

EXPANDING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM THROUGH ORGANIZATIONAL FORMS

Kebatinan, Sufism and the Global Growth Movement in Indonesia's Spiritual Training Industry

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Abstract

In Indonesia, the practice of religious freedom remains deeply contested, with marginal spiritual movements often subject to stricter limitations than their officially recognized counterparts. This paper investigates two hybrid spiritual groups in contemporary Indonesia, Bhakti Nusantara and Bionergi, based in Yogyakarta, which integrate elements of Javanese spiritual traditions (Kebatinan), Sufism, and facets of the Global Growth Movement. Despite their syncretic practices, these organizations occupy a distinctive social position that grants them greater latitude in religious and spiritual expression. By comparing them with other fringe spiritual movements that have faced criticism and blasphemy charges, this paper argues that their status as spiritual or religious corporations enables them to enjoy broader freedoms. This distinction highlights the complexities of religious freedom and its dynamic governance in Indonesia, where the legal and social treatment of spiritual groups can vary significantly depending on their organizational shape and social location.

[Di Indonesia, praktik kebebasan beragama tetap menjadi isu yang masih



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sering diperdebatkan dan gerakan spiritual marginal sering kali mendapat tantangan yang lebih berat dibandingkan kelompok keagamaan resmi. Makalah ini mengkaji dua kelompok spiritual hibrida di Indonesia kontemporer, Bhakti Nusantara dan Bionergi, yang berbasis di Yogyakarta, yang mengintegrasikan elemen tradisi spiritual Jawa (Kebatinan), Tasawuf, dan elemen-elemen dari Global Growth Movement. Meskipun bersifat sinkretik, dua kelompok ini mempunyai posisi sosial unik. Konfigurasi organisasi yang unik memberi mereka kebebasan yang lebih luas dalam mengekspresikan praktik keagamaan dan spiritual. Dibandingkan dengan gerakan-gerakan spiritual pinggiran lain yang sering mendapat kritik dan tuduhan penodaan agama, dua kelompok ini dengan status sebagai korporasi spiritual mendapat kebebasan yang lebih luas. Temuan ini menandakan kompleksitas dan dinamika tata kelola kebebasan beragama di Indonesia, bahwa ragam perlakuan kebebasan yang didapat secara sosial dan legal suatu kelompok spiritual turut ditentukan oleh bentuk organisasi dan lokasi sosialnya.]

Keywords: religious institution, syncretism, spiritual enterprise, religious freedom.

A. Introduction

Before 1965, syncretism¹ was prominently evident in many of Indonesia's most popular religious movements, particularly those associated with the Kebatinan tradition. These Kebatinan groups typically emphasized several key characteristics: a focus on attaining gnosis (mystical insight) or harnessing its by-products, such as supernatural powers; the reception of new *wahyu* (revelations) or the development of alternative metaphysical systems; an eclectic approach that drew on local

¹ It should be noted here that the word "syncretism" may lead to various meaning indicating controversy on its historical meaning, usage, level and context in the scholarly discourses. One of the best discussion on syncretism in the arena of religion is a book by Anita Maria Leopold and Jeppe Sinding Jensen, *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*, 1st edition (New York: Routledge, 2004). The book, among other, categorizes definition of syncretism into two, "the notion of Syncretism" and "the phenomenon of syncretism". The book also offers three analytical level of syncretism: the social, cognitive and semiotic. The phenomenon of syncretism discussed in this paper can be seen either from social level of syncretism in which the phenomena are related to power relations in society or cognitive level when the process of the production of syncretism is part of transformation and innovation of religious/spiritual meanings in their new context.

cultures, principally the Javanese spiritual tradition (*Kejawen*), alongside major world religions, notably Islam, Christianity, and Indic traditions; and the practice of distinctive spiritual rites and metaphysical doctrines.

The Kebatinan movements resonated particularly with the educated elite, such as the *priyayi* (the nobility and bureaucratic class), intellectuals, and national figures, while also garnering substantial followings among laborers and farmers. Proponents regarded Kebatinan's teachings as harmoniously aligned with the civic duty of Indonesian citizens to cultivate *Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa* (belief in the One Supreme Godhead), the first principle of the Pancasila. Serving as the ideological foundation of the Indonesian state, the Pancasila encompasses five pillars: belief in one God; just and civilized humanity; the unity of Indonesia; democracy; and social justice, with its principles firmly enshrined in the Preamble of the 1945 Constitution.

In 1965, the Indonesian government issued Presidential Decree No. 1/1965, mandating that Kebatinan groups “return to their origins” by aligning themselves with one of the officially recognized world religions. This decree produced several significant outcomes. *First*, it formally delineated legitimate religions in Indonesia as Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism.² *Second*, it established a policy of “delimited pluralism”,³ effectively criminalizing the mixing of different religious traditions. *Third*, it paved the way for prosecuting individuals accused of “falsely using” or “defaming” one of these recognized religions. Under the framework of the blasphemy law, several fringe religious groups were banned or disbanded, and their leaders, such as Lia Eden of the Salamullah group and Ahmad Mosadeq of GAFATAR, were prosecuted and imprisoned.⁴

In 2009, Indonesia's Constitutional Court rejected an appeal to review the longstanding legislation (Law No. 1/PNPS/1965 and its ratifying regulation from 1969) that prohibits the free combination of elements from different religious traditions. This decision effectively

² In 2000, Presidential Decree No. 6/2000 includes Confucianism as one of official religions in Indonesia.

³ Julia D. Howell, “Muslims, the New Age and Marginal Religions in Indonesia: Changing Meanings of Religious Pluralism”, *Social Compass*, vol. 52, no. 4 (2005), pp. 473–93.

