

# Religious and Political Narratives in Islamic Iconization: The Case of Kyai Kholil of Madura

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## Abstract

This article examines how Kyai Kholil became an iconic figure in Indonesian Islam in a setting where saintly veneration, pesantren authority, and electoral politics intersect. It aims to explain how the appropriation of revered religious leaders contributes to role-model formation across devotional, scholarly, and political arenas. The study combines anthropological fieldwork on pilgrimage practices and *kyai-pesantren* networks in Madura and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) milieus with analysis of historical and biographical sources. Findings show that many Muslim communities continue to view Kyai Kholil as a saint whose *barakah* can still be accessed through tomb visitation; that numerous NU *kyai* position him as an indirect guru to legitimize contemporary religious lineages; and that politicians tied to NU, including descendants, can convert symbolic proximity to Kyai Kholil into credibility and electoral advantage. The article concludes that iconization is a dynamic process that links past authority to present needs, shaping historical knowledge, community boundaries, and political constellations. It contributes a critical framework for reading mystical narrative, institutional memory, and political mobilization as mutually reinforcing dimensions of Islamic icon-making. The implications suggest that scholarship should compare multiple narratives of saints across regions and communities beyond NU and examine social, economic, and digital dynamics that influence pilgrimage, charisma, and political authority to better map the diverse logics of iconization in Indonesia and the wider Muslim world.

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**Keywords**

Iconization, Islamic iconic figures, *kyai*, religious and political narratives, role models, '*ulamā*'

**Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Kyai Muhammad Kholil (born unknown, probably in the first half of the nineteenth century; died c. 1923-1925)<sup>2</sup> from Bangkalan, Madura, Indonesia, is arguably the greatest figure of men of religion in Madura. He has been regarded as the ultimate key symbol of the Madurese religious sphere and one of the most celebrated *kyai* (religious leaders and also leaders of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*)) in the history of Islam in Indonesia (Pribadi 2018). As an iconic figure, there are many mythical stories about this legendary person. Kyai Kholil was also a part of the Jāwī community (*aṣḥāb al-Jāwīyyīn*, people from Southeast Asia who lived as a community in Saudi Arabia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) who spread his influence widely in society after returning to Indonesia.

Madura is an arid and barren island located off the northeastern coast of Java, Indonesia, separated from Java by the Madura Strait. Administratively part of East Java Province, the island comprises four regencies, from west to east: Bangkalan, Sampang, Pamekasan, and Sumenep. Its area is approximately 4,250 km<sup>2</sup>. According to the 2023 census, the island had a population of 4,099,070, almost all of whom are Muslims (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Jawa Timur 2022).

Regarding socio-religious characteristics, although Madura is not entirely different from other regions in Indonesia, stronger religious traditions appear to have emerged as a result of the island's long-term Islamization process, somewhat comparable to what occurred in other Indonesian regions such as Aceh (Morris 1983; Saby 1995) and Banten (Bruinessen 1995, 165–99). Like Aceh or Banten, where the society is traditionally tied to a religious worldview, many traditions and customs are associated with religion. As a result, *kyai*

wield significant influence over society. *Kyai* are seen as possessing extensive Islamic knowledge and whose religious abilities surpass those of ordinary people. They are revered as the most authoritative sources within the Islamic realms (Pribadi 2018). In this regard, Kyai Kholil has become an iconic role model and one of the most celebrated *kyai* in the history of Islam in Indonesia.

To this day, Kyai Kholil remains alive in the minds of many Madurese and the minds of many Indonesian Muslims in general. For many enthusiastic pilgrims, his tomb in the town of Bangkalan, Madura, is considered the final destination on an established pilgrimage route that stretches from Banten on the western tip of Java to Madura. Today, his tomb, mosque, and the surrounding area are a very popular pilgrimage site, attracting tens of thousands of visitors each month.

In this article, I discuss how Kyai Kholil has become an iconic Islamic figure and one of the most prominent *kyai* in the history and current dynamics of Islam in Madura in particular and in Indonesia in general. This essay specifically addresses the issues of 1) how and why certain Muslim communities in Indonesia regard Kyai Kholil as a saint (*walī*) with supernatural powers; 2) how and why a significant number of *kyai* consider him their indirect guru; and 3) how and why certain politicians, particularly the descendants of Kyai Kholil and also politicians associated with the NU, achieve some degree of prominence and electoral victory primarily through their association with the *kyai*. The answers to these questions are the focus of this article. Therefore, this article will explore 1) the practices of religious revival, namely pilgrimages to the *kyai*' tomb (*ziyārah*); 2) the *kyai*'s legacy that created the *kyai-pesantren* networks in Indonesia; and 3) the elections in which certain politicians have gained victory by leveraging their lineage to the *kyai*. In general, this article investigates how and why Kyai Kholil is highly respected by Indonesian Muslim communities, *kyai*, and politicians in order to show the interplay between religious and political narratives in terms of iconization in Indonesia.

