Qu(e)erying Islam:
An Exploration of Queer Muslims and their Allies in Indonesia

Diego García Rodríguez
CMII
University College London

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of:
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Submitted for examination: April 2020
Declaration

I, Diego García Rodríguez, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signed: 

Date: 14.04.2020
Abstract

This PhD thesis explores gender, sexuality and religion in contemporary Indonesia. It does so by, firstly, analysing how queer Indonesian Muslims come to, and negotiate, their gender, sexual and religious subjectivities, beliefs and practices through interactions with the social forces around them. Secondly, it draws on recent scholarship that attends to ‘agency’ not merely as a synonym for resistance but also as a modality of action to examine the emergence of queer agentic systems through submission to religious duties. Thirdly, it explores how, in contemporary Indonesia, a diverse group of people defined as allies of queer Muslims have come to develop queer-inclusive strategies from within Islam. In engaging with these three levels of analysis, this thesis presents the voices, practices and activism of contemporary Indonesians to explore the role of Islam as a source of emotional strength, guidance, and social support.

This thesis is based on a 10-month ethnographic study conducted in 2017 and 2018 on the Indonesian island of Java involving 74 semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation and media analysis. This thesis provides a critical account of the voices of queer Muslims and their allies in Indonesia, which have not been examined in depth in existing literature. Additionally, it presents a historical exploration on gender, sexuality and religion in the archipelago. Theoretically, I attend to the voices of my interlocutors to understand the emergence of queer religious agentic systems from within both submission to and negotiation of religious practices and beliefs.
Impact Statement

As the first in-depth study of queer Muslims and their allies in contemporary Indonesia, this thesis contributes to academic debates within, and among others, Indonesian, gender and sexuality, and religious studies. It does so by providing a snapshot of how queer Muslims navigate, negotiate and come to their gender, religious and sexual subjectivities in relation to the social institutions around them. The approach guiding this study, drawing upon postcolonial feminist debates about the agentic power of religious subjects, breaks away from narrow conceptualisations of agency as resistance, which are common within liberal feminist and queer scholarship. Challenging existing representations that have stressed a conflictual relationship between being queer and Muslim, my study contributes to new understandings of these intersecting subjectivities by identifying the role that religious practices such as fasting and prayers have for queer Muslims in Indonesia. Through my exploration of such practices, this study sparks new debates for future research on religion and sexual minorities exploring the agentic power of queer religious subjects.

Secondly, this study is impactful in the field of religious activism by exploring the origins of pro-queer Muslim activism in relation to progressive Islam and Islam Nusantara. Additionally, it explores the strategies developed by allies of queer Muslims to promote the inclusion of sexual minorities within Islam. To my knowledge, to date no empirical studies have been conducted on the role of non-queer progressive actors in the promotion of queer inclusion in Indonesia. While existing literature has explored progressive Islam in the ‘West’, little has been discussed under the notion of ‘progressive’ discourses in Indonesia with literature mostly discussing liberal Islam. My findings can help articulate strategies of activism combining religion, gender and sexuality to reduce and prevent discrimination and intolerance. The contributions of my thesis also relate to the study of Islam in a way that contests its depiction as a ‘homophobic’ religion, essentially inimical to queer people, by considering how, from within both Indonesian and religious values, the inclusion of queer individuals can be promoted.

Drawing on insights from my research to date, I have published 2 peer-reviewed articles in the journals Gender, Place and Culture and TSQ. These articles have been shared online and they
have already been downloaded around 400 times. Additionally, I have presented my research at international seminars and conferences to diverse audiences, including the Asian Studies Association of Australia, the European Geographies of Sexualities Conference, the International Convention of Asia Scholars and the European Association for Southeast Asian Studies.

In my role as PGTA for the *Multidisciplinary Approaches to Gender Studies* and *Social Theory* modules at UCL’s SSEES and CMII, I included dimensions of gender, sexuality and religion emerging from my research throughout group discussions, when relevant.

Impact has also been brought about through my engagement in activism with queer groups in Indonesia employing my findings to produce grant proposals, some of which have been successful leading to the start of two projects with transgender women: one based on connecting them with their family members, and another offering alternative professional development programmes.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. 3
Impact Statement .................................................................................................................. 4
Table of Contents .................................................................................................................. 6
List of Figures ....................................................................................................................... 9
Glossary ................................................................................................................................. 10
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................. 14
Chapter 1: ‘I stand in the middle of society’ — An Introduction ....................................... 18
  1.1. Prologue ....................................................................................................................... 18
  1.2. Situating this thesis ...................................................................................................... 24
    1.2.1. Decolonising genders and sexualities .......................................................... 25
    1.2.2. Religion, Queer .............................................................................................. 28
  1.3. Research aims and questions ....................................................................................... 32
  1.4. Justification and relevance of the research ................................................................. 34
  1.5. Methodology ............................................................................................................. 36
    1.5.1. An ethnographic approach .............................................................................. 36
    1.5.2. Fieldwork locations ....................................................................................... 39
    1.5.3. Data collection ............................................................................................... 40
    1.5.4. Data analysis ................................................................................................. 43
    1.5.5. Reflexivity and positionality ......................................................................... 44
    1.5.6. Ethical issues .................................................................................................. 46
  1.6. Key Concepts ........................................................................................................... 47
    1.6.1. Identity, subjectivity, subject position ............................................................ 47
    1.6.2. Gender and sexual categories ........................................................................... 48
    1.6.3. Agency ........................................................................................................... 50
  1.7. Structure of this thesis ............................................................................................... 55
Chapter 2: Three Indonesian Histories ............................................................................. 58
  2.1. Introduction ................................................................................................................ 58
  2.2. Histories of religion in Indonesian nationalism and politics ..................................... 58
  2.2.1. A (pre)history of Indonesian gender and sexual diversity ................................ 70
  2.3. A history of today’s gender, sexuality and religion ..................................................... 75
    2.3.1. The most disliked group ................................................................................. 78
    2.3.2. The advent of political homophobia .............................................................. 80
  2.4. Conclusions .............................................................................................................. 85
Chapter 3: Navigating Gender, Sexuality and Religion: Family and Education ............. 87
  3.1. Introduction ............................................................................................................... 87
  3.2. Family ........................................................................................................................ 88
    3.2.1. Family, Religiosity, Responsibility ............................................................... 92
    3.2.2. Family pressure and teachings ...................................................................... 99
    3.2.3. Marriage ....................................................................................................... 104
  3.3. Education .................................................................................................................. 108
  3.4. Conclusions ............................................................................................................. 113
Chapter 4: Navigating Gender, Sexuality and Religion: Media and Social Encounters ....... 116
Chapter 8: Conclusions

Chapter 7: Exploring the Allies’ Strategies

Chapter 6: Who are the Allies of Queer Muslims? Situating Pro-Queer Religious Activism in Indonesia

Chapter 5: Towards a Queer Religious Agency
8.1. Introduction........................................................................................................................................... 245
8.2. Que(e)rying Islam .................................................................................................................................. 247
  8.2.1. ‘Becoming’ a queer Muslim ........................................................................................................... 247
  8.2.2. Agency and power .......................................................................................................................... 253
  8.2.3. Pro-queer religious activism .......................................................................................................... 257
8.3. Limitations and further research ......................................................................................................... 261
  8.3.1. Limitations ........................................................................................................................................ 261
  8.3.2. Further research ............................................................................................................................ 262
8.5. Final Reflections ...................................................................................................................................... 265
References .................................................................................................................................................... 268
Appendix 1: Information Sheet .................................................................................................................. 309
Appendix 2: Informed Consent Form .......................................................................................................... 311
Appendix 3: List of Interview Questions and Themes .................................................................................. 312
  I.I. INTERVIEWS WITH QUEER INDIVIDUALS ................................................................................... 312
  I.II. INTERVIEWS WITH ACTIVISTS/ SCHOLARS/ RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES ................................ 313
List of Figures

Figure 1: The attackers, carrying banners on their chests with words like *keluarga* (family) and *masyarakat* (society) tie the waria up.

Figure 2: The performers conclude by hugging each other.

Figure 3: Speakers representing Islam, Buddhism, Protestantism and Catholicism discuss issues of gender, sexuality and religion in relation to their faiths.

Figure 4: Map with main fieldwork locations highlighted in green.

Figure 5. The Young Queer Faith and Sexuality Camp started with an introduction (*pengantar*) that included a discussion on Indonesian gender and sexual history (*sejarah*).

Figure 6. Indonesia’s ‘most disliked groups.’ (Rozaq 2018.)

Figure 7: ‘5,791 Men in Depok are Gay’, *Radar Depok* newspaper cover for November 18, 2015 issue.

Figure 8: ‘Indonesia’s LGBT Emergency’, *Suara Karya* newspaper cover for February 13, 2016 issue.

Figure 9: ‘Watch out! LGBT Has Become a Dangerous Movement’, *Media Umat* newspaper cover illustration for March 3, 2016 issue.

Figure 10: Banner from the blog Gay Islam Indonesia.

Figure 11: Banner presenting myself as a speaker at an international discussion on bridging faith and humanity.

Figure 12: Attendees at the conference on faith and humanity.

Figure 13: A group of *waria* and Christian students attend an event at the Christian University Duta Wacana.

Figure 14: A *waria* participant pretends to pass away during the workshop on corpse handling.

Figure 15: The body of the *waria* volunteer is wrapped with fabric following the Islamic procedure.

Figure 16: The leader of YIFoS writes Qur’anic *surat* in Arabic to develop queer inclusive interpretations of the Islam sources.
Glossary

**Abangan:** Followers of *abanganism*, often portrayed in scholarship as more lenient Muslims.

**Abanganism:** Javanese syncretic practices combining Islam and *kejawan*.

**Adat:** Local custom or traditional law.

**Ayat:** Qur’anic verses.

**Bissu:** Ritual role performed by gender non-normative shamans in the Bugis society of South Sulawesi.

**Butchi:** Masculine women who often date *femme* women and perform masculine normative roles.

**Calabai:** Roughly translated as *transgender* male in the Bugis society.

**Calalai:** Roughly translated as *transgender* female ritual priest in the Bugis society.

**Déndong/dandan/dendes:** For *waria*, it is the process of becoming (*menjadi/fadi*) *waria* by putting on make-up, dressing in typically ‘female’ attires and through the optional application of silicone injections and plastic surgery. For *gay* men, it involves temporary bodily modifications such as putting on make-up.

**Dukun:** Ritual/medical practitioner believed to have supernatural powers.

**Femme:** Term used to refer to feminine women whose sexual orientation is towards women and often perform female normative rules.

**Fiqh:** Islamic jurisprudence.

**GAYa Nusantara/GN:** First LGBT-rights NGO created in Indonesia in 1982, formerly known as Lambda Indonesia, and based in Surabaya.

**Go-Jek:** Transport app company. Go-Jek is a compound of the verb ‘go’ and the Indonesian term ‘*ojek*’, which means motorbike taxi.
Gotong royong: Mutual assistance.

Hadith: Reports on the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad.

Hijab: See jilbab.

Imam: Islamic worship leader.

IPNU: Ikatan Pelajar Nahdlatul Ulama, the Nahdlatul Ulama Male Student Association.

IPPNU: Ikatan Pelajar Putri Nahdlatul Ulama, the Nahdlatul Ulama Female Student Association.

Jilbab: Muslim veil used by women.

Kejawen: Central and Eastern Javanese syncretic religious or spiritual practices that combine Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic ideas.

Kualat: Bad karma in Indonesian.

Kyai/kiai: Male religious scholar or leader of a pesantren.

Madrasah: Islamic school.

Muhammadiyah: One of the two largest Islamic organisations in Indonesia, together with Nahdlatul Ulama, founded in 1912 by Ahamd Dahlan and is known for its modernist approach.

Mukenah: Dress covering head and body, generally white but also available in other colours, that Muslim women wear to pray.

Musholla: Small room used for prayers when a mosque is not close enough.

Nahdlatul Ulama: Largest Islamic organisation in Indonesia, created in 1926 and based on traditionalist Islamic ideas.

Nyai: Term used to refer to a female religious leader or Islamic teacher in Indonesia. It is also used to refer to the wife of a kyai.
**Pancasila**: Philosophical foundation of the Indonesian state composed of the Javanese terms ‘panca’ (five) and ‘sila’ (principles) in relation to the five principles it recognises: belief in the One and Only God; a just and civilised humanity; a unified Indonesia; democracy; and social justice for all Indonesians.

**Pengajian**: Muslim religious study group.

**Pengamen**: Street singer.

**Perda**: Short for ‘peraturan daerah’ or regional regulation.

**Pesantren**: Islamic boarding school.

**Prestasi**: Achievements, success or good deeds.

**Priawan**: A compound of the words ‘pria’ (man) and ‘wanita’ (woman) used to refer to transgender men.

**Puasa**: Religious fasting. When used as ‘bulan puasa’ it means ‘fasting month’ or Ramadan.

**Rahmatan lil alamin**: Islamic concept that means ‘Mercy to all creations.’

**Ramadan/Ramadhan**: Ninth month of the Islamic calendar when fasting is mandatory for Muslims.

**Rupiah (Rp)**: Indonesian currency.

**Santri**: Pesantren students or pious Muslim person.

**Shalat**: Mandatory prayer for Muslims that takes place five times per day. Indonesians also use sholat, solat and salat.

**Slametan**: A Javanese communal religious ritual and feast used to represent social cohesion among those taking part in it.

**Sunda wiwitan**: Syncretic religious or spiritual practices from the Sunda region of West Java.
**Surat/ Surah:** Qur’anic chapter, which is divided into verses known as ‘*ayat.’

**Transpuan:** A compound of the words ‘*transgender*’ and ‘*perempuan*’ (woman).

**Ustad:** Teacher of Islam.

**Wadam:** A compound of the words ‘*wanita*’ (woman) and ‘Adam’, the religious figure present in both the creation narrative of the Qur’an and the Book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible, used to refer to *transgender* women.

**Waria:** A compound of the words ‘*wanita*’ (woman) and ‘*pria*’ (man) roughly translated as *transgender* woman.

**Warung:** Small simple restaurant to eat or hang out with friends.

**Wudu:** Islamic ritual washing.

**YiFOS:** Youth Interfaith Forum on Sexuality.

**Zakat:** One of the five fundamental pillars of Islam, mandatory for Muslims and based on a charitable contribution or tax to alleviate poverty.
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the help and contribution of all of those who have played a part in the process of producing this thesis. I want to thank those who I met in Indonesia and left this world before I managed to complete it. Despite the difficulties they experienced, they always had a kind word, a funny expression and a passionate response to all of my questions. I acknowledge their courage and bravery to share their life experiences with me.

I came to study a PhD on the topic of gender, sexuality and religion in Indonesia as a consequence of my postgraduate studies at Lund University under the supervision of Dr Ann Kull. She was a great inspiration and her passionate way of teaching encouraged me to follow this path and led me to visit Indonesia for the first time in 2014. It was during my first visit to Surabaya that I met extraordinary friends like Tiwi, Sigit, Khanis, Renate and many other activists who I thank for their generosity. In the following years, I met many others who treated me like part of their families: Firdhan, Amar, Didin, Jihan, Steve Suleeman, who provided me with a home to stay in Jakarta, Khanis, my friend and housemate in Yogyakarta who taught me so much, and Fery, who became a sister and without whom completing my fieldwork would not have been possible.

I am thankful for the support of Dédé Oetomo, Diah Arimbi and Ela for offering me the possibility to be part of Universitas Airlangga in Surabaya. During my fieldwork in Yogyakarta, Ragil offered me not only his friendship, but also all types of emotional support for which I want to thank him. In Jakarta, Fajar saved my life and mental sanity from the first day I arrived in the country helping me with all the logistics and always having the best and most intelligent conversations until my very last minutes in Indonesia. He is one of the most brilliant people I have met in my life. Many other people made my life in Jakarta enjoyable: Ester, Aristogama, who welcomed me at his place, Adit, Ryan, and many others. Jonta, with whom I shared some of the most fun trips in Bogor and Bali, also became one of my best companions.

At UCL, my gratitude goes to my thesis supervisors, Richard Mole and Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh for their support, their commitment and thoughtful comments throughout these years. I am
grateful for all their help, not only reading, commenting and providing me with their insights about my thesis, but also through their support whenever I have needed their help.

Thanks to Thomas, Gregoire and Rasa for our coffee and lunch breaks together at university. I also want to express my gratitude to those with whom I taught at UCL, especially Kendsey and Steffano.

During my final year, I had the pleasure of spending 10 weeks at the University of California Irvine working under the supervision of Tom Boellstorff. Many thanks to him for his incisive comments, amazing energy and his invaluable assistance with thinking in alternative ways. I would also like to thank him for always being available and demonstrating an enormous amount of generosity. In California, I thank Tarek, Tim and Marco (and all the tacos we had together driving after the sun set) for their friendship and fun times together.

Thank you to the UBEL DTP ESRC for funding part of this PhD, the CMII fund for conference trips, the UBEL DTP ESRC fieldwork fund, the ICAS grant, the Anette Lawson Foundation fieldwork grant and the Frank Carter travel award I received.

My partner, Robbie, has lovingly supported me daily throughout the last stages of this PhD path always having a nice word to reduce my anxiety. Thank you to all my friends in London, Spain and around the world for taking me outside the academic bubble. There are too many to name here, but they all know who they are. Thanks to Max Andrucki that I met at the ECGS conference and who has inspired me with his thoughts and intellectual curiosity.

Thanks to Ben Murtagh, Saskia Wieringa and Ferdiansyah Thajib for their generosity and contribution to the SOAS workshop we held in July 2019, which also helped me think about my own writings. Thanks to those who used their valuable time to read my thesis and provide me with their ideas and incisive critique in addition to my supervisors: Ben Murtagh, Alicia Izharuddin, Hendri Yulius, Dede Oetomo and Sharyn Graham Davies.
The biggest thanks, in addition to my interlocutors in Indonesia, is to my parents for their incredible support. Without their help, I would never have been able to achieve this.
To my mother, Charo
Chapter 1: ‘I stand in the middle of society’ – An Introduction

1.1. Prologue

‘Hey, my darling, today I am beautiful (aku syantik), beautiful like an angel, an angel in your heart.’ As the Indonesian dangdut\(^1\) song Lagi Syantik starts, a waria\(^2\) appears before an audience of around fifty people, who burst into applause. Most of the audience members, under the age of 30, are wearing T-shirts with the names of the LGBT-rights and HIV/AIDS-prevention NGOs where they work. The stage is a pendopo, a traditional Javanese open-sided pavilion, decorated with lights. Walking distance from the stage is a plastic banner, in a mix of English and Bahasa Indonesia: ‘Welcome participants to the 5\(^{th}\) Young Queer Faith and Sexuality Camp 2018’ (Selamat Datang Peserta 5\(^{th}\) Young Queer Faith and Sexuality Camp). The pendopo’s back wall is adorned with carvings, in front of which the waria dances to the music in the front section where there is a column on each side. She climbs one of the columns rubbing her body against it. Wearing a black shiny wig, she moves her hair side to side, dressed in tight shorts and an open white blouse with a flower print. Less than a minute after the song has started playing, the music suddenly stops and a sad, slow song replaces the dangdut rhythms. Some people exclaim ‘Oh, my God’, while others cover their faces with their hands.

A boy wearing a white sweater has gone on the stage and punched the performer’s head. She is now sobbing on the floor crying and curled in a foetal position. A girl wearing a green veil joins the boy and starts hitting the waria with a newspaper while calling her ‘LGBT’. The boy has brought some rope and starts tying the waria’s body when two other girls join them on the stage. The four people attacking the waria have banners on their chest showing words written in Bahasa Indonesia: keluarga (family) agama (religion), and masyarakat (society) (Figure 1). They carry other words written on pieces of paper which they stick violently onto the waria’s body while she is crying on the floor. Some of these terms are najis (filthy), kafir (infidel),

---

1 Throughout this thesis, all translations are my own unless otherwise stated.
2 Dangdut is a type of Indonesian popular music that combines Malaysian, Indian and Arab styles. Weintraub (2011, 2010, 2006) has written extensively on this music style.
3 A compound of the words ‘wanita’ (woman) and ‘pria’ (man) used to refer to transgender women as well as effeminate men who may identify as women or waria as their gender identity.
bangsat (asshole), sumber bencana (source of calamity), hina (despicable), LGBT, sesat (perverted), pembawa sial (jinxed), banci (faggot), bencong (sissy), and laknat (cursed). They are now punching, kicking and insulting her. She has lost her wig and remains immobile on the floor, crying and screaming in pain.

In the middle of the attack, another veiled girl arrives on the stage. Whilst she is trying to convince the group to stop, a guy starts speaking through a microphone in the corner of the stage giving a speech representing the waria’s feelings:

‘I stand in the middle of society,
receiving their stigma and expectations,
I honestly don’t like it,
even though what I feel doesn’t matter.
I ask myself,
“Am I right among them, how did I get here?”’
While these words are read out, one of the girls continues hitting the waria on the floor until the speech ends and another waria arrives dancing to a slow melody. She brings peace to the attackers, who act like they can finally accept the waria by concluding the performance hugging each other (Figure 2). The audience claps in response to the happy ending and a loud pop song starts to play. With this show, the annual camp organised by the Youth Interfaith Forum on Sexuality (YIFoS) concludes.

The Youth Interfaith Forum on Sexuality (hereafter, YIFoS) was created in 2010 to produce interfaith discussions on religion, gender and sexuality. The forum maintains a website (https://yifosindonesia.org) where it declares that their activities ‘are accomplished through critical dialogue, reflection, and re-examination of religious texts on faith and sexuality, including participation in actions with other communities in relation to those issues’ (YIFoS 2019). One of the most successful projects developed by YIFoS has been the Young Queer Faith and Sexuality Camp where the performance I described above occurred. The camp took place for the first time in Java in 2012 and is held every year in a secret location. With over a hundred applicants, following a selection process, 32 attendees aged between 18 and 28 took part in the

---

4 This picture’s setting is different to that on Figure 1 since it was taken when the show was repeated the day after its first performance for a youth event.
edition I joined in 2018. Most of the attendees identify as *gay, lesbi, waria or trans*, but there are also heterosexual and gender-conforming participants. The camp aims to teach and promote discussions on religion, gender and sexuality through activities including lectures, open debates, meditation, music, painting and theatre.

The goal is for the participants to connect with each other through their similarities, grounded on a humanist ideal that the organisers locate at the core of progressive Islam. Through the week-long camp, the participants are given the chance to share their worries and thoughts communally as a way of releasing negative feelings and providing comfort to each other. The presence of well-known religious leaders from various faiths (i.e. Islam, Buddhism, Christianity) to discuss controversial religious issues on the topic of gender and sexuality let the attendees ask questions that they might not have had answered outside the camp before (Figure 3). Conservative interpretations of the religious sources are reworked communally within the space of the camp. This is the catalyst for a feeling of ‘empowerment’ that some participants shared with me during and after the camp emerging from positive experiences in the navigation of religious and non-normative genders and sexualities. While some believed that religion was against their gender and sexual subjectivities before the camp, by the end of the programme most described feeling more confident and comfortable about the relationship between these aspects of the self.

*Figure 3: Speakers representing Islam, Buddhism, Protestantism and Catholicism discuss gender, sexuality and religion.*
With the opening vignette, I wanted to illustrate the complex embodied and affective experience of queer religiosity through the show that the participants performed on the closing night. As described above, each of the attackers in the show represented a social institution using pieces of paper attached to their bodies. Their references to the family and religion had parallels with the narratives of most of my queer Muslim interlocutors, who described the influence of such institutions in processes of navigation and negotiation of their gender, sexual and religious subjectivities. While the actors above represented family, society and religion symbolically as intolerant forces, by the end of the show, and through the interactions between these different forces, they came to treat each other as equals.

This PhD thesis examines how queer Muslims in Indonesia negotiate and navigate subjectivities that emerge and fluctuate across their lives in relation to social institutions like the family, education and media, as illustrated in the above-mentioned performance. I also trace the work of allies of queer Muslims to promote their inclusion within Islam and Indonesian society. In this manner, the first half of the thesis explores individual subject formation focusing on my queer Muslim interlocutors, while the second half brings the attention to relationality exploring the work of allies. I do so by ethnographically exploring the main factors shaping my interlocutors’ religion, gender and sexuality, and the development of progressive branches of Islam in Indonesia that are inclusive of queer people. These narratives are often silenced by the loudness of conservative discourses and the construction of Islam as an essentialised ‘homophobic’ religion by ‘Western’ media (see articles like Hari 2011; for academic explorations, see Puar 2007: 17) and certain academic scholarship (Siraj 2012). While I am conscious of the violence inflicted on queer bodies in the name of Islam (as it happens with Christianity, Judaism and other religions), which I am not aiming to romanticise, I am also aware of the potential of religion, faith and spirituality to improve people’s lives, as I was told day after day by those I met in Indonesia. It is that story that I want to tell trying, on the way, to honour

---

5 I am employing ‘queer’ here as an umbrella term for local ways of identifying such as, among others, gay, lesbi, waria, or trans.

6 When using the term ‘ally’, I am referring to non-queer individuals who enjoy a privileged status in society (often consequential of their work as religious leaders, scholars, or heads of religious non-for-profit organisations) and intentionally support queer people, individually or collectively, by promoting their rights both as Indonesian citizens and Muslim subjects rejecting oppression and discrimination. I will explore their background and strategies in Chapters 6 and 7.

7 As I will note later, there are multiple other branches of Islam in Indonesia, with most of them having both liberal and conservative angles (Wichelen 2010; Fealy 2008).
the lives of those of my interlocutors who are not here to read this thesis, but whose words will remain present for others to read.

This thesis emerged from the juncture of several interests. The first arouse from my own background after attending a Catholic school during my childhood where I was educated on the dangers of sinning, a topic that I was taught, along with my classmates, as a classification: there were sins of omission, deed, thought and word. While I only attended that school for a short number of years, I started to be fascinated about the role of religion in educating us on how to behave socially – namely, to impact how we navigate, for example, our gender, sexuality or religion, some of the issues I explore in this thesis. After leaving that school, I joined a public one where I continued attending Catholic lessons leading me to reflect on my own subjectivities as a gay, Catholic-educated teenager.

Years later, after starting my Master’s degree in Asian Studies at Lund University, I had the chance to meet Professor Kull, an expert on Islam and feminism in Indonesia with whom I had numerous discussions that led me to visit the country for the first time, working as an intern for the LGBT-rights NGO GAYa NUSANTARA in the summer of 2014. It was there where a second interest emerged. I remember witnessing how some NGO activists, mostly gay men, took fasting during the month of Ramadan as a very serious duty. Most of them followed the five daily prayers, taking breaks during their working activities to do so. Considering my exposure to hegemonic white ‘Western’ knowledge, this was unexpected.

Being exposed to literature on the conflictual nature of Islam and queerness (El-Tayeb 2012; Jaspal and Cinnirella 2013), I had not expected that these individuals would not perceive Islam and queerness as ‘ungrammatical’ (a term used by Boellstorff, 2005b: 575). These behaviours were not exceptions amongst the people I met, but instead the rule as the weeks passed. It was clear that Islam (as everyday practice and subjectivity) played a significant role for the new friends that I had made. They would often locate their Muslimness before other notions of their ‘selves’ such as ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity. This led me to start wondering how they came to their combined subjectivities as queer and Muslim. Additionally, the forums and discussions organised by LGBT-rights NGOs on Islam, gender and sexuality I attended led me to inquire how these debates had started and who the key actors promoting them were. The intersections of these interests and realisations encouraged me to explore in this thesis how Indonesian queer Muslims negotiate their gender, sexuality and religion finding their own ways
of being in relation to the social forces around them, and to analyse the emergence of pro-queer activism through their work and that of their allies.

With this prologue in mind, the remainder of this chapter is structured as follows. I start by situating this thesis within the wider literature with an overview of the academic discussions that have informed my research concerning the universalisation of ‘Western’ categories of gender, sexuality and religion and the implications that this has had for subjects living outside the ‘West.’ I then continue with an exploration of debates on religion and its ‘queering’ as an intervention to rethink normative structures through queer religious experiences. Following this review of key debates, I present my research aims and questions through the interlocking themes of queer Muslim selves, queer religious agency and pro-queer Muslim activism. In the following section (1.4), I justify and delineate the relevance of my research before introducing my research methodology (1.5). It is there that I explain the choices I made regarding my fieldwork locations, my process of data collection and analysis and conclude by discussing the importance of reflexivity, positionality and ethical issues emerging in the field. The latter section covers conceptualisations and definitions of some of the key terms that appear throughout my study, before outlining the structure of the remainder of the thesis.

1.2. Situating this thesis

In this section, I situate my study transdisciplinarily focusing mainly on discussions on the decolonisation of genders and sexualities, and the ‘queering’ of religion. Before doing so, I should note that this thesis is indebted to the ethnographic accounts of scholars of gender and sexuality in Indonesia. For example, Boellstorff’s work (2016, 2005a, 2005b, 2004b) on gay, lesbian and waria subjectivities in relation to nationalism and globalisation, Davies’s studies (2011, 2007b, 2006) of gender diversity and the bissu, roughly translated as transgender priests, of Sulawesi, Blackwood’s research (2011, 2010, 2009, 1998) in Sumatra with masculine-identified tombois and their female partners, and Wieringa’s contributions (2007, 2000, 1999, 1997) on same-sex desire among female-identified individuals. Murtagh’s research (2017, 2013) on the media representation of non-normative genders and sexualities in Indonesia is also relevant to understand the shifts taking place in the archipelago. Their pathbreaking research inspired me to think intersectionally throughout my study to comprehend how subjectivities like gay, lesbi, trans and waria in Indonesia are produced at the intersection between ‘multiple
cultural logics’ (Boellstorff 2005a: 8). The reader will find that the practices of queer Muslims and their allies that I present throughout my study are approached through the lens of overlapping fields of study including, among others, postcolonial, gender and sexuality, and religious studies.

1.2.1. Decolonising genders and sexualities

‘Western’ academic work has traditionally been obsessed with the sexual exoticism and perversion of ‘the Orient’ (Murphy 2013: 311). Employing the example of Burton’s translation of *The Arabian Nights*, El-Rouayheb has critiqued the tendency to build ‘Arabia’ and the ‘Islamic world’ as regions where homosexual practices and pederasty were tolerated (2009: 7). Existing literature trying to find precedents to today’s homosexuality has noted that expressions of love between adult males and younger boys were not illicit in pre-modern Arabia (between 1500-1800), and many prominent religious scholars engaged in such activity (El-Rouayheb 2009: 3). Colonial authors fantasised about the widespread barbarity and vice in Africa, the Islamic world, South America, Asia and the Pacific. Foreign cultures were either romanticised or denigrated: tropes such as the indulgence of the hammam, the exoticism of the harem and the beauty of the tribal men went hand in hand with the Asian weakness and the perversions of the Arabian sodomites (Aldrich 2003: 9). The construction of ‘Africans’, ‘Arabs’ and ‘Orientals’ as collectivities pathologised marginals in opposition to the codes of decency consolidated in Europe by the bourgeoisie (Bleys 1993: 168; Said 1971: 190).

Contesting such depictions, the analysis of colonial violence can help understand how certain representational strategies both ‘dehumanise and dehistoricise’ (Mertens 2016: 2). For example, Mertens mentions the representation of sexual violence during the contemporary conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, depicted during colonial times as a barbaric land, against the underrepresentation of the crimes perpetrated by the colonial power to critique how violence is created as essentially different (ibid). This example helps us think about how today’s perceptions of realities are often shaped by colonial events (ibid:10). Returning to colonial times, the production of ethnocentric geographies (situating ‘Western’ cultures as the right model for all others) led to implementing colonial laws to regulate sexual practices and

---

8 This is a historical framing set by contemporary Islamic scholars like El-Rouayheb to refer to the years between 1500 and 1800. However, as I explain later, discussions on modernity are complex due to its conceptualisation as a ‘Western success’ (Kaya 2004: 46) to dominate those who are not yet ‘modern.’
validate the mission of the colonising powers in parallel to Orientalist representations (Bleys 1993: 170).

While in Europe a minority of the population was classified as ‘homosexual’ following medical and psychopathological precepts, in the colonies whole populations were stigmatised by the ascription of sexual perversions to race or culture (ibid: 171). Homoerotic fascination coexisted with homophobic condemnation contributing to the divide of ‘East’ versus ‘West’ (Boone 2014: XXI). This triggered the imposition of colonial regulations as illustrated by English common law, which led to the criminalisation of sodomy in Malaysia, Singapore and India, among other countries. After European colonialism wrecked political, educational and spiritual resources in Muslim-majority societies, Islam emerged as an ideological rallying point to prop up power in post-independence authoritarian regimes in Africa, Asia and the Middle East (Kugle 2011: 306).9

Considering my reference above to representations of same-sex practices in the Arab-Islamic world through the case of older men engaging in sexual actions with a ‘beardless male youth’, an issue to consider is how such activities did not lead to embracing a specific sexual orientation/identity. Instead, ‘actions’ rather than ‘orientations’ were the main concern of pre-modern Muslim scholars (Ioannides 2014: 121). These acts were based on asymmetrical relationships of age and social class between partners (ibid) reminiscent of ancient Greece, where sexual acts between masters and disciples were tolerated, reflecting their different social status. Instead of exploring the degree to which same-sex practices were allowed in pre-colonial societies, it would be useful to explore how their representation led to implementing colonial controls and regulations to ‘correct’ non-normative sexualities and sexual practices, some of which remain today. Additionally, it could help ascertain how this was followed by the building of ‘fixed’ sexual identities. Katyal develops the discussion on how tangible homosexual identities are a recent development in relation to the East/West binary. As she states:

Traditionally, the law presumes that one’s sexual orientation […] is a fixed identity defined by the gender of one’s chosen sexual partner. However, contrary to this view, some cultures view homosexuality as an activity, not an identity; others view it as a necessary phase in a quest for full-fledged adulthood; and still others equate it with

---

9 I discuss this issue focusing on Indonesia in Chapter 2 section 2.1.
transgenderism. [...] In other words, the presumed equation between sexual conduct, sexual orientation, and sexual identity, so prevalent in Western legal thought, tends to swiftly unravel when viewed in a cross-cultural framework. (Katyal 2002: 99).

In relation to Katyal’s work, there is an evident need to reflect on the notion of ‘modern queer identities,’ considering the problematic character of the concept of ‘modernity’ itself. This is an issue that Momin Rahman has explored in his critique of the fundamental assumption of ‘modernity as Western’ (2014: 28), with the concept of ‘modernity’ used to explain how Europe surpassed other societies and cultures.

References to modernity are complex since they tend to be linked to ‘Western’ superiority. Discourses on Islam are often built through the lens of ‘Otherness’ locating religion against homosexuality, presenting the latter as ‘the marker of the superiority of Western modernity’ (Rahman 2014: 2). With this, the ‘West’ is presented as ‘the prototype of social progress’ (Hall 1992: 313). Altman has discussed how the infiltration of ‘Western’ sexual identity politics now determines how ‘modern’ a country is, while repressing social and cultural traditions of sexuality (1997: 430). The imposition of ‘Western’ discourses in the creation of ‘Otherness’ demonstrates the significance of exploring what it means to be queer and Muslim outside ‘the West.’

In this context, the events of 9/11 have been a major milestone in the use of (queer) sexuality as a way of creating ‘Otherness’ on brown bodies. Razack notes that, following the attacks to the World Trade Center, the policing of Muslim communities in the name of gender (and, I would add, sexual) equality became a global phenomenon (2008: 20). This was consequential of the post 9/11 war on terror’s focus on the three allegorical figures of ‘the dangerous Muslim man, the imperilled Muslim woman, and the civilized European’ (ibid: 5). For Puar, the 9/11 attacks ‘facilitated the consolidation of a new identity category that groups together persons who appear Middle Eastern, Arab or Muslim’ (2007: 38). Reflecting on the consequences that this had on genders and sexualities, Puar notes how this led to the disidentification of members of such groups as citizens through a system of sexualisation and racialisation of religion (ibid). Consequentially, the war on terror sought to rehabilitate ‘lesbians, gays, and queers to US national citizenship through homonationalism’(ibid). Puar defines homonationalism as the emergence of national projects based on the recognition and inclusion of a ‘modern homosexual
exceptional identity’ against the ‘disqualification of racial and sexual others from the national imaginary’ (2007: 2).

Contesting such tendencies, scholars like Massad have critiqued the universalisation of queer rights through the imposition of ‘Western’ LGBT-rights discourses in the ‘non-Western’ world (2002: 361). He accuses ‘the Gay International’ (referring to global feminist, human rights and other NGOs supporting LGBT rights) of universalising the categories of gays and lesbians to produce ‘homosexuals where they do not exist’ (2007: 163), blaming it for the criminalisation of homosexual sociality in Arab countries. These universalising ‘impositions’ are, Massad argues, also a consequence of the production of literature on the Muslim world by Western scholars to create normative knowledge on what they call ‘homosexuality’ (2007: 162). The construction of a ‘Muslim world’ needs to be considered in relation to the building of ‘exotic others’ as free sexual beings due to their exotic character.

Massad’s critiques should be understood in relation to specific representations emerging from reductionist homonormative frameworks, which I noted above through the perspective of ‘homonationalism.’ These academic discussions have led to debates on the linkages between the deployment of queer international activism and increasingly Islamophobic discourses, encouraging us to reflect on the construction of the ‘queer Muslim’ as a uniform subject represented as a ‘victim’ in need of ‘saving’ (Rexhepi 2016; Puar 2013, 2007; El-Tayeb 2012; Haritaworn 2012; Zanghellini 2012; Massad 2007). The temporally disparate debates in this section, which span across various political epochs, will be employed as a background throughout my thesis to reflect on and contest discourses that have portrayed queerness and Islam as incompatible.

1.2.2. Religion, Queer

Religion has been discussed as an immaterial concept defined by ‘beliefs, feelings, motivations, narratives, experiences, communities and embodied practices’ (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al 2016: 10). Although religion, spirituality and faith are often used interchangeably, scholarship has noted the differences between terms in the following way:

Religion as an institutionalized system of beliefs and practices concerning the supernatural realm; spirituality as the personal beliefs
by which an individual relates to and experiences the supernatural realm; and faith as the human trust or belief in a transcendent reality (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al 2016: 10)

Expanding the first definition above, Jakobsen and Pellegrini note how religion has come to be represented as ‘a regressive force (…), one that in its dogmatism is not amenable to change’ against the concept of secularism, which often represents the liberation of humanity through reason (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008: 2). Secularism is often built by locating ‘the language of sexual emancipation and gender equality’ at its essence (Scott 2018: 178). Some consequences of this has been the dismissal of Muslims as full members of ‘modern’ societies and the equation of emancipation with an ‘expression of a universal and reified sexual desire’ (ibid: 175).

Rather than understanding religion simply as a rigid and institutionalised system of beliefs and practices, my thesis will consider the fluctuating forces shaping religious subjectivities in relation to genders and sexualities. This will be in line with the shifts taking place within the field of religious studies/sociology of religion, which have moved from a focus on the role of normative doctrine to experiences of ‘everyday religion’(Ammerman 2007; McGuire 2008) and ‘everyday Islam’ (Fadil and Fernando 2015) as it is quotidianly practised. The assumption that doctrine and theology are the most significant elements of religion used to render practice secondary and suspicious (Henriksen 2016: 48). In fact, a crucial issue for the anthropological study of religion has been ‘how to account for the complex duality of religion as an everyday practice and a normative doctrine’ (Schielke and Debevec 2012) considering the openness of religious behaviours. This openness does not represent choice in a liberal sense: instead, people often have little choice and ‘cope with circumstances over which they have little or no power’ (ibid: 11).

Studies of everyday religion explore the ordinary experiences of religious people beyond ‘the prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices’ (McGuire 2008: 12). Inspired by such debates, my thesis presents my participants’ viewpoints to describe how they engage with religious texts and embody values that they assume as Islamic. My decision to locate my work within broader debates on everyday religion is based on my belief that such an approach can be beneficial for people like women, queers and marginalised communities who have not had significant roles in Islam as an institutionalised religion and legal system. A question worth
asking is that of why everyday religion is so attractive for subjects who experience discrimination and marginalisation, and how religion in its everyday form can be of benefit for them.

Having discussed issues of everyday religion, I will now move on to address the potential of religion for social justice. Alkire (2006: 503) sets the origins of academic discussions on this topic in relation to Catholic, Jewish and Buddhist liberation theologies (Kliksberg 2003; Sivaraksa 1992; Gutiérrez 1973). The initial academic excitement around the transformative power of religion emerging from Catholic liberation theology led to a new generation of literature exploring its limitations (Levine 1992: 1). However, liberation theology still offers an approach in which human actions and experiences are prioritised over intellectual discourse (Rowland 1999: 641). As Rowland states, liberation theology offers ‘an understanding of God from within a commitment to the poor and marginalised’ (1999: 4). The emergence of this movement influenced the development of, for example, feminist biblical interpretations by exploring ‘alternative stories’ (ibid: 648). Some sections of my thesis will engage with discussions on liberation theology to emphasise their similarities with the approaches taken by my interlocutors around progressive Islam.

Putting the focus on the study of religion in the field of queer and LGBT studies, existing research has critiqued the dominant depiction of queer and religious subjects as mutually exclusive (Scherer 2017). Comstock and Henking claim that in academia queer and religious identities are often considered so unrelated ‘as to have no continuity at all’ (1997: 11). Against discourses presenting queerness as incommensurate with religious subjects, Comstock and Henking (ibid) reject the either-or approach by analysing the existing intersections between religious studies and queer theory. Resemblances between these two fields include their focus on interdisciplinarity, and their historical (through their roots in the dramatic shifts occurring after 19th-century processes of ‘modernisation’) and institutional parallels (in relation to their position within academia) (ibid).

Macke (2014) argues that the task of ‘queering’ religion requires a differentiation between ‘queering’ and ‘que(e)rying’. ‘Queering’ is discussed as ‘a critical intervening on the normative structures, discourses, and practices that construct and police sexual and gendered subjects’, while ‘que(e)rying’ dig[s] beyond theory reflecting on the possibilities of ‘que(e)rying’ as a methodology, ‘queering in an empirical sense’ (ibid: 14). Within this field, scholars have worked
on three main categories: 1) defensive apologetics through the reinterpretation of religious sources; 2) the exploration of religiously sanctioned references to same-sex eroticism present in these sources; and 3) bottom-up approaches giving priority to religious-sexual experiences and embodiments instead of opposing soul and body (Yip 2010: 37-41). Challenging the opposition of religion and queerness, the third approach is valuable for my study due to its re-evaluation of the relationships that queer subjects develop with their religion, gender and sexuality, both materially and spiritually. This literature has explored how queer religious subjects repossess religious sources, traditions and rituals to build their everyday lives (ibid: 45).

One major issue in academic discussions concerns the assumed ‘need’ of queer Muslims to manage or ‘reconcile’ a perceived conflict between their religion, gender and sexuality (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010; Siraj 2006). Although thought-provoking, this body of literature tends to maintain the binary relationship of agency and coercion, identifying queer religious subjects as devoid of agency when religious and non-normative gender and sexual identities/subject positions are brought together. Additionally, and mostly from the beginning of the 21st century, scholars have explored the experiences of queer Muslims (Rahman 2014, 2010; Kugle 2014; Yip and Khalid 2010; Abraham 2009; Habib 2009; Siraj 2006; Minwalla et al 2005; Yip 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2008). Existing scholarship has examined initiatives to reread Islamic textual sources (Shannahan 2016 for a review of literature on Islamic textual querying; Shannahan 2010 on the Qur’anic Lut narrative; Habib 2008 on queer-friendly Islamic hermeneutics). There is also work on queer Jews (Schnoor 2006; Alpert et al. 2001; Alpert 1997), and Christians (on Christian lesbians, see e.g. Trzebiatowska 2009; Mahaffy 1996; on LGBT Christians in general, see e.g. Levy and Reeves 2011; Couch et al 2008; Gross 2008; White and White 2004; Wilcox 2002; Yip 1999; on gay Evangelicals, see Thumma 1991).

Academic literature has also stressed the lower religious affiliation of queer subjects against heterosexual individuals (on the Australian context, see e.g. Couch et al 2008; and focusing on the United States, see e.g. Sherkat 2002). A large proportion of these studies have tended to attend to the process that queer religious subjects are expected to undergo to negotiate their identities. Some have set indicators to conclude if this negotiation is successful in relation to the incompatible character of religious and queer identities (Wedow et al. 2017).10 Although not

10 Wedow et al (2017) have set indicators determining why and how gay Catholic students embrace or reject their religious identities and sexual orientations: (1) their participants embrace both identities (defined as ‘integrated’), (2)
always explored through the lens of agency, such negotiations can be a form of agentic power challenging agency’s equation with resistance. Exploring the consequences that these negotiations offer to reflect about oneself in ways different to dominant condemnatory representations can open the door to understanding identity/subjectivity negotiation as an agentic process. Additional scholarship on the issue of ‘queer religion’ has either explored the specific religious beliefs and practices developed by queer religious subjects because of their sexual and gender subjectivities, or the network of social relations in which these subjects engage (e.g. family, priesthood, personal relationships), exploring intersecting identities based on, among others, sexuality, faith, race and ethnicity (Yip 2010: 47). Despite the importance of such research themes, there remains a lack of investigations on the ‘agentic’ potential of religion, faith and/or spirituality in relation to queerness. In short, my thesis seeks to expand such debates to bolster interest in the critical role that everyday and formal religion have for queer Muslims in contemporary Indonesia.

1.3. Research aims and questions

Using the Indonesian island of Java\textsuperscript{11} as my key fieldwork site, this thesis aims to examine how queer Muslims negotiate, navigate and come to their subjectivities in relation to the social institutions around them; the emergence of queer religious agentic systems;\textsuperscript{12} and the activism of queer Muslims and their allies in contemporary Indonesia. Empirically, I provide a critical account of the lived realities of Indonesian queer Muslims and their allies, which have not been closely examined in existing literature.\textsuperscript{13} This will be accomplished by taking an ethnographic approach based on interviews, participant observation and media analysis. Theoretically, I use my empirical data to challenge the assumption that queer Muslims are oppressed subjects in need of saving by conceptualising queer religious powers as part of potential contingent and fluid

---

\textsuperscript{11} Section 1.5.2 explains why I chose Java as my fieldwork location.

\textsuperscript{12} This is an issue I explore in Chapter 5 to refer to sets of interlinked powers emerging through the everyday religious practices of queer Muslims. This concept is based on the deconstruction and contestation of dominant epistemologies of agency, religion and queerness by understanding agency as a modality of action (drawing upon the work of Saba Mahmood) not only based on resistance but that can also emerge through submission to religious norms.

\textsuperscript{13} Despite this, it would also be possible to approach alliance/ally-ship from the metalevel through the work on non-normative genders and sexualities in Indonesia of contemporary academics themselves (like Tom Boellstorff and Saskia Wieringa).
‘agentic’ processes and outcomes. An additional theoretical contribution is based on highlighting the role of those I present as ‘allies’, to call into question the essentialisation of Islam as a rigid and homophobic religion. Their strategies and actions will illustrate the complexity and multifaceted character of Islam.

Through my engagement with the dilemmas offered by intersecting queer and Muslim subjectivities and subject positions, I aim to explore the ways in which queer Muslims replicate, strengthen, resist and rework norms and potential tensions. To do so, I aim to trace the emergence of modalities of agency that are operationalised in the intersection of queer and Muslim selves by performing, inhabiting and experiencing norms in various ways (Mahmood 2005: 22). Following this, I analyse the connections between the queer intrapersonal experience of religion and the emergence of queer-inclusive discourses from Indonesian religious scholars in post-New Order Indonesia. Due to the critical importance and consequential status of contextual hermeneutics to accommodate sexual minorities within religion, a significant aspect this study also seeks to investigate is the development of progressive Islam in Indonesia. While dominant discussions have focused on how religion has been used to justify the marginalisation and criminalisation of non-normative sexual and gender subjects, my study explores instead what everyday life looks like for those utilising religion to escape their marginal status. This is relevant considering the current situation in Indonesia, where conservative groups have been pushing the government to criminalise homosexual acts. However, and despite my concerns about the increasing hostility towards queer people in Indonesia, this study will privilege queer Muslims’ experiences to move beyond their representation as ‘victims of their religion.’

Before I explore the potential of queer Muslims to mobilise their power within queer religious agentic systems and the nature of their religious practices there is, I contend, a need to comprehend how they negotiate their multiple subjectivities in relation to the impact of the social forces around them. In particular, I find it relevant to study the social institutions that influence ways of thinking about religion, gender and sexuality in ways that are then negotiated through fluid experiences across one’s life. By analysing the role of the family, education, media and additional social actors, a lot can be ascertained about what preserve or disrupt the assumed norms one ‘should’ follow as a Muslim subject. As such, I approach my study through the following interlocking questions:
• How do queer Muslim come to, and negotiate, their subjectivities, beliefs and practices through interactions with the power structures around them? How do social forces shape and determine their agentic capabilities and negotiations of the self?

• (How) can queer religious agency be explored at the intersection between gender, sexuality and religion? In relation to this, what role do everyday religious practices play in the quotidian lives of queer Muslims in Indonesia? What might we learn about the agency of queer Muslims by exploring how, why, and to what extent they engage in religious practices and inhabit religious norms combining queerness and Islam?

• What are the origins of pro-queer activism among allies of queer Muslims in Indonesia? (How) can Indonesian Islamic movements such as Islam Nusantara be employed to mobilise queer rights? What can we learn from the strategies of the allies of queer Muslims in order to inform practices with the potential to transform the position of queer subjects within religious grounds?

1.4. Justification and relevance of the research

Indonesia, comprised of around 17,000 islands, is a country of records: it has the largest Muslim population in the world, it is the third largest democratic country, the largest archipelago and the fourth most populous state. It offers a relevant setting to conduct my study, from which my analysis could be used as a reference to develop future studies on queer religious individuals in other contexts. Despite the existence of scholarship on non-normative genders and sexualities in the Indonesian archipelago (Blackwood 2010; Davies 2011; Boellstorff 2005a), far too little attention has been paid to the lived realities of queer Muslims beyond their depiction as conflicted subjects through the lens of normative queer secular models.

‘Homosecular’ frameworks based on denying the existence of agency within religious grounds have created ‘the queer Muslim’ as an oppressed subject in need of urgent salvation (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al 2016; Puar 2013, 2007; Haritaworn et al 2008; Massad 2007; Puar and Rai 2002). Considering this context, I want to stress the importance of reflecting on the consequences of applying dominant theorisations of homosexuality and queerness as ‘identities’ in liberal societies to subjects in the Global South, but also to critically think about
conceptualisations of agency in relation to resistance to ‘oppression by patriarchal structures’ in mainstream feminist development theory (McFadden 2010; Parpart et al 2003; Mohanty 1984). This is a point that scholars like Boellstorff (2005a) have raised to note a distinction between being ‘gay’ in Indonesia (which he italicises to denote this difference) and being ‘gay’ in, for example, the United States.

Despite increasing academic interest in the field of religion and queerness (Scherer 2017; Hunt and Yip 2016; Taylor and Snowdon 2014; Schipper 2005), as I noted previously, research has tended to stress the conflictual relationship between being queer and Muslim, which has often been explored in terms of their ‘ungrammaticality’ with each other (Boellstorff 2005: 575a). For reasons extending from homonormative (Stryker 2008; Puar 2007; Duggan 2003; Warner 1999) secular missions to the repudiation of religion in queer scholarship, the queer religious agential subject has been underestimated in scholarly debates. Against the portrayal of Islam as inimical to the queer subject, in this thesis I challenge such representations by considering the everyday religion of queer Muslims I met in Indonesia as well as their own activism and that of the actors I call their ‘allies’. I argue that the formations of queer Muslims’ subjectivities are part of processes that are not fixed but rather evolving throughout one’s life, allowing queer Muslims to approach and negotiate their gender, sexuality and religion in fluid ways across different times. This might not only be the case of queer Muslims, but also of other religious queers in other locations, too.

I argue that attempts to explore the experiences of queer religious subjects must focus on the formation of their own subjectivities and subject positions as well as on their everyday experiences of piety.14 This, I suggest, can reveal the emergence of alternative modalities of agency that are not simply arising from resistance to religious and cultural norms but are part of submission to those same rules. In addition to the processes of navigation and negotiation of subjectivities and my analysis on the emergence of queer religious agentic systems, I complement my study with an exploration of the work of allies of queer Muslims in Indonesia. With this, I aim to offer two perspectives. Firstly, one focusing on the formation of queer Muslims’ subjectivities and the everyday, informal and unofficial Islamic practices of queer

---

14 With the term piety, I refer both to my interlocutors’ personal religious beliefs and the religious ethics governing their everyday practices.
Muslims. Secondly, a perspective focusing on the progressive discourses produced by Muslim religious leaders and scholars to promote queer inclusion within Islam.

In this process, I do not aim to romanticise queer Muslims’ everyday realities but instead elevate their voices, and those of their allies, to explore how they make sense of themselves and persist (possibly a form of agency to live through precarious times) living in an increasingly conservative society. By exploring how Islam and queer Muslims coexist in Indonesia through the strategies and values emerging from within their own context and religion, I seek to add to critical conversations on the intimate and public experience of religion, gender and sexuality, in relation to the agentic power that Islam may allow to emerge. Additionally, my analysis of the allies’ strategies in building queer inclusion within Islam will contribute to building knowledge of best practice, offering examples that could be implemented by other individuals and organisations in other locations.

1.5. Methodology

This thesis is based on ten months of fieldwork over a two-year time span divided into two months from May 2017 to June 2017 in Yogyakarta (Java), and eight months from May 2018 to December 2018 across the whole island of Java. It followed a qualitative research design that involved semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation, but also included other qualitative methods such as media analysis. Most studies of religion as a source of ‘agency’ have employed qualitative methodologies due to their usefulness in studying social worlds through the eyes of the research participants (Huq 2010; Ali et al. 2008; Jouili et al. 2006; Mattis 2002; Maton et al. 1984). The subjective nature of the religious, gender and sexual experiences, which are diverse, not always linear, and often unfolding over time, makes a qualitative approach the most appropriate. Qualitative methodologies are also appropriate to conduct research on vulnerable communities, since quantitative studies have been considered to suppress the voices of participants ‘either by ignoring them or by submerging them in a torrent of facts and statistics’ (Mies in Bryman 2012: 403).

1.5.1. An ethnographic approach
Even though many have equated ethnography with participant observation (Bryman 2012: 432), I prefer to make a distinction between ethnography as a methodology and participant observation as a method within it. Throughout my fieldwork, I aimed to contribute to ‘decolonise’ ethnography, which Gobo (2008: 2) has termed a ‘still colonial method’. While he does not explain the reason for defining as such, one could think of its colonial origins through the travels of ‘Western’ men who established ontologies of the indigenous ‘Other,’ thereby solidifying the binary between the modern ‘West’ and uncivilised ‘East’ (since these binaries existed from, for example, the travel writings I referred to earlier, which pre-date anthropology per se). While anthropologists have been preoccupied with how to explore cultures regarding issues of language, translation and meanings, gender only emerged as a concern for feminist ethnographers in the 1970s (Caplan 1988: 16). This statement is explained by the male-dominated past of ethnographic work with few anthropologists concerned to do research through a gender lens. Consequently, the significance of ethnographic research on ‘non-Western’ genders and sexualities lies in how it challenges ‘Western’ normative ontological and epistemological positions by paying attention to intersections between the ‘local’ and the ‘global.’

On the same lines, Abu-Lughod has discussed the role of feminism for ethnographic research in relation to the question of ‘objectivity’. She critiques the merging of epistemological issues with discussions on representation to reflect on how non-Western subjects are ‘known and represented’ (1986: 11). Citing MacKinnon, she goes on to explain how epistemological positions that do not follow patriarchal visions of the world are considered ‘subjective’, while only those that adhere to such approaches are considered ‘objective’. The reason why these theorists have come to this conclusion is based on their analysis of sexual inequality, considering how a dominant patriarchal structure has built the epistemological stance of objectivity to construct a world that follows that point of view (ibid.: 14). Objectivity and dominance converge, an issue that can be taken to the context of my study reflecting on how queer Muslims have come to be known ontologically (who they are) and epistemologically (how we know them) both within conservative Islamic discourses and ‘Western’ scholarship on the ‘oppressed brown queer’.

The issue of feminist ethnographies that, in Abu-Lughod’s words, aims to ‘bring to life what it means to be a woman in other places and under different conditions’ (1990: 27) was for me of particular importance as a reference to conduct queer ethnographic work to explore what
‘being queer’ means in the Indonesian context in relation to religion, gender and sexuality. While engaging in such an endeavour, I paid attention to how the research subjects that the audience/reader will be encountering were represented (Caplan 1988). This implied being critical of the concept of researching ‘through imperial eyes’ that Smith has described as

An approach that assumes that Western ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold, certainly the only rational ideas, and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life and of human beings. (2008: 57)

By straying from such an epistemological position, the ‘colonised’ can emerge as agential subjects onto which ‘Western’ traditions of knowledge are not imposed. The consequences of colonisation should also be considered to inquire how local knowledges have been denied in scholarship against the superiority of ‘Western’ ways of knowing. Indeed, Livingstone has defined geography, in relation to anthropology, as ‘the science of imperialism par excellence’ (1992: 60). Colonising strategies have not only been utilised to ‘discipline’ ways of knowing, but also local people, bodies and practices through ‘exclusion, marginalisation and denial’ (ibid: 68). Against this, my ethnographic methodology, inspired by decolonial feminist and queer research, constitutes itself as what Liamputtong (2007: 2) has called a ‘flexible and collaborative approach’ to recognise how certain subjects have been represented in oppressive ways.

Debates on ‘queering’ ethnographies have emerged recently, around the first decade of the 21st century (Browne and Nash 2010; Kulpa and Liinason 2008). What this has referred to is methodologies employed in academic work that explores non-normative genders and sexualities and ways of challenging dominant structures of knowledge production (Di Feliciantonio et al. 2017). ‘Queering’ and ‘decolonising’ ethnography share the need to overcome (hetero)normative ways of knowing through research, challenging, among other issues, conceptions of time and space that have been discussed both within queer and postcolonial theory. With this, I am thinking of Smith’s (2008) postcolonial work in her critique of the conceptions of space and time imposed by the ‘West’ on indigenous people, and Rooke’s (2010) challenge to the temporal and spatial normativity of ethnographic research.

Such discussions were considered in relation to my positionality as an ethnographer living in between blurred borders that often required being present in a field that expands beyond
the material territory that my fieldwork represented. This points to a fictional divide between my
time in Indonesia and my return to London, where I have been in permanent contact with some
of my participants online. Queering ethnography involves, therefore, challenging the
presupposed stability of the ethnographer and recognising how ‘we ourselves are pulled apart’ by
the ethnographic experience (Rooke 2010: 34).

1.5.2. Fieldwork locations

In Indonesia, ‘there is a gay archipelago that lies amidst the national archipelago’ (Boellstorff
2005a: 4). This means that queer people can be found throughout Indonesia, but also refers to the
archipelagic character of the gay world and the gay self as ‘exercised intermittently’ without
sharp external boundaries (ibid: 172). This archipelagic milieu seemed beneficial from the
perspective of choosing where to locate my study but also complicated to take a final decision.
Considering my previous experience as a volunteer and researcher in Java, I decided to maintain
this island as my fieldwork site.

With around 145 million inhabitants, Java is the most populated island in Indonesia, and
on Earth, home to around 56.7% of the country’s population (World Population Review 2019). It
attracts people from all over Indonesia, looking to find better opportunities on the island where
Jakarta, its capital city, is located. Tradition shows a history of gender and sexual pluralism in
Java that activists often utilise today to argue for the inclusion on sexual minorities within Islam,
as I explain in the next chapters. The structure of Indonesia based on Javanese centralism (which
has been widely critiqued) means that the island hosts the head offices of LGBT-rights NGOs
and several universities where progressive Islamic scholars teach.

Considering my previous experience in Indonesia, and the existence of key informants in
several cities, recruiting participants was not a difficult task except for self-identified
transgender men, who were more difficult to make initial contact with. I opted to identify and
recruit participants mainly through LGBT-rights organisations, even though not all of them were
activists or volunteers. The reason for this was that some of my key informants were well-known
in queer circles in the cities I visited, enabling me to develop a snowballing strategy.
Additionally, I conducted participant observation at events, visited universities and organisations
where allies worked, and was often invited by activists to workshops, conferences and talks
discussing gender, sexuality and religion across Java. My three main fieldwork locations (highlighted in green in Figure 4) were:

- Jakarta, with a population of almost 10 million, has a large queer population, LGBT-rights organisations and events on gender, sexuality and religion. The variety of locations where queer people gather was relevant to recruit a cross-sectional sample of queer Muslims.

- Surabaya, the capital of East Java, is the second largest city in Indonesia. It is here where one of the first LGBT-rights organisations in the country, GAYa Nusantara, was created and hosts frequent events on queer and religious issues.

- Yogyakarta, in south-central Java, the seat of the Yogyakarta Principles on the application of international human rights law in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity, is a well-known cultural centre and university town. With around 400,000 inhabitants, it is a thriving town, home to several queer-rights NGOs and to the pesantren waria, an Islamic boarding school for transgender Muslim women.

![Figure 4: Map with main fieldwork locations highlighted in green.](image)

My fieldwork was primarily based in these three cities, but I travelled extensively to smaller towns and cities accompanying my participants and attending events.

1.5.3. Data collection

Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation and document analysis.
**In-depth interviews**

As a primary ethnographic strategy to investigate everyday lives (Crang and Cook 2007: 60), in-depth interviews with a semi-structured format constituted the main source of qualitative data. They were structured around a number of themes, which I illustrate in Appendix 3. These interviews were conducted with queer Muslims, religious authorities and Islamic scholars until ‘theoretical saturation’ was reached. ‘Saturation’ has been defined by Strauss and Corbin as the moment when ‘no new or relevant data seem to be emerging regarding a category’ (1998: 212). Since it is difficult to determine the number of people who should be interviewed before saturation has been achieved (Bryman 2012: 425), I did not set specific numbers prior to fieldwork but ultimately conducted 15 interviews with each of the four groups I had aimed to speak with (lesbi women, gay men, waria/transgender women and transgender men). I also interviewed 14 individuals whom I define as ‘allies’ of queer Muslims, who work as religious leaders, religious teachers and professors, and community leaders working on queer-inclusive strategies through Islam. Interviews were between ninety minutes and two hours long. They were divided into four thematic lines of inquiry: family, education, religion, and gender/sexuality. Additionally, informal conversations were useful to gather data.

Interviews were employed to gather data that I later compared to my observations to triangulate the validity of the answers obtained. This method helped me gather a vast amount of information about the participants, from their family background to their education and self-perceptions, which I drew upon to explore how their subjectivities and ‘agentic’ powers emerged. It was also a convenient strategy to explore any changes over time revealing the contingent nature of the queer religious experience. To trace this variation over time, interviews were loosely structured like life stories, but they focused on religious, gender and sexual experiences. Sampling was linked to the fieldwork locations chosen considering my goal to recruit participants intersectionally (i.e. across a range of vectors of gender, sexuality, race, class), all of whom were living in Java. Considering that one cannot set a representative sample when conducting qualitative research of this kind, the selection followed a snowball sampling strategy: beginning with key informants working for LGBT-rights organisations, I was given referrals to other potential participants. Although I was concerned about engaging with too many activists and therefore having a biased sample, it was easy to find individuals who self-identified under the queer spectrum and had other professions: doctors, entrepreneurs, government...
officials, hotel managers, and so on. Some NGOs I worked with also shared calls for participation within their networks yielding positive responses.

