



Authority of a Female Cleric in the Educational Sphere (A Study of Nyai Khairiyah Hasyim's Leadership)

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Abstract

This research project aims to explore the relationship between piety, initiative, and the process of self-empowerment in a female cleric, drawing on Saba Mahmood's theory of piety. The empirical evidence is based on ethnographic research into the transformation of Nyai Khairiyah Hasyim's religious authority. This article presents two key propositions. First, it analyzes the transformation of Nyai Khairiyah Hasyim, who promoted Islamic boarding school education and became the first female school instructor in the city of Makkah. Second, it examines how her contributions and fatwas have brought about significant shifts in the perception of women in public spaces within a male-dominated society. By reflecting on her personal experiences and efforts as a woman and cleric rooted in Islamic boarding school traditions, she has demonstrated a depth of knowledge and insight that challenges the notion of formal diplomas. Her fatwa products include allowing female students to wear hijabs during marching activities, innovating the rubu' hijab model, and advocating for the family planning (KB) program.

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki hubungan antara kesalehan dengan inisiatif dan realisasi pemberdayaan diri seorang ulama perempuan dengan menggunakan teori kesalehan Saba Mahmud. Didasarkan secara empiris pada penelitian etnografi terhadap transformasi otoritas keagamaan Nyai Khairiyah Hasyim. Fokus artikel ini merumuskan dua hal. Pertama, menganalisis transformasi nyai Khairiyah Hasyim sebagai promotor pendidikan pesantren dan *muasis* sekolah perempuan pertama di kota Makkah. Kedua, kontribusi dan fatwanya memberikan perubahan yang signifikan terhadap cara pandang perempuan di ruang publik oleh masyarakat yang di dominasi laki-laki. Dengan merefleksikan pengalaman dan usaha pribadinya sebagai perempuan dan ulama yang berakar pada tradisi pesantren, membuat sosoknya digambarkan

sebagai besar dan terpelajar meski tanpa memiliki gelar akademik. Produk fatwa yang dibuat yaitu: kebolehan santri perempuan menggunakan celana saat kegiatan baris-berbaris, inovasi model hijab *rubu'* dan program keluarga berencana (KB).

Pendahuluan

The authority of a female cleric as a leader within the boarding school (*pesantren*) context demonstrates that a woman is capable of leading and managing an institution that, for centuries, has been dominated by male leadership and management. In this new era, Islamic scholarship is emerging, giving women the opportunity to hold religious authority and begin speaking on behalf of Islam (Kloos, 2016). This article will explore how Muslim women become empowered through piety. This piety fosters a woman's awareness as an autonomous subject, possessing freedom, seeking self-actualization, and desiring equality with men, leading to social change in society (Razak & Mundzir, 2019, p. 399). However, various societal and cultural clashes continue to create biases, suggesting that women's authority defies traditional, social, cultural, and structural norms (Supriani et al., 2022, p. 905). This has led to the increasing doubt about women's competence, their aspirations being unheard, and their mobility being confined to the domestic sphere. Such phenomena are certainly contrary to the reciprocal relationships found in the teachings of the Qur'an, specifically in Surah an-Nahl verse 97, which emphasizes the concept of equality. In relation to the role of women in the world of Islamic boarding schools, studies show that the history of women's involvement began as early as the 19th century, through their roles as students and teachers. However, the reality is that the polemic within the Muslim community still positions women as the "second sex." It is therefore not surprising that the authority of female leadership, in relation to history, continues to reflect the position of women in the context of patriarchal development and existence, experiencing ongoing progress and debate from the post-colonial period to the present day.

Given the limited literature on the role of female scholars in historical texts, not only in Indonesia but in other Muslim regions as well, it requires extra effort to prove that women deserve recognition for their equal roles with men in shaping the nation's future. Although there has been progress in the study of women and gender, the focus on the social and intellectual history of female scholars remains

scarce. This is evidenced by the lack of publications, records, or data gathering historical testimonies about the numerous female scholars and their contributions to academia, humanitarianism, and the founding of educational institutions (Burhanudin, 2002). Initial assumptions held by many researchers and scholars serve as proof that women are not considered significant in religious scholarship or even in the intellectual world in general. It is therefore unsurprising that the term *ulama* has become narrowly defined, with recognition limited primarily to men. Consequently, the concept of *ulama* has become associated with male figures, perceived to have political, sociological, and cultural influence over the historical dynamics of Indonesian and other societies. Culturally, it is acknowledged that, in the post-colonial era, women lacked power in the educational sector, compared to the opportunities available to men. Equality of opportunity and access to education, both in terms of type, level, and pathways, especially formal education, has quantitatively favored men (Qodriyah, 2003, p. 74).