I would argue that Kyai Kholil is an icon who not only remains alive in the minds of the *ummah* (Islamic communities) as a saint, but he has also been used and valued by contemporary ‘*ulamā*’ (Muslim scholars of Islamic discipline)<sup>3</sup> and politicians to support and strengthen their religious and socio-political agendas. Kyai Kholil is certainly a witness to the history of Islam in the country, an obvious iconic symbol of Indonesian Islam today, and a continuing role model for the future of Islam in Indonesia.

Kyai Kholil is an icon who can be described as a famed figure who represents sentiments, ideas, political positions, or other things known to the public. Icons are powerful and influential symbols that are reinterpreted by the public collectively over time. Icons are also individuals who become totems or brand-like symbols that show significance in the communal imagination because they represent something acclaimed, hated, or recognized. Therefore, an iconic figure is a synthesis of person, image, and myth, with evocative connotations and recognizable form (Prestholt 2019). In addition, icons are symbols of a consequential process (Ivanovici 2023).

The relationship between icons and the religious and the political realms has been discussed at length in sociology and anthropology through well-known analytical concepts such as iconoclasm, idolatry, fetishism, and dialectical imagery, which assume that icons and the configuration of the religious and the political realms are mutually constitutive (Mitchell 1987). The iconic figure is thus in itself a material object that retains memories of a particular religious and political past, which mobilizes those who know the object’s context (Navaro-Yashin 2012).

Kyai Kholil is an example of an iconic figure who forms a central element in a multifaceted, mass-mediated public production and who inspires deep emotions and engagements in the realms of religion and politics. He also evokes collective aspirations and sets people and ideas in motion (Haugbølle and Kuzmanovic 2015, 5–11). Furthermore, his virtual presence now informs everyday life

through contradictory and unstable forms of subject formation, while also providing a framework for experiencing and reading religious and political life (Koning and Vollebergh 2019, 390–402). In this sense, he has achieved and continued to strengthen his iconic status within the landscape of religious and political movements (Eldén and Ekal 2015, 124–45). Studies on the relationship between icons and the realms of religion and politics that draw on Indonesian cases remain limited. For that reason, analytical concepts such as idolatry, fetishism, iconoclasm, and dialectical imagery when applied to Indonesian religious and political icons still require sustained attention. This article responds to that gap by examining the figure of the *kyai* in Indonesia, with particular focus on Java and Madura, and by showing how processes of sainthood, memory, and political mobilization converge in the iconization of Kyai Kholil.

Classical scholarship on the *kyai* has relied heavily on Zamakhsyari Dhofier's influential *Tradisi Pesantren: Studi tentang Pandangan Hidup Kiai* (1982), which is largely grounded in Javanese *kyai* families. Dhofier identifies many leading *kyai* with strong family ties to other *kyai*, ties that are reinforced through traditions such as intermarriage within *kyai* lineages (Dhofier 1982). In a related vein, Mark Woodward notes that many *kyai* in Java are often wealthy, and that such wealth is not viewed as problematic so long as it is deployed for religious purposes (Woodward 1989, 144). Dhofier's work provides an indispensable foundation for the study of *kyai*. Yet it gives less attention to the emotional and quasi-spiritual bonds that may develop between *kyai* and their followers, and to processes of iconization through which certain *kyai* gain representative status over time. The case of Kyai Kholil suggests that legendary *kyai* can function as shared reference points for diverse groups who may hold overlapping aspirations without necessarily engaging in coordinated collective action. Building on this insight, my study argues that the reproduction of the *kyai* as an iconic figure is a strategy for projecting a particular moral and political relationship with the wider world.

Endang Turmudi's monograph (2006) on the political landscape of *kyai* in Jombang, East Java offers an in-depth mapping of political constellations within the Indonesian Islamic milieu (Turmudi 2006). The study provides a nuanced overview of the relationships among *kyai*, their roles in national and sub-national politics, and their leadership within Islamic communities. At the same time, much of the broader scholarship tends to associate *kyai* primarily with traditionalist Islam, often treating them as conceptually distant from neo-modernist or puritanist currents. Clifford Geertz, for example, downplays *kyai* agency and underestimates their roles in mediating between local culture and modernity as well as their political involvement (Geertz 1960). While Turmudi's account is crucial for understanding *kyai* as political actors, it does not explicitly develop a framework of sainthood that can explain how a *kyai* becomes a saintly figure who embodies specific religious and political positions in public life. By contrast, my case study of Kyai Kholil shows how a *kyai* may be revered by Muslim communities, fellow *kyai*, and politicians alike, thereby shaping the interplay of religious and political narratives through the idioms of sainthood and iconization in Indonesia.

