



## Nyai Dadah : The Elasticity of Gender Roles and Life History of Pesantren Woman Leader

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Permalink/DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15294/komunitas.v7i1.3602>

Received : January 2015; Accepted: February 2015; Published: March 2015

### Abstract

*This article discusses the life of Nyai Dadah, a woman leader of a pesantren (Islamic boarding school) in Central Java, Indonesia, through life history method, to shed light upon the gender elasticity in the pesantren and her struggle to promote girl education in Indonesia. Nyai Dadah is the eldest daughter of Kiai Zubaidi, the founder of pesantren 'Al Asror'. After her father had passed away, she continued the struggle of her father managing the pesantren. His younger brother was still in religious training, and when he completed the study she passed the leadership to him and then created a pesantren for girls. The study revealed that the pesantren had strategies to promote girl education and did not close itself from the rise of women's leadership. Nyai Dadah with her capabilities was able to manage the pesantren for girls. Nyai Dadah played the roles either as a 'Nyai' in the pesantren or a housewife, and religious leader in her village.*

### Abstrak

Menggunakan metode *life history*, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkapkan secara detail ketokohan seorang figur perempuan atau pemimpin pesantren di Semarang, yang disebut sebagai nyai. *Life history* nyai digunakan untuk menyampaikan perjuangan dan peran beliau di pesantren dan masyarakat. Nyai yang dikaji dalam penelitian ini adalah Nyai Dadah, anak perempuan tertua dari Kiai Zubaidi, pendiri Pesantren Al Asror, yang sekarang menjadi nyai di Pesantren Putri Huffadhul Quran Al Asror sejak tahun 2002 hingga sekarang. Studi ini berdasarkan pada konsep *life history* dan teori negosiasi gender. Penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pesantren tidak selalu menutup dirinya terhadap munculnya kepemimpinan perempuan. Nyai Dadah dengan kemampuannya, mampu mendirikan dan mengelola pesantren putri. Nyai Dadah menjalankan perannya baik sebagai seorang nyai di pesantren atau seorang ibu rumah tangga. Nyai Dadah juga berkontribusi di dalam masyarakat dengan menjadi penasehat Fatayat NU cabang Patemon dan memprakarsai ngaji selapanan sejak sepuluh tahun yang lalu sampai sekarang.

**Keywords:** life history; nyai; woman leader; pesantren

**How to Cite:** Chusniyah, S. & Alimi, M. Y. 2015. Nyai Dadah : The Elasticity of Gender Roles and Life History of Pesantren Woman Leader. *Jurnal Komunitas*, 7 (1): 112-117 doi: 10.15294/komunitas.v7i1.3602

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## INTRODUCTION

*Pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) is one institution that historically has been around in Indonesia. The education of *pesantren* becomes the choice for the people of Indonesia because most of them are Muslim. *Pesantren* is regarded as education that emphasizes on character and morality education. The development of *pesantren* in Indonesia until now has brought up modern *pesantren* with more various education styles. However, although a large number of *pesantren* have emerged, there are still some traditional *pesantren* in several areas in Indonesia.

A *pesantren* is socio-historically seen as the oldest Islamic educational institution in Indonesia that was established by the Islamic scholars. *Pesantren* is established in order to educate people to understand and implement the teachings of Islam, which emphasizes the importance of religious morality as a life guide. The oldest, in this sense, means that *pesantren* is an institution that has long lived since hundreds of years ago, has even become the deepest part of the life system of most of the Muslims in Indonesia and varied the dynamics of Indonesia (Faiqoh, 2003: 139).

The term *pesantren* according to Wahid (in Faiqoh, 2003: 143) is an educational institution of Islamic religio-traditional that has historical roots not only in Indonesia but also in Southeast Asia although the terminology varies, in Aceh for example, *pesantren* is commonly referred to as *rang-kang* or *dayah*, in Java and Madura is termed *pondok pesantren*, whereas in Malaysia, the Southern Philippines and Southern Muangthai is commonly referred to *pondok*. In line with the opinion of Wahid, Dhofier (in 2013: Arifin, 25) says that in the Indonesian culture, there are various terms used to describe the traditional Islamic system of education or *pesantren*. In Java, it is usually referred to as *pesantren*, *pondok* or *pondok pesantren*.