The above reality contrasts with historical evidence found in the book *Al-Ishabah fi Tamyiz ash-Sahabah*, written by Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, which mentions that women also contributed to the narration of hadith, with as many as five hundred narrations. Moreover, the names of female hadith scholars have been recorded by numerous scholars, such as Imam Abu Zakariya Muhyiddin bin Sharaf al-Nawawi al-Dimashqi, Khalid al-Baghdadi, Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Saad, as well as Imam al-Sakhawi and Imam al-Dhahabi (Husein, 2020, p. 36). This historical fact challenges the assumption held by many that women's intellect, intellectual capacity, and morality are inferior. The oppression and injustice faced by women in the past have persisted into contemporary times. Frequently, perpetrators have justified their actions using Qur'anic verses and hadith to legitimize their oppression. Consequently, a historical reality has emerged, showing that the interpretation of sacred Islamic texts has been dominated by men since the classical period, reflecting both discrimination and patriarchal culture (Husein, 2020, p. 21) .

Based on previous studies, research on female scholars has been extensively conducted by various scholars, which the author categorizes into three groups: *First*, studies focusing on the socio-intellectual movements within boarding schools (*pesantren*) (Muzayanah, 2020). *Second*, research conducted by Syafitri Hayati and her colleagues, focusing on female scholars who synergistically fought for madrasa education and women's organizations in the fields of religion, society, and economics, as a way of elevating women's status during that time (Hsb & Hambali, 2023). *Third*,

studies highlighting the significant role of *Nyai* (female religious leaders), who have greatly contributed to instilling the roots of Islamic scholarship in their students (Liriwati & Anwar, 2022). However, these studies have not specifically explored the authority of *Nyai* as religious scholars or the fatwas of Khairiyah Hasyim, apart from discussions of genealogy, leadership, and relevance to the educational field.

Therefore, this article aims to explore the relationship between piety, innovation, and the contributions of a female scholar, Khairiyah Hasyim, in building a responsive and empowered Islamic historiography in Jombang, East Java. This study uses Saba Mahmood's theory of piety, which highlights how a woman can become a subject within the Islamic revival of a particular community. This research is the result of ethnographic study on Khairiyah Hasyim's role in empowering women through Islamic education in the boarding schools (*pesantren*) of the Jombang region. Khairiyah's piety, resilience, and creativity in building her religious authority and developing Pesantren Seblak in Jombang, along with her distinctive fatwas, have left a lasting legacy in the form of religious texts and laws that remain relevant for further study and the management of other madrasa systems. The ethnographic approach assumes that knowledge from all cultures has high value, making it important for the author to capture the social situation and explain the regularity of various social behaviors through natural processes (enculturative) (Spradley, 2016, p. 62). This perspective will be applied in the author's examination and exploration of the complete information surrounding Khairiyah Hasyim.

Discussion

Genealogy of Nyai Khoiriyah Hasyim

Khairiyah Hasyim, also popularly known as Nyai Khairiyah, is a female cleric who made outstanding contributions in Indonesia (Muzayanah, 2020). She was born in Tebuireng, Jombang in 1906 CE as the second daughter of K.H. Hasyim Asy'ari and Nyai Nafiqah. Her lineage is believed to be connected to King Brawijaya of the 16th century (Misrawi, 2010). Her early education began with studying the Qur'an, followed by classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*) such as *fiqh*, *nahwu*, *sharf*, and *tafseer* using the classical method (*talaqi*), all of which she learned from her parents. During her childhood, Khairiyah never attended formal education. Although formal Dutch schools for girls were available at the time, they were limited to upper-class indigenous families with aristocratic backgrounds (Zainu'ddin,

1970). Despite her family's ability to access Dutch education, it was known that for the world of boarding schools (*pesantren*) and the students, such education was unpopular and even fostered antipathy toward the Dutch colonialists. As a result, from its early days, Tebuireng Pesantren prioritized religious education. Secular teachings associated with colonialism were considered forbidden at the time (Huda dkk., 2021). In addition to the resistance to secular education, the use of benches and blackboards in teaching was also prohibited, as there was no boarding school model that adopted formal methods or subjects during that era. Therefore, if a cleric had a daughter at that time, teaching her at home was an initiative to prepare the next generation (*Zamakhsyari Dhofier, Tradisi Pesantren, Studi Tentang Pandangan Hidup Kyai - Persée*, 1982).

However, this rule did not apply to Khairiyah's brothers, Wahid Hasyim and Yusuf Hasyim, who were free to pursue formal and non-formal education. Stereotypes that confined women to being merely housewives (*konco wingking*) were still widely accepted in society, limiting women's access to education. This did not, however, prevent Khairiyah from acquiring knowledge. As the daughter of a prominent cleric (*ning*), she had the privilege of eavesdropping on the religious lectures and discussions (*halaqah*) held in the *pesantren*, led by her father, from behind a curtain (Srimulyani, 2012). Her curiosity, coupled with her religious environment, helped her become a highly influential woman known for her mastery of religious knowledge.