The significance of the Madurese *kyai* has also been highlighted by several authors. Iik Mansurnoor connects the *kyai* to the *rato* (older Madurese rulers), arguing that the decline of the *rato* helped enable the rise of the *kyai* as a new locus of authority (Mansurnoor 1995). Elly Touwen-Bouwsma traces the historical processes that fostered the development of *kyai* and their organizations in Madura, noting how these networks have often served as a counterbalance to state intervention (Touwen-Bouwsma 1992). Mansurnoor's earlier study (1990) is particularly important for understanding the character and functions of Madurese '*ulamā*'. He argues that Islam is a key determinant of Madurese social and cultural life and that the *kyai* constitute a primary social institution, sustained by strong genealogical networks. However, this line of scholarship tends to understate the political qualities of these religious figures and the

ways such qualities shape their authority beyond explicitly religious domains. My study addresses this gap by demonstrating how Kyai Kholil's descendants, some of whom later became politicians and public figures, have benefited from his decisive authority, personal charisma, and enduring symbolic power. In this sense, Kyai Kholil's clan illustrates how the propensity of religious figures to play political roles is embedded in their ongoing interactions with other institutions and arenas of power.

Taken together, all this positions this article to fill a key gap in the study of iconization in Indonesia. More broadly, the article contributes to discussions on the complex intersections of narrative, practice, and authority between Islamic traditions and political constellations across the Muslim world. Conceptually, the case of Kyai Kholil offers an empirical anchor through which to expand, refine, and complicate existing debates in religious studies, anthropology, and political science on sainthood, charisma, and the production of public religious icons.

This article is structured as follows. The next section outlines the methods and sources. I then examine practices of revival, focusing on *ziyārah* to Kyai Kholil's tomb. The subsequent section discusses the legacies of *kyai* who helped create *kyai-pesantren* networks in Indonesia. I then analyze electoral contexts in which certain politicians have secured victories by invoking genealogical ties to the *kyai*. The following section conceptualizes the character and significance of Kyai Kholil's iconization. The final section concludes by summarizing the argument and underscoring the article's contributions to the study of religious and political icons in Indonesia.

## Method

Anthropological and historical approaches are used simultaneously, with greater emphasis on the anthropological approach. Library research with particular attention to periodicals, such as newspapers

and academic journals, was conducted in libraries in Leiden, Jakarta, Surabaya, Bangkalan, and Canberra to explore the history of Kyai Kholil. Contemporary aspects are revealed through two series of ethnographic fieldwork from July 2009 to January 2010, and from October 2010 to July 2011. This includes interviews and casual conversations with Kyai Kholil's descendants, caretakers (*juru kunci*) and pilgrims to Kyai Kholil's tomb, and public figures, including local politicians; hangouts; and observations at Kyai Kholil's *pesantren*.

There are many stories about Kyai Kholil found in the field, and most of them are marked by myth. Unsurprisingly, the same condition also applies to stories taken from popular books. For instance, a book by Ar-Rifa'i (2010) informs a story from a certain Kyai Muhammad Ghazi Wahib praising Kyai Kholil's heroic role in the resistance against Allied forces during World War II on 10 November 1945 in Surabaya (p. 101). Nonetheless, the author on the previous page writes that the *kyai* died in 1925 (p. 82). Therefore, it is crucial to compare Kyai Kholil's life stories from the field and popular books with archival narratives and contemporary accounts as his life history is not well recorded. Consequently, I do not discuss the history of Kyai Kholil; instead, I focus on the contemporary circumstances of how ordinary people, *kyai*, and politicians view and utilize Kyai Kholil in the religious landscape and political movements.

Specifically for this article, the discussion, analysis, and argument are novel, leading to a new contribution to the broader discussions of the complex intersection of narratives and practices between Islamic traditions and political constellations in the Muslim world. Thus, this article traces the trajectories, characteristics, and impacts of the construct associated with Kyai Kholil, which in turn helps us make sense of narratives of the past through new lenses, beyond established models and approaches.



## Results

### ***A Saint for the Ummah: Modalities and Materiality in a Pilgrimage Site***

Many Muslim communities in Indonesia regard Kyai Kholil as a saint with supernatural powers. As a result, his tomb is regularly visited by many Muslims who believe that people will receive his *bàraka* (blessing) and *karamah* (dignity) if they visit his tomb, in addition to the fact that people visit his tomb to pray for the *kyai*. During his lifetime and after his death, Kyai Kholil is believed to have displayed special mystical and mythical characteristics and so he has been regarded to be able to bestow blessing and dignity on people even though he has long passed away (Pribadi 2018). In Susan Sered's term, Kyai Kholil can be considered a root icon, an icon deeply embedded in the cultural imagination and surfacing in different ways at different times. Sered reveals that pious people are somehow closer to God and so receiving their blessing and dignity or coming into contact with something they have touched may elicit divine concessions (Sered 1999, 48–71)

During Muslim holidays, such as *Eid al-Fiṭr* and *Eid al-'Aḏḥā*, famous burial grounds (*pasarean*) in Madura, including the tomb of Kyai Kholil, attract many pilgrims from across Madura and other regions in Indonesia. Beyond Muslim holidays, the tomb of Kyai Kholil and the tombs of other renowned figures, such as Royal Pasarean Ratu Ebu in Bangkalan and Royal Pasarean Asta Tinggi in Sumenep are known to regularly receive tens of thousands of pilgrims each month.

