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Performing Gender, Engendering Communitas: Three Case Studies of Central Javanese Women
Dakwah Musicians

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Glossary of Indonesian Terms

<i>amar ma'ruf nahi munkar</i>	(Indonesian transliteration of Arabic) to order that which is good and forbid that which is wrong
<i>bapak</i>	literally “father”, honorific for men
<i>biduan</i>	a <i>dangdut</i> singer
<i>campursari</i>	Javanese popular hybrid music genre which combines elements of <i>gamelan</i> with Western instruments and influences from other regional popular musics
<i>dakwah</i>	(from Arabic) religious instruction intended to deepen faith and understanding among the masses
<i>dangdut</i>	Indonesian hybrid popular music genre influenced by Indian, Arab, and local popular musics, and named onomatopoeically for the sound of its characteristic <i>tabla</i> -like canister drums
<i>gamelan</i>	any of a variety of Indonesian musical ensembles. In the Central Javanese context, the term refers to a large ensemble of many types of instruments, primarily gongs and metallophones.
<i>ibu</i>	literally “mother”, honorific for women
<i>jilbab</i>	Muslim woman’s head covering (hijab)
<i>kodrat</i>	natural God-decreed duties and roles, often pertaining to gender
<i>koplo</i>	<i>dangdut</i> subgenre from East Java featuring exaggerated drum sounds and a faster tempo than standard <i>dangdut</i>
<i>kyai</i>	honorific for a male Islamic scholar and teacher. Alt. <i>kiai</i>
<i>mazhab</i>	(from Arabic) schools of Islamic jurisprudence
<i>Muhammadiyah</i>	Indonesia’s largest modernist Muslim organization

- Nahdlatul Ulama* Indonesia's largest traditionalist Muslim organization, often referred to by the acronym, "NU"
- Pantura* the highway along the northern coast of Central Java (*Pantai Utara*), and the surrounding region
- pesantren* Islamic boarding school, often affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama
- pesta hajatan* a life event celebration
- qasidah* loosely defined genre of Indonesian music characterized by Islamic lyrical content and/or Arab-influenced musical content. The term is closely associated with all-women musical acts such as Nasida Ria. Alt. *qosidah* or *kasidah*
- qasidah modern* the type of *qasidah* ensemble pioneered by Nasida Ria and others, including not only frame drums but western instruments like guitar and keyboard
- qasidah putri* a women's *qasidah* or *qasidah modern* ensemble
- qori'ah* a woman reciter of the Qur'an
- saweran* in the context of *dangdut* performance, the practice of audience members handing cash directly to a singer as she performs
- siaturahmi* a gathering with the purpose of maintaining or strengthening family or social ties among Muslims.
- sholawat* (from Arabic) a sung prayer, often sung by a group and accompanied by instruments such as frame drums
- tasyakuran* life event celebration to express gratitude to God
- ulama* (from Arabic) scholar of Islamic doctrine and law
- wayang* shadow theater

Introduction

It is long after dark on a chilly Thursday night in Pringapus, a small village nestled in the mountains of Temanggung regency, Central Java. Despite the late hour, the cobble streets are still overflowing with residents, mostly young men, in anticipation of the evening's entertainment. In the center of a three-way intersection surrounded by closely spaced single story houses is a large temporary stage with a story-high printed banner announcing the occasion: "Mass Qur'anic Recitation for the Celebration of the Promotion of Ryan Andoko, son of *Bapak Sriyono* and *Ibu Ari Yanti*, to Police Second Brigadier General, with *Bapak Kyai Haji Saipol Widodo*, and accompanied by *Qasima*, religious music group from Magelang."¹ While the sign suggests that *Qasima* would be accompanying the sermon from *Bapak Kyai Haji Saiful Widodo*, the sermon was already long over by the time the band arrive in a very comfortable late model twelve-seater van. The eleven girls and women performing as *Qasima* arrive in full makeup and coordinated costumes and stop by the home of the family hosting the *tasyakuran* (life event celebration to express gratitude to God) for a hot meal and prayers before walking uphill through the audience and climbing the stairs to the stage to perform.

