


## Book Review: Rijal, S. (2024). *Defending Traditional Islam in Indonesia: The Resurgence of Hadhrami Preachers.*

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Syamsul Rijal's *Defending Traditional Islam in Indonesia: The Resurgence of Hadhrami Preachers* is arguably one of the most significant monographs addressing the contemporary reconfiguration of traditional Islam in Indonesia. Its principal strength lies in its comprehensive analysis of the emergence of the *Hadhrami* (Arab immigrants who formed long-standing diasporic communities in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, many of whom are commonly known as *Habaib* and believed to possess bloodline to Prophet Muhammad) as key actors in the rearticulation of Islamic authority, particularly in Indonesia's major urban areas. Rijal successfully connects the internal dynamics of the *Hadhrami* community, intellectual and spiritual networks linking Yemen, especially Hadhramaut, with Indonesia, and doctrinal contestations between traditionalists and Salafi groups. Through this integrative framework, the book explains why *Habaib* have emerged as prominent figures in the public religious sphere after the fall of Suharto's regime in 1998. Based on twelve months of extensive ethnographic fieldwork, from December 2012 to November 2013, with some data updated in 2023 in several major cities, such as Jakarta, Malang, Solo, Surabaya, Bangil and Makassar, the study provides rich empirical insights drawn from sustained observations of major *majelis taklim* (council of learning)<sup>1</sup>, most notably Majelis Rasulullah and Nurul Musthofa. This ethnographic depth allows Rijal to analyze in detail the *Habaib's* contemporary *dakwah* (Islamic propagation) strategies, including the commodification of religious practices, the strategic use of media, and culturally creative modes of outreach designed to appeal to urban Muslim youth. Moreover, the book challenges earlier scholarly assumptions that traditional Islam would inevitably decline and lose relevance in the face of modernization (Geertz, 1960; Gellner, 1981; Weber, 1978). It also complements, while extending beyond, the work of scholars like Julia Howell (2001; 2008; 2014) that largely focuses on forms of Sufism that predate the contemporary period in both rural and urban contexts, without giving sustained attention to the *Hadhrami* community as a distinct locus of religious authority.

<sup>1</sup> Referring to religious educational gatherings.

The book is structured into seven chapters that collectively advance the central argument that the resurgence of Hadhrami preachers in post-Suharto era represents a strategic reassertion of traditional Islamic authority in response to doctrinal competition, social change, and transnational influences. The chapters move from establishing the theoretical and historical background of this resurgence, to examining the concrete mechanism through which *Habaib* construct authority by performance, media, and transnational networks, and finally, to analyzing how this authority is received and reinforced by urban Muslim youth, before concluding with broader implications for the future of traditional Islam in Indonesia.

In the first chapter, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the religious field, Rijal argues that the resurgence of *Hadhrami* figures known as *Habaib* should be understood as a response to perceived external threats, particularly from puritanical Salafi movements that challenge established traditions and religious authority. Rather than merely defending inherited practices, the *Habaib* actively transform these challenges into opportunities to consolidate their authority by promoting forms of traditional Islam that resonate strongly with Indonesian traditionalist sensibilities. This process unfolds through two interrelated strategies: first, the reinforcement of traditional legitimacy through doctrinal arguments and the assertion of Arab identity; and second, the popularization of tradition through innovative and creative *dakwah* practices tailored to the aspirations of urban Muslim youth. As Rijal demonstrates, the more intensively the *Habaib* promote traditional Islam in the public sphere, the more their social standing and religious authority are enhanced.

Chapter 2 examines the internal dynamics of the Hadhrami community from the colonial period to modern Indonesia, arguing that internal conflicts have shifted from disputes over social hierarchy and nationalist orientation to doctrinal contestation and struggles over religious authority. During the colonial era, tensions centered on reformist challenges to *Sayyid* privilege, particularly practices such as the prohibition against female *Sayyids* (*Sharifa*) marrying non-*Sayyids* and the ritual of hand-kissing as a marker of honorable status. These practices were most notably contested by Shaykh Ahmad Surkati, a Sudanese scholar who studied and taught in Mecca before later serving as an inspector of Jamiat Khair in Batavia. Surkati advocated the principle of egalitarianism (*musāwāh*), arguing that social hierarchy based on lineage had no foundation in Islamic teachings. His position eventually led to a major institutional split between Jamiat Khair and Al-Irsyad.

Founded in Batavia in 1901, Jamiat Khair was an educational organization whose founders were predominantly *Sayyids*, although its leadership structure also included several non-*Sayyids*. It established Islamic schools in Batavia and Bogor that adopted a modern pedagogical approach, combining the use of textbooks and Western sciences with the teaching of traditional religious subjects. By contrast, al-Irsyad emerged in 1914 after Surkati and his friends withdrew from Jamiat Khair. The institution promoted reformist ideas inspired by Egyptian modernism, emphasizing the purification of Islam from superstition and religious innovations (*bid'ah*) and a return to the primary sources of Islam, Qur'an and the Hadith. Owing to its strong critique of hereditary religious authority, al-Irsyad became widely known as a bastion of anti-*Sayyid* thought. Since the 1980s, however, these conflicts have increasingly been shaped by transnational Islam movements, particularly Shi'ism and Salafism, generating new doctrinal rivalries, tensions among younger *Sayyids* and conservative *Habaib*, and internal fragmentation within Al-Irsyad along generational and ideological lines.