One obvious special occasion that also attracts large numbers of pilgrims is elections, whether general elections (*pemilu*), gubernatorial and regency/municipal head elections (*pilkada*), or village head elections. Prior to the elections, candidates running for various positions in elections will visit sacred tombs of *kyai* or royal families. This is believed to bring good luck and confidence to the candidates. From my observation, I discover that the *juru kunci*

of Pasarean Ratu Ebu, Makam Agung, Makam Tengah, and Kyai Kholil's tomb claim that famous national figures generally visit their *pasarean* prior to elections. While such claims are unreliable, such stories are common in many tombs, and while some famous national figures may indeed visit, the actual numbers are never disclosed, many Madurese pass this story on to other visitors. For them, this justifies visiting such tombs: if important figures can have their wishes granted, then there is also a chance for other visitors to receive blessings (Pribadi 2018).

In an instance, during the 2008 gubernatorial elections in East Java, five pairs of candidates contested for the positions of governor and vice governor. All pairs made extensive use of Islamic symbols, one of which was visiting holy tombs. Although a few of the five pairs of candidates had an Islamic background, the vote was concentrated primarily on two pairs: Khofifah Indar Parawansa - Mudjiono (under the acronym of *Kaji*) and Soekarwo - Syaifullah Yusuf (*Karsa*).<sup>4</sup> In Bangkalan, Kyai Imam Buchori Kholil, a descendant of Kyai Kholil, gave support to *Kaji*. It was also in Bangkalan where a dispute between descendants of Kyai Kholil occurred. Another prominent figure from Kyai Kholil's clan, the regent of Bangkalan, Kyai Fuad Amin Imron, supported *Karsa*. Both *kyai* leveraged the popularity of their shared ancestors to garner support for their competing candidates (Pribadi 2018).

*Karsa* actively made pilgrimages to several tombs in Madura, including the tomb of Kyai Kholil. Visiting the tomb is a symbol of contentment. Anyone seeking electoral success, or for other purposes, visits the tomb and prays. While this may seem unrealistic, such pilgrimages are seen as a crucial step by some candidates and, more importantly, by many voters who expect their leaders to uphold the sacred values of Kyai Kholil and Madurese society in general. These pilgrimages are followed by visits to several *pesantren*, including Pesantren Nurul Kholil, Raudlatul Mutaalimin Al Aziziyah, and Ibnu Kholil (Pribadi 2018). In an article in a local newspaper, *Karsa* claimed that the rituals of *tahlilan* (religious meals) and *zikr* (the

repetition of the names of God and of supplications taken from the Quran and the *hadith*) in Kyai Kholil's tomb were in line with the advice of prominent East Javanese *kyai* who encouraged him to pray at the tomb and visit Madurese *kyai* (Radar Madura 2008).

Here we can see that even though Kyai Kholil has long passed away, he is still considered capable of bestowing blessings and dignity upon pilgrims, including politicians, community leaders, and commoners, who visit his tomb. Kyai Kholil is certainly a composite product of the popular imagination. Muslims collectively transform famous figures into powerful, mythical figures, representing ideas, emotions, and aspirations (Prestholt 2019). In short, Kyai Kholil has been viewed as a saint for the *ummah* in this regard. In terms of modalities, Kyai Kholil is represented and understood by the people in relation to the visit of the people to his tomb, through which people believe they will receive his blessing and dignity if they visit his tomb. In terms of materialities, we can see that Kyai Kholil's tomb is frequently visited by the people, who in turn makes him an icon with his own symbolic characteristics, namely a symbol of sainthood, piety, and wisdom that transforms over time and space.

### ***A Guru for the 'Ulamā': Religious Networks as Temporalities and Junctures***

Kyai Kholil is considered a key figure in the formation of the *santri* community in the Indonesian archipelago, with his renowned *santri* establishing new *pesantren* soon after returning to their places of origin. In other words, he produced *kyai* and laid down a strong foundation for the *kyai-pesantren* network. As an expert in Arabic grammar and a master in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Kyai Kholil published books that have become references in Indonesian *pesantren*, including *Kitāb as-Silāḥ fī Bayān an-Nikāḥ*, *Kitāb Tarjamah Alfīyyah Ibn Mālik*, *Kitāb Asmā'ul Ḥusnā*, *Ijāzah Barzakhiyyah*, and *Taqrīrāt Syaikhinā Khalīl 'alā Manzūmah Nuzhah aṭ-Tullāb fī Qawā'id al-I'rāb* which are still read in many *pesantren* in Madura and Java to this day.