*Pesantren* has sections that have become a trademark. *Pesantren* is usually set in a vast environment that consists of a house/s of *Kiai* or *Nyai* (the elders), a mosque/s, and a boarding school building/s. Dhofier (in

Arifin 2013: 28) states "... some basic elements that must be available in any *pesantren* are *pondok* (dormitory), *mosque*, *kitab kuning teaching*, *santris* and the *Kiai*".

In *pesantren*, *Kiai* has charisma as a leader because of the knowledge and the religion science. *Nyai* (the wife of the *Kiai*) who also leads the girl *pesantren* is a social figure that has very strong faith as a Muslim and is also respected. However, there is still a presumption in the wider community that the success of the *Nyai* in leading *pesantren* is due to the influence and role of the *Kiai* as her husband, so that the existence of *Nyai* as a leader of the *pesantren* is because of her husband, not because of her ability. So, women cannot exist because of its ability but still linked by something else which in this case is her husband who is the *Kiai* in the *pesantren* (Faiqoh, 2003: 34).

Talking about girl *pesantren* does not escape from the studies that have been done by Faiqoh (2003) and Srimulyani (2012). Both give a history of the first daughter of a *pesantren* founded in the era of the 90's. Faiqoh (2003) studied in girl *pesantren* in the area of Kajen and Pati, Central Java while Srimulyani (2012) was doing a fieldwork in East Java, specifically in Kwaron, Diwek.

In a review of history, the embryo of a girl *pesantren* was pioneered by *Nyai Nafisah Sahal Mahfudh* who established *pesantren* 'Al Badi'iyah' (Faiqoh, 2003: 177). In her study about *Nyai* as a figure who is able to make changes in the world of *pesantren*, Faiqoh (2003) explains that after *Nyai Nafisah* had established 'Al Badi'iyah', many girl *pesantrens* appeared. Based on the data of the number of the *pesantren* in Kajen and Pati presented by Faiqoh (2003), there are 27 *pesantrens* and are rendered with eight special *pesantren* for girls, i.e. *Pesantren* 'Masyitoh', *Pesantren* 'Manbatul Ulum' for girls, *Pesantren* 'Roudhotul Ulum' for girls, *Majlis Ta'lim* 'Al Hikmah', *Pesantren* Manbaul Huda for girls, Dormitory 'Kauman' for girls and *Pesantren* 'Salafiyah' for girls. Of the twenty-seven *pesantrens*, only two *pesantrens* revealed to be taken care by the *Nyai*, whereas in fact there are other *Nyais* that are not referred to as the *Nyai*. Their husbands

are stated as the leader of the girl *pesantrens* instead.

In Central Java, the first *pesantren* for girls was established by *Nyai Nafisah* while in East Java it was pioneered by *Nyai Nurk-hodijah*. Srimulyani (2012: 74) reveals that the first *pesantren* for girls in Jombang is *Pesantren 'Denanyar'*, and it is also the first *pesantren* for girls in the community of NU. Initially, in 1917, *Kiai Bisri Syansury* only prepared a *pesantren* only for male students. In 1919, due to the efforts of *Nyai Khodijah* in inviting local women, the *pesantren* began to incur some neighbor girls who came to the *pesantren* and studied formally at the rear terrace of the residence of *Kiai Bisri*.

A lot of *pesantrens* in Indonesia were founded by a *Kiai*. *Pesantren 'Tebuireng'* in Jombang, East Java was established by *Kiai Hasyim Asy'ari*, *Pesantren 'Lirboyo'*, Jawa Timur was founded by *Kiai Abdul Karim*, *Pesantren 'Al Falah'*, Ploso, Kediri, was founded by *Kiai Khamim Jazuli*, *Pesantren 'Darul Lughoh Wa Da'wah'* in Bangil, Madura was founded by *Habib Hasan Baharun*. In Central Java, there are several prominent *pesantrens* such as *Pesantren 'Al-Anwar'*, Sarang, founded by *Kiai Maimun Zubair*, *Pesantren 'Roudhotut Tolibin'* in Rembang is now taken care by *Gus Mus*, originally founded by *Kiai Bisri Mustofa*, father of *Gus Mus*, *Pesantren 'Darus Salam'*, Jatibarang, Brebes, founded by *Kiai Sholeh Basalamah*. Many *pesantrens* in Java and outside Java Island were founded by a *Kiai*.