⁴ “Lia Eden Divonis 12 Tahun”, *detikNews* (2 Jun 2009), <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-1141615/lia-eden-divonis-2-tahun-6-bulan>; Anita Permata Dewi, “Pemimpin Gafatar Divonis Lima Tahun Penjara”, *Antara* (17 March 2017), https://www.antaranews.com/berita/616557/pemimpin-gafatar-divonis-lima-tahun-penjara#google_vignette.

reinforced the so-called blasphemy laws that criminalize not only non-mainstream interpretations of recognized religions but also any blurring of their doctrinal boundaries. Originally, this legislation was designed to target mystical groups (*golongan kebatinan*) characterized by their mixed religious practices, compelling their members to revert to one of the officially recognized religions. As a result, numerous groups and individuals, both historically and in recent years, have faced prosecution under this legal framework.

However, in 2018 the Constitutional Court accepted a judicial review concerning the right of Kebatnan and other indigenous religious practitioners to leave the religion column blank on their state-issued ID cards, and it permitted the use of the designation “*Penghaya*” (adherent of Kebatnan). This 2018 ruling offered a glimmer of hope to Kebatnan followers and other local religious communities formally recognized by the state. Nonetheless, implementation remains uneven at the grassroots level. Local officials often hesitate to facilitate changes to ID cards for adherents of Kebatnan and other indigenous practices. As noted by Hilmar Farid, the Director General of Culture at the Ministry of Education, Culture, Technology, and Higher Education, a limited understanding of these new regulations at sub-district levels continues to pose significant barriers.⁵

Various scholars have explored Indonesia’s blasphemy law controversy. Hasan argues that the law fundamentally hinders the state’s capacity to manage religious diversity and freedom effectively.⁶ Meanwhile, contemporary research on spiritual movements, particularly Kebatnan groups, has gained significant attention. For example, Muttaqin explores the evolution of the terms “spiritual” and “*spiritualitas*” in describing local spiritual expressions like Kebatnan, as well as their broader incorporation within Indonesia’s official religions.⁷ Similarly, Suciati examines how Javanese Muslims integrate Pangestu’s Kebatnan teachings to address

5 Antara, “Kemendikbud Ungkap Kurangnya Pemahaman Aparatur Jadi Hambat KTP Penghayat”, detikNews (19 Jul 2023), <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-6830772/kemendikbud-ungkap-kurangnya-pemahaman-aparatur-jadi-hambat-ktp-penghayat>.

6 Noorhaidi Hasan, “Religious Diversity and Blasphemy Law: Understanding Growing Religious Conflict and Intolerance in Post-Suharto Indonesia”, *Al-Jāmi‘ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 55, no. 1 (2017), pp. 105-26.

7 Ahmad Muttaqin, “Islam and the Changing Meaning of Spiritualitas and Spiritual in Contemporary Indonesia”, *Al-Jāmi‘ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 50, no. 1 (2012), pp. 23-56.

their socio-economic and spiritual needs.⁸ Furthermore, Zuhri's study of Javanese literature indicates that while a blend of Islamic and Javanese cultural practices may occur, such syncretism rarely extends into their theological realms.⁹

In today's increasingly commercialized landscape, products and practices synthesized from diverse sources, ranging from officially recognized religions and indigenous traditions to elements of the global growth movement, circulate with relative freedom. This paper explores this phenomenon by examining two local providers of spiritualized personal development training alongside two nationally well-known enterprises that similarly draw on Sufi heritage and popular science to construct an ambivalently non-denominational form of spirituality, tailored for consumers from various religious backgrounds. In addition, we draw parallels between these contemporary commercial groups and the earlier non-commercial Kebatinan communities, highlighting the different dimensions through which each may be understood as possessing a syncretic character. The analysis also considers the conditions that sustain the viability of modern spiritual training providers within Indonesia's current legal framework, placing particular emphasis on their status as fully registered business entities. Key questions guiding our inquiry include: Where does the social and commercial space for these spiritual enterprises lie in today's Indonesia? And why have they continued to operate despite their apparent departure from the government's reaffirmed policy of delimited religious pluralism and their promotion of practices historically associated with *klenik* (occultism)?

B. Syncretism in the Social History of Religious Movements

In Indonesian religious discourse, the concept of syncretism is highly problematic, often implying that certain religious teachings and practices are inauthentic. There is an expectation that religious traditions should remain distinct and untainted by external cultural or religious influences. Mainstream groups frequently regard syncretism as a deviation from proper religious practice. The term "syncretism" carries at least two significant connotations. First, it embodies the theological assumption

⁸ S. Suciati, "The Cohesiveness of Muslim Pangestu Members in Salatiga, Central Java", *Al-Jāmi'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 52, no. 1 (2014), pp. 85-99.

⁹ Zuhri, "Beyond Syncretism: Evidence of the Vernacularization of Islamic Theological Terms in Javanese Literature in the 19th Century", *Al-Jāmi'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 60, no. 2 (2022), pp. 373-98.

that blended traditions are inherently “impure” or “inauthentic”. In this view, a true religion is seen as a unique divine revelation with distinct teachings, and any intermingling with elements from other traditions is perceived as a departure from that divine truth. Second, the term is deployed rhetorically by those who claim to represent the authentic spiritual interests of believers within specific social and historical contexts. This rhetorical use, primarily championed by pre-modern reformist movements in both Christianity and Islam, is deeply rooted in colonial legacies. These legacies have promoted notions that syncretism is almost synonymous with superstition, that superior European Christian cultures have advanced beyond such “primitive” forms, and that modernist Islamic reform should be strictly scripturalist and dismissive of mystical practices.

