

Article

Constructing Religious Legitimacy through Religious Agency: The Restoration of the Theravāda Bhikkhunī Saṅgha in Indonesia

Putu Aryatama

Sekolah Tinggi Agama Buddha (STAB) Kertarajasa, Batu, Indonesia;
email : gunajayoaryatama@gmail.com

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Abstract

The restoration of the Theravāda Bhikkhunī Saṅgha in Indonesia presents a compelling case of religious growth within an environment where institutional ordination remains contested. Drawing on a qualitative transcendental phenomenological design, this study examines how Indonesian Bhikkhunīs construct religious legitimacy through religious agency despite ongoing institutional contestation. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentary analysis with Bhikkhunīs, lay supporters, and monastic authorities. The findings reveal that religious legitimacy is constructed across three interconnected dimensions of agency: (1) spiritual self-formation through embodied Vinaya discipline and ethical practice, which grounds moral credibility; (2) collective capacity building via Dhamma education, monastery development, and transnational networking, which expands social presence; and (3) relational authority negotiation through non-confrontational engagement, digital communication, and strategic alliances, which navigates structural barriers. Together, these practices demonstrate that legitimacy is not merely a status conferred by formal institutions, but a dynamic, bottom-up social process earned through daily practice and communal engagement. Conceptually, the study advances an agency-based framework of religious legitimacy, offering broader analytical insights for understanding how restored, emerging, or marginalized religious actors establish authority under structural constraints.

Keyword

Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, Indonesia, Religious Agency, Religious Legitimacy, Theravāda Buddhism

Abstrak

Restorasi Saṅgha Bhikkhunī Theravāda di Indonesia menyajikan kasus pertumbuhan keagamaan yang menarik di dalam lingkungan tempat penahbisan institusional masih terkontestasi. Dengan menggunakan desain fenomenologi transendental kualitatif, penelitian ini menguji bagaimana para Bhikkhunī di Indonesia mengonstruksi legitimasi keagamaan melalui agensi keagamaan (religious agency) di tengah kontestasi institusional yang masih berlangsung. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis dokumentasi bersama para Bhikkhunī, penyokong awam (lay supporters), serta otoritas monastik. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa legitimasi keagamaan dikonstruksi melalui tiga dimensi agensi yang saling terhubung: (1) pembentukan diri secara spiritual (spiritual self-formation) melalui penghayatan disiplin Vinaya dan praktik etis, yang melandasi kredibilitas moral; (2) peningkatan kapasitas kolektif (collective capacity building) melalui pendidikan Dhamma, pembangunan vihara/biara, dan jaringan transnasional, yang memperluas kehadiran sosial; serta (3) negosiasi otoritas relasional (relational authority negotiation) melalui keterlibatan non-konfrontatif, komunikasi digital, dan aliansi strategis, yang menavigasi hambatan-hambatan struktural. Secara bersama-sama, praktik-praktik ini menunjukkan bahwa legitimasi bukanlah sekadar status yang diberikan oleh institusi formal, melainkan sebuah proses sosial dinamis dari bawah ke atas (bottom-up) yang diperoleh melalui praktik harian dan keterlibatan komunitas. Secara konseptual, penelitian ini memajukan kerangka kerja legitimasi keagamaan berbasis agensi (agency-based framework), yang menawarkan wawasan analitis lebih luas untuk memahami bagaimana aktor keagamaan yang dipulihkan, baru muncul, atau terpinggirkan membangun otoritas di bawah keterbatasan struktural.

Kata Kunci

Agensi Keagamaan; Buddhisme Theravāda; Indonesia; Legitimasi Keagamaan; Saṅgha Bhikkhunī

Introduction

Religious legitimacy is rarely established solely through formal institutional recognition. Across many religious traditions, it is also negotiated through religious practice, moral authority, and communal acceptance (Graham & Haidt, 2010). The restoration of the Theravāda Bhikkhunī Saṅgha provides an important example of this dynamic. Following the revival of the Bhikkhunī ordination lineage in Sri Lanka during the late twentieth century, initiatives to re-establish women's full monastic ordination have gradually expanded across Asia and beyond, generating renewed scholarly attention to Buddhist monasticism, gender, religious authority, and institutional transformation (Anālayo, 2013). This development has not merely revived a long-discontinued monastic lineage, but has also stimulated critical debates concerning the sources of religious legitimacy within Theravāda Buddhism. While some Buddhist communities have embraced the restoration of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha as an effort to recover an important dimension of the early Buddhist tradition, others continue to question its legitimacy on doctrinal and institutional grounds (Salgado, 2019). Consequently, the restoration of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha has become more than a question of monastic ordination; it represents an important case through which contemporary scholars examine how religious authority, institutional recognition, and lived religious practice interact in shaping the evolution of religious communities.