In Gunung Pati, one of the sub districts in Semarang, specifically at the campus of the State University of Semarang, there are also a number of *pesantrens*, *Pesantren 'Aswaja'* founded by *Kiai Masrohan*, *Pesantren 'Al Salafi Asror'* founded by *Kiai Zubaidi*, and the others like 'Al Uswah' and 'SGJB' (Sunan Gunung Jati Ba'alawi) are taken care by a *Kiai*. The researchers found a *pesantren* for girls located in the area of State University of Semarang run and founded by a *Nyai*, *Pondok Pesantren* for girls 'Huffadhul Quran Al Asror' (PP. HQ. Al Asror). This is where the researchers felt interested in doing an ethnographic study of life history to know the phenomenon of *pesantren* founded by

a *Nyai*, an uncommon phenomenon according to the researchers.

The interest of the researchers is in conjunction with what is expressed by Srimulyani (2012) which examines the three influential *Nyais* in Jombang, East Java. Many works have done to investigate *pesantren* and other traditional Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia. Such works have tested *pesantren* tradition, leadership, transmission and intellectual of their organization with Nahdlatul Ulama and other related topics. After reading many of these studies and the study of the Qur'an which was published, I feel that it looks reasonable to conclude that women have got less attention. In all studies of *pesantren*, *Kiai* often becomes the main subject. Until 2002, the time where Srimulyani did a fieldwork on women and *pesantren* produced a bit of good scientific studies whether in English or in Bahasa that specifically deal with the topic of women and *pesantren* particularly toward the leadership and the representation of the girl *pesantren*.

## METHODS

This paper is based on an ethnographic research I did in *Pondok Pesantren* for girls 'Huffadhul Quran Al Asror' during January to March 2015. I used the life history method to obtain a picture of how gender roles are negotiable by a *Nyai* in a *pesantren*. In this ethnographic research, I really took advantage of voice recorder, one of the features in a cell phone to record all the ethnographic interviews that I did. In addition, I also wrote field notes to facilitate the composition of the research report.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Life history is a long and detailed note on the life history of the subject. Life history views all journey of life are precious and have a meaning (Salim, 2009). Individual can learn something valuable from the his/her own self experience in the past as well as from other people's experience of life especially if the experience is highly specialized and not necessarily owned in everyone's life journey. Through the record of this life history, eth-

nographic researchers will understand in detail what the life of the research subject is and the factors which affect it including the culture in the environment.

Arif (2012) says that the record of life history requires the ability of the researchers to be sharp in seeing every detail of a person's life. Therefore, it will be clearly illustrated how the way of life of the subject from birth until adulthood and the important events that became the turning point in the life history of the subject can be found. Even though it is almost the same as the pattern of autobiography, but there is a difference especially on the stronger effort in writing to avoid the subjectivity of the author.

The use of the concept of life history in the study notices four elements in many definitions from the anthropological approach about life history. As stated by Shaw (in Danahay, 2000), there are four suggested elements in many definitions of anthropological approach towards life history: (1) life history emphasizes the importance of socio-cultural setting of the storyteller; (2) life history focuses on the perspective of the individual, the specific individual; (3) a long time, so that the history of someone looks and is associated with various things toward the group or regional local history; (4) life history is related to local history from the viewpoint of indigenous storyteller.

My research took place in Semarang, at *Pondok Pesantren* for girls 'Huffadhul Quran Al Asror' located on 1 Kauman Street Patemon. *Pondok Pesantren* for girls 'Huffadhul Quran Al Asror' is one part of 'Al Asror' Foundation, an institution which provides Islamic education. The name is often abbreviated as *P.P. 'H.Q. Al Asror'* or '*H.Q Al Asror*'. Seen from the naming of the *pesantren*, 'huffadhul quran' means people who memorize, so it can be said that this *pesantren* scores people who can memorize the Quran. However, in this *pesantren*, there are not only *santris* (students) who can memorize the Quran, but also some who do not memorize the Quran. The majority of the *santris* are students of the State University of Semarang. Currently, there are 61 *santris* consisting of 46 students UNNES, 6 alum-

ni of UNNES and 9 students of *MTs* (Junior High School) and *MA* (Senior High School) 'Al Asror'.

