

Between two worlds: women from *pesantren* appropriating private and public spaces

The history of women’s emancipation in Indonesia has come a long way. In fact young underprivileged women have already had a taste of education since the early 1900s with the first established school for girls set up in Central Java by Kartini. Most Indonesians are well aware of the struggle of this women’s rights champion in the midst of the patriarchal world around her. Brought up by a feudal aristocratic family,¹ Kartini managed to break down the wall that hindered young women to empower themselves with formal education and to escape from their fate of entering into an arranged marriage in their early teen years. However, not many know what is going on inside the gates of *pesantrens* in Java where young girls and female teachers negotiate their public persona amidst their conservative notions of women’s roles.

Hanny Savitri Hartono

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IT IS IN THIS LIGHT that this book serves its purpose. Eka Srimulyani seeks to fill a void of knowledge on how Muslim women, especially *nyais* (the wife or daughter of a *kiai*, the head of a *pesantren*) empower themselves with education, Islamic as well as mainstream, and as a consequence move between two worlds – private and public. This is not to say that they encounter no obstacles along the way, but these women have achieved tremendous milestones which could never have happened prior to Kartini’s era.

Based on her fieldwork in Jombang, East Java between 2003 and 2004, Srimulyani starts her narrative with a brief account of *pesantren*, traditional Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, particularly those in Java. She purposely frames her research within the agency of the *nyais* due to the lack of studies focusing on women in *pesantren*. Most of the studies on Islamic educational institutions thus far have been devoted to enquire about *kiais*, their leadership, traditions and intellectual transmission. Women from *pesantren* tend to be absent from the academic discourse although they play a significant part in this establishment and beyond. Srimulyani concludes that this trend to a large extent is influenced by “the patriarchal nature of *pesantren* leadership” in which a male descendant is the most likely replacement for a *kiai* when he passes away or is no longer in power. This is especially true not only in Java and Aceh but also in different parts of the Islamic world. The contribution made by the *nyais* in empowering young girls through education and leadership in *pesantrens* seemed trivial and insignificant, thus not worth investigating. However, with the recent social change in women’s engagement in the public arena,

Srimulyani is inspired to investigate how these women deal with the issue of negotiating public spaces amidst the domestically bound Javanese traditional women’s roles. She points out that the social life of women who live, study and work in a *pesantren* cannot be compared to other Muslim women in Indonesia who live outside this institution, due to the unique cultural norms and principles embodied by the establishment and its members. Hence such study is necessary and long overdue.

This ethnographic text reveals the history, journeys and both the public and private lives of three chosen *nyais* from different generations by tracing back their paths. Srimulyani intentionally selected these women to cover a span of history from the early 1900s to the present. Her core argument is that despite the fact that patriarchal traditions are learned through *kitab kuning* and practised in the *pesantren*, these women can transcend the boundaries of the institution and assume public responsibilities not only in their *pesantren* but also in their community.

Srimulyani introduces the concept of *santri ibuisim*, which derives from the notions of *priyayization* and *ibuisim*, to describe the status of *nyais*. *Priyayization* pertains to a process in which Javanese women from a privileged middle-class background, assume power in the Western sense because of their class status. In this manner a woman embodies power because of her husband’s status. Her social standing within the household and outside the home is greatly determined by her husband’s notability. Whereas *ibuisim* applies to a situation in which a woman accepts her role as a mother who takes care of her family, group members and country without expecting any reward, power or prestige in return. These Javanese ideals of womanhood were embraced and promoted by Suharto’s New Order regime without any consideration of the existing vast diversity of cultures within the country. Srimulyani sees that these concepts are embedded in the *nyais* as they are mothers of their own children, ‘mothers’ for their pupils in

Below: Girls at a *pesantren* in Jakarta, at an assembly to meet U.S. Embassy Chargé d’Affaires Kristen Bauer. (Photo reproduced under a creative commons license, courtesy flickr.com)

the *pesantren* and they can also exercise their power to manage the boarding school, especially in matters that relate to their female students, through their engagement as a *pesantren* leader in their own right and/or as a *kiai*’s wife.

What strikes a chord in this body of knowledge is the reality of having *kitab kuning* as the moral compass and teaching material used in the majority of *pesantren* under the wing of the Nahdlatul Ulama (the biggest traditionalist Muslim organisation in Indonesia). These textbooks contain interpretations of Islam not only from the Qur’an and the *hadiths*, but they are also fully charged with local cultural and traditional understandings that lead them to separate women’s and men’s roles in two very separate boxes, and place public and private spheres in the opposite continuum. Hence it is not too much to say that these *nyais* deserve all the credit since these women have weathered the predicaments they faced.

The value of this book lies in the richness of its narratives describing the history and private and public lives of the female leaders of traditional Islamic institutions in East Java that have barely been touched before. As a female Muslim of Indonesian descent who has no *pesantren* background, the book opens my eyes and provides me with a deeper understanding on what is going on behind the ‘closed doors’ of *pesantren* in East Java. One thing makes me wonder though. Will the future female leaders of *pesantrens* encounter fewer frictions since there has been a new movement to critically analyse and improve the *kitab kuning* for its patriarchal notions?

Hanny Savitri Hartono. (Vitri_ui@yahoo.com)

Notes

1 For a detailed account of Kartini’s life, dreams and struggles, see Raden Ajeng Kartini. 1921. *Letters from a Javanese princess* (A. L. Symmers, Trans). London: Duckworth & Co. Available from Project Gutenberg.

