



# THE ROLE OF NEO-SUFISM AND THE RITUAL PHENOMENON OF SLAWATAN IN PROMOTING RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

*This work focuses on the role of Neo-Sufism practice and the ritual phenomenon of Slawatan in promoting religious tolerance, through the teaching of peace and social solidarity by four religious organizations and their leaders. Slawatan is a common practice in Sufism and Neo-Sufism. Evidence shows that early Sufism promoted interreligious tolerance and harmony, and co-existed with other religions, such as Hinduism, in Indonesia. The study adopts ritual theory and participants' observation as a methodological framework. This paper argues that, the use of Neo-Sufism practice and the ritual phenomenon of Slawatan promote social solidarity which embodies the significance of religious tolerance in Central Java, Indonesia. The data also indicate that Slawatan and Neo-Sufism also have the potential to assist in the de-radicalisation and rehabilitation of religious extremists, as is evident in the work conducted by Pesantren Nur Hormain. The discussion confirms that Ahbabul Musthofa's, Al Khidmah's, Pesantren Nurul Haromain's and Al Ukhuwwah's peaceful approach to spiritual practice have promoted: social, political and educational activities among diverse communities, both in Central Java and outside Indonesia.*

*Keywords: Slawatan ritual, Indonesian Islamic phenomenon, religious tolerance, Sufism, Neo-Sufism.*

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## Introduction

The word *Slawatan* is derived from the Arabic word '*Salah*' which, when translated, means the five daily obligatory prayers in Islam. In Indonesian, *Slawatan* is derived from *Sholawat* (prayers). In the beginning this form of ritual was conducted within different forms of Islamic piety, parts of which include 'Maulid Nabi' (celebrating the birth of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam). The practice is common in Sufism. Sufism is derived from 'Sufi'. A Sufi is a person who practices Sufism. In another translation, the word 'Sufi' from its Arabic root means 'purity' or, 'one who is pure in heart' or, 'one of the elect'. According to Nicholson (1914), the name 'Sufi' was derived from the word 'Suf' which means 'wool' at its origin and was applied to those Muslim ascetics who, in imitation of Christian hermits, clad themselves in coarse woollen garb, as a sign of penitence and renunciation of worldly vanities.<sup>2</sup> This can be viewed as an attempt at interreligious harmony between early Sufis and Christian hermits. Research has shown other cases of interreligious harmony between Sufism and other faiths, such as Hinduism, in Indonesia. According to Mark Woodward (2018), the grave of Gusti Ayu Made Rai (or Raden Ayu Siti Khotijah, widely believed to be a Muslim female saint) in Bali is a

popular pilgrimage site, for both Hindus and Muslims. The graveyard receives thousands of pilgrims every year in the form of *Ziyarah* (pilgrimage), which is a common practice in Sufism.<sup>3</sup> The Wahidiyah Foundation is another group that uses Sufism practice to promote religious tolerance in Bali. According to Risalaturrohmah, the group promotes ritual prayers in line with religious diversity, through a spiritual path. During the group performance of the ritual of *Dzikr* and *Shalawat Wahidiyah*, non-Muslims are openly welcome to attend. This is consistent with the practice of a universalistic view of ritual, among people of different faiths.<sup>4</sup> (Risalaturrohmah, 2018, p.22).

In recent years, there has been special interest in the changing landscape of late Sufism in the last two decades. According to Von Schlegell (2002) this is a 'Neo-Sufi' notion, in which 18th-century Sufis shifted their doctrines and practices from the, 'union with God' to, 'union with the figure of Muhammad'.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Neo-Sufism produces transcendent and immanent spiritual concepts in human life. As such, unlike the old mechanism of isolation by devotees seeking closeness to God, there is no

3 Woodward, Mark. 2018. "The Apotheosis of Siti Khotijah: Islam and Muslims in Balinese Galactic Polity." *International Journal of Interreligious & Intercultural Studies* 1 (1): 4–20.

4 Risalaturrohmah, Mauliya. 2018. "The Challenges of Hindu Balinese's Modification to the Practice of Zikr Ritual." *International Journal of Interreligious & Intercultural Studies* 1 (1): 21–34

5 Von Schlegell, 2002, p. 578.

2 Nicholson, R. A. 1914. *The Mystics of Islam*. London: Routledge. Pp. 1-4.

need for such isolation, because: God is everywhere. Therefore, people can find God even in their own, every-day, material world. Moreover, in Neo-Sufism, followers do not necessarily have to be affiliated with a Sufi Order (*Tariqa*), and this development is reflected in the ritual of *Slawatan*.