As a member of a prominent clerical family, Khairiyah was expected to follow the tradition of endogamous marriage, which took place early when she was just nine years old. She was married to Kiai Ma'shum Ali, a beloved student of her father, from the famous boarding school family of Pesantren Maskumambang. Together, they had seven children, all of whom unfortunately died in childhood. In 1919, Khairiyah and her husband founded a boarding school in Seblak (Jombang, East Java) under her father's orders. Sadly, Kiai Ma'shum passed away in 1933 at the age of 46 (Ulum, 2021).

After her husband's death, a marriage proposal came from Kiai Muhaimin al-Lasemi in Mecca, which was facilitated through her uncle, Kiai Bisri Sansuri. Following the marriage, Khairiyah and her brother Abdul Karim Hasyim traveled to Mecca to live with Kiai Muhaimin, who was the director of Darul Ulum educational institution in Mecca (*ibid*). However, their financial situation deteriorated due to the political climate in Indonesia after independence. In response, Khairiyah established

a home industry producing sarongs, which became popular not only in Saudi Arabia but also in Yemen. This entrepreneurial venture highlighted her resilience and economic independence *al-igtishodi*. Despite her household responsibilities and her participation in religious studies (*halaqah*), Khairiyah thrived. She was also the founder of the first school for girls (*madrasatun lil banat*) in Mecca, under the auspices of Darul Ulum, which she managed with her husband. Unfortunately, Kiai Muhaimin passed away in 1956, after which Khairiyah returned to Indonesia, where she lived until her death. From this marriage, she had three children, all of whom also passed away in childhood (Muzayanah, 2020).

Educational Management

Historical records show that female religious leaders have played important roles since the time of the Prophet. Women held strategic positions during key events, such as the revelation process, on the frontlines of battle (providing medical care and food), narrating hadith, and serving as *fuqaha* (jurisprudence experts) consulted by male companions in legal matters (Husein, 2020). This role of women in knowledge transmission is evident in the writings of male scholars, who documented the biographies and contributions of around 22 female religious leaders. For instance, Jalaludin al-Suyuti noted that some companions relied on female companions as the highest authority in hadith transmission. Unfortunately, documentation of female religious scholars in Islamic history remains scarce due to limited data and the patriarchal culture that minimized the representation of women in historical texts (Mulia, 2021).

One such underrecognized figure is Khairiyah, who made substantial contributions by becoming the first woman to establish (*muasis*) a school for girls in Mecca, Madrasah al-Ula lil Banat, in 1942. The purpose of this school was to provide Islamic education for girls in Mecca, a city that had no dedicated educational facilities for females at the time. The patriarchal attitudes in Saudi Arabia, which persist today, often led to concerns that educated women would defy their natural roles. This perspective was reinforced by religious edicts, such as one from Sheikh Abd. Aziz bin Bazz, who claimed that women working in public sectors risked committing acts that could lead to immorality. Such religious opinions further marginalized women. Thus, there is a need to address and combat discrimination against women's rights in the Arab world (Mu'ammam & Wahid Hasan, 2017).

Another factor contributing to the repression of women in countries like Saudi Arabia is the perception of women as “queens in cages,” where they possess authority but only within the confines of their domestic spaces. However, since the establishment of Khairiyah’s school, attitudes toward female education began to shift, and families started enrolling their daughters in this madrasa, trusting the teaching system developed by the Indonesian religious leader (Srimulyani, 2012).

Khairiyah’s fight for women’s education did not end in Mecca. Upon her return to Indonesia at President Soekarno’s request in 1957, she dedicated her life to teaching and empowering other women. She resumed her leadership role in the religious sphere and revitalized the pesantren education system she managed. Under her leadership, she not only taught female students but also managed male teachers and students. Khairiyah’s leadership marked a new era for women in pesantren leadership in the early 20th century (Srimulyani, 2012). She successfully integrated formal and non-formal education systems by adhering to the principle *al-mukhâfadh alâ qadîm al-shâlih wa al-akhdu bi al-jadîd al-ashlâh* (maintaining good traditions while adopting positive new developments). She expanded the educational branches of the pesantren by establishing various institutions, including Madrasatul Qur’an Lil Banat, Madrasah Diniyah al-Khoiriyah, Madrasah Tsanawiyah, Madrasah Aliyah, a kindergarten, an orphanage (Yatim al-Khoiriyah), and a vocational high school (SMK). She also advanced non-formal education, such as Qur’an recitations, sermons, *qira’ah* reading groups, arbitration councils, discussions, and Friday night gatherings. Additionally, she promoted critical thinking among her students through newspaper reading, *bahtsul masail* (problem-solving in Islamic jurisprudence), and building a library (Ulum, 2021). This shows that a female religious leader with numerous students can have her leadership widely recognized. This achievement is particularly remarkable given that the pesantren operated in a traditional Muslim society deeply rooted in patriarchal and conservative norms (Razak & Mundzir, 2019, p. 340).

