

# Pesantren Al-Fattah: The Struggle of an Ascetic Waria to Create a Religious Space for Transgender Muslims in Indonesia

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## Abstract

This study seeks to describe the struggle of a Muslim transgender ascetic in claiming religious space for transgender in urban Indonesia by creating a pesantren (Islamic school). The study was conducted in Al-Fattah Pondok Pesantren, the only Islamic school for transgender in Indonesia. Al-Fattah is created by Bu Maryani, a transgender ascetic, who contributed her money, thought, energy and prayers for this school, to provide spiritual sanctuary for transvestites, despite her worsening economy and health. While many transvestites look for alternative religion, the experience of Al-Fattah reveal that transgender Muslims may find their religious sanctuary within traditional Islamic practices, not outside the traditional institutions. Al-Fattah transgender Islamic school reveal the power of lived religion, pesantren, and traditional forms of religious rituals to validate Queer spiritual practices. We argue that the use of the traditional forms of religious rituals enable the Muslim transgender to overcome the dilemma of fluidity-and-fixity in queer religious practices.

## Keywords

Islam; transgender; Islamic school; queer

## INTRODUCTION

Spirituality is the right of everyone. Like other persons, transgender Muslims have similar need to express their belief and their longing for the Divine presence. There is a growing body of literature which explores the intersection of faith, transgender and sexuality (Hossain 2012; Rouhani 2007; Marsh 2007; Schroeder 2009; Shannahan 2010; Hendricks 2009; Peumans 2014; Pellegrini 2005; Paris & Anderson 2001). In Muslim contexts, more works have been done on the intersectionality of same-sex relations and Islam than on transgender and Islamic prac-

tices (Babayan 2008, Boelstorf 2005, Blacwood 2005, Abdulhadi 2010; Abraham 2010; Al-Sayyad 2010, Bereket 2008; Gandi 2012; Habib 2010; Jaspal 2011; Khan 1997; Mavdavi 2012; Minwalla 2005; Murray 1997; Peumans 2014; Rahman 2009, 2010; Siraj 2006; 2009; Yip 2004, 2005). Studies on religion and transgender (Hossain 2012) illuminate that transgender people are not only sexual being, they are also spiritual being. They have the right to spirituality and the right to

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living in a loving religious community. Transgender Muslims, like other human beings, need to worship the Divine and learn about themselves in a deep and profound way. However, mainstream religious places and institutions do not always readily accept those transgender people because of their gender identity and sexuality (Rouhani 2007; Marsh 2007; Schroeder 2009; Shannahan 2010; Hendricks 2009; Peumans 2014; Pellegrini 2005; Paris & Anderson 2001). The heteronormative discourses largely see different gender and sexual practices as threat to the normal religious order.

Wong (2012), Peuman (2014), Norman (2015), and Taylor, Falconer and Snowdon (2014) show how transgender of different faith are struggling to reconcile religious and sexual identities in a place: town, internet or congregation. Wong (2012) studied Muslim-Malay sexual minorities in Pengkid Malaysia. Though they are increasingly subjected to the threats of moral policing in Malaysia, Pengkid has become a new identity marker for the marginalized sexual subject framed by the Islamic discourse of this country. Taylor, Falconer and Snowdon (2014) explore how queer Christian youth negotiate sexual-religious identities on online social medias. "The Internet can offer safe spaces particularly for people of counter-normative sexualities to construct an identity, forge connections and articulate voices otherwise subjugated in some offline spaces" (Taylor, Falconer and Snowdon 2014: 12). Norman (2015) explores the queer religious struggle in Metropolitan Community Church. Norman's ethnography raised a point further in the study of queer spirituality: transgender needs real places to worship, real mosque, real church, a real congregation and a real loving religious community. In Indonesia, where collectivism is strong, such need of being part of a religious community is more apparent.

In this article, we explore the struggle of Bu Maryani a transgender Muslim in Yogyakarta to claim a religious space for Muslim transgender by creating an Islamic boarding school or *Pondok Pesantren*. In Indonesia, pesantren is a well-respected place for reli-

gious learning, praying and building a religious community (Dhofier 1982). Knowing this, Bu Maryani struggled to build Islamic school for transgender in Yogyakarta not only as a way of counteracting their exclusion from religious institutions in Indonesian society, but also as a place to learn religious knowledges. The experiences of Bu Maryani and her pesantren put a new perspective on queer spirituality: they do not only need a real congregation; they also need a religious learning institution. The questions we investigate in this article among others include how pesantren provides religious space as well as a structure of religious feeling for the transgender. What motivates Bu Maryani and how is her struggle to support this pesantren in the midst of her difficult economic situation and worsening health? What specific strategies she used to educate the Muslim waria in reconciling their gender and religious identities? What kinds of activities are organised in the pesantren? How do queer-identified persons understand their religious lives? And in what ways do the lived experiences of queer Muslims respond to traditions and reshape them in contemporary practice? The research was conducted for two years and the last research was conducted five months before the death of Bu Maryani.

The research reveals that Bu Maryani builds the pesantren because she wants to provide a spiritual sanctuary for Muslims transgender where they can learn religious values and worship freely. While some transgender are more appealed to alternative religions because mainstream religions refused queer women (Wilcox 2012), this study illustrates how transgender Muslims use mainstream religious institution to defend their rights. By building the school, she has a place where she can give her wealth, energy, thought and life. The pesantren can run effectively because the devotion of Bu Maryani, a transgender religious ascetic, who not only inspire transgender Muslims, but also non-transgender.

Bu Maryani is successful in developing her queer cultural and religious strategy: to remain rooted in a local context, and at the

same time highlight Queer multiple positions and intersectional struggles. The strength of her approach is rare combination of religious asceticism, pesantren tradition, doing lived religion and traditional forms of Islamic religious practices. Her strategic choices cannot be simply categorized with Boelstorf “dubbing culture” (Boelstorf 2005). Bu Maryani draws her perspectives from religious ascetism, rather than from queer theory, religious studies, and liberation theology. Drawing from Amos’ fixity and fluidity theorization, I argue that pesantren approach and traditional forms of rituals help the transgender overcome the problem of fixity and fluidity they often face in Queer religious expression.