Javanese *Kebatinan* movements from the 1950s to the 1980s have been studied by, among others, Hadiwijono,¹⁰ Hamka,¹¹ Howe,¹² Howell,¹³ Kroef,¹⁴ Mulder,¹⁵ Rasjidi,¹⁶ and Stange.¹⁷ The term *Kebatinan* encompasses a wide range of Javanese spiritual practices, including those related to metaphysics, mysticism, psychology, and even magic. While some local Muslim scholars, like Hamka and Rasjidi, approached the *Kebatinan* from historical and theological perspectives, Western scholars tried to discern the movement from political, sociological, and psychological points of view. How about *Kebatinan* after the Reformation era? A relatively new documentation on this issue suggests a decline in the *Abangan* stream, a kind of syncretism between Islam and *Javanism*, due to increasing processes of Islamization or religionization. Hefner, in his introductory paragraph on his account of the decline of *Abanganism*, states:

Over the past half century, Indonesia has witnessed a little-noted but

¹⁰ Harun Hadiwijono, *Man in the Present Javanese Mysticism* (Netherlands: Bosch & Keuning, 1967).

¹¹ Hamka, *Perkembangan Kebatinan di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1971).

¹² David Gordon Howe, “Sumarah: A Study of the Art of Living”, Ph.D. Thesis (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1980).

¹³ Julia Day Howell, “Vehicles for the Kalki Avatar: The Experiments of a Javanese Guru in Rationalizing Ecstatic Religion”, Ph.D. Thesis (Stanford University, 1977).

¹⁴ Justus M. van der Kroef, “New Religious Sects in Java”, *Far Eastern Survey*, vol. 30, no. 2 (1961), pp. 18–25.

¹⁵ Niels Mulder, *Mysticism & Everyday Life in Contemporary Java: Cultural Persistence and Change* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1978).

¹⁶ H.M. Rasjidi, *Islam dan Kebatinan* (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1974).

¹⁷ Paul Denison Stange, “The Sumarah Movement in Javanese Mysticism”, Ph.D. Thesis (The University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1982).

important transformation of its popular religious heritage: the collapse of the nonstandard, syncretic varieties of Islam for which this sprawling Southeast Asian country was once renowned. Two generations ago, there were many such locally oriented Islamic traditions, as well as non-standard modules of ritual and learning embedded within traditions otherwise deemed Islamic.¹⁸

Following the collapse of the New Order regime under Soeharto, the 1990s witnessed the emergence of new spiritual movements in Indonesia that framed spiritual expression as part of the broader piety-promotion initiatives within officially recognized. Among these, the urban Sufi revival --often referred to as urban Sufism-- has become particularly prominent and is widely regarded as part of the broader Islamic resurgence.¹⁹ The popularity of urban Sufism discourse has attracted scholastic study, including studies by Darmadi,²⁰ Yusuf on Arifin Ilham's zikir activities,²¹ and Zamhari on the growing number of new *majlis dhikir* *vis a vis* official Tarikat in Kediri East Java about legitimacy of the groups.²² Although these groups primarily explore contemporary forms of Islamic spirituality in urban settings, their exploration is interwoven with psychological touch and growth-oriented discourses, drawing criticism from mainstream religious authorities who question their authenticity as expressions of Islam.

Studies have also been conducted on Islamic televangelism and spiritual training programs, which promote piety by translating Sufi teachings at practical levels. Among the most notable innovations in this domain are Aa Gym's spiritual management training courses, known as

¹⁸ Robert W. Hefner, "Where Have All the Abangan Gone? Religionization and the Decline of Non-Standard Islam in Contemporary Indonesia", in *The Politics of Religion in Indonesia: Syncretism, Orthodoxy, and Religious Contention in Java and Bali*, ed. by Michel Picard and Rémy Madinier (London & New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 71.

¹⁹ Julia Day Howell, "Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 60, no. 3 (2001), pp. 701–29; Martin Van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell, *Sufism and the 'Modern' in Islam*, (London: I.B Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007).

²⁰ Dadi Darmadi, "Urban Sufism: The New Flourishing Vivacity of Contemporary Indonesian Islam", *Studia Islamika*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2001), pp 205-10.

²¹ Aang Abu Bakar Yusuf, "Between Sufism and Piety: The Case of Muhammad Arifin Ilham & His Majelis Az Zikra", presented at the Piety and Pietization in Asia (National University of Singapore: Asia Research Institute, 2007).

²² Arif Zamhari, *Rituals of Islamic Spirituality: A study of Majelis Dhikr Groups in East Java* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2010).

Manajemen Qalbu,²³ and Ari Ginanjar Agustian's ESQ Way 165, which Rudnykyj conceptualizes as part of spiritual economies,²⁴ a cultural framework that bridges Islamic ethics with neoliberal economic values, thereby giving rise to a form of market Islam targeted at Indonesia's upper middle class. Another type of spiritual group, that Muttaqin has studied previously comprises businesses that market spiritual efficacy through both training and the sale of spirituality-charged material objects, said to possess metaphysical, material, and physical power.²⁵ In that research, Muttaqin notes that the Yogyakarta spiritual centers marked the hybrid forms of spirituality that represent a shift from piety-centered movements toward models emphasizing efficacy and empowerment. Unlike those studies, this paper focuses on the commercial domain of Indonesian spiritual training businesses that actively perform and promote syncretism, yet do so without incurring stigmatization or accusations of blasphemy from mainstream religious institutions.

In the contemporary Indonesian political landscape, syncretism is a contentious issue. Mainstream religious groups, supported by state instruments, function as watchdogs, actively scrutinizing and criticizing marginal religious movements considered as syncretic. Nevertheless, in practice, Indonesia today presents a wide array of cultural and religious, such as (1) deconfessionalised techniques²⁶ for cultivating spirituality and its benefits in yoga, meditation, tai chi, and reiki; (2) the widespread notion of spirituality as a universal essence *underlying all major religions* (and possibly others); and (3) the rise of ethnoreligious practices that, in some cases, fuse the teachings of the world's major religions with local cultural traditions.