Within this broader development, Indonesia presents a particularly compelling case for examining the relationship between religious agency and religious legitimacy. As a pluralistic society where Buddhism exists as a minority religion with complex organizational frameworks and state regulation, the restoration of the Theravāda Bhikkhunī Saṅgha has developed progressively through the establishment of Bhikkhunī monasteries, religious education, community service, and expanding engagement with both national and transnational Buddhist networks (Nyanabhadrā et al., 2025; Suryadinata, 2018). At the same time, however, the institutional legitimacy of Bhikkhunī ordination remains the subject of continuing debate within segments of the Indonesian Theravāda establishment. Rather than preventing the growth of the Bhikkhunī community, this contested institutional environment has coincided with increasing public visibility and expanding religious roles performed by Bhikkhunīs in Indonesian Buddhist society (Hamidah, 2022)—from leading rituals and receiving daily alms (*piṇḍapāta*) to serving as recognized sources of merit (*field of merit*) for lay supporters. This apparent paradox suggests that the development of religious communities cannot be understood solely through the presence or absence of formal institutional recognition. Instead, it raises a more fundamental scholarly question: how is religious legitimacy constructed when institutional recognition remains contested? Addressing this question is essential not only for understanding the restoration of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha in Indonesia but also for explaining how religious authority is negotiated and established within contemporary religious communities more broadly.

Over the past two decades, scholarship on the restoration of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha has expanded considerably, reflecting growing academic interest in women's monasticism within contemporary Buddhism. Existing studies generally develop along three interrelated strands. The first examines the historical restoration of the Bhikkhunī ordination lineage, documenting its revival in Sri Lanka and its subsequent dissemination to other Theravāda communities while highlighting the historical discontinuity of female ordination and efforts to restore it through transnational monastic collaboration (Kaushik, 2026; Phanthanaphrue, 2024). The second strand focuses on the legitimacy of Bhikkhunī ordination from the perspective of Vinaya, analysing textual interpretations, lineage continuity, and institutional authority to assess whether contemporary ordination can be regarded as doctrinally valid (anālayo, 2023). A third body of scholarship approaches the issue through the lens of Buddhist feminism and gender equality, interpreting the restoration movement as part of broader efforts to challenge patriarchal structures and expand women's participation and leadership in education and spiritual life within Buddhist institutions (Kabilsingh, 1991; Gross, 1993; Tsomo, 2004). This third strand emphasizes how transnational initiatives—such as the Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women—have mobilized global support to dismantle structural gender inequality. Collectively, these studies have significantly enriched contemporary understanding of Bhikkhunī restoration by explaining its historical development, doctrinal controversies, and gender dimensions. Nevertheless, they also reveal that scholarly attention has remained largely centred on questions of historical continuity, formal institutional recognition, and rights-based gender justice.

Although previous scholarship has substantially advanced the study of Bhikkhunī restoration, it has paid comparatively less attention to a more fundamental question:

how religious legitimacy is socially constructed when institutional recognition remains incomplete or contested. Most existing studies implicitly assume that legitimacy primarily depends upon formal recognition by established monastic institutions or the successful validation of ordination according to Vinaya. As Langenberg (2018) argues, liberal feminist frameworks often struggle to fully explain female monastics who navigate authority through ethical adherence rather than overt political opposition. Such rights-focused approaches are undoubtedly important for understanding institutional debates, yet they provide only a partial explanation for the continuing expansion of Bhikkhunī communities in contexts where formal recognition remains uncertain. The Indonesian case illustrates this limitation particularly well. Despite ongoing debates concerning the institutional legitimacy of Bhikkhunī ordination, Bhikkhunīs have continued to establish monasteries, educate lay communities, lead religious activities, and strengthen both national and international networks. These developments suggest that religious legitimacy cannot be understood solely as an institutional status conferred by recognised authorities; rather, it is also gradually produced through everyday religious practice, moral authority, and sustained engagement with religious communities.