Chapter 3 explains the rise of ultra-traditionalist movements identifying with *ahl al-sunna wa al-jamā'a* (*aswaja*), most of which are affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Rijal interprets this resurgence that led by Hadhrami *Habaib* and Javanese *kiai* in the post-New Order period

as a response to perceived threats to established doctrines and practices of traditional Islam. While Salafism is identified as the primary challenge, other movements such as Shi'ism, Ahmadiyah, Hizbut Tahrir, and Islam liberalism are likewise viewed as deviations from Sunni orthodoxy. Rijal further shows that *aswaja* defenders employ diverse *dakwah* strategies, including public preaching, polemical writings, and new media. He categorizes these actors into three groups: (1) popular preachers who rely on mass outreach and digital platforms like Habib Nival Alaydrus; (2) NU scholars who defend traditional Islam through debate and doctrinal critique like Idrus Ramli; (3) and online activists, such as Sarkub<sup>2</sup>, who use humor and confrontational digital content to counter Salafism and expand traditionalist discourse in online spaces. Rijal distinguishes these three types of actors on the grounds that polemics among Muslim groups articulating different doctrinal positions are expressed through multiple arenas, including periodicals, books, websites, and public debates.

In Chapter 4, Rijal shows that popular Habaib in post-Suharto urban Indonesia reassert traditional religious authority by emphasizing performance and entertainment to attract broad audiences, particularly urban youth. In a competitive religious market shaped by Salafi-Wahhabism, they present themselves as traditionalist scholars and Arab saints (*wali*) through symbols of sanctity, tradition, and Arab identity. Using Majelis Nurul Musthofa as a case study, Rijal demonstrates how this authority is reinforced through religious spectacle, media visibility, and the commodification of religious symbols. Chapter 5 establishes that the growing influence and popularity of Habaib in Indonesia are largely driven by transnational factors, particularly educational and *dakwah* networks linking Indonesia and Hadhramaut. Rijal highlights Habib 'Umar bin Hafiz as a central figure in this reconnection since the 1990s. During his first visit to Indonesia in 1993, Habib 'Umar selected Indonesian students to study at Dār al-Muṣṭafā in Hadhramaut. Graduates of this institution later played a key role in expanding his religious mission by establishing majelis taklim and traditional Islam boarding schools, thereby promoting both their teacher and Hadhramaut as authoritative centres of Sunni Islam.

In Chapter 6, Rijal examines why young urban Muslims actively participate in *Habaib* sermon groups. He suggests that their attendance is not solely for spiritual reasons; these gatherings also provide a space for youth to express their piety and vitality amid uncertainty, discontent, and limited opportunities in urban Jakarta. They seek blessings and well-being from the *Habaib*, regarded as descendants of the Prophet and saints of God. Simultaneously, they express their youthfulness by wearing *majelis* accessories, such as the Majelis Rasulullah jacket, signaling affiliation, socializing with peers, and sharing experiences within the *majelis*. Chapter 7 concludes that the rise of young *Habaib* preachers in Indonesia reflects a resurgence of traditional Islam amid challenges from modernization and new media. Contrary to earlier assumptions that traditional Islam would decline, the *Habaib* have leveraged doctrinal conflicts with groups like the Salafis to maintain and enhance their authority among traditionalist Muslims. They promote socially and theologically conservative Islam, rejecting Salafism, Shi'ism, Ahmadiyah, and liberal interpretations, while attracting a broad audience especially lower-middle-class urban youth through engagement with popular culture and new media, even though their message remains primarily within the traditionalist segment.

This book has several limitations, which I divide into three main points. First, it focuses too heavily on male actors and overlooks the important role of female preachers, even though they also developed around the same central figure, Habib 'Umar bin Hafiz. This gap is addressed by Fatimah Husein (2025) through a feminist epistemological approach that positions

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<sup>2</sup> A group of traditionalist activists who defend *aswaja* teachings against Salafi attacks.

female preachers as active producers of Islamic knowledge. One example is Ustazah Halimah Alaydrus, the most prominent Hadrami female preacher in Indonesia today, who has wide influence both through face-to-face preaching and social media, and who emphasizes the role of Muslim women in preserving the Ṭarīqah 'Alawiyyah and addressing issues facing young women.

Second, this book overlooks the involvement of the *Habaib* in political Islam, which serves as an important means to bolster their authority within society. Abdullah Yusuf Muflih and Rezza Dian Akbar (2025) examine the political roles of the *Habaib* group in Surakarta including Habib Hasan bin Anis Al Habsyi, Habib Ja'far bin Ali Assegaf, Habib Muhammad bin Yahya Baraqbah, and others, and conclude that these *Habaib* view political Islam as a vehicle for disseminating Islamic values, not for establishing an Islamic state or engaging directly in politics. Their participation in political discourse is more about supporting leaders who prioritize Islamic principles without the ambition to hold political office. This research offers new insights into Islamic political engagement in Indonesia by shifting the dualistic understanding between Islamism and secularism.

And finally, this book does not discuss the polemics regarding the lineage (bloodline) of *Habaib*, which some people have begun to doubt in terms of authenticity. Wahid (2025) highlights the shift in the religious authority of *Habaib* in Indonesia during the digital age, where traditional legitimacy based on lineage is now being challenged by demands for scientific transparency and empirical evidence, such as DNA tests. Through an analysis of social media comments, he found a tension between traditional values and a modern society that places higher value on scientific competence and moral integrity. This phenomenon of public distrust ultimately demands that the *Habaib* community rebuilds their credibility through tangible social action and accountability to remain relevant amidst current societal dynamics.

Overall, this book will be of particular interest to scholars and students of Indonesian Islam, Hadrami diasporic communities, and religious authority in post-Suharto Era. It provides important insights into how traditional Islamic authority is reconstructed in Indonesian urban contexts through transnational linkages, media engagement, and the active participation of urban Muslim youth.



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### **DISCLOSURE**

The author declares no conflict of interest.