

Being a “*Santri*”

Notes from the Field

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Nihayatul Wafiroh is a M.A. student in the Asian Studies Department at the University of Hawai‘i. She is from Indonesia and grew up in an Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) community in Banyuwangi in East Java, Indonesia. She spent four years in a *pesantren* in Tambakberas, Jombang in East Java.

Being a santri was one of the most interesting experiences of my life.

A student who studies in a *pesantren* is called a *santri*, and a *pesantren* is an Islamic boarding school—one of the most important educational institutions in Indonesia. Any Muslim student with a strong motivation to study in a *pesantren* can enroll as a *santri*. Although *pesantren* education ranges from elementary to university level, many *santri* study only for their junior and senior high school years. In the beginning, *pesantren* only focused on Islamic education, but after the colonial era, *pesantren* developed a more comprehensive educational curriculum. Nowadays, *pesantren* combine secular and religious education.

I grew up in a *pesantren* and came to know the culture well. My grandparents were the founders of the largest *pesantren* in Banyuwangi city, East Java province, Indonesia. Now, my parents have replaced my grandparents as the leaders of the *pesantren*. As a result, I was already familiar with the rules and the daily life of a *santri*. When I was in junior high school, I studied with *santri* in my parent’s *pesantren*. I also engaged in the school’s activities. Nevertheless, since I am from a founding *pesantren* family, I broke many rules and was free from punishment. Being the

granddaughter of the founder of the *pesantren* gave me a power that put me in a status above that of my peers. Therefore, when I left my parents to attend senior high school, I finally felt that I could be a “true *santri*.” I felt that in the new *pesantren* I would have to follow the rules and I would no longer have any power over my peers.

Studying in a *pesantren* is one of the traditions of my family. Everyone in my family, before marriage, has to go to a *pesantren*. A *pesantren* is mainly established by the community for the community, and in many cases the selected *Kyai* (a headmaster of a *pesantren*) will use his own funds to establish the school’s facilities. For these reasons, the living cost and tuition in a *pesantren* is cheaper than at formal schools in Indonesia, and many of the students that attend *pesantren* are from the middle and lower classes. The name of the *pesantren* that I studied at for my senior high school years was Al-Fathimiyah Bahrul Ulum located in Tambakberas, Jombang. This city was in the same province as my hometown, East Java. I studied there for four years from July 1994 to July 1998.

In July 1994, I was taken to *Kyai* and *Nyai* by my parents. Generally, when students apply to a *pesantren*, parents will give their rights as parents to the *Kyai* and *Nyai*. Having grown up in a

pesantren and having been a *santri*, I found that the *Nyai* and *Kyai* were representative of parent figures, yet this relationship caused *santri* to act out, and the resulting punishments were ineffective. The *Kyai* has an authority similar to that of the absolute power of a king. A person becomes a *Kyai* when the community recognizes that he has a strong knowledge of the Muslim religion, so it is the community that gives a person the title of a *Kyai*. The *Nyai*, the *Kyai*'s wife, supports the *Kyai* in maintaining the *pesantren*, particularly the female students. In many cases, the wife of the *Kyai* is chosen only for image purposes, not for her capability, but that is not to say that all *Nyai* fall into that category.

In the *pesantren*, the *Kyai* and *Nyai* have the same rights as parents. They not only teach but also sometimes play matchmaker. The *Nyai* holds an important role for female *santri* because she is like a mother to the female *santri*. The *Nyai* and *Kyai* are also assisted by student boards. These boards are selected by the *Nyai* and *Kyai* from among the distinguished senior students. There is a board of male students who serve the *Kyai* and a board of female students who serve the *Nyai*. They are the right hands of the *Nyai* and *Kyai*. Basically, all rules are arranged by the *Kyai* and *Nyai*, and the boards help to maintain these rules. Senior students chosen to be on these boards have to deal with issues in the *pesantren* such as education, security and student activities. The boards are divided into many departments and are run very formally. Each member has their specific positions to serve based on his or her responsibilities.