Pesantren builds their religiosity by giving them a new identity namely “santri”. As santri, they hope they will be accepted as fellow Muslim. Religious institutions, as Grace and Wells (2005) argue, largely segregate being sexual from being religious, and they fail to treat the vulnerable young queer people with dignity and integrity. Traditional mosques may find that the “religious otherness” (Nynas 2012) of *waria* (transgender) as dilemma because they do not conform to dominant understandings of identity of Muslim, male, or female. In Indonesia, transgender face two strong challenges: nation-building gender ideology and the right wing Muslim patriarchy (Peter Nynäs 2012). Both suppress plurality of gender and sexual identities. Bu Maryani navigated between these two streams.

This article contributes to the emerging scholarly discussion on Islam and sexual diversity, particularly about queer religious experiences (Amer 2012; Abdo 2012; Wong 2012; Pepe 2009; Norman 2015). Like Pepe (2009) and Norman (2015), this article attempts to share real-life stories of people that have struggled, or may still be struggling, to reconcile their spirituality and their sexuality. While Norman (2015) studied how Jewish congregation attempts to include people of gender and sexual minorities by changing the liturgies and the prayers, in this article, I explore how Bu Maryani, a transgender ascetic, emphasise

on traditional forms of Islamic rituals and pesantren as a way to reconcile Islam and queer religious experiences. While previous researches for example Blackwood’s (2005) and Boellstorff’s (2005) anthropological studies emphasize how Indonesian lesbians and gays incorporate Western discourses into local and national ones to make sense of their identities and create communities, this article emphasize how Bu Maryani drew her inspiration of Islamic ascetism and religious discourses.

### **Pesantren Al-Fattah Yogyakarta**

Bu Maryani realised well the importance of pesantren in Indonesian community, as a respected Islamic institution where students learn Islamic knowledge, train character and practice faith (Dhofir 1982). Many religious leaders she admired, such as Gus Dur (the fourth president of Indonesia), the champion of Indonesian pluralism, were products of pesantren. Knowing the importance of pesantren in Indonesian Muslim consciousness, Bu Maryani wanted to establish a pondok pesantren as religious sanctuary for transgender Muslims. Peter Neynas (2012) described the specific condition in Indonesia after the reform era: the rise of religious gender conservatism that follows decentralisation, complemented by the central government’s moral panic and increasingly insecure position.

The reform era is marked among other by the rise of transnational forms of Islam, which are less tolerant to diversity and plurality of religious and gender practices. Bu Maryani knows well that pesantren is linked to indigenous form of Islam in Indonesia, which could become antithesis to the rise of this new forms of Islam in the *reformasi* order. Building pesantren is therefore her strategy to affiliate with the mainstream religious institution in Indonesia, which is known to be celebrating moderation and religious tolerance. Pesantren is also a strategy to claim a new identity as “santri”. Transgender so far is only known as *waria*, or transvestite which only account for their sexual and gender identity. *Waria* also want to be accepted as part of pious Muslim community.

Her dream came true in 2008, when *Pondok Pesantren al-Fattah* was declared. Located relatively close to the town square of Yogyakarta palace, Al-Fattah took advantage from the tolerance of Jogjakarta society. The creation of this Islamic school began from Bu Maryani concern about place to develop the spirituality of the transgender. She dreams that later transgender develop sense of spirituality and meaning in their life. Bu Maryani is a religious ascetic. The school is the place for her to give charity and sacrifice.

Bu Maryani develops her religious knowledge of Islam by following regular *pengajian* (religious sermons) of Kyai Hamroeli in Godean, Yogyakarta. Of the approximately 3,000 participants in Kyai Hamrolie religious gathering, Bu Maryani was the only transgender. At first, Bu Maryani found it difficult to mingle with other worshippers. But over time, Bu Maryani was well received among those worshippers. Bu Maryani began to motivate herself to change her habits which were initially far from a religious touch, started from stopping her nightlife, and began to pursue the beauty business.

The history of Al-Fattah Pesantren is originated from monthly religious gathering she organised with other *waria* (transgender) in response to the earthquake that happened in Yogyakarta in 2006. Following the earthquake that devastated the city, Bu Maryani on her own initiatives invited her transgender friends in Yogyakarta to pray together for the safety of the people of Yogyakarta. The habit of praying for Yogyakarta on Tuesday (*Selasa Pon*), has become regular activities. The religious session was conducted on a rotating basis from place to place under the supervision of Kyai Hamrolie. Bu Maryani began to feel that this congregation can be transformed into something bigger to help the transgender in fulfilling religious needs. Assisted by fellow non-governmental organization who is engaged in sexual and reproductive health issues, Bu Maryani prepared the opening of Al-Fattah. Bu Maryani expressed her idea to her friends. She planned that the pesantren would

be located in Bu Maryani's house, in Kampung Notoyudan Gedongtengen Yogyakarta. Bu Maryani knew that establishing *Al-Fattah* was not easy because by setting up a special boarding school for transgender, Bu Maryani had to be willing to confront the mainstream Muslims and scholars who did not agree to the idea of creating a queer pesantren.

Bu Maryani decided to mobilise support to religious leaders in Yogyakarta. The first figure to consult with was Kyai Hamrolie, her spiritual teacher. Besides, Kyai Hamrolie is also the caregiver for her monthly religious gathering. Kyai Hamrolie welcomed Bu Maryani's proposal with enthusiasm. On 7<sup>th</sup> July 2008, *Al Fattah Pondok Pesantren* was opened. The opening ceremony was also attended by community leaders in Kampung Notoyudan like the village and mosque leaders, government representatives, and legislators. At the beginning of the establishment of the school, the number of transvestite *santris* (students of Islamic school) reached approximately 25 people. Among those 25 people, there were some gay and lesbian. There was also a non-Muslim transvestite who help the pesantren. Since the beginning, Al-Fattah is built upon the principles of inclusivity and diversity.

*Pondok Pesantren* generally requires its *santris* to live and perform daily activities at the school. However, it does not work that way with Al-Fattah. In here, *santris* only come when there are activities. If there is no activity, the *santris* will not be at the *Pondok Pesantren*, except when they have something to do with Bu Maryani. Al-Fattah initially performed their religious activities every Monday and Thursday, from noon till night. Therefore, Bu Maryani named her *Pondok Pesantren* as *Pondok Pesantren Monday-Thursday*. The existence of Al-Fattah has attracted so many parties. Al-Fattah *Pondok Pesantren* had some visits from prominent religious leaders such as the wife of Gus Dur, and a variety of printed and electronic media intending to cover the activities of this unique *Pondok Pesantren*.