Underpinned by the above description, this work aims to focus on using Neo-Sufism practice and the ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan* to promote religious tolerance, through peaceful teaching and social solidarity, by four religious organizations and their leaders. This paper argues that, the use of Neo-Sufism practice and the ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan* promote social solidarity, which embodies the significance of religious tolerance in Central Java. During the period of this study, the organizations in this research have been guided by Habib Syech, Kyai Hasanudin, Kyai Sirojan and Sholeh Ilham. Three organizations and one *Pesantren* were observed, from 2012 to 2015. They are Ahbabul Mustapha, Al Khidmah, Pondok Pesantren Nurul Haromain and Majelis Al Ukhuwwah.

These organizations were selected because they serve as symbolic representations of the *Slawatan* ritual in various communities. As Lévi-Strauss, cited by Bell (1992), notes: the human brain is shaped by social and cultural organizations into symbolic systems of communication.<sup>6</sup> Park

(2012) observes that these organizations play a significant role in organizing and coordinating civil-society groups and maintain ethnic harmony.<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that the transnationality of the organizations developed with members from different professions including: *Kyai*, *Santri*, *Ulamas*, businessmen and women, university professors, teachers, preachers, politicians and government authorities, working together beyond national boundaries, in an atmosphere of spiritual solidarity.<sup>8</sup> In doing this, they all formed a complex, inter-related and flexible network that formulates valuable social capital, which is utilized in integrating the spiritual and socio-cultural interests of the organizations.<sup>9</sup>

While taking a different approach to conventional transnational organizations, Ahbabul Mustapha and Al Khidmah have used *Slawatan* and *Dhikr* as tools to reach out to other followers of this Neo-Sufism practice in Central Java, and outside Indonesia. This is a good example of the cosmopolitan value of Islam.<sup>10</sup>

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Note: Lévi-Strauss's approach to linking the human brain with social and cultural symbols and influences was supported by Moore, Jerry D. 2004. *Visions of Culture: An Introduction to Anthropological Theories and Theorists*. Lanham, MD: Rowman, AltaMira, p. 228.

7 Park 2012, p.18.

8 Omeni, Edward. 2014. "International Workshop on Religion and Transnational Social Support." *Transnational Social Review* 4 (2–3). Routledge: 312–14.

9 Falk, Ian and Kaler, Surata. 2007. "'Real' Social Capital in Bali: Is It Different from 'the Literature'?" *Rural Society* 17 (3): 308–23.

10 Hanafiah, Hanafiah. 2018. "Dayah Collectively as

6 See, for example: Bell, Catherine. 1992, pp. 42-3.

Furthermore, Johnson (2006) argues that there is a need for a radical re-construction of transnational relations in a globalized world, in order to utilize the democratic potential of modernity.<sup>11</sup> Johnson's explanation supports the activities of Ahbabul Mustapha and Al Khidmah in the last few years. Furthermore, the data analyses categorize the activities of the organizations and *Pesantren* into spiritual, social, political and educational factors. The following discourse will explain this in detail.

### **Majelis Ahbabul Musthofa: Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore.**

Majelis Ahbabul Musthofa was founded in 1998 in the city of Solo, Central Java Province by Habib Syech. This period in 1998, according to Muhtadi (2009), was part of the early years of the Indonesian reformasi (reformation) era marked by social, economic and political instability and has contributed to the rise of different religious leaders and organizations.<sup>12</sup> The main goal of the organization is to complement the work of Dakwah, as a program of Islamic appeal.<sup>13</sup> To achieve its objective, the organization organized and conducted *Slawatan* rituals in many

places. The observation shows that in recent years, Habib Syech and the group have transformed the performance of *Slawatan* from its traditional space in the *Pesantren* to the public space, in rural and urban city centers.

Initially, the organization consisted of two groups, namely Rotibul Haddad and Burdah. However, under the influence of Habib Syech, the two groups joined together to form the Majelis Ahbabul Musthofa, with its headquarters in Solo.<sup>14</sup> By incorporating the two groups, they were able to facilitate social activities that improve the performance of the organization in the conduct of *Slawatan*.<sup>15</sup> The organization since then has established branches located in: Purwodadi, Kudus, Jepara, Sragen and Yogyakarta. They are now active in Malaysia and Singapore, where Habib Syech gives regular performances every year.

The group have a board that supports Habib Syech in directing its activities. Their members come from diverse communities including: Ulama, Kyai, Santri, politicians, businessmen, police officers, students and many *Pesantren*. Spiritually, they share one thing in common and that is their love of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) as expressed in their social life, social

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a Social Movement." *International Journal of Human Rights in Healthcare* 11 (1): 56–64.