The intersection of spiritual discourse and scientific rationality in Indonesia reflects a long-standing historical trajectory, paralleling

²³ James Bourk Hoesterey, "Sufis and Self-Help Gurus: Islamic Psychology, Religious Authority, and Muslim Subjectivity in Contemporary Indonesia", Ph.D. Thesis (University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2009); Julia D. Howell, "Modulation of Active Piety: Professors and Televangelists as Promoters of Indonesian "Sufisme"", in *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, ed. by Greg Fealy and Sally White (Singapore: ISEAS, 2008), pp. 40–62.

²⁴ Daromir Rudnykyj, "Spiritual Economies: Islam and Neoliberalism in Contemporary Indonesia", *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2009), pp. 104–41.

²⁵ Ahmad Muttaqin, "Hybrid Spirituality and Religious Efficacy of Yogyakarta Spiritual Centres", Ph.D. Thesis (Australia: University of Western Sydney, 2012).

²⁶ Deconfessionalised techniques is deconfessionalization of spiritual practices which involves techniques or approaches that aim to reducing sectarianism, promoting interfaith dialogue, and focus on shared values that transcend specific religious affiliation.

developments in Western contexts. Science, widely regarded as a source of universally valid and efficacious knowledge, has played a central role in legitimizing spiritual practices and claims. This trend has considerable potential here for tension with Indonesia's policy of delimited pluralism, which seeks to maintain discrete boundaries among state-recognized religions. Yet the notions of universal spirituality and scientifically grounded spiritual authority are far from novel. They were integral to early twentieth-century Theosophical circles and later found renewed articulation in the mid-twentieth-century Kebatinan movement, which appropriated theosophical cosmologies to ground its syncretic vision. What distinguishes the contemporary period is the re-articulation of these ideas through the globalized vocabulary of *spiritualitas*, a term derived from English spirituality, and its immediate resonance with Sufi traditions, particularly within the urban Sufi revival that has unfolded over the past three decades. A significantly expanded middle class now participates in global cultural flows, including scientific discourses, to a degree unimaginable during the mid-twentieth century, when Kebatinan was largely the domain of a small Javanese intellectual elite. A wider market for the spiritualized popular sciences of success and physical well-being is also available. As will be explored in the next sub-chapter, the market is driven by the production of how-to books on spirituality for success and a happy life, the scientification of religions, and psychologization of religious practices for the shake of prosperity.

Previous studies by scholars such as Hoestery,²⁷ Rudnykij,²⁸ Howell,²⁹ have highlighted the tensions that emerge when universalizing constructions of *spiritualitas* come into contact with Indonesia's official pluralist framework. Consider the cases of Abdullah Gymnastiar's Manajemen Qalbu (MQ) and Ary Ginanjar's Emotional and Spiritual Quotient (ESQ): both initiatives merge religious ideas and practices with the popular psychology of personal development. They promote piety projects for Indonesians, arguing that adopting greater religious discipline is the key to success here and in the hereafter. While Abdullah Gymnastiar implicitly invokes Sufi spiritual tenets, Ary Ginanjar explicitly integrates a universal spirituality into his ESQ brand, allowing their fundamentally

²⁷ Hoestery, "Sufis and Self-Help Gurus".

²⁸ Rudnyckij, "Spiritual Economies".

²⁹ Julia Day Howell, "'Calling' and 'Training': Role Innovation and Religious De-differentiation in Commercialised Indonesian Islam", *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol. 28, no. 3 (2013), pp. 401–19; Howell, "Modulation of Active Piety".

Islamic *dakwah* approaches to be extended to non-Muslims. Even though both figures and their organizations have faced criticism for allegedly promoting heresies, they have not been charged with blasphemy by the PAKEM (*Pengawas Aliran Kepercayaan Masyarakat*, the Controlling Body of the Mystical Movement of the Society). Conversely, universalistic forms of *spiritualitas* have been pushed into defensive postures. This is evident in cases such as Lia Aminuddin (Lia Eden) with the Salamullah group,³⁰ the perennialist Kaum Eden group; the Brahma Kumari World Spiritual University, now affiliated with the Hindu Directorate of the Department of Religion; and Anand Krishna's One Earth One Sky Center and the Anand Ashram, which, although they continue to offer courses like Neo-Zen Reiki and Self-Empowerment, have promoted a secular social values movement known as the National Integration Movement since 2005.

C. Syncretism in Spiritual Training Business: Success Profiles

Two additional groups bear a strong resemblance to MQ and ESQ,³¹ yet exhibit notable differences: Bhakti Nusantara (BN) and Bioenergi. All four groups share several common objectives: they teach methods for cultivating *spiritualitas* for personal betterment, reinforce the credibility of their teachings with scientific evidence, and offer their products to individuals of all religious backgrounds while operating as established business entities. However, BN and Bioenergi diverge from MQ and ESQ in two significant ways. First, they promote themselves primarily as offering direct access to supernatural powers through their products, rather than emphasizing morality, ethics, or piety as MQ and ESQ do. Second, they provide not only personal training programs but also tangible material objects that are claimed to confer supernatural abilities.

The public visibility of BN and Bioenergi presents a significant tension with the spirit of Presidential Decree No. 1, 1965, due to the following considerations: First, one of the most damning accusations that could be leveled against a *Kebatinan* group in the 1950s and 1960s (aside from charges of political subversion) was the promotion of 'occultism' (*klenik*). Most *Kebatinan* groups at the time distanced themselves from power-oriented mystical practices long embedded in Javanese religious culture.