Everything run smoothly. Kyai Hamrolie sent 25 students to become *ustadz* (re-

ligious teacher) in Al-Fattah. So that in the early days, learning in *Al-Fattah* was used to be run with a model of one student one *ustadz*. But this only lasted a few moments, and then it was re-raised independently by Kyai Hamrolie. Until one day, there was tension between Kyai Hamrolie and Bu Maryani. Kyai Hamrolie made a controversial statement in media that his intention to establish Al-Fattah was to restore the identity of the male transvestites to become completely a gentleman. Bu Maryani reacted shockingly to the statement. Bu Maryani wondered whether Kyai Hamrolie really talked like that to a journalist, or if a journalist misinterpreted his statement. Bu Maryani decided to send a letter to Kyai Hamrolie for clarification. Kyai Hamrolie did not reply. Then, Bu Maryani visited Kyai Hamrolie.

After asking for his explanation, Bu Maryani received clarity that it was true what was said by Kyai Hamrolie in the newspaper. Because of this tension, Kyai Hamrolie was no longer active in al-Fattah. His objection to the idea of queer pesantren reflects the prevailing heteronormativity of religious discourses. The *Pondok Pesantren* was in a vacuum for a while. Not long, Bu Maryani asked another teacher to replace Kyai Hamrolie to teach the transvestite *santris*. However, this *ustadz* (Ustad R) only lasted for 6 months. Though only six months, Ustad R is successful in setting the foundation of Queer interpretation of the Quran. His approaches normally discuss religious texts on gender and sexuality and give them queer perspectives.

Ustadz R left. Bu Maryani remembered that there was a student of Kyai Hamrolie whom she already knew well: Ustadz Murtijo (36). Ustadz Murtijo was then invited to teach in Al-Fattah. Then, in this last three years, the activities of Al-Fattah have been run smoothly under the guidance of Ustadz Murtijo. Ustadz Murtijo until now is still assisting the activities of Al-Fattah. Ustadz Murtijo admits that he feels the call to accompany the transvestite *santris*. His high sense of humanity makes him want to introduce Islam to the transvestite. Ustadz Murtijo told us the reason for his willingness

to teach in Al-Fattah.

"I am challenged and motivated. So far I was only involved in the community and with my friends in the mosque. I feel comfortable here because I've known Bu Maryani for a long time. I thank God I can do something for them. I am touched. Their situation is horrifying. They have a lot of pressure. But They compete to do positive actions. They try to give kindness to us all. They should not be underestimated, and abused."

With the supervision of Ustadz Murtijo, the activities of al-Fattah became once a week, i.e. every Sunday afternoon, from 5 P.M. until 9 P.M. Even then, the numbers of *santris* who come are not always 25 people. Sometimes there are only 15 people. Or even less than 10 people. This is because *santris* have various businesses which are considered more urgent than going to the school. The *santri* come only when there is any activity. Bu Maryani explains:

"Transvestite people find it difficult to worship God. Actually, not only transvestites, most men-women who have officially registered as Moslem in their ID card never do that as well, let alone transgender. I already thank God when there are friends who admit that they believe in God? If they don't, there will be no Al-Fattah. And most transvestites think about *bandha donya* (financial wealth). We bring them to the good path".

### **Transvestite *santri* at Al Fattah are not charged. All sources of funds for Al-Fattah *Pondok Pesantren* activities come from Bu Maryani.**

Al-Fattah is different from mainstream pesantren. A pesantren normally have dormitories, classes for learning and a mosque at the centre of the building (Dhofier 1982). Al-Fattah has only a simple facility. The main identity of Al-Fattah situated not far from Malioboro shopping center is just a cork board or Styrofoam. Underneath, there is a signpost pointing salon opened by Bu Maryani. There are no mosques, boarding buildings for students and school areas which characterize pesantren in Indonesia.

Physically, Al-Fattah does not have a magnificent building which is equipped with dormitories, hall, and mosque, but the physical form of the boarding school is just a regular rented house which is nothing other than Bu Maryani rented house. Bu Maryani rented the house to a neighbour at a cost of seven million annually. The front of the rented house functioned as a living room and salon. In the living room are these boarding school activities conducted. Al-Fattah legally received a notary deed per 21 January 2011. Since confirmed by the notary deed, the management has become clearer even though the management solely remains to the hand of Bu Maryani.

Al-Fattah has a huge meaning for transvestites. For them, Al-Fattah is a place where the transvestite *santris* are accepted and they can comfortably worship. If worship is done in general mosques, they feel uncomfortable with people who often underestimate them. In general, the transvestites are reluctant and confused with the mosque concept of *shaf* (rows) for female or male. This case does not happen in Al-Fattah. They can choose freely in female or male rows. And as human beings, they realize that they need to worship. Transvestite *santri* do not want people to always underestimate them. They want to be accepted as religious beings. That is why Al-Fattah was established. Al-Fattah also has many awards for having participated in a variety of activities, such as the National AIDS Committee Meeting, the International Day of Peace, and Interfaith Cooperation Young Peacemaker National Conference.

### **Bu Maryani, the Ascetic Transgender**

Bu Maryani (53) is a local transvestite from Yogyakarta. She was born on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1960. To the author, Bu Maryani openly shared her long journey. She has felt being a transvestite since the beginning of her childhood. As a child, Bu Maryani felt that she was a woman. Bu Maryani was more interested in playing with female friends than with male friends. Bu Maryani hid her transvestite tendency from her family for 20 years. At the age of 20 years, Bu Maryani

finally had the courage to come out to her family by admitting that she was actually a "woman". When Bu Maryani was born, she was adopted by a married couple who were Catholics. Bu Maryani was raised by them and baptized into Catholic. At the age of 10-year-old, her foster mother left alone in Yogyakarta. Then, Bu Maryani was bought by his biological mother.

Bu Maryani had a disadvantaged childhood. When children at his age went to school, Bu Maryani did not. Her adoptive father told her that he was not able to pay for her school. Bu Maryani was disappointed. She was unhappy with her adoptive father's personality. Long after that, Bu Maryani reunited with her foster mother who had been caring her for over 10 years. Bu Maryani chose to stay with her adoptive mother. At that time, the quarrel between her adoptive parents was unavoidable. Bu Maryani and her adoptive mother went away, leaving her adoptive father and her biological mother. Young Maryani began looking for a job in Surabaya.