11 Johnson, P. 2006. *Habermas: Rescuing the Public Sphere*. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

12 See, for example, Muhtadi, Burhanuddin. 2009. "The Quest for Hizbut Tahrir in Indonesia." *Asian Journal of Social Science* 37: 623–45.

13 See Hefner, R.W., 2000, p. 16.

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14 Note: Majelis Ahbabul Musthofa is the *Slawatan* council of those who love the Prophet Muhammad. See Woodward et al., 2012, pp. 129-130.

15 Razmi, Mohammad Javad. 2013. "A Study of the Effect of Social Capital on Human Development in Islamic Countries." *Atlantic Review of Economics* 1st: 1–22.

order and devotionals, as paradigms in the mystical interpretation of Islam in Java, and other places.<sup>16</sup> Members of the group organized and took part in the *Slawatan*, playing different roles as: supporting staff, vocalists, drummers, and logistic support for Habib Syech. Their followers in Java are estimated at more than one million. At all *Slawatan* performances conducted in public spaces attendance is open. If the *Slawatan* is held in a *Pesantren*, the organizers and the head of the *Pesantren* invite people from outside the *Pesantren*.

Socially, the organization has many activities for the benefit of their followers and different communities. For example, in 2010, during the Mount Merapi eruption, Ahabul Musthofa, under the leadership of Habib Syech and Prince Prabo Joyokusumu, used *Slawatan* performances to support the evacuees.<sup>17</sup> During this time, two *Slawatan* were conducted, one in October, in Umbulharjo, a village near the mountain. The first performance was held immediately after the initial eruptions that devastated the community around Umbulharjo. The second performance was held a month later in November, at Mogyowharjo Stadium. The researcher was invited to observe

16 Woodward, M., 2011, p. 113.

17 Note: Prince Prabo from the Yogyakarta Palace was an active member of Ahabul Musthofa. The researcher has met him several times at the palace. Whenever Habib Syech has a performance in the *Alun Alun* (City Center) the reception is always at Prince Prabo's compound inside the palace, which he turns into a restaurant.

both performances. Before going to the venue, Habib Syech, the Kyai and members of Ahabul Musthofa gathered at the palace in Yogyakarta. At around 8 p.m. the convoy, of around 10 cars, left the palace to go to Umbulharjo.

The performance started at 9 p.m. and ended at around 12 p.m. When we arrived at the evacuation center it was already full of crowds of people, who had come from Yogyakarta and its surroundings. The people came when they heard that Habib Syech was going to perform a *Slawatan* for the victims of the Merapi eruption. While the performance was proceeding, Habib Syech and Prince Prabo informed the evacuees that members of Ahabul Musthofa had many resources like: cash, clothes, and basic-food commodities to give to them. They also appealed to participants to collect resources and help the casualties. This was seen by the evacuees and the community as evidence of the solidarity that raised the spirit of hope for those affected.

Politically, although Habib Syech and many members of Ahabul Musthofa are not openly involved in politics, politicians and government authorities have lobbied them. Politicians and the police have worked, together with Habib Syech and Ahabul Musthofa, to conduct *Slawatan* in various places between Yogyakarta and Solo. The police organize such *Slawatan* performances in order to raise

community awareness on road safety and tolerance of others.

In the context of education, Habib Syech and many members of Ahbabul Musthofa who are Kyai have Pesantren where Santri from different communities go to study the Qur'an and other religious topics, including *Slawatan* and *Dhikr*. Most of the *Pesantren* are sponsored by their owners, although they receive philanthropic donations to fund the operational costs of the *Pesantren*. Furthermore, Habib Syech and Ahbabul Musthofa have spread the performance of *Slawatan* to other cities, like Kuala Lumpur, Malacca (in Malaysia), and Singapore. The number of followers of this ritual have been increasing in those cities every year; there are regular schedules for *Habib* Syech and Ahbabul Musthofa to perform in these countries.

Having discussed *Habib* Syech and Ahbabul Musthofa, the following section focuses mainly on two distinctive *Kyai*, an emerging new leader, and their organizations. They are: *Kyai* Hasanudin and the Al Khidmah organization, *Kyai* Sirojan and *Pesantren* Nurul Hormain, and Sholeh Ilham and *Majelis* Al Ukhuwwah. The reason for focusing on these two *Kyai* and the new emerging leaders and their organizations is because of their similarity to *Habib* Syech and Ahbabul Musthofa. Moreover, the researcher has spent an extensive period observing and participating in their

rituals, both in Java and internationally, including in Malaysia and Singapore. First, the discussion will focus on *Kyai* Hasanudin and Al Khidmah, secondly, on *Kyai* Sirojan, and thirdly, on Sholeh Ilham and *Majelis* Al Ukhuwwah.