Second, the official recognition of *Kebatinan* groups as 'faiths'

³⁰ Al Makin, *Challenging Islamic Orthodoxy: Accounts of Lia Eden and Other Prophets in Indonesia* (Springer, 2016).

³¹ Muttaqin, "Hybrid Spirituality".

(*kepercayaan*) (not religions, *agama*) in 1973 was both a political concession to the Kebatnan movement (acknowledging their continued electoral relevance) and also an attempt at a clean-up of the groups from any religious elements, that were then the Kebatnan groups administered by the Directorate of Culture under the Ministry of Education and Culture instead of Ministry of Religion, obliged to demonstrate that they could function within parameters very similar to the religions, and not encroach on each other or the recognized religions.

Third, the historical connections between *Kebatnan* (syncretic spiritual groups) and *klenik* reminds us that the problem with syncretism in colonial and post-colonial Indonesian society has been *as much with* superstition *as with* the implications of revealed, uniquely true, monotheistic religion. To be perceived as superstitious was to be cast as socially and economically regressive, lacking the rational and moral credibility required to participate on equal footing within the post-World War II international order of modern nation-states. Interestingly enough, why are such the two latest groups, the “efficacy” groups³² of BN and the Bioenergi, as opposed to piety oriented groups still around and tend to be save from any criticism for promoting heresy and charged as religious blasphemy? To address the question, we must first take a closer look at the two groups in question.

1. *Bhakti Nusantara*³³

The Bhakti Nusantara (literally means “devotion to archipelago”) was founded on April 15, 1998, in Yogyakarta by Muhammad Basis (b. 1966). The group has transformed its name several times indicating its changing focus. Firstly, it appeared in public as *Lembaga Seni Pernafasan Meditasi dan Tenaga Dalam Bhakti Nusantara* (LSPMTD BN [Institute for the Arts of Breath, Meditation and Inner Power]), the BN promoted means for attaining health and for mastering supernatural power through *senam pernafasan* (aerobic gymnastics), meditation, and inner power cultivation.

In 2001, the LSPMTD BN changed its name to PIHTI or

³² *Ibid.*

³³ This section was mostly taken from Ahmad Muttaqin, “Hybrid Spirituality and Religious Efficacy of Yogyakarta Spiritual Centres” and Ahmad Muttaqin, “From Occultism to Hybrid Sufism: the Transformation of an Islamic-Hybrid Spiritual Group in Contemporary Indonesia”, *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2014), pp. 81–104; and then the data was updated based on fieldwork in Yogyakarta from July to November 2019.

Padepokan Ilmu Hikmah Sejati Bhakti Nusantara [Centre for True Wisdom Knowledge of Bhakti Nusantara] and expanded its services to include true wisdom knowledge claimed inherited by *Para Wali* [Muslim Saints] which transmitted from generation to generation through *pengijazaban* process, authentication of spiritual transition from a spiritual *gurus* to *murid*. In this era, BN offered spiritual healing services and training programs for alternative healers. The group produced and sold various herbal medicines packaged in capsules, powders, etc., as well as many other health and spiritual products.

In early 2005, the BN changed its name to Puspa Jati or *Pusat Penggalian Jati Diri* [Centre for Character Building] *Bhakti Nusantara* and introduced the Tekaji or *Terapi Kekuatan Jiwa* [Soul Power Therapy] training program, which is a self-management class combined with *dhikr* litanies, humanistic psychology, and meditation. In 2005, the group also established Masais or *Majlis Samudra Istighfar* [Assembly of the Ocean of Forgiveness] whose main activities include performing collective *dhikr* and organizing *ziarah* [pilgrimage] to sacred sanctuaries of local and national Muslim saints. Finally, in about 2012, the group changed its name to the Pusat Olah Jiwa dan Olah Rasa (center for the cultivation of soul and sense).

BN publications of flyers and brochures describe its leader as Gus Muhammad Basis, abbreviated as GMB or sometimes just GM. The full name and title, Drs. H. Muhammad Basis, MBA, MRI, is usually written below his given name. The publication also lists a number of attributes indicating GMB's authority and competencies in many areas, such as: in spiritual and psychological training and consultancy as the grand master of character exploration [*Guru Besar Pusat Penggalian Jati Diri Bhakti Nusantara*], a nationally reputed trainer of soul power therapy [*trainer nasional Terapi Kekuatan Jiwa*], and a mentor of Assembly of the Ocean of Forgiveness [*Pengasuh Majelis Samudra Istighfar*]; in spiritual and alternative healing as master of divine and revealed therapy [*ahli terapi Ilahiyah dan ilhamiah*], the master of the *ruqyah*³⁴ therapy for self-cleansing [*ahli ruqyah akbar 'taẓkiyatun-nafs'*]; and in Islamic music and poetry as shepherd of the Islamic Music Group [*pengasuh group nasyid*] 'Eling Karepe' (literally means

³⁴ *Ruqyah* is a therapy method involving recitation of certain verses of the Qur'an. It is dedicated to supplications and is used as a means of treating sickness and other problems, mainly those caused by bad spirits, demons, and also physical diseases. Some Muslim groups consider that the *ruqyah* is an Islamic therapy method practiced by the Prophet Muhammad.

remember to God's will) for which his poems were composed as lyrics.

Many people came to GMB and the BN requesting help because they considered that GMB had *daya linuwih* (extraordinary power). Although his community and especially his disciples consider GMB as a charismatic figure possessing a series of spiritual powers and martial arts, on many occasions GMB claimed that he was not a *dukun* [traditional healer associated with occult practices] nor *paranormal* [magicians], nor *kyai*. He prefers to be called a spiritualist, who is not affiliated with any religious group or certain Sufi order.