To address this gap, this article employs the concept of religious agency as its primary analytical framework (Asad, 1997; Mahmood, 2012) placing it in dialogue with Buddhist feminism. Rather than understanding agency simply as individual resistance to existing structures or an assertion of gender rights, religious agency emphasizes the capacity of religious actors to cultivate themselves through disciplined religious practice, ethical formation, and active participation within particular religious traditions. From this perspective, Theravāda Bhikkhunīs in Indonesia negotiate their positions not merely by advocating for formal recognition, but by embodying monastic discipline, expanding religious education, serving lay communities, and strengthening institutional capacity. By shifting the analytical focus from the outcome of institutional acceptance to the processes through which religious actors cultivate moral authority and communal trust, this article positions the restoration of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha as a process through which religious legitimacy is continuously constructed through lived practice. Consequently, the Indonesian experience is treated not simply as a localized case study, but as an empirical setting to examine broader questions concerning authority and legitimacy in contemporary religious contexts.

Responding to the foregoing scholarly gap, this article investigates how Theravāda Bhikkhunīs in Indonesia construct religious legitimacy through religious agency during the restoration of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha. Specifically, it examines how religious agency is manifested in the everyday practices of Bhikkhunīs and analyses how these practices contribute to the formation of moral authority and religious legitimacy despite continuing debates over institutional recognition. By focusing on the relationship between religious practice and legitimacy, this study seeks to explain not only why the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha continues to develop but also how its legitimacy is gradually established within contemporary Indonesian Buddhism.

This study contributes to the scholarship on religion and society in three important ways. Empirically, it provides a comprehensive analysis of the contemporary restoration of the Theravāda Bhikkhunī Saṅgha in Indonesia, an area that has received comparatively limited scholarly attention despite its growing significance within

Southeast Asian Buddhism. Theoretically, it extends the application of the concept of religious agency by demonstrating that agency functions not only as a form of resistance or self-cultivation but also as a mechanism through which religious legitimacy is progressively constructed within contested institutional settings. Finally, conceptually, this article contributes to broader discussions on religion and society by offering a theoretical synthesis: while Buddhist feminism highlights the structural and historical terms of gender inequality, religious agency reveals the daily, practice-based processes through which religious actors establish legitimacy from within traditional norms. In doing so, the Indonesian restoration of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha offers insights that extend beyond Buddhist studies and enrich wider debates concerning authority, legitimacy, and institutional change across religious traditions.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using transcendental phenomenology, as developed by Husserl and operationalized by Moustakas (1994), to examine how Theravāda Bhikkhunīs in Indonesia construct religious legitimacy through their lived religious experiences. A phenomenological approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand how Bhikkhunīs interpret and give meaning to their everyday monastic practices within a context where institutional recognition remains contested. Rather than measuring institutional outcomes, the research focused on the subjective experiences through which religious agency is embodied and legitimacy is gradually negotiated.

Fieldwork was conducted in several Theravāda Bhikkhunī monasteries across Java and Sumatra, where active Bhikkhunī communities have been established. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure diverse perspectives relevant to the restoration of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha. The participants included senior and junior Bhikkhunīs, monastery administrators, Theravāda monks (Bhikkhus), and officials from the Directorate General of Buddhist Community Guidance of the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs. These participants were chosen because they represented different institutional positions and experiences related to the restoration and public recognition of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews explored participants' experiences of monastic practice, institutional engagement, religious service, and perceptions of legitimacy within contemporary Indonesian Buddhism. Participant observation focused on religious rituals, educational activities, community interactions, and everyday monastic life, while documentary sources—including monastery archives, educational materials, organizational documents, and relevant policy documents—were used to contextualize and corroborate the interview findings.

Data analysis followed Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological procedures, including epoche, horizontalization, the identification of meaning units, and the development of textural and structural descriptions to reveal the essence of participants' lived experiences. To address the research objective, the emergent themes were subsequently interpreted through the analytical lens of religious agency (Mahmood, 2012). The analysis focused on how monastic discipline, ethical formation, religious

service, and institutional engagement functioned as expressions of religious agency and how these practices contributed to the construction of religious legitimacy within the Indonesian Buddhist community.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed source and method triangulation by comparing information obtained from interviews, observations, and documentary materials. Preliminary interpretations were also discussed with selected participants through member checking to improve the credibility of the analysis. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, participated voluntarily, and are presented anonymously to protect their confidentiality.