In relation to language, I identified informants who were fluent in English or Bahasa Indonesia since those were the languages I could speak. However, some of my interlocutors felt more comfortable speaking Javanese. In such cases, and with the agreement of my interviewees, I counted on the help of one of my key informants as a bilingual assistant who worked for a local LGBT-rights NGO and acted as a translator during the interviews from English or Bahasa Indonesia to Javanese and vice versa. Additionally, she helped me find participants, using her extensive network of contacts, and we had frequent conversations that helped me understand my research context better. From the positive side, some interviewees felt more comfortable to speak when they were familiar with the assistant. On the negative side, some details might have been lost in the process of translating when interviews took place, but I recorded digitally and transcribed all interviews afterwards. I have kept the original terms in brackets when they could lead to confusion.

**Participant observation**

Participant observation constituted a complementary source for data collection. I took the role of the *partially participant observer*, defined by Bryman (2012: 443) as the researcher who, while joining a group’s main activities, does not do so as a full member. During my fieldwork, I did not consider interviews and participant observation as two separate methods but, instead, they complemented each other to corroborate the reliability of the data I gathered. My time in Indonesia allowed me to make a group of close contacts, many of whom became my friends. They all knew what the focus of my research was, which encouraged the start of many of our conversations. I determined what to include and exclude not only in relation to how relevant data was to answer my research questions, but also considering what, in my opinion, had to remain in the privacy of conversations that often became quite personal.

As the country experienced a process of increasing conservatism and prepared for the 2019 elections, my interactions with queer and non-queer Muslims at the house where I lived, at their homes, following them to their hometowns, at bars, cafés, restaurants, NGO offices, on the way to airports, the offices of religious organisations, beaches, night markets, *warungs* (small family-owned food stalls), events discussing gender, sexuality and religion, communities of
Muslim worship, university workshops, youth camps, malls, food courts and many other locations all provided me with opportunities to find answers to my research questions (and reformulate them) over the course of two years.

During my observations, I gave priority to the process taking place instead of describing the setting where fieldwork was conducted (Charmaz 2006: 22). To do so, I kept a field diary where my thoughts were recorded, applying Mitchell’s set of questions to conduct ethnographic fieldwork: what the settings of certain actions were, what the processes were, how the actors were organised and stratified, what they paid attention to, what they ignored, and what their practices were (Charmaz and Mitchell 2001: 163). A practical example of this comes from my first observations during the prayers held at the pesantren waria in the city of Yogyakarta, which revealed, among other issues, the multiple ways in which the participants engaged in prayer, the existence of a hierarchy within the group and boundaries between the kyai (Islamic religious scholar), the pesantren leader and the rest of the actors involved, and the numerous goals waria had when engaging in prayer. Instead of merely describing the setting, my observations helped me acquire an understanding of the phenomenon that took place in relation to a personal process of queer religiosities.

**Media analysis**

Media analysis is an additional method often employed by ethnographers. In my research, I supplemented interviews and participant observation with the analysis of media resources linking Islam and non-normative genders and sexualities in the country produced by sources with both queer and non-queer backgrounds (i.e. the online blog Gay Islam Indonesia, newspapers like *Radar Depok* and *Suara Karya*), focusing on materials published in recent years. I explore these materials in Chapter 4, where I analyse the role of the media in the production of knowledge on queerness and religion that impacted my participants’ subjectivities. This method is time consuming, but provides a vast amount of information, it is already available and offers additional perspectives to those discussed by research participants.

**1.5.4. Data analysis**

The three different data collection methods (interviews, participant observation, and media analysis) led me to employ data coding to conduct my analysis. Prior to this, I audio-taped each
interview on a digital recorder. Soon after the interviews, I transferred the digital files onto my laptop, encrypted the file and transcribed them verbatim. This was one of the most time-consuming processes during my research. However, engaging carefully with the recordings by listening and transcribing the interviews helped me identify themes that I developed as arguments. After transcriptions were complete, I read all of them several times. I then started the process of coding, defined as ‘reviewing transcripts and/or field notes and giving labels to components parts that (...) appear to be particularly salient within the social worlds of those being studied’ (Bryman 2012: 568). This was done in two phases: initial and focused coding.

Firstly, initial coding considered the participants’ terms and other fragments of data that were significant. Through my initial line-by-line coding I searched for themes in the interviews and observations to establish analytic categories emerging from them. The absence of new labels and repetition of the same ones helped speed up the analysis. Secondly, focused coding selected the most relevant initial codes to compare them to extensive data (Bryman 2012: 569). After this initial stage of analysis, I continued to develop subcategories within the set categories establishing links between them as I explored the data. I coded digitally, employing the qualitative analysis software NVivo.

The guiding principles of my study (revolving around the exploration of queer Muslim subjectivities and the potential of Islam to support these subjects) informed the interpretive strategy employed while coding. This required a balance between the participants’ own words, expressions and how they made sense of the world around them, and my research aims together with the goal to relate their narratives to the research questions I will be answering in the upcoming chapters. The process of coding has been defined as a ‘constant comparative method’ by Glaser (1965) since it requires a permanent comparison of data from interviews from earlier and later times, as well as notes from observations from activities taking place in different moments (Charmaz 2006: 54). Follow-up interviews or personal contact with participants took place when these categories needed to be redefined.

1.5.5. Reflexivity and positionality

During my research in Indonesia I was often asked two questions before starting the interviews: ‘Are you gay?’ and ‘Are you a Muslim?’ The answers to these inquiries led to diverse reactions in my participants. When disclosing my sexual orientation, an invisible wall between us would
break down. However, when answering ‘no’ to the second question, some interlocutors expressed curiosity about my research choice, while others over-explained Islamic concepts or rituals, assuming that it would be more difficult for me to understand their experiences. Such situations helped me acknowledge questions of reflexivity and positionality about the differences between myself and my participants regarding sexual orientation and religion, but also about issues like social class, gender or geographical origins, through the emergence of relationships based on difference.

Reflexivity refers to the ‘self-aware analysis of the dynamics between researcher and participants’ and the ways in which ‘the researcher’s positioning impacts on the research process’ (Whyte cited in Gobo 2008: 43). Considering this, I permanently reflected on my subjective thinking as a researcher (with my own biases and prejudices) when analysing the participants’ behaviours, in relation to how they simultaneously perceived me. Besides this two-dimensional perception, my influence on the social worlds of my participants, and the impact that they may have had on me, must be considered.

My position as a researcher employing a research design that was inspired by queer methodologies meant working from a frank sense of myself based on openness and reflection (Rooke 2010: 35). This implied performing my own ‘gay’ cultural capital, which contributed to being accepted within certain circles on the ground. Simultaneously, I reflected on my own positionality and ontological assumptions as a self-identified gay researcher since I was not able to entirely distance myself from my participants, despite our differences. As a white foreigner, or ‘bulé’ in Indonesian, I needed to consider the ways sexual and gender subjectivities were formed in that particular context since, as Sedgwick (1993: 8) has noted, ‘race, ethnicity and postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these [sexuality and gender] and other identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses’ that might arise as problematic following ‘Western’ hetero/homonormative conceptualisations. Although I was mostly identified as a bulé, I was often mistaken for a Middle Eastern person during my everyday life in Indonesia, which also influenced positively how I was treated compared to being European. This does not mean that European people would be unwelcomed, but instead that people often tried to start conversations with me or behave in particularly nicer ways when I visited religious spaces (i.e. mosques, religious pilgrimage locations).
In general, my queer research positionality involved facilitating the exploration of the diverse alternatives that my research methods offered, instead of following normative conceptualisations set by pre-established systems (Gorman-Murray et al 2010: 101). Considering the variety of participants, I had to negotiate and adapt my own subject positions depending on who I was talking to. For example, I had to prioritise some when speaking with a religious authority that I left behind when engaging in conversation with a queer activist. This illustrates the difficulties of negotiating one’s subjectivities in the field that scholars before me have noted within queer (Browne and Nash 2010) and ethnographic debates (Katz 1994; Haraway 1988), leading to the acknowledgement of the interconnection between reflexivity, positionality, subjectivity and objectivity.

1.5.6. Ethical issues

Considering the sensitive character of my study and the vulnerable situations of many of my participants, I conducted my fieldwork and data analysis with extreme caution to protect my participants’ safety. With the term ‘sensitive’, I am following Welling et al’s reference to projects that require disclosing ‘behaviours which would normally be kept private and personal’ (2000: 256). Researching ‘vulnerable people’ has been the object of extensive reflection and debate. Liamputtong describes vulnerable individuals as those who might be victims of ‘potential harm and require special safeguards to ensure that their welfare and rights are protected’ (2007: 2), including sexual minorities. Vulnerability may simultaneously affect the participants and the researcher when the latter is caught in emotionally loaded situations (ibid.: 6).

However, conducting research on sensitive subjects can also be beneficial for the participants (ibid: 29). This was the case of several of my participants, who got in touch with me after the interview to express their gratitude and describe our encounter as a ‘therapeutic’ experience, an issue that Izharuddin (2020) has discussed. Despite the potential benefits of participating in research, one must be aware of the possibility of unethical behaviours arising from the differences of power between researcher and researched. With this, I am thinking of what Patai (1994: 21) has called ‘interviewing down’, referring to conducting research among groups ‘less powerful than the researcher’ in economic, social or political terms. The inequalities inherent in the interview process between my participants and I must be recognised. The problems that the research exchange involves makes it necessary to reflect on strategies to reduce
‘appropriation’ in the interview process and reinforce the potential beneficial outcomes it might have for the participants (ibid: 33).

When recruiting subjects, first contact was made through key informants, and I evaluated their situation together with local activists to guarantee that approaching them would not affect their physical and mental safety. My ethical approach acknowledged the importance of developing trust with my participants from the beginning to the late stages of the research process. Such a relationship was established by being clear about my research goals, providing participants with an information sheet (Appendix 1), followed by an informed consent form (Appendix 2) so they could choose whether to join the study. Interviews took place in locations agreed by both my interlocutors and I, considering everyone’s security, while participant observation occurred after asking for permission. As noted in the informed consent form, participants were able to withdraw from the study at any point and had the possibility to read the interview transcripts. I anonymised the names of queer Muslims participants and treated data confidentially. Where progressive Muslim allies are well known public figures (such as Aan Anshori and Musdah Muliah) I have used their real names following their consent.

I used a password-protected laptop, and all data collected was encrypted to ensure security. Before my pilot study in May-June 2017, I received ethical approval (Ethics Application 11077/001) from the UCL Research Ethics Committee. The project was registered with the UCL Data Protection Office (No Z6364106/2017/05/09). Beyond ethical approval numbers and registers, one needs to reflect on the, paraphrasing Patai, difficulties of conducting truly ethical research in an unethical world (1994: 37).

1.6. Key Concepts

1.6.1. Identity, subjectivity, subject position

This thesis is mainly about the lives of queer Muslims and the work of their allies in Indonesia. Drawing upon the work of other scholars of gender and sexuality in Indonesia like Boellstorff and Davies, I explore how the ‘queer Muslims’ come into existence by using a language of subjectivities and subject positions. My understanding of identity is based on an experienced sense of self that is openly articulated (Davies 2011: 13), discursively constructed (Fraser 1992: 178) through social interaction, language and regimes of truth (Foucault 1984: 113) and based on
our interactions with those around us (Mead 1967). Putting ‘identity’ into practice is complicated everywhere, including in the Indonesian context. This is not my concern alone, but also of other scholars working in Indonesia before me who have considered that it implies a clear sense of self that must be visibly asserted publicly (Davies 2010; Blackwood 2010; Boellstorff 2007, 2005a). Following authors such as Boellstorff (2007) and Davies (2010), I establish a distinction between identities (more permanent, rather static and uniform),\(^{15}\) and subject positions and subjectivities acknowledging the existence of multiple subjective ways of being within each subject.

Subject position refers to lived categories of selfhood that, while often being socially recognised (Boellstorff 2007: 36), are nonetheless fluid, evolving and unpredictably inhabited. Subjectivities refer to the participants’ own assumptions about themselves arising when taking on a subject position, whether slightly or wholly, momentarily or permanently (Boellstorff 2005: 10). These terms are useful to represent the experiences of *gay* men, *lesbi* women, *waria* and *transgender* people who often reject labelling themselves through fixed identity labels, while simultaneously turning attention to the socially constructed character of subject positions without which subjectivities would not exist. A clear example of the relationship between subject positions and subjectivities has been offered by Butler in relation to gender. The legitimisation of certain gender norms ‘to become viable as a “one”’ has produced a process of subject-formation prior to the constitution of a gendered subjectivity’ (Butler 1993: 232). Following Blackwood’s conceptualisation of subjectivity (2010: 22), I seek to explore the ‘transformative process of self-positioning’\(^{16}\) to analyse how queer Muslims’ subjectivities come into being in Indonesia, and how they are constantly negotiated in multiple ways.

**1.6.2. Gender and sexual categories**

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz argues that applying concepts created in ‘the West’ (i.e. homosexual) might not be appropriate ‘outside of the territories, people, and values that it represents’ (cited in Boellstorff 2005a: 8). In this manner, Geertz critiques the application of ‘Western’ terms to non-Western contexts arguing that they tend to ‘fit rather badly at best’

---

\(^{15}\) My take on identity as a more fixed category than the notion of subject position is inspired by the work of scholars of Indonesia like Boellstorff (2007) and Davies (2010), whilst noting that not all scholars of identity would agree with this characterisation. For example, postmodern scholars of identity may argue that rather than having an essential identity, individuals have multiple identities that evolve across their lifetime. Additionally, scholars of identity have been divided into categoricalists (adhering to fixed definitions of identity) and anticategoricalists (aiming to deconstruct analytical categories) (Cravens 2017: 15).

\(^{16}\) Blackwood employs this terminology to refer to the process through which subjectivity is constructed.
(1990: 77). For others like Boellstorff, this is problematic since it mistakes ‘interpretive frameworks for authoritative typologies’ (2005a 8). Claiming that concepts like ‘gay’ or ‘homosexual’ cannot explain non-Western practices ‘misleadingly implies that the concepts are adequate in the West’ (ibid). Following Boellstorff (2005a), I acknowledge that concepts from ‘the West’ are already in use by queer Muslims in Indonesia prior to the ethnographic encounter as a category of practice to describe their ‘everyday social experience’ (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 4-5). Their own understandings, and the ways they rework their own selves as both queer and Muslim guide my analysis, considering the importance of the terms used (gay/lesbian, local terms, or both) and what they imply.

Inspired by Boellstorff’s (2005a) work, I have decided to italicise the terms that my participants used to refer to themselves to mark their differences in meaning from English terms such as gay, lesbian or trans. This follows an emic approach based on a participant-centred understanding of the dimensions around them. As Boellstorff explains, while queer Indonesians have reterritorialised these concepts, they still have their own ‘history and dynamics’ (ibid, 8). For example, when I use the local term waria and the English term transwoman I refer to individuals who identify themselves in diverse ways. While some of them describe themselves as having a female jiwa (soul/spirit) trapped in a ‘male physical body’, others locate themselves somewhere in between men and women or explain that they are women who were assigned male at birth. Similarly, the italicisation of the term gay denotes that gay subjects are not a derived form of an imagined universal gay culture, but instead illustrate a transformation of the forms of ‘desire and senses of selfhood’ found elsewhere (Boellstorff 2004b).

Considering the problematic nature of using the term ‘queer’, I want to briefly explain that I use ‘queer’ in two ways. Firstly, as a category of analysis that can help me express the fluidity of participants’ self-identifications not simply in relation to their gender and sexuality, but generally against the logics of normativity (Rooke 2010, 29). Secondly, I use the term ‘queer’ as an umbrella term encompassing ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, ‘bisexual’ and ‘trans’ Muslims, whilst acknowledging that it does not make a distinction between sexual orientation and gender identity, nor does it refer to an accepted term used in the Indonesian context, where terms such as banci and waria for trans women, lespi and butchi for lesbian women, and binan for gay men are often used instead. However, when exploring specific lived realities, I will use the local terminology due to its importance in the process of building non-normative subjectivities
Throughout my study, I also at times employ the acronym LGBT, considering that this is a well-known term in Indonesia today, around which attacks against sexual minorities are often framed by, among others, mass media, street protests and statements made by government officials.

1.6.3. Agency

Research on Muslim women and queers has witnessed the emergence of subjects in need of ‘salvation’. Mohanty has critiqued the production of ‘third world women’ as subjects of knowledge portrayed as sexually constrained, ignorant and uneducated, in contrast to the ‘Western’ sexually free and modern woman (Mohanty 1991: 56). Examples of this are analyses of the purdah,17 as Mohanty (1991: 67) and Odeh (1983: 55) have stressed, noting how ‘Western’ scholars have universalised ‘the Other,’ women who wear veils, as oppressed subjects.

Similarly, queer Muslims are portrayed as ‘victims’ devoid of agency in the centre of missionary projects. I employ the term ‘missionary’ to refer to the discourses that have the mission to promote ‘Western’ ways of, for example, being queer or feminist in countries where queers and women are represented to be perceived as victims. Puar has explored the queer missionary paradigms that position Palestinian queer Muslims ‘in a victim narrative parallel to that propagated by the Israeli state they are battling against’ (2007: 17). This is an issue that Massad has also discussed in relation to the Orientalist discourses spread by what he calls the ‘Gay International’. As I noted in section 1.2.1, with this concept he refers to mostly ‘Western’, male and white-dominated international human rights and LGBT organisations intending to ‘liberate Arab and Muslim “gays and lesbians” from the oppression under which they allegedly live’ (2007: 161).

Turning now to the concept of agency, there is a degree of uncertainty around the term that makes it necessary to clarify exactly what it means throughout this thesis. Scholars have noted the vagueness that ‘agency’ has maintained through its association with concepts like self-hood, motivation, will, purposiveness, intentionality or choice to name a few (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 962). Human agency, in its most general sense, just means the capacity of an individual to act within a given structure. Since there is no agreed definition on what constitutes

---

17 This is a practice existing in some Muslim and Hindu cultures based on excluding women from strangers, mainly men, often using a curtain.
agency, it is important to specify the conceptions of agency I am drawing upon prior to my discussion on queer religious agency in Chapter 5. Existing notions of agency produced within the field of feminist and queer theory might be insufficient to fully describe the formation of Muslim subjectivities and, more specifically, the agentic power arising from the practices of queer Muslim subjects.

This is an issue that Saba Mahmood (2005) has critiqued considering how agency has been conceptualised within feminist theory through her exploration of a women’s piety movement in Egypt. As she notes, this conceptualisation of agency is based on the search for ‘expressions and moments of resistance that may suggest a challenge to male domination’ (Mahmood 2005: 8). As Wichelen notes, commenting on the work of Mahmood, feminist theory is embedded in the ‘project of modernism which privileges a notion of human agency based on progression’ and is, therefore, ‘complicit in imposing its ethical particularities onto alien bodies’ (2009: 53). For Mahmood, such an approach limits our capacity to ‘understand and interrogate the lives of women whose desire, affect, and will have been shaped by non-liberal traditions’ (2001: 203). Challenging the limitations of such progressivist models, she defines agency as a ‘capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable’ (2005: 18). This conceptualisation, ‘beyond the binary model of enacting and subverting norms’ (ibid: 29), is inspired by the Foucauldian analysis of ethical formation. This is particularly relevant to move beyond the representation of queer Muslims as agentic subjects only when perceived as ‘resisters’ (therefore, conceptualising agency through the disruption of existing power relations).

As Mahmood argues, a Foucauldian approach can help us think of agency ‘(a) in terms of the capacities and skills required to undertake particular kinds of moral actions; and (b) as ineluctably bound up with the historically and culturally specific disciplines through which a subject is formed’ (ibid). It is through the paradox of subjectivation that we can start to think about the emergence of agency through subordination, in the case of my interlocutors, to a divine power. This is an issue that Butler has also discussed. For her, ‘the paradox of subjectivation (assujetissement) is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms’ (1993: 15). Responding to this, Mahmood has stressed how Butler’s leaves intact ‘the natural status accorded to the desire for resistance to social norms, and the incarceration of the notion of agency to the space of emancipatory politics’ (2001: 211). This
approximation to agency would leave Muslim women and queers who do not ‘resist’ religious norms as subjects devoid of agency.

While Butler conceptualises agency mainly as resistance to norms, Mahmood turns to Foucault to describe the paradox of subjectivation as central to his formulation that one’s ‘capacity for action is enabled and created by specific relations of subordination’ (Mahmood 2005: 29). While a variety of definitions of the term have been discussed, this thesis will follow the conceptualisation of agency suggested by Mahmood as a concept delinked from the goals of progressive politics, not merely as an alternative expression for resistance to social norms but as a modality of action, to leave its meaning open to emerge, as she notes quoting Asad, from ‘within semantic and institutional networks that define and make possible particular ways of relating to people, things, and oneself’ (Asad 2003: 78).

Drawing upon this body of work, through my references to queer religious agency across my thesis I aim to propose new steps in the direction opened by Mahmood detaching agency from the goals of progressive politics (2005: 14). By focusing on religious practices, I will illustrate how agentic power may emerge through submission to the external authority of Allah. This type of agency, emerging at the intersection between religion (understood here as both practice and faith) and queerness, is linked to bodily behaviours, which Mahmood presents to discuss how religious subjectivities inform how we inhabit other parts of our selves (Jivraj and De Jong 2011: 156). As she writes, ‘bodily behavior does not simply stand in a relationship of meaning to self and society, but it also endows the self with certain kinds of capacities that provide the substance from which the world is acted upon’ (2005: 27). This is a relevant theoretical starting point from which to reflect on how religious practices become meaningful to my participants. As with the Muslim women that Mahmood studied, this theoretical approach is useful to explore queer Muslims as ‘agents within, and not just against, patriarchal religious traditions’ (Salam 2018, paragraph 9) challenging, therefore, liberal thought.

Normative discourses of queer liberation have led to the emergence of troubling narratives

About the greater homophobia of immigrant communities and communities of colour, about the stricter family values and mores in these communities, about a certain prerequisite migration from home, about coming-out teleologies. (Puar 2007: 22)
This points towards the need to reflect on the risks of victimising Muslim queers and women when presenting them as permanently ‘marginalised’ and ‘oppressed’. Ahmed notes how some Western scholars have preferred to remain silent about these issues because of their privilege (2007: 166). Opposing such positions, she brings up Spivak’s words to propose the employment of a ‘certain degree of rage’ against a past that has written a miserable script (1990: 62).

Renewed scholarly interest in Muslim women has achieved this through the incorporation of these women’s actual experiences in the work of scholars who have explored the importance of cultural, social and economic global interconnections to reflect on what Abu-Lughod calls the ‘Western’ ‘moral crusade’ to rescue certain Muslim subjects from their culture and religion. This strand of research has been characterised by its critique of the ‘Western’ vocabulary of subjugation and liberation considering that it is not enough to describe the experiences of actors in the Global South. If we take the example of veiling, we can note how some ‘Western’ feminist discussions have not only presented it as evidence of women’s lack of agency, but also as a practice to be resisted since it is incompatible with ‘empowerment’ and ‘freedom.’

Against these debates, other scholars have noted the importance of veiling in the development of politics of representation in terms of social class, religion and political association (Abu-Lughod 2013: 39), and as a source of freedom, security and protection (Ahmed 2011: 252).

This is a subject that Mahmood has also discussed through the example of the Egyptian Muslim women she studied, who upheld the Islamic virtue of female modesty by using the veil. As she states, there emerges an inevitable relationship between ‘modesty’ as a norm and the ‘veil’ as the ‘bodily form’ it takes (2005: 23). The exploration of spaces located between resistance and submission can help us recognise Muslim subjects as possessors of agency instead of mere victims, by acknowledging the extant entanglements between agency and coercion (Madhok et al 2013: 3). A risk stressed by Mahmood is establishing that certain subjects ‘need’ to resist certain forces. To explain this, she offers the example of Muslim women engaging in movements that seem hostile to their own interests (2005: 2). Instead of understanding agency as an explicit challenge to domination, it can be analysed as a ‘diagnostic of power’ (Abu-Lughod 2005: 23).

---

18 Example of this is Amin’s (2000) evaluation of a society’s development level in relation to the absence or presence of the veil.
1990: 42) and a possibility for action that historical relations of subordination allow and generate (Mahmood 2005: 18).

Critiquing the conflation of agency and resistance, Mahmood argues that norms are not only done/undone and/or consolidated/subverted but ‘performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways’ (ibid: 22). While in Mahmood’s work these concepts are explored in relation to a grassroots women’s faith movement in Egypt, the problem of conceptualising agency only in terms of resistance is also useful to address the context of queer Muslims. This requires, following Mahmood’s work, to go beyond what she calls the ‘binary logic of doing/undoing norms’ to explore how queer Muslim subjects are constructed ontologically. In this manner, freedom would not simply refer to the absence of external obstacles to individual choice, which would render these subjects as actors disavowed of agency (Georgis 2013: 98), but instead to inclusive collective endeavours based on interactions between human subjects.

Focusing on the concept of freedom, Mahmood has critiqued its theorisation by feminist authors as both a universal desire and social idea based on escaping from structures of male oppression and achieving liberation from subordination (2005: 10). To explain her conceptualisation of freedom, Mahmood sets a distinction between positive and negative freedom. While the latter is based on the idea that self-guided actions and choices are not affected by external obstacles, the former is based on the capacity for ‘self-mastery.’ Defining these two types of freedom is relevant because they both point towards the idea of ‘autonomy’ and individual capacity to act independently, through which agency is often conceptualised following liberal feminist and queer thinking.

Freedom and agency have been measured by the weight of resistance to conceptualise postcolonial subjectivities (Georgis, 2013: 19). In these debates, the normative idea of freedom is presented as a consequence of one’s one will, an ultimately autonomous action that cannot be based on ‘custom, tradition or social coercion’ (Mahmood 2005: 11). Against the normative conceptualisation of freedom produced mainly by ‘Western’ theorists, Mahmood highlights the work of Native and African-American feminists who have expanded the concept by including questions of race, class and ethnicity (ibid). As the writings of Mahmood and Abu-Lughod illustrate, there are lives that do not fit the stories that certain feminist theorists have reinforced.

---

19 Interestingly, and in a different academic field, Zimmerman (2000: 44) defines ‘empowerment’ as the ‘mechanism by which people gain mastery over their lives’ (my emphasis).
The portrayal of Muslim women as devoid of choice ignores how choice itself is ‘an impoverished account of freedom’ that not only is determined by power, but also overlaps with it (Brown in Abu-Lughod 2013: 19). This is illustrated by the lived realities of women in Abu-Lughod’s work, which led her to thinking that terms like oppression, choice and freedom are not enough to understand their efforts to live their lives, acting as ‘blunt instruments’ to capture their dynamics (2013: 25). Considering the issues I have explored throughout this section, I want to argue that more academic work is needed to demystify the lives of Muslim women and queers to reconsider what freedom, empowerment, agency and choice might mean outside ‘Western’ contexts.

The discussions presented throughout this section demonstrate the elusive character of the term ‘agency’ and its association with, among others, concepts like freedom, norms, choice and power. The importance of these approaches, upon which I rely throughout this thesis, lies in their implication for the study of queer agency beyond liberal feminist and queer intellectual positions against which the ‘freedom’ of queer subjects is universally evaluated. If we want to comprehend the complexity of the personal and social worlds of queer religious actors, we may need to reflect on the insufficiency of a notion of agency based on resistance as well as a conception of freedom emerging solely from individual autonomy.

### 1.7. Structure of this thesis

This thesis is organised around five main empirical chapters that explore various, interlinked aspects of the queer Muslim milieu. Before the empirical chapters, Chapter 2 provides an examination of the emergence of Islam in Indonesia and its interrelationships with gender and sexuality. Through histories that are interwoven with ethnographic encounters, it provides the reader with a thorough understanding of the context from and within which my research can be situated.

In the first two empirical chapters, I explore the social institutions impacting the queer Muslim participants’ gender, sexual and religious negotiation and navigation of subjectivities. In Chapter 3, I explore the significance of family and education in the making of (queer) Muslim subjects. I argue that the family constitutes a key force both for the building of the post-colonial Indonesian nation and for the personal worlds of queer Muslims. To develop my argument, I explore how various degrees of family piety affect the upbringing of queer Muslims, examining
the role of family religiosity, pressure, and the significance of marriage. Following this, I analyse the role of education to produce knowledge on religion, gender and sexuality. In Chapter 4, I focus on the media and social actors external to the family and education to explore their role in processes of self-definition/redefinition and negotiation of subjectivities. This will reveal the shifting representations of queer people in media through an analysis of newspaper covers and the relevance of virtual queer worlds for queer Muslims in contemporary Indonesia. Subsequently, I explore the role of broader clusters of social connections acting as catalysts for the negotiation of one’s religious, gender and sexual subjectivities.

In the third empirical chapter (Chapter 5), I challenge the dominant portrayal of queer Muslims as subjects who constantly struggle to reconcile their queer and Muslim selves engaging with the voices of my interlocutors. Specifically, I look at ritual practices like salat and fasting through which my interlocutors described positive outcomes that I identify as sources of agentic power. Additionally, I present the case study of waria Muslims who situate themselves as possessors of a ‘jiwa perempuan’, which I translate as a female soul/spirit linked to Allah. My explorations in Chapter 5 will help me describe the everyday religious experiences of my queer Muslim participants to reveal how the messiness of gender, sexual and religious assemblages points to the hybridity of emerging agentic systems.

In the fourth empirical chapter (Chapter 6), I explore the conditions that make pro-queer Muslim activism possible focusing on a Muslim student organisation, inter-faith dialogue, and a local network based on the ideas of the former president of Indonesia Abdurrahman Wahid. I introduce several progressive Muslim actors as ‘allies’ of queer Muslims to trace their support and involvement in the promotion of their rights. The use of data collected through interviews I conducted with Muslim religious leaders, university professors, school teachers and community leaders as well as my attendance at various events across Java where religion, gender and sexuality were discussed, will enable me to answer the research questions I outlined concerning the role of such actors. Additionally, I present Islam Nusantara, also known as Indonesian Islam, as a force that makes pro-queer activism possible.

In the fifth and final empirical chapter (Chapter 7), I turn to questions concerning the strategies developed by progressive Muslim allies to promote discourses accepting of queer subjects through Islam. By using the term ‘strategies’ I am pointing to actions taken through individual and communal work. Here I think through the multifaceted paths through which allies
come to develop tactics for queer inclusion in the midst of an increasingly conservative environment. I first turn to an exploration of scholarship on the issue of pro-queer activism through faith. Following this, I analyse the approaches employed by these actors to promote the acceptance of queer subjects within Islam through an approach based on working through multiple channels: among others, independently, with queer organisations, with conservative religious leaders, and individually with queer Muslims.

The five empirical chapters at the core of this thesis offer multiple ethnographic vignettes and fieldwork encounters, which are analysed through a diversity of theoretical approaches derived from gender and sexuality studies, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, nationalism studies and postcolonial theory. Following the empirical chapters, the concluding discussion in Chapter 8 addresses my contributions to existing debates. To situate my thesis within the multifaceted background of Indonesian history, I move now to Chapter 2 where I present three Indonesian histories of Islam, gender and sexuality.
Chapter 2: Three Indonesian Histories

2.1. Introduction
Throughout Indonesian history, spiritual practices and religious beliefs—from pre-colonial animistic forms to today’s political Islam—have moulded ways of understanding the self as, among others, a national, religious, gendered and sexual being. This chapter analyses academic debates within the specific social and historical context of Indonesia, examining the interrelationships between Islam, gender and sexuality through the lens of various histories instead of presenting a chronology of events. Local faiths and spiritualities have evolved historically through processes of ‘religionisation’, which Hefner has defined as the reconstruction of local spiritual traditions through ‘religious ideals and practices seen as standardized, textualized, and universally incumbent on believers’ (2011: 72). To explore these issues, I start by exploring histories of religion in Indonesian nationalism and politics. I then recount another history, to inquire how specific genders and sexualities have come into being in Indonesia and what their relationship is to colonialism and the expansion of Islam. Finally, I provide a third history beginning with current-day Indonesian genders, sexualities and religions to discuss the emergence of political homophobia and moral panics, which have been defined as ‘a turbulent, excited or exaggerated response to deviance as a social problem’ (Mann 1984: 255). Ethnographic encounters are interwoven through these histories, constituting other histories in themselves. The observations and interview extracts included herein in turn lay the foundations for my analysis of the queer Muslim milieu presented in the following chapters.

2.2. Histories of religion in Indonesian nationalism and politics
It was the second day of my final period of PhD fieldwork in Indonesia. While my friend Ayu and I were walking away from the parking space where we had left our motorbike towards a nearby warung, she asked me, ‘Do I look Indonesian to you?’ The question came up after a chat about the diversity of Indonesian ethnicities on the way to our destination. ‘Maybe not exactly like the other Indonesians’, I said, being immediately aware of the absurdity of my statement lacking a proper analytical explanation. Without providing me with time to amend my answer,
she replied, ‘Babe, please, define to me what you think being Indonesian means and what the Indonesian nation is (apa itu bangsa\textsuperscript{20} Indonesia?), because I still don’t know the answer.’ While defining their Indonesian subject position was a difficult task for many of my Indonesian interlocutors, in this section I explore how Indonesia came to be the nation it is today – and the role of religion therein – and the efforts of the government to educate the young generations on the importance of ‘being Indonesian’ through celebrations like the Hari Sumpah Pemuda or Youth Pledge Day, which I explore below.

Indonesia has the largest Muslim population; it is the largest archipelago, and the fourth most populous nation in the world. With more than 300 ethnic groups (Acciaioli 1985), the national motto is Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, or ‘Unity in Diversity’. Independent since 1945 after around 350 years of Dutch colonial rule, Indonesia emerged as a state within the territorial boundaries set by the colonisers to create the Netherlands East Indies (Vickers 2005). Colonial rule was characterised by Dutch economic exploitation through an increasingly hierarchical and authoritarian system (Kahin 1952: 6) that created the conditions for the 1945 revolution. Prior to the revolution, Japan had invaded Indonesia in 1942 officially as a means to ‘liberate’ its people from the Dutch. The Japanese state emphasised the oppressive nature of the Dutch colonial system and denounced the increasingly deteriorating economic conditions in the colony. In so doing, Japan’s interventions played a critical role in creating the conditions needed to bring about a shift among Indonesians from feeling a sense of nationalism to pushing for national self-determination and independence (Vickers 2005: 2). The notion of nationalism I am referring to is related to the Dutch colonial rule: it was then that the Indonesian people started to think of themselves as part of a nation. Despite the existence of kingdoms in several locations of the archipelago prior to the Dutch occupation, it was only after the Netherlands took over its islands that physical boundaries were established to create the Netherlands East Indies (ibid).

A question worth asking, considering that Indonesia is made of more than 17,000 islands, is how these ‘physical boundaries’ were even established on the archipelago. It was not simply the creation of physical boundaries, I would argue, that contributed to creating a shared sense of nationhood over the around 670 ethnic groups (Boellstorff 2005: 16) that, despite migration, remain geographically spread today. It was instead the structural changes that the Dutch brought

\textsuperscript{20} The Indonesian term bangsa can be translated both as nation and people. In this case, I have translated it as ‘nation’ considering the context and evolution of the conversation.
through their legal and administrative system that planted the seeds for the building of a national identity. This process of ‘Indonesianisation’ was strengthened post-independence through the adoption of Bahasa Indonesia as the language unifying the archipelago, the implementation of the state ideology of Pancasila and a state-wide education system inculcating a sense of national identity. Scholars have referred to independent Indonesia as a system of ‘fragile unity’ at risk of fragmenting (Sears 1996: 5), an ‘improbable nation’ (Pisani 2014: 1). For Pisani, the improbable character of the Indonesian nation-state is exemplified in the declaration of independence that its founding fathers Sukarno and Hatta released on the 17th of August of 1945: ‘We, the people of Indonesia, hereby declare the independence of Indonesia. Matters relating to the transfer of power etc. will be executed carefully and as soon as possible.’ For Pisani, ‘Indonesia has been working on that ‘etc.’ ever since’ (ibid: 2).

The Indonesian revolution was made possible by the combination of nationalism and the Japanese destruction of what the Dutch had built (Vickers 2005: 85). A question that must be raised is why the Japanese would promote Indonesian nationalism, which could be considered as against their own interests as occupiers. A potential answer is that the Japanese wanted to mobilise the population for the war effort since this was happening in the midst of World War II (ibid: 93). The goal, therefore, was to unite Japanese and Indonesian causes: nationalist discourses were allowed as a tactic as long as they contributed to the war effort (ibid). For Vickers, ‘the country would not have come into being without Japan’s intervention’ (ibid). However, one should be careful in suggesting that it was only Japanese intervention that activated anticolonial actions. Japan indeed played an important role, but it would not be accurate to suggest that it was purely external intervention that led to this shift. In fact, other scholars have noted how Sukarno, the first president of Indonesia, had already identified ‘Islam, nationalism and Marxism’ as the key streams of the Indonesian anti-colonial movement around 1926 (Formichi 2012; Barker 2008).

My friend Ayu is not the first Indonesian person to wonder what it means to be Indonesian. Indeed, this has long been debated by both Indonesian and non-Indonesian thinkers (Toer 1996; Kahin 1952, Anderson 1983). Questions of national belonging take on particular forms in the case of large, multi-ethnic states where an ethnic identity is not used as a foundational category
of belonging. This is not unique to the Indonesian case; the same is true of the Philippines or Malaysia. While people often think that their nations are natural phenomena, they are in reality socially constructed, as the work of Anderson (1983) reveals. It is in Anderson’s study where we could find a potential answer to Ayu’s inquiry when defining the nation as ‘an imagined political community’ (1983: 6). He explains why it is ‘imagined’: ‘because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’ (ibid). Being Indonesian does not equate to being ‘orang asli’ (indigenous people), considering the multiplicity of ‘orang asli’ one can find across the archipelago. Instead, as Anderson puts it, ‘being Indonesian was (and is) not something ‘natural’ or biological but was (and is) something created by modern history’ (2002: 19). In order for Indonesians to appear in the world, Anderson continues, they have needed (and still need) to ‘be trained, day in day out, both by him- or herself, and by his or her fellow human beings’ (ibid). This suggests that there were no Indonesians before Indonesia existed as a unified territory, a potential preliminary answer to Ayu’s question. It also suggests that national identifications must be based on a distinction between self and other: the nation acts as a unifying force for the Indonesian citizens while simultaneously differentiating them from other nations. To build an Indonesian national identity, and considering the importance for the nationalist movement to set markers of difference between their in-group and the Dutch out-group, Islam started to play an important role during the end of the colonial rule. A problem arising during this period was that the Dutch out-group was readily identified, while the Indonesian in-group was precisely ‘in becoming’ rather than already existing as a unified in-group. In relation to the significance of religion, in the next subsection I focus specifically on Islam to point to its increasing relevance throughout Indonesian history.

*The growth of Islam in Indonesia*

As stated in the introduction to this thesis, I am interested in studying how queer Muslims come to their gender, sexual and religious subjectivities, as well as the role of their allies, instead of exploring the general history and nature of Islam, Allah and the roots of religious beliefs and practices in Indonesia. However, I want to explore the history of Islam in Indonesia prior to

---

21 As I also discuss in relation to nationalism, the socially constructed character of ethnicity must be acknowledged against its portrayal as a ‘natural’ biological difference. While noting this issue, it is also the case that ethnicities have long been used to define the nation, as the concept of ethnic nationalism illustrates.
presenting my empirical chapters to provide context to my analysis, while also portraying the shifting boundaries that separate various branches of Islam in Indonesia’s current polarised society. The task of studying Islam in Indonesia is problematic considering the extant differences of opinion between professed Muslims on what Islam is (Woodward 1996: 7). In what comes next, my analysis of the role of Islam in nationalism and politics will include a discussion on pre-Islamic Indonesia, the acculturation processes between Islam and local traditions and the current political milieu, which is undoubtedly shaped by religion.

Prior to the arrival of Islam in the period between the 1300s and 1400s, portions of the archipelago were composed of mainly Hindu-Buddhist empires (Ricklefs 1993: 10). The spread of Islam began through the arrival of Muslim traders from India, China and Arabia, who settled in what we know today as Indonesia by marrying locals (Geertz 1968: 11). From the coast, where trade took place through the arrival of ships, its adoption spread into inner areas starting from Sumatra and Java (Ricklefs, 1993: 6). While Islam has constituted a source for cultural homogenisation in other contexts, a key feature of Islam in Indonesia that Geertz first noted was its ‘remarkably malleable, tentative, syncretistic, and, most significantly of all, multivoiced’ character (1968: 12). This is represented by the work of the Wali Songo, whom Geertz defines as ‘the nine apostles’ of Indonesian Islam (Geertz 1968: 25), considered to have introduced this religion in Java without violence or force. Instead, they resorted to traditional arts such as rebana music, wayang (Javanese puppet theatre) and gamelan22 and martial arts such as pencak silat to spread Islam (Van Dijk 1998: 222, 225). Nurcholish Madjid has noted how, unlike other Muslim-majority countries, Islam in Indonesia ‘did not supplant the existing religion by military conquest’ (1996: 91-92). Instead, it spread almost entirely throughout Indonesia through what he calls ‘penetration pacifique’ or peaceful penetration ‘by traders-cum-missionaries’ (ibid) in a space of three hundred years until the 16th century (Geertz 1960: 125). Relatively isolated from Middle Eastern Islam until the middle of the 19th century, it was then that an increasing number of Arab traders started to settle in Indonesia. This was not a unidirectional process, bearing in mind that by 1880, Indonesian people constituted the largest colony in the city of Mecca (Hurgronje 1931: 291). These pilgrims were in charge of opening pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) upon their return to Indonesia, contributing to a slow orthodox turn. It was also them

22 A gamelan is a musical ensemble traditional in the Indonesian regions of Java, Bali and Sunda.
who founded religious organisations like Sarekat Islam in 1911 and Muhammadiyah in 1912 (Geertz 1960: 126).

Indonesian Islam has often been portrayed as unauthentic, deviant and corrupt in relation to the Islam of the Middle East (Hurgronje 1906). While early Islamic practices incorporated pre-existing indigenous forms (Vickers 2005: 55), the trend has been towards the exclusion of local faith systems such as kejawen\textsuperscript{23} and Sunda wiwitan\textsuperscript{24} from the Muslim religious experience. This is not a new phenomenon. In fact, Hefner (2011: 80) notes how the increasing presence of pesantren and the tensions between santri (a term used to refer to pesantren students or pious Muslims) and abangan (Javanese Muslims who engage in religious syncretism through the mix of practices and beliefs from animism, Hinduism and Buddhism) groups through party politics have challenged abanganism\textsuperscript{25} from the 1950s. Debates on the performance of practices that are not inherently rooted in Islamic sources go back to disputes between modernist and traditionalist Muslims on the rejection or acceptance of what Federspiel has called ‘folk Islam’ (1996: 211). In addition, the state’s support of ‘efforts at social and religious “building up” (pembinaan)’ (ibid) from the 1970s also had a negative impact on the abangan’s survival.

While this decline in local practices must be acknowledged, during my fieldwork I also came across several individuals who still engaged in what Geertz (1960) calls abanganism through the local practice of mutih (a fasting ritual based on eating only white rice and drinking water) and puasa ngebleng (Javanese fasting aimed at achieving specific goals), spirit beliefs, periodic slametans (communal religious feasts that usually take place in Java to represent social cohesion among those taking part in it) and visits to the local dukun (traditional healer) to get rid of diseases. Despite the gradual loss of followers that these local ritual practices have witnessed, a 2017 Constitutional Court ruling started allowing Indonesian citizens to list indigenous belief practices as their chosen religion.\textsuperscript{26} The dominant opposition to these practices arises from Islamist groups. I often heard stories from young Muslims recounting how their parents had decided to leave local practices behind considering them musyrik (against the teachings of Allah) because of the pressure from their immediate social environment.

\textsuperscript{23}Kejawen is a term often used interchangeably with abangan referring to the Central and Eastern Javanese syncretic religious or spiritual practices that combine Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic ideas.

\textsuperscript{24}Syncretic religious or spiritual practices from the Sunda region of West Java.

\textsuperscript{25}Abanganism is a term that Hefner defines as ‘non-standard, syncretic varieties of Islam’ (Hefner 2011, 71), which is followed by the abangan.

\textsuperscript{26}Indonesian law requires every citizen to select a religion to be shown on their KTP (national ID card).
The decline of the number of ‘purely kejawen’ people in Java, understanding ‘pure’ as not being influenced in their practices by Islamic beliefs, does not mean that they do not culturally engage in some rituals in the same way that some Muslims are irreligious and unobservant, but still have a cultural identification with Islam because of the environment they inhabit. In *The Religion of Java*, Geertz explores Islam in Java through the three levels of the *santri* (Muslims whom he describes as followers of a ‘purer Islam’) (1960: 5), the *abangan* and the *priyayi*, a term referring to the Javanese elite. This would mean that only the *santri* really followed the teachings of Islam, which has been challenged by local scholars such as Nurcholish Madjid noting that, this being true, only a small minority of the population would have professed this religion back then (1996: 93). Against such depictions, later work has noted the critical role of Islam for premodern *priyayi* life (Kumar 1985, Soebardi 1975).

Historically, some national movements have been largely secular, but for many such movements, including the Indonesian case, religious identity has powerfully shaped debates around national belonging. Following this line of thought, for Kahin (1952), an important factor leading to the emergence of a unified nationalism in Indonesia was religious homogeneity. Islam emerged as an ‘in-group symbol’ against the Dutch coloniser, who professed a different religion (Kahin 1952: 38). Therefore, a reason for the extension of Islam in the archipelago was the reaction to Western colonialism (Wertheim 1950), which, connected to the widespread usage of the Malay language resulting from the Dutch strategy of forbidding Indonesians to use the Dutch language, contributed to strengthening nationalism. In this process, the Indonesian state reinterpreted ‘denizens of what was known as the ‘Malay Archipelago’ as citizens of an Indonesian archipelago’ (Boellstorff 2005a: 190).

In turn, Bahasa Indonesia, a form of Malay that became the national language, came to be considered the ‘language of unity’ (*bahasa persatuhan*) through the Youth Pledge (Sumpah Pemuda) declared on 28 October 1928 at the Indonesian Second Youth Congress (Kongres Pemuda Kedua) in Batavia, known today as Jakarta. In addition to one language, the declaration also proclaimed the ideals of one motherland (*darah yang satu*) and one nation (*berbangsa yang

---

27 Scholars like Marshall Hodgson have also pointed to major systematic errors in Geertz’s work: the lack of a historical dimension within his anthropological methodology, the identification of universal Islamic features as un-Islamic and the minimisation of his subjects’ linkages to a global Islam (1975: 551). In relation to Geertz’s assumption, Woodward notes that for scholars such as Ricklefs or Pigeaud, real Muslims were somehow not quite real Javanese (1996: 33) because they would not engage in the Javanese pre-Islamic forms of worship and ritual. Such discussions shaped Orientalist paradigms that, until the late 1960s, relegated Islam to the margins of Indonesian culture and history silencing political Islamic voices (ibid: 34).
The Sumpah Pemuda gathered representatives of youth movements from various islands in the archipelago, most of them Dutch-educated and exposed to Western cultural norms (Anderson 1983: 121), to discuss nationalist ideas. Foulcher (2000: 377) describes the Sumpah Pemuda as ‘one of the most familiar markers of twentieth-century Indonesian nationalist history.’ While some scholars have pointed to this event as ‘the founding moment of nation and national language’, for others like Foulcher this threefold declaration is no more than a symbolic construction, a permanent reminder of ‘nationalism’s need for a teleological history of its own origins’ (ibid: 378).

Returning to the role of Islam in mobilising the local population against the Dutch presence, Van Dijk notes that the rebels expressed a strict connection to orthodox Islam while fighting for independence in three ways: performing their religious duties rigidly, fighting what they considered ‘un-Islamic behaviour,’ and wearing Islamic clothing against both traditional and Western dress (1998: 228). After independence, under Sukarno’s government, some sectors of the population supported the creation of an Islamic state (known as Negara Islam Indonesia) through Islamist groups such as Darul Islam (‘the Home of Islam’) established in 1942 (Chaidar et al 2019). Under the leadership of Kartosoewirjo, this group challenged the government unsuccessfully from the late 1940s until the early 1960s. During the New Order (the term coined by second Indonesian president Suharto to name his authoritarian regime),28 Islamist parties in Indonesia were grouped under the United Development Party (PPP). Formed in 1973, this political alliance constituted the main Islamist political opposition to Suharto’s government. However, following a new national regulation forcing all political parties to adopt Pancasila as their sole ideological principle in 1983, Islam stopped being the official political foundation of the PPP (Weatherbee 1984: 189).

From the 1970s Islam started to be accepted as a key feature of Indonesian society by political leaders who encouraged Islamic worship and ceremonial practices (Federspiel 1996: 193). The process of Islamisation had taken place gradually. For example, through the adoption of, as noted before, Bahasa Indonesia as the national language, which Madjid considers having contributed to the ‘Islamic colouring of Indonesian modern political culture’ (1996: 94). Additionally, the official state ideology of Pancasila was only accepted after being ‘Islamised’ in

---

28 Suharto’s New Order began after he became president in 1966, following the massacre that took place between 1965 and 1966 killing hundreds of thousands of people accused of being communists (Cribb 2001). It concluded 32 years later with the start of democracy in 1998.
the sense that some of its principles had to be adapted to Muslim standards to be recognised by Muslim politicians. This was exemplified through the change of the principle of ‘Nationalism’ to ‘Unity of Indonesia’ because of the objection of Muslim leaders (ibid: 89). As Madjid notes, the concept of ‘nationalism’ was perceived by the Islamists as a challenge to ‘Islamic universalism and cosmopolitanism’ (ibid: 89-90). The Muslim representatives also objected to the original precepts because they were concerned about the public role of Islam in the country. They only started supporting Pancasila after signing the Jakarta Charter (Piagam Jakarta), a preamble of the Indonesian Constitution stating that the state ‘was to be based upon belief in God, with the obligation for adherents of Islam to carry out Islamic law’ (Ricklefs 1993: 209). Although the reference to carrying out Islamic law was erased the day after the independence proclamation, by commanding belief in one God, Pancasila, set forth in the Preamble of the 1945 Constitution, followed the Islamic principle of tawhid or monotheism.

Global Islamic discourses such as revivalism (dakwah), neo-fundamentalism and modernism also influenced Indonesian religious beliefs and practices around that time, affecting the modernist-traditionalist divide (ibid: 215). Commonly practised by the urban lower classes and the rural elite, it was around the 1970s when the hajj pilgrimage started being an important ritual for the middle and upper classes leading to the emergence of programmes like the hajj-plus, a luxurious version of the hajj staying in five-star hotels and travelling business class (ibid), illustrating the intersections between religion and social class. It was also in the early 1970s that liberal Islamic thinkers such as Nurcholish Madjid, Abdurrahman Wahid and Dawam Rahardjo personified the start of an Islamic renewal through a modernist approach based on ijtihad (Islamic critical thinking).

For Madjid, ijtihad was the channel through which Islamic teachings could constitute the basis for ‘modern religious tolerance and pluralism’ (1996: 106). For Abdurrahman Wahid, former general chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), it was important to stress a distinction between Islam and Arab culture to preserve local traditions (adat). For him, being a Muslim was not defined by one’s engagement in fasting or salat, but instead by one’s intention to live a Muslim life, opposing the strict definitions posed by early scholars of Indonesian Islam

29 Elson (2009: 116) has explained that Suharto was against the inclusion of the obligation for adherents of Islam to carry out Islamic law since that could alienate non-Muslims.
30 Federspiel employs the term ‘modernist’ to refer to those Muslims who stress the importance of reform through critical thinking or ijtihad, while ‘traditionalist’ is used to identify those opposing the beliefs of the modernists through their engagement in ideas inspired by the Syaffi jurisprudential school (1996: 216).
(Woodward 1996: 144). Through the political philosophy of ‘universal humanism’ shaped by Javanese-Islamic foundations, Wahid defended the maintenance of a secular system in Indonesia to preserve the rights of non-Muslims and argued for a ‘non-revolutionary transformation of Islam in which Islamic values are employed in the general struggle of humanity’ (ibid: 149). He ended up becoming the president of Indonesia from 1999 to 2001, when he was dismissed over allegations of corruption.

While during Suharto’s New Order all attempts to achieve an Islamic state failed under the dominant power of the military, in the early 1990s religion started to play an increasing role. Suharto moved from his support of abanganism towards the inclusion of Islamic ideas in the last years of his rule. Religious education started to be recognised through the national education bill, and legislation reinforced the position of religious courts managing family affairs (Abdullah 1996: 51-56). Suharto’s fall gave way to the Reformasi era starting in 1998, which has witnessed the emergence and expansion of Islamist movements supported by educational institutions, proselytism movements, online campaigns, Islamist political parties and organisations moving between the blurred boundaries of terrorism and politics such as FPI (Front Pembela Islam, or Islamic Defenders Front) and FJI (Front Jihad Islam). As Fealy and White explain (2008: 1), while scholarship on Indonesian Islam used to portray the local Muslim community optimistically, stressing its moderation and tolerance, the 1990s marked the beginning of explorations on the rise of fundamentalist movements, which Hefner (2000) calls ‘uncivil Islam.’ In his study of Javanese religions, Beatty (1999: 239) notes how ‘political and social tensions affect religious expression, variously shaping, stimulating, and muting it’. Amid this evolving picture, the interconnections between adat and shariah law are still being invoked ‘as sources of hope for order and justice’ at the provincial level in Indonesia (Bowen 2003: 17).

A question worth asking is what the assemblages between Islam, nationalism and politics look like in the Indonesia of 2019. To answer this, Islam should be analysed in the plural as ‘Islams’ to avoid common Orientalist epistemologies of Islam as a rigid and monolithic category. Illustrative of this diversity is the fatwa issued in 2005 by the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (the Council of Indonesian Islamic Scholars) to condemn categorically ‘the notions of pluralism,

\footnote{The New Order regime had a big impact on the previously mentioned Darul Islam, which the government perceived as a threat to its emphasis on ‘the political demobilization of society as a pre-requisite for economic modernization (…) because of its military experience, considerable membership, and militant form of Islamist ideology in past conflicts’ (Rahman and Hadiz 2017: 61).}
liberalism and secularism’ that they considered to be against the principles of Islamic doctrine and worship (Kersten 2015: 1). A year later and on the symbolic Pancasila day, a group of Muslim thinkers reacted to the fatwa by reading the Maklumat Keindonesiaan or ‘Declaration of Indonesianness’ in front of an audience that included members of religious minorities such as the Ahmadiyyah and the then president of Indonesia, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. The declaration appealed to Indonesian citizens, stressing the importance ‘to unite in diversity’ through the defence of the Pancasila principles (Raillon 2011: 102) against Islamic fundamentalists. The response from Islamist groups was immediate. Instead of rejecting Pancasila, they began to re-read it as non-secular. Ma’ruf Amin, who became the new vice-president of Indonesia in 2019, defined Pancasila as a source to sanction Islam as the ‘national law’ (ibid: 105). This illustrates the diversity of Indonesian Muslim thought, between those who define themselves as progressive (or sometimes liberal, a more controversial term to be used), those supporting a more orthodox and exclusive perspective, and those who position themselves somewhere in between.

In summary, these divisions could be set in terms of orthodoxy versus orthopraxy. For the progressive religious leaders, scholars and activists I met during my fieldwork, the focus was mostly on correct conduct, good deeds and tolerance through the guidance of Islam (orthopraxy) contrasted with the emphasis of the practice of the Islamic rituals (orthodoxy) by conservative voices. Some progressive Muslims I talked to employed Islam Nusantara (translated as Archipelagic Islam/Indonesian Islam, but for some scholars mostly inspired by Javanese values) as a useful concept to explain their religion. This is a discussion I will develop more fully in Chapter 6, but it is important to note its significance here as part of a wider history of religion, politics and nationalism. While some Indonesian scholars (Kasdi 2017) reach back to the times of the Wali Songo to set the beginning of Islam Nusantara, others note the absence of a specific date for its emergence (Nurhisam 2016: 168). After being introduced to academic debates by local scholars like Azyumardi Azra in the 1980s, what seems clear is that current debates around Islam Nusantara started in 2015 through its adoption as one of its conceptual pillars by Nahdlatul Ulama (Fealy 2018). What Islamic scholars and religious leaders often stressed during my fieldwork was the culturally grounded dimension of this branch of Islam against the ‘Arabisation’ of religion in Indonesia. For some of them, it was a term used to describe Islam in the wider Southeast Asian context (Southern Thailand, Southern Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei), making a regional Muslim community that some call ‘Jama’ah al-Jawiyy’, which finds
similarities across countries in a similar way to which gender plurality has been discussed in the region (on this, see section 2.2.).

A catalyst for the diffusion of this concept has been its usage by the Indonesian President Joko Widodo at international forums to stress the archipelago’s religious moderation (Fealy 2018). Usage of this term is not widespread due to its political significance which, once again, reveals the interconnection between religion and politics. Some scholars I met in Indonesia preferred to describe their Islam as NU (Nahdlatul Ulama), NU Gusdurian, one of the most progressive factions of NU (named after the ideas of Abdurrahman Wahid, also known as Gus Dur) or Islam Rahmatul lil Alamin (Mercy to All Creations). The reason to keep this distance is often explained with reference to the usage of the Islam Nusantara concept by the political party PKB (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa, or National Awakening Party) as part of its political agenda.

The division between progressive and conservative discourses is not balanced. Instead, conservative Islam is on the increase. As Picard notes, while Islamist parties have not been able to impose sharia law through Constitutional reforms, they still have the power to impose sharia-inspired regional bylaws (peraturan daerah), challenging the competence of the central government in religious issues (2011: 18). Today, these bylaws regulate, among other issues, dress codes, religious observations, ‘moral’ conduct, male and female interactions, gambling and alcohol consumption (Picard 2011; Assyaukanie 2007). They have also been used to persecute sexual minorities. Witnessing this new context, Hefner has raised the question of ‘where have all the abangan gone?’ (2011: 71). To offer a preliminary answer to his question, he points to the displacement of the local varieties of Islam by ‘an Islam organised in a more standardised, textual, and deterritorialised form as religion (agama)’. What Hefner calls ‘religionisation’ has not happened without the influence of external forces, mostly from the Middle East, revealing the role of Islam as a global network that is reshaping local religious practices in Indonesia. Salafi and Wahhabi ideologies have been exported to Indonesia, and the wider Southeast Asian region, since the 1980s (Von der Mehden 2014). In Indonesia, the primary channel for Saudi funding has been the Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia (the Indonesian Society for the Propagation of Islam, or DDII) and the Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Islam dan Arab (the Institute of Islamic and Arabic Studies, or LIPIA). As Von der Mehden explains (ibid), the DDII offers scholarships to study in the Middle East, has built mosques, hospital and orphanages, published
Islamic materials, funded local religious educational institutions and trained religious intellectuals in Indonesia.

For some scholars, the current situation, with two clear political blocs shaped by religion, echoes historical patterns. As Aspinall (2019) writes, in the 1955 elections the results illustrated a clear division between Islamists on one side and traditionalist Javanese Muslims together with minorities voting from other islands on the other side. In 2019, Prabowo and Jokowi represented a similar partition between the hard-line groups supporting the former and the more moderate NU followers endorsing Jokowi, which are (surely with exceptions) often tolerant of religious minorities and traditional local practices. The current context reveals the increasing role of Islam as a political tool, which also explains the attacks against sexual, religious and ethnic minorities intertwined with national discourses locating these subjects as threats to the national project.

It is tempting to conclude by stating that Indonesia, often portrayed as a moderate Muslim-majority nation in the past, has lost its moderation. I will not do that. Instead, I will state that Indonesian Islam today offers a plurality ranging from those who still support or tolerate the local tradition of syncretism incorporating local belief practices into Islam to those influenced by Wahhabi/Salafi precepts, practising what some scholars consider an ‘Arabised’ version of Islam (see, for example, Hasan 2008, 2009 on the influence of ‘Arabised’ versions of orthodox Islam in Indonesia; Snider 2010 for a critical evaluation of debates on processes of ‘Arabisation’; Rohmaniyah et al 2012 on the role of Saudi ideology in Indonesian political parties; and Feillard and Madinier 2011: 238, on Indonesian movements based on returning ‘to original Islam and Arabisation’). As noted, these different perspectives have an obvious influence in politics through polarising discourses shaped by religious mobilisation. While one should be concerned about the drift towards conservatism and authoritarianism in Indonesia, there are reasons to be optimistic. Jokowi’s re-election against the more conservative Prabowo, the widespread presence of Muslim voices stressing the importance of *ijithad*, and civil society groups fighting for the rights of marginalised communities present on every island reveal that Indonesia can still be an example for other Muslim-majority nations through its motto of ‘Unity in Diversity’.

2.2. A (pre)history of Indonesian gender and sexual diversity

The narratives thus far provide perspectives on the role of Islam in Indonesia mainly through the lens of nationalism and politics, but an additional (and intertwined) stream has taken place
alongside those histories: a history of gender and sexual diversity that cannot be isolated from such processes. This history can be located within the wider context of gender pluralism in Southeast Asia. Despite the heterogeneous character of the region, commonalities between Southeast Asian nations can be noted: linguistic structures, dietary traditions, religious beliefs, patterns of kinship, gender, sexuality and socio-political organisation (Peletz 2009: 2). Literature has illustrated how non-normative genders and sexualities were common in most of the region’s pre- and early modern states mostly through their engagement in religious and spiritual practices. Examples of local non-normative genders and sexualities that do not fit within the gender binary and have a ritual role are the manang bali among the Iban of Sarawak (Blackwood 2005; Guetschow 1996), the baylan, asog bayog and bayoguin in the Philippines (Brewer 1999), the Malay sida-sida (Peletz 2009: 59), pawang (ibid: 61) and mak yong (Hardwick 2013), the Vietnamese on dong or ‘hermaphroditic witches’ (Heiman and Van Le 1975) and the Burmese nat kadaw (Sanders 2011; Ho 2009). Scholarship has also explored the existence of non-normative genders and sexualities without ritual roles through the case of the Thai kathoey (Jackson and Sullivan 1999; Jackson 1998), who have been described in similar ways to the Indonesian waria, a term roughly translated as transgender women. In the context of South Asia much has been written about the Indian hijra (Reddy 2005; Agrawal 1997; Nanda 1990, 1993), traditionally defined as ‘hermaphrodites as well as males who have had their penis and testes sacrificially excised and have thus become eunuchs’ (Peletz 2009: 31), who have long existed both within Hindu and Muslim communities in India. These examples illustrate the existence of individuals with non-normative genders and sexualities across different cultures throughout Southeast Asia playing similar roles as ritual specialists and healers.

In Indonesia, these ‘indigenous sexualities’ have been explored through the work of Atkinson (1990) with the Wana of Central Sulawesi, Hoskins’s (1990) research with the Kodi of Sumba and Davies’s (2011, 2007) ethnography with the Bugis of Sulawesi. A common key argument that these authors make pertains to the notion that gender serves ‘a difference that makes a difference’ (Atkinson 1990: 60). This phrase indicates that gender in these indigenous communities is linked to specific goals, usually related to spiritual potency. An additional example of these accounts comes from the Ngaju Dayak of Kalimantan, where the term basir, translated as ‘unfruitful’ or ‘barren’, has been used to describe priests in charge of officiating ceremonies, often referred to as ‘transvestites or homosexuals’ with a ‘bizarre behaviour and
lifestyle’ (Jay 1989: 32). The work of Blackwood (2005) is crucial to understanding the history I am aiming to tell here through her exploration of transgressive ritual practitioners in the archipelago. As she writes:

Gendered cosmologies that contained powerful masculine and feminine energies required ritual specialists […] to access these spiritual powers. The sacred origins of gender as the template for the universe made it essential that female-bodied as well as male-bodied individuals traversed gender boundaries to regain sacred oneness and preserve community harmony. Gendered cosmologies created a particular imagining of gender that was both bounded—that is, limited to masculine and feminine—yet traversable; this view of sacred genders travelled through and occupied a central place in the archipelago, producing transgressive ritual practitioners who combined masculine and feminine in one body (Blackwood 2005: 859).