An Indonesian tabloid, *Posmo*,³⁵ attributed Basis as an internationally reputed master of the *ruqyah* [*Abli Ruqyah Internasional*].³⁶ In 2005, *Posmo* tabloid awarded GMB the 'Posmo Award 2005',³⁷ along with thirty-four Indonesian spiritualists. In his profile, GMB was described as a figure who had been transformed from street spirituality to the Muslim way [*dari spiritualitas ilmu kejadugan ke jalan Muslim*]. It is illustrated that his spiritual journey was a transformation process from *spiritualitas kasar* (rough spirituality) to *spiritualitas alus* (soft and finer spirituality) indicating the shifting from occultism to hybrid Sufism. When we clarified with him the meaning of his transformation, GMB explained it in the context of his spiritual center. He drew an analogy between his center's development and car speed transmissions. GMB noted that the LSPMTD era, when the BN offered training on invulnerability and occultism [*kekebalan* (bulletproof), *anti api* (fire resistant), *terawangan* (sibyl), etc.], was the era of *kejadugan*. To GMB, this kind of occultism [the *ilmu katosan* and *kanuragan*] is *spiritualitas kasar*, literally means 'rough spirituality', which is a very basic

³⁵ *Posmo* is a weekly tabloid first published on 15 March 1999 in Surabaya and dealing with the spiritual and paranormal, amid the uncertainty in Indonesia after the decline of the New Order era in 1998. The word '*Posmo*' was taken from Postmodernism. The idea behind publishing the tabloid was to provide alternative information, when the public was overwhelmed by political news. The main contents of the tabloid are about spiritual, ritual, religious, and esoteric dimensions of human beings. As stated by the editor, the tabloid addresses, as its main readers, the religious community, Javanese centrists, spiritualists and paranormal, religious people, *budayawan* [humanists, cultural activists], historians, and academics. Due to competitive development of online tabloid/magazine, *Posmo* ended its paper publication in December 2017.

³⁶ Koesmoko et al., *Profil Spiritualis Penerima Posmo Award 2005* (Posmo, 2005).

³⁷ The Posmo Award is a yearly award by *Posmo* tabloid, dedicated to spiritualist, paranormal and alternative healers, that according to the editor, have contributed much to the development and continuation of the tabloid, by for example, advertising their spiritual programs and products; Muttaqin, "From Occultism to Hybrid Sufism"; Muttaqin, "Hybrid Spirituality".

level of spiritual knowledge and practice, just like the first gear of a car.

Religious eclecticism or syncretism in Bhakti Nusantara can be seen in its spiritual training program that offers various spiritual traditions ranging from occult practices, *ritual dhikr*, to spiritual products sold to its customers. For example, when we conducted a fieldwork and interview, GMB explained that he had a *keris* (kris) in his room which could give him a signal whenever there would be a guest with negative intentions coming to him. In one of the videos uploaded on YouTube, GMB demonstrates how to make a kris stand-alone on its sharp part as a foundation.³⁸ He also explained that one day, on his journey for *ziarah makam wali* (pilgrimage to saint grave) with his disciples, he and his group cancel to eat their catering at one of the restaurants because he saw that all the served food were already eaten by many spiritual entities which only can be seen by a special person.

Furthermore, amid the popularity of social media in Indonesia, the group switched its strategy for promotion, from print-out flyers, local TV shows, and newspaper advertisements to direct promotion via short messages or WhatsApp of targeted customers. In one of his WA messages on 10 November 2019, GM sent a picture when he met his guess with a note:

I meet guests from Japan. The guest's problem is that the husband is gripped by a demonic aura of jinn, so the husband is unaware of *iblis/ijah's* (devil) behavior, which is extremely unreasonable! In Japan, in Indonesia, and anywhere in the world, jinn exist! Who does not believe in the existence of jinn, means he does not believe in the existence of humans, animals, fish, trees, etc. on earth. The jinn are just the same as those creatures. All are created by Allah SWT. Those who do not believe in the existence of spirits or the existence of trillions of angels, levels of heaven and hell, etc., are very arrogant atheists! Therefore, let us continue to take Allah SWT as our protector by diligently reading His Holy verses so that we are not contaminated or attached by the aura of the jinn/devils....

The BN teachings and practices to some degree reflect syncretism between Islamic spiritual tenets of Sufism with the practices of occultism rooted in Javanese tradition. Nevertheless, BN succeeded in surviving and lack of both criticism and blasphemy by mainstream religious groups. Its

³⁸ Rumah Sehat Alami BN, "Gus Muh. Basis (GMB) Mendirikan Keris" (14 May 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SlpGNAXRfEs>, accessed 14 August 2019.

ability to brand the center as a spiritual training and consulting business institution, not a religious organization, is among the key factors of its success.

2. *Bioenergi*³⁹

Bioenergi is a spiritual enterprise in Yogyakarta which is run under the rubric of PT. Bionergi Internasional (Bionergi International, Inc.). The group declares itself as the center for training, healing, and business consultation, with its tagline “*Menjadi akhir segala solusi*” (Be the final solution); the solution, that is, of various problems such as those concerning disease, career, business, and family. Among the terms mostly used in its promotions are: *sehat* (healthy), *sukses* (successful), *kaya-raya* (rich), and *bahagia* (blithe).

The group was founded by Syaiful M. Magshri (b. 1968) in Yogyakarta based on the vision he got when he performed *tafakkur* in 1994. Syaiful claimed to be a *tarekat* (Sufi Order) practitioner and also had involved in a number of inner power trainings groups (*lembaga pelatihan senam pernafasan dan tenaga dalam*) in Yogyakarta, such as Sinar Putih, Prana Sakti, and Satria Nusantara. In the last group, Syaiful was even appointed as a fellow in the Bureau of Research and Development where he had an opportunity to conduct research, so he understood well the ‘secret’ behind the *tenaga dalam* (inner power).