*Nyebong* (offering sexual service) was her first job as a transvestite. In Surabaya, Bu Maryani *nyebong* in Taman Lawang. Bu Maryani even still remembered that among transvestites who hang out there, DG who is currently a successful entertainer. From *nyebong*, Bu Maryani earned numerous incomes. But after a long time, she did not feel any blessing with the money she earns from the work. Bu Maryani felt less comfortable when she eats with the money. Bu Maryani knew that in society, *nyebong* was a job deemed negatively. Bu Maryani stopped *nyebong* and became a street singer in Semarang. She felt happier with her new job. She enjoyed her work as a street singer because she likes music, especially keroncong and dangdut. With money from street singing, she could buy a house and was willing to marry "her" man. When she sang in front of a salon owned by a transvestite in Semarang, Bu Maryani was offered employment by the owner of the salon. Bu Maryani initially worked at a beauty salon as a *kapster* (assistant). Bu Maryani mopped the floor and washed her customers' hair. Not long

after Bu Maryani had mastered the skills in beauty clinic services, Bu Maryani decided to open her own salon in her house in Yogyakarta.

Her salon was full of customers. Bu Maryani earned a lot of money. At the age of 17-year-old, she already achieved success in her career of makeup and bridal salon. Her well-established economic circumstances made Bu Maryani thought of her religious condition. After meeting with Kyai Hamrolie, she decided to convert herself to Islam following Kyai Hamrolie. Since that time Bu Maryani actively follows the Kyai Hamrolie's religious session normally followed by thousands of Muslims. Joining the congregation of Kyai Hamrolie's *Pengajian* is not easy for Bu Maryani. She got negative response from other worshippers, although Kyai Hamrolie never questioned her transvestite being. Alone, Bu Maryani was fighting for her right to religion in the midst of worshippers who have a clear sexual identity: male and female. Of nearly 3,000 worshippers, Bu Maryani was the only transvestite. However, she managed to get through the difficult times by showing that a transvestite could also show good behaviour.

Bu Maryani is rich. However, her wealth and prosperity could not fool Bu Maryani from the fact that she was lonely. Bu Maryani needed a lover to live as any other human being. Not long after that, Bu Maryani met a man who became her lover. Bu Maryani and her boyfriend were "married". But her husband betrayed her. He married her only for her wealth. He left and stole all her wealth. Bu Maryani felt tremendously hurt and disappointed. However, Bu Maryani still reminisced their happy times together. Therefore, a "marriage" picture of Bu Maryani with her boyfriend is still hung on the wall of her room.

Since then, Bu Maryani was deprived. Her salon was not as busy as previously. Bu Maryani decided to sell her cars and house. Then, Bu Maryani rented a house. Bu Maryani steadfastly and diligently kept the business by running the salon. At the age of 41 years old, Bu Maryani felt the presence of a child. She was aware of her nature that

although she was a "woman", she could not give birth. Therefore, she decided to adopt a newborn baby girl. Living a different life as before has made Bu Maryani cautious in spending money, especially after adopting a child. Bu Maryani has become more efficient. A few years later, Bu Maryani decided to move to Notoyudan which was now the site of Al-Fattah. In Notoyudan, Bu Maryani salon went pretty well. Bu Maryani also has *kapsters*, but they repeatedly went and were replaced with other assistants. All *kapsters* who had worked in the salon of Bu Maryani are transvestites.

In 2006, Bu Maryani actively pioneered the religious activities of the transvestites. In 2008, Bu Maryani established Al-Fattah assisted by her colleagues. In 2011, Al-Fattah got a notarial decree. Though her financial condition is complicated, Bu Maryani is the major source of funding for activities that take place in Al-Fattah. Bu Maryani said that she is very wealthy if only she bears her only child and herself. However, because she is looking for good deeds as a provision in the hereafter, she decides to give everything to support Al-Fattah. Bu Maryani is indeed troubled in managing the funds for Al-Fattah. But Bu Maryani does not want to beg. She is reluctant to ask for help because Bu Maryani thinks that it is inappropriate that asking for money in the name of religion. Bu Maryani says:

"The important thing is that I believe I have God, I ask God, the One who gives everything. That's it I already feel at ease. If I have a problem like this, I feel exhausted, yes, but later when I remember that I will get into the coffin, I rise again. That is me. So if a student complains then give up, I said oh, no, mine is still heavier. I take care of the *Pondok Pesantren*, taking care of this, taking care of that. When there is money it is ok, but when there is no money? *Santris* came here and stayed to eat. I got my daughter's HP mortgaged."

There are only a few people like Bu Maryani. Bu Maryani who usually wears a hijab in her daily life, gives everything to Al-Fattah: material, energy, and thought. Bu Maryani never thinks twice. Even for

millions of rupiahs, even Bu Maryani is still working on it. It is not rare that she has to ask for a loan for the purposes of the *Pondok Pesantren*. Bu Maryani often seeks a loan to her friend, the transvestite community, cooperation, or even mortgages her belongings. The only income that can be relied on by Bu Maryani her beauty services. The beauty service of Bu Maryani can generate hundreds of thousands or even millions of rupiah in an instant. However, the income from the salon cannot be ascertained. Sometimes customers are crowded, sometimes they are quiet. Therefore, Bu Maryani is used to playing with a huge amount of money but she has a lot of debt to cover her daily needs and Al-Fattah.

Many cheated Bu Maryani. She had catering orders, but the buyer did not pay for months. Some guests also stole her Blackberry when she made drinks. Her cris which was bargained to one billion rupiahs was also stolen. The incident had made her ill for weeks. Some of her *kapsters* also cheated. In the midst of difficult conditions, Bu Maryani is still trying to run Al-Fattah activities. Until finally her patience received an answer from the Lord. In April 2013, Bu Maryani was given the opportunity to go to umrah with most of the cost being granted by people that she never knew. Bu Maryani's Umrah only cost her five million rupiahs. Bu Maryani is very grateful for this. For her, Umrah is something that proves that God cares about Bu Maryani.

Bu Maryani's health is worsening. When the author lived in the house of Bu Maryani to carry out research, Bu Maryani even was hospitalized. Bu Maryani repeatedly got in and out of the hospital with some various diseases. Her sick and weak financial condition caused Bu Maryani to delay Al-Fattah activities, including delaying the planned pilgrimage to the cemetery along with transvestite santris.