Result and Discussion

Spiritual Self-Formation as Religious Agency

The findings indicate that the religious agency of Theravāda Bhikkhunīs in Indonesia is grounded primarily in processes of spiritual self-formation cultivated through disciplined monastic practice. Across interviews and field observations, participants consistently described religious discipline not as an externally imposed obligation but as an intentional practice of ethical and spiritual transformation. Daily observance of the Vinaya, meditation, chanting, scriptural study, and ritual participation were understood as interconnected practices through which Bhikkhunīs continuously cultivated the dispositions, virtues, and moral commitments expected of the monastic life. Rather than functioning merely as religious routines, these practices constituted the foundation from which their religious agency emerged.

A senior Bhikkhunī who has lived the monastic life for more than fifteen years reflected on this transformative process:

"When I first entered monastic life, I thought it was simply about following rules. Over time, however, I realized that every rule—from the way we eat, walk, and speak—is actually a practice for shaping the mind and the heart. Discipline is not a burden; it is the path that frees us from the habits that bind us."

This account demonstrates that monastic discipline is experienced not as passive conformity but as a conscious process of self-cultivation. The informant's narrative illustrates how religious authority begins with the transformation of the practitioner rather than with external recognition. The cultivation of disciplined conduct becomes an internal moral disposition that shapes everyday action and provides the ethical foundation for subsequent engagement with the wider Buddhist community.

Field observations further revealed that adherence to the Vinaya is neither mechanical nor rigidly literal. Instead, Bhikkhunīs continually interpret and apply monastic discipline within the practical realities of contemporary religious life. For example, restrictions concerning physical contact with men are implemented through context-sensitive strategies that preserve both monastic discipline and effective interaction with lay communities. As one Bhikkhunī explained:

"We cannot have physical contact with men, but we can communicate clearly and respectfully. Sometimes we use an object to indicate something or maintain an appropriate distance. It is not about avoiding men; it is about preserving inner composure and remaining focused on the Dhamma."

Rather than limiting religious participation, disciplined observance of the Vinaya becomes a source of practical creativity. The findings suggest that agency is expressed through the capacity to interpret religious discipline in ways that remain faithful to monastic principles while responding effectively to contemporary social situations. In this sense, obedience does not eliminate agency; instead, agency is enacted through disciplined ethical practice itself.

The influence of spiritual self-formation also extends beyond the internal life of the monastery. Participants consistently reported that disciplined monastic conduct gradually generated trust and credibility among lay Buddhists. Regular meditation, visible simplicity, consistent observance of the Vinaya, and commitment to religious service collectively shaped public perceptions of Bhikkhunīs as authentic spiritual practitioners. A long-term lay supporter described this perception:

"I observe how the Bhikkhunīs live their daily lives—they wake up early, meditate, study the scriptures, and serve the community. They rarely speak about themselves, yet their actions speak louder than words. I trust them as spiritual teachers because I see that they genuinely practice what they teach."

The testimony illustrates that public recognition develops through sustained observation of everyday religious practice rather than through formal institutional endorsement alone. Moral credibility is accumulated gradually as lay communities witness consistency between religious teaching and monastic conduct. Spiritual discipline therefore functions simultaneously as a personal process of ethical cultivation and as a visible expression of religious authenticity.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the primary form of religious agency exercised by Theravāda Bhikkhunīs is rooted in spiritual self-formation. Their agency is expressed not through direct resistance to existing religious structures but through the deliberate cultivation of disciplined monastic lives that embody Buddhist ethical ideals. This finding resonates with Mahmood's understanding of agency as a capacity formed through ethical discipline rather than through opposition to authority (Mahmood, 2012). At the same time, the internalisation of monastic discipline into durable dispositions reflects what Bourdieu conceptualises as *habitus*, whereby external norms become embodied practices that guide action almost intuitively (Costa & Murphy, 2015). In the Indonesian context, therefore, spiritual self-formation constitutes the first stage through which Bhikkhunīs cultivate the moral authority that later supports broader processes of institutional engagement and religious legitimacy.