In the nineteenth century, mostly through the role of Kyai Kholil's *pesantren*, Madura became a profoundly Islamized region. Several *pesantren* with prominent *kyai* figures were involved in the formation of *santri* communities. Although Kyai Kholil was not associated with any *ṭarīqah* (Islamic mystical brotherhood/a school of Sufism) order, he was known as a renowned Sufi scholar (Zulkifli 2002), a condition also applicable to almost all eminent *kyai* in Java who have been recognized as saints by their followers (Dhofier 1980, 47–58). An example of a very famous saintly figure in Java is the founder of the NU, Kyai Hasyim Asy'ari, who is said to have practiced Sufi rituals (Dhofier 1999). Kyai Hasyim is arguably Kyai Kholil's most prominent former student who once studied under the guidance of Kyai Kholil in Bangkalan, Madura.

It is common for *kyai* to wield authority, especially where their influence is bolstered by a network of marriage alliances between leading *kyai* families and a network of *kyai-santri* relationships across Java and Madura. This social base of support for the NU has grown over time, attracting some urban and more educated followers (Samson 1978, 196–226). In Java and Madura too, many leading *kyai* have family ties with other *kyai*. These ties are made possible by, among other things, the tradition of intermarriage among *kyai* families. The son of a *kyai*, for instance, is usually sent to a *pesantren* whose owner (almost certainly also a *kyai*) is familiar with the *kyai*. After completing his religious education, the *kyai*'s son will be trained by his last mentor to build his own *pesantren*. The *kyai*'s interventions are evident in the marriage and leadership of the *santri* (Pribadi 2018).

The NU was able to attract local *kyai* and many Muslims primarily due to its perspective that valued the more traditional and syncretic aspects of Islam in Madura. In addition, Kyai Kholil's prominence was used by NU leaders to foster a sense of pride among Madurese religious leaders by signifying that Kyai Hasyim Asy'ari, Kyai Wahab Chasbullah, Kyai Bisri Syansuri, and Kyai Maksum, all founding members, had been students of the eminent *kyai*. NU

leaders expected, therefore, that Madurese *ulama* would take pride in their legendary *kyai*. Being members of the NU, or even simply sympathizing with it, was interpreted as protecting Islam from the potential reformist and modernist threats. The success of key NU figures in rallying their colleagues to this cause mirrored the life of rural Muslims in the Archipelago, which is centred around the *kyai-pesantren*-the NU networks (Pribadi 2018).

The *kyai* should be viewed as an institution, in the sense of a set of attributes. This consists of the office holder personally and a set of indispensable characteristics such as family background, resources, religious centres, and a network of followers (Mansurnoor 1990). *Kyai*'s institutions, such as the *pesantren*, exclusively belonged to the *kyai* or the *kyai*'s family and were seen as religious centres for educating *santri* who wished to become religious leaders or for those who were simply sent by their parents to study Islamic knowledge. *Pondok* (lodges) as part of *pesantren* were built to facilitate *santri* who came from afar to reside in the *pesantren* (Kuntowijoyo 2002).

In the Indonesian archipelago during the nineteenth century when colonial rule was in full swing, religious leaders emerged primarily on the periphery, often acting in defiance of local and Dutch authorities (Bruinessen 1995, 165–99). In Madura, Islam reached a more systematic stage in the nineteenth century. Old *pesantren* grew rapidly and new ones were built. A number of well-off villagers became followers of *kyai* and facilitated their financing of their *pesantren*, a pattern that has continued until today. Hence, the emergence of *kyai* as religious leaders was, to some extent, a leveraging of local assets (Mansurnoor 1990). The discussion by the *kyai pesantren*, along with *pengajian* (Islamic congregations), gave *kyai* a sense of Islamic religious authority, which is very flexible, dynamic, and constantly changing from time to time. Therefore, the patron-client relationship between *kyai* and their followers was predictable (Horikoshi 1987; Hannan and Mursyidi 2023). Knowing how *kyai* build their networks, it is obvious now that a great number of *kyai* have considered Kyai Kholil their indirect guru. The *kyai*-

*pesantren* networks in Indonesia are one of his many legacies, a condition that marks Kyai Kholil's position as a guru for many '*ulamā*'. The formation and development of religious networks in Madura and Java that was initiated by Kyai Kholil required a long process, which in turn has enabled us to understand the dynamics of Kyai Kholil's iconization.

As a product of popular imagination, Kyai Kholil's personalities have exhibited significant dynamics across space and time. These diverse interpretations, or the malleability of an iconic figure, has often enhanced his or her appeal (Prestholdt 2019). In this sense, temporalities and junctures involve the dynamic interplays between personalities and established social structures, which lay the groundwork for power and agency within which struggles to construct and deconstruct and develop and challenge iconic figures emerge at any given moment. This is a continuous process in which Kyai Kholil's personalities have become iconized due to the fact that the social structure of the Madurese and Indonesians in general require iconic figures in the formation of religious networks. These networks are characterized by an imbalanced feature in which a guru must be more superior in all aspects to the *ummah* to display a justified relation.