### **Majelis Dhikr Al Khidmah: Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Southern Thailand.**

Like Ahbabul Musthofa, *Majelis* Dhikr Al Khidmah was formed to promote the spirit of *Dhikr* to celebrate the life of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) and Sufi saints who have contributed to the spread of Islam in Java and the entire Malay world. During the period of this research, Al Khidmah was headed by *Kyai* Hasanudin from Semarang, 2009 - 2014.<sup>18</sup> The organization was launched in 2005 and they have board members who help the leader to run the affairs of the organization. Al Khidmah has its headquarters in Surabaya, capital of the East Java Province. However, it has branches in different cities in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Southern Thailand.

As of 2018, Al Khidmah has a membership estimated at more than one million *jamaah* (followers), the majority of whom are in Java.<sup>19</sup> However, they also have a strong membership in Malaysia, Singapore and Southern Thailand. Members of Al Khidmah

<sup>18</sup> Interview with *Kyai* Anis Dzirkul Muttaqin, Mas Dida and Dr Muhsin Kalida, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with *Kyai* Anis Dzirkul Muttaqin, 2018.

come from diverse professions, such as *Kyai*, *Santri*, university professors, university students and businessmen and women. Every year, the organization organizes several *Haul Akbar*. The *Haul Akbar* is a religious ritual held to pray for the dead, it includes *Slawatan*, *Dhikr*, *Do'a* and other activities. The researcher has observed several of these rituals in Yogyakarta, Karimun Jawa and Jepara in Indonesia, Malacca (in Malaysia), and Singapore.

Al Khidmah has a radio station in Semarang under the management of *Kyai* Hasanudin. The organization also has a university in Surabaya, and several *Pesantren*. They provide scholarships for Indonesian and international students. In one discussion with *Kyai* Hasanudin, he said:

*Al Khidmah has a memorandum of understanding with the Muslim community in Petani, Southern Thailand. Every year they provide scholarships for numerous students from Petani to study at the Al Khidmah tertiary institution in Surabaya.*<sup>20</sup>

This is their contribution, to help the Muslim community in Petani, so that their students can have a good Islamic education in Indonesia. Aside from their contribution to education, Al Khidmah have recently developed a spiritual tourism program called *Wisata Nurainy*. Hitchcock (1995) argues that the Islamic response to tourism remains a comparatively unexplored area. However, for Al Khidmah, the

development of spiritual tourism will expose more Islamic communities to tourism in general.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, Al Khidmah's spiritual tourism initiative is consistent with Picard's (2003) emphasis on the need to develop people-based tourism, to bring economic benefits to local communities.<sup>22</sup> Involving different communities in spiritual tourism not only promotes the participants' spiritual senses, but exposes them to a greater participatory space in tourism that satisfies their spirituality, and at the same time provides economic benefits. Starting at the grass roots level, as Al Khidmah is doing, will encourage authorities to pay attention to this new form of tourism, that is fast developing in Muslim communities in Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries.

Al Khidmah's spiritual-tourism program was developed by *Kyai* Hasanudin and his family when he was head of Al Khidmah. His wife, Ibu Endang, serves as the principal contact in Indonesia while his son, Dida, serves as the main tour-operator for participants in Singapore and Malaysia, where he is based. However, they are supported by other members who are part of the committee that operates this new form of tourism. Spiritual tourism is the idea of visiting holy places,

21 Hitchcock, Michael. 1995. "Inter-Ethnic Relations and Tourism in Bima, Sumbawa." *Sojourn* 10 (2): 233–58.

22 Picard, Michel. 2003. "Touristification and Balinization in a Time of Reformasi." *Indonesia and the Malay World* 31 (89): 108–18.

20 Discussion with *Kyai* Hasanudin, in Malacca, 2013.

including mosques and the graveyards of saints, *Kyai*, *Ulamas* and other religious leaders, as well as historical places and city centers for shopping, souvenir hunting and tasting different varieties of food from diverse cultures.