Boellstorff defines these subjects as ‘ethnolocalised homosexual and transvestite professional subject positions’, or ETPs (2005a 43). His theoretical framework is useful to explore how ‘indigenous sexualities’ are linked to certain times and places, fetishising tradition and leading to historical explanations of being ‘LGBT’, as I explain through the example of YIFoS at the end of this section. But before tackling the current situation, I shall explore the history of gender and sexuality that led to today’s milieu. Starting in the 1500s and consolidated in the 1800s, the Dutch patriarchal worldview started to transform gender and sexual diversity in Indonesia through colonisation. This was not a homogeneous process, but instead followed diverse paths depending on the locations they occupied (Blackwood 2005).

This phenomenon was not specific to the Indonesian case but was part of the global project of European colonialism through which ‘gender differentials were introduced where there were none’ (Lugones 2007: 196). Lugones illustrates these processes through the example of the Yoruba people (on this, see Oyewumi 1997) and Native American tribes where ‘no gender system was in place’ (Lugones 2007: 196) prior to the colonial encounter. In addition to the role of the Dutch colonisers in the construction of sex-dichotomised bodies (Blackwood 2005: 859), the expansion of Islam contributed to the growth of dominant gender discourses rooted in the
belief in ‘a single masculinised god who created man and woman with fixed and different natures’ (ibid: 872).

Andaya has noted how from the 1600s women’s independence in Java started to become limited through selected Islamic stories (emerging from the Qur’an and hadith) stressing the need to be ‘chaste, modest and above all obedient to their menfolk’ (1994: 112). Starting from the 17th century, conservative Islamic norms on gender and sexuality were strengthened through Dutch collaboration. For example, Muslim men could obtain documents from the Dutch authorities to forbid women from sleeping away from home (ibid). From the 1600s to the 1700s, pesantren became a common institution across the archipelago as centres of Islamic education. While women could register and take lessons, they were limited to beginner classes and were not allowed to take advanced levels (Howell 2001). While these transformations caused the disappearance of some non-normative genders and sexualities, they also led to the emergence of processes of resistance and accommodations in the archipelago (Blackwood 2005: 864). Despite these examples, when analysing events presumed to be grounded in Islamic precepts, one needs to be aware of the existence of alternative interpretations of the Islamic sources that also offer opportunities for gender justice.32

As the country moved towards independence it became apparent that the desired change associated with this would not take place. Instead, Suharto’s New Order implemented regulations aimed at homogenising the Indonesian population through ‘an ideology of sex categories based on biology and the promotion of a unitary women’s role’, presenting the state as a ‘family system’ or asas kekeluargaan (Robinson 2008: 10). Suryakusuma has referred to the New Order ideology on gender as ‘State Ibuism’ (which could be translated into ‘State Motherism’), a system that ‘defines women as appendages and companions to their husbands, as procreators of the nation, as mothers and educators of children, as housekeepers, and as member of Indonesian society – in that order’ (1996: 101).

The concept of ‘gender’ was only introduced to Indonesian academic conversations in the late 1990s. As Oetomo notes (2000: 46), the term has increasingly been used among Indonesian academics and activists often as ‘a synonym for ‘women’ or euphemism for ‘feminism’ or

---

32 There are numerous studies on this topic: see, for example, the work of Shaikh (2003), Mir-Hosseini (2004), Bahi (2011) and Jones-Pauly and Tuqan (2011) on Islam, women and gender justice.
‘feminist’. Interestingly, there is no local term to refer to ‘gender’ in Indonesia other than *jenis kelamin*, which instead translates as ‘sex’ or ‘sexual organ’. Indeed, I often heard people using *gender* and *jenis kelamin* interchangeably during my fieldwork. Clark explains (2004: 15) that some Indonesian people even think of *gender* as referring to a type of musical instrument used in *gamelan* which shares its name with the English word ‘gender’ illustrating how foreign the concept is for some portions of the population. In fact, many of my older participants expressed a lack of familiarity with the term ‘gender’.

As Robinson notes (2008: 12), the notion that there are essential differences between sexed bodies is a recent perception in some regions of the Indonesian archipelago. This, I argue, does not point to the absence of a conception of ‘gender’ in Indonesia. Instead of using a language of ‘gender’, differences between masculinity and femininity are often described through the terms ‘*perempuan*’ (woman) and ‘*laki-laki*’ (men). While Bahasa Indonesia must be recognised for its often gender-neutral character with terms such as ‘*kakak*’ and ‘*adik*’, used to refer indistinguishably to older and younger brothers and sisters, kin terms such as the Javanese ‘*mas*’ (‘older brother’) and ‘*mbak*’ (‘older sister’) also prove the existence of ‘gendered’ distinctions between males and females. To address older people, *bapak/pak* (father, used as ‘Mr’) and *ibu/bu* (mother, used as ‘Mrs’) are commonly employed. Similarly, the Sundanese language employs terms such as ‘*akang*’, ‘*aa*’ and ‘*kakang*’ for ‘older brother’ and *teteh/telceu* for ‘older sister’. In regions such as South Sulawesi, local discourses have also asserted the qualities that women and men should embody (Davies 2006; Millar 1983). The deemphasis on gender commonly found across Southeast Asia should not lead us to assume, as Geertz believed, that these societies are ‘gender-neutral, ungendered or unisex’ (Peletz 1994: 139).

---

33 In recent years, the construction of ‘gender’ and ‘feminism’ as threats to the local values has been illustrated by campaigns from conservative organisations such as Family Love Alliance (Aliansi Cinta Keluarga or AILA). According to Rita Soebagio, AILA’s Chair, their aim is to ‘explore the philosophical and ideological roots of the concept of gender equality (kesetaraan gender)’ in relation to the ‘efforts to deconstruct moral and religious values by feminists’ (‘Kritik Konsep Kesetaraan Gender’ 2018). Additionally, the April 2019 Instagram campaign ‘*indonesiatanpakfeminis*’ (‘Indonesia without Feminists’) is also illustrative of the current waves of moral panic emerging in the name of the defence of ‘traditional values’ through slogans such as ‘my body is not mine, but rather Allah’s’ (Fachriansyah 2019). Gender equality is perceived as a threat to local moral and religious values, which is not specific to the Indonesian context but is indicative of a global anti- ‘gender ideology’ movement present in countries such as Poland, Spain and Ireland often in connection to the Catholic Church (Kováts 2017).
2.3. A history of today’s gender, sexuality and religion

In today’s Indonesia, local activists often discuss the historical existence of sexual minorities in the archipelago through ‘indigenous’ homosexualities and transgenderisms aiming to challenge anti-LGBT discourses. This is not surprising considering, as Boellstorff notes, ‘that the narrative continuity of history and identity remains a crucial way to claim authenticity’ (2005: 45). This is also reminiscent of Foucault’s argument that ‘bodies are historical’, meaning that they are not essential and, as such, arise as ‘constructed artifacts’ (Errington 1990: 9). While I witnessed such discussions at several workshops and seminars, the longest exploration I listened to took place at the Young Queer Faith and Sexuality (YIFoS) Camp (Figure 5).

This example is relevant to illustrate how some of those who currently position themselves within the ‘LGBT’ spectrum draw on historical, collective past gender and sexual practices as a strategy to demand social acceptance. The opening discussion at the YIFoS camp put the focus on the existence of transgender people in North Sumatra centuries ago by exploring the story of a waria who was socially respected as a patriot fighting for independence during colonial
times. Following this, the Bugis bissu (ritual role performed by gender non-normative shamans), calalai (roughly translated as transgender male) and calabai (roughly translated as transgender female ritual priest) were discussed before focusing on Javanese culture following a geographical focus through which maps of each region were projected. Most of the discussion focused on assumed Javanese historical precedents to today’s LGBT positions through explorations of the erotic adornments of the temples Candi Sukuh and Candi Cetho in Central-Eastern Java, the ludruk theatrical genre, the reog traditional dance and the epic poem Serat Centhini. Some participants discussed the influence of colonial rule in changing attitudes towards nudity in Balinese culture, while another commented that one of the Wali Songo members was actually a ‘biological’ woman who presented herself as a man. After a series of comments from the audience, the speaker took control of the discussion to conclude stating that:

The Nusantara civilisation has traditionally had a cultural wealth related to sexuality. What happened is that the arrival of Europeans to the archipelago shifted the situation from diversity to homogeneity through the slogan ‘Gold, Glory and Gospel’, which has had consequences for the perspectives of sexuality that we have in Indonesia today.

For these activists, identifying as gay, lesbi and trans today in Indonesia is explained in relation to pre-colonial ways of being, presented as explanatory variables for acceptance. The focus is often on the role of Dutch colonialism for the erasure of non-normative genders and sexualities, while Islam, also a foreign import, is left out of the conversation. In contrast to ‘Western’ discourses of LGBT rights as human rights, LGBT acceptance (through the concept of diterima, or ‘to be accepted’) in Indonesia is often pursued in relation to a non-normative gender and sexual history or through the engagement in ‘prestasi’ (achievements/success/good deeds) processes.

---

34 I tried to find the origins of this story asking my interlocutors and they referred me to the life of Si Putih. According to their statements, which coincide with online articles I found (Isnaeni 2019), Si Putih was a waria who guided General Soedirman’s guerrilla group during the Indonesian National Revolution.
35 The reog Ponorogo is a traditional type of dance from East Java (even though there are other types of Reog such as the Sundanese Reog Sunda in West Java) where the performer (known as warok) must abstain from having sex with women, but is allowed to have sex with young boys, who also perform as dancers and are called gemblak.
36 I have not been able to assess the authenticity of this story, but many of my interlocutors described them during interviews.
37 The ‘Nusantara civilisation’ can be translated as the ‘Civilisation of the Archipelago’ and is often used to refer to the social and cultural development of the Indonesian archipelago.
Prestasi is often employed in relation to educational success but can also be used to describe professional achievements. It is ‘a keyword in the everyday discourse of young people, and of schools’ referring to both ‘achieve and to perform, and to gain some form of public recognition’ for that success (Prabawa-Sear 2018: 285). While the definitions I received from my interlocutors was ‘achievement’ or ‘success’, Boellstorff (2005a: 35) has translated it as ‘good deeds.’ Throughout this thesis, I employ prestasi to refer to a life achievement that could be in theory voluntary or involuntary for the agent of prestasi, but that in practice is expected to be reciprocated by other social actors and, ultimately, by the state. Different from neoliberal notions where the burden of support for discriminated members of the population is not directly on the state, the Indonesian notion of prestasi is based on the expected exchange of one’s achievements for a combined familial and national acceptance.

In addition to my observations at events as the one above illustrates, arguments for acceptance based on historical explanations and prestasi were provided by my participants during interviews, especially by waria who often distanced themselves from the ‘LGBT community’ expressing that ‘they were in Indonesia before LGBT people.’ Some of them also stressed Islam as a source of acceptance by referring to the existence of hadith in which one of the Prophet Muhammad’s wives was described as interacting with the khuntsa (effeminate males) or mukhannats (masculine women), which they would equate to waria.38 These examples illustrate the existence of intertwined ‘streams’ that I have tried to develop throughout this and the previous sections: nationalism, politics, colonialism and religion have all contributed to shaping genders and sexualities in the Indonesian context.

Although, as noted above, many pro-queer Indonesian activists are trying to find historical precedents to today’s LGBT people within ETPs and local traditions, objectively this does not make sense as a strategy because they come from limited and specific parts of the archipelago (i.e. the Reog Ponorogo; the bissu, calalai and calabai in South Sulawesi), were usually only for male-bodied individuals (like the bissu) or related to pederasty (i.e. the Warok-Gemblakan in the Reog Ponorogo; examples taken from Serat Centhini39 by local activists). This is reminiscent of the statements made by Benedict Anderson in Imagined Communities, when he

---

38 One of this hadith mentioned was recorded by Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj, which has been discussed by Kugle (2011: 114) and that he located within “Kitab al-Salam,” book 40, chapter 13, report 5820.

39 Serat Centhini is a 19th-century compilation of Javanese stories and teachings that has often been used to prove the existence of non-normative genders and sexualities throughout Indonesian history.
speaks about the three paradoxes of nationalism, the first one being ‘the objective modernity of nations to the historian’s eye versus their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists’ (1983: 5). This is part of a discourse aimed at demonstrating that alternative genders and sexualities are not ‘Western’ imports, but rather have local precedents. In this regard, so many queer-rights activists are trying to lean on historical justifications because they are working within the horizon of national discourse, even if they are not always aware of it.

2.3.1. The most disliked group

It is a Thursday night in Yogyakarta in late September 2018. A civil society group has been organising an event on gender, sexuality and Islam for several weeks with a famous speaker in LGBT-rights circles, whom I have had the chance to hang out with several times in other locations. The café where it was to take place was chosen a while ago, but at the last minute, just as we are about to get there, the friend with whom I am riding a motorbike receives a WhatsApp message: the location has changed. ‘Safety concerns’, they explain. We drive for thirty more minutes until we reach a different café, far from main streets and behind closed doors. We must put our phones onto airplane mode. We double check that the GPS is also off. We cannot post pictures online until the talk has finished. We cannot tell anyone that we are there. Every small motorbike noise coming from the narrow street next to the café is perceived as a potential threat. The event starts. The speaker begins his presentation under the title *Catatan Ringan Islam dan Seksualitas* (‘Light Notes on Islam and Sexuality’), a sensitive topic to be discussed. This is not the first event where I have been told to be discreet, to turn off my phone. It is the usual procedure nowadays.

A month later, during a two-day workshop on gender, sexuality and religion held at a hotel in Yogyakarta, the same safety strategy is followed. The NGO in charge of organising the event cannot reveal who they are to the hotel management. Funnily enough, it takes place next to a national meeting from the political party PDI-P, which has a poster next door announcing where their event is happening. A few metres away from them, we are secretly discussing unspeakable issues with a door sign that says, ‘Ari’s Event’, the name of one of the activists instead of the organisation’s name. They have told the hotel management that they are meeting to hold a seminar on religion. A few weeks later, the YIFoS camp is taking place in a secret location that only a few of us will know beforehand. I must plan my trip from a different city, so
I have access to the information, but I am not allowed to discuss it even with other activists from the city where I am staying. The camp is held one hour away from the closest town, in the middle of the countryside, behind closed walls. When I arrive at the location, I notice that people are using walkie-talkies and controlling the doors at all times. I am told to turn off location tracking on my phone. I cannot tell anyone where I am since they know I am attending the event. We cannot share pictures mentioning the location due to the risk of attacks.

These days, one can attend these discussions and gatherings strictly by invitation only. When I asked if I could invite friends to join, I was often told that it was not possible to do so, invoking reasons of privacy, confidentiality and safety. During my first time conducting fieldwork in Indonesia in Ramadan 2014, I attended events at LGBT-rights NGO offices to break the fast together with other community members, film screenings and discussions, all of them openly advertised. I remember going to the warung in front of an NGO office in Yogyakarta discussing what was happening without fear of being heard by the owner. Today, these conversations would not take place. Not even on private WhatsApp groups, which my activist friends kept deleting during 2018, trying to find safer platforms where they could communicate. Anti-LGBT moral panics have led to a permanent fear of being seen, heard or known. When one of my friends saw my name written as a speaker on the poster for the 2018 International LGBTIQ Conference at Jakarta’s Theological Seminary (one of the few events still publicly promoted), she urged me to get in touch with the organisers to get my name removed as soon as possible. I started to internalise the fear that those around me could not escape from. What has changed in recent years? How has Indonesia got to this point?

According to data from the Wahid Foundation and the Indonesia Survey Institute (LSI), in 2016 the LGBT ‘community’ was the most disliked group by 26.1% of the 1,520 poll respondents across Indonesia’s 34 provinces, followed by Communists and Jews (Figure 6) (Rozaq 2018). The latest survey, released in 2018, indicated that the LGBT community had moved to the second position (17.8%) behind the Communist ‘enemy’ (21.9%).
2.3.2. The advent of political homophobia

Before independence, to my knowledge the only instance of LGBT persecution in Indonesia took place between 1938 and 1939 through the ‘vice scandal’, which solely affected men. As Bloembergen notes, more than 200 homosexual men, mostly Europeans, were arrested by the colonial police under the pretext of fighting pederasty (2011). Around the same years, similar scandals took place in British Malaya and Nazi Germany (ibid). Throughout this process, the police boosted notions of social ‘cleaning’, contributing to the stigmatisation of homosexuality in the colony. The early 20th century also witnessed the implementation of laws aimed at reducing ‘anti-social behaviour’ reminiscent of the regional laws passed in the last five years in Indonesia, such as the Regional Regulation on Rampage and Beggars (‘Peraturan Daerah Gelandangan dan Pengemis’) in Yogyakarta, which has led to the arrest of waria, street singers and street children.

Academic discussions and media articles have set the period between mid-2015 (following the legalisation of same-sex marriage in the US) and the first months of 2016 as the start of an unprecedented series of anti-LGBT attacks in Indonesia occurring simultaneously at multiple levels (Wijaya 2020; Boellstorff 2016). This included statements made by government officials and politicians against the LGBT community. In early 2016, the Minister of Higher
Education publicly stated his aim to ban LGBT student groups from universities (‘LGBT not welcome at university: Minister,’ 2016), which was followed by the Minister of Defence comparing the LGBT community to ‘a proxy war’ and ‘modern warfare’, stating that it is not only ‘dangerous’ but also ‘skews the mindset of our nation away from our base ideology’ (‘Minister: LGBT Movement More Dangerous than Nuclear Warfare,’ 2016). Amid this anti-LGBT hysteria, queer people have been the target of police raids at saunas, bars, hotels, warungs, beauty salons and private housing. The pesantren waria, an Islamic boarding school for waria, was attacked by the militant Islamic group FJI in 2016 forcing its leader to shut it down temporarily. The homophobic rhetoric of conservative media also translated into violent attacks perpetrated by, among others, radical groups and municipal police forces like the SatPol PP. The degree of anti-LGBT paranoia has been considerably greater post-2016 than it was before, as media attention and increasing academic conversations have illustrated. However, my interlocutors also recounted having experienced intolerant attacks before that date. Agnes, a self-defined transgender street singer (pengamen) living in Yogyakarta described:

Around 2010, I used to fight all the time with FJI, the Pemuda Kabah [radical Islamic groups] because of being transgender. When I was working as a pengamen, they’d attack me. I remember one day when I was working with my transgender friends and FPI people came. They brought bags with urine and faeces, and they threw them at us. The police were there, but they didn’t help us, we were just running like crazy around there. One of my friends was hit on the head and she was bleeding, she was knocked down by a motorbike ... They were all screaming ‘Allahu Akbar (‘Allah is great’) and we, all the waria, were also screaming back at them ‘Allahu Akbar’, so what’s the meaning of religion, what’s the meaning of Islam?

Agnes’s example, and the stories of other queer Muslims I met during my fieldwork, illustrate the widespread existence of anti-queer violence prior to what has come to be known as the ‘2016 anti-LGBT crackdown’. In 1999, the fourth national congress of the Indonesian Lesbi and Gay Network (Jaringan Lesbi dan Gay Indonesia, or JLGI) was cancelled following threats from radical organisations, while a year later the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) Asia conference in Surabaya was also cancelled after an attack by FPI (Boellstorff
These public expressions of hate do not always match the everyday interactions and friendships across normal and belok Indonesians, terms widely used among my interlocutors to refer to heterosexual (normal) and non-heterosexual (belok) people. Indeed, social proximity, understood as ‘socially embedded relations between actors’ (Boschma 2005: 66), was often highlighted by my participants as a source of tolerance and integration. These relations were often consequential of religious rituals and everyday religious interactions leading to the emergence of social ties between neighbours that decreased the importance given to one’s non-normative gender or sexuality.

Despite the occurrence of anti-LGBT violence prior to 2016 as the examples above illustrate, that year marked the emergence of a new wave of homophobic rhetoric built through moral panics. In fact, in the last years, moral panics have emerged globally to exclude minority groups: the Roma people in Eastern Europe, Muslims all around the globe and LGBT people in an increasing number of locations. Boellstorff has explored the emergence of violent acts against queer Indonesians through the framework of ‘political homophobia’, defined as ‘an emergent cultural logic linking emotion, sexuality, and political violence’ (2004a: 469).

For Boellstorff (2016), Indonesia has not traditionally been a homophobic society, but instead it has prioritised heterosexuality, which explains why this political homophobia is notable and new. Expanding the heterosexist belief that heterosexuality is the only natural or moral sexuality, political homophobia brought a wave of repulsion to the presence of homosexuality and others forms of gender and sexual non-normativity (ibid). In relation to Indonesia’s Islamisation, this concept is more useful as an analytical tool to explore the current Indonesian context than ‘religious homophobia.’ While it is true that some attacks have been done in the name of Islam, making use of what some call ‘religious homophobia’ (Reygan and Moane 2014; Taylor and Snowdon, 2014; Olyan and Nussbaum 1998) runs the risk of representing these homophobic sentiments as coming from Islam because that is ‘what Islam is’, perpetuating Orientalist models that disregard concrete circumstances (Said 1997: XXII).

Violent incidents cannot be approached simply as consequential of religious principles. Instead, one should pay attention to their connections with ‘masculinity, emotion (such as feelings of malu or shame), and the public sphere’ (Boellstorff 2004a: 469). They should also be
considered in relation to transnational developments, the role of foreign funding and their parallel emergence in other geographical contexts. For example, the increasing presence of such homophobic discourses in African countries has been linked to funding provided by American Evangelical organisations aiming to spread homophobic ideas in countries such as Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria and Zimbabwe (Baptiste 2014, Walker 2014, Kaoma 2011). A similar example can be found in Tonga, where the fakaleiti (transgender) community has increasingly been the object of attacks from pastors funded by American Evangelical money (Besnier 2002: 559). As a reaction to this, scholars have also noted the role of the Christian faith to support LGBT activism (Van Klinken 2018) through the practices of LGBT Christians themselves similarly to recent events taking place in Indonesia through Islam.

Today’s slogan ‘tolak LGBT’ (‘reject LGBT’) echoes the ‘tolak PKI’ (‘reject the Communist Party’) discourses of the 1960s. At the centre of Islam there is the precept that one should engage in good deeds with those around while also rejecting what is considered evil. For fundamentalist groups, these values are translated into the duty to reject and fight what is ‘dangerous’ for the national project. It happened with the PKI members and it is happening today against LGBT people through increasing political homophobia. Attacks done in the name of Islam by hardliners have not led my interlocutors to reject their religion. Instead, as I witnessed during my fieldwork, most of them have developed a stronger connection to Islam, both in an intimate and social level.

Since the 2019 presidential campaign started in September 2018, an increasing number of anti-LGBT protests organised by radical Islamic groups took place across the country in cities such as Surabaya, Bogor, and Tasikmalaya. These attacks have surprisingly led to the mushrooming of seminars and workshops linking gender, sexuality, and religion organised by LGBT-rights NGOs, which were not as common in the past. Simultaneously, the positioning of LGBT people as not only a threat to Islam, but also as enemies of the Indonesian nation has led to a shift in the way queer Indonesians perceive themselves. While Boellstorff (2016) argues that his queer participants stressed nationality before ethnicity during his research in Indonesia in the late 1990s and early 2000s, what I often witnessed in 2017-2018 was the opposite phenomenon. Some of my interlocutors associated themselves with their ethnicity rather than their nationality.

40 In relation to this, it could be helpful to think through Weiss’s framework of ‘anticipatory homophobia’ (2013) based on responding homophobically to events that have not taken place yet within a particular society by considering events that have occurred somewhere else.
to position themselves as, for example, ‘gay Javanese’ or ‘lesbi Minang.’ The reason for this was rooted in the belief that their ethnic group was more supportive of queer people than the Indonesian nation. However, this might be linked to alternative explanations. For example, ‘local’ gay identities can be employed to distance oneself from the hegemonic model of the Jakarta-based queer activism, which has become a target of persecution and hatred by the media through its conflation with ‘Western’ models of queer activism based on the promotion of same-sex marriage in Indonesia. Another explanation could be that this is a strategy to further decentralisations from Indonesian national subject positions as a critique of Javanese political hegemony.

In contrast with my interlocutors’ localised identifications, the ‘LGBT community’ has been constructed by conservative political and religious leaders in Indonesia as a neo-colonial ‘Western’ export, threatening local morals, cultures and values. While Islam arrived as a foreign import to Indonesia, it is presented as an asli (‘native’) force against the asing (‘foreign’) LGBT threat. Those using the term are often ignorant of what the acronym LGBT stands for, as several self-defined anti-LGBT religious leaders confirmed to me. Beyond political reasons, these increasing anti-LGBT hostilities have also been explained in relation to the support received by Indonesian LGBT-rights NGOs from international funding agencies and the resonance in the media of the US Supreme Court’s ruling on marriage equality in 2015 (Wijaya et al 2018; Boellstorff 2016). All these foreign events explain why local activists work to create a sense of traditional legitimacy.

Queer Indonesians are built as ‘foreign’ to the Indonesian national project through distinctions between what is asli Indonesian and asli Islam and what is not. The permeable limits between nation and religion are clear in this context. In this process, conservative voices introduce their religion as a shared identity reminiscent of what Eriksen calls ‘us-hood’ group identification (1995: 427). With this, shared identities are produced through the construction of an external agent as a real or imaginary enemy presented as a threat (1995: 427). The assumption that queer people threaten normative genders and sexualities has been built around the concept of ‘teroris moral’ (‘moral terrorism’) through a reverse discourse employed by hard-line Islamic groups, who are often described as terrorists themselves (Boellstorff 2014: 151).
2.4. Conclusions

The Indonesian histories that I have explored throughout this chapter offer various approaches to gender, sexuality and religion in the archipelago to lay the foundations for the next empirical chapters. My goal has been to provide the reader with an approximation to the intersections between the forces that, in diverse ways, have contributed to shaping queer and religious subjectivities and subject positions in Indonesia. These debates have significant implications for the understanding of how nationalism, gender, sexuality and religion intersect in multiple ways pointing to the significance of thinking intersectionally.

Today, mainstream media mostly describe Indonesia as an increasingly conservative society against the progressiveness that made it different to other Muslim-majority countries in the past. These representations often include the depiction of queer Indonesian Muslims as victims of their religion suffering attacks from radical groups. While these aggressions have indeed occurred, this chapter has also pointed to the work of queer activists to challenge literalist approaches and build queer-inclusive religious discourses. Despite my focus on Islam throughout this chapter, one should keep in mind that Indonesia’s national motto of ‘Unity in Diversity’ points to, among other issues (i.e. ethnicity, languages), the religious richness of the archipelago. In fact, today’s Muslim religious practices are influenced by Buddhist, Hindu and indigenous spiritualities that existed before Islam arrived.

A question worth asking considering the diversity of Indonesian culture and its positive reception of new ideas throughout centuries is why the moral panics and anti-LGBT climates I explored in section 2.3 began to take place in the country. A potential answer could be found by returning to the importance of nationalism in post-colonial Indonesia: in the realisation of a national identity, markers of difference with what some consider to be ‘Western’ ideas have played an important role. A possible explanation for this is that while the Dutch colonised the country through violence and oppression, Islam spread, as I mentioned earlier, peacefully and through acculturation and syncretism. This dissimilarity is linked now to the construction of an ‘LGBT other’ which is related to ‘the West’ as a new colonising force through the invasion of a ‘correct’ local way of doing gender and sexuality. The belief that being LGBT is a ‘Western’ export is not unique to the Indonesian context, and it has been a common argument in postcolonial societies as is the case of Malaysia and Singapore, which inherited anti-sodomy
laws from their colonial rulers. In this context, strategic interpretations of the Islamic sources have been employed by conservative groups to reject those who do not adhere to the norm while trying to shape national principles as I have illustrated through the Pancasila debates in section 2.1.

As I noted earlier, during my fieldwork in Indonesia, I often witnessed how local activists tried to find historical precedents of gender and sexual diversity in the archipelago to today’s queer and LGBT subject positions. This is a tricky strategy considering the specifics of these subjects. However, leaning on historical justifications posits an interesting question in relation to how significant national discourses can be to produce queer-inclusive discourses. While this occurs, for other informants it was a focus on ethnic identity that was used as a tool to support diversity rather than working within the horizon of national strategies. As I will note in the following chapters, it is not only nationalism, but also, and more increasingly, alternative Islamic interpretations that are used to justify queer inclusion.

In the following chapter, I put the focus on my queer Muslim interlocutors by exploring the role of family and education as agents influencing both the formation and negotiation of gender, sexuality and religion. The narratives I present in the following empirical chapters should be approached keeping in mind the significance of the broader processes of nationalism, religion, gender and sexuality that I have explored in Chapter 2.

Replicating Dutch laws, same-sex sexual relationships under the age of 21 were against the law in the Netherlands Indies in accordance with Article 292 of the Indies Criminal Law (Bloembergen 2011: 5). However, since independence in 1945 the current State Penal Code (KUHP) only states that ‘An adult who commits indecent acts with another person of the same sex who is not yet an adult shall be sentenced to up to five years’ (KUHP, 1946, Chapter 14, Article 292).
Chapter 3: Navigating Gender, Sexuality and Religion: Family and Education

3.1. Introduction

Through Chapters 3 and 4, I explore the four main agents that emerged through the narratives of my queer Muslim interlocutors as forces shaping their negotiation and navigation of gender, sexual and religious subjectivities. I divide the discussion into family and education in Chapter 3 and media and social actors external to family and education in Chapter 4. In this chapter, I start by considering how the religiosity of family members and the responsibility that queer Muslims have towards them play a role in the building of their subjectivities. Subsequently, I consider the role of family pressure and teachings to examine the factors shaping my interlocutors’ religious practices. I conclude the first half of the chapter by examining how reflections on marriage are influenced by family ideals. My aim here is to demonstrate the significance of the family in providing queer Muslims with a religious, sexual and gender worldview, while also playing a role in the production of their subjectivities. In the second part of the chapter, I focus on education to explore how formal and informal educational institutions impact both the formation and negotiation of queer Muslim religious, gender and sexual subjectivities by using strategic interpretations of the religious sources.

Early in my fieldwork I came to realise that most of my interlocutors would make sense of their subjectivities in ways that were intimately related to how they were taught about religion, gender and sexuality earlier in their lives. In Lived Religion, McGuire (2008) wonders what we may discover about religion by focusing on individuals, instead of looking at affiliation or organisational participation. Through this chapter, I aim to stretch McGuire’s inquiries to raise further questions about how to approach the messiness of religious lives which are shaped through intersections of official and informal discourses and practices. What might we find by putting the focus on the explanations provided by queer Muslims themselves about how and why they came to be the type of religious subjects they are today? What is the role of the family in the formation of religious, gender and sexual subjectivities? What are the consequences of being educated at particular educational institutions? Through the following sections, I want to take
these questions seriously to provide the reader with potential answers by paying attention to my participants’ words.

3.2. Family

At about eight o’clock on a Monday morning I wake up at Adit’s brother’s house in rural Central Java. He is a self-identified transman born in 1991 who has invited me to accompany him to his hometown. I stay at his brother’s place, a big two-storey house with a large living-room facing the kampung (village) main street. Sitting on the floor, Adit’s brother and I have some fruit and coffee for breakfast while Adit is helping his mother at the pesantren (Islamic boarding school) that his family owns next door. Lighting up a cigarette, he opens up to me regarding Adit’s transition. ‘Back then I felt ashamed’ (malu), he states, ‘because of the people around us, the neighbours and those who know my family.’ The dialogue stops when Adit passes through the living room to get utensils from the kitchen, as if this could not be discussed in front of him considering the sensitive character of the conversation. When Adit leaves the house to continue helping his mother, his brother continues: ‘We didn’t speak for several months after my brother said that he identified as a man, I couldn’t accept his condition.’ It was only with time that he could accept Adit as a transman, an obstacle being what other people would think of their family, instead of the direct influence of Islam as a negative force against the acceptance of his brother’s transsexuality.

After breakfast, I have a conversation with Adit at a small warung nearby, where he explains that his family’s shift from rejection towards acceptance constituted a positive influence to accept himself as a transgender man:

I talked to my father and he remained silent for three days. He was a kyai (Islamic religious leader). After that, I said, ‘if you want to be angry with me, it’s okay, express your anger, but don’t be quiet.’ He replied, ‘I cannot be angry with you because that’s God’s will for your life.’ It was a very touching moment for me, he cried after saying that. My parents wanted to know how I felt about being trans, so we became closer, we talked to each other a lot. However, my brother took longer to accept me. He only changed his mind after my father got sick. He was in a coma for three days… Before that, he called my brother from Mecca where he
was performing the *Umrah*\(^{42}\) and he cried saying, ‘don’t be too harsh on your little brother, he’s still your brother, love him, take care of him.’ After that, when my father was in the hospital before passing away, my brother started to be very nice to me, even when his friends came to see my father, he was like, ‘this is my brother, he is a *transgender* person, but that’s okay.’

This vignette points to the anxieties that the presence of a *transgender* person in the family can produce in relation to the maintenance of the Indonesian values of family dignity (*martabat*) and honour (*harkat*). Additionally, it illustrates the diversity of reactions within Adit’s family members. While for his father, an old *kyai* who could be expected to be more conservative than Adit’s younger brother, his transness was assumed to be God’s will, his brother assumed it to be instead a challenge to God’s creation. Growing up within a family that founded a *pesanatren* means that he and the rest of his siblings will always carry on their shoulders the weight of social pressure and the need to maintain the family’s reputation.

It was not only Adit’s pious family that had difficulties understanding and accepting his gender identity, but also Adit himself, who went through self-denial and depression until he finally came to his subjectivity as a *transman*. From a process of ‘commute’ between his religion and transness, Adit moved on to integrate those two positions. Even though his brother, sister and mother now accept Adit as a member of the family, he still finds himself looking for ways to explain what being a *transgender* person means and why Islam does not explicitly reject him, by sharing with them alternative interpretations of Islamic sources. These interpretations were perceived by Adit as an important factor for his family acceptance. His engagement in communal religious rituals such as *salat*\(^{43}\) (prayer) with the rest of the family members has also contributed to strengthening the familial bonds between them.

During my stay at Adit’s village, he always presented himself to those around us wearing the traditional Javanese male Muslim clothes of *sarung* (fabric wrapped around one’s waist) and *peci* (cap worn by Muslim males). His adherence to religious clothing standards illustrates his submission to social expectations leading to the positive outcome of being perceived as a member of the religious community that surrounds him despite his gender non-normativity. Also,

---

\(^{42}\) Pilgrimage to Mecca that Muslims can undertake at any time of the year except during *Hajj*.

\(^{43}\) In Indonesian, terms used to refer to the five daily prayers are ‘*sholat*’, ‘*salat*’, ‘*shalat*’ and ‘*solat*’. To keep the cohesion throughout my thesis, I use ‘*salat*’ since I heard it most often.
his ability to ‘pass’ as male played a role in being accepted when he interacted with strangers.\textsuperscript{44} These practices raise questions about the emergence of agency from within submission to norms, rather than by resisting them. When I met Adit again weeks later at a youth event in Jakarta, he wore jeans and a shirt leaving behind his traditional appearance, which made me reflect on the possibility of it being a strategy to fit within the space of the family home and the kampung. An alternative interpretation could be that he was wearing these clothes to fit with the youth event rather than the other way around since most of the attendees were young Jakartans wearing more ‘modern’ clothing style. During the process of data analysis, I contacted Adit again to reflect on these interpretations and he noted that, ‘For me wearing sarung and peci is also my way to challenge society so they can see that being trans or LGBT is not about being influenced by “Western styles”’. This reveals the multiple meanings that clothing has for Adit and the strategic choices he makes depending on the space he inhabits.

The family has been central for the building of the post-colonial Indonesian nation. Indeed, the project of nation-building was sanctioned during Suharto’s New Order by the ‘asas kekeluargaan’ or ‘family principle’ through which the Pancasila principles are concretised, expressing that the nation is ‘made up not of citizens but of families’ (Boellstorff 2005a: 104). This ideology blurs the boundaries between the public and the domestic sphere: the state is imagined as a collective family made of thousands of nuclear families within which mothers and children are led by the father. The idea that kekeluargaan or ‘familiness/family-ism’ is at the core of being Indonesian can be traced back to the early expressions of nationalism and to the work of Ki Hadjar Dwantara, the founder of the Taman Siswa national educational movement, who proposed the notion that ‘the internal order of an organization should be sustained by familial bonds’ (ibid: 196). Shiraishi (1997) has also explored the role of the family as a key concept during Suharto’s New Order. Her reflection on the consequences of the ideology of kekeluargaan can be useful to understand the significance given to both family and home by queer Muslims I interacted with during my fieldwork.

As Shiraishi notes, exploiting this principle for their own ends is for Indonesian citizens a ‘way of overcoming powerlessness and vulnerability’ (1997: 34). This finds resonance in the

\textsuperscript{44} With the verb ‘to pass’, I find inspiration in Ginsberg’s work when he describes how individuals assume ways of being to escape the discrimination that their identities could bring ‘to access the privileges and status of another’ (1996: 3). I also acknowledge the problematic character of the term that some scholars describe as ‘being erased as transgendered’ (Cromwell 2006).
queer Muslim experience: the maintenance of familial linkages often represents a source of power to avoid the potential helplessness Shiraishi describes. The dimensions these linkages take, and the assemblages through which they are shaped, are not one but many. For example, queer Muslims sometimes find ways to balance their failure to meet the national requirement of marriage and procreation through *prestasi*. As Agung, a *gay* man working in Jakarta for an international marketing company, put it: ‘I have the power now to come out to my parents because if they don’t accept me, I could easily shut down my financial support for them, although I’d never do that. They pretty much rely on me in terms of electricity, Internet, my mum’s monthly financial security, I provide for them.’ Tania, a *lesbi tomboi* from Central Java referred to the relevance of academic instead of professional success: ‘My parents don’t speak now about my sexual preferences, they know that I am their *tomboi* daughter, but I’m quite successful academically, I’m a good daughter, I don’t want to have conflicts with my family.’

Related to these reflections that are implicitly linked to *prestasi* as a source of acceptance is the conviction that children should never rebel against their parents. This is in line with Suharto’s national discourses using metaphors like the *anak buah* or ‘subordinate’ to refer to Indonesian citizens. As he once stated, ‘the *anak buah* can never rebel against his *bapak* (father)’ (Shiraishi 1997: 53) where the former represents Indonesian citizens and the latter the Indonesian nation. Folding this metaphor of the national into the personal, queer Muslims strive towards the maintenance of positive relationships with their family members and, therefore, their religion, which is often practised communally.

My reflection about the family so far has mostly developed around the issue of nationalism, but it is important to reflect on the parallels between the principle of the *asas kekeluargan* for the Indonesian nation and the role given to the family within Islam. Existing literature has noted that ‘the family in Islam is considered the main foundation of Muslim society and culture’ (Al-Mutair et al 2014: 254). For Yahya (2012), in Islam the family is perceived as a ‘unit of society, community and nation.’ Ghazwi and Nock (1989: 368) add that traditional Muslim families have not only been based on protecting their children, but also on the expectation that their children will return complete obedience to the parents.
3.2.1. Family, Religiosity, Responsibility

For the most part, my interlocutors referred to the family as a source of knowledge about religion directly or indirectly. The family is often defined in relation to their religious institutional membership. It is common to hear statements like ‘My family is NU (Nahdlatul Ulama)’ or ‘I grew up in a Muhammadiyah family.’ Most of the queer participants described the religious affiliation (referring to both their social identification as Muslims and their spiritual engagement) of their families in three main ways: open/moderate (*terbuka*), very religious (*sangat religius*) and fanatic (*fanatik*). The ways in which queer Muslims come to grips with their gender, sexuality and religion is often related to their family background. From descriptions of moderation to fanaticism, a common thread is the need to believe in God. Even during interactions with queer Muslims whose families were completely accepting of their non-normative gender or sexuality, where there was no concern about marriage and where virginity was discussed as unimportant, the one thing that could not be challenged was one’s belief in God.

In relation to the three levels of religiousness that my interlocutors designated, during my first interviews in Jakarta I assumed that those who described their families as open/moderate or *terbuka* were linked to higher social classes, and then realised that I was missing the complexity of these issues when interacting with working-class relatives of queer Muslims in rural areas who expressed similar perspectives. For some participants, moderation was explained in relation to ethnicity. Ria, a middle-aged waria from Yogyakarta, stated: ‘I come from a Javanese family, which means that we are not so religious.’ Ela, a waria from Central Java, explained her family’s moderation in relation to her freedom to become (*menjadi*) a waria: ‘My parents have always given me and my siblings the freedom to decide whatever we are. When I came out to my family, it was easy because they had allowed me to wear skirts since I was a child.’ For Lina, Jakarta-based and the only bisexual Muslim woman I met during my fieldwork, moderation was understood in a different way: ‘I’ve never been forced to go for prayers or to wear the veil, if I were going for prayers it was because I wanted to; it would be out of my own will and not my parents.’ Her narration is based on an ethics of freedom founded on the possibility of following her own will against external religious or family demands. For her, moderation is equated to freedom in a sense that resonates with liberal political theory where one is free only when acting out of their own will.
Those who defined their families as ‘very religious’ pointed to the need to relate every action one performs to religion. This does not imply being highly educated on the Islamic sources, memorising the Qur’an or being able to discuss the hadith. Moving away from ‘official’ Islam, this categorisation is instead related to everyday practices: for example, following the five daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, or providing zakat. Lila, a young lesbi woman from Central Java, stated: ‘My parents don’t see anything from the perspective of humanity, but from religion. Since I studied at a pesantren, they know that I already have the knowledge about everything, but they consider that I don’t apply that knowledge in my life.’ Leyla, who also defined her family as very religious, noted about her mum, who passed away recently, that, ‘She applied Islam to everything she did. She wore the jilbab, she did the hajj, she was a member of more than five different pengajian (Muslim religious study groups), she was very active in the local mosque and even at the mosques outside our kampung.’ As noted, being ‘a little’ or ‘very’ religious is assumed to be related to the significance given to Islam in everyday life instead of to the level of religious education received.

Furthermore, a distinction between describing one’s family as ‘very religious’ and ‘fanatic’ has to do with the family’s reaction to their children’s queerness. Those using the term ‘fanatic’ often shared experiences of violence and fear when speaking about their families. For example, Mirza, a gay Muslim from Central Java, located his family’s fanaticism in their membership of Lembaga Dakwah Islam Indonesia (LDII). As he noted:

My father joined LDII when he was a university student in Jakarta. Before that, he had joined radical organisations like Ngruki. Within LDII, I am only allowed to read about Islam as they teach it to you, so if you have Islamic readings outside what is taught by LDII, that’s not permitted. You are not allowed, if you are caught, they will burn the book… It is also recommended to reduce your interactions with people outside LDII, so most of my friends were also members. About being gay… I came out to one of my close friends from LDII because I knew he could keep my secret, but he said that I should be killed to get rid of my sins since I had had anal sex.
This excerpt reveals the power that Mirza’s family had over his Islamic education and his social interactions outside LDII circles. It also points to the significance given to anal sex versus the absence of discussions on same-sex desire and attraction. Mirza’s narration also denotes the role of the norms that religious organisations like LDII establish for their members, which consequently become family rules to restrict one’s conduct. Other queer Muslims who defined their families as ‘radical’ or ‘fanatic Muslims’ described their family’s membership of fundamentalist organisations as well as various norms such as not being allowed to interact with non-Muslim people, to meet friends outside the family house or to remove the jilbab. In these cases, family pressure to get married was often higher than in the case of those who grew up within more open-minded backgrounds.

Growing up within conservative or progressive family backgrounds was often stressed by my interlocutors as an influence on how they experienced their gender and sexuality. For those like Mirza and others who had been threatened by their parents when finding out about their non-normative sexual orientation or gender identity, the narratives I heard ranged from being forced to undertake ruqyahs (Islamic exorcisms), being thrown out of the house or running away from home to suffering from episodes of depression and suicide attempts. From these situations, some of them also described positive stories of reconciliation with their family members who ended up accepting them.

The common emphasis on the family reveals the importance given to this unit both in Islam and Indonesian culture. This is not to say that it should be studied as a monolithic force considering the evolution that the concept of the family has undergone throughout Indonesian history, particularly after the opening to democracy in 1998 and the increasing significance of Islam. While I agree with Boellstorff when he states that in Indonesia the fundamental unit of the nation is never the extended family but instead the nuclear family (2005a: 117), I disagree with scholars such as Niehof, who have stated that ‘there is no such thing as “the extended family” in Indonesia’ (1995). For many of my queer Muslim interlocutors, it was not the nuclear family but instead the keluarga besar or ‘extended family’ that constituted the main obstacle towards living comfortably as queer and Muslim. Leyla, a 20-year-old lesbi woman from East Java, noted that, ‘My parents are not the problem but my extended family since we have some hafidz (someone who has memorised Al-Qur’an), I have relatives who graduated from famous pesantren like al-Munawwir, they are really strict.’ Liam, a 25-year-old transgender man living in Central Java,
also described how, ‘When I think about my gender expression, I am worried about my extended family, it’s not about my nuclear family (keluarga inti).’ These concerns take place because of the role of local concepts such as malu (roughly translated as ‘shame’), martabat, harkat and nama baik, which can be translated as ‘dignity’, ‘reputation’ and ‘good name’. For example, during my fieldwork an activist told me that ‘someone could destroy his family dignity (martabat keluarganya) or lower his family’s worth (harkat keluarganya) by being LGBT.’ This points to the importance given to inter-dependence instead of individuality in the Muslim family, which is in line with previous academic discussions on family and Islam (Yip 2004a).

The consequences that the opinions of their keluarga besar might have on their parents and siblings is often a source of concern for queer Muslims. Considering that one’s Muslimness is passed down through the family unlike one’s gay or waria subject position (Boellstorff 2005a: 67), the importance given to religion in the familial sphere is not surprising. For most queer Muslims in Indonesia, the family made by one’s parents and siblings (but especially mother and father) is central to their personal world: most of the decisions taken pass through reflecting on what their consequences would be for their parents. I heard on several occasions how ‘coming out’ or taking a wrong decision could worsen the health situation of a sick father or a mother recovering from surgery. Protecting one’s parents and responding to their tanggung jawab was perceived as an obligation for most of my interlocutors. The concept of tanggung jawab represents children’s responsibilities towards their parents, a notion that evolves throughout one’s life: one’s tanggung jawab is not the same before and after getting married or having a child. The concept can be translated as ‘responsible’ when written as tanggung jawab, as well as ‘account for something’ or ‘be responsible for something’ when written as mempertanggungjawabkannya. In its second form, ‘accounting for something’ is related to providing explanations or reasons for one’s actions, processes which my interlocutors often undertook with their family members: why they had not married yet, why they had no children or why they had not yet prayed on a specific day. To my knowledge, existing literature on gender and sexuality in Indonesia has not devoted much attention to this concept that I often heard during interviews and everyday interactions with queer Muslims. The only reference I have found has been in Boellstorff’s work when he explains that the performance of a ‘tomboi style’ is, for tombois, often based on being responsible (which he translates as tanggung jawab) towards their femme partners (Boellstorff 2005a: 164).
This concept finds resonance with Islamic ethics as a moral value of responsibility. Some of my interlocutors referred to tanggung jawab in relation to the sanctions of Islam and felt encouraged to be responsible for their parents through fear of God. For some, tanggung jawab was perceived as a source of stress, especially in the case of those who had been rejected by their family members for being queer and had reconciled with them later in life. As Dina, a lesbi woman from Central Java born in 1980, noted:

My parents didn’t give me a decent life, but now they demand things from me. My siblings say that my mother is old, that I should take care of her. Why is it my responsibility (tanggung jawabku)? What has my mother given me? Now I’m burdened with responsibility (dibebani tanggung jawab). They tell me that children aren’t allowed to rebel (durhaka) against their parents…

Ela, a waria from Yogyakarta born in 1967, expressed the significance that this concept had when she first had a conversation with her brother about her gender identity:

First, my brother told me, ‘You are an adult now, you have been following your own path and the most important thing is to be responsible (kamu harus bertanggung jawab) for the consequences of your actions.’ I remember that my mother also said, ‘It’s okay if you want to dress like that as long as you are not a thief.’ This made me feel more confident and leave my feelings of guilt behind.

For Astrid, a transgender woman from Jakarta born in 1995, this concept revealed a social world existing beyond the domestic sphere, that was not expressed by other interviewees:

When we were studying at Senior High School, my cousin told me, ‘I’m not like you, you’re really like a woman, but I’m not, I’m interested in men.’ I was like, ‘are you gay?’, and he replied, ‘yes, I am’. After that, he showed me his collection of porn videos. I was shocked, ‘oh my God, how can you have that?’, and he told me, ‘I cannot hold back (menahan) my lust (nafsu).’ I told him, ‘I cannot judge you, but you must know your social responsibility, your tanggung jawab. It’s
your responsibility with God, with your society... as long as you do good deeds and you don’t do anything bad, I guess it’s okay.’

These three excerpts illustrate different dimensions of the responsibility that queer Muslims assume to have pointing to the internalisation of both national and religious ideals. Dina’s words express the feeling of burden brought by the persistent expectations that her family members place on her as well as an assumed inconsistency between the lack of support she received from her parents while growing up and the responsibility she has been given today. She also points to the concept of *durhaka* or ‘rebellion’, a term that some equate to ‘treason’ (Graf 2007; Chee 1980). *Durhaka* is often mentioned in literalist Islamic interpretations to stress the punishments that Muslims would receive if they were to rebel against their parents (Rakhmani 2016), as well as to note the duties of the wife towards the husband (Ainiyah 2017). As Dina shared with me, the burden of being unable to maintain her masculine gender expression at the family home while growing up as a *lesbi* woman has now been replaced by the weight of her *tanggung jawab*.

For Laudya, a *lesbi* woman from Sumatra born in 1989, her responsibility acted as a balance for her sexual orientation and what she considered to be sinful actions. As she told me, ‘At least I can still struggle (*berjuang*) for my mum as a redemption for my sins (*penembusan dosaku*).’ The goal of these redemption processes could be to transform herself as a different ethical subject by forming relationships with moral codes and norms (Mahmood 2005: 29). A question that must be taken seriously in relation to Laudya’s statement is how sins and the process of redemption from them impact her *lesbi* subjectivity. During our dialogue, she referred to her activities in the ‘night world’ (*dunia malam*) as constituting those sins: going to night clubs, smoking, drinking alcohol and dating multiple girls were, for her, indicators of sinful behaviour. In response to these actions, she looked for redemption by not only developing stricter religious practices, but also engaging in good deeds. This is because she understood the performance of good deeds as a channel through which connecting with God is also possible. Additionally, taking care of her mum was an action through which repentance to God was expressed.\textsuperscript{45} This is not the only means by which she attempted to redeem herself from sins. God’s redemption is also sought through the transformation of her subjective interiority (desire, will to act in certain ways, and reasoning). In relation to this, Laudya provided the example of

\textsuperscript{45} In Islam, the concept of repentance is known as *tawba*.  

97
how she often prays asking for forgiveness to God and employing actions such as prayers and fasting as channels to repress her same-sex desire.

The invocation of sins in Laudya’s case seems relevant to that of Ela’s shown above, whose family acceptance is built by not committing bad acts. While her family has always accepted her as a *waria*, their main point of concern is that she does not challenge what is expected from a ‘good citizen’ as illustrated by the words of her relatives when pointing to ‘not being a thief’ and ‘being responsible for the consequences of your actions.’ Being responsible for one’s own life and well-being emerges as an additional category of *tanggung jawab* that is intrapersonal instead of interpersonal and that can be positive to avoid further discrimination from society. Finally, Astrid’s example demonstrates the existence of individual and collective dimensions attached to the concept of *tanggung jawab* through the reference to the moment when her cousin came out. While she identifies herself as a *transgender* woman, throughout our conversation she tried to take distance from the ‘*LGBT* community’ arguing that she was a ‘real woman’ and did not act out of lust, which she considered her cousin to do.

In line with this, she equated social responsibility and responsibility to God with *tanggung jawab*. For her, people should not be judged by others regarding their accomplishment of responsibilities. Instead, everyone should engage in a process of self-control rejecting negative actions and embracing good deeds, which is reminiscent once again of the importance of *prestasi*. The religious dimension of the concept, which Astrid notes when pointing to one’s responsibility to God, has been discussed by local Indonesian scholars drawing on Qur’anic references. For example, Yuliawati (2017) has pointed to the *hadith* of Al-Nasa’i and Abu Dawood to note that the Prophet Muhammad argued that ‘everyone has a responsibility (*tanggung jawab*)’, parents and children alike.

* * *

As shown above, my interlocutors placed great significance on their families’ religiosity to explain the kind of Muslims they are today. The three main levels of religiosity described by my participants had a consequence on how they approached their gender and sexuality. This was illustrated, for example, through the case of Ela, who linked her family’s religious background to the absence of obstacles to present herself as a *waria*. A significant contribution of this section in
relation to the role of the family in shaping one’s behaviours thus pertains to my exploration of the Indonesian term *tanggung jawab*, which, I argue, has both national and religious connotations. As noted above, it represents the children’s responsibility towards their parents, but also illustrates the social pressure that queer Muslims face to present themselves both as good Muslims and good Indonesian citizens.

In summary, I have thus far shown the impact that family religiosity and the concept of responsibility (also linked to the family) have in the navigation of queer Muslim selves. The section that follows moves on to consider the influence of family pressure and teachings in the shaping of queer Muslim subjectivities.

### 3.2.2. Family pressure and teachings

To what degree do the religious backgrounds of parents shape those of queer Muslims? How does the family influence the navigation of one’s subjectivities through school choices and friendships? Existing scholarship has noted the role of mothers and fathers as a key source of religious socialisation. For example, in their research on Catholicism Greeley and Rossi (1966) noted that religious teachings in the domestic sphere had a stronger influence on adult religiosity than the education received in religious schools. Himmelfarb (1977, 1979) has also highlighted the role of parents as agents of religious socialisation in his research on American Jews. The relevance of his findings in relation to the experiences of my interlocutors relates to the role of parents in channelling their children into certain educational institutions. This is in line with the experiences of some queer Muslims in Indonesia, whose families encouraged them to attend religious groups, as I explore below. According to Himmelfarb, these groups may ‘reinforce (…) what was learned at home’ (1979: 478) and may simultaneously channel them into other religious activities. Despite the significance of such scholarship, I want to stress the risks of reinforcing the notion of being ‘socialised’ into, for example, gender, sexuality and religion since it could erase the ongoing flux that characterises everyday life. With this I am thinking about the

46 On the differences between mothers and fathers as agents of political and religious socialisation in the USA, see Acock and Bengtson 1978; on the relationship between student religious commitment and perceived parental religiosity in the USA, see Johnson 1973; on the role of Muslim parents for the religious socialisation of their children in rural Denmark, see Pedersen 2014; on the combined influence of family, church and peers for religious socialisation, see Cornwall 1988; on the role of the family for religious socialisation in African American families, see Gutierrez et al 2014; on Asian American families, see Park and Ecklund 2007; on the parental impact on the religiosity of offspring in US Protestant denominations, see Martin et al 2003.
navigation and negotiation of one’s beliefs, subjectivities and practices in relation to agents that not only shape the subject but also allow it to engage in fluid reconfigurations of the self.

While interrelations can be set between family, education, media and peers as agents impacting how individuals use their agency to make decisions and navigate their various subjectivities, previous literature has identified the family as the main significant social force considering that most of the decisions regarding religious issues during childhood are made by the parents. Parents often control whether their children attend a religious or non-religious school, consider whether they should join extracurricular religious activities, influence friendship choices, media consumed, the frequency of mosque attendance, and other religion-related issues. Religious knowledge in the domestic sphere is not only received from the parents, but also from ustad (religious leaders) that usually visit the family house to teach children how to read the Qur’an, educating them about fiqh and other religious sources. Most of my interlocutors noted that they grew up taking these lessons at home from 2 to 3 days per week. For some, a member of the family acted as the religious teacher. As Julie, a 26-year-old lesbi Muslim from East Java, said, ‘My uncle was the one who always insisted that I should learn Islam. To be a good girl, I had to memorise Al-Qur’an, pray 5 times a day and what else…? My uncle would tell me to stay at his place to teach me about Islam because I had to follow the right path.’

Family pressure does not only appear during childhood but is significant across one’s whole life. In the middle of several of the interviews I conducted, my interlocutors received phone calls from their parents to remind them that they should not forget to perform salat. Some of them stopped the interview to go to the closer mushola, while others told their parents that they were going to pray immediately, though did not do so. Some of my interlocutors explained that they experienced pressure to pray and fast from their family members:

When my mum comes to Yogyakarta, if it’s salat time, she always tells me, ‘You must perform salat, you can play with your phone later, do what you want, but now it’s salat time.’ If we are in the middle of the road, we must stop at the closest mosque to pray, she’s always like that. If we’re home, we must start praying, she’s like, ‘you can play until subuh, but first you must do salat.’ She’s very strict. She always says, ‘You have to pray for your dad, because your dad isn’t here anymore.’ It’s very important to perform salat, she’d always tell me not
to forget to fast too, also the *puasa sunnah* (optional fasting), she reminds me to do that. – Laudya, 29, lesbi woman, Sumatra

My mum always reminds me to pray, even until now… She’d text me on WhatsApp asking if I have prayed, if I haven’t done it, she’d tell me to do it. I always say that I’m about to start, that I’m on it. – Ario, 25, transgender man, Central Java

These stories demonstrate how family members apply different degrees of pressure to encourage their children to practise religious rituals. While the family can directly influence child and teenage religiosity, leaving the family home can also lead to variations illustrating a reduced influence of the family on adult religiosity. Furthermore, a considerable amount of literature has explored how different siblings may develop and negotiate subjectivities, beliefs and practices differently despite having the same or a similar family setting (Dunn 2007; Saroglou and Fiasse 2003). Complementing the role of the family, one needs to consider the ongoing negotiations one engages with and the ways in which different subjects engage, resist and resignify religious teachings leading to multiple processes of subjectivity formation.

Some of my interlocutors noted how the religious education received from their parents while growing up constituted a strong influence on how they thought of themselves as queer and Muslim. For example, when I asked Tony, a transgender man from East Java, whether he ever heard his family speaking about sexual minorities while he was growing up, he said:

Yes, of course, my entire family would speak about this topic. Everyone said that it’s forbidden (*haram*) in Islam, that you’ll be punished, you’ll get bad karma (*karma buruk*),

47 you’ll get *kualat* (‘bad karma’ – in Javanese), that you’ll get *azab.*

48 They’d say that your life would become difficult. They think that it’s like having a disease (*penyakit*). This led me to being in denial, you know. I kept thinking, ‘I’m not supposed to be like this, it’s not normal.’

47 Despite the usage of the term by the interviewee in relation to Islam, this is not an Islamic principle or concept.
48 Tony used the term *azab* to refer to what is known in Arabic as Adhāb al-Qabr or Azab al-Qabar. This has been translated into English as ‘the punishment of the grave’ (Fay 2016: 28), ‘the torment of the grave’ (Maher and Bissoondath 2019: 20) and ‘the punishment in the tomb’ (Sourdel 2007: 4).
Other queer Muslims recounted similar experiences:

My family always told us not to get close to them, because they’d infect us (*akan tertular*) with their nature (*sifatnya*). They’d say all the bad words about LGBT people from A to Z, so I started to think that I was sick. – Iko, 18, *transgender* man, North Sumatra

Sometimes we’d see a *waria* street singer (*pengamen*), and my father would be like, ‘iiih, God forbid (*amit*), look at that *bencong*, she’ll be sent to hell, that’s so disgusting!’ This made me feel like I was a sinner until I heard of alternative religious interpretations. I also remember when we saw a *butchi* (masculine women) and my mum was like, ‘you’ll be like this in the future because you’re fighting every day about the clothes you have to wear’. – Dina, 38, *lesbi* Muslim, Jakarta

Boellstorff (2005a 102) argues that *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians do not commonly come to their sexual subjectivities in the domestic sphere because of the lack of role models for same-sex sexual orientations. However, the excerpts above illustrate references to non-normative genders and sexualities within the family sphere that for some of my interlocutors constituted their first encounter with such subject positions even if they were rife with negativity. Additionally, during my fieldwork in 2017-2018, several of my interlocutors also pointed to the presence of queer relatives in the family as a source of self-identification while growing up. Queer Muslims in Indonesia mostly learn what they should *not* be through childhood teachings in which their own same-sex desire and attraction is shaped by the religious messages received from their family members. In contrast to Boellstorff’s work, in her work on the *tomboi* of Padang in West Sumatra, Blackwood argues that early childhood practices are crucial elements in the emergence of *tomboi* subjectivities considering that they are ‘the basis for their present sense of self as men who are attracted to women’ (2010: 68).

As Tony’s words illustrated above, discussions taking place within his family about queer people would bring up references to prohibitions in Islam through terms such as ‘*haram*’ (not
allowed in Islam), being ‘punished’, getting ‘bad karma’ and ‘kualat’. Iko’s narration above, echoing Tony’s words, also points to the construction of non-normative genders and sexualities as sickness resonating with conservative discourses that are now widespread through mass media in Indonesia framing being LGBT as a disease. Other interlocutors noted that their relatives would point to the danger of being LGBT not only for the gay or lesbi person, but for the entire family, since the queer child would bring a curse for all family members affecting them in the afterlife. This was a shared preoccupation among some of my interlocutors considering their common belief that the sins of a single member of the family are enough to bring calamities to the whole nuclear and extended family, leading to punishments in the afterlife through the concept of djannaham/jahannam. This concept has been translated as ‘hell’ and ‘hellfire’ to represent the punishments that evildoers will receive in the afterlife (McAuliffe 2001) in opposition to ‘paradise’, which is known as djannah or firdaws (Garde 2001).

Some of my interlocutors described how statements made by family members often created a feeling of fear among them that in some cases persisted during adulthood. For example, several gay and lesbi Muslims noted that they were still scared of waria today because of the messages they heard while growing up. Dina’s case above illustrates the linkages between emotions and religion. For her father, stumbling upon a waria constituted a cause of repulsion that was linked to his religious ideas noting that waria would be ‘sent to hell.’ For some of my interlocutors, religious teachings from family members often led to feelings of guilt when first noticing their own same-sex desire or gender non-normativity. Sandra, a lesbi Muslim from Central Java, explained that when she was caught by her mum with a girl, ‘I was told that it’s a sin (dosa), and that things like that would give me azab. My mum told me, “I would prefer if your father was cheating on me than you becoming a lesbian”.’

However, when I asked other participants whether their relatives ever spoke about queer people, some also noted that they never heard any negative messages against gay, waria or lesbi people. Instead, some mentioned that their parents explained to them the differences between heterosexual and homosexual people without expressing their opinion. For example, Agung, a gay Muslim from East Java born in 1994, said, ‘I remember that my sister once told my mum “I’ve seen two men walking down the bridge holding hands,” and then I asked, “Oh what’s wrong with that?,” and I remember my mum saying, “if two guys are with each other then they are homosexual” and that’s it.’ Dani, a transgender man from West Sumatra born in 1993, noted,
‘My parents have never been judgmental, they’ve never judged anyone. They’ve always been like that, but when it happened to their kid, you know. They never said that someone is sinning (berdosa), no, they’ve never done that, thank God.’