Bionergi publication depicts Syaiful as a religious and professional person who holds many kinds of spiritual aura. He was described as the inventor and formulator of Bioenergi Science; founder and owner of Bionergi Center; owner of the companies CV Mahkotasari Reymasindo and PT Bioenergi International; spiritual consultant for Suzuya Corporation of Japan and Hong Kong; founder of Natural Healing Foundation Indonesia; shepherd of Majelis Ilmu Spiritual Indonesia (Assembly of Indonesian Spiritual Knowledge); spiritual teacher and founder of Bunga Melati Foundation which focuses on education for Down syndrome and autism. For his spiritual mastery, Posmo tabloid nominated Syaiful for the Posmo Award in 2005.⁴⁰ For his professional competency in developing entrepreneurship, the Indonesian Ministry

³⁹ This part was mostly developed from Muttaqin, “Hybrid Spirituality” and Ahmad Muttaqin, “From Piety to Efficacy: Hybrid Sufism in a Secular Landscape”, *RIMA: Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2012), pp. 25–46; then, the data was updated based on fieldwork in Yogyakarta from July to November 2019.

⁴⁰ Koesmoko et al., *Profil Spiritualis Penerima Posmo Award 2005*.

of Cooperation and Small and Medium Businesses recognized Syaiful as a young billionaire and awarded him the ISEMBIA Award in 2007.⁴¹ The center's products indicate an amalgamation of various elements of religious Sufi teachings, herbal, global spiritual-growth movement, as well as scientific notions. The slogan "*ilmiah, ilahiah dan tanpa efek samping*" (scientifically grounded, spiritually guided, free from adverse effect) appears in almost the group's advertisements indicating that all of its products are scientifically proven, religiously accepted and without any side effects.

The eclecticism by selecting, combining, and preserving original contexts, and syncretism by integration, fusion, and creation of new meanings of Bionergi can be found in its spiritual training and spiritual products. The name of the trainings and product offered by the groups indicates the amalgamation of Javanese tradition, Sufis tradition, and scientific consideration. For example, Syaiful names his spiritual training as: *Gemblengan Ilmu Metafisik* (GIM), *Pelatihan Quantum Bioenergi*, *Program Bioenergi Healing*, *Rawatan Bionergi*, etc. On the center's website, the GIM is described as a training program to master practical solutions for various problems and to realize all human needs in modern metaphysics ways with a note "*tanpa ritual, tanpa mantra, tanpa klenik*" (no rituals, no mantra, no occult). Furthermore, on the picture of the program advertisement, there is also a note that the GIM is *Ilmiah - Alamiah - Ilahiah* (Scientific, Natural, Divine). It seems that it is part of the center's strategy to offer training programs representing the hybridity of several elements. The terms *gemblengan ilmu metafisik* are commonly used for something related to occult practices and tend to be considered by rational modern people as backward. The center, therefore, adds the word "modern" after the "metafisik", noting that the metaphysic taught in the GIM is not as backward as the public assumes. Even the center also guarantees that the program is not in contradiction to science or religion, and it is natural.

For spiritual products, Bionergi offers terms that are more scientific tone such as "Bio Sound" (CD music for audio therapy), "Bio Cell", "Bio Chips," (chips attached to a gadget to easily persuade customers via phone), "Kapsul Bioenergi" (Bionergi capsule), "kapsul penyembuhan" (healing capsule), "kapsul kecerdasan" (intelligence cap-

⁴¹ Syaiful Maghsri, "Profile HM Syaiful M. Maghsri," *Bionergi Menjadi Akhbar Segala Solusi* (4 Dec 2017), <https://bioenergicenter.com/profil-hm-syaiful-m-maghsri/>, accessed 3 September 2019.

sule), Bioherba (herbal product for health), etc. The interesting thing about Bioenergi is how the center tries to rationalize its spiritual training and products through the process of “psychologization” and “scientification.”

The psychologization appears during the training program by emphasizing that all people have potential energy, called Bio-energy, existing around their body that can be nurtured and cultivated for their prosperity. During the training, participants were motivated by a suggestion that they can reach their success and break their limits with words of encouragement that psychologically boost strong motivation. One of the training processes is what the center calls “bionergi adjustment”, in which participants were stimulated by establishing their commitment, pumping their motivation, increasing their self-confidence, and being positive thinking and positive feeling. Psychologically, the adjustment process is a turning point, a moment of change for an individual to be better than in the past; shifting from a negative point of view into a positive one; transforming a passive and responsive attitude into a proactive one.

In the Bionergi training and publications, Sufi teachings are elaborated with elements of self-management, humanistic psychology, and growth techniques. In his books, seminars, and training programs, Syaiful claims that he just explores Sufis teaching in practical ways for practical goals. For example, performing *doa* (prayer) and *zikir* (repetitive litanies) before conducting certain activities is equivalent to mind navigation strategies to gain better concentration. *Sabar* (patience) and *syukur* (gratitude) will lead people to find tranquillity and a peaceful mind so they will be able to manage their positive thinking. As a result, they will not easily fall into a stressful mind and are hindered from any sickness.