Visits to the graveyards of saints is a common practice in Sufi tradition. It is referred to as *Ziyarah*. In 2013 the researcher participated in spiritual tourism in Singapore, Malacca and *Pulau Besar* (Grand Island) in Malaysia. While the group was in Malacca, they visited many colonial places and museums, and cruised on the Malacca River. Also, they visited historical mosques and the graveyards of saints and *Ulama*. While in these holy places, the head of the group, a *Kyai*, who was delegating for *Kyai* Hasanudin, led the prayers and *Dhikrs*. In *Pulau Besar*, the group visited the graves of the saints buried there and members repeated the prayers and *Dhikrs* in unison.

Spiritually, from August 23rd to September 1st, 2013, *Kyai* Hasanudin and Al Khidmah embarked on what they called '*Haul Akbar Asia Tenggara*' (Grand Southeast Asia Haul) which started from Indonesia, then went to Kuala Lumpur and Malacca (in Malaysia), Singapore, and Petani (in Southern Thailand). The event included *Dhikrs*, prayers and *Ziyarah*. It was held alongside spiritual tourism. The researcher was invited to participate. He joined in all the rituals in Indonesia and Malaysia. However, when the

group was going to Thailand, he was asked to stay in Kuala Lumpur and wait until they returned. This was for security reasons, because of the political instability in Petani back then. The 'Southern East Asian Haul' continues every year and is held a week after the end of *Ramadan*.

Politically, although *Kyai* Hasanudin and Al Khidmah do not openly involve themselves in politics, politicians have lobbied them for their support, privately. There are many politicians who are members of the group. They take part in the rituals and contribute resources, the same as other members. Furthermore, in the context of group leadership, it is important to emphasize that *Kyai* Hasanudin's dynamic experience and adaptability to new ideas gives him vital support among the Al Khidmah followers, especially from the younger members, who are studying at various Islamic and secular university campuses in Indonesia, and other countries.<sup>23</sup> Throughout the fieldwork, participants always talked of his generosity and remarked that he is open and hard working. He sometimes leaves home for weeks, travelling around different parts of Indonesia and Southeast Asia to meet members and perform rituals with them. For example, in describing his moral values, the following paragraph is relevant, and is, therefore quoted. In it, he relates some details of his life

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Zaini, Achmad, 1998



experience:

*For the past nine years, I always go around leading rituals and prayers, for example, Solat Tasbih (Tasbih Prayers). During this time, I have travelled to Solo, Makassar, Batam, Jakarta, Bekasi, Garut and Kendal, in Indonesia, Kuala Lumpur and Johor in Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.*<sup>24</sup>

This extraordinary paragraph shows the extent of *Kyai* Hasanudin's efforts to fulfill his duties as the head of Al Khidmah, by reaching out to its members throughout Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. It confirms the transnational nature of the activities of his organization. In fact, *Kyai* Hasanudin did all this travelling during his last year as head of the organization, in 2014.

*Kyai* Hasanudin continued:

*While travelling I am always accompanied by a team of supporters. Among this group are mothers, young men, young widows. Among the group, some like travelling by car, but dislike flying, or travelling by ship. Others like shopping while on the journey. For some, their hobby is culinary.*<sup>25</sup>

*Kyai* Hasanudin's description shows the multiple interests of the followers on his journeys and ritual travels. Although the purpose of the team members is to help the *Kyai* perform his ritual obligations, the followers all have other objectives. Furthermore, the *Kyai*'s narrative gives an example of gender parity and the contributions of women, widows, and

young people, both at a national and transnational level. *Kyai* Hasanudin here (below) confirms the multiple interests that motivate people in this form of spiritual activity. He remembers:

*People accompany me on our journeys to get two things. The first, is to be able to travel in a group, enjoying the hospitality of many people, learning about the cultures of various countries. They can take photographs and create status on social media. Second, others want to get the blessing of the trip, as a way of registering success in this world, and the hereafter.*<sup>26</sup>

*Kyai* Hasanudin concludes by stating that:

*I can learn to understand the meaning of life through the national and international rituals. I believe that it is wise to travel with companions of various character.*<sup>27</sup>

### ***Pondok Pesantren Nurul Haromain: Using Slawatan, Dhikr for drug rehabilitation and de-radicalization.***

*Kyai* Sirojan Muniro is the head of *Pondok Pesantren Nurul Haromain*. In an interview with him, he said the following:

*I studied in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, under the guidance and teaching of Imam Abuuya Assayyid Muhammad Al Maliki, one of the famous scholars of Mecca.*<sup>28</sup>

The *Kyai* spent two years in Mecca with many other Indonesian students. He returned home to Yogyakarta at