Most of the transgender men I interviewed also noted how growing up as a tomboi was often more easily accepted than being a feminine boy. They would note that being considered a girl acting in a masculine way was often accepted and even encouraged through being given boy’s toys, clothes and haircuts. This is because acting like a boy represents courage and bravery, which can be a source of pride for the family, especially for the fathers, while having a son who acts in a feminine way is perceived as a sign of weakness in parallel with patriarchal constructions of masculinity and femininity. This needs to be considered within the particular time of childhood and adolescence since adulthood often leads to variations on the perceptions of the parents, who expect their children to act in a normal way.

* * *

Taken together, family pressure and teachings impact the subjective realities that queer Muslims develop regarding their non-normative genders and sexualities. My aim through this section has been to illustrate how, for some of my participants, family pressure constituted a force towards the shaping of their religious piety, while also noting how statements made on gender and sexuality represented a first point of contact with non-normative ways of being. Complementing the previous section, I have argued that family members often put pressure on their children to engage in religious rituals from childhood until adulthood. This pressure is linked to the expectations that Muslim families have for their children regarding their engagement in daily prayers or fasting. For my participants, the knowledge acquired from parents combined with the expected religious behaviour impacted their subjectivities, beliefs and practices often in unexpected ways. I move now to an exploration of marriage, which was central for some queer Muslims I met.

3.2.3. Marriage

Boellstorff explains that in Islam, ‘the central concept organizing sexuality is that of marriage between men and women’ (2005a 199). This might be the case of dominant Islamic discourses,
but we should also acknowledge the existence of alternative approaches. Noting the dominant positions existing within other religious traditions can help avoid falling into representations of Islam in particular as opposed to sexual freedom. In fact, the Roman Catholic Church has stated that ‘the use of the sexual function has its true meaning and moral rectitude only in true marriage’ (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1975). The same applies to Modern Orthodox Jewish discourses teaching that ‘sex before marriage is forbidden, but sex within the context of marriage is permissible’ (Guterman 2006). Besides religion, getting married in Indonesia means becoming ‘a successful citizen’ in accordance to the family principle that I described earlier (Boellstorff 2005: 202).

When asked why he married a woman, Fajar, a 43-year-old gay Muslim, explained, ‘I got married because my family wanted me to. They didn’t force me, but they were pushing me.’ Cindy, a 50-year-old lesbi Muslim, got married and had a child to respond to her family’s demands. Both divorced their partners within one year of their weddings. As Cindy mentioned, ‘When I told my mother I was divorcing my husband, she said nothing because I already had a baby.’ This denotes that family pressure abates after getting married or having a child, even when the family knows that their children maintain a homosexual lover. Getting married responds to the constructed idea of the ‘good Muslim’ who is married and has offspring, but also with a self-assumed consistency between a queer Muslim subjectivity and a married status (Boellstorff 1999). This illustrates both an intrapersonal and a social milieu, the former represented by the multidimensional character of queer Muslim subjectivities and the latter in relation to the asas kekeluargaan based on the construction of the family as the central unit of the nation in the Indonesian state ideology. This construction is reconfigured by queer Muslims through new versions of the family inspired by heteronormative frameworks. For example, Cindy refers to her butchi girlfriend who works outside the home as her ‘husband’ while she has taken the role of the ‘housewife’. In this case, family ideals and patriarchal schemes are intertwined determining distinct ways of behaving for the wife and the husband, the former taking the role of serving the latter. There is certainly an appropriation of heteronormative ideals here, which remind of what Duggan calls ‘homonormativity.’ But does this Indonesian local ‘normativity’ reflect the ‘normativity’ that we found in other contexts? This is an issue that Shin (2020) has raised exploring lesbian couples in South Korea to highlight the significance of
understanding local contexts to interrogate what the category of ‘normativity’ might mean in different places in relation to local cultural and economic meanings of the family.

In contrast to arranged marriages, same-sex clandestine weddings are often held in domestic spaces following Islamic rituals to legitimise queer unions. Same-sex couples do not have the right to get married in Indonesia, even though the constitution stipulates that every citizen has the right to have a family and children via legal marriage (Wieringa 2013: 97). Arief, a gay Muslim, participated in two lesbi marriages playing the role of the kyai. As he explained:

The couple was made of a feminine and a masculine lesbi. In Indonesian Islam, the kyai just holds the hand of the male and says, ‘I marry you to this girl’, so I held the hand of the masculine lesbi who wore men’s clothes. After that, we three signed a paper.

Although these unions are only symbolic, they are seen by the couples involved as a means to legitimise their relationship. Heteronormative rituals are recreated by performing normative gender roles even when the two members are of the same sex. The absence of legal recognition suggests that the influence of religious powers is so deeply instilled in these individuals that they see themselves following heterosexual weddings’ procedures to validate their relationships. However, religion should not be taken as the only explanation. Instead, one needs to consider the significance of patriarchy and other frames of reference that interact to produce the enactment of heterosexual modes of relationship validation as it also occurs in ‘secular’ and Christian-majority contexts. In the case of Indonesia, the institution of marriage also has a strong input from the state through the asas kekeluargaan.

For some of my participants, the space of the home only allows marriage to be partially disrupted, since lesbi and gay couples take on the role of the husband and the wife by wearing gendered clothes and performing rituals following heteronormative traditional patterns.49 While the domestic space does not escape the norms regulating marriage, same-sex wedding ceremonies produce queer religious settings in which heteronormativity and queerness converge. These wedding rituals bring a sense of ‘empowerment’ to the queer couple that shifts normative

---

49 I am focusing here on the case of those queer Muslims who had moved out of their parents’ house and had a home of their own.
understandings of agency. With this, I suggest the existence of modalities of agency arising from within the consolidation of norms, thus challenging the conflation of agency with resistance/transgression. Queer theory’s focus on the ‘transgression of norms as the sine qua non of queer agency’ (Schippert 2011: 79) is defied by queer Muslim agential models emerging in their detachment from the emancipatory objectives of progressive politics (Mahmood 2005).

This does not mean that agency cannot also emerge through resistance to modes of domination. However, I want to take distance from the conceptualisation of ‘freedom’ as rejection of or resistance to religious norms as a rational practice to be expected from women and queers. It is that normative presumption (the more one resists, the freer one is) that Mahmood locates at the core of progressive liberal politics (Bautista 2008). Rethinking agency in this way requires moving beyond ‘Western’ hostilities against religious norms, practices and traditions. The example of queer Muslim weddings challenges the logics of transgression of norms as a prerequisite for the emergence of queer agency. What does queer Muslims’ willingness to participate in religious practices - which from a liberal notion of freedom, ‘subjugates’ them - tell us about their agentic power? Drawing upon the reflections of Bautista on Muslim women (2008: 77), I argue that the presumption that queer Muslims should desire to oppose Islamic norms and practices is consequential of how questions of obedience and liberation are commonly connected to liberal conceptions of queer agency. Therefore, the various types of marriage in which queer Muslims engage in Indonesia should be approached through the lens of alternative epistemologies of what being an agentic queer Muslim means. It is in this manner that the submission and religious devotion of these actors can be approached as a source of self-fulfilment rather than absence of agentic power by framing agency as a capacity for action.

* * *

Section 3.2 aimed to illustrate the impact of the family in shaping one’s subjectivities in relation to my interlocutors’ ongoing negotiations. My exploration has revealed the linkages between religious and national ideals. This has been illustrated by the role of the ‘family principle’ in the building of the post-colonial Indonesian nation describing Indonesia as composed not simply of inhabitants but of families. While the ways in which my participants live their lives have been impacted by the teachings received from their families while growing up, they still use their
agency to adapt their beliefs to their own preferences. The significance of the concept of *tanggung jawab*, and its connection to Islamic ethics, is a relevant finding in this context to illustrate the responsibilities that queer Muslims are placed upon. The importance given to performing religious rituals by family members has also been evident in section 3.2.2.

Despite the diversity of experiences, my interlocutors were connected by the central role that their families had in their lives describing how they had come to their subjectivities as queer through statements made by their parents. While some statements were negative, other participants described positive expressions. In the second half of the section, I explored the significance of marriage illustrating how both national and religious ideals can lead to the construction of a ‘good Indonesian Muslim’ who must be married and have children. Adhering to this, some of my participants did so to later return to their same-sex lovers. For other queer Muslims, the importance of marriage was equally evident as illustrated by the celebration of same-sex weddings reproducing heteronormative standards. Moving from my exploration of the family, in the following section I put the focus on education.

### 3.3. Education

This section explores the impact of education in the navigation and negotiation of my participants’ genders, sexualities and religious experiences. This is closely related to the role of the family considering that it is often parents who choose the educational institution that their children attend. Sherkat (2003: 151) has noted that ‘education (…) may influence religious preferences, and religious orientations also direct educational attainment and occupational choice.’ Religious education often comes from a variety of sources. While I have noted before that family members constitute a source of informal knowledge on religious norms, attendance of religious institutions such as *pesantren*, and *madrasah* (Islamic schools) also have the potential to shape the perspectives of queer Muslims. Despite this influence, we should consider their capacity to negotiate their multiple selves and utilise their agency to adapt and prioritise the teachings received in flexible ways.

For most of my interlocutors, religious education started early in life. It is common for Muslim children in Indonesia to attend extracurricular religious activities such as Taman
Pendidikan Al Qur’an (hereafter, TPA). The decision to attend these lessons is taken by the parents or close family members in the absence of the parents. As I was told, this is done not only for the children to improve their knowledge of Islam and Al-Qur’an, but also to express the family’s piety publicly to build their reputation as ‘good Muslims’ in the eyes of their neighbours, since there is usually a TPA group for every kampung or mosque. Most of my interlocutors recalled attending TPA every day after attending their public or religious school from the age of six until around 12 years old. Every year, the TPA leaders organise what is known as pesantren kilat, an intensive programme to study Islam during the month of Ramadan through which all children, independently of their gender, stay for a short number of days at the local mosque. Throughout this period, in addition to the religious lessons, it is mandatory to follow the five daily prayers plus the salat tarawih at night.

Some of my participants noted that they felt directed by their parents to join TPA, but this was not always perceived as a negative pressure. Most of them noted that they enjoyed the lessons for a variety of reasons. Ardi, a 36-year-old gay man from Bogor, said, ‘I felt pressured by my parents to go there, but I enjoyed it because the teacher was really nice and she told us stories about the Prophet, stories with morals, it calmed me, and it gave me a sense of direction because when I was in High School I had a lot of problems and insecurities, so I found comfort in religion.’ Laudya, a 29-year-old lesbi woman from Sumatra, noted that, ‘I enjoyed it because I had friends from school, we were all mixed, boys and girls. We’d play together, run, climb the trees, and then after that the teacher would arrive and we’d study ngaji (Qur’anic recitation), surat pendek (short surat), and surat panjang (long surat). I enjoyed it because I was with my friends, and we had the challenge to memorise the surat, so we could get a reward in exchange. We’d get candies, sweets, things like that.’

Most of the statements above illustrate experiences of joy that lack further reflection on the materials being taught. In contrast to this, other queer Muslims expressed a critical perspective on these processes. Dimas, a 27-year-old self-defined transboy from East Java, stated, ‘At first, I liked it, I enjoyed it for a long time while I was growing up. I learnt a lot of things that we were taught, but I didn’t like it when the teachers started saying things like men should become the head of the household, and women shouldn’t develop their career above

---

50 The English translation would be ‘Al Qur’an Education Garden’, known in Indonesian as both TPA and TPQ.
51 The salat tarawih is an optional prayer performed at night during the month of Ramadan.
men.’ While these activities are often perceived as forces to teach children to obey the authority of the religious teachers instead of acting through their critical thinking, some of my interlocutors expressed ideas similar to Dimas’s, challenging what they were taught.

Spaces like TPA constitute a source of knowledge on Islam, but also on gender and sexuality. From a young age, some of my interlocutors were taught about the condemnation in Islam of homosexuality and transgenderism:

I heard the story of Lut for the first time at TPA. We had to sit down, and the teachers read stories about the prophets, like the Prophet Adam and all that. A teacher told us that same-sex relations were cursed (dilaknat), that there was a punishment. All these negative religious views about homosexuality put more pressure on me. I started to wonder if I was wrong, if I was a sinner, and I prayed more to get closer to God. – Lucinta, 20, lesbi, Central Java

Every Friday we had this teacher at TPA who would tell a story about a different prophet, and one day I had to memorise the story of the Prophet Lut. I thought it was right, that gay people were cursed. If you are a little kid and your teacher is indoctrinating you like that, you’re like ‘wow, we cannot argue against it.’ Later, when I was with a girl for the first time, we both felt very confused about our feelings, ‘what’s wrong with us?’ You know, I had been told that in our religion that was sinful, that it wasn’t right. – Satu, 36, non-binary, East Java.

For Lucinta and Satu, these teachings emerged as sources of distress in relation to their sexual orientation and gender identity. My interlocutors noted that conservative teachings are not unique to TPA. Some also recalled listening to homophobic messages during their lessons at both public and religious schools. For example, Ardi, the gay man I introduced before, noted that:

When I was in Junior High School, one of my teachers said that the punishment for being gay was being thrown from the tallest building of the city. That freaked me out. I started thinking, ‘if I’m gay then I’m going to be thrown from ... which
building is the tallest in this town?’ I was very afraid. I thought it was wrong, like I wasn’t supposed to be like this.

Agung, the gay Muslim I introduced before, stated that:

We never had a lesson on sexual education at my school, that’s a taboo topic, but my religion teachers would tell us that being gay is a sin, which is a very typical thing to say in a religious setting here. Of course, I didn’t feel comfortable about being attracted to my same sex, I thought it wasn’t right. They would say that those acting like the people of Lut would be cursed and destroyed because that happened before to those who were gays and lesbians.

Some of my interlocutors also noted that their religion teachers had pointed to the existence of solutions to stop being gay, lesbi or trans following Islamic rituals. Tono, a 26-year-old gay man from West Java, explained:

Some teachers at my school said that banci or bencong could be healed with a ruqyah, calling God’s name, through mengaji, reading Qur’an... They said that banci and bencong were possessed by the devil, so they had to be cured through a ruqyah. I remember hearing that, but I didn’t ask God to change me. I only asked God to show me if this was right or not.

The public and private education system is not only a channel through which the family principle or ‘asas kekeluargaan’ is inculcated as scholars like Boellstorff (2005a: 196) have noted, but also where gender and sexual normativity is presented as the right model to follow. Because of this, some queer Muslims express feelings of guilt and stress due to the absence of alternative interpretations inclusive of their sexual orientation and gender identity. This is a common but not inflexible milieu since access to queer-inclusive interpretations through peers and alternative media and education in later stages of life, as I will explore in Chapter 4, tends to reduce those feelings. School and extracurricular lessons on religion contribute to the production of heteronormative notions of the family, gender and sexuality that are linked to models of national
belonging. Some of my interlocutors noted that these discussions not only took place within the religion course, but also within courses like Social Sciences (Ilmu Pengetahuan Sosial or IPS). For example, Ayu, a lesbi woman who was born in 1996, recalled:

I remember reading in a schoolbook that homosexuality was categorised as a deviation (penyimpangan). That was at IPS, I think it was at Junior High School or Senior High School, I don’t remember which one, but I remember that it was written. It said that it was against Eastern culture (budaya ketimuran), that it was a sin, and that it was against nature (melawan kodrat). They used the words homosexual and waria.

Ayu’s words demonstrate the existence of state-sanctioned homophobic discourses, which are part of the national school curriculum, built through the East/West binary and drawing upon a mixture of religious and pseudoscientific explanations. It is through this curriculum that some queer Muslims first encountered terms like gay and lesbian. For example, Lucy, a lesbi woman in her twenties, said that, ‘I first heard about the word lesbian maybe in the 3rd or 4th grade of Elementary School, when I was around 7 or 8 years old; it was from the religious teacher, when she spoke about how women who love women are sinners.’ These encounters were often based on negative interpretations leading to the feelings of guilt mentioned above. Age is a factor here since older participants did not describe similar issues, which demonstrates that this is a more recent discussion. It must be noted that these teachings are not always present in the classroom. A minority of my interlocutors also mentioned that they had never witnessed conversations on homosexuality or transgenderism, while some who were taught about the story of the Prophet Lut recalled that their religion teachers never referred to same-sex sexual acts but instead explained the story as being about the loss of faith and the dangers of engaging in ‘un-Islamic’ acts.

What the various narratives I have presented across this section point to is the significance of education for the building of queer Muslim subjectivities. Some of my interlocutors only came to think of themselves (initially negatively) as gay or lesbi after listening to stories condemning same-sex relationships and sexual acts. Education as an agent impacting the negotiation of religious, gender and sexual subjectivities in Indonesia must be considered in relation to specific
historical and social moments. With this, I am pointing to the differences between the narratives I have presented throughout this section, most of them taking place in the last 20 years, and the absence of references to these issues from the older queer Muslims I interacted with. The increasing conservatisation of the Indonesian society that I discussed in Chapter 2 finds a channel of expression in educational institutions through which teachers can influence the behaviours and attitudes of their students.

3.4. Conclusions

With respect to the research questions set in Chapter 1, this chapter set out to provide a reflective account on the impact of the family and education in the shaping and negotiation of queer Muslim subjectivities. As I have noted, many scholars have attempted to explore the impact of agents like the family and education to validate gender, sexual and religious appropriate behaviours in children and relatives. For example, Cornwall (1988) has wondered how it is that people come to have faith, feel and act religiously suggesting the importance of family and education. While these studies have important implications for my explorations in this chapter, most of them have tended to leave queer subjects out of the discussion to focus instead on normative genders and sexualities. For my participants, the family was the main influence affecting their negotiation of subjectivities considering the common proximity between family members in the Indonesian context.

As I have noted, the relevance of the family has been stressed both within Islam and as a notion of Indonesian unity through the family principle or asas kekeluargaan. This is not unique to the case of Indonesia. Indeed, the trope of the family has been vital to many modern governmentalities (Boellstorff 2005a: 195). However, it is in the interlocking of religion and nationalism that the family emerges as a central force shaping the subjectivities of my interlocutors. While previous research has explored the centrality of the family for the Indonesian nation (Brenner 1998; Blackburn and Bessell 1997; Suryakusuma 1996), it is important to reflect on the parallels between the significance of the family for the Indonesian national project through the principle of asas kekeluargaan and the role that the family is given in Islam as the core foundation of society and culture. The family can be both a source of support and conflict, its relevance expressed also through the recent development of programmes that I witnessed during my fieldwork aiming to build dialogues between queer Muslims and their
families in Java where Islam, gender and sexuality were discussed with religious leaders acting as mediators.

The emergence of concepts like ‘gender harmony’ and the ‘happy (Muslim) family’ (*keluarga sakinah*) continues to challenge gender and sexual rights as an extension of Suharto’s *asas kekeluargaan* (Wieringa 2015: 27). These principles shape the ways in which parents educate their children on the importance of marriage and the practice of religious principles as a source of familial and national stability. This context is reminiscent of discussions on national heterosexuality as the mechanism by which a ‘core national culture can be imagined as a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behavior, a space of pure citizenship’ (Berlant and Warner 1998: 549). The pressure that families exercise on their children to be not only the perfect child, but also the perfect Muslim takes directions that go beyond family expectations.

This is illustrated by the celebration of arranged ‘heterosexual’ weddings with partners with whom some of my interlocutors ended up having children, only to divorce later. As Boellstorff notes (2005a 202), getting married is in Indonesia a ‘precondition to being a successful citizen.’ In relation to this statement, I argue, marriage is also perceived as a requirement to be acknowledged as a ‘good Muslim’ by society more generally considering that weddings are social events that large amounts of people attend. For some of my interlocutors, religious ideals and the family principle acted as sources of pressure that influenced the celebration of same-sex wedding ceremonies to marry unofficially with their partners following heteronormative Islamic procedures. There was often no dream of a marriage certificate recognised by the state (or even by society in general). It was enough with having their partnership legitimised in front of their friends. It is important to reflect on the implications of inhabiting a patriarchal and heteronormative system that also influences the enactment of heterosexual relationship modalities beyond the Indonesian context as discussions on the adoption of gay marriage laws illustrate (Ferguson 2009; Warner 1999).

Following an exploration of the role of the family in the queer Muslims’ upbringing, this chapter has noted the role of education, which was identified by most of my interlocutors as a source of negative messages regarding non-normative genders and sexualities. While the main focus of the religious lessons they received, both in public and private educational institutions, was often on the dangers of the practice of anal sex through homophobic interpretations of the
story of the Prophet Lut, some of my participants also recalled having been taught about transgenderism as a sinful ‘condition’ that defies Allah’s will and can be healed. The interrelation between all these different forces is demonstrated by the involvement of the Indonesian government in the design of the educational materials taught in public schools categorising homosexuality as a deviation (penyimpangan) and sin (dosa) that is against Islam and Indonesian culture, as one of my interlocutors expressed. National principles of gender and sexual normativity are officially sanctioned through the school curriculum. Growing up within a system that offers little space for critical thinking and encourages passive memorisation often means that these lessons are accepted without being challenged by students.

The findings from this chapter make several contributions to the current literature. Firstly, they offer an alternative account to the narrative stating that queer subject positions are not passed down through the family in Indonesia ‘unlike ethnicity, religion, or gender’ (Boellstorff 2005a: 67). As I have noted, some of my interlocutors first came to know that queer subject positions existed, and often consequently to their own queer subjectivities, through statements made by their family members. Second, my findings shed new light on the role of the family and education in shaping the lived experience of gender, religion and sexuality by focusing on non-normative genders and sexualities through the voices of my participants. Finally, my discussions through this chapter have also opened new directions for the study of agentic powers emerging through the performance of religious rituals, which I will explore more in-depth in Chapter 5.

In sum, I want to state that family and education have a critical role for the modelling of religious behaviours while also shaping how queer Muslims come to terms with their gender and sexuality. This is not, I argue, a rigid milieu since my interlocutors also described how they permanently renegotiated what they had learnt throughout their lives. In Chapter 4, I complete my exploration of the emergence of queer Muslim subjectivities by focusing on the role of media, peers and social actors external to the family and education.
Chapter 4: Navigating Gender, Sexuality and Religion: Media and Social Encounters

4.1. Introduction
Following my analysis on family and education, this chapter casts the net wider to examine the role of media and social actors external to the family and education in the negotiation and navigation of one’s relationship to religion, gender and sexuality. Firstly, I engage with and expand scholarly discussions on the role of magazines and newspapers for queer people in Indonesia to come to their own subjectivities by attending to the increasing significance of the Internet and social media. I do so by exploring the production of virtual worlds in the first half of section 4.2. to continue with the increasing intersections between religion, gender and sexuality on digital platforms. In section 4.3. I move to the role of peers for the emergence of ‘aha’ moments (Boellstorff 2005a: 69), of finding similarities with rather than differences from others. I frame this through the notion of ‘becoming queer’ or ‘jadi queer,’ following an emic approach, to illustrate the significance of other social actors in the formation of one’s own subjectivities. This chapter is built on an analysis of interviews, participant observation and media data by paying attention to recent newspaper portrayals of an ‘LGBT emergency’ (‘darurat LGBT’) as well as the queer Muslim website ‘Gay Islam Indonesia.’

4.2. Media
In A Coincidence of Desires, Boellstorff (2007) presents nine queerly comparative theses to explore some broad patterns he identifies across non-normative genders and sexualities in Southeast Asia. His sixth thesis points to the ‘pivotal but contingent role’ of print media, television and movies ‘to the formation of gay and lesbian subject positions (and to a lesser degree, tomboi and femme subject positions)’ (213). This is also discussed in The Gay Archipelago, where Boellstorff notes that ‘most gay and lesbi Indonesians come to their sexualities through mass media’ (2005a: 31). For Blackwood (2008: 488), Indonesian newspapers, magazines and films have typically carried queer knowledge in negative terms,
while still ‘offering the possibility of imagining difference’ rather than, as Boellstorff argues, similitude.

Muslim subject positions were not common in, for example, Indonesian sinetron (soap operas) until the early 2000s (Rakhmani 2014), with family and education being the main sources of contact with Islam during childhood and teenage years for my older participants. However, sinetron have been ‘Islamicised’ and are today mainly composed of pious Muslim characters, which differs from a past when the characters were not portrayed praying, women would not wear the jilbab and men would not use the peci. From portraying Islam ‘for tokenistic purposes’ in the 1980s and 1990s, from the early 2000s there have been an increase ‘in the commodification of Islamic images’ (ibid: 341).

In this section I am interested in exploring two dimensions that mass media allows to emerge. Firstly, how it acts as a source for queer Muslims to come to perceive themselves as, among others, transgender, gay or lesbi, while, secondly, constituting a space that allows the emergence of virtual queer communities. This will, therefore, reveal the role of mass media in mainstreaming representations of queer people, while also providing models of identification for my interlocutors. Secondly, I want to expand Boellstorff’s exploration of the critical role of mass media in the lives of gay and lesbi Indonesians to inquire how it can contribute to the formation of alternative Muslim (in addition to queer) subjectivities by providing access to queer-inclusive interpretations of religious sources.

4.2.1. Embracing subjectivities through media representations

Media has not only played and continues to play a key role in the emergence of gay, lesbi and waria subject positions in Indonesia, but also in the formation of Muslim subject positions. While Boellstorff’s fieldwork took place from the early 1990s until 2004 when the Internet was not as widespread in Indonesia as it is today, he nevertheless points to its incipient importance at the time of writing The Gay Archipelago (2005a). The significance of Internet usage today is demonstrated by data noting that around 64.8 percent of the Indonesian population (171 million out of the 264 million Indonesians) had an Internet connection in 2018, which represented an increase of 10 percent from 2017 (‘Indonesia has 171,’ 2019). Most queer Muslims I interacted with during my fieldwork described the Internet and social media (mainly mIRC, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram) as their main source of knowledge about gender and sexuality as well as a
space to move from solitude to queer sociality. While Murtagh (2013) has noted the potential significance of Indonesian films including homosexual characters in the formation of gay subject positions, I never heard gay, lesbi, transgender or waria Indonesians refer to films like Arisan!, Gadis Metropolis or Akulah Vivian, which Murtagh explores in his work, as the channel through which they came to their subjectivities. Interestingly, most queer Muslims who were in their twenties and early thirties were more familiar with international films like Call Me by Your Name or Love Simon than with local films. I also witnessed the screening of queer-related films at LGBTIQ-rights NGO offices, none of which were Indonesian. These examples illustrate how globalisation is shaping gender and sexuality in Indonesia mainly through mass media broadcasting role models from America, while increasing content from India and the Middle East are being imported too (Davies 2011: XIV).

Throughout my research it emerged that media was perceived by queer Muslims as a source of informal learning about gender and sexuality that cannot often be acquired through channels like the family or school. Around the 1980s print media emerged as the main source of information on non-normative genders and sexualities for queer Indonesians (Blackwood 2007: 296; Webster 2005; Howard 1996). In fact, Boellstorff’s interlocutors described that the categories gay and lesbi first entered mass media through the coverage of a lesbi wedding by the magazines Tempo and Liberty in 1981 (2005a: 62). The former importance of magazines is in line with Blackwood’s fieldwork with lesbi women in West Sumatra in 2001 and 2004, who described how they found out about lesbi subject positions through magazines like Kartini and Sarinah (2007: 297). These media representations have been important for queer subjects as a source of information, but they have mostly given a negative image of gay, lesbi or waria subjects. In fact, they often encouraged readers to behave in a ‘normal’ way (meaning with this ‘heterosexually’) by turning to religion and portraying homosexuality as a mental illness (ibid). While this media is intended for a normative audience, once my participants came to their non-normative subjectivities, they often started to access alternatives such as films aimed at queer audiences.

Negative media representations have increased after the 2016 LGBT crackdown, which has contributed to the continuous stigmatisation of queer people. In the following three examples
from the newspapers Radar Depok, Suara Karya and Media Umat, sensational headlines are used to portray LGBT people as a threat to the social order. The November 18 edition of Radar Depok (Figure 7), under the headline ‘5,791 Men in Depok are Gay’ (‘5,791 Pria Depok Gay’) begins as follows:

The gay community is flourishing in Depok. The massive campaign of sexual orientation ideology is one of the causes. The infiltration of gay elements into popular culture such as films, advertisements, and music is increasingly unstoppable. It is natural that urban communities like Depok are being easily affected.

---

52 Radar Depok is a printed daily newspaper published by the Jawa Pos media group in the city of Depok (1.87 million inhabitants) in West Java.

53 Suara Karya was a printed daily newspaper published by Golkar, Suharto’s party ruling Indonesia from 1971 to 1999. It ceased publication around three months after the cover I present here was published, in May 2016, but remains active online.

54 Media Umat is a daily Islamist newspaper published by HTI (Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, Freedom Party of Indonesia).
The following two newspaper covers also illustrate the ways in which the LGBT acronym has been used in recent times. In the first one, from the now extinct newspaper *Suara Karya* (Figure 8), the headline states ‘Indonesia’s LGBT Emergency’ (‘*Indonesia Darurat LGBT*’). The article starts as follows:

Indonesia has seen the emergence of a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) phenomenon. Moreover, this phenomenon has international support, such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the US government. A number of people called on President Joko Widodo to intervene in handling this issue to save the present and future generations from the practice of sexual disorders. Government involvement is seen as relevant and urgent because the LGBT phenomenon is forbidden by religion and violates laws and regulations.

![Figure 8: “Indonesia’s LGBT Emergency”, Suara Karya newspaper cover for February 13, 2016 issue](image)

In the second one, from the Islamist tabloid *Media Umat* (Figure 9), the headline states ‘Watch out! LGBT Has Become a Dangerous Movement’ (‘*Awas! LGBT Jadi Gerakan Membahayakan*’). The term LGBT appears in the colours of the rainbow flag and the headline is written over a design of flames that represent hell and the burning of a group of people shown above the fire.
These three examples, which are just a few of many, suggest that a shift is taking place in relation to how media in Indonesia portrays non-normative genders and sexualities. While in the past occasional reports about lesbi weddings (Blackwood 2007: 297; Boellstorff 2005a: 62) or individual stories exploring the lives and problems of gay and lesbi Indonesians were represented in mass media, today the focus is largely on the ‘LGBT community’ as a whole, which is presented as a ‘phenomenon’, ‘emergency’ and ‘dangerous movement’ to the readers. Media, and specifically conservative outlets, have increasingly included LGBT content since late 2015 and the beginning of 2016. These media discussions have taken place in relation to the shifting political, religious and social landscape after Suharto’s fall. This new context has led to the emergence of national discourses presenting non-heterosexual desire as a threat to the stability of the Indonesian nation, facilitating the emergence of proposals to revise criminal laws aimed at ‘repressing immorality’ (Blackwood 2007: 303).
The term LGBT was first introduced in Indonesian national and local media as a foreign category in early 2016, despite its widespread usage among local activists long before that.\textsuperscript{55} It was that year that it became a national object of discussion for the first time; before that, people were aware of terms like gay, lesbian, waria or homoseks, but only a small portion of ordinary Indonesians were familiar with the acronym. Even in 2018, some people I interacted with (both queer and non-queer) would use LGBT without knowing what the acronym stood for, believing that it was another way of saying homo. Newspaper representations have played a significant role in promoting ideas about LGBT individuals as dangerous subjects, often describing them as carriers of a disease that can easily spread, dangerous criminals and active perpetrators of national campaigns through the term ‘gerakan’ or ‘movement’. When discussing these media representations with queer Muslims in Indonesia, I was surprised to hear that most of them were not affected by them personally, but they were mostly worried by the effect that those depictions could have on their families. For others, discussions about LGBT people were perceived as a positive source of visibility even when they displayed negative representations. Among my interlocutors, only three out of the 60 interviewees referred to the importance of print media as a point of contact with these terms. Tito, a transgender man who was born in 1964, explained that:

In the 1970s it was normal to find short stories about gays and lesbians in Majalah Stop (Stop Magazine). They would never speak about female to male trans, just gay, lesbi and wadam\textsuperscript{56}, but without using the terms explicitly. The characters were two boys together, or two girls having a relationship. I was 14 years old [in 1978], and it was then when I discovered my condition. At that time, I also looked for references. That was very difficult at that time, of course. In Indonesia, scientific books were very rare. I mean, speaking about these issues ... but even in psychology and psychiatry it was very rare to speak about those things. I found a biography from a transsexual man who married a transsexual woman. They were English. I read that in a magazine called Matra, it was in Bahasa Indonesia. My classmate gave it to me during the second year of university when I was around 20.

\textsuperscript{55} I was told by a local activist that it was around 2010 when they started defining their activities as ‘LGBT’.

\textsuperscript{56} A compound of the words ‘wanita’ (woman) and ‘Adam’.
While Boellstorff notes (2005a: 61) that, to his knowledge, the first time *gay* subjectivity appeared in mainstream media was in July 1980 through a story published in the magazine *Anda* under the title ‘I Found My Identity as a *Homosexual* Person’, Tito’s narration reveals the presence of stories featuring *gay, lesbi* and *wadam* characters prior to that, despite not using these terms explicitly. Besides Tito’s story, two *gay* Muslims referred to magazines as sources of knowledge on these concepts. One of them, Yanto, born in 1992, recalled finding the term *gay* while reading the Indonesian version of the magazine *Cosmopolitan* around 2001-2002. While prior to the 2000s it was usual to use the term ‘*homoseks*,’ as the new millennium started it became commonplace to see the term ‘*gay*’ in media. Budi, born in 1987, also mentioned that it was in an entertainment magazine that he first came across the term ‘*gay*’ when he was around 15 years old, around the year 2003. As he told me, ‘I found it in this entertainment magazine, I don’t remember which one it was, but there was an article about *gay* people. I didn’t care about it, but I felt relieved; until then I didn’t think I was normal, but then I realised that there was someone like me out there, and that they would call themselves *gays* or *homosexuals*.’

Boellstorff considers the reception of messages from mass media as a critical force for Indonesians to start thinking of themselves as *gay* and *lesbi* (2005a: 69). In relation to this, he notes that he never heard *waria* refer to mass media as the source through which they first recognise themselves as *waria*. Instead, they would learn about this subject position from their social environments (ibid). Through my *waria* interlocutors, I confirmed the importance of their peers in relation to the learning process that Boellstorff mentions, but some of them also pointed to media celebrities as a source of knowledge and self-identification. Ria, a *waria* from Yogyakarta born in 1962, recalled a story of discovery of the *waria* subjectivity that was linked to television and family. As she noted, ‘we used to watch this show on TV with Tessy from Srimulat, I didn’t know what she was, but my family thought that she was a *waria*, so I started thinking about myself like that.’ Ria is referring to Kabul Basuki, an Indonesian male comedian and actor who took his stage name from his oldest daughter but never identified as a *waria*. This illustrates the complexities of subject positions that may be perceived in ways that do not match realities by certain audiences. In this case, Kabul Basuki was playing the role of Tessy by performing feminine gestures, using make-up and jewellery and pretending to speak like a Surabayan woman. As Ria continues, ‘when I came to Yogya, I joined the *pengamen* community
and they gave me a new identity as a *waria*.’ While she started thinking of herself as a potential *waria* after watching Tessy on TV, she came to her subjectivity as a *waria* through the social circle she became part of, pointing to the importance of the peer group.

For Astrid, a *transgender* woman from Jakarta, the *transsexual* singer, actress and TV presenter Dorce Gamalama was the first point of contact with the *transsexual* subject position. Also known just as Dorce, she is one of the most famous Indonesian presenters because of her work hosting the *Dorce Show* on TransTV from 2005 to 2009. The significance of Dorce for some of my interlocutors was based on the fact that she underwent sex confirmation surgery, which took place in 1985, and had her gender and name change officially recognised in 1988 (Murtagh 2017: 182). As Astrid told me, ‘I think Dorce was already on TV around the 1990s. When I saw her, I was confused, I was like, “who am I?”, I didn’t know if I was like her.’ For Dorce, a referent for Astrid and other *transgender* women I met, Islam played an important role in the building of her subjectivity. As Priyatna explains, religion occupies a central position in Dorce’s autobiography where she presents Islam ‘not only as a religion but more importantly as a way of life’ (2015: 217).

### 4.2.2. Virtual queer worlds

Among my queer interlocutors, print media was not as significant as it was for Boellstorff’s participants, because of their generational difference and the emergence and dominance of the Internet. What most of my younger participants discussed was the Internet as a space where one could ‘find oneself’ but also find others with whom to identify as *gay*, *lesbi* or *trans*. This was an issue mostly raised by *gay*, *lesbi* and *transgender* men, while *waria* would refer instead to television, as noted above, and social encounters taking place in public spaces. However, the use of new technologies through apps has become an important issue for those *waria* who engage in sex work, moving from the physical space of the streets to the digital dimension of the Internet. In fact, when in 2018 I visited the traditional prostitution spaces in Yogyakarta with *waria* activists I was told that, in addition to the increasing conservatism of Indonesian society making sex workers afraid to work on the street, new technologies have affected the geographies of sex work and nowadays most of them look for clients from their phones. While this is not an issue I aim to analyse in greater depth here, I consider it significant to note *waria*’s use of new
technologies, to update Boellstorff’s work when he notes that ‘male transvestites’ seem to have made limited use of the Internet to date’ (2007: 214).

Returning to the significance of the Internet as a source of knowledge on gender and sexuality influencing one’s own subjectivities, in the following excerpts some of my interlocutors describe the multiple channels used to acquire information:

When I was around 16 [in 2008] I started looking for information about being gay online and I found a lot of stuff. I was in a denial period for several months, I was struggling while searching for information about being LGBT, about my emotions, so this helped me think of myself in a different way. Before I started High School I thought I could change to be straight, but then I realised that I couldn’t, that being gay is okay, and there were many people like me. – Nico, gay man, born in 1992, Central Java

When I was 15 [in 1997] I found a mailing list for lesbi women. In Indonesia it was quite big to have mailing groups in the past to broadcast information to all the members. It was a Yahoo group called Lesbi Club created by someone from IPP (Institut Pelangi Perempuan), an Indonesian young queer women organisation. First, they called me a butchi before the transmen movement started in Indonesia. Later, I felt comfortable to call myself a transman. I continued reading more about sexuality online and realised that I didn’t feel comfortable identifying as trans, so I decided to identify as a non-binary person. – Satu, non-binary, born in 1982, East Java

When I started looking for information about sexuality, I did my own research on Google. I joined an online forum for gay people in Indonesia, but they mostly talked about sexual activities and I didn’t feel comfortable, so I left it. I don’t know why I felt like that, I thought it was odd. Back then I was trying to gather as much information as possible because I had to know what I really was. I felt like I

---

57 Due to the process of language change over time, recent literature has started to refer to waria as transgender people against their past portrayal as ‘transvestites.’
was a stranger, I was in a world completely different to me, I needed full knowledge before feeling comfortable having sexual relations. – Rudi, gay man, born in 1991, Central Java

I got my knowledge from the Internet. That’s where I found what queer is, what non-binary is. I’ve realised that I can finally feel comfortable now identifying as non-binary. Sometimes I feel male, sometimes female, other times non-binary, but in the Indonesian context it’s still difficult to identify. It’s difficult to find definitions for non-binary. Until now we haven’t had any words to refer to this. – Tiga, non-binary, born in 1998, Central Java

These four excerpts from interviews illustrate a larger discursive pattern about how my interlocutors came to, among others, gay, non-binary, lesbi or trans subjectivities. Their narrations are voiced through a language of emotions to describe how they have managed their gender identity and sexual orientation. Being in denial or struggling emotionally, for example, is linked to the view that gayness is a way of living that can be subverted. In contrast to those negative feelings, the goal of feeling comfortable (nyaman) emerges in various ways. For Tiga, it relates to being able to identify as non-binary despite the lack of Indonesian terms to describe such subjectivity, while for Rudi comfort is presented as an evolving process related to the acquisition of information about being gay. These accounts illustrate that access to information acts as a factor increasing one’s feelings of comfort regarding one’s gender identity or sexual orientation. As Ahmed writes (2013: 147), ‘normativity is comfortable for those who can inhabit it.’ The absence of normativity in the queer Muslim milieu emerges as a source of discomfort that is only challenged by the finding of normative subject positions online. It is then when they reach a feeling of partial ‘comfort’, a concept that Ahmed defines as suggesting ‘well-being and satisfaction, ease and easiness’ (ibid).

As I will explore in Chapter 5, this concept is central to the religious experience of queer Muslims, who often refer to Islam, and the rituals attached to it, as sources of comfort. Ahmed notes that heteronormativity has become a form of public comfort ‘by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape’ (ibid: 148). While being comfortable for heteronormative subjects, those spaces might make queer subjects uncomfortable. One might
wonder whether homonormativity could emerge as a source of comfort by letting queer subjects embrace positions that may ‘liberate’ them from feeling lost, as Rudi notes above, ‘in a [I would add, heteronormative] world completely different to me’, strange and uncomfortable, by occupying normalised subject positions. Considering that homonormativity privileges specific non-normative genders and sexualities, which are tolerated and encouraged through the assimilation of heteronormative models (in the ‘West’ often referring to marriage, monogamy and procreation) one might wonder what the dominant acceptable form of non-normative sexualities would be in Indonesia.

Is there an Indonesia-specific homonormativity distinct from ‘Western’ standards? These are relevant questions to consider amid global processes impacting the lived subjectivities of queer Muslims who reterritorialise terms like gay, lesbi or trans (Boellstorff 2005a: 8). While to my knowledge no previous studies have addressed the possibility of a local form of homonormativity, Murtagh’s work (2013) on Indonesian cinema has noted the presence of homonormative couples in films. As he notes, these are opposed to ‘queer unwanted subjectivities’ such as waria ‘to make films acceptable to a heteronormative majority’, drawing on ‘Western’ notions of homonormativity (2013: 107). What is most relevant from Murtagh’s analysis is that film representations of queer Indonesians based on Western illusions do not match his ethnographic research with such subjects, who seem to inhabit alternative queer worlds.

The Internet, and the multiple outlets it offers, have become a key channel through which queer Muslims can embrace subjectivities and subject positions. This speaks not only to the fact that the consumption of print media has declined, but also to the absence of stories about queer people in magazines and newspapers beyond their negative representation under the LGBT acronym in recent years. While, during my first visit to Indonesia in 2014, I never met anyone who identified as non-binary, in 2017 and 2018 several of my interlocutors used non-binary and queer to present themselves. The majority of those employing these terms first heard about them online, while some found them through trainings on gender and sexuality organised by LGBT-rights organisations.

A significant issue at play here is that most of the information consumed by my interlocutors using these new terms came from ‘Western’ sources. This was especially important for transgender men: out of the 15 people I interviewed, there were only two people who
mentioned Indonesian sources as the origin of their knowledge. The oldest one, Tito, who was 54 at the time of the interview and introduced himself to me as ‘one of the first transgender men in Indonesia’, noted that he learnt about terms like gay and lesbi from Indonesian newspapers. However, his knowledge on transgender issues came from magazines that he was sent by post after getting in touch on the phone with Australian and American NGOs.

Other transgender men mentioned foreign content as their key source of information regarding their gender identity. For example, Nino, from Central Java and born in 1991, said, ‘I first found the term HBS, Harry Benjamin Syndrome, then I read about transsexualism and I found several videos showing the transitions of transmen on YouTube, there are so many videos showing the transition from female to male; I felt that it suited myself, I wanted to be like those people ... That was when I was studying at university, six years ago [2012], when I was 21.’ For Eko, a transgender man from Central Java born in 1993, YouTube was also a key source of information: ‘I’ve learnt mostly from Google and YouTube, I found some materials in Bahasa Indonesia, but the videos from YouTube are always from foreigners, it is never Indonesian people.’ The only two transmen who pointed to sources in Bahasa Indonesia referred to an online blog where they could get in touch with the authors. As Dani, from Bandung and born in 1993, explained:

I Googled something looking for information and I realised that it was all just foreigners (bule). I wanted to meet someone here, from Indonesia, physically, so I Googled the term ‘transsexual’ together with words in Bahasa Indonesia, and I found an Indonesian blog speaking about the Harry Benjamin Syndrome. I emailed the author and she put me in touch with Tito. That was in 2012 or 2013. We just spoke on the phone. After that, I came to Jakarta to meet him in person. At first, I told him that I was grateful to find a friend. I told him, ‘I’m not alone anymore’. He asked me some questions, ‘What do you feel about yourself?’ I told him, ‘I feel like this, I’m actually like this, but I’m confused (bingung)’. When I met him, I realised I could still have a life, I started having hopes. He told me about his process, he told me about how difficult it was to find information in the past. He asked me to be grateful for having more information now.
Dani’s story illustrates the importance of the support that social media allows to emerge. It also points to the significance given by queer Muslims to finding other local people with whom to establish bonds and discuss their subjectivities, considering the dissimilarities with the lives of the foreign transgender individuals found online. For many of my interlocutors, blogs and social media constituted a source of information about being gay, lesbi or trans, but also a channel to interact for the first time with people who identified in the same way as them. While in the past parks, riverbanks and malls were the main spaces for queer sociality, the increasing number of raids by local police officers, the fear of being caught and easy access to smartphones have changed the context in which these encounters take place.

For many queer Muslims, the digital emerges as a door to the physical world. As Dani recalls, after coming across the blog, he managed to have a phone call with Tito and they finally met in person in Jakarta, where he travelled from his hometown in East Java. Once again, emotions and feelings play a key role in the story: for Dani, this encounter helped him reduce his feeling of loneliness while coming to his subjectivity as a transgender man. For Tito, asking about Dani’s feelings was required to confirm whether he would consider him trans or not. The absence of formal sex education makes these connections between queer subjects significant not only to be educated on these issues, but also to understand what one is experiencing and as sources of emotional support. As Dani notes, it was after discussing his feelings with Tito that he ‘started having hope’, moving from a state of desperation to a feeling of expectation and optimism for the possibility of transition to happen.

Dani’s experience is reminiscent of Cutrona’s and Russell’s (1990) five dimensions of social support: 1) emotional, 2) network, 3) esteem, 4) tangible and 5) informational support. Previous scholarship has also noted the importance of online support as a source of well-being and stress reduction. Ybarra et al. note that LGBT youth ‘are more likely that non-LGBT youth to have online friends and to appraise these friends as better than their in-person friends at providing emotional support’ (2014: 123). Hillier et al. explain that when there is a lack of support available offline, the Internet can arise as a tool ‘for creating and maintaining positive, close relationships for LGB youth’ (2012: 226). My interlocutors expressed similar thoughts regarding their online friendships, which illustrated the multidimensional role of the Internet for them as both a social space and a setting activating new ways to navigate their gender, sexuality and religion through the possibility of accessing alternative sources of information.
An additional reason explaining the significance of the Internet for queer Muslims is that it allows them to be anonymous. Most of them present themselves under nicknames while pondering whether they want to express their ‘real’ identity and gather offline with those they meet online. Engaging in anonymous interactions allows queer Muslims to discover certain aspects of themselves while interacting with subjects who might also experience discrimination offline (McKenna and Bargh 2000: 63). Scholarship has noted the significance of technological developments as a source of gratification when ‘homosexuality is closely policed and often restricted’ (Gudelunas 2012: 348). For some of my interlocutors, the Internet was not only perceived as a source to gather information and meet people with whom they could identify, but also a channel through which sexual encounters could take place. Although since 2016 gay websites and dating apps like Grindr and Blued have been blocked by the government, all of my participants who were willing to use them knew how to unblock them by installing VPN apps on their smartphones. Interestingly, the dating app Tinder, which allows both gay and heterosexual interactions, remains unblocked by the government since it does not target homosexuals exclusively. While these apps tend to be linked to sexual encounters, some of my interlocutors used them to create friendships. Some also said that they were no interested in using them because they were not ‘looking for casual sex’, or because of previous bad experiences of being tricked into meeting someone who subsequently blackmailed them to pay large amounts of money to avoid outing them to their family or friends.

4.2.3. Islam, Queer, Digital

While so far section 4.2 has focused on media as a source to define and negotiate gender and sexual aspects of the self, my interlocutors also pointed to the role of the Internet as a positive source of knowledge on alternative interpretations of the Islamic sources. Similarly to how they look for information on being gay or trans, most of them also searched for information regarding Islam’s position on queerness. An Indonesian website that several participants mentioned as a source of information regarding sexual ethics and Islam was the blog Gay Islam Indonesia (hereafter, GII), to my knowledge the only website focusing specifically on Islam and homosexuality in the country. The blog, which can still be accessed online on http://gayislamindonesia.blogspot.com/, presents 13 posts published between November 2010 and March 2011 under a banner combining the rainbow flag with five pictures portraying gay
couples, one of them holding a baby, behind the sentence ‘Belief is freedom’ (‘Keyakinan adalah sebuah pembebasan’) (Figure 10). What is most striking about the banner is that these couples are all made of white homonormative potentially ‘gay’ men: it does not include any people that could be identified as Indonesian. This seems to replicate the notion promoted through conservative discourses in Indonesia, which I noted in Chapter 2, that homosexuality is a ‘Western’ export. There are no references to the Indonesian context beyond the red and white flag on the banner’s right side and the sentences in the national language. The only religious symbol is the central star and crescent that has represented Islam since the mid-20th century, which is unrelated to the white men in the banner. The nonrepresentation of Indonesian queer people is linked to the universalisation of ‘Western’ gay models of being that do not match the realities that queer Indonesian can access. This constitutes a contradiction with the narratives presented in the blog posts, which target Muslim individuals like my interlocutors, most of whom do not fit within a hegemonic ‘gay’ subject position.

The blog goals are introduced in the first post, noting that GII ‘is aimed at interpreting the gay existence (keberadaan gay) within the Indonesian Muslim environment (lingkungan).’ It continues stating its goal of creating an open dialogue with those Muslims who reject ‘gay behaviour’ (perilaku gay) or are hesitant (ragu) to accept it. To finish this short first post, the writer invites the audience to avoid engaging in blasphemy ‘because Islam is a strong holder (pemegang kuat) of the rahmatan lil alamin58 belief upholding tawhid (the oneness of Allah) as the reference for dialogue between convictions (keyakinan) and beliefs (kepercayaan).’

58 Islamic concept that means ‘Mercy to all creations.’
The blog was regularly updated for around five months with a total of 46 comments, with the largest number of responses being to the article ‘Why did God create men who love men?’ (‘Mengapa Allah menciptakan laki-laki yang mencintai laki-laki?’) posted on the 24th of December 2010. Those commenting present a variety of opinions for and against the acceptance of homosexuality in Islam. Some of the blog posts are only speculative discussions lacking references to support the statements made, but they are still noteworthy since they were considered by some of my interlocutors as a first point of contact with the possibility of embracing Islam while being queer, after having been educated on their condemnation. During its online presence, GII also published 7 bulletins entitled ‘Buletin Jumat Bisikan - Gay Muslim Whispers’ which are still available to download (in Bahasa Indonesia and English) where Islamic concepts like *ijtihad* and *zakat* are discussed in relation to homosexuality, and alternative interpretations of the story of the Prophet Lut are presented.

While the blog has not been updated since March 2011, the creators have opened a Facebook and Twitter page under the same name where they still post a mix of news in Bahasa Indonesia and English, events such as Idahobit (International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia) and the Transgender Day of Remembrance, and promote events on gender, sexuality and religion taking place across Indonesia. Some followers of the Facebook page have written comments against queer people to which the administrators often reply. For example, when someone posted that, ‘LGBT should repent (tobat)’, the page administrator replied that, ‘anyone, from any sexual orientation, can still be a Muslim, are you the owner of Islam? You aren’t, right?’ These dialogues, although giving space to those that express intolerance towards queer Muslims, were considered useful by some of my interlocutors to find spaces of acceptance within Islam.

A question worth asking is how important this site really is, considering that it only functioned for a few months, and did not receive a large amount of comments. While I do not have a concluding answer to evaluate its significance, the fact that many of my interlocutors raised this blog as a source of information that influenced how they perceived themselves led me to the exploration above. Some questions that remain unanswered are who those behind this blog were and whether it was an individual or an organisation, why it stopped being active, and what its impact has been as an informal form of religion, gender and sexuality education.

In addition to blogs like GII, it is important to consider the online work of non-queer
Muslim activists as a source of knowledge into religion, gender and sexuality through alternative exegesis, which is linked to my explorations in Chapter 7. These materials also become catalysts for processes of negotiation of subjectivities, spirituality, beliefs and ritual practices moving from the perception of queerness as ‘sin’ to evolutions towards self-acceptance. For example, Ela, a *waria* born in 1967 who is very active online, noted that:

The work of these scholars is very important for us because it helps us psychologically, it gives us more energy. They know better about religion than other people and they choose not to judge us. This is really helpful. Those religious leaders who have a good way of thinking (*pikiran yang baik*) and are open minded can be very helpful. They can also influence the wider social environment through their statements. I still believe that religion can become a tool to support those who are different.

Additionally, Tono, a *gay* man from West Java mentioned earlier, noted that, ‘When I found progressive interpretations online, I started being able to explain the stance of Islam on particular issues, like sexuality. If someone asks me, I can explain Islam using those ideas. I can explain the story of Sodom and Gomorrah from both the progressive and the conservative interpretation now.’ For Nico, ‘Their work [of the progressive actors] is very important because when they express that being LGBT is okay in Islam it can help society think that it’s fine, they can help the majority of the population get a different perspective and understand us.’ As Budi noted, ‘There was a time when I tried very hard to find alternative interpretations of the Qur’an online and it helped me realise that Islam itself is open to interpretations, it’s not a rigid teaching.’ While some of my interlocutors referred to the importance of the work of Irshad Manji\(^59\) as a source of knowledge, most of my interlocutors pointed instead to the influence of local scholars. Abdul, a *gay* Muslim from Jakarta born in 1987, explained that ‘These interpretations made me understand that there’s a different perspective about my religion, like the one from Musdah Mulia, and I started to be like, it’s okay, it’s not about Islam, it’s about perspective, and that can help people to accept themselves.’

\(^{59}\) Irshad Manji is a controversial Canadian scholar of Islam who was attacked in Yogyakarta by fundamentalist groups when she visited Indonesia to launch her book *Allah, Liberty and Love.*
These progressive interpretations are significant to *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria* Muslim subjectivities because of their public availability: they are not only available to queer Muslims, but also to other social actors that usually know about their existence only through negative depictions presenting them as a threat to the Indonesian nation and to Islam. The emergence of queer-inclusive discourses produced by allies of queer Muslims in print and online media has reshaped the queer Muslim world: from lacking recognition socially and living their sexual subjectivities ‘on the margins of the normal world’ (Boellstorff 2005a: 126), queer Muslims have started to be acknowledged publicly by their allies.

For other queer Muslims like Dani, their first contact with these interpretations did not take place through individual efforts to look for information online, but instead through queer friends met on social media. As he noted, ‘I’ve learnt a lot from one of my friends I met online who is also a *transgender* man, sometimes I text him and ask him about what Islam would say about this and that, I’m happy when he shares his thoughts with me, but we rarely find that kind of *Ulama* here. Most of them are really conservative, right?’ Through everyday interactions online and offline, queer Muslims in Indonesia reshape their own subjectivities in a continuous process where gender, sexuality and religion are enmeshed within each other. It is not only their subjectivities that are shaped by media, or by the interactions with friends who consume specific media contents, but those subjectivities simultaneously influence media too, as illustrated by the emergence of the GII blog created by queer Muslims themselves opening new ways of engaging in discussions on gender, sexuality and religion.

4.3. **Additional social influences**

My interactions with queer Muslims confirmed that their religion, gender and sexuality were often shaped and negotiated in relation to their parents, education and media, as I have noted so far. However, they also raised the significance that other social actors (i.e. classmates, peers, partners) had in the negotiation and navigation of their subjectivities in relation to symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships established with them. Through this section I examine how social actors who are not part of family and educational spheres influence the process of queer Muslim subjectivity formation. A question worth asking is what the role of social interactions outside the family and educational environments is in the engagement of queer Muslims with their religion,
gender and sexuality and if this can result in a more positive perception of the self as queer and Muslim.

4.3.1. Becoming queer

During my fieldwork I often heard queer Muslims recalling how, while they might have found terms like *trans*, *gay* or *lesbi* online, they only started to learn more deeply about the implications of these terms when they were defined as such by other queer individuals. The expectations that queer peers have regarding what makes a *lesbi* woman or a *gay* man together with the practices observed by these subjects contribute to the building of their own subjectivities. In relation to this, to demonstrate the influence of peers, I return to Satu, a *non-binary* Muslim from East Java, who, as I noted before, stated, ‘First, [my friends] called me a *butchi* before the *transmen* movement started in Indonesia. Later, I felt comfortable to call myself a *transman*. I continued reading more about sexuality online and realised that I wasn’t comfortable identifying as *trans*, so I decided to identify as a *non-binary* person.’ Despite being identified by their peers as a ‘*lesbi butch*’, Satu moved to define themselves as a *transman* only when ‘the *transmen* movement started in Indonesia’, demonstrating once again the influence of their peer group and broader environment. However, as they stated, ‘I realised that I wasn’t comfortable with the *transmen* stuff, you know, being masculine, adopting the men’s way of talking, the masculine behaviour and all of that, so I decided to identify as a *non-binary* person.’

Because of increasing access to information through their smartphones, most of my interlocutors expressed similarities with Satu’s case, explaining their subjectivities through encounters with online content acting as a balance for sources of pressure emerging from family, school or other peers. This case is also illustrative of the assumed normative character implied in being *trans* that I also heard from other participants when referring to norms and expectations emerging from other peers: speaking in specific masculine ways, wearing male clothes or moving their bodies in manly ways were perceived as sources of pressure that for some people become an integral part of their subjectivity.

Laudya, a *lesbi* woman from Sumatra, recalled how she came to her sexual subjectivity as a *lesbian* through one of her friends. As she explained:
When I came to Yogya I started meeting people who called themselves lesbi. They asked, ‘are you a lesbi?’ I was like, ‘no, I’m normal’. In the end, one of my friends said, ‘if you are ready to become (jadi) a lesbian, you shouldn’t be bothered by what people think, be ready to deal with people staring at you.’ I replied, ‘yes, I’m ready’. From that moment, when people asked me, ‘are you a lesbi?’, I always replied, ‘yes, I am, what’s the problem?’ It was different with my friends at uni, I told them, but then I didn’t go back to campus for two weeks. After that, one of my classmates called me one day. He was like, ‘why aren’t you coming to uni?’ I said, ‘because everybody knows that I’m a lesbian’. Then he said, ‘we are your friends and we accept you the way you are.’ From that, I started to go back, and I didn’t care about anyone who didn’t accept me.

This case illustrates the relevance of peers in both encountering the lesbi subject position and embracing it as one’s subjectivity. For Laudya, there was a process of ‘becoming,’ or ‘jadi,’ that started with her acquisition of knowledge and evolved until she felt ready to embrace this subject position. The progression to recognising herself as a lesbi woman was part of a social process that involved reflecting on the potential reactions of her peers when acknowledging her lesbian subject position publicly. While she notes that she ‘was ready’ to ‘become a lesbian’, her narrative also reveals that her fear of the reaction that her university classmates would have led to her temporary absence from university. She only returned when one of her classmates got in touch to express her support. Social support, as expressed by her friends, arouse as a force making Laudya’s lesbi subjectivity possible.

Despite the importance of media that I noted in section 4.2, for some of my waria interlocutors it was through encounters with peers that they came to their waria subjectivity. For the transmen I interviewed, the role of other transgender men with whom they could identify was critical to understanding their own experiences. While gay and lesbi Indonesians have been represented through both positive and negative images on mass media, and waria are well-known as part of society due to their visibility, transgender men were and still are the most invisible group within my interlocutors. Djoko, a transgender man from Jakarta born in 1986, related that he started inhabiting a transgender subjectivity only after he was identified as such by his friends. As he explained:
There was a conversation in my small circle of friends, and someone said: ‘you know what, you are fucking trans, you know what trans is?’ And I said, ‘no, no, no, I don’t know, I’m just a fucking lesbian’, and then suddenly I thought, ‘yeah, probably I’m trans, I’m in denial.’ After those conversations, I kept asking myself if I was a transman, and I went to a psychiatrist. (…) I’m accepting myself mentally as a man now, and even though I still have breasts, the people around me acknowledge my masculinity.

Zulkifli, a non-cisgender man from Central Sumatra born in 1995, also noted that it was when he moved to Java to study at university at the age of 18 that he learnt the term transman from a discussion at a philosophy group. As he said, ‘I learnt the word transman there, but I don’t feel comfortable using the term because I feel that it’s about having the physical appearance (penampilan) of a man, so I just define myself as a man.’ For Zulkifli, and for other interlocutors, despite being identified by his peers as transgender, the normative implications of the term push them away from its usage preferring instead to simply use the term ‘man’.

The experiences of finding a subject position to which one can relate resonate with the narratives of some of Boellstorff’s interlocutors in Indonesia, who expressed similar feelings in relation to the discovery of sources discussing gay and lesbi subject positions. As Boellstorff notes, through these moments his participants came ‘to think of themselves as gay’ in a way different to ‘the ‘aha!’ moments that dominate knowledge production in the West since queer Indonesians express the discovery of similitude rather than difference’ (2005a: 69).

What constituted a common narrative thread between most of my participants was the notion of ‘jadi’/’menjadi’ (‘becoming’) queer, represented locally through terms like, among others, gay, waria, lesbi or transpuan. For some people, this refers both to being aware of one’s non-normative gender or sexuality through a process afforded by media and social interactions, but also to the fluidity and shifting character of such subjectivities throughout one’s life. For others, it marks a specific moment in time when they started to perceive themselves as gender non-normative or attracted to their same sex. This is relevant to explore gender and sexuality as fluid categories that are cultivated through one’s lifetime in relation to external social forces.
4.3.2. Towards a queer Muslimness

In this section I move on to discuss the relevance of broader clusters of social connections in the navigation and negotiation of one’s queer and religious subjectivities. These include peers but also other social actors who have a role in the ongoing negotiations and contestations in which queer Muslims engage throughout their everyday lives. As I noted in the previous sections, some of my interlocutors stressed the religious teachings they received from their families and schools as sources of anxiety. Those struggles are challenged by peers they met later in life, often after joining online platforms, attending trainings on gender and sexuality, joining queer-rights organisations or leaving the family home to study at university in a different city. Support groups in the form of friends constitute a key source of care for queer Muslims who have experienced alienation and/or rejection at home and look for ways to reconnect with Islam (Kugle 2014: 76). As Kugle illustrates through his queer Muslim participants living in ‘Western’ countries, friends often become a reference point to discuss Islam and ritual practices in relation to non-normative genders and sexualities (ibid). In the case of my interlocutors, this was especially significant for those who had been thrown out of the house or ran away because of their parents’ negative reaction to their non-normative gender or sexuality. In those cases, religion often played a critical role in the building of new communities of friends that provided the support that they had not found anywhere else.