### Life History of Nyai Dadah

*P.P. H.Q. Al Asror* is taken care by a *Nyai* named *Nyai Mahmudah Masruroh Al Hafidhoh*. The last two words of the name is a title she has received because she is a *hafidhoh* of the Quran, a person who can memorize the Quran. Although it can be said that *P.P. H.Q. Al Asror* is a *pesantren* who is less known because its status is still under the auspices of Al Asror Foundation, this *pesantren* has contributed in educating its *santris* to have Islamic personality in accordance with the Quran. Most of the *santris* who are students are greatly helped in terms of learning the Quran. A few students confessed, living at *P.P. H.Q. Al Asror* is the first time for them to live their lives in a boarding school with the routine such as having prayers in congregation, doing *Dhikr* together, reciting the Quran, studying *Kitab Kuning*, and the other boarding school routine in general.

*Bu Nyai Mahmudah Masruroh* is a *Nyai* and a housewife. '*Ibu*' (Ma'am), the familiar way to call *Bu Nyai* by her *santris* is a descendant of the *Kiai* and elders of Patemon village. Among the public, *Bu Nyai* is called *Bu Dadah*. She is the first daughter of a couple, *Kiai Zubaidi* and *Mbah Siti Markonah*. In fact, she is not the first child because *Kiai Zubaidi* had a son named *Muhammad Imam Jauhari Mustofa*. However, his age was not long, seventeen days after his birth, he passed away. Three years later, it was the birth of a daughter who was later given the name of *Masruroh Mahmudah*.

*Bu Nyai* was born 45 years ago, precisely in 1970, in a modest family. His mother was a housewife who was also working on a rice field. While his father, *Kiai Zubaidi* was a remarkable figure of the elders in Patemon Village. *Kiai Zubaidi* is a very simple figure in his life; he lives and fills his life with religious services and always does *Dhikr*. His simplicity and the piety of his religious services have made his twelve children currently live in a well-established life and they have a very good education history, both *pe-*

*santrén* education and formal education.

In 1976, after *Bu Nyai* had finished her study in an elementary school, she did *mondok* (lived in a boarding school) in Betengan, Demak, to memorize *Juz Amma* (the 30th section of the Quran) with *Nyai Fatimah*. One year later, *Bu Nyai* moved to *Pesantren 'Al Badriyah'* while continuing her middle school education in Futuhiyah, Mranggen, Demak. That was where *Bu Nyai* started memorizing the Quran until in 1984 she completed his memorization of the Holy Quran. The experience of *mondok* formed the character of *Bu Nyai* to become a leader because *Kiai Zubaidi* expected that she could later practice her knowledge by establishing a *pesantren*.

### **Nyai Leadership**

About the leadership of women in Islam, in fact it is already clear that Islam never forbids women to be a leader in the community. Arnez (2009), says "... there is no verse in the Quran indicating that women are not allowed to become leaders in society, as men and women are equal". Arnez (2009) in his writing entitled '*Empowering Women Through Islam: Fatayat NU Between Tradition and Change*', declares that Fatayat Nu as an advanced group argues that banning a woman from becoming a president is contrary to the Islamic sources. According to them, the women deserve the right to occupy leadership position as long as they are capable and meet the required conditions, such as competence, confidence, and leadership skills. If in a community, a woman has more competence than other members of the community, she can choose to become community leader.

Srimulyani (2012) who has made observations on the lives of girls in a *pesantren*, their representation, and their leadership, especially *Nyai* as the important figure in the *pesantren*, sees that woman's leadership in a *pesantren* is a result of the negotiation. The shape of the negotiation is to remain instrumental in the *pesantren*, although structurally, she is often not counted as a leader of a *pesantren*.

Srimulyani (2012) observed the lives of the girls in a *pesantren*, their representation,

and their leadership, especially *Nyai* as the important figure in the *pesantren*. An observation on her life and her representation has described something beyond the limitations of gender bias when more complexity from gender roles can be understood. It cannot be denied, even though a *pesantren* is associated with religious patriarchal values that emphasize the field division of public and personal, the lives of some *Nyais* do illustrate how the division of the field can be negotiated (Srimulyani, 2012: 136).