<sup>24</sup> Information written by *Kyai* Hasanudin, in 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Information written by *Kyai* Hasanudin, in 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Information written by *Kyai* Hasanudin in 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Information written by *Kyai* Hasanudin in 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with *Kyai* Sirojan, 2013

the end of his studies because he wanted to start his own *Pesantren*. The Kyai started the project all by himself. Although, since it opened, the *Pesantren* has received donations from various individuals and the community, the *Pesantren* Nurul Haromain was officially launched in 1995, in Sentolo village, Kabupaten Kulon Progo, Yogyakarta. The presence of the *Pesantren* in the village is beneficial for the local community, because it contributes to the enhancement of interest in it, through the development of social capital.<sup>29</sup> The *Pesantren* has a *Santri* population of 610. Of this number, 500 are regular *Santri*, while 110 are in the rehabilitation program.<sup>30</sup> They are both boys and girls, men and women. There are tens of classrooms, a hall, a mosque and a permanent stage where the *Slawatan* and other activities are held.

One strength of the *Pesantren* is its combination of the traditional NU (*Nahdlatul Ulama*) *Pesantren* style and the formal educational system. The formal education includes SMK (Vocational High School). Students, after graduating from SMK, can enter the university of their choice, while at the same time continuing to study and reside in the *Pesantren*. The non-formal education follows a similar

structure. Furthermore, students are also *Santri*, which means they attend both schools. Throughout the participant observation there, there was always a *Dhikr* session after every daily prayer. The students have a regular *Slawatan* schedule and every year they hold a grand performance. It was to one of those performances that Habib Syech was invited in 2013. The performance roles are divided according to students' interests. They have their own set of *rabana* (drums) and other musical instruments.

Spiritually, like *Habib Syech*, *Kyai Sirojan* is well known for his preaching and creative style of *Slawatan*. His charismatic leadership appeals to the *Kyai* and *Santri* communities who are affiliated with the Al Khidmah and NU organizations. His study background, in Indonesia and Mecca, gives him the flexibility of translating the Qur'an from Arabic, to Javanese and Indonesian. During the field observation, the researcher accompanied him and his family to *Slawatan* performances around Java, including in Wates, Magelang, Wonosobo and the Karimun Jawa Islands. *Kyai Sirojan* is a member of Al Khidmah and is a regular participant in Al Khidmah's 'Haul Akbar ASEAN', as explained previously.

Interestingly, the *Pesantren* Nurul Haromain started a program to help reform drug addicts, ex-gangsters, and criminals. In an interview with *Kyai*

29 Permani, Risti. 2011. "The Presence of Religious Organizations, Religious Attendance and Earnings: Evidence from Indonesia." *Journal of Socio-Economics* 40 (3): 247–58.

30 Interviews with *Kyai Sirojan*, 2013 and 2018.

Slamet after a night we spent together in the Pesantren, he said the following:

*I was a preman before and have been involved in lots of criminal activities. Since I met Kyai Sirojan and other Kyai, they have helped me to turn around my life spiritually. I started attending Slawatan and Dhikrs, I pray and am respected by the Kyai and Santri communities.*<sup>31</sup>

According to De Jong and Twikromo (2017) *preman* refers to a gangster, or member of a vigilante group. Sometimes they are also associated with criminal and violent activities. They suggest that *preman* can either cause conflict, or keep the peace. They believe that some elites use the services of *preman* to secure their positions and businesses. Moreover, some *preman* are involved in political parties and organizations, as well as being given authority to manage parking lots.<sup>32</sup> Using *Slawatan* to reform drug addicts, criminals and *preman*, as in the case of *Kyai Slamet*, serves the interests of the community. Evidence from the interview with *Kyai Slamet* shows that he has reformed and is using *Slawatan* and *Dhikrs* to turn over a new page in his life. He has consequently been recognized as a *Kyai* in the community. During the field work the researcher visited his house and spent one night with his family. It was by the invitation of another *Kyai*, *Siraj*, who is the head

of the Al Khidmah branch in Jepara. While the interview was proceeding, *Kyai Slamet* opened his shirt and showed the researcher tattoos and scars on his body. This suggests he was showing evidence of his involvement in the underworld. *Kyai Slamet*'s story is supplementary evidence of the complex set of factors and multiple interests that motivate people to attend the ritual performance of *Slawatan*.

Furthermore, like other *Kyai* mentioned in this section, *Kyai Sirojan* is not openly involved in politics. However, he has been invited to the military barracks in Yogyakarta to hold a *Slawatan*, in 2014. During this performance it was observed that such an event was arranged to facilitate more dialogue between the military and the community. It was also a way of strengthening the military personnel's spirituality through *Slawatan*, *Dhikrs* and prayers.