For some of my interlocutors, the development of new perspectives regarding gender, sexuality and religion took place within religious spaces like pesantren. Most of them engaged in what is known as mairil in Bahasa Indonesia, a term used to refer to same-sex practices that are common between the students living in a boarding school. Some described their engagement in sexual acts with other students or with the religious figures living there, who would explain to them that it was accepted to experience one’s sexuality as long as there was no anal sex. This experience was not unique to my gay and waria interlocutors who had lived in pesantren, which has been discussed in previous literature (Izharuddin 2013; Hoesterey and Clark 2012: 220; Oetomo and Emond 1993: 3), but also included lesbi women (on this, see Nurish 2010; Oetomo 2000: 51). In fact, some of my lesbi interlocutors recalled having relationships with other girls while living in pesantren.
For others, it was meeting new people at university that contributed to the activation of alternative processes of negotiation of their subjectivities. For example, Raffi, a 28-year-old gay Muslim from West Nusa Tenggara, explained:

When I started studying at university in Java, I met this other student who was interested in theology. We started chatting about Islam and non-patriarchal interpretations. She was the first person who told me how to read the Qur’an in a personal kind of way and I felt hopeful. She assured me that there is nothing wrong with homosexuality in Islam, and because she had spent a long time at a pesantren she was an expert in Qur’anic interpretations. One day, she brought the Qur’an to me. She was like, ‘look at these verses, it doesn’t say anything here.’ She was reading the verses about the Prophet Lut and she said that the crime that God punished them for wasn’t homosexuality but their lustful desires and their harmful acts, like raping, and robbery. While I was hearing that from her, I was like, ‘Oh, my God!’, suddenly it was like a revelation to me, so my revelation started from my own individual awakening but through someone who was assuring that there was nothing wrong with myself.

Raffi’s religious ‘aha!’ moment finds resonance with the stories I explored earlier in relation to how queer Muslims come to start thinking of themselves as gay, lesbi, waria or transgender. In this case, peer contact with other Muslim subjects led to the reformation of ideas acquired in the past that had built Islam and queerness as irreconcilable opposites. In the multiple stories I heard that shared similarities with Raffi’s vignette, a common narrative was that these encounters took place between queer Muslims and peers who had a strong knowledge on Islam, which was perceived as a source of legitimacy to start thinking of Islam as a queer-inclusive force. A similar story was shared by Lili, a lesbi woman from Central Java born in 1988, who noted:

My second girlfriend knew a lot about religion. She told me that God is not cruel and that he wouldn’t punish his creations. I felt relieved because I thought that her explanation made sense. At that time, I started to learn more about sexuality, gender, and that helped me to start being brave to discuss those ideas in relation
to religion too. That’s the moment when I joined an LGBT organisation.

Noor, a converted lesbi Muslim from East Java born in 1962, also noted that it was her partner, a devoted Muslim woman, who helped her study about Islam. As she explained, ‘My partner told me that the teachings in the Qur’an aren’t like what conservative people say; she said that what is written in the Qur’an is good and taught me all of it through different types of hadith.’ These alternative interpretations are often assumed to be valid by queer Muslims since they consider them to be based on rational arguments explained through particular religious sources, such as the Qur’an and the hadith.

Besides the role of partners and friends, my interlocutors often mentioned the importance of the social actors they met through their engagement in queer-rights organisations and through their attendance of workshops on gender, sexuality and religion. Because of the religious lessons received while growing up, as I noted through the section on education in Chapter 3, most had assumed that the Qur’an explicitly prohibits being gay, lesbi or trans. Most of them described the first time they listened to alternative interpretations of the story of Lut as a source of comfort. This often came from other queer Muslim peers, but also from religious leaders and activists. As Ayman, a 28-year-old gay man from North Sumatra noted, ‘After going to my first workshop on religion, gender and sexuality and listening to all those new interpretations, I felt that they helped me a lot because they provided a more progressive view on LGBT issues.’ While most of my interlocutors shared similar experiences, a few noted that despite their familiarity with queer-inclusive interpretations of the Islamic sources they still were not able to engage with them. An example of this was provided by Osama, an 18-year-old self-identified transgender cowok (boy) from North Sumatra: ‘I’ve heard progressive interpretations, but I feel that I’m not strong enough to absorb that knowledge because of the dogmas that are still embedded in my brain.’

In addition to interactions with queer Muslims and allies through educational activities, practices of worship emerged as an important communal experience for some of my interlocutors. While gay, lesbi and transgender men often described their attendance of mosques to practice the ritual of salat, most of my waria interlocutors rejected doing so. This is because
of the difficulties to ‘pass’ as ‘normal’ that waria find in contrast to other subjects. Considering that they would not feel comfortable praying in front of people who could notice them as waria, some of them explained their search for alternative spaces where they could pray communally with other waria. In this milieu, the emergence of the pesantren waria, the Islamic boarding school for waria Muslims in Yogyakarta has served as a source of community belonging and comfort. Ela, a waria from Central Java born in 1967, explained that, ‘At the pesantren I have a space where I can learn more about religion, where I can get to know more about God in a comfortable space. I can pray together with my friends and discuss religious topics with the ustad and the teaching team who can accept (menerima) me the way I and my waria friends are.’

As noted above, these references to religious authorities go beyond the significance of peers. Indeed, they point to the role of other social actors in the negotiation of belief and subjectivity to embrace religion in alternative ways. This was illustrated by most of my waria interlocutors, who described how they moved from rejecting Islam to becoming pious Muslims after finding and joining the pesantren. Nunik, a waria from Central Java born in 1965, said, ‘I can provide insights and experience (pengalaman) because I am also a Muslim; I feel relieved (lega) here, I have no burdens (nggak ada beban gitu). If I go to the mosque, I become depressed (tertekan) as there are many who will mock me, while here I feel welcomed.’ These excerpts reveal the importance of community belonging to feel comfortable while learning about one’s religion; feelings and actions that are often denied in other settings. Acceptance also arises as a key force to feel relieved in opposition to the feeling of unhappiness that rejection brought to some of my interlocutors. This relief was explained in relation to the group when referring to oneself not only individually but communally including one’s waria friends. The significant role of emotions is evident in these stories: comfort, relief, feeling depressed or welcomed are feelings emerging from one’s Muslim and waria subjectivities.

4.4. Conclusions

While Chapter 3 examined the impact of the family and education in the ongoing flux characterising processes of subjectivity formation, this chapter has focused on the role that media, peers and broader clusters of social connections have on the everyday confrontations,

---

60 The term ‘normal’ was often used by my participants to refer to heterosexual and cisgender people. It is also common to refer to the ‘waria world’ (‘dunia waria’) and the gay and lesbi worlds in opposition to the ‘normal world’ represented by normative genders and sexualities.
contestations and negotiations that continually produce queer Muslim selves. My goal has been to advance my exploration of the lived experiences of queer Muslims in Indonesia, complementing the previous chapter, to comprehend how they re/define their subjectivities. I began this chapter putting the focus on the role of mass media. Firstly, I discussed how, for some of my interlocutors, the media was a space to imagine themselves as gay, lesbi or waria. Despite often being unfavourable to queer people, media contents constitute a source of identification for those queer Muslims who have not found alternative representations of non-normative genders and sexualities.

Since the start of democracy in 1998, media portrayals of queer individuals have evolved from individual gay and lesbi romantic stories, often told in negative terms, to the communal depiction of the ‘LGBT community’ as a threat to the Indonesian nation using expressions like ‘LGBT emergency’ or ‘dangerous movement’ as I have shown through the example of three newspaper covers. These mass media negative representations have however led my interlocutors to identify in certain ways (i.e. gay, lesbi, trans) and negotiate their subjectivities through agentic exercises. Additionally, and as an act of self-preservation, some of them also rejected or refashioned media contents that negate their subjectivities. This would not be about ‘agency’ per se, but instead about what Hall calls an oppositional interpretation of media text in a hegemonic media system: dominant representations of what being LGBT means are replaced by alternative interpretations supplanting such meanings (Steiner 1988: 13).

Contrary to earlier studies highlighting the significance of print media, there has been a decline in its importance in recent years for queer people to come to their subjectivities. This was not only the case of my queer Muslim interlocutors, but I often heard similar narratives from non-Muslim individuals. For them, the Internet constituted the main space to ‘find oneself’ and to search and create queer support networks. While literature on genders and sexualities in Indonesia has noted the significance of mass media for queer Indonesians in the past (Boellstorff 2005a; Blackwood 2007), my findings have significant implications for the understanding of how the Internet works as a source of, firstly, knowledge on queer and religious issues and, secondly, support for those who may struggle with their gender and sexuality through the creation of interpersonal connections. My analysis lays the groundwork for future research into the role of the Internet not only as a key force through which gay, lesbi and trans Muslims come to their subjectivities in Indonesia, but also as a channel that allows to develop and further refine
their understanding of their subjectivities through both research and social media interactions. The relevance of the Internet is clearly supported by my fieldwork findings, and by the emergence of blogs like Gay Islam Indonesia as one of the first online platforms to discuss Islam, gender and sexuality together.

My findings add to the rapidly expanding field of LGBT identities and online new media (Craig and McInroy 2014; Pullen and Cooper 2010) pointing to the presence of online content exploring Islam in relation to queerness, which has been largely absent from literature. The experiences of my interlocutors illustrate the potential of online networks as tools for individuals to come to and negotiate their gender, sexual and religious subjectivities. In contrast to projects like GII, the Indonesian government has been quick to block queer apps and websites under the argument that they promote ‘sexual ‘deviancy’ and a ‘gay lifestyle’’ (Listiorini and Davies 2017). Reacting to these actions, most of my interlocutors found alternative ways to use apps, often one of the few available spaces to discuss their gender and sexuality given increasing reticence and fear of hanging out in public spaces, which used to be the main settings for queer interactions in the past.

The second half of this chapter has explored the role of peers and broader clusters of social connections in the negotiation of one’s queer and religious subjectivities. While previous research has noted the role of peers in religious socialisation (Erickson 1992; Hyde 1990; Cornwall 1988; Potvin and Lee 1982), I prefer to use a language stressing the ongoing variations that characterise everyday life. While the family constitutes the first and main agent impacting one’s negotiations of religion, gender and sexuality in the first stages of life (mainly childhood and teenage years), I argue, by attending to the experiences of my interlocutors, that peers and additional social actors arise as the primary influence later on. Alternative religious interpretations and ways of approaching non-normative genders and sexualities are often transmitted to queer Muslims by social actors that are not part of their family or formal education, encouraging perspectives based on the reinterpretation of texts that are commonly used to condemn non-normative genders and sexualities. The importance of such actors as sources of support has been illustrated by the narrations of my participants, who often referred to positive emotions (i.e. calm, comfort) to express the feelings elicited by their interactions with them. An example of this is the case of the pesantren waria, which I have noted as contributing to interpersonal support and community belonging.
The findings of this chapter have various implications. Firstly, they point to the importance of mass media and the Internet as sources of information that have a consequential impact for the emergence and negotiation of queer and religious subjectivities. While my older interlocutors referred to same-sex stories published in the 70s and 80s on print media, for most of my younger interlocutors it was through the Internet that they came to either identify and refine their subjectivities as, for example, gay or transgender. Blackwood (2007) has described how around the 1980s terms like lesbi and gay started to be used by Indonesian mainstream media. As she argues, this not only played an important role in the making and circulation of discourses about lesbi and gay subject positions but also led some Indonesians to start taking on these terms to identify themselves (ibid: 294). This is an issue that continues to develop as my references to participants employing terms such as trans and non-binary demonstrates.

To conclude, this chapter has widened the exploration that I started in Chapter 3 on the forces influencing the negotiation of queer religious subjectivities. These two chapters certainly add to our understanding of the forces impacting queer and religious selves in Indonesia. These Indonesians combine religion, gender and sexuality with their national identity through processes that are simultaneously shaped by global discourses to which new technologies have granted them access. Replicating the Indonesian nation-state, queer Muslims appear in archipelagic ways, their multiple selves shaped by forces that, like imagined islands, contribute to the building of their subjectivities. Moving from my exploration of the forces that shape queer Muslim selves, in Chapter 5 I put the focus on the emergence of agentic powers through religious rituals like salat and fasting.
Chapter 5: Towards a Queer Religious Agency

5.1. Introduction

I start this chapter on queer religious agency with three vignettes—one focusing on a transgender Muslim man in a rural area, another from a gay Muslim man living in Jakarta and the last one from the pesantren waria, the Islamic boarding school for transgender Muslim women. In section 5.2, I critically explore previous debates on the presumed need to reconcile queer and Muslim subjectivities in relation to the experiences of my interlocutors. My aim is to emphasise that the construction of religion and non-normative genders and sexualities as ‘ungrammatical’ (Boellstorff 2005b) does not resonate with the narratives of most of my participants’ attempts to move beyond discourses of ‘reconciliation’. I aim to reinforce this idea by presenting the case study of waria Muslims who describe themselves as possessing a jiwa perempuan, which I translate as a female soul or spirit linked to God. I move in section 5.3 to a more detailed exploration of the everyday religious practices of queer Muslims by putting the focus on the significance of surrendering to God through the acts of salat (prayer) and fasting in relation to agentic power. I begin, however, by presenting three vignettes illustrating the various assemblages between gender, sexuality and religion of three of my participants, highlighting the fluidity of the religious experience, which permanently evolves through negotiation, adaptation and change. These vignettes anticipate my explorations of the ‘lived religion’ of queer Muslims in the subsequent sections, which I understand as ‘the actual experience of religious persons’ which might not always match the ‘prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices’ (McGuire 2008: 12).

Adit

Adit is driving a motorbike to a small café where he has invited some of his friends to hold a discussion on Islam with us. It is a rainy night in a small town in rural Central Java. On the way there, he points to a hospital and tells me that ‘it used to belong to us, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)’. A bit further down the road, there is another one that is managed by Muhammadiyah. We are
getting closer to our destination. It is then when I notice that we are not going to a café. When we park the motorbike, just before it starts pouring with rain, I realise that we are in front of the Pendopo Kecamatan Lima. This *pendopo* (a traditional Javanese open-sided pavilion) is an official building owned by the district’s government. It is around seven o’clock on a Monday evening and there is a long queue of young people waiting to enter the complex. Inside, on the wall, there is a large banner with a picture of myself (Figure 11) that someone has found on the Internet accompanied by a text stating:

International Discussion Forum Part II: The Bridge of Faith and Humahity (sic).
Keynote Speaker Diego Garcia Rodriguez (Spain)
PhD Candidate University Collage (sic) London

![Figure 11: Banner presenting myself as a speaker at an international discussion on faith and humanity.](image)

The casual conversation at the local café has turned into an ‘international’ discussion where I have suddenly become the keynote speaker. The event has been organised together by IPNU (Ikatan Pelajar Nahdlatul Ulama, the Nahdlatul Ulama Male Student Association) and IPPNU (Ikatan Pelajar Putri Nahdlatul Ulama, the Nahdlatul Ulama Female Student Association). The audience is divided into two groups with the boys sitting on the left side of the floor and the girls on the right (Figure 12). The head of the district’s government is sitting with some other
politicians and religious leaders in the front row. I sit on the stage where I am introduced to a famous kyai with whom I am supposed to discuss how to bridge faith (keimanan) and humanity (kemanusiaan). I was not ready for this, but I write down a list of terms in a small piece of paper: among others, wasatiyyah (Arabic for ‘moderation’), keadilan (Indonesian for ‘justice’), toleransi (‘tolerance’). There are more students arriving. There is a rebana music band sitting in the right corner. The music starts. A Sufi whirling group arrives, and two guys start whirling while the band is chanting. Adi is greeting everyone and introducing me to all his friends. He will be sitting between the kyai and myself acting as a moderator and helping me in case I have problems to find a specific word in Bahasa Indonesia. Most of the people in the audience know that Adit used to be a member of IPPNU, the branch of Nahdlatul Ulama for female students, but he is now part of IPNU, the male student organisation. Some months ago, the members gathered to vote and decided together that he could move from one group to the other when he started his hormonal therapy. Not only did the members welcome him as part of IPNU, but some of them were an important source of support for Adit through his transition as a transgender man.

Figure 12: Attendees at the conference on faith and humanity.

The discussion starts, and I begin my talk by linking the social and cultural context of exchange among Muslims, Jews and Christians during the times of Al-Andalus to the
values of diversity in Islam Nusantara. I speak about tolerance, diversity, pluralism and respect. I am not mentioning terms like ‘gender’, ‘sexuality’ or ‘LGBT’, a now well-known acronym in Indonesia. Without referring to any of those concepts, Adit’s presence sitting on the centre of the stage is a declaration in itself. He is accepted by most of his religious community as a *transgender* man. The *kyai* with whom I am discussing the ideas of the forum explains that faith cannot exist without the human values of love, compassion, tolerance and cooperation.

*Muhammad*

I am in South Jakarta hanging out with Muhammad, a *gay* unobservant Muslim from Sumatra who works in the city. While eating some *gorengan* (Indonesian fritters), he tells me about his experience with Hassan, a guy he met a few nights before on Grindr, an online dating application used mostly by gay men. After exchanging several messages discussing their sexual preferences, Muhammad decided to take a Go-Jek to Hassan’s apartment. Once there, they had a short conversation prior to having sex, when Muhammad played the role of the top. Just right after they ejaculated, Hassan ran to the toilet to perform *ghusl*, a ritual purification that some Muslims consider mandatory after having sexual intercourse. Before five in the morning, Muhammad was awakened by the sound of Hassan’s alarm, who set it to perform *fajr*, the first of the five daily prayers. While Muhammad was still in bed, he could see Hassan rolling a mat on the floor and praying in the direction of the Ka’abah. As Muhammad told me, he was surprised by his pious behaviour just after having sex with him. When he was done with praying, he went back to bed and hugged Muhammad to fall asleep shortly after.

*The pesantren waria*

The Pondok Pesantren Waria Al-Fattah of Yogyakarta is the first and only *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) for *waria* Muslims in Indonesia. It is 16.00 on a hot Sunday afternoon and around ten *waria* have gathered to attend the *pengajian hari minggu*, a weekly discussion group to study Islam. They all sit on the porch reading the Qur’an divided in small groups led by three *ustad* (religious teachers). Three of them are wearing the veil, while two others use the *peci*, a black cap usually worn by Muslim men in Java. The *pesantren* leader starts reciting Qur’anic
verses with the religious teacher and the rest of the students follow them. In the middle of the recitation, it is time for salat and most of them get inside the prayer room after performing wudu (ritual washing). One of the ustad takes the position of the imam (prayer leader) in the front of the room. Some waria pray wearing male clothes, while others using the female prayer attire (mukena) do so behind them. The prayer has finished, and they go back to the porch, where the same ustad will teach them about the importance of ghusl, a type of ritual washing that should be done after engaging in sexual acts. Some attendees ask questions in a serious tone, while others burst into laughter through inquiries related to events that took place while doing sex work the night before.

*   *   *

What these three vignettes illustrate are the various everyday ways in which religious practices are carried out by queer Muslims in Indonesia and the reality of coexisting queer and Muslim subjectivities. They also point to the fragility of Western dominant depictions of Islam and queerness as incompatible forces that constantly require reconciliation and the ‘Western’ media representations of Muslim queer people as sexually repressed. The experiences of queer subjects like Adit, Hassan and the members of the pesantren waria open new avenues for reflecting about the emergence of queer religious agentic systems, which are both individual and collective in nature, based on the cultivation of a spiritual and religious life. Adit’s vignette raises questions about the mobilisation of Islam as a source of tolerance through the forum’s topic of discussion (‘the bridge of faith and humanity’), which is related to his own personal experience of acceptance by his religious community. As a transgender Muslim man, Adit had the opportunity to move from the female to the male student branch of Nahdlatul Ulama. His example also opens new epistemological possibilities to think about different approaches to gender identity and sexual orientation, desire or attraction in Islam. Would he have received the same treatment being a lesbi woman or a gay man? For people like Muhammad, religious practices are perceived as being in opposition to queer subjectivities. However, for pious queer Muslims, such practices constitute powerful exercises representing an agentic power emerging in multidirectional ways from submission to resistance to religious norms.

149
Meanwhile, *waria* members at the *pesantren* do not experience a reduction of their human agency by turning to religious lessons and prayers after a night of sex work, nor do they perceive it as being incompatible with their professional activities. Instead, their piety allows them to connect both with one another and individually with Allah while also creating spaces for alternative religious moral action shaped by the settings they inhabit and the obstacles they must confront. In line with this, scholars like Haan have explained that moral action is ‘informed and influenced by variations in contexts’ and by individuals’ ‘own strategies of problem solving’ when they confront a moral dilemma (1986: 1282). As these vignettes anticipate, in this chapter I want to attend to the everyday religion of queer Muslims in Indonesia and the multiple forms agency takes in relation to their religious practices. Various types of religious behaviour arise in relation to one’s gender and sexuality in ways that may sound unexpected for those who assume Islam to be a monolithic religion. As Ibrahim argues (2019: 23) through his work on ‘improvisational Islam’ in Indonesia, ‘it is the unflinching assurance with which Islam is frequently treated in popular discourses, as an entity that we know to be this or that way, that ought to be disrupted.’

The exploration of these multiple agentic forms will take place in relation to the discursive and embodied practices of queer Muslims that both challenge and perpetuate religious practices providing, in similar ways to the subjects explored by Mahmood in the Egyptian mosque movement, ‘the necessary conditions for both their subordination and their agency’ (2004: 154). Existing literature on queer Muslims has tended to look for examples of their resistance to norms as illustrative of their agentic capabilities (Massad 2007: 37). By exploring the emergence of alternative modalities of agency through the case of my participants, I aim to contribute to existing debates within queer and religious studies about processes of self-formation that do not match ‘Western’ dominant liberal theory. Additionally, my analysis of their religious practices will contribute to work within the field of everyday religion, as I noted in Chapter 1 (section 1.2.2), by illustrating how religion in its everyday form can be of benefit for marginalised subjects. This will reveal the extent to which quotidian religious actions have the potential to make positive contributions to queer subjects by putting the focus on their embodied practices.
5.2. Reconciling subjectivities?

Muslim lesbians face the tremendously difficult task of reconciling faith with sexuality (…) and struggle to accommodate themselves within a religious and ethnic community that legitimates and cultivates the stigmatization of homosexuality.
(Siraj 2012: 464)

There is a dominant perception among ‘Western’ scholars that faith and sexuality are at odds with each other and that they need to be reconciled. The fragment above from an academic article on Muslim lesbian women in the United Kingdom is part of a larger corpus pointing to the incompatibility between Islam and queerness. This is often expressed by describing the extraordinary efforts that some queer Muslims must undergo to reconcile faith with sexuality, portraying specific religious and ethnic communities as permanent sources of homophobic discrimination. In fact, there are many who describe Islam ‘as an extremely homophobic religion’ (Siraj 2012: 449). My goal in this section is to challenge such academic discourses by revealing the artificial construction of Islam and queerness as opposites through an examination of the everyday experiences of queer Muslims in Indonesia.

The assumed ontological distinction between Muslim and queer subjectivities is itself a postcolonial construct emerging at the intersection of Orientalism and neo-liberalism. This points to the dominant Orientalist representations depicting queer Muslims as ‘victims’ of their religion and culture and, therefore, in constant struggle. In relation to this, neo-liberal approaches have produced ‘universal’ needs that must be fulfilled for individuals to be truly free, which is central to liberalism. Acknowledging these intersections will help me deconstruct the claims made by scholars about what Islam is in relation to queerness by putting the focus on everyday experiences of religion. With this, I want to illustrate that Islam is not a set of literalist monolithic discourses, but instead has room for interpretation, as Chapters 7 and 8 will also illustrate. It is not my goal to simply challenge the scholars who have explored reconciliatory processes, since it could be the case that their participants pointed to those struggles, but instead to demonstrate the existence of alternative narratives that do not assume the need to reconcile Islam and queerness.
As I noted in Chapter 1, when I first visited Indonesia in 2014, after having read much academic literature about the struggles queer Muslims faced to live their gender, sexuality and religion, I took for granted that my interlocutors would describe their efforts to combine their queer and Muslim subjectivities. However, I soon realised that this discussion was not present in the reflections of most of my participants. Instead, most of them were surprised that I asked them about their processes to integrate Islam and queerness. For some people, like Inul, a 47-year-old waria from Central Java:

Being Muslim and waria walk hand in hand. As long as we pray to God, God will never discriminate against His own creatures. It’s so comfortable to believe that there is no difference between other Muslims and waria Muslims.

This example illustrates an assumed coexistence between one’s Muslimness and warianess, which I also found among my gay and lesbi interlocutors. In this case, this compatibility is explained through submission to religious norms. As Inul explains, one will always be accepted by God as long as the ritual prayer is followed. This points to the absence of resistance to religious norms, which is often explained as evidence of the possession of agency, revealing, paradoxically, the importance of submission for the emergence of alternative agentic models. By yielding themselves to the superior force of God, queer Muslims achieve their potentiality through submission to a divine external authority that enables them to live their subjectivities in relation to the spaces and times they inhabit (Mahmood 2005: 31). For some of my participants, the increasingly anti-LGBT climate since 2016 has also affected their religious experiences in paradoxically positive ways: some have developed a stronger adherence to formal religious rituals and informal spirituality as a way of contesting discourses that exclude them from Islam.

On a hot night in June 2018, sitting at her warung while eating some mie goreng (fried noodles) I had a conversation with Julie, a 26-year-old lesbi women from East Java:

**Diego:** Some people say that you can’t be lesbi and Muslim, that you must reconcile these two positions…

**Julie:** Where are those rules coming from? Are they God?

D: You feel okay being a lesbi Muslim then?
J: Of course!

D: Is there anything about being a Muslim that makes you feel better in your everyday life?

J: Following obligations like *salat*, recitation, and fasting, is good for my life. The important thing for me is that I can still follow them.

D: Why are those religious duties so important for you?

J: Because when I’m praying, God knows what I need. I’m sure that there’s a God who will not hesitate to help his people. I had a hard life because I had to run away to find money, but during those hard times I always remembered I had a God, so when I asked him for help, he would still help me, but I didn’t want to complain too much. There were times when I almost gave up living, but I was still believing in God.

For Julie, the power of God is not only perceived as a spiritual force with which she can connect individually, but it also relates to her own conviction that being born as a *lesbi* woman is consequential of being a creation of God. Her religious subjectivity is not formed within the walls of the mosque but takes place instead within her individual milieu, since she does not feel comfortable attending the religious space for worship because of her masculine gender expression. While this could be analysed as an inability to completely reconcile queerness and faith, I argue that it is instead the construction of the mosque as a heteronormative space that constitutes the reason for her discomfort. This analysis requires a distinction between ‘official’ *salat* taking place within the physical space of the mosque and the engagement in prayer in domestic spaces. Julie’s narrative reveals the emergence of agentic moments built through the personal connection between the Muslim believer and Allah, which is perceived as a source of strength in difficult times instead of representing oppression. These narratives allow us to think of alternative conceptualisations of agency to comprehend the agentic sparks produced by queer Muslims against teleologies of agency as a source of normative ‘liberation’ and ‘freedom’ through resistance.

Islam takes on new forms through the daily rituals that queer Muslims practise in the privacy of their homes, but also when leaving the house. I want to illustrate this point with an example from Achmad, a 35-year-old *gay* Muslim from Jakarta, who described how:
When I go to the office and I take a Go-Jek, I hop on the motorbike and I say ‘bismillahirrahmanirrahim’ (‘In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful’), and then the drivers are sometimes like, ‘you’re a very religious person, Bapak’, and I’m like, ‘oh, wait a minute…’

Levitt has noted how informal religious rituals habitually illustrate more about the shifting character of religious life than the events taking place at official religious buildings (2007: 109). Like Achmad, who does not regularly pray at the mosque, other queer Muslims would recite bismillahirrahmanirrahim before performing daily activities: driving a motorbike, having a meal or undressing. Through quietly pronouncing this prayer, they are both embracing their religion in their everyday life and providing additional meanings to what being a Muslim is beyond formal rituals. This is in line with Levitt’s examples of American Muslims praying while stopped at traffic or travellers crossing themselves before taking a plane (ibid: 109). These expressions of religiosity are only significant for some of my interlocutors when other actors make them aware of them, as Achmad’s case illustrates when noting how the Go-Jek driver assumed that he was ‘a very religious person.’ A question that must be asked is to what extent this could be a cultural rather than religious expression. What makes someone religious, and what does being religious even mean? Can we assume that adhering to the formal teachings (i.e. following the five daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan) is a marker of one’s faith? What is the role of these daily informal rituals in the constitution of one’s Muslimness? The internalisation of Islam as part of one’s religious subjectivity through daily actions (that sometimes are automatic and unintended) offers a lens to approach religion as compatible with being gay, lesbi or trans. This opens the door to reflecting on agency as not only emerging from intentional action but also through automatic unintended deeds.

The following excerpts from interviews illustrate the typical answers of my interlocutors regarding the inseparability between their queer and religious subjectivities:

I’m a lesbi but I also carry my Muslim values, so they become one. You can’t be mean to the people around you, you can’t hurt people. If there’s a girl who likes me, but I don’t like her, it’s better to be honest and tell her that I don’t like her
instead of making her feel pain. Even if I do things that some people consider that you can’t do being a Muslim, I still try to do good deeds to my fellow human beings. – Laudya, 29, lesbi Muslim from Sumatra

What is wrong about being a religious person and LGBT? People try to make us feel scared of Allah. I’ve been threatened by my own friends because of not wearing the jilbab. I still have faith and I believe that worshipping is not something that you should show everyone, that’s between me and Allah. Allah is ‘rahman’ (merciful), not just ‘rohim’ (loving). – Leyla, 20, non-binary Muslim from East Java

Being a Muslim and being a lesbian is not against each other. It’s not a problem. God doesn’t see people from a sexual or gender perspective. God sees people as creatures and only considers the things that people do. God has its own measurement and if you do more good things than bad things then you will be a good Muslim. – Dora, 45, lesbi Muslim from East Java

My religion and my sexuality are together because my sexual orientation was given to me by my God, it’s part of my soul/spirit (jiwa). I cannot just make myself gay. God created me as a gay man, with my perfections and my imperfections, with my own uniqueness. – Reza, 30, gay Muslim from Jakarta

These excerpts anticipate the emergence of multiple varieties of queer religious agency, which were manifested in various ways by my interlocutors. As mentioned before, my approximation to agency is inspired (despite the distance between her study and mine) by the work of Mahmood in Egypt (2005). Scholars like Deeb (2006) and Abu-Lughod (2002) have also pointed to the emergence of alternative models of agency through the experiences of Muslim women, which do not fit within ‘Western’ dominant frameworks. If for Mahmood the agency of the women she explored in Egypt is a challenge to the ‘politically prescriptive projects of feminism’ (2005: 36), what could the role of queer religious agency constitute in relation to international lesbian

---

61 I explored this in Chapter 1, section 1.6.3.
and gay politics, or what Joseph Massad (2008) has called the ‘Gay International’? For Laudya above, a combined lesbi and Muslim subjectivity is shaped by religious moral imperatives illustrated by her rejection to harm those around her. While she assumes these subjectivities to constitute a single one, she is also aware of their incompatibility in the eyes of conservative actors. By cultivating the Islamic value of respect (known in Arabic as ihtiram62) as part of her human dignity, which some scholars have described as a religious duty (Muzaffar 2014; Kamali 2002), she reduces the potential feelings of guilt that other social actors bring to her.

Leyla’s narrative illustrates the astonishment that some of my interlocutors expressed when reflecting on the potential incompatible character of being Muslim and queer. She points to the significance of her faith in opposition to the social pressure she has experienced. This pressure has to do with the increasing visibility of Islam in Indonesian public spaces after the democratic turn of 1998 that scholars like Hasan (2009) have called ‘public Islam’ and that is closely linked to the process of Islamic revival beginning in the 1970s. Her words not only point to the issues attached to being LGBT, but also to unveiling, which is not indicative of a reduction in her religiosity levels. Leyla’s example demonstrates the significance of individual spiritual experiences in the context of everyday religion against formal religious frameworks. While she is not against religious rituals, she does not consider it important to express her piety publicly to come to a pious subjectivity.

For Dora and Reza, religion and sexual orientation are also overlapping entities grounded on essential explanations of gay and lesbi subjectivities and the assumption that God’s creation cannot be wrong. Dora’s narrative is in line with Laudya’s explanation when stressing the importance of ‘doing good things.’ Their words are linked to the importance of prestasi acting as a catalyst of agentic processes by contributing to society with good deeds. The belief that God loves all people independently of their gender or sexual orientation was widespread among my interlocutors, but for some coming to this belief was part of a process of negotiating their multiple selves considering the impact that the forces I explored in the previous chapters (for example, family, education or media) had on them. This often had to do with interpretations of the religious sources used to condemn queer individuals. Some of them engaged in processes of negotiation (a more useful term than that of ‘reconciliation’) to manage their subjectivities in the

62 Scholars have defined ‘ihtiram’ as both respect and ‘mutual respect’ (ihtiram mutabadal) (Lassner 2012), but the term has also been translated as ‘honor.’
middle of increasing social conservatisation and permanent attacks from conservative religious groups and media outlets against LGBT people in the name of Islam. The reason why I argue for the employment of ‘negotiation’ rather than ‘reconciliation’ is based on the negative connotations of the latter implying the restoration of conflictual forces. Rejecting such terminology can help reduce the representation of Islam and queerness as incompatible. Besides the examples noted above, in the next subsection I want to focus on waria Muslims as a specific mode of queer religious subjectivity by attending to the concept of jiwa perempuan or women’s soul/spirit.

5.2.1. Case study: ‘I have a jiwa perempuan’

Ela is a fifty-year-old self-defined waria who lives at the pesantren waria. While she looks like any other veiled woman when she is volunteering at HIV/AIDS organisations, when I visit her at the food stall where she works, she is wearing long jeans, a jacket, an air pollution face mask, and a cap. With her masculine look no one would think that she is the same person I met the night before: her long shiny black hair covered by her veil is now short; her dress has given way to a proper ‘boy’ look. ‘You look so different,’ I say. ‘I have to pass as a boy,’ she replies. After we visit her boss to bring the cash, we sit with a cup of coffee and she explains: ‘Living as a waria is difficult, right? While I’m not comfortable wearing these clothes, I must do it because of my job. This is because I work for someone else, how would my boss react if I dressed the way I like? It would be different if I had my own business.’ Ela’s work is a constitutive force against the embodied form of what she defines as her true waria self, leading to a permanent ‘commute’ between a feminine and a heteronormative appearance. When she is not working, she wears the veil, bodily enacting her religious self. Her words also reveal the significance of social class and status. The situation might not be the same for upper-class waria with higher economic resources, as is the case of beauty salon owners and artists, who often find it easier to transgress heteronormativity. This opens the door to discussions on how being a social waria is shaped by intersections of ethnicity (e.g., Chinese Indonesian, Javanese), class position, location (the city, the kampung, or a permanent commute), and education.

When I meet Nilam, one of Ela’s friends, on a different day, she notes that she thinks of herself as ‘just a waria, I don’t feel like a woman or a man, but just like a complete waria.’ In

---

63 I published some portions of this section as an article on Transgender Studies Quarterly (Rodriguez 2019b).
contrast, Ela explains, ‘I’m sure that my sexual attraction is towards males, while my gender identity is waria and I identify myself as a woman.’ For Ela, gender categories are expanded, transcending the binary gender divide through the incorporation of a waria gender identity that is located between male and female. Although this could be understood as constituting a ‘third gender,’ previous literature has been critical of such conceptualisation, considering that waria are instead a ‘male femininity’ (Boellstorff 2004c: 161). Ela defines her gender identity as a waria, but she simultaneously identifies as a woman. While this might not fit within ‘Western’ models of gender and sexuality, Ela notes: ‘We feel trapped in our body condition, which is male, but we have a female jiwa, we have feelings coming from within. We identify as women but have the physical body of those who were born with male genitalia.’ Describing the exceptionality of waria, she continues, ‘One thing that is unique about waria is that we are ‘spirited’ to behave (menjiwa berperilaku) like a woman.’ Ela presents her gender and sexuality as a three-dimensional self composed of male, female, and waria assemblages, each one arising from different paths: soul/spirit, physical body, and sexual desire. While the masculine side is based on biological sex (male genitalia), the waria and the woman subjectivities are based on the confluence of sexual attraction with the spiritual aspect of the self through the operationalisation of the jiwa. Gender is, therefore, not only based on socially constructed differences between biologically born males and females but also linked to an intrinsic spiritual character that is automatically assumed to be linked to religion. In addition to waria, references to the jiwa were also made by some of my gay and lesbi interlocutors to locate the origin of their same-sex desire.

As I witnessed at the pesantren, these ideas are often discussed during the lessons led by the ustad, where waria study alternative interpretations of religious sources such as the Qur’an and the hadith. At one of these sessions, they discussed the existence of the mukhannath, defined by the ustad as transgender people, during the Prophet Muhammad’s time. These discussions link the teachings of the hadith with waria’s own realities to advance inclusive ideas promoting self-acceptance by stressing the divine origin of the mukhannath, who the ustad considered to be like the waria subject. I also attended several forums where one of these ustad presented his progressive Qur’anic exegesis, taking the message outside the pesantren to build dialogues of acceptance and pluralism with other societal actors.

While previous scholarship has considered the jiwa a constitutive source for waria subjectivity, its significance requires us to dig deeper into this concept to unearth its polysemy
(this is to say, the coexistence of multiple meanings) in relation to the polysemic character of gender, sexuality, and religion. Davies’ (2006, 2010) work on nonnormative genders and sexualities in South Sulawesi notes the significance of the jiwa in the formation of calabai and calalai subjects, which I defined in page 56. As one of her participants notes, ‘The jiwa is very important, you must have the jiwa calabai’ (2010: 36), a statement that resonates with waria narratives I found in Yogyakarta. Davies defines jiwa as ‘spirit’ or ‘soul’, complementary to the term roh, which she defines in the same way (ibid: 215). However, Davies also notes (pers. comm., November 20, 2018) that roh can refer to ‘something much deeper,’ while jiwa originally comes from the Sanskrit, meaning ‘life.’ This leads me to reflect on the possibility of understanding the jiwa as an exteriorisation of the roh through one’s outward everyday personality. This is illustrated by Davies’s participants: the jiwa constitutes not only the subject but also their outward embodied behaviours. In this manner, having an outgoing or reserved personality is a result of their jiwa calalai or calabai (Davies 2010: 122).

Boellstorff (2005; 2004; 2003: 10) defines the jiwa as ‘soul’ and equates it to ‘subject position’ to develop a social constructionist theory of sexuality. The critical significance of his conceptualisation lies in its linkage to a ‘collective meaning’ (2005: 10) that, for example, allows a lesbi woman to identify with other lesbi women by referring to their common jiwa (10). Boellstorff identifies (2005: 10, 164) references to the jiwa in statements made by lesbi women, waria, gay men, and tomboi as a source of one’s subjectivity. As he notes, understanding that God creates one as a tomboi ‘is linked to having the soul (jiwa) of a man’ (164). Additionally, Blackwood’s work (2010: 101) on the tombois of Padang, West Sumatra, introduces their jiwa laki-laki, defined as ‘masculine spirit,’ as an additional source to identify as men, which is completed by ‘appearance, behaviour and bodily movements.’ Moving away from definitions of jiwa as ‘soul,’ Blackwood considers that it is instead ‘a set of attributes and a masculine way of being that develops through experience over time, rather than something that is part of one’s nature from the beginning’ (101). This is in line with Hegarty’s (2018: 357) discussion on the term in relation to waria practices of déndong, or putting on make-up,⁶⁴ as the final step toward ‘the externalisation of innate characteristics that reveal a jiwa perempuan.’ While he borrow Boellstorff’s definition as a ‘woman’s soul,’ Hegarty also states that, for waria, the jiwa arises

---

⁶⁴ Definitions for the terms déndong and dandan are complicated considering its difficult translation. It implies a process of transformation through which waria become or ‘menjadi’/‘jadi’ waria. It may be based on simply applying make-up, but it can also include silicone injections, plastic surgery and wearing female clothes.
against essentialist conceptualisations as a ‘gradual form of awareness’ that takes place through one’s identification as ngondhek (ibid: 366), which one my participants defined to me as ‘being a sissy man.’ For Hegarty, the jiwa cannot simply be conceptualised independent of the material body. Among existing scholarship, only Boellstorff’s work briefly relates the jiwa to religion through his participants’ assumption that it is God’s creation.

Putting the focus on the intersections between the waria’s jiwa perempuan and religion is useful to develop counterhegemonic strategies to resist colonising identities, as previous authors have done through the concept of the ‘spirit’ to explore the two-spirited aboriginal people in America (Cameron 2005). Considering my participants’ accounts of their experiences, the spiritual origin of the waria subjectivity occupies a dominant position against normative ontological constructions of gender and sexuality. When the pesantren members develop a stricter adherence to their religion, they are not simply being submissive; they are achieving the potentiality of their waria selves arising from a jiwa, considered to be God’s making. Can this jiwa perempuan represent the origin of the waria Muslims’ agentic power? In line with Mahmood’s work (2005: 32), this type of agentic power, resulting from religious traditions and therefore not purely belonging to waria themselves, is operationalised through the enactment of values emerging from those traditions: the waria Muslim subject is ‘made possible by the discursive logic of the ethical traditions it enacts’ (ibid). These actors publicly expressed their religious subjectivity in ways that were different to those of the gay and lesbi Muslims I met, who mostly did not consider it necessary to manifest their religion through clothes, symbols or social practices. Most waria Muslims not only cultivated their intimate piety, but also the public expression of their belief through the clothes they wore, their engagement in communal prayer and their attendance of religious events where they interacted with religious leaders. When asked about the veil, some said that they chose to wear it following an Islamic command that required them to do so, while others explained it as a strategic choice. For example, Mami Lini, an older and well-known waria activist in Central Java, described why she started veiling in 2006, 12 years before our meeting:

I feel different now wearing the veil because in the past a lot of people would tease me. Now, if people want to mock me, they must think twice after they see me wearing it. This is one of my strategies. I meet many people because of my
work, and I don’t know whether they are anti-waria or if they support us, but if they see me dressed like this, they might not know I’m a waria. I think by dressing like a Muslim woman I am adjusting to my age, I must dress properly. I don’t like doing dandan, I don’t paint my eyebrows, I only use lipstick sometimes. This way people forget that the person in front of them is a waria because they think that all waria are identical, with thick make-up and lots of silicone. This makes me feel confident.

Similarly, other waria employed the rhetoric of strategic choice to explain why they veiled. In contrast to perceiving the veil as a symbol of the Islamic principle of female modesty, most of them approached it from the perspective of their Muslim subjectivity and, more importantly, what is expected to be worn by Muslim women in the eyes of society. The popularity of the veil among waria is situated within the increasing presence of religious public expressions in post-authoritarian Indonesia since the 1990s as both a symbol of moral control and assumed adherence to the Islamic principles. The choice to wear the veil is an external material consequence through bodily practices of the intimate immaterial existence of a jiwa perempuan independently of how strategic the choice might be. Often unaware of it, these bodily practices shape waria pious subjectivity through the performance of what Mahmood calls ‘prescribed bodily forms’ which are ‘necessary attributes of the self’ (2005: 133). The waria’s jiwa perempuan constitutes the basis for the coordination between one’s spirit/soul, one’s body and one’s Islamic faith, considering that it is claimed to have a divine origin, explaining therefore the importance of perfecting their Muslimness both in the interiority and the exteriority of the self for some waria. As three of the participants noted:

I express myself as a woman, and I am comfortable with my ‘wariahood’ (kewariaan). I am automatically attracted to men because I have the soul of a woman (berjiwa perempuan). — Nilam

As a waria, I feel like a woman (perempuan), I’m only trapped (terjebak) in a man’s body. Only my body is male, but my jiwa, my feelings, and my instincts are female (perempuan). — Diah
I don’t aspire to be a woman, because I already know what women and men are. I am in between men and women; on the one hand I am a man but my jiwa desires to express itself as a woman. — Ria

As these interview excerpts illustrate, jiwa is used both as a noun (jiwaku, ‘my jiwa’) and a verb (berjiwa). As I was explained during my fieldwork, the verb berjiwa can be understood as both ‘having the soul of’ and ‘being possessed,’ as if being a waria was a condition that one cannot escape from. This is represented by Nilam’s words when she mentions the term kewariaan, which I have translated as ‘wariahood’ to express both the state or condition of being a waria and the features that are considered natural to a waria. Jiwa means different things for each of these participants: feelings, instincts, sexual attraction, or gender expression emerging from one’s spirit or soul. Even though its meaning may vary, they all agreed that they own a jiwa perempuan instead of a jiwa waria. The belief in the possession of an intrinsic woman’s soul or spirit constitutes a key argument for the fusion of waria and Muslim subjectivities. Most of the waria I interacted with expressed the difficulties that their gender identity had brought to their lives, but they still noted the indivisible character of their subjectivities. For example, Diah noted that, ‘Being a waria is takdir (destiny given from God).’ Challenging the increasing radicalism of post–New Order Islamic discourses, waria Muslims illustrate the potential of queer piety for the building of agentic capacity at the intersection between gender, sexuality, and religion. These agentic systems emerge from one’s ‘spirit’ or ‘soul’ leading to the possibility of thinking through spiritual agency as an immaterial power and capacity for action that shapes the material self.

5.3. Queer Religious Agency

In this section I look at the ways in which my participants’ agentic power was activated through their engagement in religious practices that were often impacted by their queerness. This process I call ‘queer religious agency’ (hereafter, QRA). Discussions on the concept of agency have been central for scholars of gender, sexuality and religion in recent times. Despite the significance of scholarship on the agency of Muslim women and queers, I argue for the need, following the path set by, among others, Mahmood (2005) and Abu-Lughod (1990), to transcend the location of agency in the ‘political and moral autonomy of the subject’ (Mahmood 2005: 7) as most feminist
scholars have done to date. Central to this endeavour is a rethinking of the normative equation of agency and resistance common in queer theory (Puar 2007: 23). This shift can be helpful to question the assumption that power is ‘always and essentially repressive’ (Abu-Lughod 1990: 42) drawing upon the Foucauldian notion of ‘where there is power, there is resistance’ (1978: 95-96).

With my reference to postcolonial critiques of resistance research, I want to set the context to take a theoretical shift towards the problematisation of the ‘universality of the desire - central for liberal and progressive thought, and presupposed by the concept of resistance it authorizes - to be free from relations of subordination and, for women, from structures of male domination’ (Mahmood 2005: 10). Expanding the object of study from Muslim women to queer Muslims, the application of the QRA approach through the narratives of my interlocutors can offer new ways to tackle queer Muslim subjectivities beyond the feminist and liberal projects that Mahmood has critiqued. With this, I am referring to the dual character of feminism as an ‘analytical and politically prescriptive project’ that, despite its many branches, is united by ‘the premise that where society is structured to serve male interests, the result will be either neglect, or direct suppression, of women’s concerns’ (ibid). Taking this to the context of queer Muslims, I argue that normative projects of queer liberation have offered a diagnosis of queer subjects across cultures and societies and a prescription for fighting the marginalisation, subordination and oppression of queers outside the ‘West’ (ibid). My reflection here draws upon my discussion in Chapter 1 (page 54) on the normative character of freedom for both feminism and liberalism, which is linked to both the project of queer liberation and women’s freedom.

A great number of scholars (Rinaldo 2014; Mahmood 2005; Abu-Lughod 2002; Deeb 2006) have produced literature on Muslim women exploring alternative modalities of agency that challenge dominant conceptualisations emerging from ‘Western’ feminist approaches. Bartkowski and Read (2003: 88) suggest in their study on pious evangelical and Muslim women that, similarly to women in other religions, they possess a significant degree of agency in forming their religious identities. Exploring the lives of Amish and ultra-Orthodox Hassidic women in Israel and the USA, Shahar has noted the emergence of agency from their ‘rigorous adherence to religious dictates’ (2017: 88). Scholars have also added to discussions on agency through the concepts of ‘empowerment’ linked to the queer religious experience (on the Malaysian mak nyahs or transgender women, see Goh 2014, and Goh and Kananatu 2019; on
Zambian gay religious men, see Van Klinken 2015; on queer Christian women, see Murr 2013; on intersex and transgender religious subjects, see Rodriguez and Follins 2012), while some others have linked religiosity to the wellbeing of queer subjects (Kerry 2009; Preves 2008). These instances demonstrate the potential of religion, faith and spirituality for the mobilisation of agentic powers at the intersections between religious and queer subjectivities and subject positions.

The religious dimension of the type of agency I present here needs to be considered prior to exploring its ‘queer’ component. Leming presents religious agency as a ‘personal and collective claiming and enacting of dynamic religious identity’ (2007: 74). She defines religious identities as those acquired, actively sought, or passed on by family, religious groups or other social entities (ibid). For Leming, the constitution of religious agency is based on the active ownership of a religious identity. Despite the importance of her work, I want to move, as I noted in Chapter 1, to a focus on subjectivities and subject positions representing more fluidity than a language of identities, which are perceived as more permanent and uniformising (Davies 2010; Boellstorff 2007). In this manner, I understand religious agency as a modality of action that is enacted through religious, faith or spiritual practices. This type of agency can arise through the materiality of the religious subject (i.e. the physical action of praying or fasting), but also through immaterial/mental actions (i.e. spiritual practices). It can emerge both individually and collectively as the case of the pesantren waria illustrates, where its members’ engagement in religious practices leads to both their mental transformation and the refiguration and reproduction of religious tradition. The argument I want to make by combining a ‘queer’ and ‘religious’ component to conceptualise this type of agency is based on the belief that queer agential subjects also exist within religious frameworks contesting what some call ‘homosecularism’ (Scherer 2017: para. 8) and others ‘queer secularity’ (Puar 2007: 13). ‘Homosecularism’, a concept coined by Scherer (2017: para. 8), refers to the ‘homonormative expectation of belligerent secularism’ that has contributed to the dominant positioning of queer subjects outside religious grounds. The type of agency I am presenting here does not always require a transgression of norms rejecting, therefore, the conflation of agency and resistance.

A question worth asking is that of what it is that makes this type of agency ‘queer’. If we take as an example the field of queer migration studies, much has been debated about the distinction between ‘queer migration’ and ‘migration of queers’. Some scholars argue that
migratory movements of queer individuals should not necessarily be considered ‘queer migration’ since for migration to be queer, it must be *motivated* by their queer genders or sexualities (Gorman-Murray 2009). Challenging scholars stressing the importance of the non-normative genders and/or sexualities of the subjects of study in this process, Braine argues that ‘queering religion’ is ‘a multivalent concept, not limited to or necessarily derived from the sexualities and genders of practitioners’ (2014: 41).

In developing an approximation to QRA, the ‘queering’ process must begin with the deconstruction and contestation of dominant epistemologies of agency, religion and queerness. This is in line with Browne and Nash’s definition of ‘queering’ as ‘the ‘destabilizing’ of dominant epistemologies and methodologies’ (cited in Macke 2014: 15). This process finds resonance with Yip’s discussion on the process of ‘queering’ religious texts when he speaks about the ‘transgression and deconstruction of naturalized and normalized hermeneutics’ (2005). As Macke notes, ‘theories *are queered* (…) when dominant ways of knowing about sexuality, gender, and the interrelations thereof are deconstructed and de-centered’ (2014: 15). Through the concept of QRA, I want to, on the one hand, contribute to comprehending the experiences of religious subjects (those who practice Islam in multiple and varied ways) who describe themselves as, generally, *LGBT* or, using the local terms *lesbi*, *waria*, *priawan*, *tomboi* or *transpuan*, among others. On the other hand, I want to follow the path started by scholars like Jodi O’Brien ‘to disrupt the notion that religion = oppression and secularization = emancipation’ (2014: XIV). In line with this, QRA ‘queers’ religion by destabilising conventional ‘homosecular’ assumptions.

The type of agency I am presenting here is ‘queer’ and ‘religious’ not only because it is shaped by individuals who define themselves as religious subjects and describe their genders and sexualities in non-normative ways (which would constitute a simplistic reading), but also because the productive power that it represents is a challenge to hetero- and homonormativity and unsettles dominant theological condemnations of queerness. It is queer, too, because it contests the assumption that there is a universal expression of agency based on resistance to norms. My understanding of ‘queering’ as destabilisation and disruption to dominant structures of power can be better illustrated with a reflection on discussions on queer agency in previous literature on queer religious subjects. Among scholars of the field of queer scholarship in religion, there is a propensity to evaluate the degree of agentic power that queer Muslims possess.
Putting the focus on the ‘queering’ of religious agency, I think about this as a channel to contest ‘Othering’ processes through the narratives of those who have been excluded from dominant epistemic structures that are linked to ‘Western’ circuits of knowledge production. This approach finds linkages with other academic fields as the work of Luibhéid illustrates within migration studies. She explains queer migration scholarship through an insistence on ‘recovering, theorizing, and valorizing histories and subjects that have been largely rendered invisible’ (2008: 171). This is reminiscent of Spivak’s Can the Subaltern Speak (1988: 76), where she explores the concept of ‘epistemic violence’ as the constitution of the colonial subject as Other. As a discursive term, it explains the subjugation of those outside the ‘West’ through Western and Eurocentric misconceptions of their own processes of meaning-making regarding the worlds that surround them.

Considering the common representations of queer Muslims as victims of their own religion through what could be described as a process of epistemic violence, an exploration of the multiple forms that agency takes will allow me to arrive at a broader framework illustrating the intersecting structures of power in which queer Muslims are submerged. In what comes next, I explore the ways in which surrendering, which I understand in this context as submitting oneself to a divine authority, impacts the agentic power of my interlocutors, whom I explore as agents who both perpetuate and disrupt power relations. After an introduction to the issue of agency as surrender, I structure my discussion around the performance of the religious duties of salat and fasting.

5.3.1. Agency as surrender

It was a hot night in late November 2018, and I was riding a Go-Jek from Northeast Jakarta to the South, where I was about to meet Astrid. The roads were busy, and it took me longer than expected to get to the Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant where Astrid was waiting for me, sitting in the middle of an almost empty space. As I walked towards her, I could see her eating some food that she was holding with her right hand, while using the other one to lift her niqab.

65 This is an issue that Mahmood highlights in relation to the study of Muslim women arguing that most scholars tend to search for ‘moments of resistance that may suggest a challenge to male domination’ as evidence of their agency (2005: 8).
Dressed in black, with her face covered by the *niqab* and her hands by black gloves, I could only see her eyes and the eyeliner that she had applied around them, which she later explained to me as being *sunnah*, a practice of the prophet Muhammad recommended to be followed by Muslims. When I got closer to her, she greeted me by waving one of her hands as if she was saying ‘hello’ to stop me from trying to shake them. Sitting in the middle of the restaurant, other customers arriving looked at us with a mix of surprise and fear, some of them pointing at Astrid and moving to other tables. Considering these reactions, I asked how she felt about the reactions of people to her dress. She explained that, ‘You know, Islamophobia doesn’t only exist in the West, but also here, among Muslims themselves, who always avoid me or look at me with a bad face.’

Growing up within a conservative Protestant family, Astrid converted to Islam while studying abroad in Germany, where she joined a local Muslim organisation. She is a 23-year-old self-defined *transgender* woman who wears *niqab*. A controversial piece of clothing that has been at the centre of academic debates on Muslim women’s identity, choice, oppression and agency (Mancini 2016; Zempi 2016; Taramundi 2014; Bakht 2012), for Astrid it was a polysemic garment that she described as a source of protection and a symbol of her Muslim and female subjectivities. Why would a *transgender* woman want to wear a *niqab*, which even for most of the Indonesian people I met was perceived as inimical to their culture and local Islam? Can this piece of clothing tell us anything about queer religious agentic processes? An answer can be found in the significance that Astrid places in ‘surrendering’ to Allah, which translates into submission to religious obligations in everyday life. For her, total ‘freedom’ can only be attained through the rigorous piety represented physically by the *niqab*. As she told me, ‘I wear the *niqab* because the *hadith* states that a woman’s face is a sensitive part of the body to be shown to men, but also because it reminds me of Allah and prevents me from doing bad things.’

Her statements illustrate how bodily practices can constitute a channel to fulfil assumed religious norms. These practices contribute to the inscription of religion on one’s body and to the construction of a public religious subject position that allows one to become a member of certain religious communities.

An additional explanation for Astrid’s bodily enactment of her Muslimness comes from her conversion to Islam from another religion. In fact, studies of conversion have noted how

---

66 The fact that she converted abroad, where she joined a small community, impacted how she enacted her new religious subjectivity in a stronger manner. Additionally, this could explain the significance of religious submission to fulfil social support needs when being alone in a new country.
converts take on new bodily practices to build and achieve membership in their new religious communities (Davidman 2011: 209). In relation to these social activities, Astrid has participated in several events held by the radical group FPI, which is well-known for its attacks on LGBT people. When I expressed my surprise after hearing this, she emphasised that she had also been part of the 212 Action. As she explained, ‘I’m not the only one, I have other transgender friends who also joined those protests; don’t believe everything you see on the news.’ The conversation with Astrid that November evening was not a typical one. In fact, she was the only transgender woman I met who supported such groups and who wore the niqab. However, I heard of other people like her, and I came to meet several transgender men who told me very similar stories. In fact, my interlocutors who rejected fundamentalism described how several transgender friends with whom they had lost contact had started engaging with those groups. Despite the differences regarding their support to radical groups like HTI (Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia) and FPI, a commonality between them was their disposition towards submission to religious norms in ways that seem inimical to notions of freedom emerging from ‘Western’ liberal secularity.

Against the imaginary of freedom that is common within liberal political theory by which actors are considered free on the condition of acting autonomously (Mahmood 2005: 148), for many queer Muslims I met in Indonesia, freedom was achieved through one’s complete surrender to religious norms. Other participants illustrated the significance of surrendering to Allah as a source of agentic power. Ario, a 25-year-old transgender man from Central Java, defined Islam as, ‘Peace (damai) and surrendering (berserah diri), giving myself to God to feel like I am nothing compared to Him.’ For Tono, a 26-year-old gay Muslim from West Java, his Muslim subjectivity was also produced through the action of berserah diri, the Indonesian verb for surrender. As he explained, ‘For me, to become a Muslim is to completely surrender to God, to give my life to Him to control how I behave, that’s the only way I can seek help, I don’t see anything else as the highest power in the Universe.’ The importance of ‘surrendering’ to Allah is linked to the etymological meaning of the term Islam, which scholars have translated as ‘surrender’ (Ramadan 2007) or ‘surrender to the will of Allah’ (Yusuf 1978: 15). The act of surrendering, which some would assume to be antithetical to the emergence of agentic power,

---

67 The 212 Action was a demonstration led by radical Islamist groups which took place on the second of December 2016, in Jakarta, gathering around 200,000 marchers demanding the imprisonment of the former Jakarta governor Ahok, who had been accused of blasphemy.
was perceived for many of my participants as a practice of self-control that could be read as a source of agentival capacity.

However, surrendering is more than just self-control. It is also about consciously allowing incoherence to reside within one’s subjectivity embarking consequently on a personal mission towards ethical perfection. For most people, the notion of authenticity means total coherence in one’s inner and outer self, which often includes participation in communities that foster that coherence. However, the examples of queer people joining ultra-conservative groups such as FPI represent instead incoherence and risk of self-negation as an expression of ‘surrender’. A question that must be asked is what elements of themselves they are truly surrendering. It is not their non-normative self, as the waria in niqab demonstrates, but it could be instead their attachment to the physical world through an effort on cultivating their spirituality. Subordination to Allah and religious duties enables forms of action that have a positive result for queer Muslims. The significance of surrender was often expressed through the performance of two of the five pillars of Islam that I explore next, which have a key role in the production of queer religious agentic systems: prayers and fasting (puasa).

5.3.2. Salat and additional prayers

The five daily prayers, considered one of the five pillars of Islam, constitute a mandatory act of worship for all Muslims. In Indonesia, prayer time does not go unnoticed. The sound of the azan (call for prayer) has increased its volume in the last years with the growing installation of speakers in the numerous mosques that continue to be built throughout the archipelago. While not being a Muslim, during my time living in Yogyakarta I woke up every day before five in the morning due to my proximity to my kampung’s mosque. The azan is followed by the noise of dozens of motorbikes of those who drove and the conversations between friends who travelled to the mosque on foot. For some waria and transgender Muslim women, these quotidian actions constitute a source of anxiety considering their non-normative gender expression. As some of my interlocutors noted, they felt more comfortable praying at home or moving across various mosques to reduce the possibility of being noticed. For gay, lesbi and Muslim transmen, it was easier to blend in amidst the rest of the worshippers at the mosque. Despite the diversity of their experiences in relation to their genders and sexualities, common patterns were revealed through our conversations. They often pointed to the positive outcomes of surrendering to Allah through
salat in relation to three main issues: achieving calmness, expressing gratitude, and finding a sense of direction.

a) Achieving calmness

Laudya, a 29-year-old lesbi Muslim, has experienced anxiety for a long time because of family issues. Once her father passed away, her mother was alone, and her older brothers did not help. Having to carry the weight of family pressure, she turned intermittently to religion looking for calmness. As she explained, ‘I use salat when I have big problems to feel calmer (lebih tenang).’ Laudya feels comfortable engaging in worship only when she is facing difficulties while she could spend weeks without praying when she is not dealing with stress. Why would someone turn to prayer to evade daily struggles instead of getting her problems off her chest in a different way? As Laudya explained:

My friends care for me, but there are certain things that we must keep to ourselves... Salat is the only way I have to feel better about myself. Sometimes I perform salat five times a day, and then after that it takes me a long time to do it again. Every time I pray, I say, ‘God sorry if yesterday I forgot to pray, I forgot to follow your path.’ When I pray, I always ask for forgiveness. I still wear mukenah to perform salat, and sometimes my friends tell me that they feel disgusted seeing me wearing it, but that’s my kodrat, if you are a woman, you must wear mukenah.

Similar narratives were evident in other interviewees. Zulaykha, a 21-year-old bisexual woman from Jakarta, described how, ‘I’d only pray for special occasions, when I’d feel depressed and my mum is like, “you should go pray”; she doesn’t see prayer as a religious thing, but more as a way of meditating and feeling good.’ Arlo, the transgender man from Central Java, shared that, ‘I enjoy doing salat because it calms me, it helps me understand that I don’t own my life, that my life is His life.’ Some of my interlocutors also described how salat led them to cry as a way of

68 The term kodrat, often translated as ‘nature’, refers to the essential biological aspects that constitute someone as a man or a woman impacting the roles that one is expected to take. It is associated with religion, as Wieringa illustrates when defining kodrat as a ‘religiously ordained position’ (2009: 46).
getting rid of negative emotions and momentarily ending suffering. Participants often noted how ‘feeling depressed’ or ‘feeling down’ was a catalyst to engage in prayer, looking to feel better. Some of them defined their prayers as a type of meditation that had contributed to fighting depression and anxiety disorders. This points to the understanding of prayer as both a spiritual experience and an obligatory ritual established by religious norms. As an agentic practice, salat offers queer Muslims the substance of emotional states of serenity beyond its character as a religious norm. In this manner, the connections between religion, faith and spirituality, which I noted in Chapter 1, emerge through everyday actions that transform normative religious practices into personal religiosity.

**b) Expressing gratitude**

Some of my interlocutors pointed to the importance of engaging in salat to express gratitude. Within the context of Islam, I understand gratitude as a religious experience based on a tri-polar construal (Roberts 2014). This implies that queer Muslim believers (A) are grateful to Allah (B) for something (C) that is assumed to have been granted by his divine power. Previous research into religion has attempted to evaluate the significance of gratitude for religious subjects noting that they tend to be more grateful than secular individuals (Tsang et al 2012; Rosmarin et al 2011). During my fieldwork, I witnessed the significance of religious gratitude as a source of spiritual fulfilment and self-control for queer Muslims. For example, Tono, a 26-year-old gay Muslim, shared with me how after receiving a scholarship to study in Singapore he started to pray more often to express his thankfulness. For him, having received such an award was consequential of his good deeds and everyday achievements, or prestasi, constituting the precondition for his continuous engagement in salat. Other participants (especially waria) referred to how they would hold communal prayers with other queer Muslims to manifest their gratitude for their positive experiences. This cycle of gratitude prayers takes place endlessly for some queer Muslims, since some consider that salat is required to achieve one’s goals which, when achieved, are assumed to have been granted by God because of one’s rigorous piety and should be concurrently thanked through prayer.