Woman's leadership in a *pesantren* is usually not visible and examined by the researchers before, because if you talk about the leadership of a *pesantren*, which always appears as a prominent leader is the *Kiai*. Although in reality, the women in the family of the *Kiai* such as wife, daughter, sister, have a large role in the management of a *pesantren*, especially *pesantren* for girls. Srimulyani (2012: 45) says, in fact, the leadership of a *pesantren* will always end up in the hands of a close family of the *Kiai*, whether it is consanguineal or affinal. The leadership period is unlimited; usually a substitute will remain in this position until his death. In the official archive, the name of the *Kiai* always appears as a leader, though in daily fact, especially in a *pesantren* for girls, his wife, his children, his mother, or even his sister will have a prominent role. In 2003, when I visited *Pesantren 'Al Fatimid'*, the biggest sub *pesantren* of *Pesantren 'Tambak Beras'* that is famous in Jombang, its leader was *Kiai Natsir Abd Fattah*, although his wife was also actively involved in teaching and leadership. His mother, *Nyai Musyarofah*, is *Nyai sepuh* (senior *Nyai*) and asked for opinions in matters relating to the *pesantren*, her position was similar to the Board of Advisors of the *pesantren*.

At that time, *Nyai Musyarofah* still led the congregation prayer of *santris* from the girl *pesantren* in a small mosque that merged with the *pesantren* building. In *Pesantren 'Lirboyo'*, two daughters of *Kiai Anwar* were active in organizing two *pesantrens* for girls. In a traditional *pesantren* in Pacul Gowang, *Kiai Aziz Mansur* was assisted by his wife and his sister, *Nyai Farida*, who had

more knowledge in the study of the Quran and had memorized the entire Quran.

The role of *Bu Nyai* in the *pesantren* is to educate the *santris* to be capable of reciting the Quran well even memorizing it. *Bu Nyai* also becomes the figure of mother for the *santris*. *Bu Nyai* in her everyday life in the *pesantren* acts like a mother for her children. For example, *Bu Nyai* becomes a place for sharing and telling their problems. Everytime the *santris* want to come out from the *pesantren*, they bid farewell first to *Bu Nyai*. Other role performed by *Bu Nyai* is being a manager in the *pesantren*. *Bu Nyai* manages the finance, including managing the budget of the *pesantren* for the payment of daily needs and electricity of the *santris*.

As a *Nyai* in the community, *Bu Nyai* does not only have roles in the *pesantren* but also social responsibilities in the community. *Bu Nyai* has a strategic role within the organization of Fatayat NU Patemon branch, i.e. as an advisor. *Bu Nyai* also manages the routine study for communities around Patemon, namely *ngaji selapanan*, held because seeing the condition in the vicinity where the mothers, especially the *khafidhoh*, have not yet had a container as a means to learn about the Quran and its *tafsir* (exclamation of passages of the Quran by supplying additional information).

### Gender Elasticity

*Bu Nyai* is a figure who has a central role in the *pesantren*. Even though the central role that *Bu Nyai* carries out will ultimately be back in domestic affairs, *Bu Nyai* as the leader in the *pesantren* demonstrates that gender roles are a result of the construction of the community. Gender roles are elastic and can be negotiated. Although the roles are normative, individuals have the flexibility to perform their roles to face the reality and problems that occur in the community.

### CONCLUSION

The existing review of *pesantren* which only focuses on the figure of the *Kiai* has made it identical with the patriarchal culture. In

fact, at this moment, *pesantren* is an Islamic institution which does not close itself against the birth of dozens of women leaders in the *pesantren*. *Nyai Dadah*, a woman who takes care of *Pesantren* for girls 'Huf-fadhul Quran Al Asror' is a figure of *Nyai* that is capable of negotiating with *pesantren* patriarchal condition. Her leadership in the *pesantren* is evidence that gender roles in *pesantren* are negotiable. *Bu Nyai* can be an inspiration for students and the community in the surroundings to be the women who are able to actualize themselves and contribute to the social environment in the community.

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