Collective Capacity Building as Religious Agency

The findings further demonstrate that the religious agency of Theravāda Bhikkhunīs extends beyond individual spiritual cultivation into collective efforts aimed at strengthening institutional capacity and expanding religious participation. While spiritual self-formation provides the ethical foundation of agency, its practical expression becomes visible through collaborative initiatives that enable Bhikkhunīs to establish educational institutions, develop monastic infrastructure, and cultivate national and transnational networks. Rather than seeking legitimacy primarily through formal institutional recognition, participants consistently described these collective activities as practical means of serving the Buddhist community while gradually strengthening the social presence of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha.

One of the most significant expressions of this collective agency is the development of Dhamma education. Across the research sites, Bhikkhunīs have established Dhamma schools for children and adolescents, organised scriptural study groups for lay Buddhists, and developed training programmes for novice nuns (*sāmaṇerīs*). These educational initiatives not only transmit Buddhist teachings but also demonstrate the intellectual competence of Bhikkhunīs as religious educators and monastic leaders. A Bhikkhunī responsible for coordinating educational programmes explained:

“When we first began teaching Dhamma, some people questioned whether Bhikkhunīs were capable of becoming teachers. However, after they saw that our students genuinely understood the Dhamma and were able to practise it in their daily lives, those doubts gradually diminished. We did not argue about whether Bhikkhunīs were allowed to teach; we simply taught, and the results spoke for themselves.”

This account indicates that educational practice functions as a practical demonstration of religious competence rather than as an explicit claim for recognition. Instead of engaging in doctrinal debates concerning their status, Bhikkhunīs establish credibility through the consistent delivery of religious education that is valued by lay communities. In this respect, educational activities become an important arena through which religious authority is gradually cultivated in everyday practice.

Collective capacity building is equally evident in the development of independent monastic institutions. The monasteries established by Bhikkhunīs function not only as places of residence and meditation but also as centres for religious education, community service, and social interaction. Participants consistently described monastery construction as an institutional strategy that enables the Bhikkhunī community to organise religious activities independently while creating visible spaces for public engagement. One Bhikkhunī involved in establishing a monastery reflected:

“Building a monastery is not simply about providing accommodation. It is about creating a place where people can learn the Dhamma, where the community can gather, and where society can recognise that Bhikkhunīs make meaningful contributions to religious life. Every brick that we place represents our commitment to serving others.”

The establishment of monasteries therefore represents more than physical expansion. It creates institutional environments in which Bhikkhunīs exercise leadership, organise religious programmes, and develop long-term relationships with lay communities. Through these institutions, the presence of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha becomes increasingly visible within Indonesian Buddhism, allowing religious practice and community engagement to reinforce one another.

Another important dimension of collective agency is the development of extensive collaborative networks. At the national level, Bhikkhunīs maintain relationships with Buddhist organisations, government institutions, educational bodies, and interfaith communities. Internationally, they participate in transnational networks connecting Bhikkhunī communities in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Taiwan, and several other countries where female monastic restoration has progressed further. These networks provide opportunities for religious education, institutional cooperation, and mutual support while broadening access to knowledge and experience unavailable within Indonesia alone.

One participant described the significance of these international relationships:

"When we meet Bhikkhunīs from Sri Lanka or Thailand, we realise that the challenges we face are not unique. They experienced similar difficulties before gaining wider acceptance. We learn from their experiences, and they also learn from ours. These relationships remind us that we are part of a much larger community."

Another Bhikkhunī, who had participated in advanced monastic training abroad, explained how international engagement transformed her understanding of monastic responsibility:

"When I studied in Sri Lanka, I saw Bhikkhunīs teaching at universities, leading ceremonies, and giving Dhamma talks before thousands of people. It changed the way I understood what it means to be a Bhikkhunī. I realised that monastic life is not about limitation but about responsibility and service."

These findings suggest that collective capacity building operates simultaneously at local, national, and transnational levels. Educational programmes strengthen intellectual credibility, monasteries provide institutional foundations for religious activities, and collaborative networks facilitate the exchange of knowledge, resources, and experience. Rather than functioning as isolated initiatives, these activities reinforce one another in expanding the organisational capacity of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha.