Other interlocutors rejected the notion that salat could help them achieve what they wished for and said that they would never pray to ask for things to happen. Despite this way of
thinking, they considered that their positive experiences were consequential of God’s will. As Rury, a 35-year-old lesbi woman, explained:

Some people pray conscientiously when they have a difficult time, but I always avoid praying when I’m in a difficult situation because I don’t want to use God. It’s unfair… I pray diligently when I feel very happy. I always believe that God is with me, whether I’m praying or not. Even right now, here, God is seeing us, but how you see and feel it is different for every person.

For those who shared Rury’s mentality, engaging in prayers of supplication or request, which are known as salat hajat in Indonesia and allowed in Islam, was perceived as an act of selfishness. This type of prayer is performed by Muslims when they want to achieve something specific (examples I heard were finding a partner, being successful in a business and overcoming a disease). While some of my interlocutors occasionally engaged in salat hajat, Rury and others rejected it. Their belief in the expression of gratitude through prayer might be rooted in the significance given by the Qur’an to being thankful to Allah as a virtue to be cultivated by Muslims (Al-Seheel and Noor 2016; Emmons and Crumpler 2000). What I consider significant in these processes is the role of gratitude as one of the assemblages producing queer agentic systems leading to potential feelings of ‘empowerment’.

Gratitude is consequential of one’s strict submission to religious norms considering that what one achieves is the product of Allah’s concessions. This is not unique to queer individuals, but also common for non-queer Muslims. For those who do not engage regularly in salat and fasting, positive events like finding a job or overcoming a disease were perceived to be reasons to be grateful to Allah through prayer, therefore increasing their faith and spiritual connection with God. An additional issue to consider here is how agency appears in two dimensions through the expression of gratitude, one of them being as non-human agentic power emerging from Allah. As Roberts explains, ‘gratitude attributes benevolent agency to the source of one’s blessings’ (2014: 69), which for believers is alleged to be God. From the perspective of queer Muslim subjects, agency arises through the embodied religious practice of salat that brings spiritual and physical rewards. The engagement in prayers as expression of gratitude should be read, I contend, as an illustration of the existence of various structures of power that are thought to be productive for
the queer religious subjects. This is demonstrated by the belief that one’s achievements have been granted by Allah, pointing simultaneously to a divine power structure and the queer religious agentic power that generates and is generated by the expression of religious gratitude.

c) Finding a sense of direction

A third agentic practice emerging from the narratives of queer Muslims concerns the role of prayers to feel in control of one’s life, which my interlocutors described as finding a sense of direction. Dimas, a 27-year-old self-defined transboy from East Java, described how, ‘sometimes I pray salat istikharah and salat hajat to ask God for guidance.’ Besides salat hajat, which I mentioned in the previous section, salat istikharah, also known in Arabic as Salat al-Istikharah, is a prayer recited by Muslims when looking for guidance on specific issues. For Ardi, a 36-year-old gay Muslim man, it was not only salat, but also religious lessons that had provided him with a channel to control his life during his teenage years: ‘I liked going to the religious sessions because they gave me a sense of direction since I had a lot of insecurities when I was in High School.’ For Dani, a 25-year-old transgender man from West Java, religion and prayers were perceived as an everyday need to feel ‘stronger mentally and physically.’ As he described, ‘I need my religion, I need Allah, I need it as the basis of my life to keep on going, I’ve never felt forced to practise Islam, I just need it so badly.’

The significance of prayers as life guidance was also explained by Julie, a 26-year-old lesbi woman from East Java. After running away from home following the traumatic divorce of her parents, she started performing as a pengamen (street singer) with a group of homeless friends she met on the street. Prior to leaving the family house she had not been strict about prayers, but she experienced an evolution afterwards. As she told me, ‘religion is like a life guidance (pedoman hidup); when I left home, I felt that praying was more important, it wasn’t just salat but praying (berdoa) in general.’ As she noted, besides the five daily prayers, additional prayers like salat hajat and istikharah were important to achieve stability in her life in difficult times. Julie’s experience was common among some of my interlocutors, who saw themselves forced to leave their family home because of experiencing rejection or just because they tried to look for a better life in a different city. Some others pointed to struggles experienced when noticing their same-sex desire or gender non-conformity, which for some led to a feeling of
confusion and loss. Yanto, a 26-year-old *gay* Muslim, described such an experience in the following way:

I remember when I was 13-14, I’d pray five times per day, and I’d read the Qur’an not knowing what it meant but I felt this connection with Allah and it was all my own will, nobody forced me. At that point, I felt that the people around me were all going in different directions and I felt lost... I felt just directionless in life, so I turned to Allah, I turned to religion and I found comfort, I sought refuge in that, and it gave me a sense of direction. Because when you pray five times per day there’s a clear direction of where your life is going on a daily basis, you know...

For many of my interlocutors, spiritual connections with Allah through prayer constituted a source of guidance providing them with a sense of power in their life paths. This points to the emergence of sources of self-control that are placed outside the subject. Instead of perceiving submission to religious norms as an oppressive issue, they underwent the contrary process: it was this obedience that created, in their own view, paths for the emancipation of the self through references to ‘freedom’ and ‘liberation.’ This self-willed submission to norms does not mean depriving oneself of achieving one’s desires but becomes instead the catalyst to enacting an ethics of self-determination that does not match the liberal imaginaries of freedom (Mahmood 2005: 148). These narratives could be perceived as clashing with the emphasis on individualism that liberalism supports considering the significance given by my participants to both individual prayers and communal practices. However, this was not always the case in light of their emphasis on personal piety choosing to pray in order to achieve a personal spiritual gain. It would be different if the reason why they prayed would have been for the moral strength of their community. Instead, they often looked for a positive impact on those around them (in terms of being perceived as ‘good Muslims’ and, therefore, accepted despite their queerness) for their own benefit rather than for the benefit of the wider social community.

This was especially significant for *waria* Muslims I met in Yogyakarta, who were members of the *pesantren waria*, and would describe their weekly religious lessons and prayers as a source of guidance in life. Some engaged in *pengamen* and sex work, which had taken them to various
islands and cities throughout their life often feeling a lack of stability that was replaced by a sense of direction when engaging in communal prayers. Inul, one of the members, said that after joining the pesantren she started to reflect more on the decisions she was taking in her everyday life through a statement that aligned power with being in control of her life. As she explained, ‘if anyone thinks of doing something bad, after joining the pesantren we’ll think twice about it like, “oh, I have already joined the pondok pesantren!,”’ we listen to the preaching, so we do what we naturally want with our lives, which is doing good deeds.’

Despite acting on her own accord, what is perceived as ‘natural’ arises from her Muslim subjectivity. In this manner, performing good deeds is naturalised through the internalisation of the Islamic values of social justice and human dignity. This points to the emergence of agentic modalities of action rooted in systems of submission that contribute to the reconfiguration of individual freedom. Submitting oneself to the quotidian act of praying translates into the emergence of powers relations that, through the possibility to find direction in life, lead to the assumption of ‘being in control’ by negotiating, contesting and sustaining other pre-existing power structures.

5.3.3. Fasting

Fasting, known in Bahasa Indonesia as puasa, emerges inexplicitly as a source of internal and communal power from the narratives of my interlocutors. Fasting is the fourth of the five pillars of Islam and is required during the holy month of Ramadan, when food and drinks are forbidden during daylight. Some of my interlocutors additionally engaged in the puasa Senin Kamis, also known as puasa sunat, or ‘optional fasting’ on Tuesdays and Thursdays when Ramadan is not taking place, and puasa daud, also voluntary and aimed at achieving a reward, which can be done any time of the year except for the festivities of Idulfitri and Iduladha. Through my fieldwork I found various consequential patterns of fasting that were linked to the notion of surrendering to Allah: emotional and sexual control, training oneself in Islamic virtues and the cultivation of empathy and solidarity. What these examples illustrate is, I contend, the emergence of agentic power at the intersection of religion and queerness.

Drawing, once again, upon the work of Mahmood, I contend that this type of power offers queer Muslims with a capacity for action that is created and enabled by the relations of subordination established through the religious duty of fasting. This contests queer ideals based
on the rupture with that which is considered ‘normative.’ As Puar explains, equating ‘queerness’ to the requisite of freeing oneself from norms is problematic because it makes ‘individual agency legible only as resistance to norms rather than complicity with them, thus equating resistance and agency’ (2007: 23). The fasting practices of queer Muslims, which are not much different from those of non-queer people, demonstrate that the acts of queer people are not always based on liberatory and transgressive goals, a discourse supported by strands of queer theory that Puar has critiqued (2007). This, of course, requires us to engage in a process of unlearning what we academically ‘know’ about queer Muslims from their dominant representations as victims devoid of agency.

Consider, for example, a group of queer Muslims who noted the significance of fasting as a source of self-control. For Lidya, a 29-year-old lesbi Muslim, fasting had been a helpful resource since her teenage years, when she struggled with mental illness stemming from her sexual orientation. As she noted, ‘I still fast, not only as a religious activity, but also to prevent bad behaviours and control my emotions...’ As she continued, ‘if I’m angry with someone I don’t express it to them while fasting... If someone hits my car, then I can remain patient.’ Fasting constitutes a reminder of the Islamic values to remain calm and avoid engaging in negative actions. By fasting, Lidya trains herself in the Islamic virtue of sabr, which represents the maintenance of patience when facing unexpected situations. In this light, I argue for a turn to an investigation of agency surpassing normative notions of queer agency as emerging solely from the transgression of norms, to take the complexity of power seriously. This can be accomplished, as Mahmood argues, by delinking the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics, ‘a tethering that has led to the incarceration of the notion of agency within the trope of resistance against oppressive and dominating operations of power’ (2005: 34).

For Lidya, fasting was not only about abstaining from all food and liquid for a certain period, but also entailed a variety of interpersonal behaviours that were perceived as beneficial to her everyday life. Other participants also pointed to fasting as a ‘source of blessings and emotional control.’ That was the case of Laudya, who explained that:

Fasting has taught me a lot. I’m a temperamental person, but when I’m fasting, I become a better person. If my girlfriend gets angry and starts yelling at me, I just stay quiet. She’s also very temperamental but fasting makes me feel relaxed. I’m
happy when I’m fasting, I can be more patient (sabar), I can hold back my emotions, and have a better relationship with the people around me.

These narratives illustrate the significant linkages existing between bodily practices, ethics and moral conduct despite the scholarly tendency to present practices like fasting and praying as not having political implications (Mahmood 2005: 119). The ritual of fasting is operationalised towards the task of creating a harmonious society based, inexplicitly, on the Indonesian notion of gotong royong, or mutual assistance. This illustrates, once again, how Islam and the project of Indonesian nation-building coexist in ways that are not always visibly obvious.

Other queer Muslims described how they had struggled with their gender and sexuality turning to fasting as a potential solution to repress their desire in what I argue to be another dimension of queer religious agency. This was the case of Jono, an 18-year-old transgender man, who explained that, ‘fasting helps me repress my desire; when I’m fasting, I can focus on whatever I’m doing, and my feelings of attraction towards women can be reduced. Of course, I still like girls, but it helps me reduce the need of wanting to be with someone. It’s not just about sexual desire, but also about possessing someone.’ Cita, a 32-year-old waria Muslim, also explained the significance of fasting as a way ‘to hold back my lust (menahan hawa nafsu). If I am fasting, I realise that I am doing things that are not good, so sometimes it’s like a form of control for me.’ Other people received these ideas from their religious teachers, as Raffi, a 28-year-old gay Muslim explained: ‘my ustad would constantly tell us that we could repress our sexual needs by fasting.’

‘Authentic’ queer identity often relies on the capacity to openly express one’s non-normative gender or sexuality rather than to repress it. Considering this, the words of Jono and Cita are particularly relevant illustrating a temporary repression on the full expression of their sexuality for the sake of spirituality. This is similar to how openly gay priests make a vow to remain celibate for the sake of their vocation. Being celibate for faith reasons does not diminish one’s queer subjectivity but can re-create such subjectivities and subject positions in new ways. The narratives above can be explored through a framework of ‘positive ethics’ to analyse the importance of relating to moral codes in particular ways. Colebrook (1998) defines positive ethics as being ‘beyond notions of norms’ to pay attention to the ‘practices, selves, bodies, and desires that determine (and are codetermined by) ethics’ (ibid: 50). This can help us understand
the relationships established between the queer Muslim subject, the authority of religious norms and one’s self subjectivity (understanding oneself as Muslim and, for example, *gay*, *waria*, *trans*, etc), what one wants to achieve (in the case of Cita and Jono, a lower sexual desire) and what one can do to produce a specific ‘modality of being and personhood’ (Mahmood 2005: 120).

Fasting as a source of emotional control and individual training in Islamic virtues such as patience finds resonance with the work of Hadot on ‘spiritual exercises’, which he defines as ‘practices which could be physical, as in dietary regimes, discursive, as in dialogue and meditation, or intuitive, as in contemplation, but which were all intended to effect a modification and a transformation in the subject who practices them’ (2002: 6). Considering this definition, the Islamic ritual of fasting can be read as a spiritual exercise through which queer Muslims transform themselves within, making spiritual progress and intending to ‘carry out a radical change’ in their being (ibid: 176), which demonstrates the fluidity of individual freedom.

An additional dimension of fasting was presented by several queer Muslims who described it as a source of empathy and solidarity. They would often define *puasa* as the basis to build proximity with individuals from lower social classes. In the following excerpts, three queer Muslims engage in this line of reasoning:

Fasting helps me feel like a homeless person, like an orphan with no food. We can feel like people who have less opportunities, it helps us feel like equals. – Astrid, 23-year-old *transgender* woman, Jakarta.

Fasting for me represents solidarity... If someone is hungry, I feel hungry too, just like them. – Dani, 25-year-old *transgender* man, West Java.

By fasting I am getting a moral lesson to experience what other people feel, I mean, those who don’t have money to eat. Some Muslims feel that they should be respected when they fast, but I think we should flip that. It should be us, as Muslims, who respect those who don’t fast as we respect those who cannot eat. – Adit, 28-year-old *transgender* man, Central Java.
These narratives point to the role of fasting not only as spiritual training, but also as a moral venture which takes the self-willing fasting Muslim closer to those who cannot afford to eat by temporarily experiencing their hunger. Engaging in this religious practice does not lead to a feeling of moral superiority nor to judging those who do not fast, as Adit’s example illustrates. Instead, it represents a practice of moral self-cultivation to become, as some of my interlocutors described, a ‘good Muslim’, which was often understood as not only following the religious rituals but also showing respect to those who practise Islam in ways that are different to one’s actions. Fasting is perceived to be an action of solidarity with those in need, while also contributing to the expansion of one’s empathy through bodily experiences. Considering that this is a typical moral justification for most Muslims, queers and non-queers alike, during Ramadan, a question that must be raised is what makes this particular kind of solidarity unique to queer Muslims.

An answer might be found in the specific spiritual resonance that queer Muslims find with the struggles of those who are poor and in need. While fasting during Ramadan is often temporary, happening only during that particular period of time, this notion of solidarity remains beyond such temporal framework. Reflecting on fasting as a catalyst for agentic systems is helpful to disrupt the notion of the ideal queer as transgressor/resister. In this case, the emergence of agency is consubstantial to the practice of ‘surrendering’ to a divine power to achieve one’s potentiality as a queer Muslim subject. Once again, this modality of agency is not based on one’s individual actions in isolation from the rest of society, but it is also perceived as a communal process since individual actions are based on considering other members of society.

5.4. Conclusions
Like other individuals who practice and attend to their religious lives in ways that do not always match official creeds, the example of the queer Muslims I met in Indonesia demonstrate what McGuire calls ‘the contested nature of definitional boundaries’ (2008: 43) establishing acceptable Muslim beliefs and practices. Such limitations have led to the adoption of institutional (and often inexact) perspectives on religion (ibid). In this chapter, I have explored how everyday multifaceted and, sometimes, inconsistent religious practices can constitute the basis for the emergence of queer religious agentic systems. Resonating with literature exploring religion as practice (Ammerman 2007; Hall 1997), with this chapter I have argued for the importance to
take the everyday religion of queer Muslims seriously beyond the exploration of Islam as official doctrine. This means emphasising the position of Islam as the everyday experience of faith and belief against religion as text and legal interpretation. In line with this, in section 5.2 I contended that the common depiction of queer Muslims as subjects in perpetual need to reconcile their identities or subjectivities is often unrelated to the actual realities of some of them. The section also served to introduce the case study of the waria’s jiwa perempuan, or female soul/spirit, to address the importance of Islam as a source of agentic power in relation to the waria’s gendered spiritual subjectivities.

Studies of everyday religion located within the discipline of religious studies have privileged ‘individual spiritual experiences and social context over fixed categories and statistical equations’ (Biney 2018: 125). The focus is on how ‘nonexperts experience religion’ in both ‘private and public life, among the privileged and nonprivileged people’ (Ammerman 2007: 5). Some queer Muslims I have presented throughout this chapter, mostly the youngest ones, are well educated, while some (mostly waria) left school before their teenage years and have worked ever since as street singers or sex workers. Some, as I explored in the previous chapters, grew up within conservative families while others described their family as progressive or liberal. Despite their differences, a common feature they shared is that none of them had abandoned religion entirely. As Ammerman notes, religion ‘includes not only theologies or formal teachings (…) but also everyday practices and identities through which people live it’ (2007: 142). These actions and individualities vary among queer Muslims who in some cases engage in formal religious participation while others have developed creative ways to practise their spirituality outside of the mosque, the musholla and the pengajian.

(How) can queer religious agency be conceptualised? Aiming to offer preliminary answers to this question, this chapter has shifted away from the ‘Western’ equation of agency as resistance that is common in poststructuralist feminist theory and queer theory. I have done so finding inspiration in the work of, among others, scholars like Mahmood (2005), Abu-Lughod (1990) and Puar (2007), to explore queer religious agency as a modality of action that takes shape within a non-secular framework sometimes impacted by the non-normative genders and sexualities of the agents whose narratives I have presented. Even though the queerness of the queer religious agent is not always the reason behind the decision to act ‘religiously’, the identification of my interlocutors as, for example, gay, waria or trans has implications to contest,
firstly, the representation of queer Muslims as victims of their own religion through their own practices and, secondly, the projects of homonormativity and ‘Western’ feminist and queer neoliberalism, within which one’s ‘freedom’ is measured in relation to how much one’s ‘oppression’ is resisted.

The type of agency I have presented in this chapter is queer, as I stated earlier, not only because of the queer self-identification of my interlocutors, but also because the productive power that it represents unsettles dominant academic representations and theological condemnations of queerness. QRA is built through the combination of a capacity to act in a religious way through the performance of what my interlocutors considered to be a Muslim subjectivity and the disruption of both hetero and homonormativity presenting a challenge to homosexual frameworks. Drawing upon the work of Mahmood (2005), I have argued that a queer religious agentival capacity may emerge not only through actions based on resisting norms but also in the manifold behaviours through which one lives those norms. Applying this framework, ‘what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency - but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment’ (ibid: 15).

Through this chapter, the empirical context offering a window on queer religious agency has been an exploration of the religious rituals of salat, additional prayers and fasting. Prayer was perceived by my interlocutors as a source to achieve calmness, express gratitude and find guidance in daily life. This led to the emergence of feelings of ‘freedom’ through one’s complete surrender to religious norms opposing imaginaries of liberation that are common in liberal political theory by which individuals are only ‘free’ on the condition of acting autonomously (Mahmood 2005: 148). Additionally, fasting was linked to submission to Allah leading to the attainment of emotional control, training the self in Islamic virtues (i.e. patience, social justice, human dignity) and the cultivation of empathy and solidarity. Ritual prayers and fasting were therefore perceived by most of my interlocutors as appropriate channels through which they could tap divine power. This milieu reveals the need to transcend portrayals of religion as a transhistorical entity existing as a unitary phenomenon that scholars like Asad and McGuire have criticised (Asad 1993: 29).
To conclude, and reflecting on my explorations throughout this chapter, I want to stress the dangers of perpetuating assumed ontological and epistemological distinctions between Muslim and queer subjectivities, which I have tried to challenge through the exploration of queer religious agentic models. Such distinctions are often manifestations of postcolonial constructs emerging at the intersection of Orientalism and neo-liberalism. With this, I want to think about the permanence of Orientalist representations portraying queer Muslims as ‘exotic’ subjects, ‘victims’ of their religion and culture and, therefore, in constant need of reconciling their gender, sexual and religious subjectivities. When pointing to the intersection of Orientalism with neo-liberalism, the latter emerges as a continuation of the ‘Western’ domination of knowledge that Orientalism exemplifies by creating what Gamble has called a ‘new dominant common sense’ (2001: 129) through the production of assumed universal interests that are required for a society to be truly free, which is at the core of liberalism.

With this in mind, it is important to be critical of the liberalist emphasis on freedom from coercion as the basis of its ideology. Acknowledging these intersections and putting the focus on the everyday experiences of queer religious subjects can help deconstruct existing ontological claims about the incompatibility of Islam and queerness. Challenging discussions that perpetuate ontological and epistemological fictional distinctions between East and West, I argue for a way of knowing arising from queer Muslims’ own explanations. From my explorations of the everyday religion, gender and sexuality of my queer interlocutors in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, in the remaining two empirical chapters I move the focus to those actors that support and promote queer rights in Indonesia employing a religious approach.
Chapter 6: Who are the Allies of Queer Muslims? Situating Pro-Queer Religious Activism in Indonesia

6.1. Introduction
While from Chapters 3 to 5 I have put the focus on the experiences of queer Muslims in Indonesia, in Chapters 6 and 7 I move to explore the role of those actors I call ‘allies’ of queer Muslims. As I noted in Chapter 1, I use the term ‘ally’ to describe non-queer individuals who enjoy a privileged status in society due to their activities as religious leaders, scholars, or heads of religious non-for-profit organisations, and intentionally support queer people, individually or collectively, by promoting their rights both as Indonesian citizens and Muslim subjects. Some of them received a strict religious education in pesantren and madrasa within and outside Indonesia in countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt and have worked extensively on Qur’anic hermeneutics. The chapter seeks to explore progressive Islam in contemporary Indonesia through the work of these allies, identify what the main forces behind pro-queer activism are and how Islam Nusantara, a branch of Islam shaped by Indonesian culture and traditions, can be mobilised to support queer rights. I aim to locate the emergence of pro-queer Islamic discourses at the intersections between these allies and the actors around them, progressive hermeneutics (alternative interpretations of the religious texts advocating for social reform) and religious dialogue.

After an exploration of literature on progressive Islam in section 6.2 to set the background to my discussion, I turn in section 6.3 to an analysis of what it means to be a ‘progressive Muslim’ in Indonesia by paying attention to my self-defined progressive interlocutors’ own narratives. Following this, the second half of the chapter is divided into two sections. In the first one (section 6.4) I look at the sources of inspiration that make pro-queer Muslim activism possible (but not inevitable), focusing on the role of student organisations, inter-faith dialogue, and Gus Dur’s ideas. In section 6.5, I examine the phenomenon of Islam Nusantara through the voices of allies and thus attend to the processes through which this branch of Islam takes shape.

In this chapter I will argue that nationalism, the concept of liberation and local tradition are the main constitutive forces shaping Islam Nusantara through an implicit contestation of
debates portraying *adat* or local customs as un-Islamic (Bellows 2011). Liberation arises not only as a religious process, but it is embedded in Indonesian colonial history and present in contemporary progressive discourses indirectly. In this context, I contend that pro-queer activism takes on multiple forms. What type of activism is this? Why do some progressive Muslim leaders support the *waria*, but not LGBT people in general? While the sources of inspiration I explore can make pro-queer activism possible, they do not make it inevitable. This means that not everyone who has joined the groups I explore in this chapter support queer rights, but those organisations have capititated some members to mobilise pro-queer support.

6.2. A brief introduction to progressive Islam

In the last two decades, a significant body of work has examined progressive Islam. Safi’s 2003 edited volume *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism* has become the main reference work to explore the subject. In this volume, several authors discuss potential strategies through which Islam can embrace modernity while being faithful to its teachings. For them, social justice, civil liberties and equality between those who are perceived as different can be supported by Islam through the practice of *ijtihad*, or Islamic critical thinking. However, defining what constitutes a ‘progressive Muslim’ has been a source of conflict, as illustrated by the tensions in relation to what the concept implies between Safi himself and the Progressive Muslim Union of North America (PMUNA), where he used to be a board member (Duderija 2010: 129). As Safi notes, striving for justice and pluralism should be at the centre of the progressive Muslim movement (2003: 2). This aim resonates with the concept of ‘keadilan’ or ‘justice’ that Indonesian progressive Muslims often employ to advocate for queer rights. The issue of progressive Islam has been explored mostly in ‘Western’ literature in relation to the American context to stress the diversity that is inherent in both Islam and America (Wadud 2003), within discussions on Islamic jurisprudence (Ali 2003), through comparative studies of interpretational models governing Neo Traditional Salafi (NTS) and progressive Muslim approaches (Duderija 2016), and as an identity (Duderija 2010). One of the few systematic efforts to define progressive Islam was undertaken by the Progressive Muslim Network (PMN), an online platform established to bring together scholars and activists working on progressive Islamic discourses from around the globe (Esack 2003: 80). According to this definition,
Progressive Islam is that understanding of Islam and its sources which comes from and is shaped within a commitment to transform society from an unjust one where people are mere objects of exploitation by governments, socio-economic institutions and unequal relationships. The new society will be a just one where people are the subjects of history, the shapers of their own destiny in the full awareness that all of humankind is in a state of returning to God and that the universe was created as a sign of God’s presence. (Esack 2003: 80)

Scholars like Duderija have set principles guiding a progressive Muslim approach such as: (i) a ‘principled or prophetic solidarity’ (an expression coined by Esack) with those who are marginalised to promote religious pluralism and social and gender justice, (ii) ‘speaking truth to power’ through self-critique to follow the principles of a just society, (iii) engagement in a progressive critical interpretation of Islam, and (iv) understanding modernity not simply in a ‘Western’ sense but acknowledging the ‘historical, social, political, cultural and religious/theological specificity of modernity itself’ (Duderija 2010: 134). Although not explicitly mentioned, the first principle of solidarity with marginalised subjects could be an argument to protect sexual minorities. However, only a small fraction of the scholarship on progressive Islam openly tackles the inclusion of queer Muslims within this movement. Kugle has stressed the significance of sexuality-sensitive religious interpretation attentive to sexual diversity through the semantic and thematic analysis of the Qur’an (2003: 203).  

His analysis finds resonance in the approach of Indonesian allies such as Aan Anshori and Musdah Mulia, whose work I explore in this chapter and the following one, who have engaged in queer-friendly Qur’anic hermeneutics.

Considering that a full discussion of the extant literature on progressive Islam lies beyond the scope of my study, I want to move now to the specific Indonesian context. Using the concept of ‘progressive Islam’ in Indonesia is a complicated task considering its written similarity to the Islam Berkemajuan adopted by the Islamic organisation Muhammadiyah in 2015, which has been translated as ‘Islam with Progress’. According to Haedar Nashir, Muhammadiyah’s current leader, Islam Berkemajuan shares the values of moderation, peace and tolerance that Islam

---

69 As noted in Chapter 1, much has been written on Islam and homosexuality, but I am referring here specifically to debates framed within progressive Islam.
Nusantara promotes (Arifianto 2017a: 4). However, it is necessary to clarify here that when using the term progressive Islam throughout this thesis I am not referring specifically to Islam Berkemajuan nor to Islam Nusantara (despite the strong influence of the values of Islam Nusantara on my interlocutors’ narratives). Instead, with the term ‘progressive’ I am thinking of the promotion of social reform towards the building of a just society inspired by the conceptualisations of Safi and Duderija presented above. Following this, I frame the allies within progressive branches of political Islam. With this, I am not understanding ‘politics’ as activities related to governance (i.e. ‘Indonesian government politics’) nor to one’s membership of an Islamist political party. Instead, I am referring to the political character (understood as relating to social affairs) of the progressive beliefs and principles emerging from within Islam, bearing in mind their potential power to effect social change.

Focusing on Indonesia, Hefner has developed the concept of ‘civil Islam’ to define a movement that denies ‘the wisdom of a monolithic ‘Islamic’ state affirming instead democracy, voluntarism, and a balance of countervailing powers in a state and society’ (2000: 12-13). As Hefner continues, civil Islam is not a reproduction of a Western concept of civil society. Instead of promoting a liberal model of individualism and self-containment through which ‘autonomous agentic subjects’ can emerge, civil Islam is closer to Tocquevillian notions of civil democracy based on understanding democracy as a noncoercive system where citizens are encouraged to respect the rights of other citizens (Hefner 2000: 13). Against the abstraction of Muslims from their external relations with other Muslims, in the ‘self-contained and solitary’ way that Parekh (1992) has described as common in liberalism, the relations between individuals and their outside world is central for the allies I explore in this chapter.

Resonating with Hefner’s portrayal of the Muslim actors he locates within ‘civil Islam’ (2000: 13), the allies consider that society involves more than independent individuals. Inspired by Hefner’s work, I want to point to the emergence of Muslim activism for queer rights operating through similar (and further) notions of ‘free speech, participation, and toleration’ on which civil Islam is based (ibid). When I speak about activism, I am not only referring to actions done through well-thought and planned campaigns, but I am also thinking about purposive everyday informal interactions that can contribute to achieve social change.70

---

70 I want to take distance here from previous notions of activism within work on Islam and non-normative genders and sexualities such as Kugle’s, which he defines broadly, in his study of queer Muslims (2014) to stress instead the
both by Islamic and Nusantara values, occurs in an ‘archipelagic’ way: from media interventions to interpersonal encounters via political participation, as I will demonstrate exploring allies’ strategies in Chapter 7. Moving from theoretical discussions to my interlocutors’ own definitions, in what comes next, I explore what being a progressive Muslim means for the religious leaders and scholars I interacted with during my fieldwork and what the implications of defining as progressive are for pro-queer activism.

### 6.3. Progressive Muslim allies

When reflecting on the position of progressive Muslims in Indonesia, it is important to bear in mind that it remains a relatively small movement within the broad context of Islam in the archipelago. With this, I am referring to ‘official’ discourses of Islam instead of the everyday interactions between actors which may reveal progressive patterns but do not always reproduce political debates. As Aan Anshori, a well-known Gusdurian leader and member of Nahdlatul Ulama, explained to me during an interview, ‘The progressive wing of Islam, where me and my friends are, is just a minority.’ Even though he might be right in his analysis, a point that cannot be denied is that this minority is an active one, with branches across the Indonesian archipelago and individuals engaging in dialogue through workshops, lectures and multiple events on almost every island. As Aan told me, ‘In general, Indonesian Muslims are tolerant, but tolerance is never enough, they have to speak up against injustice.’

The concept of justice (‘keadilan’) emerges at the heart of progressive Muslim thought. Reflecting on the consequences of embracing progressive Islam, Marzuki Wahid, co-founder of the progressive Islamic institute Fahmina, explained to me that ‘progressive Islam is a liberating Islam, that offers new views and more just (adil) relations.’

The view that this branch of Islam can bring about a fair society is explained through the conceptual metaphor of liberation depicting how people can be set free through religion. Without referring explicitly to it, Marzuki’s statement finds resonance with Christian liberation theology, calculated/purposive character of allies’ actions through organised networks and organisations. With this, I am saying that I do not consider everyone an ‘activist’ in the way that Kugle presents almost all individuals as activists when they self-consciously interact ‘with others in order to change the social order’ (ibid: 220).

---

71 The Gusdurian Network is a Muslim organisation aimed at implementing the values of Gus Dur. I explore this in section 6.4.3.

72 The Fahmina institute, located in Cirebon (Central Java), was founded in 1999 and works on the production of knowledge through the contextual study of Islamic religious sources.
which puts a strong emphasis on the ‘liberation’ of the poor from their unfair situation, and also finds roots in the colonial struggle for liberation and independence from the Dutch. Considering that my interview with Marzuki included a discussion of the place of sexual minorities within Islam, his words imply that, for him, these subjects need to be freed from oppression. Identifying as progressive is not only based on stressing the individual dimension of the religious experience (i.e. what some refer to as ‘being liberated’) but is also concerned with communal projects that emerge through interactions between religious subjects. Following this line of thought, Abdul Muiz Ghazali, a professor of Islamic Studies and member of several NGOs, noted that:

Being a progressive Muslim means having a way of thinking that comes forward to elevate the values of humanity (kemanusiaan), respecting other human beings by focusing on how we socialise (bergaul), having [a good] relation with the people around us without judging whether they are sinful or not, regardless of their sexual orientation.

What statements made by the allies often implied was that ‘being progressive’ is inseparable from being a good (Muslim) human being understanding this as being respectful of the different. Social justice is at the centre of this movement and is supported by Islamic values equated with secular ‘humanist values’ (nilai-nilai kemanusiaan). Since human beings are believed to be a divine creation, these values are simultaneously explained to have been bestowed by Allah. Mutual respect, harmonious socialisation and positive interpersonal relations are not only values to be promoted through an Islamic humanist approach, but also reveal the importance of belonging to a collectivity shared by all Muslims, as Abdul states in the excerpt above, ‘regardless of their sexual orientation.’

Some of my interlocutors employed the terms ‘humanisme’ (‘humanism’) and ‘kemanusiaan’ (‘humanity’) interchangeably even though most of them were not aware of the long intellectual history of the philosophical tradition of humanism. Despite their difference in meaning, ‘humanisme’ and ‘kemanusiaan’ were often used to refer to placing the welfare of human beings above all other issues through the belief in their universal needs, which coincides

---

73 Traditional Muslims might also describe ‘being a good Muslim’ in a similar way, but they might also have different ideas about what a good human being is. For example, when I engaged in conversations with more traditional individuals, being a ‘good Muslim’ was often equated with ‘correct’ ritual practice (i.e. fulfilling the five pillars of Islam).
with common definitions of the ethical stance of humanism. Scholarship on Islamic Humanism (Bardhi 2002; Goodman 2003; Kraemer 1992, 1984; Moosa 2011; Tibi 2012, 2009) has noted the potential of this movement to challenge Islamism, overcome social conflicts by uniting all humanity into a single family and situate respect for diversity at the centre of Islam. Tibi has noted that ‘the Muslim alternative to Islamism is humanist, civil Islam’ (2012: 232), which takes us back to the work of Hefner (2000) mentioned in the previous section. This way of thinking is somehow reminiscent of the humanistic tradition of Islam that some Indonesians have termed ‘neo-modern Islam’, which was supported by the Ministry of Religion during Suharto’s times (on neo-modern Islam, see Cone 2002: 54). Of course, queer acceptance was not part of the conversation of the liberal ministers of the time, an issue that Musdah Mulia, a famous Indonesian Islamic scholar and human rights activist, also explained to me when discussing her understanding of progressive Islam:

With the term progressive, I mean that Islam is a religion that is *rahmatan lil alamin*. This means that it brings affection to all beings, not only human beings. Yes, all beings, including plants and animals. Islam for me brings positive transformation to the entire universe. For me as a Muslim, progressive means going against mainstream interpretations. For example, as a human rights activist I believe I must defend *LGBT* rights. We as Muslims cannot discriminate, exploit, and attack *LGBT* groups.

Musdah’s statements are relevant because of her defence of *LGBT* rights, which she has promoted publicly leading to a backlash from conservative members of society. However, her statements rejecting attacks against *LGBT* groups should not be taken as a key example of a progressive way of thinking. In fact, most conservative people who are against queer people would also agree that exploiting and attacking such people is wrong.

While not using the term explicitly, the progressive allies I met were pointing to the concept of *adab al Islam* when speaking about queer people. This has been defined in several ways referring to Islamic humanism (Cone 2002: 56), manners, culture and the content of wisdom (Goodman 2003: 107-108), or the worldly culture of the polite classes during the High Caliphate, which became a standard across the Islamic world becoming ‘the culture of polite society’ (Hodgson 1975: 239). The notion of *adab* as Islamic ‘etiquette’ has been encouraged
through the *hadith*. For example, the book of *hadith* Al-Adab al-Mufrad collected by Muhammad al-Bukhari addresses what the standards of general social behaviour are for Muslims. This code of behaviour is at the core of an Islamic humanism, which Indonesianists like Robinson (2008) have connected to feminism in Indonesia. As she notes, Islamic feminism in Indonesia is rooted in ‘a humanist and cosmopolitan version of Islam’ (Robinson 2008: 7) through ‘hermeneutic readings that emphasise humanistic ideals rooted in Qur’anic values’ (ibid: 165).

This concept is additionally linked to Indonesian nationalism. As Robison continues, in the early twentieth century, ‘Indonesian nationalism incorporated ideas of natural rights (…) through universalising terms like ‘*manusia*’ (humankind)’ (2008: 35). In relation to this, Musdah’s statements in the excerpt above point to the importance of the Islamic concept of ‘*rahmatan lil alamin*’, which she defines as ‘bringing affection to all beings’, but that can also be translated as ‘mercy to all creations.’ For her, the protection of God’s creations includes a notion of environmental ethics, which has been an increasing topic of academic production in the last twenty years (Saniotis 2012; Deen 2007; Foltz 2000). In line with Musdah’s approach, Aan, who defined himself to me as a ‘*rahmatan lil alamin* Muslim’, emphasised that implementing this Islamic concept is especially significant in the Indonesian context ‘to protect diversity since we have such a wide variety of identities.’ Complementing the value of ‘*kemanusiaan*’, ‘*rahmatan lil alamin*’ emerges as a guiding principle for Muslims both individually and communally. As Pak Man, a community leader and head of a *kampung* in Yogyakarta, explains:

> I must act politely because for me Islam is *rahamatan lil alamin*. Islam is about mercy for all creations without considering the differences between the tribes. That’s the most important thing for me. Both social and personal dimensions are important. I need to connect with Allah personally, but since I live as part of a society, it is important to also contribute to our community life.

This reflection is based on an emphasis of similarity between all human beings locating its origins in the notion of creation (*’ciptaan’*) by Allah rather than focusing on the differences between them. Pak Man’s narrative is also in line with the importance of a social dimension described by Abdul above stressing the importance of socialising (*’bergaul’*) and ‘having a good
relationship with the people around us regardless of their sexual orientation.’ The question of ‘community life’ and being an active part of society is central for every Indonesian citizen. It is not only related to religious principles, but it emerges as a local way of acting in which helping each other finds expression in the local concept of mutual assistance or ‘gotong royong.’ As Bowen notes, post-independence Indonesia has had the notion of social interaction ‘as collective, consensual and cooperative’ at the basis of discussions on the nature of society (1986: 545). When reflecting on the significance of *rahmatan lil alamin* in relation to the phrase of ‘gotong royong’, one can perceive it as both an individual moral obligation that every Muslim should adhere to, and a communal project through my interlocutors’ references to a ‘social dimension’ that is also reminiscent of the Islamic concept of *fitra*, which Kugle (2014) has explored to refer to how God ‘has created all things distinct in their individuality yet making up a harmonious whole’ (25).

The range of narratives that I have presented so far points to the existence of similar patterns in the ways that allies understand the concept of progressive Islam. However, this is not a cohesive movement. On the contrary, it is characterised by the existence of heterogeneous debates and divergences. As Kyai Hussein Muhammad, who received his education from Cairo’s Al-Azhar university and is the co-founder of Fahmina, explained to me, defining what progressive Islam means is problematic considering the existence of multiple sources of disagreement. However, he has found some general guidelines to describe the movement by employing the binary of conservative versus progressive. As he said, ‘Those who adapt to the changing times (*perkembangan zaman*) are the ones I call progressive, while those that hold on to the textual teachings (*ajaran textual*) are within the conservative dimension.’ While all versions of Islam draw inspiration from its religious texts, what this implies is the rejection of textualist approaches that lack contextual interpretation. As he continues explaining, which I also witnessed at events where progressive approaches to Islam were discussed, an additional difference between conservative and progressive Muslims arises from the strategy used to approach everyday issues: ‘Progressive people approach problems from their substance (*substansinya*) instead of taking the perspective of formality (*formalitasnya)*.’

With the notions of ‘substance’ the *kyai* is referring to ‘that which is created’ (‘*inilah yang menciptakan*’) by Allah, which unites all creations as equal beings, while ‘*formalitas*’ refers to the textual approach (in this case, referring to literalist interpretations) to which conservative
Muslims, he considered, adhere therefore rejecting the acceptance of queer Muslims. Following a similar line of thought, Musdah pointed to the threat of ‘formalisme’ (formalism) understood as the imposition of the methods practised in the early years of Islam in today’s society through regional regulations (perda-perda) in contrast to contextual interpretations of the religious sources. The issue of ‘formalism’ has been defined by scholars of Islam as a perspective through which the traditions at the time of revelation are considered to be the basis for ‘sacred, unchangeable, ideal and desired relations and models’ (Matsunaga 2011: 364).

6.4. A background to pro-queer activism

Following my exploration in section 6.3. of what progressive Islam means for the allies, I shall note that a common feature shared by all of them was their engagement with other organisations, complementing their obligations as professors, institution directors or NGO leaders. Some were (and still are) active in social work focusing on, among others, inter-faith dialogue, reproductive health, Chinese-Indonesian rights, victims of the 1965 communist massacre and farmers’ rights. Interestingly, their engagement with those communities is not a consequence of belonging to the group. For example, none of the allies was queer, Chinese-Indonesian or a direct victim of the 1965 violent events. This is a distinct point from previous research on queer Muslim activism performed by queer Muslims themselves who would look for alliances with other minority groups, as explored by Kugle (2014: 190). In opposition to that, all the progressive Muslims engaging in pro-queer activism whom I interviewed identified as heterosexual and did not occupy positions within queer-rights NGOs. While some allies have made Islam their ‘profession’ as religious leaders and scholars, others are full or part-time activists, their activities being influenced by their past experience with three main groups: PMII (Pergerakan Mahasiswa Islam Indonesia or Indonesian Islamic Student Movement), inter-faith organisations, and Gusdurian networks (Jaringan Gusdurian). In what comes next, I explore the significance of these three groups as forces that shape the allies’ conception of progressive Islam and makes pro-queer activism possible but not unavoidable.

6.4.1. PMII
PMII (Pergerakan Mahasiswa Islam Indonesia or Indonesian Islamic Student Movement) was created in 1960 by the Muslim organisation Nahdlatul Ulama with the goal of supporting the Partai NU (Nahdlatul Ulama Party) and train young NU members intellectually.\textsuperscript{74} I first came across the work of PMII in 2014 when I conducted fieldwork for my master’s dissertation in Java. I remember a conversation I had with one of its leaders at Airlangga University in Surabaya, who stressed the significance given by PMII to educating on gender equality and reproductive health by working intersectionally with other societal groups. It was then that he mentioned their work with GAYa Nusantara, but I never had the chance to study the alliances between queer-rights NGOs and Muslim student organisations further. Years later, when I went back to Java for my PhD fieldwork, some of my interlocutors pointed again to PMII as an inspiration for their engagement in pro-queer activism. While I want to note the significance of PMII as a catalyst for political and social change in relation to queer rights, this organisation has not officially supported queer people. Keeping this in mind, in what comes next, I will be exploring the narratives of former and current members of PMII who are currently active in pro-queer activism. While not having taken an official position regarding queer issues, PMII has been organising workshops on gender and sexuality where these issues are discussed. The organisation is also involved in a range of activities aimed at effecting social change. As one of its members explained to me during my fieldwork, ‘PMII has worked with people living on the riverbanks to alleviate their poverty and with those who are evicted from their homes by the government by implementing Islamic values to defend them.’ These examples are not only illustrative of the potential of Islam to bring about positive change, but also demonstrate the importance of Muslim student organisations built around the Islamic value of social justice, which simultaneously acts as a catalyst for the possibility of queer inclusion.

As Marzuki, a former member of PMII, explained to me, his current activism is the result of a personal process of mental evolution that began when he moved from his hometown in West Java to the city of Yogyakarta to commence his university studies. This led him to start changing his views on three main issues. As he explained to me, ‘The first was about the relationship between Islam and other religions; the second on how human beings should treat animals; and

\textsuperscript{74} Data from 2017 indicates that PMII has 230 branches and 24 branch coordinators across Indonesia (Putri 2017). Although I have tried to find the number of members to give a sense of its size, I have not found such information. Nahdlatul Ulama, the organisation to which it belongs, is considered the largest Muslim organisation in the world with around 90 million adherents (Winn 2019).
my third shift was regarding gender relations.’ This points to three common issues that other allies raised as mental obstacles to perceive those around them as equals. Growing up in a kampung in rural Java, Marzuki noted how he was always told that ‘non-Muslims were evil (jahat) people who would go to hell (neraka).’ Patriarchal interpretations also shaped his views on gender equality, which shifted when he moved to Yogyakarta. As he told me, it was not his university education that led to the mental growth he described, but instead his engagement with PMII. It was after joining this organisation that he began to explore the Qur’an and the hadith from the perspective of humanity (kemanusiaan) to, he said, ‘develop better gender and religious relations to reduce discrimination and violence through reinterpretations of the religious teachings (reinterpretasi terhadap ajaran agama).’

As Marzuki’s experience illustrates, traditional Islamic interpretations constitute one of the obstacles for gender justice and the support of religious minorities. This is a point that has been discussed in existing scholarship, noting how scholars of Islamic feminism have been at the forefront of critical readings of the Qur’an ‘to undermine traditionalist scriptural interpretations’ (Bartkowsk and Read 2003: 75), pointing to the importance of contextual interpretations considering the historical conditions under which the Qur’an was revealed (Scott 2009). Besides literalism, some interlocutors stressed how patriarchal structures embedded in the local culture (which are not unique to the Indonesian context but exist globally) also have a negative influence on people’s perspectives on gender equality. A former leader of PMII in East Java described the importance of contextualism within the organisation:

At PMII, we believe that Allah created all humans equally, but the traditional interpretations position men as the leaders of women. That’s why it’s important for us to interpret the Qur’an according to the current social context. I believe in equality between men and women, but we still have a patriarchal society.

Van Bruinessen and Wajidi have explored the contribution of PMII to secular and left-wing alliances demanding ‘total reform’ during the Reformasi times (2006: 3). As they note, a great number of PMII members moved to join or create NGOs after Suharto’s fall (ibid). This was confirmed by my interlocutors, who noted how it was only after they started hanging out with queer Muslims at gender and sexuality workshops organised by PMII in the late 1990s that they
established alliances with queer-rights NGOs. Aan explained the reason why he started supporting queer-rights organisations in relation to his prior involvement in PMII:

I started in 2000, you know, I got involved first with PMII. That was a big influence. I read a lot about humanity from Gus Dur, how he got inspiration from Islam to achieve social change without rejecting the Indonesian context. His perspective regarding Islam in Indonesia is pretty much about making everyone equal to everyone, it’s about equality, also between straight and homosexual people, as well as the waria. This is very different from classical Islamic perspectives. All that encouraged me to do much more.

This illustrates the significance of the work of PMII in opening the door to progressive ideas laying the groundwork for supporting queer rights through Islam. As Marzuki told me, his experiences at PMII were a channel through which he ‘found himself.’ ‘Finding oneself’ emerges both as a way to make sense of social realities and a ‘liberation’ from traditionalist interpretations. Aan’s statements also point to the interconnections between PMII and the ideology of modernist scholars like Gus Dur. Once again, the concepts of kemanusiaan and keadilan, which I have noted before, are stressed as necessary lessons in one’s path towards progressive Muslim activism.

One’s membership in PMII is perceived as a stimulus to making one’s support for queer Muslims possible but not inevitable, which is confirmed by the fact that just as not all members identify as queer-friendly, neither does the organisation promote tolerance towards sexual minorities explicitly. As Aan confirmed to me, ‘not all PMII cadres have been enlightened yet regarding LGBT issues, but of course there are some.’ Despite this, the organisation continues holding courses on gender and sexual ethics in Islam in multiple locations across Indonesia where they have recently started to include a non-binary gender perspective through collaborations with progressive religious scholars. It also promotes inter-faith dialogue, which I turn to explore in the next subsection by moving away from PMII to explore its role as a catalyst for pro-queer activism.
6.4.2. Inter-faith dialogue

Taking place secretly behind closed doors at a hotel near a touristy area in Central Java, GAYa Nusantara organised a 2-day inter-faith workshop that brought together a group of 16 people to discuss religion, gender and sexuality in late 2018. The participants discussed the position of their respective faiths regarding sexual minorities and also exchanged religious perspectives through inter-faith dialogue. Members were, among others, activists from religious organisations, professors from Christian universities, a waria ex-priest, a transgender Muslim man, a member of Komnas Perempuan (the National Commission on Violence Against Women), a Methodist preacher and a Christian reverend. The discussions included the position of LGBT people within various religions (such as Islam, Christianity and Buddhism), the classical interpretations of religious texts on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC) diversity, and the dissemination of progressive interpretations.

The participants also shared conversations over lunch and dinner that contributed to an increased understanding of each other’s problems and to the building of a feeling of community as some described to me. These Muslim encounters with progressive ideas take place while simultaneously stressing the need to engage in the rituals that are considered required to ‘be a good Muslim.’ The conversations, in between Islamic tradition and liberalism, resonate with definitions of Islamic post-traditionalism (also known as postra) as a method of discourse critique (Kersten 2017: 174). As Kersten explains, this Islamic current is inspired by Wahid’s support of an ‘indigenisation of Islam’ (pribumisasi Islam), Latin American liberation theology and Hanafi’s manifesto of the ‘Islamic Left’ (ibid). The importance of embracing Islam as the religion of ‘rahmatan lil alamin’ was raised by some participants in the event as a source of tolerance.

This type of gathering, which has taken place in other locations, acts as both a catalyst for inter-faith dialogue and progressive hermeneutics inclusive of sexual and gender diversity, and it is also a useful setting for queer religious subjects to share their stories with their allies. This is an issue I witnessed through the case of two waria and a transgender Muslim man attending the event, who described their experiences of transition sharing very emotional narratives. As one of them stated, ‘Being in this group has helped me accept and understand myself.’ They not only engage in intersectional activism but also illustrate the embodiment of queer Muslim intersectional lives. In 2019, GAYa Nusantara published a book with the outcomes from this 2-
day workshop exploring nine key issues at the centre of the debates during the meeting: 1) dissecting *(membedah)* the labelling of queer individuals as sinners *(pendosa)*, 2) answering the question of whether God’s creation is always binary, 3) exploring homosexuality as a reality, 4) reinterpreting the concept of procreation, 5) meeting the needs *(memenuhi kebutuhan)* of sexuality, 6) analysing gender expression from the perspective of religion, 7) purification *(purifikasi)*, 8) reinterpreting the story of the people of Luth and Sodom and Gomorrah, and 9) understanding piety and faith. These are some common subjects of discussion I heard during interviews as well as during my attendance of events.

Most allies were members of inter-faith groups or had engaged in inter-religious dialogue through organisations working on other issues. For example, Aan in Jombang and the schoolteacher Bu Anis in Yogyakarta recounted how they started organising exchange visits between Islamic and Catholic schools to encourage their students to interact with people of different faiths aiming to fight intolerance and discrimination. Following these visits, Bu Anis found inspiration to begin organising encounters between her students and queer people, which I explore in Chapter 7. This is often a complicated task. In fact, Aan explained to me that he had this project rejected from three different schools until one of his friends from Nahdlatul Ulama, who owned an Islamic school, offered to organise the exchange with a Christian school. Those who rejected the initiative, Aan explained, argued that ‘it was too complicated, and they said they were not ready yet’.

In the last years, conversations taking place between leaders representing different religions have emerged as an additional source of unity between sexual minorities and minority religions. Only in the early months of 2019, Jakarta’s Theological Seminary has published two edited volumes on Christianity and queer issues: ‘*Siapakah Sesamaku?*’ (‘Who is my fellow?’) and ‘*Homoseksualitas dan Kekristenan*’ (‘Homosexuality and Christianity’). The seminary regularly holds discussions on gender, sexuality and religion, working together with organisations such as the Youth Interfaith Forum on Sexuality (YIFoS). These inter-faith forums are often employed as channels through which discussions on queerness and religion are included strategically to achieve the long-term goal of building queer inclusion.

Academic scholarship has stressed the potential of inter-faith dialogue for the promotion of queer rights. For example, in their work on LGBT college students Rockenbach et al (2017) explain how engaging in interfaith activities can be beneficial for religious queers. As they note,
‘interfaith spaces are perhaps the most receptive for students to question, embrace, and internalize their multiple identities’ (2017: 505). Gaffin’s study (2008) on an LGBT interfaith project in London also illustrates the complexity of developing dialogues at the intersection between religious, gender and sexual diversity. Opposing rigid theologies of inclusivity, she proposes the formulation of theologies enabling individuals to acknowledge their limited understanding of the shifting and multifaceted social worlds in which they operate (ibid: 357).

According to Musdah, who I introduced earlier and is the former Chair of the Indonesian Conference on Religion and Peace (ICRP), ‘When we work on interfaith dialogue with religious leaders from various regions one of the things we focus on is the defence of LGBT groups.’ This is not an easy discussion because the dominant approach in major religions has been against the inclusion of sexual minorities. Indeed, other members of ICRP are not supportive of LGBTIQ people. For example, Pak Muhamin, a kyai leading a female pesantren in Yogyakarta who used to be the leader of ICRP, illustrates the existing tensions between those engaging in inter-faith work. As he explained to me, ‘Some people in the organisation have been too defensive (terlalu membela) of LGBT people.’ For him, LGBT people ‘represent a sexual deviation (penyimpangan seksual).’

In contrast to these statements, he has been a vocal supporter of the waria community in Yogyakarta. When the radical group Front Jihad Islam (FJI) demanded its member shut down the pesantren waria, he became a mediator between the santri (students) and the fundamentalists. As he told me, ‘Waria are not LGBT, they are “human children” (anak manusia) and they have the right to be glorified.’ Interestingly, the common translation of ‘anak manusia’, which I have italicised due to its difficult translation in this case, has been ‘son of man’, a Christian expression referring to the sayings of Jesus that has been equated to ‘son of God’. For Pak Muhamin, this expression is a reference to his belief that waria are God’s creation, a reason why they should be protected. This is not an infrequent case since I heard similar declarations from other religious leaders, who I would not locate within the progressive Muslim spectrum considering their intolerant views. Their support for waria Muslims can be explained by their adherence to the heteronormative gender binary and the consideration that they are part of the local culture.

While they perceive gay or lesbi Muslims as deviant subjects who choose their attraction to their same sex, waria are understood as suffering from a gender identity disorder that is inescapable. Although I met Muslims who supported waria but rejected the LGBT community, I
never found anyone who supported LGB people while rejecting waria. What I consider notable here is that those who supported waria but rejected LGBT people used the acronym LGBT including the T, which refers to transgender and transsexual people. However, they perceived waria as different to the T in LGBT due to its local character, as some religious leaders explained to me expressing that they were ‘part of their culture.’ This context opens the door to discussions on important theoretical questions regarding the different approximations to gender variation versus same-sex desire, love and romance. The higher acceptance of embodiment transgression over non-normative desires constitutes a paradoxical milieu considering the Islamic emphasis on bodily behaviours. However, a potential explanation is that some waria return to masculine Muslim clothing standards when practising salat. This is interpreted by some religious leaders who support them (but who reject lesbi and gay Muslims) as the correct embodied performance of belief against same-sex desire. What these debates also illustrate is the existence of multidimensional levels of support towards queer Muslims, which I want to narrow through the employment of the term ‘allies’ to focus on those who work on progressive discourses inclusive of queer Muslims in general. In this context, as I have shown, inter-faith dialogue constitutes an important tool towards the inclusion of queer-supportive discourses.

6.4.3. Gus Dur’s ideas

As noted in Chapter 2, Abdurrahman Wahid, known as Gus Dur, was the President of Indonesia from 1999 to 2001, led Nahdlatul Ulama for 15 years and founded the National Awakening Party (PBB). Besides the extensive scholarship on his work, Wahid himself produced several important publications discussing Islam and the Indonesian nation (Wahid and Ikeda 2015; Wahid and Taylor 2008; Wahid 2005, 2003, 2001, 2000) that are available in English. The inspirational heritage of Gus Dur is still present today: from younger to older Indonesian citizens, Muslims and non-Muslims, I often heard supportive statements towards Wahid’s alternative discourses, which Kersten defines ‘in clear defiance of the liberal Islam that unabashedly champions capitalist neoliberalism’ (2017: 176). The multiple controversies he faced during his short presidency did not allow him to develop the programme he had planned for Indonesia.75 His ideas are still stimulating discussions in multiple levels (for example, on

75 Some of these controversies included confrontations with the army, his apology to the victims of the 1965 massacre, and his support to religions other than Islam (Vickers 2005: 2011).
politics, religion, or nationalism) and have led to the emergence of the Jaringan Gusdurian (Gusdurian Network). Run nationally by his daughter Alissa, it is present across Indonesia through more than 200 local groups (Aan Anshori, personal communication, 17 May 2019). In 2018, the Gusdurian biannual national meeting held in Yogyakarta welcomed more than 700 attendees. As the Jaringan’s website explains:

The Gusdurian network is an arena of synergy (arena sinergi) for the Gusdurian [communities] to open cultural spaces and non-political practices. Within the Gusdurian network, there are individuals, local communities/forums, and organisations that feel inspired by Gus Dur’s values, thoughts, and struggles. Because it is a network (jejaring kerja), formal membership is not required. The Gusdurian network tries to continue the struggle that was initiated and developed by Gus Dur in the context of today’s challenges. (Gusdurian 2019).

By employing the term ‘synergy’, the emphasis is on the importance of cooperation and interaction between multiple organisations and stakeholders looking to produce a joint effect rather than working separately in line with the spirit of ‘gotong royong’. This includes students, religious leaders, scholars and other admirers of Gus Dur working through four major levels: Islam and faith, culture, the Indonesian state and humanity (Gusdurian 2019). The principle of ‘kemanusiaan’ (‘humanity’), which is at the centre of the allies’ discourses, is presented as an additional source of guidance. The main goal is to perpetuate Gus Dur’s ideas in today’s Indonesia focusing on what the network calls ‘the 9 values of Gus Dur’: ketawhidan (monotheism), humanity, justice, equality, liberation (pembebasan), brotherhood (persaudaraan), simplicity (kesederhanaan), sikap ksatria (prioritising the interests of others rather than self-interest) and traditional wisdom (ibid). These values, inspired by Islamic principles, are put into practice through debates, anti-corruption campaigns, cultural forums, social media workshops and entrepreneurship trainings with diverse societal groups. Some allies raised such principles to support their pro-queer Muslim activism, which they located at the juncture between local traditions and Islamic values.

Kyai Hussein Muhammad explained to me that discussions combining gender, sexuality and Islam started to be encouraged by Gus Dur himself as early as in the 1980s through the
Association for Pesantren and Community Development (Perhimpunan Pengembangan Pesantren dan Masyarakat), known as P3M. Brenner (2011) explains that P3M has organised workshops ‘on women’s sexuality, reproductive health and rights; domestic violence; and women’s treatment in fiqh’ through reinterpretations of the Islamic sources to promote women’s rights (483). Although to my knowledge the place of sexual minorities within Islam was not the main topic of discussions back then, these activities can be perceived as a precedent to today’s conversations. While, according to the members I interacted with, the central board of the Gusdurian Network does not have an official position regarding sexual minorities, they have never publicly opposed their acceptance. Their support towards vulnerable groups on the basis of humanity, equality and justice makes it easier for its members to engage in discussions on queer issues.

The network has incorporated SOGIESC debates into the Gusdurian internal training. An example of the Gusdurian work with queer organisations is the programme ‘Mainstreaming Gender and Sexuality in the Religious Community’, which was organised with GAYa Nusantara and the development aid organisation Hivos held in the Javanese cities of Surabaya, Mojokerto, Malang, Jombang, Jember and Banyuwangi. For the last three years, members of the network have organised discussions putting together queer people and other marginalised communities such as the Ahmadiyyah Muslims with Sinta Nuriyah, Gus Dur’s widow. These events have been reported in the media noting the presence of waria organisations such as Persatuan Waria Jombang joining bukker (‘buka bersama’ or ‘breaking the fast together’) gatherings (‘Istri Gus Dur’, 2018). On a personal level, Sinta Nuriyah has also received and advised the leaders of the pesantren waria in her residence (Emont 2017). Some Gusdurian leaders argue that Gus Dur himself supported LGBT people through his work as an advisor for the Ikatan Waria Indonesia (Indonesian Waria Association). In fact, media reports have noted his attendance of the Putri Waria Indonesia (Miss Waria Indonesia) contest in 2006 where he declared that ‘waria have the same rights as [other] citizens of Indonesia’ (‘Gus Dur Hadiri’, 2006). Members of the network like Aan have published newspaper articles supporting the linkages between Gus Dur’s values and LGBT inclusion (Anshori 2016).

76 While there were Muslim women’s organisations working on gender and sexuality issues before, I am referring to groups whose focus was not on women, gender and sexual rights.
When I asked Aan about the relationship between Islam and his work as a Gusdurian coordinator in East Java, he referred to the five principles developed by Professor Kamali: justice, compassion, consciousness, equality and human dignity, all of which have been adopted by the Gusdurian network. Following Aan, I would like to suggest that the articulation of Islamic ethics (represented by those five principles) is done through their entanglement with local circuits of knowledge production relying upon what my interlocutors called ‘local’ or ‘traditional wisdom’ and based on the social capital of actors like Gus Dur whose work can exert power to mobilise resources. Some people I interviewed would not only say, ‘I am a member of the Gusdurian network’ but would identify as ‘a Gusdurian Muslim.’ Aan illustrated this point when he told me, ‘When people ask me, “what is your Islam?,” I say that I am Nahdlatul Ulama, of course, but what part within NU? I always try to say I am NU Gusdurian because that’s a very progressive faction within NU.’ This illustrates the links between religion, social work, traditionalism (represented by one’s membership to NU) and progressive ideologies while also pointing to the variety of opinions existing within NU. This section has stressed the influential role of Gus Dur’s ideas for the building of queer-inclusive strategies before putting the focus on Islam Nusantara in section 6.5.

6.5. Islam Nusantara

In the previous section I explored three sources repeatedly mentioned by the allies as the background to their current engagement in pro-queer activism. Following that, I turn to discuss Islam Nusantara or Indonesian Islam as a force to make such activism possible. Once again, it needs to be noted that this possibility does not mean inevitability: other religious figures who have embraced Islam Nusantara do not support sexual minorities.

As noted in Chapter 2, the concept of Islam Nusantara has been discussed widely since the 1980s (Arifianto 2017b, 2016; Hasyim 2018; Nurhisam 2016; Woodward 2017). The Indonesian scholar Azyumardi Azra has defined it as a distinctive Islam resulting from the ‘interaction, contextualisation, indigenisation and vernacularisation of universal Islam with the social, cultural and religious realities of Indonesia’ (Azra 2018, on Twitter). Islam Nusantara is explained as a local version of a global Islam shaped by the social and cultural environment, but also, and what I consider more relevant, ‘the religious realities of Indonesia.’ In fact, Joko Widodo, the current president of Indonesia, endorsed it publicly in 2015 declaring that ‘our Islam
is Islam Nusantara, which is full of respect, courtesy and tolerance’ (‘Jokowi Minta NU,’ 2015). It was also in 2015 that the Muslim organisation Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) proposed and promoted the term Islam Nusantara as an alternative to political Islam.