### Transgender Santris

In total, there are about 25 transvestite *sant-ris* at the Al-Fattah. However, not all students are active. Among 25 *santris*, those who are still actively studying in Al-Fattah

are SR (51), WA (49), Novie (37), YS (46), YY (55), NK (22), and OK (45). In 20014, only seven people left because the other waria were busy with their own business. SR (51) is an alumnus of the Department of Biology, a prominent university in Yogyakarta. SR tries to follow the values and norms in her village by wearing *hijab* (veil). In her village, people practice Islam strongly. Therefore, SR decides to wear a hijab. When Bu Maryani had the idea to establish a *pesantren*, SR was also involved in the establishment process. SR becomes vice chairwoman. She said that *Pondok Pesantren* for transgender is important because transvestites need spiritual enlightenment. "Most Transvestites are preoccupied with money, boyfriends, and having fun. Sometimes they forget that there are times in life to pray. To surrender to God. There must be balance. So they will feel peaceful.

SR, who has a business of jewellery craft for bride, is pleased with the existence of Al-Fattah. She claims that she wants to look for knowledge through Al-Fattah. Besides, she also hopes that the other Moslems recognize her as their fellow Moslem. After studying in Al-Fattah, she admits that she is becoming more confident and more comfortable because she can have faith without any guilt. Another santri is W (48). Wu, who likes wearing mini clothes and high heels, and knows all the transvestites in Yogyakarta, became transvestite *santri* in Al Fattah since the beginning of the opening of Al-Fattah. W joined Al-Fattah after Bu Maryani invited her. We want to learn to read and understand the Qur'an, learn the true prayer, study ablutions, and worship God. Previously, W could understand how to worship in Islam, but she thought it was not complete without guidance from religious scholars. Then, in Al-Fattah, she has gained a deeper understanding on Islam and feels closer to God. Here is W's defense of the rights and obligations of worship:

"We have a lot of rejections or receptions. Many do not accept us, but God accepts us. We are more concerned with God. My responsibility is to God, not to my fellow human. I never respond to any stereoty-



pes. And if you also have feelings for God, just be closer to Him. Being sinful or not, I don't care. The important thing is that I remember and I also believe that I have the Lord and it's my belief. Because I feel I have been given a lot of things, life, health, food and so on"

In the middle of the declining number of *santri*, W is still active at Al-Fattah. W always supports Al-Fattah because Al-Fattah is the only place that accepts her to worship God. People generally do not accept worship done by transvestites in mosques. In her village, she has never set her feet in the mosque to worship because she hesitates to follow the rows of women or men. YS is another *santri*. YS joined Al-Fattah after receiving the information about the *Pesantren*. At that time, she was jobless and felt in need to have activities to occupy her time. YS finally decided to join Al-Fattah. As the time goes by, Al-Fattah is not only a place to spend her spare time. Al-Fattah gives her the opportunity for doing several positive activities. Through *al-Fattah*, YS meets her fellow transvestite and many guests who are attracted by Al-Fattah. Through those meetings, YS feels comfortable and more motivated. Therefore, YS is happy and really enjoys herself being a transvestite *santris*. YS said that she worships in the mosque and chose to join the row provided for men. Such action is based on her belief that she wants to be treated as a man when she dies someday. To her who was born with male gender, it means that she will die with the male gender as well. For that also she does not have desire to change her gender by operation including not questioning her identity card as a man.

The next *santri* is N. Her birth name is Ali Muzayyin. She began using the name "N" in 1996 when she decided to be a transvestite. N is fluent in reciting Quran. This is not strange considering the fact that N had been in traditional *Pesantren* for two years in Sidoarjo during junior high school. Her parents sent her to *pesantren* at that time because they saw transvestite signs in N, though their hope cannot be fulfilled. The *pesantren* could not transform him into a man. N is happy becoming a *santri* in Al-

Fattah. «I want my life to be better, because I do not forget my God. Because sometime there are friends who admit that they are Islam, but they do not run a prayer. Although unfortunately, my father does not like it. Although I am a transvestite, I have the Lord, and I have to pray.

N admits that since being in al-Fattah, N receives blessing from the Lord as if her life is well facilitated now. N currently lives peacefully because she has finally found her true life path. In the time when she became a *santri*, N stopped *nyebong* in February 2013. Therefore, for N, al-Fattah does make a difference in her life. With a strong background of religious knowledge from a religious family, N understands well the pros and cons of al-Fattah in the midst of society. Various justifications that support or reject the existence of *al-Fattah* have been heard by her since the beginning of its establishment. N who is already *katam* (finish) the Quran repeatedly expresses her response to the people who disagree with the worship transvestites as follows:

« If, for instance, they ask that later there are curses like in the time of my prophet, that was in the past. Now, the world evolves. And maybe if they have explored more deeply as possible, If they understand there are other interpretations, they would not discredit transvestites like that.  
«

From Al Fattah, N claims that she has received a lot of things including the experience and knowledge of religion that she had forgotten, such as memorizing short letters in the Quran. N also feels happy to get together with transvestite friends in boarding school. There, she can channel her desire to teach her fellow transvestites about the Quran. To balance herself as a *santri*, N has a large collection of *jilbab*. But she only wears *jilbab* in certain events, such as meetings, seminars, and receptions. N does not want to wear a *jilbab* on a daily basis because she feels uncomfortable wearing the veil and it makes her head hot.

## Religious Activities in Transgender Pesantren

The strength of Al-Fattah gender approach lies in its religious activities, its emphasis on religious morality, not on its legal principles. Norman (2015) studies the successful efforts of non-heteronormative people to promote their identity through religious activities. Religious activities provide endless meanings and strong foundation. Because transgender Muslims have more challenges in their life, they have bigger need for spirituality. That is why; religious activities can help them overcome the pressure in their life. Religious activities also important for the transgender to connect between queer theology and praxis. For the Muslims, they need an answer for their questions: how should they worship? As male or female clothing? In the female group or in the men group? Amos (2008: 59) writes:

There must be real connections between theology and praxis if theology is to mean anything at all. In other words, what a congregation thinks and values must translate into its embodied lived experience and actions if its thoughts and values are accurate and actual. In fact, if integrity between theological thought and practical action does not exist, the validity and stability of that thought might rightly be called into question. Therefore, congregations need to be intentional about ensuring that such an integral link exists between their core theological values and how those values are lived out in the fullness of their congregational lives.<sup>59</sup>

Through these religious activities, Bu Maryani gives “a key feature of the pastoral leader is to help the congregation develop such an integral and grounded praxis” (Amos 2008: 59). Currently, there are seven programs in Al-Fattah: Sunday *Pengajian* (recitation), *Pengajian* of Pon Wednesday night, *yasinan* and *tahlilan*, grave pilgrimage, activities of *Ramadan*, *syawalan*, and sacrifice on Eid al-Adha. Through these programs, they resist the religious heteronormative discourses of Indonesian society. Below is the description of every program.

