pesantren* and NU that play a significant role in defending the idea of *ahl as-sunnah* and as an actor nurturing the Islamic community (*ummah*).

### ***Kiai Kampung* Representing Religious Institution**

As mentioned, *kiai kampung* managed mosques with strong affiliations with religious institutions such as *pesantren*, NU, and MUI. The relationship between institutions and the state has become more dynamic in the Reform era. This dynamic is apparent in the increasing roles of religious organizations and their skyrocketed participation in political practices. In many general elections, the collaboration between nationalist and religious actors within political contests represents a serious effort by political parties to absorb aspirations from Islamist groups. Conversely, religious institutions have also become more cooperative with government policies and are increasingly committed to supporting the empowerment of Muslim communities.

In line with the increasingly cooperative relationship between religious institutions and political alliances at the national level, *kiai kampung* has served as a local channel for promoting this collaboration. On the one hand, they have strengthened the role of religious institutions within communities, becoming key agents in social and religious life at the grassroots level. On the other hand, they also function as mobilizers of political support. As a result, these dynamics have shaped the moral foundation of the state and influenced public policy. Through the MUI as its official channel, the state has issued numerous fatwas against offline and online gambling, premarital sex, prostitution, and alcohol consumption—framing them as immoral and sinful. Alongside these prohibitions, there has also been active encouragement to observe core Islamic practices such as prayer, fasting, pilgrimage (*haji*), and zakat (almsgiving), accompanied by guidance on performing them correctly and morally.

At the local level in Rembang, *kiai kampung* acted as agents in curbing social ills such as gambling, alcohol consumption, prostitution, homelessness, and begging. Through regular preaching and sermons at mosques, they



condemned these immoral behaviors, framing them as societal diseases. Their religious messages effectively supported the agendas of both the state and religious institutions in addressing social, moral, and religious issues. It shows that their religious and cultural life role has expanded to include social responsibility within their communities.

As religious and social leadership agents, *kiai kampung* did not operate in isolation; they were closely connected to the *pesantren* near their geographical area. They would regularly visit the *kiai pesantren* to consult on problems within their communities and seek guidance. Conversely, the *kiai pesantren* also donates a significant amount of funds to support the construction of mosques. During the interview, respondents frequently mentioned the late K.H. Maimun Zubair as a prominent *kiai pesantren* who significantly developed village mosques. In the other parts of Rembang, *pesantren* continue to provide religious guidance and shape community values. This socio-historical relationship influences how *kiai kampung* manages mosques and addresses social and political issues. Therefore, it can be concluded that the ideological preference of the surrounding *pesantren* strongly shapes the typical management of mosques.

This relationship was rooted in the historical closeness between *kiai kampung* and *pesantren*. The development of religious traditions and political orientations emerged from mutual support within a network of *kiai* who shared common ideologies. This network was getting stronger because many *kiai kampung* also served as local administrators of NU and MUI. At its core, the network was built on a shared adherence to the *Ahl al-SUNNAH WA AL-Jamā'ah* tradition, which regards *kiai* and *ulama* as inheritors of the prophetic legacy (*warathat al-anbiyā'*) in guiding social and political life. This closeness shapes how *kiai kampung* and religious institutions manage mosques and community affairs.

The primary role of *kiai kampung* reflects a hierarchical relationship in which larger religious institutions—such as *pesantren*, NU, and MUI—are seen as having greater religious authority and a deeper understanding of Islamic teachings. This authority stems from their role in producing religious knowledge and their higher social status. In contrast, *kiai kampung* operates

at the village level, typically has no students, and belongs to the middle economic class. Besides managing mosques, they often work as farmers or traders, focusing less on religious scholarship. This hierarchy extends beyond mosque management to shape broader social and political perspectives.

Although *kiai kampung* sometimes held differing views on mosque management, they continued to refer to and respect *kiai pesantren* and other religious institutions. It reflects their recognition of these institutions as role models in promoting religious activities, preserving cultural traditions, and transmitting Islamic knowledge. Such deference acknowledges the hierarchical status of *kiai*. It serves as a way for *kiai kampung* to build their authority and position in society, particularly within the mosque as a centre of religious dissemination.

## Conclusion

Mosques have been among the most contested spaces throughout Islamic history, symbolizing power, ideology, and religious authority. In Java, mosques serve not only as symbols of Islamic identity but also as educational institutions that cultivate the ideological foundations of local Islam.

This paper highlights three key conclusions after examining the agency of *kiai kampung*: First, Indonesia's Reform political landscape has become more receptive to Islamic aspirations. Islamist groups have taken advantage of this shift by using mosques as platforms to promote their agendas, mobilize mass protests, and influence future generations. Second, *kiai kampung* plays a central role in mosque management by translating Islamic values into community needs. Their influence extends beyond religious matters to encompass social and political issues. In this role, *kiai kampung* also acts as an intermediary for local governments, helping to legitimize and promote public policies. Third, *kiai kampung* remains influential at the grassroots level due to its strong ties with established religious institutions such as *pesantren*, NU, and MUI. These relationships form an ideological network that helps sustain Islamic traditions and prophetic values across religious, social, and political domains.[]

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