To provide a sense of how many figures support sexual minorities within the context of Islam Nusantara, one of the members of NU explained to me that there are three main branches within NU: firstly, one that he defined as ‘conservative’, holding Islamist political views; secondly, a ‘moderate’ group, more tolerant but leaned towards political Islam represented by PBNU (Nahdlatul Ulama Executive Board) and PKB (National Awakening Party); and, lastly, a minority progressive group represented by the Jaringan Gusdurian, which are more accepting of LGBT people. Complementing Islam Nusantara, this last group also embraces the notion of ‘pribumisasi Islam’ (‘indigenisation of Islam’) coined by Abdurrahman Wahid and based on a combination of local values and social justice.

Whilst extant scholarship has explored the concept of Islam Nusantara, no single study has considered the emerging linkages between the values it supports and pro-queer Muslim activism. My goal with this section is to illustrate the queer potential of Islam Nusantara stimulating future research in that direction. I will be doing this by pointing to the discussions arising in the junctures between Islam Nusantara values and pro-queer Muslim activism to offer paths demonstrating the potential of Islam to mobilise its followers in the struggle against homophobia. These discussions also point to the existence of intersecting nationalist, religious, gender and sexual discourses. This context adds new layers to previous research conducted in the field of gender and sexuality in Indonesia. While Boellstorff (2005a) studied how the Indonesian nation and non-normative genders and sexualities intersect in the archipelago, religion has not been the main topic of analysis in most of existing studies. Even though I do not have a concluding answer to explain why Islam Nusantara has become central to the support of queer rights in some progressive circles, its emergence could be a reaction to the increase in homophobic sentiments in the last years and the widespread consideration that being LGBT is a ‘Western’ intervention. In what follows, I centre my analysis on the importance given within Islam Nusantara discourses to nationalism, liberation and local cultures.
6.5.1. Nationalism

Hefner has noted that ‘no idea has had so profound an influence on the refiguration of Muslim politics in modern Indonesia as has nationalism’ (2000: 37). In fact, nationalism, together with Islam, constituted one of the central forms of identification for all my progressive interlocutors. As discussed in Chapter 2, the official state ideology of Pancasila was only accepted after being ‘Islamised’. Among other issues, the adaptation of its principles to Muslim standards made it mandatory to believe in one single God. The key principle of tawhid, upon which Islam is built based on the indivisible oneness of God, was preserved. Considering the compatibility of Islam with Pancasila, my interlocutors explained their pro-queer activism in relation to the significance of the state ideology as a source of support for Indonesian diversity. This is an issue to consider in light of the common tensions between nationalism and diversity. An explanation for the Indonesian promotion of diversity lies in the specific features of the archipelago and the fact that nationalism and diversity remain within the framework of the belief in a single God, which limits the ways in which one can be accepted as an Indonesian citizen. Rather than opposing diversity, Indonesian national unity is built through the motto of ‘Unity in Diversity.’

The official philosophical foundation of the Indonesian state is often argued as a reason against the establishment of an Islamic state, which would oppose the national principle of pluralism. This approach has been present among Muslim intellectuals since the late 1950s, as Hefner has noted through the work of the religious scholar Siddiq, who wrote articles encouraging his fellow Muslims to accept the notion of pluralism embodied in Pancasila (2000: 88). It is also consequential of the government’s ideological campaigns from the early 1980s requiring all social and political organisations to recognise the ‘Five Principles’ as their ‘sole foundation’ (‘asas tunggal’). Even though the ‘asas tunggal’ was lifted by Habibie in 1999 (Brown and Wilson 2007), Pancasila was still raised as a source of unity by most of my interlocutors.

As Musdah explained to me, ‘Pancasila is in harmony (selaras) with the Islamic principles. There is no contradiction between Pancasila and Islam.’ The compatibility of Islam and Pancasila also finds linkages with contextualist approaches to Islam based on taking the realities of the current times into consideration to determine the Islamic guidelines to be followed. For Musdah, Islam Nusantara, built through the principles of Pancasila, is also useful to take distance
from what she calls ‘Arab Islam’. As she said, ‘I am proud of being Indonesian, we are not an Islamic state, we have Pancasila, we have ‘Bhinneka Tunggal Ika’ (‘Unity in Diversity’).’ This motto is often raised by the allies to argue that homophobic sentiments are against the concept of ‘Unity in Diversity’ pointing to the compatibility between a national identity and the protection of gender and sexual diversity. Following this line of thought, Marzuki Wahid explained to me that, ‘to deal with conservatism and radicalism, the most effective way is to promote the national values. I believe that both Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution promote human rights (hak asasi manusia) and democracy, so they must be put forward.’ While most of my interlocutors linked Islam to national identity, they did not believe in a single and homogenous ‘national Islam’ represented by Islam Nusantara, as some scholars have noted, or even in what Woodward has called an ‘Islam of the Southeast Asian Archipelago’ (2017). As Abdul Muiz Ghazali explains:

There are many types of Islam Nusantara. For example, there’s Islam Nusantara à la Hindu. That’s the style (corak) of Islam here. Islam in West Java is different to Islam in East Java. Islam in Indonesia is based on that locality (berbasis lokalitas), on the local traditions that exist here. Islam is blended with the elements of acceptance (elemen penerimaan) emerging from the local traditions.

This view that Islam Nusantara is not homogeneous but instead plural is in line with the national motto of ‘Unity in Diversity’, once again employed to argue for the acceptance of non-normative genders and sexualities in relation to the rich diversity of the archipelago. In this manner, gender and sexuality are presented as additional layers to Indonesia’s ethnic, religious and cultural pluralism. Marzuki also described Islam Nusantara in the plurals stating that, ‘Islam[s] Nusantara are different between each other because they are influenced by the local culture (budaya lokal). Of course, there are interactions, but we can say that Islam in Java is different from Islam in Aceh. At the same time, Javanese Islam is not the same as Islam for the Minang people or Islam in Papua.’

Despite academic discussions on the ‘Arabisation’ of Indonesian Islam as a negative process, describing all ‘Arab Islams’ as conservative is an over-simplistic statement considering the rejection of Wahhabism and Salafism within ‘Arab’ countries. However, among the religious leaders and scholars whom I interacted with in Indonesia, it was common to use ‘Arab Islam’ as a simplification to refer to Wahhabi ideologies.
While there are different ways of conceptualising Islam Nusantara in relation to the wide variety of local practices of religion, spirituality and faith, all of them are united by the duty to respect the other existing diversities on the basis that every Indonesian Muslim share the same nationality and must respect the same Constitution, the principles of Pancasila and the motto of ‘Bhinneka Tunggal Ika’. All these different aspects are raised as reasons to promote the acceptance of queer individuals at the intersection between religion and nation. In line with Boellstorff’s analysis of the Indonesian nation, these allies place ‘tradition over modernity as the ultimate justification for the nation’ flipping this way the colonial binary (Boellstorff 2005a: 82). What is significant here is that nationalism is not presented through a unified and homogeneous group that would make the Indonesian nation, but instead on various collectivities that are linked by being Indonesian. Interestingly, Islam is framed under the same terms: there is no one Islam Nusantara, but many. In this archipelagic Islam, the umma or community of Muslim believers is not homogenous. It is connected by their differences instead of their similarities. The type of Muslim subjectivity that these allies support is reminiscent of Boellstorff’s discussion of Indonesian gay and lesbi subjectivities: they are archipelagic ‘in that their authenticity does not require renouncing other subjectivities’ (ibid: 205). From my exploration of the significance of national ideas, I put the focus in the next section on the concept of liberation.

6.5.2. Liberation

At several of the events I attended, Islam Nusantara was discussed as a potential source of liberation (pembebasan) and justice for those who are oppressed and ostracised. For example, during the 2-day workshop organised by GAYa Nusantara mentioned earlier, the participants raised the role of religion to promote acceptance and tolerance towards sexual minorities, and also as an instrument for their intimate liberation through the individual practice of faith. As Marzuki told me, Islam Nusantara has the potential ‘to liberate those who are oppressed and exploited, the people who are discriminated because of their religion, because of their gender or sexual orientation.’ In line with Marzuki, the allies often use parallels between the actions of the Prophet Muhammad fighting slavery and injustice and the concept of social justice to support the inclusion of queer subjects through Islam Nusantara.

Existing literature has explored the role of Muhammad as a ‘prophet of liberation’ (Kerr 2000) noting how He freed ‘human beings from all sorts of sufferings and revived their dignity
from social scourges’ (Rehman 2017). A common narrative I heard was in relation to zakat, a mandatory payment to the poor constituting one of the five pillars of Islam. Marzuki explained this point, noting how ‘the Prophet always supported the poor, that’s why we have to pay zakat, so that our wealth is redistributed with poor people. This is what I consider one of the processes of liberation.’ An additional example I was given by the allies was that the Prophet Muhammad brought liberation to women. This was often done by presenting egalitarian visions of Islam that resonate with the work of scholars like Asma Barlas, which some allies had read and reflected on. As I heard at a forum on gender, sexuality and religion, ‘the Prophet considered women as equal to men. Therefore, women had the same rights: they stopped being forced to get married, they could become witnesses and guardians and polygamy was limited to four people. That was liberation from oppression.’ Based on these examples, most of the allies presented Islam Nusantara as the basis for gender and sexual liberation despite dissimilarities with notions of human rights present in other discourses of ‘liberation.’

The project of liberation is not only a religious mission, but it is also based on political and social justice. It is reminiscent of the Latin American Catholic movement of liberation theology, which has been succinctly summarised by authors like Berryman as ‘liberation in one’s own person, in the community, and in relation to God’ (1987: 1). Following the precepts of Latin American liberation theology, research has explored the application of this model for the inclusion of queer subjects within Judaism (Kukla 2006), establishing linkages between religious liberation and the queer liberation movement that figures like Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson started in the United States. In addition, black churches have worked on non-heteronormative theologies drawing on the social justice values of black liberation theology (Lewis 2015; Griffin 2006: 224; Bates 2005). These examples illustrate the influence of a movement focusing mainly on the eradication of poverty that started within the Roman Catholic Church, which nevertheless still maintains a conservative official approach to sexual and gender diversity. Focusing on the emergence of an Islamic liberation theology, scholars like Kugle have noted the similarities with its Catholic precedent stressing the importance of the ‘struggle for justice’ (2014: 47). In line with the statements made by my progressive interlocutors, Kugle’s participants (in his case, queer Muslims living in various ‘Western’ countries) also recur to the notion that the Qur’an was revealed by Allah as a tool to fight oppression.
The concept of liberation, which I heard multiple times throughout my fieldwork, cannot be explored in isolation from the post-colonial context of Indonesia. Its historical formation is related to conceptions of freedom from the Dutch colonial rule when Islam emerged as a marker of difference, as noted in Chapter 2. Liberation through religion constitutes a pattern in the Indonesian context: from being one of the catalysts for colonial freedom, it is today imagined as a force towards emancipatory queer processes which are not framed within secular models against religious norms, but instead draw upon religious values, ideals and commandments to achieve one’s potentiality. This discourse points, once again, to the emergence of agentic processes that are not in line with the model of agency as resistance to norms as explored in Chapter 5.

6.5.3. Local cultures and values

In relation to the importance of nationalism that I noted in the first subsection, the discussions on Islam Nusantara that I witnessed throughout my fieldwork always stressed the importance of the local culture. In this section, I will be using the term ‘local’ to mean both Indonesian (often presented against Saudi influence) and sub-national (e.g. ethnic identities). While in section 6.5.1 I stressed the importance of Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution, which are official concepts aimed at building the Indonesian nation, in this section I want to point to the significance given by the allies to local traditions and cultures that existed (and still exist today) across the archipelago prior to implementing national laws. For most of the allies, the local cultures of Islam Nusantara emerge as a protective shield against the Arabisation of Islam in Indonesia. Most of them would define themselves in the same way that Jokowi did in 2015: ‘my Islam is Islam Nusantara.’ As noted before, defining oneself as a ‘Muslim Nusantara’ often coexists with definitions of one’s Muslimness as ‘Nahdlatul Ulama’ and ‘rahmatan lil alamin.’ The distinction between local Islam and that from Saudi Arabia was often done through binaries ranging from Indonesian versus Saudi clothing to differences between the positions that women are allowed to occupy in each country. The reasons to distinguish Islam Nusantara from other Islams often pointed to the greater degree of ‘freedom’ existing in Indonesia.

As Marzuki told me, ‘Islam Nusantara offers a perspective that is in accordance with Indonesia, where we are different from those in Saudi Arabia.’ Nyai Masriyah, the first woman leading what she defined as a feminist pesantren in Indonesia, told me that, ‘there [in Saudi
Arabia] women do not have rights. Here, Islam must fit the local culture, otherwise people won’t embrace it.’ While for her the acculturation of Islam is part of a strategic process to avoid losing Muslim followers, Indonesia is currently witnessing a reverse progression: an increasing number of Muslims are adopting Wahhabi ideologies. This process has contributed to the formalism of conservative interpretations of the Islamic texts into regional by-laws. For example, while in the past there were no regulations requiring women to wear the jilbab at public schools, many of them are forcing their students to do so today. This is an issue that Gus Dur discussed. For him, religious practices should remain within one’s private life rather than becoming formalised in the life of the state.

The differences between Indonesian local traditions and other Muslim-majority societies are celebrated by the allies to raise the issue of queer rights. Proud statements were made by several allies regarding the absence of legislation criminalising same-sex sexual activities in Indonesia, while they emphasised that in countries like Saudi Arabia, they can lead to the death penalty. This idea was employed to frame Indonesia as a more ‘modern’ country paradoxically referring to antiquity by referring to old traditions of pluralism and diversity against an assumed intrinsic conservatism among Middle Eastern countries. As Musdah explained to me, ‘in Indonesia we have local values like respecting (menghargai) each other, respecting what is different from us.’ For these allies, the local value of respect is assumed to include the acceptance of sexual minorities too, which is often done by equating local gender and sexual diversities to ethnic pluralism. This point was illustrated by Mulia noting that, ‘we Indonesians appreciate the different ethnic groups that exist here. In other countries, there are ethnic conflicts, they fight, like in Afghanistan. In Indonesia, you won’t see that.’

Ethnic conflict and communal violence have occurred in Indonesia. However, despite being one of the most ethnically diverse states in the world the level of interethnic problems has been relatively low when compared to countries with small differences in language or culture such as Yugoslavia, Somalia and Rwanda, which have experienced some of the bloodiest conflicts (Bowen 1996: 12). This context is favourable to portray Islam Nusantara as a foundation for moderation and tolerance since it is conceptualised through local culture and traditions. In addition to the examples of peaceful ethnic co-existence, the allies often point to the assumption that Indonesian history has always observed the presence of ‘indigenous’ transgressive genders and sexualities. I witnessed one such explanations during a forum on religion, gender and
sexuality, as the fragment below illustrates, where the *bissu, calalai* and *calabai* in the Bugis society were linked to the existence of similar figures throughout Islamic history. As one of the speakers noted:

We can see through the context of local religion (*agama lokal*) in Indonesia, such as the ancient Bugis religion in South Sulawesi, that since the 13th century we have recognised the existence of five different genders. These were *urane* (male), *makkunrai* (female), *calalai* (women with a female gender expression), *calabai* (men with a female gender expression) and finally the *bissu* who are considered not to represent any gender. The existence of *bissu* was also mentioned in *La Galigo*, an epic manuscript about the creation of humans.

These ideas are in line with what Boellstorff has called ‘ethnolocalized homosexual and transvestite professional’ (ETPs) subject positions (2005: 45), which I mentioned in Chapter 2, to note that they can only be found among specific ethnic groups (in this case, the Bugis) and are linked to ritual or performance. The statements above take us back to the arguments used by queer Muslims themselves to explain that they should be accepted because, as many of them told me, ‘we have always been part of Indonesian society.’ While there is no direct correlation between identifying as *bissu* and being a *lesbi* woman, the transgression of normativity is seen as a reason to claim both citizenship and religious inclusion.

In contrast to Boellstorff’s experience when he states that he only occasionally heard gay men or *waria* refer to the *bissu* or the *warok* to claim authenticity (2005: 45), this is an issue that I often heard during interviews as well as at events like the YIFoS camp and workshops on religion, gender and sexuality. In fact, for activists like Dede Oetomo, histories of transgendered ritual specialists can be used strategically by queer people in contemporary Indonesia to empower themselves (2006: 331). This takes us back to the importance of nationalism (transforming culturally specific positions like the *bissu* to the national horizon of Indonesianness) and also to my discussion on Anderson’s work (1983) in Chapter 2. Once again, we see how leaning on historical justifications to support one’s right to be accepted as *gay, lesbi* or *trans* activists are working within the horizon of a national discourse that is often localised (as the example of the Bugis communities prove).
Returning to the discussion of the speaker above, the forum’s introduction to Indonesia’s gender diversity was followed by a parallel being drawn between indigenous and Islamic transgressive genders and sexualities. As the speaker explained:

The concept of non-binary creation has been described several times in the Qur’an. For example, through the story of Maryam (the virgin Mary) who was pregnant without being touched by men, and also through the feminine men described in Surat At-Tur 52:24 explaining how those entering heaven will be surrounded by young men sparkling like pearls. These feminine descriptions show how God’s creation transcended binary barriers illustrating the immeasurable power of God. Both the classical ulama (a body of Muslim scholars) ijtihad on khunsa and mukhannats, and the existence of five genders in ancient Bugis religion, show that humans were indeed created with diverse conditions as evidence of the greatness of Allah. Through the recognition of the human diversity that exists on Earth, we are carrying out our task as servants of God who not only strive to honour Him through vertical worship, but also through a social, horizontal worship towards our fellow human beings.

This explanation places great significance on religious sources that are reappropriated by the progressive Muslim allies to promote acceptance towards queer subjects. The example of Maryam, who is considered the most significant female figure in the Qur’an and ‘the only one identified by name’ (Stowasser 2001) is presented above as an Islamic precedent to queerness despite not offering a substantial or logical explanation to how immaculate conception could be understood as a non-binary experience. However, this is an issue that some scholars have explored in the past. For example, Anderson (2005: 25) has wondered what the implications are of a woman who ‘allows a spirituality coded specifically as queer and female penetrate her body and her consciousness, creating a sexually-charged discourse in a space previously designated as (...) heterosexual territory.’ This queer reading of religious sources is also evident through the example of Surat At-Tur 52:24 in the excerpt above, which has been translated from Arabic as
‘there will circulate among them [servant] boys [especially] for them, as if they were pearls well-protected’ (Saheeh International 1997).  

The excerpt presented above illustrates how queer-affirming interpretations of the Qur’an are linked to Indonesian ‘indigenous’ gender and sexualities. Together with the queer analysis of Maryam’s pregnancy and the various surat referring to ‘servant boys’, figures like the khuntsa and the mukhannats emerge as useful tools to establish parallels with the local bissu. The khuntsa and the mukhannats have been studied by scholars of Islam like Kugle (2010), who has equated the terms to a ‘transgender’ identity employing three hadith narrating stories about men who expressed themselves in feminine ways during the times of the Prophet Muhammamd. The belief in what Clifford calls ‘the narrative continuity of history and identity’ (1988: 341) is not only a way to claim authenticity, but also emerges as a duty to be followed by Muslims when the speaker above noted that acknowledging human diversity means ‘carrying out our task as servants of God’ pointing once again to the importance of both individual faith practices and communal responsibilities and duties.

6.6. Conclusions

If Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis explored the forces impacting the negotiation of queer Muslim subjectivities, and chapter 5 looked at queer religious practices in relation to the notion of agency, this chapter has explored the concepts of progressive Islam and Islam Nusantara in Indonesia, with a particular focus on how the allies of queer Muslims, a concept that I introduced here, understand ‘being progressive.’ With the term ‘ally’, I have referred to non-queer actors who actively support the rights of queer Muslims. With this, I have moved from the ‘informal’ and everyday Islam explored in Chapter 5, to the ‘formal’/‘official’ Islamic discourses emerging from religious leaders, scholars and activists. To reveal the various events that shape one’s self-assumed progressive character, I have described the allies’ participation in Muslim student organisations, inter-faith dialogue, and Gusdurian networks. I have argued that engagement in such organisations and networks make pro-queer activism possible but not unavoidable

---

78 Besides Surat 52:24, scholars have also mentioned Surat 56:17 (‘there will circulate among them young boys made eternal’) and Surat 76:19 (‘there will circulate among them young boys made eternal, if you see them, you would think them [as beautiful as] scattered pearls’) as examples of the promises made to Muslims once they go to heaven (Hariyanti and Nurhayati 2017).

79 Kugle explores this issue more in-depth in Chapter 6 of Homosexuality in Islam (2010).
considering that other members of such groups do not currently engage in the defence of sexual minorities. It is clear, however, that they are major sources of stimulation for the allies.

Indonesian Progressive Islam —rooted in social justice, liberation from oppression, and contextualism— arises, I argue, as a catalyst for the inclusion of queer people within society. Understanding Islam as a source of social support and connectedness constitutes the basis to set principles guiding the acceptance of those who are perceived as different to the majority. This is often built through the notion of ‘rahmatan lil alamin’, a blessing bestowed by Allah to all creations, as an explanatory principle to promote the welfare of all human beings, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The empirical findings in this chapter provide a new understanding of progressive Islam in Indonesia beyond the concepts of Liberal Islam and Islam Berkemajuan, from which I have taken distance. These findings also shed new light on the emergence of pro-queer Muslim activism by focusing on the background from which the ‘allies’ of queer Muslims began to build their activism. As I have noted, the role of the Muslim student organisation PMII, inter-faith dialogue, and Gusdurian networks were raised by my interlocutors as strong sources of stimulation for the building of queer-inclusive approaches. This is an important finding to situate the emergence of this modality of activism in Indonesia. While not all these activists are experts on gender and sexuality, they are authorities in Islam and have invested much of their time in developing contextualist approaches inspired by the teachings they received from more senior scholars.

Saeed has noted how contextualism offers ‘a critical alternative for contemporary Muslims to textualism’ by placing ‘great hermeneutic value on the historical context in which the Qur’an was revealed’ (2013: 3). For the actors presented in this chapter, the focus was not only on the context of revelation, but also, and importantly, on the specificities of the Indonesian context today. The permanent emphasis of my interlocutors on the social, cultural and religious pluralism of the Indonesian archipelago has led me to analyse the concept of Islam Nusantara in this chapter. The insights gained from my study may be of assistance to develop further explorations of pro-queer religious discourses through the operationalisation of this local branch of Islam. As noted, my interlocutors’ notion of Islam Nusantara places great emphasis on nationalism (stressing Indonesian national diversity), liberation from oppression (returning both to the Islamic principle of social justice and the history of gender and sexual diversity in the archipelago) and the significance of local cultures and values revealing how leaning on historical
justifications to support one’s right to be accepted as *gay, lesbi or trans* is done within the horizon of a national discourse that is often localised.

Challenging the increasing presence of literalism, fundamentalism and Wahhabi voices in Indonesia, these thinkers position themselves as distinct from mainstream voices after having received a strict religious education in *pesantren* and *madrasa* within and outside Indonesia. Unlike other religious scholars in Indonesia, the allies are more concerned with orthopraxis than with orthodoxy for the building of progressive Islamic discourses, which is reminiscent of the Catholic tradition of liberation theology. They place more importance on the correct practice of faith by engaging in deeds that are beneficial for the harmonious functioning of society rather than on the practice of rituals, which is at the basis of orthodoxy.

In the next chapter I focus more specifically on the strategies employed by the allies to put their ideas into practice. This will reveal the complexity of this movement and the multiple intersecting directions in which these actors engage with other progressive individuals, conservative actors and queer religious subjects.
Chapter 7: Exploring the Allies’ Strategies

7.1. Introduction
In this chapter I turn to questions concerning the strategies developed by the allies to promote Islamic discourses accepting of queer subjects through their activism. With the term ‘strategies’ I am describing both informal and formal actions implemented through individual and communal work. Here I want to think through the multifaceted paths through which the allies come to develop tactics for queer inclusion in their everyday lives amid an increasingly conservative turn in Indonesia. I first explore scholarship on the issue of pro-queer activism through faith. Following this, I move on to an analysis of the tactics developed by these actors to promote the acceptance of queer subjects within Islam through a multi-level approach based on working through multiple channels: independently, with queer organisations, with conservative religious leaders, or individually with queer Muslims.

7.2. Pro-queer activism through faith
Among existing scholarship, only a few articles have mentioned the allies’ work. This has been done in relation to queer advocacy by referring mainly to the work of the Indonesian activist and progressive Muslim scholar Musdah Mulia (Jauhola 2012; Wee 2012; Wieringa 2010), who I interviewed and mentioned before. While focusing on gender variance through the case of intersex people in Indonesia, Wieringa has located Musdah’s work under the framework of progressive Islam (2010: 162), presenting her statements that homosexual orientations are accepted in Islam. In his article on Islam and homosexuality in Indonesia, Boellstorff briefly notes that a small minority of Indonesian Muslim intellectuals have shown tolerant attitudes towards gay Muslims, calling for the recognition of homosexuality and same-sex marriage (2005b: 582). In contrast to the lack of scholarship produced by ‘Western’ academics on these issues, a larger body of research by Indonesian scholars has noted the role of local Islamic intellectuals in the promotion of queer rights (Asmawi and Yasin 2017; Saroh and Relawati 2017; Sa’dan 2015).

The Indonesianist and scholar of Islam Hefner has argued that the post-9/11 context has witnessed two opposed perspectives regarding Islam’s compatibility with democracy and civic
diversity, one gloomy, the other guardedly optimistic (2005: 2). The Indonesian case can serve as an example of both positions. While ethnoreligious violence has broken out between diverse groups in the country (for example, on the North Maluku religious war, see Wilson 2008; on episodes of religious conflict across the archipelago, see Van Klinken 2007), religious ideas have also been used to promote democracy, pluralism and rights (Hefner 2005, 2000, 1997; Barton 2002, Abdillah 1997). Moving the focus to gender and sexuality, in recent years, especially after the start of what some have termed the ‘2016 LGBT crackdown’, the emergence of homophobic and transphobic discourses in Indonesia has been explained owing to Islamic religious ideas in both academic literature and media. For example, in February 2019, an article in The New York Times explained that ‘an ascendant Islamic movement […] has embraced some homophobic policies and portrayed LGBT people as a threat to national harmony’ (Ives and Suhartono 2019). In February 2018, CNN reported that ‘many conservative Islamic Indonesian politicians would like same-sex relations to be banned entirely’ (Westcott 2018). In the early months of 2019, ‘Western’ media has also explored the existence of Islamic exorcisms in Indonesia as a conversion therapy for LGBT people through sensational representations reproducing Orientalist patterns of ‘the East’ as a site of backwardness against a modern West, disregarding that, for example, 34 states still allow conversion therapy in the United States of America (Movement Advancement Project 2019). While religious discourses can (and indeed do) constitute a significant influence driving homophobic sentiment in Indonesia, sources such as the Qur’an, the hadith and fiqh are not simply instruments of oppression but have emerged as forces for emancipation through strategies of appropriation by queer Muslims and their allies.

Situating the focus of this chapter within a wider research environment focusing on Indonesia seems complicated considering the limited literature, as I noted above, on the role of non-queer religious leaders and scholars in building queer activism through religion, which further enhances the significance of my explorations. Outside the Indonesian context, most of the research exploring pro-queer activism from religious organisations has focused on LGBT faith activist groups. Scholars have employed the concept of ‘queer Muslim activism’ (Perkins 2016; Posocco 2016; Choi 2015; Shannahan 2010) to refer to the actions taking place using Islam to bring about social change and increase queer acceptance. This type of activism has been

---

80 As I noted in Chapter 6, scholars have noted how, despite being one of the most ethnically diverse countries, the level of interethnic problems has been relatively low in Indonesia.
described only in relation to organisations defined as ‘LGBT Muslim’ or referring to queer Muslim actors. Shannahan (2010: 672) presents the work of the UK-based LGBTQI Muslim organisation Imaan as an example of ‘queer Muslim activism’. Based on research with queer Muslims in the American city of Hamtramck, Perkins (2016) similarly employs the term to imply that this is a type of action emerging from queer Muslims themselves. In the American context, there is work on the now-extinct\textsuperscript{81} LGBTQI-Muslim organisation Al-Fatiha (Minwalla et al 2005). The scholar of Islam and homosexuality Kugle included Imaan and Al-Fatiha in his list of support groups for queer Muslims with six organisations from the Netherlands, Canada, and South Africa (2014: 231). Academic scholarship has also explored the context of Judaism noting the existence of LGBTQ Jewish organisations like Keshet in the USA (Schnoor 2015). In recent years, these groups have gathered through international events such as the Jewish LGBT+ World Congress, which held its last meeting in Sydney in March 2019. On Hinduism, research has mainly noted the existence of GALVA, the Gay and Lesbian Vaishnava Association (Hunt 2012), while LGBT Buddhist groups have also been explored recently (Yip and Smith 2016; Gleig 2014). Despite the significance of these examples, there remains a lack of discussions on the work of non-queer religious figures supporting queer rights in countries in the Global South like Indonesia.

An additional body of research has explored the support of religious groups to queer people mostly in ‘Western’ contexts. For example, Hunt (2015) has explored the issue through the examples of Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Hindu groups. While not all the members of the groups explored by Hunt are queer, their mission is often to integrate sexual minorities within their faith. Within Christianity, Hunt highlights LGBT caucuses such as the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptist and Pentecostals, and the creation of gay-affirming churches such as the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches in America (Hunt 2015: 244). In the field of Pentecostalism, an ethnographic study by Lewin (2018) has explored the emergence of LGBT-accepting discourses within African American churches under the argument that ‘everyone is God’s creation’ (in line with the reasons provided by some Indonesian allies), complementing research on LGBT-affirming black churches in the

\textsuperscript{81} The organisation existed between 1997-2011. After its founder, Faisal Alam, stepped down in 2004, subsequent leaders did not manage to keep it alive. In 2013, Alam created the Muslim Alliance for Sexual and Gender Diversity (MASGD) (Jaspal 2016).
United States of America (Lewis 2015; in the context of HIV/AIDS see Leong 2006). In the Christian tradition of Anglicanism, the figure of Archbishop Desmond Tutu as a human rights advocate and gay rights activist has been the object of extensive research (Van Klinken and Gunda 2012; Beyrer 2012; Thoreson 2008). His work as a heterosexual religious leader fighting for queer acceptance is in line, despite the religious differences, with that of the Muslim allies I present in this chapter.

7.3. Strategies
In this section, I move from the background to pro-queer Muslim activism explored in Chapter 6 to the specific strategies developed by the allies. These practices aim to both illustrate how they build their activism and to present examples of good practice which other actors and groups could use to inform and fortify their actions.

7.3.1. Alliances with other minority groups
For some allies, a common issue raised was that the promotion of a queer-inclusive rhetoric is often done at the theoretical level through discussions that lack a practical engagement with other societal actors. For example, Abdul Muiz Ghazali told me that he has ‘chosen to not simply talk about gender and sexuality openly, but to engage in real actions with multiple groups.’ This strategy is not limited to working with sexual minorities, but also with other vulnerable groups. With some of his progressive colleagues, Abdul has founded organisations where women and Christian Chinese-Indonesians hold most of the positions of power, while Muslims have become a minority within those groups. Despite the focus of these organisations not being specifically about gender and sexuality issues, these topics are incorporated by the allies into the discussions they hold with other civil society groups. For example, they do so during inter-faith forums and discussions on ethnic minorities that they link to sexual and gender minority issues. As Abdul explains, ‘what we are looking for is not only to achieve tolerance but acceptance towards others; that’s why we use a language of acceptance (Bahasa penerimaan).’ Tolerance is not enough because it does not lead to the recognition of queer Indonesians as full members of society: it is the dominant (conservative) group that will remain determining what should and should not be tolerated. An issue to raise here, too, is whether acceptance would be enough considering the
lack of legislation protecting sexual minorities and the increasing emergence of local bylaws discriminating against them in Indonesia.

The allies believe that building alliances with other minority groups can increase their collective power. I witnessed an example of these alliances when I attended the Youth Interfaith Forum on Sexuality (YIFoS) camp in 2018. The programme included a visit to the Sajogyo Institute, a non-profit institution working on agrarian justice and equal rights for women and men to be in control of land and natural resources. After the Sajogyo’s staff introduced the experiences of farmers whose lands are taken by force by the government, some camp participants discussed similar situations occurring in the regions they were coming from. For example, a Papuan waria explained the problems faced by local people in West Papua describing how foreign corporations are taking the minerals away from their lands. One of the participants noted how, ‘The struggle for LGBT rights is almost the same as the struggle of people to protect and keep their land.’ Following this, another participant asked whether Sajogyo Institute also works with gender and sexual minorities. One of the staff members explained that the Institute often holds rituals in Sulawesi to pray with the local farmers and the bissu to ask for the protection of their crops. He continued acknowledging that transgender people have always been part of Indonesian tradition, which he used as an argument for their inclusion returning to the relevant ritual role of the bissu.\(^{82}\) As he concluded, ‘All across Indonesia people are being pushed away from their lands independently of being waria or not, the conflict is between society and big companies.’

These struggles are perceived as a unifying force between queer people and other minority groups, a strategy that is reminiscent of existing discussions on the gay emancipation movement. For example, Tielman notes that the Dutch homosexual movement was successful because of its strategic alliances with other minority groups (1987: 16). In her research with young Muslims in Italy, Frisina (2010) also notes that their transversal alliances with other minority religions ‘have questioned the Italian model of secularism and called for more pluralism and religious equality’ (564). Similarly, the alliances created by the allies with other societal groups within Indonesian can contribute to strengthening claims of national belonging

\(^{82}\) This is explained because of the traditional role of the bissu in the Bugis society of Sulawesi, which should be considered when reflecting on how to integrate gay or lesbi individuals who are not perceived in the same way.
influencing their inclusion. For some of my interlocutors, these coalitions were described as potential catalysts to contain the power of those who have the capacity to coerce them.

7.3.2. Connecting students with queer people

In recent years, several progressive allies working at public schools and universities have promoted religious-based initiatives bringing together students and queer individuals. This is not limited to the work of progressive Muslim figures. In fact, I had the opportunity to witness such events taking place at the Christian University Duta Wacana (UKDW) in Yogyakarta, where one of its professors has been organising meetings between the local waria community and university students. My exploration of one of these meetings in what comes next aims to highlight their significance as a source of dialogue and acceptance between queer and non-queer individuals of various faiths.

After a quick drive from Jalan Kaliurang, I arrive in UKDW with a local friend. Someone guides us, and we find ourselves in a large hall where the mass usually takes place. While this event is held once a month at a Christian university, most of the participants are waria Muslims, some of them veiled. Around 40 people, students and waria visitors, gather in front of a stage where the prayer of faith is usually offered (Figure 13). Today, the space is not only used to pray, but the participants will also play a game together. Bu Hendri, the middle-aged professor leading the activity, takes a microphone and asks everyone to divide themselves in groups of 4-5 people. I sit with my friend, three students, all of them studying to become pastors, and a young waria. One of the group members must go on the stage and pick up a picture from a box to then return to the group and discuss what it suggests to each one of them.
Most of the questions focus on the anniversary of Indonesian independence, which was celebrated a week prior to the event. Some questions discussed within the group I observe are: ‘What exactly does independence mean for you?’ and ‘What have you done to achieve the goal of independence?’ These questions are answered in relation to a picture of a plant growing from a seed. One of the students mentions that, for her, independence should be about solidarity and sharing since she comes from Eastern Indonesia, where she considers that people do not enjoy the same benefits that those in Java do. Another student talks about her goal to work hard to improve society in the future. The waria participant in our group talks about the importance of helping people through good deeds to be able to be independent and accepted socially, which takes me to reflect on the significance of prestasi. She provides an example of the Yogyakarta earthquake in 2006 when the waria community helped the victims, which she assumed to be evidence of their role as both good citizens and good Muslims.

After the game, the event continues with a speech from a Christian waria from Papua who used to work as a priest before transitioning. As she says, ‘I feel that I have not yet achieved my independence, life is like a long journey where you have to keep struggling. I am from Papua, where I couldn’t express myself, but I can be myself in Yogyakarta.’ Following this, she
starts singing a song, ‘Jesus, I can feel you here.’ Students and waria Muslims join her singing and clapping their hands. The song ends, and two students go on the stage to start a prayer, which is followed by all the audience independently of their religion. One of the students asks God to help the LGBT community, and to also assist those who cannot accept LGBT people to finally accept and respect them. Following this, everyone sits in a circle with their eyes closed before the event concludes.

Through these meetings, students who might never have interacted with waria can start dialogues that allow them to find similarities among themselves. Instead of discussing gender, sexuality or religion directly, these issues arise through conversations about their Indonesianness, allowing students to overcome potential prejudice and reduce stereotyping emerging from their lack of interaction with queer people. This is in line with Allport’s contact hypothesis based on four positive factors to reduce intergroup prejudice: a) equal status between the groups, b) common goals, c) intergroup cooperation, and d) the support of authorities, law, or custom (Pettigrew and Tropp 2005: 264). While the beliefs held by the student participants prior to the meetings might influence their attitudes, the compliance with these four factors through the participants’ (both waria and students) equal status during the activities, the common goal of answering questions during the games and engaging in prayer, their cooperation during the meeting to create a welcoming atmosphere, and the support of the professor through her authority and legitimacy leading the event, all contribute to develop positive attitudes. This is in line with previous research on the importance of intergroup activities to ‘cultivate meaningful engagement’ (Zúñiga et al 2002: 7) between members of various social identity groups (Liang and Alimo 2005; Zúñiga 2003).

Besides the work of Bu Hendri through the periodical meetings taking place at UKDW, Bu Anis, a teacher of Islam in a public school in Yogyakarta, has also started inviting activists from the local queer-rights NGO People Like Us Satu Hati (PLUSH), who regularly visit the school to teach the students about gender and sexual diversity. As she explained to me:

When they came, I opened the meeting by asking the students, ‘Do you see any differences between you and these people?’ After that, the activists explained why they were here, and then we finished by having a forum. The goal that I have set is that the students realise that while there are differences between all of us, we also have
different ways to face those differences: you and I are different, but we are not enemies. You are a Christian and I am a Muslim, she is a waria, and you are not. We do this through the principle of *lakum deenakum wal yadeen* (‘for you is your religion, and for me is my religion’.)

Bu Anis’ explains her strategy through the Qur’anic Surat Al-Kafirun [109:6], which states: ‘For you is your religion, and for me is my religion.’ From this principle of religious freedom, that she expresses in Arabic in the excerpt above, she sets the basis for a general affirmation of gender and sexual tolerance. For her, acceptance is based on the recognition of difference rather than similarity. Besides these sessions, she has also started organising what she calls ‘anti-mainstream fast-breaking’ during the month of Ramadan. Through these events, her students visit marginalised communities to break the fast together: among other groups, they have visited the members of the *pesantren waria* in Kotagede, the local women’s jail and a shelter for disabled children.

These activities are not only taking place at public schools, but also at public universities such as Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM) in Yogyakarta, considered one of the oldest and more respected institutions of higher education in Indonesia. As one of the professors who teaches a course on religion, body and sexuality at UGM shared with me, these discussions are one of the channels she has been using to teach her students about gender and sexuality. Her strategy varies depending on the target audience. As she explained, when working with undergraduate students ‘we have to explain basic concepts like *kodrat* or ‘natural destiny’, body, and sexual orientation during the class because some are still confused about them’, while postgraduate students ‘have more knowledge but still ask lots of questions regarding LGBT issues.’ As she continued, ‘most of them are curious about these issues because of their religion, because they don’t have a clear idea of what Islam commands in relation to being *LGBT*, while some other students have questions about their own sexuality.’

To answer these questions, this professor has invited activists from local LGBT-rights NGOs. The sessions have been led by *lesbian* and *transgender* women, who have taught the students about SOGIESC. As the professor noted, ‘the fact that these activists are part of the community makes it more touching for the students when considering the discrimination that they experience’, which might help increase their empathy towards and acceptance of sexual
minorities. One of the challenges these teachers and professors have faced when discussing gender and sexuality in relation to religion is that ideas on what is *halal* and *haram*, allowed and not allowed in Islam, are so embedded in some students’ ways of thinking that they find it difficult to accept sexual minorities. Despite these observations, they also note that most of the reactions from the students have been positive. The development of student contact with queer people through religious discussions can be an example for other institutions to encourage positive attitudes towards minority groups. In this context, the role of teachers and professors acting as allies through their pedagogical practice is key for the building of queer-inclusive safe spaces that allow interactions and dialogues.

### 7.3.3. Producing knowledge

All the allies engaged in the production of knowledge on gender, sexuality and religion through two main channels. The first has to do with their individual research and engagement in progressive Islamic exegesis, publishing their work through books, newspapers and social media, while the second is based on sharing their ideas in debate forums, training programmes and workshops. For example, Marzuki Wahid explained to me that his past research focused on exploring Islamic law and the *waria* practice of *salat*. Research conducted by the allies is useful in various ways: for the scholars themselves to understand these issues better, for conservative figures who might hold homophobic and transphobic ideas because of their ignorance and lack of interactions with these subjects, and for queer Muslims by having access to queer-inclusive work on religion, gender and sexuality. The production of knowledge is not limited to conducting research and disseminating findings in articles and books, but it is also used to conduct trainings to educate queer Muslims on gender, sexuality and religion, as I will note later.

Special editions of Indonesian academic journals have also explored issues of religion, gender and sexuality. In May 2017 the journal of theology and women studies *Sophia* launched an edition entitled ‘Uncovering Gender and Sexuality Diversity’ (‘*Menguak Keberagaman Gender dan Seksualitas*’). Additionally, the journal of Islamic studies *Jurnal Studi Keislaman Nizham* published a special edition in 2016 entitled ‘Islam and LGBT.’ Some articles explored LGBT acceptance from the perspective of human rights, while others were openly transphobic such as Faizin’s ‘Islamic counselling as a solution to the transgender phenomenon’ (‘*Konseling Islam sebegai solusi fenomena transgender*’). While not all the authors share a progressive
approach, it is significant that some pieces included in these special editions promote the acceptance of queer subjects through both religion, and human rights approaches.

Allies often use newspapers to share their messages. For example, Aan Anshori has published several articles in the newspaper *The Jakarta Post* (Anshori 2016) and the online magazine *Magdalene* (Anshori 2018) promoting queer tolerance in Islam. Musdah Mulia has also been vocal online through writings and interviews on Indonesian media like *Magdalene* (Diani 2017) and *Jurnal Perempuan* (Setyarini 2016) discussing the acceptance of LGBT people within Islam. Musdah Mulia (2009) has also worked individually on progressive Qur’anic exegesis inclusive of queer discourses discussing *surat* such as Surah An-Naml83 and Surah Asy-Syu’ara84. The collaborative work of the allies is illustrated by publications like *Fiqh Sexualitas*, written by Musdah Mulia, Kyai Husein Muhammad, and Marzuki Wahid (2011) and published online freely by the Indonesian Planned Parenthood Association (PKBI). This is the first volume ever published in Indonesia applying Islamic jurisprudence on gender and sexuality from, as its authors note, the perspective of human rights. The positive impact of this research production was raised by most of my queer interlocutors as an alternative source of knowledge influencing how they navigated their subjectivities. On another level, it has also been used by conservative groups to develop counterarguments.

In the last years, conservative groups have strategically used blogs, websites and social networking platforms like Twitter and Facebook to spread hate speech. To counterbalance those messages, the allies have started to organise and produce online content exploring alternative interpretations of the religious sources. This strategy is not only based on producing and publishing materials, but some of them are starting to be trained on how to use online tools to improve their websites’ search engine rankings as some allies shared with me. The production of online content offering progressive religious perspectives is for some queer Muslims an important force towards their self-acceptance considering the lack of such resources anywhere else, as I explored in Chapter 4.

---

83 This *surat* is number 27th in the Qur’an and is composed of 93 *ayat*, which constitute some of the most controversial sections of the Holy Book considering that, besides the lives of prophets Moses, Solomon, and Saleh, it describes Lot’s story, which is often used to condemn sodomy.

84 This *surat* is number 26th in the Qur’an and its name translates as ‘poets’. It is commonly interpreted as describing how disbelievers were destroyed after threatening some of the prophets.
7.3.4. Training queer Muslims

Another strategy developed by the allies is to work directly with queer Muslims communally. As noted previously, progressive religious actors and queer individuals often gather through forums and debates. During my fieldwork, I attended numerous trainings across Java where the allies taught queer Muslims about alternative interpretations of the religious sources. The Dutch development aid organisation Hivos has also supported trainings in other locations. In 2018-2019, it funded workshops on gender and sexuality led by ustad in Gorontalo (Sulawesi), and events gathering Muslim and Christian queer individuals in Flores. In line with this, I witnessed programmes taking place at the pesantren waria in Yogyakarta where several ustad trained the santri on religious-related issues.

In December 2018, I attended a two-day training on Islamic burial and funeral rituals held by an ustad at the pesantren waria. At the start, the leader of the pesantren announced the creation of a funeral group to take care of the bodies of waria who pass away. As she stated, ‘We want to be able to take care of our waria friends when they die.’ Some waria explained the importance of this group because they had run away from home after facing violence, while others were thrown out of the house by their families. As a participant noted, ‘Some of us are sex workers and street singers living on the street.’ Another said, ‘Even if I am homeless, I still deserve to be treated with dignity when I die.’ In fact, Islam commands its followers to treat the body with respect before being buried (Rispler-Chaim 1993) and several hadith establish that ‘the dead deserve respect and dignity as do the living’ (Hamdy 2012: 107). However, most of the participants felt pessimistic about their bodies being treated with respect after passing away, describing examples from friends who had died recently. The event started in a serious, pedagogical tone, but when the ustad started explaining how to handle the corpse, a waria pretended to pass away in the middle of the room (Figure 14) making the audience burst into laughter.
After explaining the *sunnah*, or optional funeral procedures, the *ustad* focused on two mandatory steps: the corpse must be washed and shrouded in white cloth. Following this, he cut seven pieces of white fabric, which he located on a table. He followed the procedure set by Islam for women noting that the number of pieces is different for males and females. To explain how to wrap the body, the *ustad* asked for someone to volunteer and lay down in the centre of the room (Figure 15). After the volunteer had her body shrouded, someone asked whether it was alright for a *waria* to wash the corpse of a woman stating that in Islam only ‘real’ women can do so. The *ustad* explained that ‘if you are predominantly male (*dominan laki-laki*), you cannot touch the woman, but if not there’s no problem.’ None of the participants asked what the *ustad* meant by being ‘predominantly male’, but an explanation to his statement might be found in the variety of manners in which *waria* identify, as I noted in section 5.2.1, which leads to choosing whether one wears male or female prayer clothing.

*Figure 14: A waria pretends to die during the workshop on corpse handling.*
Instead of showing fear or distress, while the waria’s body was covered with fabric and her nostrils filled with cotton, everyone laughed, taking pictures on their smartphones. This normalisation of death is consequential of the high mortality rates among waria but also relates to the functioning of death rituals as a source of collectivity and solidary acceptance of the termination of life. While work within transgender studies has explored violence and suffering (Lombardi et al 2002; Moran and Sharpe 2004; Clements-Nolle et al 2006; Testa et al 2012), other scholars have critiqued this emphasis as a form of ‘trans necropolitics’ through which transgender subjects are portrayed as victims or potential victims (Hegarty 2017: 80).

The role of the uestad, who visited this location from a well-known pesantren, should be noted as a source of legitimacy for waria. This was the first time that this programme took place, but the pesantren waria has held various workshops with progressive religious leaders focusing on other issues (i.e. family acceptance, sexual health, religious interpretations), besides the weekly religious lessons led by a group of uestad and uestadza. Having a space where waria feel

Figure 15: The body of the waria volunteer is wrapped with fabric following the Islamic procedure.
free to ask questions without being judged, make jokes and laugh together about a usually serious issue contributed to creating a sense of belonging to a community leaving behind the difficult lives that some of them live. The question of how this may contribute to the emergence of queer religious agentic processes needs to be asked. A potential explanation might be found considering systems of social agency – which I define as a collective system of agentic power within which not one but many actors act as their carriers – emerging from situations like communal discussions and trainings, led by religious experts, who have the legitimacy to provide religious education. This agency is ‘relocated’ through ‘agentic transferrals’ from religious actors to queer Muslims who acquire knowledge and capacities for action that they might not have before.

This is different from, but complementary to, the individual agency of queer Muslims explored in Chapter 5. In that case, it was constituted by autonomous rituals (i.e. prayer, fasting) from which agentic powers emerged through the building of alternative pious selves based on the navigation and negotiation of religious practices. These multidimensional ways of exploring agency are in line with Mahmood’s insistence on not proposing ‘a theory of agency’ (2005: 188) to pay attention instead to the different modalities it takes. Only by paying attention to these specificities can we, Mahmood argues, start to grasp the ‘different modalities of agency involved in enacting, transgressing, or inhabiting ethical norms and moral principles’ (ibid).

These social agentic processes cannot be explained without considering the social structures existing in democratic Indonesia after Suharto’s fall in 1998. This new democratic phase allowed citizens (from conservative to progressive) to have a voice and become carriers of new forms of agentic power. In this context, the allies are perceived as possessors of authority by some queer Muslims, which is especially significant because their knowledge is not related to the simple things of everyday life, but instead to the sacred, the divine and the unknown. Once their knowledge is distributed among queer Muslims through educational programmes, trainings and workshops, social agency becomes an unequally shared force to be negotiated in relation to the social worlds one inhabits, translating into negotiations of one’s own ‘existence and authority’ (Meyer and Jepperson 2000: 115).

Beyond the funeral training above, other activities illustrate interactions between allies and queer Muslims through educational events. For instance, Stephen Suleeman, a Christian pastor and professor at the Jakarta Theological Seminary, has organised several workshops with
Muslim religious leaders on islands across the archipelago to train participants on religion, gender and sexuality. An additional example is the YIFoS camp, with which I started the introduction to this thesis, where religious leaders taught queer-inclusive interpretations of the Islamic sources. These events are critical in providing alternative knowledge to that received through formal education, which often condemns non-normative genders and sexualities, while also creating spaces of communal debate.

### 7.3.5. Mediating between queer Muslims and conservative religious leaders

As part of their strategic work, the allies aim to build mutual understanding by acting as mediators between queer Muslims and conservative religious leaders who do not yet accept sexual minorities. For some allies, it is critical to build bridges since they consider that intolerance is a consequence of ignorance and a lack of interaction with queer individuals. As Abdul Muiz Ghazali shared with me:

> One of my strategies is to help LGBT people talk to conservative religious leaders through my mediation. The way I contribute to this is by inviting them to gather. Sometimes those religious leaders might get angry. We should let them feel like that until they can accept them by having discussions that aren’t focusing on religion.

Abdul presents this approach as his personal plan of action designed to achieve the goal of queer inclusion within Islam. This contrasts with that of other allies, who preferred to work separately (without the involvement of queer Muslims) with religious figures that they identify as intolerant, since they were concerned about a potential backlash. For Abdul, the first step is to facilitate interactions between these two groups without discussing religious issues. Following this, a second stage is based on introducing religion into the conversation. As he explained, ‘that’s when we can work on acceptance based on religion.’ For him, it is imperative to begin through a mutual identification as human beings independently of religious issues.

Through his role as a mediator, he introduces disputed religious sources (such as the story of the Prophet Lut), providing alternative interpretations by stressing the importance of *ijtihad*. For the allies, it is important to develop contextual approaches not only through one’s
independent work, but also through the encouragement of interactions between social groups that are often considered to be in conflict. As Abdul notes, ‘My duty is helping LGBT people speak up, because I am not representing LGBT people, I am representing the values of humanity (kemanusiaan).’ These settings offer the tools needed to start conversations that would rarely take place without the mediation of allies.

The gatherings are not held in large groups, but often with a small number of religious figures to limit their power in voicing anti-queer discourses considering that they already enjoy what some allies call ‘the majority discourse’ or ‘Bahasa mayoritas.’ These processes of acceptance start sometimes through the expression of queer prestasi, highlighting ‘achievements’ and ‘accomplishments’ emerging from the contributions of queer Muslims to society. An example provided by Marzuki Wahid was the role of waria after the 2010 Mount Merapi eruption in Yogyakarta when they organised themselves to provide the victims with free haircuts and held a music performance to raise funds. While previous literature has explored the role of waria in disaster risk reduction (Balgos et al 2012), it has not analysed the religious consequence of the actions beyond a reference to the pesantren waria.

As Marzuki mentioned, some conservative leaders described a change of attitude towards waria after interpreting their actions as an example of prestasi in combination with the Islamic pillar of zakat, which is not only based on the payment of a tax but also on providing welfare to those in need. An obstacle identified by some allies against the possibility of these encounters is that some queer Muslims are not willing to meet conservative religious actors due to fear. However, some allies keep encouraging queer Muslims to be part of these informal meetings. As Abdul notes, ‘the most important thing is to show the conservative actors that queer Muslims are kind.’ While for him, kindness can constitute a step towards acceptance, achieving such state in practice is not as easy as it might sound.

In addition to these informal gatherings, these mediation strategies also take place through official meetings organised in conjunction with queer-rights NGOs. An example is Ghazali’s work with an LBT (in this case, lesbi, bisexual women and female-to-male transgender) organisation in Central Java through which he held a discussion between queer Muslims and conservative religious figures. As he noted, most of the conservative leaders refused to share a space with sexual minorities at first but ended up agreeing to join. During the gathering, Ghazali opened the discussion highlighting the physical similarities between the
attendants: ‘we all have the same skin, legs, hands, what matters in the eyes of God? Our piety (ketaqwaan).’ By pointing to shared physical features and a common Islamic piety, he encouraged a dialogue that ended up leading to positive outcomes. As he noted, ‘I made them change their minds, there were many religious figures who started to think in a different way.’ This takes us back to the emergence of systems of social agency that complement individualistic approximations to agency. In this example, the focus on piety as a shared feature demonstrates that social agency does not only exist within members of an assumed homogenous group (i.e. waria, gay men – who, despite being considered members of a similar ‘community’, do not always possess an agency of the same kind) but also among those that are often depicted as opponents: conservative religious leaders and sexual minorities.

7.3.6. Individual contact with queer Muslims

In this section, I highlight the importance of the informal counselling in which allies engage as a form of queer religious affective labour. During my fieldwork I not only witnessed how allies participated in training sessions and workshops where they presented their work in front of an audience, but I also observed their intimate interactions with queer Muslims that illustrated a different type of support. They were playing in many cases the role of informal counsellors, some of them having been officially trained for that and some others just acting out of compassion and empathy.

When events took place, those allies leading the discussion not only came to the venue and presented their ideas but also exchanged phone numbers and started friendships with queer Muslims who shared with them their personal stories. From the perspective of some queer Muslims, friendships with the allies were a potential foundation for self-acceptance. For others, who did not perceive being queer and Muslim as opposites, their support was helpful when struggling with family rejection or lack of professional opportunities. The individual interactions between progressive allies and queer Muslims represent an additional dimension through which the promotion of queer inclusion within Islam takes place. I understand ‘promotion’ here as both the active encouragement for self-acceptance through the deployment of affective labour and the practice of formal and informal counselling providing individual help to resolve personal conflicts. Before further exploring the emergence of affective labour in the intersection between religion, gender and sexuality, I want to present examples with minimal commentary to illustrate
the role of counselling as an affective practice:

-A *ruang konseling*. Following weeks of refurbishment work, Bu Shinta, the leader of the *pesantren waria* of Yogyakarta, welcomed me to the renovated space encouraging me to walk around. She was very excited, rushing to show me around and pointing to the new rooms. The house where one of the *waria* used to live had turned into a library where the *santri* could consult books and magazines on Islamic topics and sexual health. Next to a reading corner, there were a pile of cushions and a little room that Shinta called ‘the counselling room’ (*ruang konseling*). While there is an official counsellor visiting regularly from the Universitas Sarjanawiyata Tamansiswa in Yogyakarta, an *ustad* also provides informal counselling. I had the chance to interview him on this work, and he noted that some queer Muslims had visited the *pesantren* to share their problems and receive counselling from him. While he is not paid for providing this support, he explains it as part of his Muslim duty to achieve social justice by helping the oppressed.

-A *vocational school in Yogyakarta*. Bu Anis, the teacher of Islam I mentioned previously, heard about someone facing problems at the vocational school next to the public school where she works. As she told me, ‘they’ have been bullied and discriminated against by other students.’ When she knew about their situation, she decided to offer her help and talk to the student: ‘I gave them a space, they are very close to me now.’ For her, informal counselling took place through intimate conversations and prayers where the student had the opportunity to express their feelings in a safe and respectful environment. In this context, religion emerged as a source of support through rituals aimed at improving the student’s well-being. As Bu Anis noted, ‘the student asked me to pray for them, I know how stressed they are, but I’m trying to show that I accept them.’ Prayer is seen as a source of well-being, which the teacher perceives as complementary to dialogue. The teacher has also started to encourage other students to accept them the way they are by teaching about gender and sexual diversity.

---

85 I am using gender neutral pronouns because the student’s gender identity was described to me as fluid.
-A home. One afternoon somewhere in Central Java one of the allies got a call from a lesbi Muslim: she was asking for help after running away from home because her parents found out that she had a girlfriend. Not long after the conversation took place, this religious leader opened the doors of their house to host the young couple until the situation improved. In contrast to the case of the ustad at the pesantren waria and the teacher I mentioned above, this ally had received educational training to become a counsellor and currently teaches a course on counselling at an Islamic university. The ustad provided this couple with his home as a shelter illustrating the personal engagement that some allies develop beyond their public activities, which is not always made explicit but denotes the significance that the values they support have on their everyday deeds.

Following these descriptive examples, purposely presented with little analysis for the reader to obtain a picture of the situations, I move to an exploration of their significance through the notion of ‘queer religious affective labour.’ While engaging in informal counselling arises as a source of support for queer Muslims to overcome their internal struggles, this can be at times tremendously demanding for the allies as a practice of affective labour. The allies are often contacted after having been identified as potential sources of support by queer Muslims, who have found them online or have heard from other friends about their work. This modality of affective labour is particularly significant considering that a large number of queer Muslims I interacted with expressed the difficulties they faced when trying to find a counsellor or therapist who could understand their situation. For some, finding a ‘queer-friendly’ professional was a difficult task. Some of my interlocutors reported that several psychologists had called them ‘sinners’, while others stated that ‘they had a mental problem’ that ‘could be fixed to go back to normal’ when they revealed their non-normative sexual orientation or gender identity, which often worsened their mental health.

O’Rourke has noted the importance of ‘affect’, which ‘is felt and flows between bodies, between subjects, making us responsible for, obligated towards (...) the other’ (2008: XII). The interpersonal relations between queer Muslims and allies allow us to observe the centrality of affective exchanges consequential of the exclusion and discrimination that queer subjects
experience. For the allies, this affective support is often explained through religion, since it is assumed that Islam arrived to assist the oppressed. The differences of power existing between allies and sexual minorities are relevant to understand the nature of this personal support. For queer Muslims, the individual support received from allies can act as a source of healing. This is achieved not only because of the friendships they build, but also through the legitimacy that they attach to the allies as religious experts who often base their counselling on queer-inclusive interpretations of the religious sources. How can we explore the affective assemblages that arise in the intersection between religious doctrine, individual faith and gender and sexuality? The work of Thajib (2018, 2014) on affect and emotion in the everyday lives of queer Muslims in Indonesia is relevant in the search for potential answers to this question. Besides the experiences of queer Muslims, he also points to the affective discourses produced by conservative government and religious leaders to condemn queer subjects. Thajib (2017: 128) engages with the work of Wetherell (2012) on the role of affect ‘as relational and embedded in shifting social processes.’

Wetherell defines affect as ‘embodied meaning-making (…), something that could be understood as human emotion’ (2012: 4). The allies create new meanings through affective practices to contest religious interpretations that are disturbing for queer Muslim subjectivities. Their affective practice of informal counselling is embedded in social relations that serve to regulate, mediate and disrupt the status quo (Wetherell 2002: 114), challenging heteronormative religious interpretations. These practices, shaped both by affect and by the Islamic values of justice, solidarity and provision of welfare, contest the power of conservative discourses and increase the confidence of queer Muslims. It is in these outcomes that its queer value is manifested: these religious-based forms of affect can disrupt rigid boundaries of disaffection, transforming conformism into critical thinking. Here, in line with Wetherell’s work, affective practice is also expressed as ‘a social activity, woven in other social practices, with potentially mixed effects and impacts’ (2012: 114).

Following the work of Ahmed (2014: 46), these social actions can be conceptualised within a framework of affective economies, as systems that ‘distribute feelings so that bodies and objects accumulate associations that are taken as natural to them’ (as cited in Ritchie, 2015: 183). As described by the allies, when queer Muslims get in touch with them to ask for help, they are often feeling ‘stressed’, ‘scared’ or ‘anxious.’ In relation to these feelings and drawing on the
work of Ahmed (2014: 14), their mood (i.e. ‘feeling stressed’) becomes the affective lens through which affective labour is later shaped leading to ‘social networks, forms of community, biopower’ (Hardt 1999: 96). This type of affective labour is ‘religious’ because of being rooted in Islamic faith, spirituality and reinterpreted religious doctrines: Islam acts as a social glue between the allies and queer Muslims leading to the emergence of feelings of belonging to a common religious community. It is queer not only because of its gender and sexual non-normative character, but also because of the disruptive notions on which it is based. With this, it challenges emotional forms of oppression (often built through hate speech) by engaging in intimate one-to-one support. These actions, taking place discreetly, were for some of my queer Muslim interlocutors an important source of support that impacted the ways they understood their own subjectivities allowing them to leave behind condemnatory interpretations of their gender and sexuality.

7.3.7. Working communally with LGBT-rights NGOs

The allies’ work also includes working with queer-rights NGOs to produce discourses of pro-queer acceptance together. As I mentioned earlier, GAYa Nusantara has organised multiple events bringing together religious leaders from various faiths. As Muhammad, one of the activists working for the NGO, explained to me, ‘This is not a conversation that was this important for us in the past, the focus was rather on sexual health, HIV/AIDS, but we have slowly increased our discussions about religion, gender and sexuality working together with religious figures.’

While prior to the 2016 ‘anti-LGBT crackdown’ there had been forums and discussions on these issues taking place, the activities have intensified in the last four years. During my fieldwork in 2017 and 2018, I attended several events where queer activists gathered with religious leaders and members of other organisations working on inter-faith dialogue, gender and sexuality such as the Youth Interfaith Forum on Sexuality (YIFoS). Besides the 2-day workshop organised by GAYa Nusantara that put together queer activists and some key progressive religious scholars in the country, I also witnessed events where a single speaker would present and engage in discussions with activists. An additional type of discussion took place through the ListeningYou program organised by YIFoS. In this series of sessions taking place in Jakarta in late 2018, the organisers put together individuals working at organisations such as LBHI
(Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Indonesia, or Indonesia Legal Aid Institution), GAYa Nusantara and the Institute for Criminal Justice Reform with religious leaders like the Christian pastor Stephen Suleeman from Jakarta’s Theological Seminary (STT). The four sessions that took place from September to December 2018 were organised around four main issues: SOGIESC and human rights, LGBT and criminalisation in Indonesia, religion and sexuality, and LGBT discussions in the media.

In the session on religion and sexuality I attended, the leader of YIFoS and Stephen Suleeman presented queer-inclusive interpretations of the religious sources, the former focusing on Islam and the latter on Christianity. The forum took place in one of the rooms of Jakarta’s STT and several members of the audience introduced themselves as LGBT. The leader of YIFoS wrote several Qur’anic verses on a whiteboard describing the multiple meanings that the Qur’anic surat in Arabic have to illustrate the possibilities of interpretation (Figure 16). The attendees had the chance to ask questions and clarify what was not clear. One of them, a gay Muslim man, shared that he found it difficult to accept himself as gay and Muslim since he felt that his religion was against his sexual orientation. The rest of the audience reacted to his intervention with applauses, some hugging him to express their support. The speaker replied that Islam is not against homosexuality turning to specific interpretations of religious sources to develop her statement. Another attendee, a self-identified Catholic transpuan, shared her story of transition and narrated her past life as a priest.