Taken together, the findings indicate that religious agency is not confined to individual ethical formation but also emerges through collective institutional practices that enable religious communities to sustain and expand their social presence. These processes illustrate how Bhikkhunīs actively construct organisational capacity by transforming religious knowledge into educational programmes, monastic institutions, and collaborative networks that benefit the wider Buddhist community. In this respect, the findings support Bourdieu's argument that different forms of capital can be strategically accumulated and converted across social fields (Bourdieu, 1986). However, the Indonesian case also extends this perspective by showing that such institutional development is not pursued primarily for organisational expansion itself but as a means of expressing religious commitment through education, service, and community building. Collective capacity building therefore represents a second dimension of religious agency through which spiritual self-formation becomes institutionalised and increasingly visible within contemporary Indonesian Buddhism.

Negotiating Religious Authority in a Contested Religious Field

The findings reveal that religious agency extends beyond personal formation and institutional development into the continuous negotiation of religious authority within a contested religious field. Although the restoration of the Theravāda Bhikkhunī Saṅgha in Indonesia has gained increasing visibility, participants consistently acknowledged that questions concerning the legitimacy of Bhikkhunī ordination continue to generate differing responses among Buddhist organisations, monastic authorities, and lay communities. Rather than confronting these disagreements through direct institutional contestation, Bhikkhunīs have developed strategies that gradually cultivate recognition while maintaining constructive relationships with existing religious institutions.

One of the most prominent strategies identified in this study is what participants described as a patient and non-confrontational approach to engagement with the wider

Sangha. Instead of demanding formal recognition, Bhikkhunīs emphasise disciplined practice, religious service, and consistent community involvement as the basis for establishing credibility. A senior Bhikkhunī explained:

“We never force people to accept us, nor do we demand recognition. We simply do what we are supposed to do—cultivate ourselves, serve the community, study and teach the Dhamma. Gradually, people begin to realise that our commitment is no different from that of the Bhikkhus. Some who were once hesitant eventually accepted us, not because we persuaded them, but because they witnessed our practice.”

This testimony illustrates that recognition is pursued through sustained religious practice rather than institutional confrontation. Participants repeatedly described legitimacy as something that develops incrementally through trust, consistency, and demonstrated commitment instead of formal negotiation alone. Religious authority, therefore, emerges as a relational process in which everyday practice gradually reshapes perceptions within the Buddhist community.

The findings also show that Bhikkhunīs strategically engage with existing institutional structures whenever opportunities become available. Participation in programmes organised by the Directorate General of Buddhist Community Guidance, involvement in national Buddhist events, and collaboration with educational and interfaith organisations provide important platforms through which Bhikkhunīs increase their public visibility and strengthen institutional relationships. One participant who frequently represented the Bhikkhunī community at official events explained:

“Whenever we receive invitations to official programmes, we always participate. It is important not only to show that we exist, but also to build relationships with government officials and leaders from other Buddhist organisations. Every opportunity allows us to demonstrate that Bhikkhunīs can contribute positively to both religious and national life.”

Rather than seeking recognition outside existing institutions, these activities demonstrate an active effort to participate within established religious and governmental structures. Institutional engagement becomes a means of expanding opportunities for dialogue while reinforcing the public contribution of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha.

Another significant finding concerns the strategic management of public representation. Participants described increasing use of websites, social media platforms, and printed publications to communicate religious activities directly to wider audiences. Digital communication enables Bhikkhunīs to present their own narratives of monastic life, educational programmes, and community service rather than allowing public perceptions to be shaped primarily by external interpretations. As one Bhikkhunī responsible for managing monastery media explained:

“In the past, many people knew very little about Bhikkhunīs. What they heard was often based on misunderstanding or negative rumours. Now we can share our own activities—our Dhamma classes, social service, and educational programmes. People begin to see who we really are instead of relying on hearsay.”

The findings further indicate that alliances constitute another important dimension of authority negotiation. Bhikkhunīs have established collaborative relationships not only with sympathetic Bhikkhus but also with academics, civil society

organisations, and international Bhikkhunī communities. These partnerships broaden access to intellectual resources, public engagement, and institutional support while simultaneously strengthening their position within wider Buddhist networks. Several participants noted that support from progressive monastic leaders and international Bhikkhunī communities has reinforced confidence to continue the restoration movement despite ongoing criticism from more conservative groups.