### ***A Symbol of Riding the Coattails for Politicians: Kyai Kholil's Decisive Authority, Self, and Personality***

In Madura, as in many Muslim strongholds of Indonesia, where many local traditions and customs have been linked to religion, local leaders with highly respected religious ancestries have played a central role in local politics. In this regard, Kyai Kholil's clan has demonstrated a very pivotal role in a number of elections, during and after the New Order era (1966 – 1998) in Madura and East Java (Pribadi 2018).

After President Suharto came to power during the New Order, most *pesantren* leaders developed a more dynamic mindset in response to the challenges posed by the New Order administration

to meet the increasing demands of employment in the business and government sectors following the development plans established by the administration. *Pesantren* were modernized, including their educational system (Hasan 2009). The modernization process is also evident in the political participation of some *pesantren* people. The involvement of *kyai* in politics during the New Order, however, did not reflect a shift in stance among traditionally conservative *kyai* into reformed and progressive ones. Although there was a tendency for *kyai* to lend their political support to Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP [the United Development Party]), most Madurese *kyai* distanced themselves from political parties during the New Order. Only a certain number of *kyai* openly participated in politics. The patterns of *kyai* in politics, such as guiding older *santri* to vote for a certain political party, were only seen in those *pesantren* where such elements were highly appreciated by the *santri* (Pribadi 2018).

In Bangkalan, the celebrated Kyai Kholil's *pesantren* and its associated *pesantren*<sup>5</sup> as well as Pesantren As Shomadiyah were renowned sites that affirmed people's political aspirations during the Suharto administration. In Sampang, Kyai Alawy Muhammad's Pesantren At Taroqqi served a similar function. As long as the *kyai* of these *pesantren* remained functionaries or at least supporters of the PPP and championed the party, their constituents would likely vote for the PPP. A number of *kyai* whom I spoke with emphasized the vital role of Kyai Kholil's family in this regard. During the New Order, Kyai Kholil's entire family openly supported the PPP. Some *kyai* in the family, such as Kyai Amin Imron, Kyai Makmun Imron, and Kyai Abdullah Schal (Schal is short for Syaichona Kholil, and Syaichona is an honoured title for Kyai Kholil) became central figures in the PPP, not only in Bangkalan, but also at the national level. Most, however, endorsed the party in a more moderate manner (Pribadi 2018).

In the 2008 East Java gubernatorial elections, a number of *kyai* in Madura played a significant roles in electoral politics. Kyai Imam Buchori Kholil, a descendant of the legendary Kyai Kholil, gave

support to *Kaji*.<sup>6</sup> Another prominent figure of Kyai Kholil's clan, the Regent of Bangkalan, Kyai Fuad Amin Imron, stood behind *Karsa*. Both *kyai* leveraged the popularity of their common ancestry to garner support for the competing candidates. This is also where a dispute between Kyai Kholil's descendants occurred (Pribadi 2018).

The dispute was inevitable due to the significant influence of Kyai Kholil's descendants. They have been ambitious to exploit their lineage because people pay attention to the religious, social, and political activities of the legendary *kyai*'s heirs. In present-day Madurese religious spheres, to be recognized within religious circles, a *kyai* must generally fulfill three essential requirements: he must come from a *kyai* family; he must lead a *pesantren*; and he must be a member of the NU. If any of these three requirements are not met, then he will not be considered a *kyai* within the vast network of *kyai* in Madura (Pribadi 2018). Therefore, Kyai Kholil's descendants certainly feel confident that they will have influence in society, due to their ancestor's fame.

Exceptions to the three requirements, however, do occur. Kyai Fuad Amin Imron (1948-2019), the Regent of Bangkalan for the 2003-2008 and 2008-2013 periods was widely regarded as a *kyai* even though he never led a *pesantren*. His high regard appeared to stem from his being the great-grandson of Kyai Kholil and the son of Kyai Amin Imron, a prominent *kyai* of the NU and the PPP. This influential figure proved capable of leveraging his status as a political party functionary, business individual, religious leader, and cultural figure to encompass a large domain of influence. Fuad was able to maintain his power through collaboration with members of parliament, dominated by Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB [National Awakening Party) and the NU individuals; by leveraging the *kyai-pesantren*-the NU networks; and by utilizing his multifaceted social standing (Pribadi 2018).

In the 2008 Bangkalan regency head elections, particularly prior to the elections, a *khaul akbar* (grand *khaul*) for Kyai Kholil was held at Pesantren Al As'adiyah Bangkalan on 30 November



2007 (*Radar Madura* 2007). Thousands of visitors gathered in the *pesantren* not only to commemorate the legendary Kyai Kholil, but also to welcome Fuad Amin Imron, the *kyai*'s descendant, as well as the incumbent regent and candidate regent who would participate in the 2008 *pilkada*. In that event, Siti Masnuri, Fuad's wife, presented gifts to members of Muslimat (the women's organization of the NU). In Madura, as elsewhere in Indonesia, it is common for political figures to give gifts or attend religious events where constituents are present before general elections, as they believe this will generate more votes (Pribadi 2018).