Additionally, during the field work, the researcher joined *Kyai Sirojan* for a home visit to a political figure in Yogyakarta. This was during the presidential-election period in Indonesia, around July 2014. The aim of the meeting was *Silaturahmi* (greeting). Usually such meetings are friendly visits between the *Kyai* and the religious community. When the researcher and *Kyai Sirojan* arrived at the house they were given a warm welcome and taken to the lounge room where they met the host. A few minutes later other *Kyai*

31 Interview with *Kyai Slamet*, 2013.

32 De Jong, E., and Twikromo, A. 2017. "Friction within harmony: Everyday dynamics and the negotiation of diversity in Yogyakarta, Indonesia." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 48 (1), 71–90.

arrived to join them. At the meeting it was obvious that the object of the discussion was to gain support from the *Kyai*. In doing this, politicians can help mobilize support from the *Santri* to vote for a certain candidate during the election. They promised some resources and material benefits, if the *Kyai* could help to do that. Later, while going home, the researcher asked *Kyai* Sirojan his opinion of the issue they discussed. The researcher remembers the following:

*As religious leaders they are expected to be neutral in politics. I have around 610 Santri in my Pesantren; some have already declared their support for one of the candidates, so I cannot force them to change their choice. However, the least I can do is to ask half of the Santri to support one candidate and the other half to support the other.*<sup>33</sup>

It is common during the pre-election period that politicians lobby the *Habibs*, *Kyai*, *Ulama*, *Santri* and others in the *Pesantren*. This was evident in the analysis of a home visit with *Kyai* Sirojan to a politician's home in 2014. Having the support of the *Habibs*, *Kyai*, and *Ulama* is important because they have a large group of followers who have the potential to influence election results. However, the *Kyai* always have reservations about becoming openly involved. They believe this will jeopardize their neutrality, which in turn can have a negative impact on their credibility in the community.

In summary, it is important to note that *Kyai* Sirojan's study background gave him an open attitude to innovation in education, both in the formal and non-formal systems. In doing this he enhances the quality of student and *Santri* education. His close contact with the *Kyai* communities in Indonesia, and *Ulama* and counterparts outside Indonesia, provide him with a strong network of colleagues, who have supported his struggle to provide a quality education, while at the same time, intervene to solve societal problems, such as issues relating to preman, drug addiction, and violent crime.<sup>34</sup> This incentivizes him to recruit those members of society affected by such problems. Now, the *Pesantren* has attracted many students and *Santri*, who are ex-preman, drug addicts, and those with anti-social behaviors. By using *Slawatan*, *Dhikr* and prayers, these people have successfully been rehabilitated. Although the *Pesantren* has challenges, such as funding, they have continued to recruit more students and *Santri* every year.

### **Majelis Al Ukhuwwah and the expansion of Slawatan in universities**

Sholeh Ilham is one of *Habib* Syech's vocalists and was a key member of Ahabul Musthofa Kudus in central Java, before moving to Yogyakarta.

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<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Zaini, Achmad. 1998. "Kyai Haji Abdul Wahid Hasyim: His Contribution to Muslim Educational Reform and Indonesian Nationalism during the Twentieth Century." McGill University.

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<sup>33</sup> Discussion with *Kyai* Sirojan, 2014.

Ilham was born in Kudus and received both formal and non-formal education in his home town. In 2004 Ilham moved to Yogyakarta to attend university at Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kaligaga (Yogyakarta Islamic State University Sunan Kaligaga). While undergoing his studies, Ilham formed an alliance with other university students, rehearsing and performing *Slawatan* on, and off, campus. His mesmeric voice and language skills are key strengths in his ritual performance of *Slawatan*. He has mastered all of Habib Syech's *Slawatan* songs in: Arabic, Javanese and Indonesian. Participants say they like listening to him.

His popularity among the younger generation of *Slawatan* followers in universities and *Pesantren* around Yogyakarta contributes to the motivational factor, attracting these youths to the ritual performance. In this sense he serves as a symbolic representation of the ritual, and the participants give him legitimate authority, by supporting his performances. In a discussion with Zainal Abidin, a key participant in this study, he remarked:

*Ilham is a gifted man and his skills are a barakah (blessing).*<sup>35</sup>

While still at university, Ilham continued to work with Habib Syech and Ahabul Musthofa. He travelled with Habib Syech, serving as one of his main vocalists throughout Indonesia and

abroad. Ilham finished his university degree in 2011, and graduated with a Bachelor of Islamic Theology. He wrote his thesis on the topic: "*Kajian Terhadap Tradisi Shalawat Jam'iyah Ahabul Al Mustafa Kabupaten Kudus*" (The study of the tradition of *Slawatan* Ahabul Al Mustafa group in Kudus province).<sup>36</sup> His thesis is a key reference of this study.