Importantly, participants also demonstrated an ability to transform institutional constraints into opportunities for religious innovation. When access to certain ceremonial spaces or religious events was restricted, Bhikkhunīs responded by organising independent Dhamma programmes, educational activities, and community services that attracted increasing lay participation. Rather than interpreting exclusion as a permanent obstacle, they viewed it as an opportunity to expand alternative spaces where Buddhist learning and practice could flourish. As one participant remarked:

“We cannot force others to invite us. What we can do is create spaces where anyone who wishes to learn and practise the Dhamma is welcome. We do not wait for opportunities; we create them ourselves.”

This finding suggests that religious agency is expressed not only through adaptation to existing institutional structures but also through the creative production of new religious spaces that broaden opportunities for participation. Instead of relying exclusively on established channels of authority, Bhikkhunīs actively cultivate alternative arenas in which their religious commitment and leadership become publicly visible.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that negotiating religious authority is neither a process of direct institutional resistance nor passive accommodation. Rather, it involves the strategic combination of disciplined practice, institutional engagement, public communication, collaborative networking, and religious innovation. These strategies reflect what Bourdieu conceptualises as competition within a religious field, where actors seek recognition through the accumulation of symbolic resources rather than through formal authority alone (Bourdieu, 1971, 1991). At the same time, the findings complement Mahmood’s conception of agency by showing that religious actors may transform contested institutional environments not through confrontation but through ethically grounded practices that gradually reshape social recognition (Mahmood, 2012). In Indonesian context, religious authority therefore emerges as a negotiated achievement, cultivated through sustained participation in religious and public life, and ultimately provides the bridge between collective religious agency and the construction of religious legitimacy.

Constructing Religious Legitimacy through Religious Agency

The preceding findings demonstrate that the restoration of the Theravāda Bhikkhunī Saṅgha in Indonesia cannot be adequately understood as a process driven solely by institutional recognition or formal religious endorsement. Rather, the empirical evidence indicates that religious legitimacy is progressively constructed through the interaction of spiritual self-formation, collective capacity building, and the continuous negotiation of religious authority. These dimensions should not be understood as separate forms of activity. They constitute an interconnected process through which Bhikkhunīs cultivate moral credibility, develop institutional capacity, and negotiate

recognition within the wider Buddhist community. This interpretation resonates with scholarship on lived religion, which shifts analytical attention from official institutions and authoritative texts toward the ways religious traditions are embodied and enacted through everyday practices (Ammerman, 2015).

The findings suggest that spiritual self-formation constitutes the starting point of this process. Through disciplined observance of the Vinaya, meditation, scriptural study, and ethical self-cultivation, Bhikkhunis develop the moral dispositions that become the foundation of their religious authority. This personal transformation, however, does not remain confined to the internal life of the monastery. As demonstrated in the preceding sections, spiritual discipline is translated into collective initiatives including religious education, monastery development, social service, and institutional networking. These activities transform individual religious commitment into collective organisational capacity, enabling the Bhikkhuni Saṅgha to participate more visibly in Indonesian Buddhist society.

As collective capacity expands, Bhikkhunis increasingly engage with broader religious institutions, government agencies, and lay communities through processes of negotiation rather than confrontation. Recognition therefore emerges not as an immediate consequence of formal ordination status but as the cumulative outcome of sustained interaction, demonstrated competence, and public trust. The findings indicate that religious legitimacy develops incrementally as lay Buddhists, religious organisations, and other stakeholders repeatedly encounter the ethical conduct, educational contributions, and social engagement of the Bhikkhuni community. In this sense, legitimacy is less an institutional declaration than a socially constructed recognition grounded in lived religious practice.

These findings both support and extend Mahmood's conception of religious agency. Mahmood argues that agency should not be understood exclusively as resistance to power but also as the capacity cultivated through ethical discipline and embodied religious practice (Mahmood, 2005, 2012). The experiences of Indonesian Bhikkhunis strongly affirm this perspective. Their agency is expressed primarily through obedience to monastic discipline, sustained spiritual cultivation, and religious service rather than through direct institutional opposition. However, the present study further demonstrates that such ethical self-cultivation does not merely shape individual subjectivity; it also generates wider social consequences by creating conditions through which religious legitimacy gradually becomes possible. Religious agency therefore functions not only as a mode of ethical formation but also as a mechanism of institutional transformation.