In Al-Fathimiyyah, the *pesantren* I attended, there were many residential buildings, each with various rooms. About 15-20 *santri* lived together in one room. My room, Al-Masyitoh B 1 or GBONE was the largest room in the *pesantren*, so there were about 45-50 residents. The residents of this room were from many different provinces and islands in Indonesia. Additionally, half of the residents were studying in the junior high school, and the rest were in the high school. We did our activities such as sleeping, eating, studying and chatting in that room. Every single resident had three cabinets for clothes, books and shoes. In the *pesantren*, we believed that a modest life would be the key to gaining sufficient knowledge. Because of this, *santri* tried to live humbly. For instance, we slept without beds and used only blankets, and

we shared everything with each other, even the bathrooms and our pillows.

A *pesantren* has many strict rules regarding *santri* activities. Even studying and doing personal activities is arranged by the *pesantren* student boards. In the early morning at 4 a.m., the bell rings in the *pesantren* office, and *santri* wake to prepare for morning prayer in the mosque. After praying, the second bell signals time to read the *Qur'an*. These activities were always done from early morning until 10:30 p.m.

Santri also could not go outside the *pesantren* areas without receiving permission from the student's respective *pesantren* boards and the *Kyai* or the *Nyai*. Receiving permission to leave the *pesantren* was a long process. First, a *santri* had to take their security book from the *pesantren* office. Every *santri* has their own security book. This book is the record of when the student leaves the *pesantren*. With their security book, a *santri* will approach the *Kyai* or the *Nyai* and ask for permission. If the *Kyai* or *Nyai* allows the *santri* to leave, she will sign their book and write when they are to return. If the *Kyai* or *Nyai* does not give permission, the process is stopped there. Because of these rules, *santri* can only leave the *pesantren* once every two months. Special consideration is given to students when making family visits. But when students are only leaving the grounds to go to the market place or to town, they will be limited in the length and frequency of trips.

Additionally, the controlling of relationships among female and male *santri* was very strict. Because in the Islamic doctrine women and men who do not have any blood connections are prohibited from contacting each other, almost all female *santri* never spoke with male *santri*, even though sometimes we knew the names of some boys. Breaking any of these many rules meant punishment from the leader of the *pesantren* or from the board members.

My room, GBONE, was famous for our creativity and for being troublemakers. There was even an informal gang. Those who wanted to be "popular" in the *pesantren* became members of this gang. Mostly members of this gang were senior *santri*. Because of their seniority, they served as role models for the junior *santri*, like me at the time. The leader of the gang's name was Karim. She had been in the *pesantren* since junior high school and knew the school well. Her strongest trait was that she was friendly. For sure,

everyone enjoyed chatting with her and she easily attracted people as her followers. In addition, she was a smart and dynamic person, which made her very persuasive. The gang had responsibilities like everyone else, but they did not do them. Everyone in my room knew this, but no one was brave enough to go against them, and everyone tried to be as friendly as possible to the gang. For example, after morning prayer, all *santri* must clean their sleeping space and return items to their rightful places or no one would be allowed to sleep that night. However, the gang would continue sleeping, avoid prayer and avoid reading the Qur'an. No one bothered them, not even the boards of my room. In fact, many of the members of the gang were senior students and were even members of the student board of the building and room.

The first time I arrived in the room, I thought that everyone was equal. In my view, the senior *santri* should follow the rules as older sisters would. In fact, I remember the first time I spoke with Karim. She asked me about my family, my boyfriend, and my hobbies. She was so friendly that I felt as if I had already known her for long time; hence, I could talk about anything with her. After I became close to her, she often asked me to do activities with her. For a short time, I was one of about ten of her followers, and of them, the only underclassman.

Becoming one of Karim's followers changed my status in the room from a junior *santri* to a powerful *santri*. It was prestigious among the students for a junior *santri* to have such a chance to be friends with Karim. I never really knew why she chose me. In my analysis, perhaps, compared with other junior *santri* in my room, I was more confident because I was already familiar with *pesantren* life. Another thing was that the *Nyai* and *Kyai* knew me and my family well, since we were all a part of the same *pesantren* network. I think that she had expected that she would receive more attention from the *Kyai* and *Nyai* if she became my friend.