After his graduation Ilham continued to work with *Habib* Syech, while at the same time building his own group. In 2014, Ilham and his colleagues formally launched the *Majelis* Al Ukhuwwah. However, Ilham said the idea of the group was conceived after 2011.<sup>37</sup> During the launch Ilham sent an invitation to Zainal Abidin, who invited the researcher to join him. At the launch, the researcher observed that many of the participants were from Ilham's former Islamic State University and *Pesantren* in Yogyakarta. They were motivated and willing to take this form of Neo-Sufism into their academic and daily lives, through the collective responsibility of group members. They see Ilham as a source of inspiration.<sup>38</sup>

After the performance the researcher had a discussion with Ilham and he was very excited because then he could launch his own group of *Slawatan*. Since then Ilham has

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Ilham, 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Ilham, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Kahf, Monzer & Samira, Al Yafai. 2015. "Social Security and *Zakāh* in Theory and Practice." *International Journal of Economics, Management and Accounting* 23 (2): 189–215.

<sup>35</sup> Discussion with Zainal Abidin, 2014.

continued to attract more followers. Aside from university students, many *Kyai*, *Ulamas*, and devotees of *Slawatan* attend his performances. Now, Ilham and Majelis Al Ukhuwwah have hundreds of followers, from diverse professions and communities. Hefner (2014) argues that these types of groups and actions are part of the religious practices and ethics that are flourishing in the Muslim world.<sup>39</sup> In fact, at the launching alone, in 2014, there were around one thousand five hundred people.<sup>40</sup> The group also have hundreds of followers on social media. They use 'virtual space' to promote the spirit of *Slawatan* in their supporters. The group's social-media connection provides 'virtual' social capital and serves as an alternative source of information for their members.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, Nisa (2018) argues that the use of social media serves as an effective *Dakwah* communication channel, that turns their enthusiasm into collective action.<sup>42</sup>

As a young Javanese man, with a religious-studies background and great personal appeal, Ilham has advantages in expanding the interest in *Slawatan* performance in Java. Also, it is advantageous for him, because some

of his followers are from other parts of Indonesia, outside Java, who, when they finish their studies, will likely return to their respective hometowns, and take Ilham's name with them. In this regard, his popularity will reach those areas, and his skillful performance will continue to attract more participants to the ritual of *Slawatan*. Furthermore, their connection helps nurture a fertile ground for collective action, which helps in mobilizing resources for the group.<sup>43</sup> Ilham's launch of *Majelis Al Ukhuwwah*, whose followers see Habib Syech as a role model, is more evidence of the complex factors and multiple interests that motivate people's interest in the ritual of *Slawatan*.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has discussed the use Neo-Sufism practice and the ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan* to promote religious tolerance, through the teaching of peaceful and social solidarity by four religious organizations and their leaders. The data analyses show that *Slawatan* is a common practice in Sufism and Neo-Sufism. Evidence demonstrates that early Sufism promoted interreligious tolerance and harmony, and co-existed with other religions, such as Hinduism, in Indonesia. However, the study shows that religious leaders, like *Habib Syech*, *Kyai Hasanudin* and *Kyai Sirojan*,

39 Hefner, Robert W. 2014. "Modern Muslims and the Challenge of Plurality." *Soc* 51: 131–39.

40 Interview with Ilham, 2018.

41 Parnini, S.N., Othman, M.R. and Saifude, A. 2014. "The Dynamics of Social Capital and Recent Political Development in Malaysia." *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 15 (3): 443–64.

42 Nisa, Eva, 2018, pp. 24-43.

43 Shaykhutdinov, Renat and Dilshod, Achilov. 2014. "Islam, Islamism, and Collective Action in Central Asia." *Trames* 18 (4): 383–405.

together with their organizations have encouraged the development of socio-economic activities that have provided an alternative to the rising tide of religious conservatism in Indonesia. The data indicate that the *Slawatan* ritual and Neo-Sufism practice have the potential to assist in the de-radicalisation and rehabilitation of religious extremists, as is evident in

the work conducted by *Pesantren* Nur Hormain. The discussion confirms that Ahabul Musthofa's, Al Khidmah's, *Pesantren* Nurul Haromain's and Al Ukhuwwah's peaceful approach to spiritual practice have promoted social, political and educational activities among diverse communities in Central Java and outside Indonesia.[]

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