The findings likewise complement Bourdieu's understanding of the religious field. Bourdieu explains that religious authority is shaped through the accumulation and conversion of different forms of capital within competitive social fields (Bourdieu, 1971, 1986). The experiences of Indonesian Bhikkhunis illustrate this process in important ways. Spiritual discipline generates moral credibility; educational activities strengthen cultural capital; institutional networks expand social capital; and together these resources contribute to symbolic recognition within the Buddhist community. Nevertheless, the findings also suggest that the accumulation of capital alone does not fully explain the construction of legitimacy. Recognition develops not simply because resources are accumulated, but because these resources are consistently embodied in

ethical religious practice that is publicly observed, experienced, and trusted by religious communities. Consequently, symbolic recognition emerges through the interaction between institutional capacity and lived moral authority rather than through strategic competition alone.

Taken together, these findings lead to a broader conceptual proposition concerning religious legitimacy in contemporary religious communities. The Indonesian restoration of the Theravāda Bhikkhunī Saṅgha demonstrates that legitimacy should not be viewed as a fixed institutional status granted exclusively by established authorities. Instead, legitimacy is better understood as a dynamic social process through which religious actors cultivate moral authority, expand institutional capacity, negotiate relationships within contested religious fields, and gradually earn recognition through sustained religious practice. This process can be conceptualised as an agency-based construction of religious legitimacy, in which religious agency precedes and progressively shapes wider institutional acceptance rather than merely resulting from it.

This interpretation also contributes to scholarship on the restoration of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha. Previous studies have largely approached restoration through questions of historical continuity, Vinaya interpretation, institutional legitimacy, and gender equality (Analayo, 2023; Falk, 2007; Kieffer-Pülz, 2014). These perspectives remain essential for understanding the doctrinal and historical dimensions of Bhikkhunī restoration. The present findings, however, suggest that formal recognition represents only one dimension of legitimacy. The Indonesian case demonstrates that legitimacy can also be progressively produced through the everyday practices, institutional initiatives, and social relationships through which Bhikkhunīs become recognised as credible religious actors. The contribution of this study therefore lies not in rejecting institutional legitimacy but in situating it within a broader social process of legitimation.

Accordingly, the contribution of this study extends beyond the specific case of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha. By demonstrating how religious legitimacy is progressively constructed through everyday religious practice, institutional engagement, and communal recognition, the findings provide a broader analytical framework for examining authority, legitimacy, and institutional change across diverse religious traditions. The Indonesian experience therefore illustrates that the durability of religious institutions depends not only upon formal recognition but also upon the capacity of religious actors to embody ethical commitments that are continuously recognised, trusted, and affirmed by the communities they serve.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the religious legitimacy of Theravāda Bhikkhunīs in Indonesia is not merely a status conferred through formal institutional recognition or doctrinal validation. Instead, it is dynamically constructed through three interconnected dimensions of religious agency: individual spiritual self-formation (embodied Vinaya discipline and moral credibility), collective capacity building (Dhamma education, monastery construction, and transnational networking), and relational authority negotiation (non-confrontational engagement, digital communication, and alliance building). Operating simultaneously at individual, collective, and relational levels, these practices enable Bhikkhunīs to translate everyday religious conduct into moral authority and growing public trust within a contested religious field. Conceptually,

this study advances an agency-based framework of religious legitimacy by extending Mahmood's emphasis on ethical self-formation and Bourdieu's concepts of capital and field. Moving beyond binary understandings of agency as either resistance or submission, the findings demonstrate how ethically grounded religious practice contributes to institutional capacity and enables religious actors to renegotiate their position within existing structures. In contexts where formal recognition remains contested, legitimacy therefore emerges incrementally as an earned social achievement rather than solely as a status conferred through institutional authority. These insights extend beyond Buddhist studies by offering a broader analytical lens for examining how emerging, restored, or marginalised religious actors construct authority under structural constraints across diverse religious traditions. While the qualitative design of this study prioritises the lived experiences of Bhikkhunīs, future research could complement these findings through quantitative assessments of lay perceptions and comparative studies across Southeast Asian monastic traditions. Such research could further illuminate the processes through which female monastic communities develop, gain recognition, and become institutionally established over time.

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