The interactions between participants created a feeling of belonging among them. Some participants had never encountered progressive readings of the stories of Lut or Sodom and Gomorrah contesting their interpretation as a condemnation against same-sex sexual acts. Even though not everyone knew each other prior to the event, sharing a common space and getting to acquire new ideas together was perceived by some participants as a source of self-recognition. The feeling of community among religious subjects, some of which felt abandoned by their religion mostly because of heteronormative dominant interpretations, also increased their interest in joining future sessions to learn more about progressive religious exegesis, which was illustrated by the questions of some participants asking to join future events.
Besides these events, progressive religious allies of various faiths have engaged with the NGO GAYa Nusantara (GN) to produce written outcomes of the discussions taking place during their workshops. For example, after the 2-day workshop organised by GN, the NGO published a book presenting its outcomes. Additionally, a volume exploring personal narratives written by queer religious individuals was launched in 2019. These projects illustrating the collaborative work of progressive religious allies and LGBT-rights NGOs not only take place unidirectionally from the religious leaders to the members of those organisations. The queer activists have also started building projects for the mainstreaming of gender and sexual diversity to faith communities.

As Dede Oetomo, founder of GN, explains, the mainstreaming of SOGIESC discourses to religious leaders in East Java started in 2017. The work of GN on these matters has focused mostly in the cities of Surabaya, Mojokerto, Jombang and Malang through three main objectives. Firstly, the dissemination of knowledge about gender and sexual diversity among religious people, both leaders and communities. Second, bringing together religious groups and LGBTIQ individuals to get to know each other. Lastly, expanding the acceptance of LGBTIQ people on various levels, especially among those who are members of religious communities. To reach
these goals, GN has created a steering committee composed of queer religious individuals and faith leaders. This has been done following a process of identification and networking with local faith leaders through face-to-face conversations. Following the first point, public seminars have taken place in Islamic universities such as Universitas Hasyim Asy’ari in Tebuireng, Jombang, Universitas Islam Malang and IAI Uluwiyah, Mojokerto; as well as the Christian church of Merisi in Surabaya. Additionally, GN has organised gender and sexuality short courses with young queer religious individuals and members of faith communities to share their lived experience of religion and discuss religious sources. In this process, social media campaigns using videos and memes on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube have helped spread their contents. Some organisations highlighted by GN as key partners are the Ardhanary Institute, YIFoS, Rumah Kita Bersama (Rumah KitaB), the Center for Marginalized Communities Studies (CMARs), the Jaringan Islam Antidiskriminasi and the Gusdurian network. The example of GN presented here illustrates a two-directional process emerging both from allies and queer activists with the goal of promoting messages of tolerance through education on religion, faith and spirituality.

7.3.8. Building dialogues with conservative actors

Most of the allies have developed communal strategies and interacted with other civil society groups in the hope of strengthening their activism. In this section, I focus on interactions between allies and conservative religious figures taking place without the presence of queer Muslims. This was a strategy raised by some scholars who considered that more engagement was needed with those who had a role in the production of homophobic discourses. As Abdul Muiz Ghazali told me, ‘We should work on the protection of the perpetrators (pelaku). Who are they? The religious leaders.’ When I asked him what he meant by ‘protecting the perpetrators’, he explained:

> What do I mean by protecting them? Informing them, educating them well. They are human beings. I have done that several times: from rejecting LGBT people until the point when they can accept them.

As this conversation illustrates, the discourse of ‘menolak’ (‘rejecting’) is often explained as
consequential of ignorance and lack of education. The task of transforming minds from ‘menolak’ to ‘menerima’ (‘accepting’) is crucial for the allies who engage with conservative actors through direct interactions. This mission mirrors the significance that queer Indonesians (Muslims and non-Muslims alike) attach to achieving social acceptance as part of their project of national belonging. These interactions usually take place through casual forums that have no connection to gender and sexuality at religious organisations such as Nahdlatul Ulama, emerging as convenient spaces to bring up these issues subtly. As one of the allies noted, ‘Some people meet with other religious groups, but they don’t want to speak directly to those who condemn [LGBT people] and protect them in real life. They don’t want to know who the perpetrator (pelaku) is, they only know the victim. They don’t know that we must speak with the perpetrator as much as with the victim.’ Although he did not mention it, Abdul’s words seem to be inspired by Sherover-Marcuse’s work on liberation theory (2000), where he highlights the importance of engaging with the oppressors building dialogues to promote tolerance.

For some allies, facing these conservative leaders head on is not always seen as a beneficial strategy, since they might be larger in numbers when trying to hold a discussion. This explains that when this happens it is usually through one-to-one interactions. However, allies like Aan Anshori also stressed the need to challenge conservative people head on. As he told me, ‘If we don’t do that, conservative people will never be challenged. If you believe in gender equality, justice, human dignity, try to stand up and speak about it even if there are challenges.’ In relation to the exchange of perspectives between progressive and conservative actors, other allies noted how individuals who they identified as anti-LGBT had approached them in public spaces. For example, Aan shared with me what happened days after participating on a national TV show to speak about LGBT issues:

I was with my sister and one of my friends having lunch when someone came. He asked me, ‘Are you Aan Anshori?’ And I replied, ‘Yes, I am, do I know you?’ ‘No, you don’t know me’, he said screaming, ‘but I know you! What did you say on national television regarding LGBT people? I remember! I don’t agree with you!’
Following this, Aan invited this person to sit down and share a meal to discuss these issues together. As he told me, ‘I tried to calm him down explaining that having different opinions is natural in Islam. We had a conversation. I mentioned several verses of Al-Qur’an and that helped him relax. I said, “do you understand that Al-Qur’an says this?” I convinced him, he understood it.’ This vignette illustrates the threats to which the allies are exposed. While in this case there was no physical violence, the aggressive tone used by this individual constitutes one of the reasons why some progressive actors are still inclined to maintain a low profile. However, it also shows that dialogue can lead to mutual understanding. In this case, a confrontational beginning evolved into a calm atmosphere by pointing to specific religious sources to promote queer inclusion.

Moving beyond the production of knowledge and the conversations between allies and queer individuals, interactions with conservative actors is considered by some allies as a key necessary process to transform intolerance into acceptance. As Aan noted, ‘Ignorance is a big problem, people have problems to understand the substance of Islam.’ An educational model based on memorisation instead of understanding could be one of the reasons for the absence of critical thinking, a practice that the concept of *ijtihad* has encouraged throughout Islamic history.

### 7.4. Conclusions

To conclude, I would like to point firstly to what this chapter was not about. This chapter has not been aimed at explaining the reasons why some Muslim religious leaders and scholars support the rights of queer Muslims, and why some reject them. Instead, I have attempted to explore the actions through which pro-queer Muslim activism takes place in Indonesia. The progressive Muslim allies take different approaches to support queer-rights in relation to what they individually consider to be more helpful to achieving their goals. While some like Musdah Mulia are perceived as lonely fighters taking an individualistic and vocal approach to activism, others like Abdul Muiz Ghazali and Aan Anshori argue for more relational approaches.

What emerges is a picture of the efforts in which the allies engage to protect and promote the rights of queer Muslims, not just through their individual production of knowledge on Islam, gender and sexuality, but also, and more importantly, through the building of alliances with other societal actors. This is often done formally through connections with other marginalised groups, but also informally interacting with conservative Muslim figures. Inspired by the work of Meyer
and Jepperson on social agency (2000), I have pointed to the potential of this type of activism towards the emergence of social/communal agentic systems through contacts between religious leaders and queer Muslims, who develop their capacities for action via the legitimacy of the allies.

The importance given by some allies to working together with the ‘perpetrators’ or ‘pelaku’ also illustrates the archipelagic nature of their practices and concerns. I call them ‘archipelagic’\(^{86}\) because the differences found between the allies point to how they move across different ‘islands’ of activism (from the context of conservative leaders to that of queer-rights activists). This occurs without renouncing to what they consider to be an authentic Muslim subjectivity. The dialogues between progressive and conservative actors reveal the significance of including the dominant conservative group in the conversation. While multiple workshops and programmes directed at training and educating queer Muslims are readily available, putting the focus on the pelaku offers a convenient additional tactic to the existing battery of strategies.

Working in the field of racism, Sherover-Marcuse has stressed the importance of working with the oppressors assuming that they might ‘change their attitudes and behaviour when they feel acknowledged and appreciated as individuals, are listened to with complete respect on their own concerns, trust the person presenting the new perspective when the new perspective makes sense to them and they are not blamed for their prior conditioning or behaviour’ (Sherover-Marcuse in Lindsay and Danner 2008). This is in line with the approaches developed by the allies in working with conservative religious leaders. Instead of basing their actions on direct confrontation, they acknowledge the concerns of conservative actors by listening to what they have to say first. In this context, it is also significant that some allies are respected as members of religious organisations such as Nahdlatul Ulama. Besides the interactions between conservative and progressive actors, I have also pointed to the role of the latter as mediators between queer Muslims and those who express their rejection towards them.

This chapter reveals the importance given by allies to taking an active role in the development of actions aimed at achieving queer inclusion. Complementing their work with conservative actors, activism takes on dynamic approaches to engage with queer Muslims and other societal groups for future social change. This was demonstrated through the emergence of

---

\(^{86}\) I am drawing here on Boellstorff’s definition of gay and lesbi subject positions as ‘archipelagic’ since ‘their authenticity does not require renouncing other subjectivities’ (2005a: 205).
activities connecting school students with sexual minorities. This is not only done within Islamic educational environments, but also at Christian universities. In addition to these communal approaches, the allies also work specifically with queer Muslims by holding events to train them in alternative religious interpretations. Their activism shows the importance of affective labour getting personally involved with queer subjects revealing the role of emotion and care as a potential source of self-acceptance and strength.

The strategies I have presented throughout this chapter are not a uniform set of actions followed by all the actors I have identified as allies. This heterogeneity points to the multidimensional nature of pro-queer Muslim activism and constitutes a source of tension for some of my interlocutors in relation to the absence of a communal strategy. Illustrative of this is that some allies engage in workshops and training programmes with sexual minorities but only a few held gatherings mediating between them and conservative actors. In fact, I saw the same faces in most of the events I attended during my fieldwork: for example, Aan Anshori, Abdul Muiz and Kyai Hussein Muhammad were frequently invited, while other actors would never be present in such events, working instead independently. In those cases, I conducted interviews with them that led me to perceive that they had developed their own independent plans.

The absence of a common strategy is likely to engender backlash from actors from the conservative majority. Strategies based on acting independently and confrontationally by attacking homophobic actors head on were regarded as inappropriate by most of the progressive Muslim allies. For example, some of my interlocutors perceived some allies to be ‘too vocal and individualistic’, lacking engagement with other progressive actors to build a common approach. This is understood to have the potential to negatively affect the work that other progressive Muslims are conducting subtly, which could lead to a stronger reaction from conservative groups. As one of the allies noted, ‘Acting without dialogue and disregarding the situation is what I call being fundamentalist (fundamentalis).’

Some allies noted the importance of employing a ‘Bahasa sosial’ or ‘social language’ based on mutual respect and tolerance instead of building one’s activism through academic discussions of gender and sexual theory or religious discourses. As one of the allies stated, ‘When your ideas are accepted in intellectual discussions without any resistance, it does not mean that you have succeeded.’ With this, he pointed to the importance of building dialogue between societal actors instead of focusing solely on academic work that might be
inconsequential for creating queer Muslim acceptance. The strategies I have noted can be key to the success of collaborative public engagement efforts through alliances between diverse groups, coalition-building, engagement in training sessions, and partnerships. Considering this complex context, it is not only the task of allies but also of queer-rights activists to encourage the building of mutual understanding and tolerance.
Chapter 8: Conclusions

8.1. Introduction

I see God everywhere

Aku melihat Tuhan di mana-mana

I see God in your tears, when you bow at the feet of anxiety.

Aku melihat Tuhan di linang air matamu, ketika engkau bersujud di kaki kegelisahan,

in the rain of mosques and prayer rooms, in the shade of churches, or Chinese and Buddhist temples

di rinai hujan masjid dan mushola, di teduh gereja, atau klinteng dan vihara

You complain about yourself, who you think is lost in the wilderness of sin, at the gates of hell

Engkau berkeluh kesah tentang dirimu, yang kau kira tersesat di belantara dosa, di pintu-pintu neraka

I see God in the prejudices you hold against yourself

Aku melihat Tuhan di prasangkamu tentang dirimu.

You think God is moving away, even though he is closer to your most honest and intact mind

Kau kira Tuhan menjauh, padahal ia mendekat lekat di batinmu yang paling jujur dan utuh.

I see God everywhere, in the mirror in the morning, where I look at my body and face,

Aku melihat Tuhan di mana-mana.

di cermin pagi hari, tempatku menatap tubuh dan wajahku,

every morning after long nights when you fall on my chest.

saban pagi usai malam malam panjang tempat kau rebah di dadaku.
This poem was written by Adit, the transgender man from Central Java introduced for the first time in Chapter 3 (p. 88). He read it at the closing ceremony of the YIFoS 5th Young Queer Faith and Sexuality Camp, standing in the middle of the stage just before the final performance with which I opened this thesis. The poem seems to be both a self-reflection about Adit’s experience as a pious Muslim, and a message to the audience, most of whom identified as gay, lesbi, transgender, waria or queer. Reflecting on his gender, sexuality and religion, he speaks about a feeling of loss ‘in the wilderness of sin, at the gates of hell.’ Such expressions find parallels with some of my interlocutors’ narratives in which they described the teachings received while growing up.

Employing a eulogy dedicated to Allah, Adit’s poem is a call to overcome internalised trans- and homophobia. Drawing upon his own emotional experiences, he tells a story of guilt and liberation through his relationship with God. Allah is represented as a divine force that he describes falling on his chest to denote the importance of his spiritual connection through the jiwa (soul/spirit), an issue he raised when I interviewed him. The poem celebrates his everyday interactions with God, which are marked by renewed optimism and hope and juxtaposed with the pessimistic shadow of the past. The usage of metaphorical imagery (‘in the rain of mosques’, ‘I see God in your tears’) is noteworthy to express how God’s presence (and submission to his divine power) arises as an alleviation of one’s guilt and anxiety. Adit is expressing his inner subjectivity while simultaneously projecting the subject positions of those in the audience through his poetic devices.

Like Adit’s poetry, this thesis has explored the interrelationships between gender, sexuality and religion by putting the focus on the lives of queer Muslims and their allies in contemporary Indonesia. The archipelago’s religious, linguistic, political and cultural diversity and its specific colonial history and contemporary transitions have contributed to problematising the context within which my participants construct their subjectivities. It has done so by drawing on ethnographic fieldwork to challenge existing literature around the assumed inconsistencies between being queer and Muslim, which are often portrayed in unintelligible ways. Consequently, I have attended to how queer Muslims negotiate their multiple selves by using their agency to make decisions and adapt religious beliefs and practices to their own priorities. In this context, my findings have uncovered how social agents like the family, education and media influence the negotiation and contestation of subjectivities and
norms. Additionally, I have traced the emergence of progressive branches of Islam inspired by Indonesian local values that have inspired queer Muslims and their allies to promote the inclusion of gender and sexual minorities within Islam. In doing so, I have contested the conflation of agency and resistance that is common in poststructuralist feminist and queer theory to note the existence of alternative agentic systems arising from within submission to religious norms. While exploring the potential of religion for the emergence of agentic powers, I have also elevated the importance of communal processes through which queer Muslims are supported by their progressive allies.

This concluding chapter returns to the main objectives and research questions of this thesis, which I outlined in Chapter 1. The key theoretical and ethnographic intention of ‘qu(e)erying Islam’ around which this thesis is centred has cast a light on the formation of queer Muslim subjectivities (which some of my interlocutors described as a process of ‘becoming’ or *menjadi*) and the connection of these ongoing processes with the emergence of agentic power. In relation to this, I have noted the impact of the sociocultural background of my interlocutors by exploring the relationship of social institutions like the family, education and media with teachings on gender, sexuality and religion. This has been useful to describe the impact of such forces on the constant flux that characterises human subjectivities and constantly alters and transforms norms and ways of being. Evidence of such transformations is the emergence of queer-inclusive Islamic discourses shaped by the values of Islam Nusantara giving way to the strategies described before this chapter.

8.2. Que(e)rying Islam

This section explores the debates that this thesis has contributed to by identifying three key themes emerging from my analysis in chapters 3 to 7: ‘becoming’ a queer Muslim (8.2.1), agency and power (8.2.2) and pro-queer religious activism (8.2.3).

8.2.1. ‘Becoming’ a queer Muslim

A key contribution that my thesis has made is in tracing the ways that Indonesian queer Muslims come to build and negotiate their subjectivities, beliefs and practices through interactions with the power structures around them. My study adds to the growing body of research on queer and religious subjects that I described in Chapter 1 contributing to existing

Drawing upon existing literature on non-normative genders and sexualities in Indonesia (Blackwood 2010; Boellstorff 2005a, 2005b; Davies 2011, 2007a, 2007b), I have offered a textured exploration of Indonesian queer Muslims’ lived experiences and narratives. This has served me to challenge what Fiddian-Qasmiyeh calls ‘repress-entations’ (2014: 263) of these subjects as victims of their religion and culture and, therefore, devoid of agentic power. My findings have pointed to the fluid character of my participants’ subjectivities, opposing rigid conceptualisations of the self. Despite recounting narratives of struggle during childhood and adolescence resulting from exposure to homophobic interpretations of the religious texts, most of my interlocutors assumed their queerness and religion as integrated assemblages that did not constitute a conflict at later stages in life. These findings differ from dominant representations of queer Muslims as subjects constantly ‘suffering’ from their irreconcilable subjectivities.

Queer Muslim participants largely described their ongoing forms of self-making through the concept of ‘becoming,’ employing the Indonesian terms menjadi or its short form jadi. Paying attention to the ongoing fluctuations that characterise everyday life and contribute to the process of ‘becoming’ queer and Muslim, I have expanded debates on ‘menjadi’ as a process of self-awareness among gay and lesbi Indonesians (Boellstorff 2005a). I have done so by identifying the significance of the multiple agents existing around my participants to acknowledge that this process of becoming does not take place solely within one’s individual self. Instead, I have described how the emergence of queer Muslim subjectivities often rests on social interactions in both physical and virtual worlds. Beyond discussions on non-normative sexual orientations, the specific process of menjadi waria, which is different to that of gays and lesbians considering the physical dimension to it, has been explained as the cultivation of a gendered embodiment through social interactions accumulated over time (Hegarty 2017: 69). There is, therefore, a constant relationship between individual-community-nation, and the multiple ways in which queer Muslims navigate their subjectivities.
While there is no translation of the verb ‘to be’ in Bahasa Indonesia, *menjadi/jadi* is the term offered by translation websites like Google Translate despite not having the same meaning. For example, to state ‘I am happy’ one would simply say ‘Aku senang’, which translates as ‘I happy.’ This makes discussions of ‘becoming’ in the Indonesian context even more relevant considering that ‘to be’ is translated to English as ‘to become.’ To be [a queer Muslim] is, therefore, to become. The particularities of becoming/*menjadi* gay, lesbi or waria have commonly been discussed with reference to gender and sexuality (Hegarty 2017; Boellstorff 2005a). However, what I find particularly promising about this concept is that it allows to think epistemologically about the flux of religious subjectivities and what ‘being’ a Muslim might mean across different times and locations through a permanent state of ‘becoming.’ While this was raised by many of my interlocutors when discussing their sexual orientation, *waria* and *trans* participants used this term to explain how they arrived at the present materiality of their bodies through processes of becoming.

The subjective process of ‘becoming’ a queer Muslim – as could also be the case of, for example, lesbian Buddhists or Christian gay men – is inevitably influenced by wider social forces. As my findings have shown, the teachings received from family members and formal education impact one’s negotiations of desires, emotions, actions and subjectivities in early life and adolescence. For most of my interlocutors, the religious lessons received through primary and secondary education, both in public and private institutions, largely focused on the dangers of the practice of anal sex through homophobic interpretations of the story of the Prophet Lut, and the sinful character of transgenderism. This often impacted the navigation of their gender and sexuality in negative ways, leading to feelings of guilt, sin and distress. In opposition to those discourses, their access to alternative knowledge on gender and sexuality as well as religious interpretations later in life also influenced how they produced their own selves exerting their agentic powers. Becoming queer is therefore also becoming Muslim, as we acknowledge the possibility of renegotiating and transcending the power of regulatory norms by both resisting and surrendering to them. The power of *menjadi* lies, then, in the continuous provision of new configurations of the self. As such, it echoes definitions of ‘becoming queer’. As Halperin writes, becoming queer (and, therefore, transforming oneself) is understood as, ‘an identity without an essence, not a given condition but a horizon of possibility, an opportunity for self-transformation, a queer potential’ (1995: 79).
Halperin continues by stating that while ‘one can’t become homosexual, strictly speaking: either one is or one isn’t, one can transform oneself, one can become queer’ (ibid.). While drawing upon the work of Foucault, Halperin is transcending the Foucauldian idea of becoming homosexual through the notion of ‘becoming queer’ (ibid). The queer spirit of ongoing transformation is also linked to more recent discussions on ‘becoming queer’ understood as a way to transform and trouble knowledge (Di Feliciantonio et al 2017: 407). Taking this to the context of my interlocutors, I contend that their navigation of selves in relation to the multiple powers impacting processes of becoming leads to the epistemological transformation of both how they ‘know’ themselves and how we know them.

Given the constant reference to a process of ‘becoming’ by my interlocutors, an obvious paradox emerges in their belief that it was Allah who made them gay, lesbi or waria. This inconsistency can be explained by establishing a distinction between a self-assumed essentialised subjectivity (‘I am gay because I was born this way’) and the constant transformation of a pre-existing self. This evolving notion of the self was often influenced by my participants’ access to alternative forms of knowledge and social support through media, Internet and the social actors around them. This enabled them to reconfigure the ways they navigated their subjectivities, complicating the common portrayal of queer Muslims as devoid of agency.

My findings have also revealed how national ideals of Indonesian citizenship intersect with religious discourses and teachings in the production of gender and sexual norms. The impact that nation-building efforts have on demands of queer recognition based on national belonging has been a topic of academic discussion alerting us of the difficulties to separate national and religious discourses in the Indonesian archipelago (Davies 2010: 8; Boellstorff 2005a). Complementing existing literature, my findings have noted how queer Muslims in Indonesia understand their subjectivities at the intersection of religious and national ideals that are simultaneously impacted by global discourses on queerness and Islam. In this context, a key contribution is based on recognising the significance of both individual and social settings by noting the interconnections between individual, community, nation and religion starting with the role of family members in shaping how queer Muslims perceive themselves through their statements regarding non-normative genders and sexualities, which were often based on religious teachings.
The central role of heteronormative family ideals in the building of the post-colonial Indonesian state is confirmed by ideological tools like the family principle or asas kekeluargaan, a metaphor of the nation as a family led by a male figure. Starting in Suharto’s New Order, Indonesia has been built as a familial state (negara kekeluargaan) through, among other channels, the public education curriculum to present the modern family as the foundational unit of the nation (Boellstorff 2005a: 196). Despite the significance of such ideology, I have also noted instances of new queer Muslim kinship illustrating the possibilities for new types of ‘keluarga’ to develop. Expanding existing debates on the interactions between non-normative sexualities and nationalism in Indonesia (ibid), I have demonstrated the significance of Islam on how my participants came to their subjectivities as queers and Muslims. As I have found, for my participants, to be queer was not only to engage in national (as well as global) assumptions and ideals, but also to absorb religious norms and values. The most explicit example of the impact of religion in one’s subjectivity was my exploration of the waria’s jiwa perempuan, which I translated as soul/spirit representing the divine origins of one’s wariahood. Besides waria, some gay and lesbi participants also described a connection between their sexual orientation and religion assuming the possession of a gay or lesbi jiwa. The increasing importance of religion in the Indonesian state practices and discourses finds resonance in the lives of my queer Muslim participants differing from existing literature based on fieldwork conducted in the 1990s where religion was not given a prominent role.

My research has also contributed to existing discussions on the formation of queer subjectivities in Indonesia by identifying parallels between the Indonesian family principle and the role of the family as the core foundation of society and culture in Islam. This points back to my earlier reference on the significance of communality above individuality in Indonesia by drawing upon existing literature on the notion of gotong royong or ‘mutual cooperation’ (Bowen 1986). The construction of the nuclear family (instead of the citizen in isolation) as the smallest unit of the nation during Indonesia’s New Order (Suryakusuma 1996: 95-97) has impacted queer subjectivities across the archipelago until the present day. Simultaneously, the family in Islam is the basis for a harmonious social order: the expectations of family members are not framed only within the familial unit, but also within the greater social system of which

---

87 I briefly noted this in Chapter 3, Section 3.2.3. There is potential to continue exploring Indonesian new forms of ‘keluarga’ in future research.
they are part that is inspired by a communal Muslim brotherhood (Al-Barwani and Albeely 2007: 130). In relation to the significance of these interpersonal orientations, an additional contribution of my work lies in my exploration of the concept of tanggung jawab, a theme that has not been widely discussed in existing literature, referring to one’s responsibility towards family members representing both national and religious values. This reveals the centrality of collectivity over individual gratification, which is also in line with my exploration of allies’ strategies in terms of how they support queer Muslims both individually and communally supporting organisations and delivering lessons together to promote social justice.

Having noted the significance of national ideas of citizenship, I want to look now at the future. In relation to this, a question worth asking is how virtual worlds are used in the construction of queer and Muslim subjectivities. My findings show that, against the unidirectional teachings that my participants received from family members and teachers, which they would rarely challenge, online spaces offer opportunities to acquire alternative knowledge and to engage in discussions with other Internet users. The possibility of being anonymous online, maintaining one’s privacy, offers opportunities to navigate one’s queerness and Muslimness in ways that are not possible within the limits set by familial, societal and educational norms. This is an important contribution to previous debates that lays the foundation for future research agendas, validating my argument that a shift has taken place with regards to previous discussions presenting zines and newspapers as the main source of identification for queer Indonesians in the past.

The role of the Internet as a setting where individuals can negotiate and transform their identities and subjectivities has been discussed in recent literature (Guta and Karolak 2015; Poletti and Rak 2014). Such scholarship has noted how online platforms constitute examples of media affordance allowing users to create specific types of identities that can be shared with others. This opens the door to analyses of queer religious self-representation through digital ethnographies attending to how online platforms allow for transformations of the self through online textual practices. Moving beyond existing scholarship discussing the significant role of print media in helping queer Indonesians come to their gender and sexual subjectivities (Blackwood 2008; Boellstorff 2007, 2005a) I have revealed the role of the Internet and new technologies as critical sources of knowledge and communication offering channels to voice one’s thoughts while also creating new agentic forms. For some of my participants, it was only
when they started having access to the Internet that they stopped thinking of themselves as sinners. As summed up by Nico, a gay Muslim from Jakarta:

I always had issues because everyone told me I couldn’t be gay within Islam, but when I came across alternative interpretations and met people on the Internet, I finally started to accept myself.

### 8.2.2. Agency and power

A second major theme emerging in this thesis pertains to my participants’ agentic power as explored vis-à-vis the intersecting operations of gender, sexuality and religion through the notion of queer religious agency. As noted in Chapter 1, queer and religious subjectivities are often considered by social scientists to be ‘so unrelated as to have no continuity at all’ (Comstock and Henking, 1997: 74). Such claims find little resonance with the experiences of gender, sexuality and religion that I observed during my time in Indonesia, and that exist elsewhere in the world (Kugle 2014; Yip and Khalid 2010). Considering this, my thesis has contributed to contest homosexual approaches that contend that there is a universal way of being queer based on ‘Western’ models of identity (Massad 2015) through secular homonormative expectations (Scherer 2017). I have done so by embracing an emic approach seeking to comprehend how my interlocutors understood their own actions. The common depiction of queer Muslims as victims devoid of agency in the media and academic literature continues to perpetuate the queer exceptionalism of homosecularism. This carries the implication that non-religious queer subjects are freer than their religious counterparts presenting queer emancipation as exclusively secular. My findings, combining a ‘queer’ and ‘religious’ component within the framework of agency, have contributed to debates on alternative models of queer agential subjectivity. This has demonstrated that most of my participants did not follow dominant models of ‘queer liberation’ set out through mainly ‘Western’ standards. This is a point that Yip (2008) notes in his critique of the perpetuation of homonormative paradigms through which knowledge on queer lives is reproduced. With this, he argues for explorations of queer lives beyond expectations of queer assimilation and homogeneity, paying attention to intersectional ways of being. If one considers that queer Muslims can only be ‘free’ within secular frameworks, we then need to ask what the example of
my Indonesian interlocutors can tell us about universal epistemologies of secular ‘liberation’. In this manner, my findings have also noted the potential of religion to mobilise ‘freedom’ in ways that do not match the discourse of queer secularity within liberalism. Puar summarises the problem of queer secularity this way:

> Queer secularity demands a particular transgression of norms, religious norms that are understood to otherwise bind that subject to an especially egregious interdictory religious frame. The queer agential subject can only ever be fathomed outside the norming constrictions of religion, conflating agency and resistance (Puar 2007: 13).

To my queer interlocutors in Indonesia (and other queer religious subjects elsewhere surely), this would mean having two options: seeking ‘liberation’ by inhabiting a secular self or living an illogical life in the ‘conflicting binary’ of queerness and Islam. This either/or narrative has intensified in ‘Western’ media articles through references to Islam regarding the LGBT crackdown taking place in Indonesia since 2016 (Bevins 2018; Feder 2016). While attacks against queer people continue to take place in ‘Western’ countries, often in relation to Christian religious texts, Islam remains portrayed as the most homophobic religion. This happens, as Puar explains, despite exhortations by queer Muslims who have described that their struggles are not different from those of Christian or Jewish queer people (2007: 14). By implication, queer Muslims in Indonesia are commonly portrayed as powerless subjects who ‘struggle’ to live a ‘free’ life amid cultural and religious constrictions.

With my discussion on queer religious agency, I am not denying the significance of moments of resistance to religious norms that have been used to discriminate against queer individuals through traditional interpretations of the religious sources. I also acknowledge, as I noted in Chapters 3 and 4, that some religious teachings that my interlocutors described having received were not accepting of non-normative sexualities. Instead, through the notion of queer religious agency I want to argue for our engagement, as scholars, in efforts to distinguish between the multiple hermeneutics that religious texts allow and the individual experience of religion, faith and spirituality that religious subjects might describe, as illustrated in Chapter 5, to reflect on agentic models that might not fit ‘Western’ liberal secular frameworks. In line with this argument, most of my thesis has been inspired by Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety* (2005),
where she starts her exploration of a women’s piety movement in Cairo with the question: ‘why would such a large number of women across the Muslim world actively support a movement that seems inimical to their “own interests and agendas”’ (2005: 2).

Drawing upon Mahmood’s work, I have aimed to demonstrate the existence of multiple modalities of agency beyond dominant subversive types, which are also based on one’s strict adherence to religious duties such as prayers and fasting. Therefore, I have noted how portrayals of queers as ‘victims of their own religion’ do not match the experiences of my interlocutors, who described their ‘freedom’ as consequential to their surrender and obedience to Allah and religious obligations. Prayers were understood by my interlocutors as sources of calmness, gratitude and guidance in daily life pointing to the emergence of feelings of ‘freedom’ through one’s complete capitulation to religious norms. This challenges an imaginary of liberation common in liberal political theory by which individuals are only ‘free’ on the condition of acting autonomously (Mahmood 2005: 148). Complementing the significance of ritual prayers, fasting (puasa) emerged as a source of both internal and communal agentic power. As noted, the queer act of fasting is linked to one’s surrender to Allah, leading to the capacity to develop one’s emotional control, train oneself in Islamic virtues (such as patience, social justice and human dignity) and cultivate empathy and solidarity, which is in line with the experiences of non-queer Muslim subjects too.

Existing scholarship has characterised religious subjects as possessors of a religious agency in relation to their enactment of dynamic religious identities (Leming 2007: 74). Additionally, a growing body of scholarship has explored the concept of religious agency in relation to religious women with disparate approaches to its theoretical underpinnings (Singh 2015; Bracke 2008). Other scholars have referred to the agentic potential of religion failing to fully explain what they meant with ‘religious agency’ (Katzenstein 1998: 28; Ammerman 1997: 203). However, a critical contribution of this scholarship lies in its contestation of the ‘false consciousness’ thesis of modern liberal-secularist feminisms. This refers to the belief that ‘women who participate in patriarchal religious traditions are acting against their own objective interests and are therefore simply the passive and brainwashed victims […] of men and their patriarchal institutions’ (Singh 2015: 661). As Davies notes, agency does not always need to be a ‘challenge to power structures but can be deployed towards self-serving ends’ (2010: 124).
In this context, the analysis of the rapidly evolving Indonesian religious context (Boland 2013; Effendy 2003; Hefner 2000; Geertz 1968) offers a background against which religious agency can be analysed. Employing the concept of religious agency in Indonesia, scholars have explored the experiences of Muslim women. For example, Rinaldo has introduced the notion of ‘pious critical agency’ as Muslim women’s ‘capacity to engage critically and publicly with religious texts’ (2014: 825) to oppose depictions of religion as constraining women. Beyond the Indonesian case, further studies exploring the role of religion as a source of agentic power for queer subjects would be worthwhile.

How could explorations of queer religious agency help us comprehend the experiences of queer subjects in other countries in the region, such as Malaysia and Brunei? The case of Brunei would be particularly interesting considering the international boycott against the country in 2019 after the introduction of sharia law allowing death by stoning for those engaging in sodomy. This has reactivated narratives which place Bruneian queer Muslims within victimology narratives and portray Islam as a source of ‘barbarism’ through classic ‘white saviour’ narratives that do not match the everyday realities of these subjects, as local queer people have shared online (Ibrahim 2018). This takes me, again, to support the need to explore the individual and communal religious practices that queer Muslims (and their allies) utilise to negotiate queerness and religion in relation to the forces around them.

In conclusion, one of the goals of my thesis has been to explore alternative models of agentic power that do not match conceptualisations of freedom/liberation common within liberal political theory. With this, I am referring to the assumption that human agency can only occur through the disruption of norms instead of, as the case of my participants illustrate, embracing them. Considering the vagueness around which the concept of agency has commonly been discussed in existing scholarship (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 962), it is not surprising that the very limited references to ‘queer religious agency’ that I have found do not provide an exhaustive conceptualisation of this concept (I have done so in my own writings, see Rodriguez 2019a, 2019b; and Justaert 2017; Talley 2006: 15). In other cases, it has been equated with the assumed need to reconcile queer and religious subjectivities (Brower 2019: 83). Consequentia
d of the fluid and evolving character of queer religious agency, I have intentionally not sought to provide a rigid definition of this concept, aiming instead at presenting an understanding of agency as a modality of action in the Mahmoodian sense: to resignify how surrender and
submission to religious norms, often considered contrary to agency itself, can actually constitute important sources of agentic power. Paying attention to how queer religious subjects embrace, negotiate, and inhabit religious practices, norms and values can provide us with further answers to the question of how this type of agency is constituted.

8.2.3. Pro-queer religious activism

A final theme pertains to the research problem of understanding the relationship between gender, sexuality and religion through the work of the allies of queer Muslims, to inform practices for the inclusion of queer religious subjects in other contexts globally. Employing an ethnographic approach, I have investigated the origins of pro-queer Muslim activism in relation to both progressive Islam and Islam Nusantara. Additionally, I have presented the strategies developed by these allies to support the inclusion of queer Muslims within Islam. To my knowledge, to date no empirical studies have been conducted on the role of religious leaders and scholars in the promotion of queer inclusion in Indonesia. While existing literature has explored progressive Islam in the ‘West’ (Safi 2003; Esack 2003; Mandavilli 2003), little has been discussed under the notion of ‘progressive’ discourses in Indonesia (Arifianto 2013), with most of the literature discussing instead liberal Islam focusing on the Liberal Islamic Network (Ali 2005; Harvey 2009).

As I have noted, with the term activism I am thinking both about organised campaigns and everyday intentional interactions that contribute to building queer inclusion. With this, I am not saying that every action is activism, which is different to how Kugle presents his queer Muslim interlocutors as ‘activists’ in Living Out Islam (2014: 220). Instead, I am framing the allies’ engagement in campaigning to effect social change within a sample of participants who were neither formal members of queer-rights groups nor identified as queer or LGBT themselves. Therefore, I take distance from the ‘modes of activism’ described by Kugle as actions emerging ‘in the life stories of gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslims who volunteer with support groups’ through, for example, ‘struggling’ to pray in certain spaces (ibid: 2). In this manner, the type of activism that characterises this pro-queer movement has been influenced by, as I described in Chapter 6, participation in student religious organisations, inter-faith groups, and Gusdurian networks, leading to heterogeneous ways of acting. This type of activism demonstrates the various degrees of power that individuals hold as well as the potential
of what I call ‘agentic transferrals’ between allies and queer subjects as they interact and exchange knowledge.

My exploration of pro-queer religious activism offers an additional lens to existing work on the increasing conservatism of Islam in Indonesia (Hefner 2019; Wieringa 2019). My research shows that the allies’ pro-queer activism is influenced by their previous engagement in groups that make their support possible, but not inevitable. The importance of engaging in such networks through communal activities says much about the Indonesian spirit of ‘gotong royong’ or ‘mutual assistance’ introduced in Chapter 6. With this, I want to argue again for the need to pay attention to local ways of ‘doing’ activism that might not locate individual autonomy at its core, as it is the case within liberal frameworks. This relates to how my queer Muslim interlocutors engaged in ongoing negotiations and adaptations of the self, considering the importance of mutual assistance, reciprocity, and cooperation in Indonesian culture (Bowen 1986; Sullivan 1986). This takes us back to rethinking what freedom might mean in this context against discourses of queer liberation exported from the ‘West.’ When addressing these issues, it is important to acknowledge that there is a danger of essentialising ‘Indonesian culture’ through the oversimplification of the extraordinary diversity of social practices in the archipelago.

In relation to the emergence of pro-queer activism, I have noted the importance of progressive Islam in Indonesia, within which most of the allies I met located themselves. This is a significant field to continue exploring, considering the lack of literature beyond explorations of Liberal Islam and Islam Berkemajuan, from which I distanced myself. Before concluding this thesis, I need to be clear, too, about the potential dangers that using ‘progressive’ labels involve for the representation of Islam. When we speak about progressive, liberal or moderate Islam, we need to be careful not to create distinctions between those whom we generally refer to as ‘Muslims’ without attached adjectives. My usage of progressive Islam does not mean that what is not progressive is automatically anti-queer, but instead represents a particular concept that my interlocutors used to define themselves. Academic work has noted the problematic character of using terms like ‘progressive Muslims’ to pay attention to what is inexplicitly located on the other side (i.e. ‘radical’ Muslims, ‘extremists,’ etc.). This is an issue that Safi has discussed to analyse the representation of the ‘good Muslim’ as an individual or small circle against general
Muslim masses as ‘evil, terrorist-supporters, anti-Western, patriarchal, misogynist, undemocratic, and anti-Semitic’ (2011: para. 3). As he wonders:

If one of the two extremes away from the ‘moderate Muslims’ is easy to imagine (terrorism, Bin Laden, etc.), the other extreme is ill-defined. What are moderate Muslims moderating? If one extreme is terrorism, then what is the other extreme? ‘Moderate Muslims’ are often defined, and confined, to be supporters of US foreign policy, vis-à-vis some important issues, such as supporting US global military presence, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Palestinian-Israeli issue (ibid: para. 12).

Safi’s reflection illustrates the pervasive influence of imperialist discourses on the representation of Muslim subjects. As scholars, we should carefully consider such literature paying attention to the political and religious dimension of terms prior to employing them.

An additional contribution of my work within the issue of pro-queer religious activism has to do with my exploration of the principles shared by the allies. For example, their insistence on the concept of humanism (‘kemanusiaan’/‘humanisme’), based on putting the focus on the welfare of human beings above all other issues, can be linked to contemporary scholarship on Islamic humanism (Tibi 2012, 2009; Goodman 2003) as a challenge to Islamism and a foundation to dialogue and mutual respect. This points to the significance of orthopraxy (correct conduct) against orthodoxy (correct belief) as a model for doing theology and producing progressive Islamic discourses, which I have argued to be in line with the Catholic tradition of liberation theology.

Belief in the principle of ‘rahmatan lil alamin’ was also significant as a source to promote acceptance and tolerance on the basis that all beings are created equal by Allah. A second shared principle pertains to the defence of contextualism against literalism, which I noted through the engagement of the allies in queer-friendly Qur’anic hermeneutics. Lastly, another shared ground among allies relates to their conviction that the Indonesian archipelago can be a catalyst of pluralism and heterogeneity, contesting what allies call ‘Arab Islam’ mainly to refer to Wahhabism through the framework of nationalism. This is a problematic binary that we should reflect on, considering the simplistic equation of ‘Arab Islam’ with a system of ideas.
representing conservatism similarly to discussions on the Balkans describing the local Muslims as victims of an ‘aggressive Arab Islam’ (Elbasani and Roy 2015).

My findings have also expanded existing scholarship on Islam Nusantara (Woodward 2017; Evers 2016) exploring the allies’ references to this local branch of Islam to justify their activism. Considering the significance of nationalism and local culture in the shaping of Islam Nusantara, my findings have significant implications for the understanding of how pro-queer Muslim discourses are produced by leaning on historical justifications within the horizon of a national discourse that is often localised. In essence, queer acceptance is often promoted in relation to the historical existence of non-normative subjects like waria or bissu in Indonesia, who are often based in specific geographical locations, through discourses highlighting the diversity of the archipelago more broadly.

Having discussed progressive Islam and Islam Nusantara in relation to the origins of pro-queer Muslim activism, this thesis addressed the specific strategies implemented by allies to support queer individuals in Indonesia. This constitutes one of the first attempts to thoroughly examine the role of non-queer religious allies in promoting queer activism through religion, not only in the Indonesian context but also globally. In this manner, I explored eight main strategies developed by allies, revealing the multifaceted conditions within which pro-queer Muslim activism takes place in Indonesia. Three main approaches can be identified from those diverse practices, which could inspire future projects working along similar themes. Firstly, an approach seeking to create connections between queer subjects communally and other members of society. This occurs with multiple social actors. For example, with those who are also perceived as minority groups to create stronger movements together, but also with students to educate them on gender and sexual diversity. Secondly, premised on the significance of creating inclusive spaces, another approach is based on providing education and training to queer individuals. This takes place individually, with NGOs and with larger groups. A final approach is based on departing from confrontational modes of activism through the engagement with those who have expressed rejection against sexual minorities.

Despite being a minority, the allies are today more active than ever before, producing educational materials, organising trainings and engaging with those who are not yet on their side. Considering this stimulating context, my findings expand existing discussions on the potential role of Islam as a channel to promote and achieve social justice (Wadud 1995;
Khadduri 1984; Kotb 1969). While a considerable amount of literature has been published on gender justice through Islam focusing on women (Ashrof 2005; Mir-Hosseini 2004; Barlas 2002; Wadud 1999), less has been said about the potential of religious values for social justice projects inclusive of queer people (Siraj 2016; Hendricks 2010). For some scholars, a starting point for the expansion of such work could be to focus on the Qur’an’s central themes: gender equality, human diversity, forgiveness and mercy (Siraj 2016: 99). Beyond such hermeneutical exercises, my research has demonstrated the value of ethnographic research to uncover how Islam can be lived both as a personal (putting the focus on my queer Muslim participants) and a communal (analysing the allies’ strategies) positive force towards achieving the goal of social justice. In the next section, I explore the limitations of my study and propose some directions which future research could follow.

8.3. Limitations and further research

8.3.1. Limitations
One of the limitations of this thesis is its exclusive focus on queer Muslims. While I justified my choices in Chapter 1, I find it important to raise the implications of the lack of alternative religious voices in my sample. Among others, exploring the experiences of queer Indonesian Christian, Hindu and Buddhist individuals would have been helpful to ascertain whether they engage in similar processes to those of my participants. My lack of engagement with those individuals is explained by the temporal and spatial limitations of my study. Further research on the everyday religion of Indonesian queer non-Muslims, as well as their allies, would usefully complement this thesis.

Another clear limitation has been my limited geographical focus on subjects living in Java. This points to the potential for further research on queer religious individuals and allies living on other islands where queer organisations exist, which could make the recruitment process smoother, such as Bali, Sulawesi and Sumatra. With this, I might have involuntarily contributed to perpetuating the role of Java as a centre of knowledge production, failing to explore the existence of stimulating opportunities for research through the work of queer religious communities beyond Java-centric approaches.
In coming to recognise the potential agentic role of religion, faith and spirituality, a broader focus on other geographical locations (as well as religious faiths) would allow for an analysis of gender, sexual and religious assemblages from alternative perspectives. This would also allow us to ascertain whether the role of national ideals such as the ‘family principle’ or ‘asas kekeluargaan’ is as strong in other locations as it is for people living in Java (despite the fact that many of my informants were not originally from Java) and the implications of local cultures in the negotiation of one’s queerness and religion. Considering the qualitative nature of this research study, it is also important to acknowledge the difficulty to set parameters assessing with exactitude how agentic powers emerge among my interlocutors in Indonesia in relation to how they navigate and negotiate their queer and religious selves. However, this is not an issue that one could achieve through large-scale surveys. Instead, more attention to other intersectional categories such as social class, ethnicity or location could complement my study.

8.3.2. Further research

Having explored some of the limitations of this thesis, I will now move on to discuss two key directions in which future research could develop. The first relates to my findings concerning the formation of queer Muslim subjectivities in relation to the social agents I presented in Chapters 3 and 4 as forces shaping ever-evolving processes of subjectivity navigation and transformation in contemporary Indonesia.

The rapidly transforming social environment in Post-Reformasi Indonesia is a critical issue for future research in relation to the evolving nature of processes of subjectivity and identity formation. For example, my analysis in Chapter 4 of the role of media has revealed the major differences between older and younger generations in coming to their queer subjectivities. While for the former magazines and newspapers were the main source of information and identification, for the latter it was through new technologies that they started to think of themselves as gay, lesbi or trans and to connect with like-minded people. Therefore, an additional topic of research could focus on the role of virtual and physical spaces for the formation of queer community life and its consequential impact on one’s subjectivities. As previous scholars conducting fieldwork in Indonesia in the 1990s and early 2000s noted (Boellstorff 2005a: 127), most gay, lesbi and waria individuals used to gather in physical spaces such as malls, parks or river sidewalks. These spaces are known in Bahasa Indonesia as tempat.
ngeber, which translates as ‘hanging-out places.’ I attended many such spaces during my first visit to Surabaya in 2014, where I spent time with queer activists. This has completely changed today considering the increasing police raids and hostile climate with frequent attacks from radical groups that have heightened fears among queer subjects who instead make use of apps and Internet spaces to connect with each other. These transformations might serve as a reference point to explore how queer religious subjectivities and subject positions take form in the Indonesian context, complementing the work of previous scholars of gender and sexuality who did not specifically focus on religion (Blackwood 2010; Davies 2010; Boellstorff 2005a).

Recent studies have presented the experiences of queer Muslims in Indonesia (Boellstorff 2005b), with authors analysing their emotional practices (Thajib 2017, 2014) and the significance of geographies, both as subjectivities and physical spaces (Rodriguez 2019; Thajib 2018). This body of scholarship represents a significant reference point for future research following the paths I proposed above, linking queer Muslims’ internal worlds to the social spaces around them by paying attention to their religion, gender and sexuality. Despite the existence of such work, little attention has been paid to the formation of queer Muslim subjectivities and subject positions in Indonesia, with existing literature focusing instead on the gender and sexual aspect of the self. Considering this, broader discussions on queerness and religion could be used as a foundational referent for future research paying attention to existing studies on queer Muslims within fields such as sociology (Rahman 2010; Yip 2004a), human geography (Yip and Khalid 2010), and migration studies (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016; Kosnick 2015; Peumans 2014).

Exploring the agentic power of these subjects beyond expressions like ‘reconciling identities’, ‘struggling’, ‘victims’ and ‘powerless’ by paying attention to the significance of Islam in their everyday decisions, adaptations, negotiations and contestations may usefully contribute to developing alternative portrayals of queer Muslims. This would be helpful to also broaden understandings of agency from both theoretical and empirical approaches, transcending the normative conflation of agency with resistance that I have critiqued throughout my thesis. This can speak back to the constrictions that dominant secular-liberal values (i.e. ‘queer liberation’) posit to queer Muslim subjects when they describe experiences of ‘freedom’ and ‘emancipation’ through religion. This research path could draw upon ‘lived’ approaches to the
study of religious lives that pay attention to the coexisting aspects of the self (Williams 2010; McGuire 2008).

The second direction of research I propose would further examine the strategies developed by organisations and individual actors in Indonesia to produce queer-friendly religious strategies. This could best serve the purpose of NGOs and activists providing them with tools to implement actions aimed at integrating the gender, sexuality and religion fields, which are usually seen as opposites. Despite the growing importance of activist work at the intersection between gender, sexuality and religion, to date little attention has been paid to the origins, formation and impact of such initiatives in Indonesia. Beyond brief explorations of the YIFoS queer camp with which I opened this thesis (Thajib 2018; Rodriguez 2015), research has failed to address the motives leading to the opening of strategies combining religion, gender and sexuality to promote queer inclusion.

Considering the significance given by the allies of queer Muslims to the notions of justice (keadilan), liberation (kebebasan) and humanity, this research would seek to explore how such terms are defined in relation to Islamic values for the building of queer-inclusive approaches, to deeper analyse what the strategies I presented in Chapter 7 reflect about their understanding of Islam. This strand of research would build on existing work exploring pro-queer activism through religion (see section 7.2 of this thesis), which has mostly focused on the work of queer-religious organisations (Minwalla et al 2005) to fill a gap in existing literature regarding the engagement of non-queer subjects in the promotion of queer rights through Islam. In relation to this, the sub-lines of research I have identified within this second direction could be situated within scholarship exploring religious activism (Leirvik 2014; Marfleet 2004).

An issue that future research should also consider is the increasing emergence of anti-LGBT regulations in Indonesia. A topic of discussion among allies has been the role of the Indonesian government in dealing with the expansion of Wahhabism and hard-line Islam through the transnational exchange of Islamic knowledge. While sharia law has not been officially implemented outside the special region of Aceh, legislation discriminating queer people has been linked to the political climate, as the events taking place around the 2019 elections have shown demonstrating their potential electoral return for politicians. For example, in late 2018 the government of Payakumbuh, the second-largest city in West Sumatra, announced that a bylaw on social ills would be revised to add articles prohibiting LGBT
activities ‘to prevent the ‘deviant behaviour’ from spreading’ (Ramadhani 2018). Around the same time, the East Kotawaringin regency in Central Kalimantan and the Cianjur regency in West Java started discussing the restriction of LGBT activities by drafting bylaws and issuing circulars inviting preachers to spread anti-LGBT messages through their sermons. In recent times, discussions have taken place around the modification of the Indonesian Criminal Code, with LGBT activists noting that it could be used to target queer people. These regulations constitute a challenge for the freedom of sexual minorities that future research should consider.

In a globalised world, an additional question worth exploring is how local pro-queer religious activism is impacted by international circuits of advocacy production, considering the emergence of international networks of queer Muslims such as the Global Queer Muslim Network and the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies, of which some organisations in Indonesia are part. This exposure to global discourses could lead to an additional line of enquiry exploring how Islam Nusantara and vernacular forms of Islam in Indonesia both resist and are affected by global ways of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ a queer Muslim in parallel to the increasing influence of Wahhabi discourses in a national scale.

8.5. Final Reflections

This thesis has intended to ethnographically analyse the multidimensional and complex subjectivities and subject positions that queer Muslims living in Java navigate, negotiate and contest in relation to the social forces around them, while paying attention to the emergence of pro-queer Muslim activism. To conclude and look beyond what I have explored throughout this study, I want to point to an additional dimension of agency emerging from some queer Muslims’ everyday realities. Since beginning this research, many of those that I interacted with during my fieldwork have passed away. Most of them had AIDS and never knew about their positive status until it was too late to act. Some turned to Islam in a stricter way when they found out about their condition. It is with an excerpt from Rina, a 58-year-old HIV-positive waria from Central Java, that I start drawing this thesis to a close:

Alhamdulillah (‘Praise be to God’), as an HIV-positive person, I am proud to be a Muslim because I can still find strength praying to Allah. Everything I ask for is granted to me by Allah, when I ask for health, He helps me remain stable, when I ask
for fortune [rezeki], He gives me what I need. Some people think that I am a sinner, but only Allah knows why I was created this way. I can still be a Muslim and find the strength to survive day after day in my faith and relationship with Allah.

Rina’s words illustrate an additional level of agentic power, one that has to do with the support that religious piety is assumed to provide to cope with health issues. She points to the significance of rezeki, a non-predictable reward provided by Allah that can only be obtained after making a deliberate effort. Some of my interlocutors described ‘receiving rezeki’ to refer to experiencing good luck after a period of rigorous piety or performance of good deeds. Concluding this thesis, Rina’s words seem to offer an eloquent summary of my study.

Rina and I discussed her experience of religion, gender and sexuality through a long conversation that took place at an HIV/AIDS NGO office. As she told me, she felt that before and after being diagnosed as HIV-positive, her religion, faith and spirituality had always acted as a source of individual ‘power’ to survive the obstacles that she had faced throughout her life: running away from home, being homeless, engaging in sex work, being infected with the virus, and so on. It was through her submission to religious obligations that she felt ‘liberated’ from the problems of her everyday life.

Her experiences, like those of the other queer Muslims I presented throughout my thesis, point to the critical role of Islam in mobilising agentic power. As Bracke notes, Muslim women (and, I would add, queer Muslims) have been ascribed ‘a lack of agency and (deficient) subjectivity’ (2008: 61). This has frequently been done without considering these subjects’ everyday realities which, when explored, reveal the multiple dimensions that religion, faith and spirituality have to offer, as I have demonstrated. Following the steps of interpretative sociology and cultural anthropology, I want to conclude by arguing for the study of socially produced meanings to comprehend human behaviours as ‘subjectively significant action’ (Rüpke 2005: 351), to avoid perpetuating the exploration of queer religious experiences through a preconceived ‘Western’ lens.

This invites us to reflect on the role of homosecular frameworks, presenting secularism as the only dimension within which queer subjects can be ‘free’, for the perpetuation of ontological (stating that there is a universally ‘oppressed’ queer Muslim) and epistemological (setting how queer Muslim subjects are represented) models. For most queer Muslims I met in
Indonesia, there was no permanent yearning to challenge religious, social, cultural or national norms. Instead, they often achieved their potentiality as queer religious subjects through those same norms. As Rino, a gay Muslim from Jakarta once told me, ‘my prestasi is being proud to be a queer Muslim, being able to be myself.’ It is with his words that I want to conclude my thesis inviting the reader to critically reflect on those representations that have become so common that we often assume to be true.
References


Gardet, L. *Encyclopaedia of Islam.* Brill.


KUHP. (1946). *Chapter 14, Article 292*.


Socialization Among Young Muslims in Scandinavia and Western Europe (pp. XXX). Routledge.


297


300


http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQCOM_00113


302


Wadud, A. (1999). *Qur’an and woman: Rereading the sacred text from a woman’s perspective*. Oxford University Press, USA.


Asian Journal of Communication, 16(4), 411-431.


Wieringa, S.E. (1997). Jakarta’s Butches: Transgendered Women or Third Gender? Presented at The International Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture and Society
conference Beyond Boundaries: Sexuality Across Cultures, Amsterdam, July 29–August 1.


Appendix 1: Information Sheet

Information Sheet for Participating in Research Studies

Project Title: Queering Islam: LGBT emancipation through Muslim faith in Indonesia

My name is Diego García and I am inviting you to participate in my research project. I very much hope that you would like to take part. This information sheet will try and answer any questions you might have about the project, but please don’t hesitate to contact me if there is anything else you would like to know.

Before you decide whether you want to take part, it is important to read this information sheet carefully and discuss it with others, including the Primary Researcher, if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. If you decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and you will be asked to sign a consent form.

This project aims to learn about how LGBT Indonesian Muslims use Islam as a means of emancipation. In particular, I am hoping to find out how LGBT Indonesian Muslims negotiate their religious, gender and sexual identities, how progressive Islamic discourses influence the negotiation of identities, what the role of progressive Islamic scholars is in building societal LGBT acceptance and what factors influence the reconciliation/compartmentalisation of identities.

This study has been approved by the UCL Research Ethics Committee [Project ID Number: 11077/001] (to be edited when it is finally approved)

Contact Details

Primary Researcher: Diego Garcia Rodriguez, PhD candidate, University College London

Secondary Contact: Dr Richard Mole, University College London

This project is part of a Gender & Sexuality PhD study which aims to explore several unanswered questions in relation to the strategies developed by LGBT Indonesian Muslims to use Islamic faith as a source of emancipation. Since the perspectives of LGBT Muslims within Muslim societies are not often illustrated in research focusing on Islam and LGBT issues, I have decided to fill this gap in literature by focusing on Indonesian LGBT Muslims older than 18 years old.

I would like to invite you to participate in this research project by sharing some of your thoughts and experiences.

As a participant, you will be invited to take part in a one-to-one in-depth interview with the Primary Researcher. These interviews will take place in a location agreed by both the participant and the researcher. This will constitute the main source of qualitative data for this research project. Additional interviews may be conducted in order to provide the participant with opportunities to add any comments that may have arisen over the course of the study and reflect on the experience of being a participant in the project.
You should only participate in this project if you want to; choosing not to take part will not disadvantage you in any way. In this manner, you may withdraw your participation at any point during the study without giving a reason. You may also withdraw your data at any time up until the interviews are transcribed for analysis (one week after the interview is conducted).

At the end of the study, participants will be offered a copy of a summary report of the findings.

All data will be collected and stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and will be accessible only by the research team. The material collected will be treated in confidence, anonymised and stored securely. Recorded interviews will be written up and the digital voice recorder will then be wiped clear. No one will know that you have been involved in this project.

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this information sheet. If you would like to be involved, please complete the following consent form.
Appendix 2: Informed Consent Form

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and listened to an explanation about the research.

Project Title: Queering Islam: LGBT emancipation through Muslim faith in Indonesia

Researcher: Diego García Rodríguez

This study has been approved by the UCL Research Ethics Committee [Project ID Number: 11077/001]

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this research project. Before you agree to take part the person organising the research must explain the project to you.

If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you to decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

Participant’s Statement

I …………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

☐ have read the notes written above and the Information Sheet, and understand what the study involves.
☐ understand that if I decide at any time that I no longer wish to take part in this project, I can notify the researcher involved and withdraw immediately.
☐ consent to the processing of my personal information, which may include transcriptions of interviews and copies of written diary material, for the purposes of this research study.
☐ understand that my participation will be taped and I am aware of and consent to the use of these transcriptions for a PhD thesis and potential journal articles.
☐ understand that the information I have submitted will be used to inform a PhD thesis and that I will be sent a copy of a summary report. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me from any publications.
☐ understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998.
☐ agree that the research project named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree to take part in this study.

Signed:                                Date:

Thank you for volunteering to take part in this study. If you have any questions at any time during the study, please contact Diego García, Primary Researcher:
Appendix 3: List of Interview Questions and Themes

This appendix includes the guiding questions used during my interviews with queer individuals and non-queer scholars. In general, the questions that I am presenting here were a guide for the conversation. Interviews were semi-structured, and the respondents’ answers determined which questions were asked afterwards.

I.I. INTERVIEWS WITH QUEER INDIVIDUALS

First part: Basic information

How old are you?
Where are you originally from?
How would you describe your ethnicity?
Where do you live?
What is your profession?
How would you define your gender identity and sexual orientation?

Second part: Family background and education

What was your father’s profession?
What was your mother’s profession?
Do you have any siblings?
Would you call your family a ‘religious family’? If so, what would you mean by that?
When you were a child, did you go to a religious school?
Do you remember any reference to non-normative genders or sexualities made by your teachers while you were studying?
When you think of your childhood, do you remember engaging in religious rituals with your family?

Third part: Being [gay, lesbi, waria, trans (adapt for each interview)]

When did you first realise you were attracted to your same sex? / When did you first realise you felt like a [waria, woman, man]?
How did you feel about being [follow identification of participant]?
Have you told your family about your [gender identity / sexual orientation]?
How has your family reacted to you being [gender identity / sexual orientation]?
How important is prestasi for you to be accepted by your family members?
Are you in a relationship? Could you please tell me about it?
In case participants work for NGOs: What is your experience working for NGOs? How did you get into it?

Fourth part: Religion
Do you identify as a Muslim?
How important is your religion for you?
How would you define God? What is your relationship with God?
Do you engage in any religious rituals? If so, what do they represent to you?
Do you celebrate Muslim festivities such as Ramadan and Idulfitri? What do they mean to you?
When you pray at home, do you wear any special clothes?
Have you heard any religious texts being used to condemn queer people?
Do you think it alright to be [participant’s gender identity or sexual orientation] and Muslim at the same time?
Are there any benefits you can identify in your everyday life emerging from being a Muslim?
Do you think there is a misconception that people who are Muslim cannot be gay?
Do you feel accepted by other Muslims?
Do you have more friends that are queer? Are they also Muslims? Have you talked about religion with them?
Have your friends been victims or violence or attacks?
What do you think of terrorist groups such as FPI who attack people in the name of Islam?
What would you tell them if you could talk to them?
What do you think of those who say that being queer is sinful?
Have you been victim of discrimination or violence because of your gender identity or sexual orientation?
Do you know of any religious leaders and scholars in Indonesia who support [use term referring to non-normative genders and sexualities] people? If so, how helpful has their work been for you?

The future

Considering the current political context, what do you think the situation will be for queer people in Indonesia in the future?
Do you think that the political scenario can influence acceptance?
If you could share anything from your experience with your gender, sexuality and religion, what would your message be for other queer Muslims who might have difficulties navigating their subjectivities?
Just before finishing, would you like to add something?

I.II. INTERVIEWS WITH ACTIVISTS/ SCHOLARS/ RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES

First part: Basic information

How old are you?
Where are you originally from?
Where do you live?
Where do you work?
How would you describe your gender identity and sexual orientation?
How would you define yourself as a Muslim?
Second part: Affiliation to NGOs/ Religious organisations

Which organisations are you a member of?
When did you first hear about this organisation?
Why did you decide to join this organisation?
What is the difference between this and other organisations working on the same field?

Third part: Queer issues and religion

Do you think that is alright to be [use local terms for non-normative genders and sexualities] and Muslim? Why?
Do you think that Islam can be an empowering force for [local terms for non-normative genders and sexualities] people?
Have you engaged in activities supporting the rights of [local terms for non-normative genders and sexualities] people in Indonesia?
What inspired you to start engaging in such activities?
Have you engaged in queer-inclusive interpretations of the Islamic texts?
Have you talked about this topic in any conference or meeting?
What kind of activities have you engaged with to discuss queer issues and Islam?
What are the reactions of those around you to these issues?
Do you identify as a feminist? What does feminism mean for you?

Fourth part: Current situation and the future

What are your strategies to create queer inclusion through Islam?
What are some challenges you have identified to achieve [local terms for non-normative genders and sexualities] acceptance?
What is your opinion about groups such as FPI, which attacks sexual minorities in the name of Islam?
Do you feel that anything has changed in the last years in Indonesia regarding the queer community?
Just before finishing, would you like to add something?