### **Sunday Pengajian**

The series of *Pengajian* (religious study) at

the Al Fattah was initially held on Mondays and Thursdays. Therefore, the Al Fattah is also called the *Pondok Pesantren* of Monday-Thursday. However, over the course of time with all the dynamics that exist, particularly money and the activities of the santri, the recitation was organized on Sunday only. This Sunday religious gathering is the most important religious session for the transgender in Al-Fattah. The activity begins at five, starting with divine litanies. After the Maghrib prayer, students study the Quran until Isha. After Isha they analyze *hadith* or verse of Quran, in regard to the topics of transvestites. Previous ustadz (Ustad R) analyzed the verses related to transgender, hadiths which have relation to transvestites. If ustadz Murtijo, he just leads the prayers, enlightens the soul, brightens things up. Ustadz Murtijo explains the description of the activity of boarding as follows: «(We) worship together, the obligatory prayers, we continue to multiply our *dhikr* (prayer), ask forgiveness, we multiply the Quran recitation that lead to conversion to them, after that we pray again, continue to sharing session, and I hope we can give little enlightenment for them, so they are motivated to further the spirit and willing to improve themselves constantly. During the prayers, the congregation is divided into two, namely *bermukena* (wearing female attributes) congregation and *sarung* (glove) congregation. Because it is in the middle between men and women, transvestite *santris* wear their *mukena* as women or wear *sarung* and *peci* (cap) like men. It is based on their convenience in worship.

N is an example of a transvestite *sant-ri* who positions herself as a man when she worships. N chooses *sarung* and *peci* because she feels comfortable with *sarung* and *peci*. N initially tried to wear a *mukena*, but because she felt hot, N then chose to use *sarung* back. The same thing is also felt by W. W who wore *mukena* says that she feels more comfortable wearing *sarung* and *peci*. Wearing *sarung* and *peci* is her choice. YS also has the same choice as N and W. YS feels more comfortable when she wears *sarung* to pray. *Sarung* and *peci* are also an option

for Okky. S chooses differently. She wears female worship attributes to pray. Shinta is more comfortable wearing *mukena*. Her worship is based on the feeling of comfort. If her feelings are not comfortable, then S will not be able to be humble in prayer. Related to the clothing to pray, Ustadz Murtijo stresses to the santri to remain consistent with the choice. If transvestite *santris* are choosing to wear *mukena*, then from the beginning to the end, these *santris* must wear *mukena*. If these *santris* choose to wear *peci* and *sarung*, then from the beginning to the rest, these *santris* must still wear them. Although Ustadz Murtijo already stresses this, there are still many *santris* who sometimes wear *mukena* and sometimes change it into *peci* and *sarung*, or vice versa. But it was still the case when Ustadz Murtijo was teaching three years ago. Currently, the *santris* seem to be more consistent in their worship attribute choice. In the past, when Al Fattah had 25 *santris*, the *santris* wearing *sarung* and *peci* were placed in the living room while the ones with *mukena* were placed in the middle of the house of Bu Maryani. But now, the prayer activity is done in the living room or in the middle of the house of Bu because the numbers of *santris* who come are just a little. After the Maghrib prayer is finished, the next activity is *dhikr*. By Ustadz Murtijo, the current *dhikr* concept is oriented to readings that contain elements of repentance and ask forgiveness to God.

The teaching of Islam determines that the practice of sexual relations outside of marriage is forbidden or sinful. *Nyebong* practice performed by transvestites becomes part of the context of the sexual practices. Therefore, in Islam, *nyebong* is also regarded as an act which is not good. Therefore, Ustadz Murtijo invites the *santris* to do *dhikr* after prayers to seek forgiveness to God for behaviors which are considered bad in Islam. Through the *dhikr*, Ustadz Murtijo hopes each transvestite *santris* can maximize opportunities to improve themselves. *Dhikr* is finished at 18:30. Ustadz Murtijo invites the transvestite *santris* to read the Qur'an. Ustadz Murtijo divides the *santris* into two groups, i.e. groups that have been

fluent and a group that has not been fluent in reading the Qur'an. The groups that have been fluent read separately from the other *santris*. Then they will listen to the Qur'an reading. The model of listening is that all *santris* will get a turn to read. If the *santris* get their turn to read, then the other *santris* in the group must listen and correct if there are less precise readings. Usually, joining this group are Yetty or often addressed as the MY (55), Novie, Wulan, Shinta, and Nur Khaila (22). As for the group that has not been smooth to read the Qur'an will be tutored by Ustadz Murtijo one by one, like Bu Maryani, YS, Okky, and Irma. They will learn to read the Qur'an begins *Iqro* book <. The activity of reciting Quran will be completed after the call to prayer <*Isha*> comes. Furthermore, the *santris* will be rushing to prepare to pray *Isha* <. When they have finished praying *Isha*>, then they will have a discussion of activities together. In the discussion session, Ustadz Murtijo usually will emphasize the provision of a study on the knowledge of *aqidah*-morals or the knowledge of ethics.

Ustadz Murtijo said that the material taught is not too high. Ustadz Murtijo who is also lecturing in prisons and the localization uses the model which is as attractive as possible to teach religious material to the *santris* so that the *santris* are also interested to listen. An interesting model will motivate them to know the teaching of Islam itself. He is reluctant to provide religious materials that even the *santris* are not interested in. Ustadz Murtijo does not use rigid ways in presenting the material. For him, the transvestite *santris* who are willing to come to *Pondok Pesantren* to learn the religion has already made him grateful.