Fuad was also able to meet the expectations of his people by responding well to communal issues and concerns. For instance, before he became regent, Kyai Kholil's tomb had been in rather bad shape, despite attracting tens of thousands of visitors every month. After Fuad assumed the regent position, he renovated the tomb including its mosque, and improved the main road to the graveyard as well. The people saw this as Fuad showing a high degree of respect for Kyai Kholil (Pribadi 2018).

What is important to note here is that many of Kyai Kholil's descendants have been able to exploit their lineage in order to benefit in the social, political, and economic sectors. The great appreciation of the people for the legendary *kyai* has been used by all members of the *kyai*'s bloodline. Therefore, Fuad's prominence could, in principle, be enjoyed by other descendants and politicians who are able to leverage the significance and prominence of Kyai Kholil's decisive authority, self, and personality.

From the above examples, we can see that the traditional religious identity of Madurese political actors and their ability to use the powerful image of Kyai Kholil's patronage have been central to their performance in local politics, a situation that continues to this day. In this regard, Kyai Kholil can be seen as a symbol of riding the coattails for politicians, or in other words the accumulation of benefits for politicians.

The politicians who utilize Kyai Kholil in their political activities have benefited by the condition in which Muslim voters not only draw meaning from Kyai Kholil but also project meaning onto him. Here we can see that Muslims develop emotional, even quasi-spiritual relationships with iconic figures, and thus they often function as totemic identity markers. In this essay, Muslims even blur the distinction between sacred and secular by representing modern iconic figures as saint-like or superhuman (Prestholt 2019). In short, the psychological condition of many Madurese and Indonesian Muslims in general who emotionally venerate Kyai Kholil has contributed to the process of iconization that makes him into a 'hero' and an 'authority' in his lifetime, and particularly after his death.

## **Discussion**

### ***The Iconization of Kyai Kholil: Intersecting Religious and Political Narratives of the Past***

In Antiquity, icons were believed to be inhabited by a divine spirit or to have been purified through virtuous living, rituals, or contemplation, and the resulting state was expected to attest through the person's body. Such a person would be recognized by their physical attributes, including size, beauty, or strength, or by their voice or persuasiveness. Therefore, iconic persons were spectacles worthy of witnessing and imitation (Ivanovici 2023).

Throughout their lives, icons serve as focal points of popular imagination, representing collective sentiments, despite the condition that such sentiments may not align with their personal philosophies (Prestholt 2019). However, Muslim culture does not have a formal process for declaring an individual a saint, nor are there explicit criteria for what constitutes sainthood. Rather, these terms are widely used to describe individuals known for their piety or good deeds.

In the formation of the iconization of Kyai Kholil, a vast amount of mythical material could be utilized, yet only certain and particular

themes are consciously or unconsciously selected. When ‘*ulamā*’ and politicians weave stories of Kyai Kholil into their narratives, they select those that serve deliberate, specific, and typically saintly and pious themes. When the public praise Kyai Kholil, they emphasize stories that glorify the saint in accordance with their assessment of contemporary Madurese and Indonesian Muslim values (Sered 1999, 48–71).

In the case of Kyai Kholil, religion and politics have been intertwined in the iconization processes of the *kyai*, thanks to the favourable condition in Indonesia since the nineteenth century in which *kyai* and other religious figures, such as *juru kunci* and gatekeepers of mosques (*merbot*) were able to elevate their standing in society. This was particularly true for those involved in organizing religious life. They were needed primarily during ritualistic festivities, events that have been preserved to this day. Moreover, some *kyai*, in addition to showing their capacities as men of Islamic learning, also performed mystical Islam rituals, such as predicting the future, healing people’s illnesses, and giving martial arts lessons. Supernatural powers, drawn from mystical Islam, were important attributes in cultivating power and authority. Madura, as well as other places in the Netherlands Indies in the nineteenth century, witnessed these circumstances. The people, in turn, have benefited from the *kyai*’s service in the form of religious festivities and personal links and consultation when needed (Pribadi 2018).

Religious narratives attributed to men of religion and the appropriations of the role of religious leaders have contributed to the construction of role models in the Muslim world. This, for instance, has benefited Muslim youth as they navigate the process of intersecting socio-religious identities, a condition often characterized by a need of role models (Nurfitria 2023, 36–45). In the case of Kyai Kholil, he has been regarded as an influential iconic figure who has been exploited by many parties. In contemporary era, Kyai Kholil’s descendants are acutely aware that they, as well as regional governments and politicians, depend on each other. While

politicians need Islamic elements possessed by his descendants to generate decisive votes, the latter needs the former to expand their influence. The Islamic elements are somewhat accustomed to this tradition, although in the past they were usually less active recipients rather than becoming demanding actors in the post-Suharto period.