I learned many things from her, especially how to take advantage of my time in the *pesantren*. She introduced me to new friends and she taught me how to break the *pesantren* rules without getting caught. Because of her influence, I became braver at breaking the *pesantren* rules. Running away from my duties (praying, studying, and doing *pesantren* activities) was a daily routine. In the

first year, I was only breaking my room rules. By the second year, I took it one step further. I began to contravene the larger *pesantren* rules. For instance, Karim and I went to her brother's house outside the *pesantren* without permission from the *Nyai*. Another time, Karim asked me to go to a place where she had already made an appointment with her boyfriend. As the lookout, I kept watch outside while she met her boyfriend. I would inform her if there were *pesantren* board securities near by. Furthermore, she often asked for money from other members of the gang, and sometimes when she saw good things, such as clothes or veils, she strongly recommended that her followers buy them. Then, after we brought them home, she wore them like they were hers.

We broke the rules many times, but the *pesantren*'s security boards did not detect us. However, one day when Karim, Anis (another of Karim's followers), and I left the *pesantren* for town, one security board member saw us on the bus. After we returned to the *pesantren*, *Nyai* asked me if I had broken other rules and I confessed to everything we had done in the time I had been in the gang. As a result we were heavily punished: cleaning toilets, reading the whole *Qur'an* in a day, giving statements that I would not repeat these activities again in front of the whole mosque, and praying five times a day behind the prayer leader (*imam*) for forty days. This was really hard and very embarrassing for us.

The hardest punishment was when *Nyai* said she was disappointed in me. To be honest, I was worried that *Nyai* would report this case to my parents. Fortunately, *Nyai* only advised me, and she promised that she would not inform my parents. Perhaps *Nyai* did not inform my parents because she wanted to preserve her relationship with them. Since I am the daughter of a family that has a *pesantren*, it is very prestigious when a *pesantren* receives a student who is from another *pesantren* family. Another thing was that *Nyai* knew that I was just Karim's follower, so my behavior would change when outside of Karim's influence. In many cases, *Nyai* informed parents when students repeatedly broke the rules, but that did not happen to me. After this case, I promised myself that I would not make trouble again. Then, in the following year, I became a member of the *pesantren*'s board, serving as one of the higher officers. After these realizations and changes, I was more reluctant to break the rules.

Although Karim was a secretary on the *pesantren* board, she continued to break the rules. Six months before graduation, *Kyai* decided to send her back to her family without an honorable graduation. According to *pesantren* practice, there was nothing that they could do for her any longer. The last punishment from the *pesantren* boards had not had any influence on her. I recall, one day after we had punishment together, she said, "Nyai is not fair. Why did she not ask me about my reasons for breaking the rules before she punished me? These punishments are really embarrassing. All *santri* know about our case now." Karim thought that when one did something, they had their own reasons for their behavior, but *Nyai* never wanted to know about reasons. I never got to know Karim's reasons either, and now I wonder about them. Problem solving should be more important than punishment. Karim had said that every single person has their own reasons for bad behavior. If someone made trouble, they might have their own problems. Finding the right solution for the problem should be the best way. In the *pesantren*, if a *santri* breaks the rules, it is better for the leaders and their staff to talk with that student about their problems before punishing them. I believe that others cannot stop problem students from doing wrong. They can only stop themselves. Thus, it is not a guarantee that after the punishment is received, the *santri* will behave well.

The privacy of an individual *santri* should be respected. Punishing them in front of the public breaks a *santri*'s rights as a human being. For me, being embarrassed in front of my friends was harder than doing the punishment. The wrong punishment can cause spite against the leaders and board members, and this is what is happening in the *pesantren* when "embarrassment" is used as punishment.

During the time that I was breaking rules in the *pesantren*, I was aware that I was making a mistake. As a junior student, I had been looking for a senior student as a role model and I found that in Karim. Essentially, the *Kyai* and *Nyai* replaced my parents, but in the *pesantren* there were about seven hundred *santri*, and the *Kyai* and *Nyai* could not give equal attention to us all.

The figure of a parent is important in children's lives. This figure can also become the person who will guide and accompany a child as they mature. Children follow and do anything for their idols. The effect of these figures on children can be good or bad. It is up to the parents and teachers to regulate these relationships. In my case, Karim was my adult figure. She was like a big sister to me. The *Nyai* and *Kyai* ought to be like parents, so that *santri* will share their problems with them. But, the *Nyai* and *Kyai* put their positions much too high above the *santri*. As a result, *santri* are not able to act as children with them.

Looking back now, I see that my experiences are lessons to be learned. After I finish my studies, I plan to return to my family's *pesantren* and help my family maintain the *pesantren*. I hope to be able to act as a parent to the students, and also to give them fair punishments.