In addition to teaching religious materials, Ustadz Murtijo also accepts counseling services for the *santris*. Many transvestite *santris* tell their stories via SMS to Ustadz Murtijo. Usually, the transvestite *santris* tell about their life problems, such as romance, economics, and psychology. Ustadz Murtijo does not object to this counseling. Ustadz Murtijo does not see his transvestite *santris* merely as a student, but as a friend. Ustadz

Murtijo is aware of the difficulties experienced by the transvestite. Therefore, in Al-Fattah it is more important to establish a sense of family and togetherness among its members. Within his teaching, Ustadz Murtijo avoids the delivery of the things that are judgmental. Murtijo reduces the percentage of *halal-haram* material contained in the study of jurisprudence. For Murtijo, the emphasis is on the willingness of the transvestite *santri* to change for the better. To support the realization of such an idea, Ustadz Murtijo who ever experienced a boycott from some ustadz in Yogyakarta when he started teaching in Al-Fattah. Ustadz Murtijo stresses the teaching on *aqidah* material that the *santris* can live well in the transvestite community. "I taught how to pray well, morals in Islam, morality in seeking fortune, their morals to others, so that transvestites could be respected for the existence of their own activities".

Religious presentation is normally followed by question and answer. Ustadz Murtijo particularly likes the question and answer session because in this session, transvestite *santris* actively and openly ask questions with their innocence. The transvestite *santris* also show their transvestite tendency at the session, especially in the case of talking to each other using a palindrome not understood by Ustadz Murtijo who often accompanies transvestites at their death's door. Sometimes, when the discussion session begins, transvestite *santris* who asked permission to go home early because they will conduct evening activities. If ustadz Murtijo finds such a case, he does not directly give warning. Ustadz Murtijo always allows them because he believes that someday those who are still in the street will eventually change over time. Discussion session lasts until 21.00. Usually, the topic of discussion session cannot be separated from the issue of transvestite and worship.

### **Pengajian of Pon Wednesday Night**

In addition to regular *pengajian* activity once a week in Al-Fattah, there is also monthly religious gathering, which is also under the supervision of Ustadz Murtidjo. Every *Pon*

Wednesday once a month, part of the living room and the middle room in Bu Maryani's rented house are crowded. Approximately 100 people join the *pengajian*. The participants of *Pengajian Pon* Wednesday night consist of housewives in the village Notoyudan and group recitation of mothers from Surokarsan. Bu Maryani invites a group of mothers to Surokarsan because before staying in Notoyudan Bu Maryani already routinely conducted *Pon* Wednesday evening recitals in Surokarsan with some mothers there. Transvestite *santris* also participated in the study. But not all of them come because they have their own business outside. Regularly every month, Bu Maryani holds *Pengajian of Pon* Wednesday night with her own funds. Bu Maryani never asks for funds from the people. Even for both consumption and transport for the pilgrims, Surokarsan mothers are from Bu Maryani. When *Pon* Wednesday is approaching and Bu Maryani does not have the funds, she will borrow money. The *Pengajian* is initiated by Bu Maryani with the intention of praying for her birthday which is on Wednesday *Pon*.

### **Yasinan and Tahlilan**

Bu Maryani often receives the dead bodies of her fellow transvestites to be taken care of in the funeral. This is due to a lot of family of her fellow transvestite friends who refuse to attend the funeral. From previous experience, i.e. as many as fifteen of the late transvestites are visited by her transvestite *santris*, among those, five people were killed by train and ten people passed away due to illness. In addition, there are some people who died due to the aging factor. Those fifteenth deceased people did not have any relatives who would take care of their funeral. If the transvestites who died were Christian, then Bu Maryani would ask the help from Christian religious leaders. Therefore, Al-Fattah also holds an inter-religious prayer. If transvestite friend who is died is a Muslim, then Al-Fattah always holds *yasinan* and *tahlilan*. *Yasinan* and *tahlilan* are common activities of prayer for a deceased person by reading prayers and verses from the Quran. *Yasinan* and *tahlilan* are done for every transvestite

who has died despite whether the transvestites who have died belong to Al-Fattah or not. This includes if there are transvestites who are died and not citizens of Notoyudan, the people around Al-Fattah are also willing to work together to take care of their funeral. The men serve up tents while the women are in charge of the cooking. *Yasinan* and *tahlilan* are led by Ustadz Murtijo until seven days after the death of the late.

### **Grave Pilgrimage**

Every month of *Ruwah* ahead of Ramadan, Bu Maryani with the other fellow *santris* and ustadz usually perform the pilgrimage to the grave of transvestites with the intention of praying to transvestite friends who had died. Until now, the number of transsexual colleagues who have died and are visited along which some 15 tombs scattered in various tombs in Yogyakarta. In addition to grave pilgrimage of transvestite friends, the *santris* at the Al-Fattah are also invited to make a pilgrimage to the religious leaders of Islam in Yogyakarta as well as and outside the city, as it already is in the tomb of Sunan Ampel Surabaya. In the near future, Bu Maryani already plans to hold a pilgrimage to the grave of Gus Dur in Jombang and to the grave of Sukarno in Blitar. Grave pilgrimage activity was initiated by Bu Maryani with the intention to remind her and other transvestites that death is a certainty for every human being. Therefore Bu Maryani always invites friends in order to always serve the Lord. Besides remembering the dead, the grave pilgrimage is also done to remember the memory of their deceased friends during the life of transvestites where they spent time together. Both transportation funds (bus rental) and catering as well as accommodation when the pilgrimage - like flowers and wages for the caretaker tomb - are still the responsibility of Bu Maryani. If Mrs. Maryani does not have sufficient funds, then Bu Maryani will try to earn money on the appointed day, such as finding sponsors, seeking loans to moneylenders, or selling her belongings.

### **Ramadan, Syawalan and Idul Adha**

Usually in *Ramadan* month, the activities in Al-Fattah become more intensive. If a typical day is only once a week, in Ramadan, the number can be two to three times bigger. The activities include breaking the fast together, praying *Tarawih* together, *tadarus*, and *sahur* (dawn meal). Activities of Ramadan is usually enlivened by the arrival of various guests, such as *santris* and university academics, activists or observers' issues of gender and sexuality, community leaders, media and electronics, as well as national figures, like Shinta Nuriyya Wahid and Siti Musdah Mulia who break the fast with the family member of Al-Fattah. At such times, the rented house of Bu Maryani will be very crowded. As in other activities, Bu Maryani remains a major source of funding in the Ramadhan *month* activities. Bu Maryani admits that it is hard but it still has to be run. «Ya Allaaaah, I handle everything by myself, starting from preparing the breakfast, breakfasting, but when I feel tired, I remember the hereafter, well, later when I pass away, how I should wake up. So I rise again. «

Other important activities for Al-Fattah are *syawalan* and the festival of sacrifice. During these two Islamic festivals, Bu Maryani provides sacrificial animals to the people in Notoyudan. Sacrificial animals are purchased by the *santris* through contributions. Usually they sacrifice a goat for a village community of Notoyudan. Besides religious activities with *pesantren*, *santri* of Al-Fattah also participate in other events such as cultural parade, the anniversary of the city of Yogyakarta, and social events with free haircuts. These events become a means of assimilation and integrity of transvestites in Yogyakarta and to show their identity to the public.