The scientification of spiritual products can be seen in its explanation that in addition to being taught in class during the training program, the efficacy of the Bionergi can be transferred through the manufactured goods in capsules, cards, chips, CDs, which are promoted as spiritually efficacious. Referring to research findings in a prestigious American university, the center, for example, claims that hearing certain sounds can be therapy for health problems. The center also claims that

the Biochip is made of materials in which its atom has been heated in a nuclear reactor in Japan. About the Intelligence capsule, the center explains:

The Intelligence Capsule is formulated precisely and accurately by the inventor and formulator of bioenergy science, Mr. Syaiful M. Maghsri. The capsule contains bioelectromagnetic energy which, if taken, will immediately fuse and stimulate the biomolecular system in the body that will radiate and connect with all aspects of life: physical, spiritual, mental, emotional, social, economic, and spiritual, so as to neutralize various effects of negative energy, improve memory and facilitate the realization of the hopes and ideals of your children.⁴²

The above Bionergi profile has shown that under the umbrella of spiritual business, not a religious group, the center has succeeded in operating without public attention to its syncretic element. The center also actively campaigns and frames its products and program as scientifically proven, religious/spiritually accepted without any side effects. Again, the social location of a spiritual business, not a religious/spiritual group is a fundamental reason for its success.

D. Social Location and Space of Religious Freedom

Returning to our first “why” question: How can these syncretic religious-spiritual efficacy groups, such as BN and Bioenergi, continue to find a market? While the Kebatinan groups, organized under the banner of *Kepercayaan* and supervised by the Department of Education and Culture (and later the Department of Culture and Tourism), have waned in popularity over recent decades, groups rooted in *tenaga dalam* and other occult practices (exemplified by BN and Bioenergi) have continued to attract and recruit followers.

There are still plenty of people practicing as what once would have been called *dukun* (supernatural healers, miracle workers, and practitioners of dark arts), but those in the public view now call themselves spiritualists or *paranormal*. They operate as individual providers, for a price (although not necessarily specified) and advertise in magazines. *Posmo* tabloid is dedicated to covering matters of interest to this community and its clients.

Now let us consider the second question: Why have groups promoting a broadly syncretic spirituality, with practices extending beyond

⁴² “Kapsul Kecerdasan”, *Bioenergi Center*, <https://bioenergicenter.com/kapsul-kecerdasan/>, accessed 9 Nov 2019.

the boundaries of a single recognized religion (syncretism) and claiming to provide access to supernatural powers (superstition), not been shut down or denounced by MUI (*Majlis Ulama Indonesia*, Indonesian Ulama Council)?

First, it is important to acknowledge that both groups have attracted criticism, and even physical attacks, even though neither has been taken to court. So why have not they been shut down by the government? A key factor lies in their social location: they are constituted as formal business entities. Having registered as a *CV* or *PT* (limited company), these groups do not present themselves as religions. They do not aim to compete with or challenge the officially recognized religions. For example, while Bhakti Nusantara gradually remodels itself on the model of prominent piety-promotion enterprises, it is also mindful of conducting Sufi devotions without incurring allegations of misusing religion. In this framework, its founder views the pietization of the business as a natural progression, a strategy that reinforces the credibility of the products offered while simultaneously contributing to the Islamic *dakwah* movement.

Another factor is the nature of the commercial environment. In the marketplace, what these groups teach and sell appears similar to products that originated in secular arenas, such as performance-enhancing psychology or alternative medicine practices, which are not inherently linked to “spirituality”. This similarity makes it difficult to single out BN or Bioenergi as transgressing the boundaries of proper religion through their commercial activities.

The recognized religions in Indonesia often cater to practical needs for divine aid, whether it is praying for rain, seeking victory in battle, or receiving blessings believed to bring health and prosperity. Examples include the popular practice of *kyai* offering blessings; the rise of prosperity gospel churches among Christians; initiatives like Yusuf Mansur’s Kun Fayakun, which emphasize the miracle of *sedekah*; and Islamic healing rituals promoted by figures such as Ust. Haryono and Ust. Arifin Ilham. In a manner akin to the reluctance of mainstream U.S. churches to support legislation against the so-called “brainwashing” of cult members, established religious institutions in Indonesia may also find it difficult to openly criticize such practices.

Beyond these institutional frameworks, syncretic trends among world religions and other traditions are not unique to Indonesia but are widespread in Southeast Asia. In the Philippines, for instance, Beckford and Suzana have documented syncretism within a new religious healing *Al-Jāmi’ah*, Vol. 62, No. 2, 2024 M/1445 H

movement, particularly through Pranic Healing.⁴³ In Thailand, as Kitiarsa notes, the blending of roles between magic monks and spirit mediums has long played a central part in popular religious expression, maintaining enduring popularity through the 1990s and 2000s as these figures countered efforts by their followers to move beyond socially marginalized positions in both religious and socioeconomic realms.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, in the context of religious freedom, Indonesia reveals a distinctive trend: spiritual business enterprises seem to enjoy greater operational latitude than traditional religious organizations. Their status as commercial entities, registered as businesses, allows them to navigate within a broader market framework, thus affording them a degree of freedom that extends beyond the conventional boundaries of religious institutions. The social location of spiritual business enterprises seems to have more freedom than just merely religious organizations.

E. Concluding Remarks

The emergence of spiritual training enterprises that commercially promote a syncretic blend of local religious traditions, Sufis teachings, and elements of global growth movements presents a striking paradox within Indonesia's religious landscape. While such groups traffic in elements once dismissed as *klenik*, they face far less stigma and escape accusations of blasphemy, than their non-commercial counterparts. Their social location as a spiritual corporation seems to allow syncretic religious/spiritual groups to have more space of freedom for existence and expression rather than those being merely identified as a community. It means that in today's Indonesia, the degree of religious freedom for marginal religious/spiritual groups is not only a matter of doctrine or law, but of where, and how, they situate themselves socially.

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⁴³ James A. Beckford and Araceli Suzara, "A New Religious and Healing Movement in the Philippines", *Religion*, vol. 24, no. 2 (1994), pp. 117–41.

⁴⁴ Pattana Kitiarsa, "Magic Monks and Spirit Mediums in the Politics of Thai Popular Religion", *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2005), p. 209.

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