Fatwa

Since the early 20th century to the present, many female scholars have emerged on the historical stage in various parts of the Muslim world. Their knowledge in the field of Islam is profound and has developed in accordance with the demands of the times (Samsu et al., 2021). During the early years of independence, the dynamics of thought and the role of scholars in the realm of Islamic legal reform in Indonesia

became strategic in supporting government principles and programs. One of the ways this was expressed was through fatwas that called for new laws relevant to the context of that era. The term fatwa itself refers to a type of Islamic legal thought (Mudzhar, 1998, p. 127). A fatwa means an answer to a question or “the result of *ijtihad*” or a legal determination (Muin et al., 1986, p. 172). It is a legal determination regarding a particular issue or event stated by a mujtahid as the result of their *ijtihad* (Muhammad, 2016, p. 151). The dynamic and responsive nature of fatwas played a significant role in the active participation of Nyai Khairiyah when she was asked about difficult issues (*musykil*) at that time.

Khairiyah was often noted to receive invitations from the ranks of PBNU, Fatayat, and Muslimat, even becoming a *musahih* at *Bahtsul Masail* events. At that time, the topic discussed was the legal status of women wearing trousers for marching activities. In response to this issue, Nyai Khairiyah permitted it, supported by arguments that *sahabiyah* (female companions of the Prophet Muhammad), such as Aisha, Umm Aiman, and Umm Umarah, participated in battles and thus were involved in marching and wielding weapons, which required clothing that allowed for ease of movement. If women wear trousers according to Islamic guidelines, it facilitates their movement. It is known that trousers cover the aurat more completely (*kamil*) compared to the *jarik* (the cloth traditionally worn by women), which can easily become open and hinder movement. This demonstrates that Khairiyah’s fatwa was not rigid and was able to contextualize narrative texts according to the needs of the times and public welfare. However, Khairiyah’s fatwa allowing trousers was in contrast to the opinions of male scholars who were more conservative and lacked reasoning in forbidding them. Even though Khairiyah’s fatwa was opposed by Kiai Bisri Syansuri, it remained accepted: the use of trousers is permissible, provided they are long and cover the aurat in accordance with Islamic law (Ulum, 2021).

Another notable issue addressed by Khairiyah’s fatwas was the innovation of the Rubu’ hijab, which she initiated and is still relevant today. At that time, the application of hijabs among women and students was merely to cover the hair and show the neck. However, due to Khairiyah’s innovation, she introduced a new model of hijab, the Rubu’ hijab, intended to cover the neck and chest. This hijab was first introduced in Jombang in 1964 during the commemoration of the founding of Nahdlatul Ulama (Srimulyani, 2012). The history of this innovative hijab model is something that many Muslims in Indonesia are likely unaware of.

In addition to discussions about women's clothing, another fatwa produced by Nyai Khairiyah addressed the legal issues surrounding family planning programs initiated by the government to curb birth rates. Differences of opinion among scholars were inevitable. In this regard, Nyai Khairiyah stated that family planning programs are permissible if the reason (*illat*) is to facilitate the education of offspring. However, if it is solely due to the fear of poverty caused by having many children, then family planning is not permitted. This refers to the verse in QS. Al-An'am;151: "Do not kill your children for fear of poverty; We provide for them and for you." This opinion was later used by members of the BKKBN, specifically KH. Nasaruddin Latif, as the basis for the comprehensive implementation of family planning programs in Indonesia (Ulum, 2021).

Conclusion

Nyai Khairiyah is recognized as an idealistic figure, a scholar, and a leader who is rarely known as a fighter engaged in education and social-religious issues. Through her piety, she became an essential asset for a woman to be an active, empowered female scholar with a gender awareness. Her contributions in a male-dominated public sphere did not diminish her knowledge. Nyai Khairiyah serves as a concrete example of a woman born and raised in a conservative and traditional society, emerging as a hero of Islamic education whose authority is widely recognized, even without an academic title. The fatwas she produced demonstrate that women can contribute to the formulation of legal products and serve as *imadul bilad* (pillars of development). Referring to the Arabic verse that states, *fakaifa nadzunnu bil ab'nai khoiran idza nasyau bil hitmil jahilat* (How can we expect our children to be well-educated if they are raised by uneducated mothers?!).

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