### **Claiming religion through Religious Rites**

Amos (2008) described three characteristics of being religiously queer. These three gives me analytical tools for analysing Queer religiosity. Amos writes: "The few core values that I have argued are decidedly queer in

nature, include (a) affirming the goodness of human bodies in general and sexual bodies in particular, (b) privileging fluidity over fixity, and (c) living out a radical form of inclusivity and hospitality in the [Islamic] community. These values are formed by queer experience and, in turn, influence the way queer people think theologically. We could appropriately argue that these values are sacred values that describe the character of God as well as the shape of a faith that urges humanity to become more God-like” (Amos 2008: 63).

The activities in Al-Fattah depict how religion becomes a means of expression or struggle for the identity of a group (in this context transvestite) in four meaningful ways. *Firstly*, the pesantren is able to both give free religious expression to the transgender, and adjust to Muslim faith. Muslim religious groups are known to generally divide people into two groups, namely men and women. In Al-Fattah, students are free to decide whether they wear *mukena* or *sarung* when they pray to prove the social activities of religious *santri* at the Al-Fattah. *Muslim transgender can* worship comfortably in the middle of their identity as transvestites.

*Secondly*, Pesantren Al-Fattah is successful in nurturing Queer perspectives in understanding of religious doctrines and practices. Students can confidently challenge heteronormative attacks through queer inclusive religious interpretation. *Thirdly*, through series of religious rituals and activities, Al Fatah heals the division between being sexual and being religious, and has affirm their gender identities as a gift from God (Amos 2008: 65). Like other initiatives in Christianity, al-Fattah is also founded with a primary affirming theological understanding of transgender, which “acknowledges the failure of fixed categories of gender performance and sexual attraction to adequately represent the reality of our lives” (Amos 2008: 66). As part of pesantren, they now have a new identity: *santri*.

*Fourthly*, Pondok pesantren helps the transgender overcome six big challenges a transgender face in their life: (1) knowing themselves to be different from their assigned

genders at an early age; (2) lonely, homeless, no one to talk to; (3) misunderstood or rejected by parents or family; (4) inner certainty of their true gender identity; (5) pressured to fulfill gender expectations; (6) resistance to wearing clothing expected of their assigned gender; and (7) shame of their bodies’ development that contradicted what they knew to be their gender (Cris Glaser 2010). Through these series of activities, all these problems are addressed in Al-Fattah.

*Fifthly*, religious activities in Al-Fattah provide an exit to the challenges on the issue of fluidity vs. fixity normally faced by a transgender religious community. Amos writes: “This issue of fluidity vs. fixity may be the greatest challenge for queer theological communities. Repeatedly, even as we have appreciated the wiggle room to define ourselves, our gendered bodies, and our relationships in ways that transgress heteronormative assumptions, we have failed to master an ability to live comfortably with ambiguity for long. We seem to long for things to be ”pinned down” and we retreat to unchecked assumptions about the stability of gender and of relationship configurations” (Amos 2008: 68).

The experience of Al-Fattah illuminates that “gender and sexualities are continually negotiated, performed, intersected and disrupted with variance, traditions, and narratives apparently unintelligible (and most certainly unacceptable) to the two identified hegemonic discourses» (Hamziq 2012: 25). However, concrete religious forms give them religious confidence and security. As we can see in the life of *santri*, the impact of the pesantren is positive. Many are becoming more confident, and independent. From a religious perspective, many decided to stop and some were still fairly active in the evening although not as often as previously. Their activities in pesantren also reduce their *nyebong* activities. For example, W will go out for *nyebong* when she needs lots of money. W admits that she decides to do *nyebong* because there is no other job that puts transvestites as workers. «Store, supermarket, or office, they do not accept

transvestites. They only need a man or a woman. Although the transvestites have higher education, they still look for women or men. No vacancy accepts transvestites, very rare.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, Al-Fattah became a religious sanctuary for the transgenders until today. The leadership of Bu Maryani is continued by Bu Shinta because Bu Maryani passed away in 2014. Today Al-Fattah is located in Kotagede, Yogyakarta. Al-Fattah becomes an antithesis to everything outside, which use to curtail sexual and gender plurality. They use religions to express their gender and sexual identity. The centrality of Bu Maryani, her arcetism, her dedication to sacrifice everything for the pesantren, the detailed religious activity and pesantren approach is the key factor for the success of her pesantren. She is an inspiration, not only to the transgender, but also to everyone who realizes that they are human being. Her dedication to spend everything she gets from salon income, food stalls, beauty services, mortgages and cover the needs of their families and the needs of the *Pondok Pesantren* is incomparable.

Al-Fattah is successful because it provides supports for the vulnerable transgenders, give space for spiritual expressions, provide tolerant understanding of Islam, friendly spaces to worship according to their gender identities, and the variety of religious programs. Pesantren Al-Fattah can provide different understanding of Islam from the perspectives of transvestites. While society attack transvestite with certain verses of the Qur'an, the Muslim transvestites are able to show the defence of their gender identity by using arguments from the Qur'an and other Islamic traditions. Through religious activities such as prayers, *Pengajian* or discussion, *Pengajian* of Pon Wednesday night, *tadarus* Qur'an, *iftar* and *sahur* together, *yasinan* and *tahlilan*, grave pilgrimage, *syawalan* and religious gatherings, sacrifice on Eid al-Adha, and so on, the transgender Muslims

find real expression of religious spirituality and intellectualism. In these traditional forms of rituals, they overcome fixity and fluidity of religious expression. Pesantren helps waria overcome the prevailing structural inequalities of heteronormative secular and religious social worlds.

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