The notions of iconization are useful in analyzing the complex relationships between Kyai Kholil and the contexts within which he emerges as an iconic figure. These ideas suggest that religion and politics play out in these processes. In the context of the iconization of Kyai Kholil, we see that the *kyai* has been glorified and celebrated by the community, and has been used to oppose and challenge the governments particularly by the *kyai*'s descendants using powerful narratives to maintain their significance in society. Kyai Kholil has been influential during his lifetime and also iconic, imaginary, and charismatic in his afterlife. His 'presence' in the afterlife has created strong power relations, particularly within the circles of '*ulamā*' who became his pupils and his descendants who employ his persona in politics. Meanwhile, for the people, his charisma and saintly personalities have been used as means to gain blessing and dignity.

We can see that people feel compelled to make icons, such as Kyai Kholil, part of their lives because through them, they are able to continually experience powerful myths. Icons such as Kyai Kholil are known as the greatest performers of the greatest myths, and they bask in the kind of glory bestowed upon those with prophetic and charismatic powers to provide cultural leadership in times of great need (Holt 2003).

The revival and contestation of iconic figures who are expected to shape the present and the future can be observed globally. Saints, religious leaders, and social and political figures often overlooked for decades or even centuries are being rediscovered and given new meaning. However, the case of Kyai Kholil is not included in this phenomenon because Kyai Kholil has long been venerated as a saint. From the case of Kyai Kholil, this article suggests that men of religion,

including prophets, saints, caliphs, and ‘*ulamā*’ are iconic figures around whom religiosity and the desire to revive and reconnect with the past converge, establishing a normative framework for everyday life. These processes of revival, in many contexts, are at the centre of local, communal, and national political aspirations, actions, and struggles, often based on particular understandings and imaginations of politics and religion.

Drawing on these findings, this article offers a framework for critically examining how iconic figures are constructed and deployed as role models at the crossroads of competing narratives, both within and across religious traditions, and the political and religious appropriation of historical personalities. The results resonate with Prestholdt (2019), Sered (1999), and Holt (2003), who underscore how mystical stories attached to religious figures help anchor communal authority and deepen sacred charisma. In the case of Kyai Kholil, the persistence of hagiographic accounts does not simply reflect devotional memory; it also reveals an ongoing cultural negotiation over what kind of religious authority is considered legitimate, persuasive, and worth reproducing in the present.

At the same time, this article extends those insights by emphasizing the historiographical dimension of that process: the making of role models is not only about preserving the past but also about mobilizing it. The appropriation of iconic figures functions as a bridge through which religious and political narratives of earlier eras are selectively reactivated to address contemporary anxieties and future aspirations. Kyai Kholil thus illustrates how the symbolic power of saintly figures can be reworked into a social force, shaping moral imagination and sustaining the sacred values of the community. Seen this way, the endurance of his iconic status is less a static inheritance than a dynamic project, continually refined through narrative, contested through interpretation, and harnessed to articulate what the community seeks to become.

## **Conclusion**

This article shows that some Muslim communities in Indonesia continue to regard Kyai Kholil as a saint endowed with supernatural power, not only as a historical memory but as an active source of blessing and dignity for pilgrims including politicians, community leaders, and ordinary believers who visit his tomb. It also demonstrates how many kyai position him as an indirect guru, illustrating how his persona has been iconized within the kyai–pesantren networks that structure Madurese religious life and, in broader ways, Indonesian Islam. In the political arena, the findings further suggest that certain politicians, especially Kyai Kholil’s descendants and figures associated with NU, gain visibility and electoral advantage through symbolic proximity to him, because voters both draw meaning from Kyai Kholil and project new meanings onto his legacy. Across these domains, Kyai Kholil emerges as an icon who remains “alive” in the ummah’s imagination and is repeatedly mobilized to reinforce religious authority and contemporary socio-political agendas.

At the same time, this study has clear limitations. Its focus on a single iconic figure and on specific ritual, genealogical, and electoral contexts means the analysis cannot be generalized to all Indonesian Muslim communities or to other traditions of saint veneration and political symbolism. The article also foregrounds religious and political narratives, leaving other dimensions of iconization less fully examined. Future research could address these gaps by conducting comparative studies of multiple saints across regions and organizational milieus, including settings beyond NU; by tracing how iconization operates through social and economic narratives; and by examining the growing role of digital media in shaping pilgrimage, charisma, and political legitimacy. Such broader and comparative approaches would deepen our understanding of how role models are constructed, contested, and repurposed across the Muslim world.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Some parts of this article have already appeared in Pribadi 2018.
- <sup>2</sup> No one knows exactly the date of birth or death of Kyai Kholil, as his life history is not well recorded.
- <sup>3</sup> In Madura, Java, and Indonesia in general, the terms of *kyai* and '*ulamā*' are used interchangeably.
- <sup>4</sup> The elections is discussed further in the next section.
- <sup>5</sup> There are a number of *pesantren* that have close connections or claim to have interrelated ties with Kyai Kholil's *pesantren*. These connections are not exclusively based on family bonds, though these are common. To name a few, Pesantren Syaikhona Kholil 2, Pesantren Ibnu Kholil, and Pesantren Al Muntaha Al Cholili.
- <sup>6</sup> The stories of *Kaji* and *Karsa* are discussed in previous section.

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