At close to ten o'clock, the musicians take their places: bamboo flute, saxophone, canister drums, electric guitar, electric bass, and keyboard arranged in a semicircle from stage right to stage left. Upstage, in the center, sits the drum set. Frontwoman, Dwi Chrisna, stands front and center in studded knee-high black leather stiletto-heeled boots, white skinny jeans, white button-up shirt with a light blue hijab tucked into the collar, a navy vest fitted at the waist and flowing loosely around the hips, and a cowboy hat perched at an angle on her head. The other musicians

¹ *Pengajian Akbar Dalam Rangka / Tasyakuran / Bribda Ryan Andoko / Putra Bapak Sriyono dan Ibu Ari Yanti / Dengan Bapak Kyai Haji Saipol Widodo / Diiringi Qasima Grup Musik Religi / dari Magelang*. All translations are the author's, unless otherwise noted.

wear variations on the same theme: denim, leather, shades of blue, creatively styled jersey cloth hijabs, and cowboy hats. Behind the guitar, bass, and keyboardist, a few chairs have been placed for off-duty vocalists, including me, the visiting graduate student from the United States who promised to sing a *dangdut* song with the band later that evening. The street leading up to the stage is crowded, yet quiet and attentive, as the band plays an upbeat setting of a Javanese interpretation, or *tafsiran*, of *surah Al-Fatihah*, the opening verses of the Qur'an. An impressive array of stage effects kicks in, including colorful spotlights and a smoke machine. After several more songs with religiously themed lyrics in Indonesian, Javanese, and Arabic, voices from the audience start shouting out song requests. Dwi Chrisna laughs and speaks into the microphone, "I hear a lot of *dangdut* requests, but the atmosphere here is still religious!" in the tone of a patient schoolteacher mildly reprimanding an unruly class.



Fig. 1: Qasima frontwoman Dwi Chrisna sings, turning from the crowd to face a video camera.

There is a tangible shift in the atmosphere when the band plays the opening to a new secular hit. A sea of swaying arms in tee shirts and hoodie sleeves emerges from the crowd in front of the stage, and a chorus of "*hak e, hak e*" erupts in time with certain drum breaks easily

identifiable by *dangdut* aficionados, a dramatic change from the largely still and quiet audience just minutes before. Two cameramen circle the stage, often weaving between the Qasima musicians as they play and lingering in front of each for a closeup shot of a curated smile or two-fingered peace sign pose. As the atmosphere sheds some of its religiosity in favor of dance-friendly *dangdut* and *campursari*, thirteen-year-old Isna, the group's youngest singer with her own fan following, takes on lead vocals on many of the songs.² Both Isna and Dwi Chrisna work the audience incessantly, demanding that they sing along louder, and at one point crouching at the edge of the stage to point the microphone downward at the front row of the audience. Dwi Chrisna again enforces expectations for the audience, exclaiming that “the later it gets, the more fun everyone’s having! I’m glad it doesn’t look like anyone’s dancing is getting out of hand.”

At this point, it is after eleven o’clock and the increasingly enthusiastic audience is mostly young men, though most of the crowd is obscured by shadow. On the illuminated front stoops of houses lining the street, several women, older men, and children watch quietly from the sidelines. Months later, watching an uploaded video of the performance on YouTube, I notice a group of young women hanging out just under the front corner of the stage. A gaggle of excited young men, probably in their late teens or early twenties, make their way to the back edge of the stage, where I sit with the off-duty vocalists. They identify themselves as members of Qasimania, the Qasima fan club with branches across Indonesia, and explain that today is their friend’s birthday. They offer up their cell phones, already in camera mode, straining to reach

² *Dangdut* is a genre of Indonesian hybrid popular music influenced by Indian, Arab, and local popular musics. The genre is named onomatopoeically for the sound of its characteristic tabla-like canister drums. *Campursari* is a Javanese popular music genre which combines elements of *gamelan* and popular genres such as *keroncong* and *dangdut*. *Campursari* can mix western instruments with Javanese metallophone instruments, or may feature programmed keyboard sounds meant to sound like the instruments of the *gamelan*. Female vocals in *campursari* feature the wide and fast vibrato and nasal typical of women singers with Javanese *gamelan*.

stage level, and ask for recorded video birthday greetings from their idols. With encouraging nods from Isna, I pass the phones along and watch as Isna and another vocalist record smiley and sugar-sweet video messages on the cell phones of strangers as the band continues to play.

In the span of just a few hours, the performers of Qasima had shepherded a hundred or so people through an experience ranging from quietly absorbing a Javanese-language interpretation of a *surah* (chapter) from the Qur'an, to singing and dancing along to the “*Goyang Dua Jari*” (Two-Finger Dance) dance craze popularized on social media platform, TikTok. The musicians not only dictated the atmosphere and rules of the space shared by performers and audience, but were part of a participatory give-and-take with fans and audience members below the stage. Backstage, and after the show, the band members were still in the spotlight but continued to interact with the audience, posing for photos and videos with fans until climbing into the tour bus for a very chatty and lively forty-minute return drive to Qasima's Base Camp in Secang, on the outskirts of Magelang.

Qasima's musicians and management, like many Indonesian musicians within and beyond the constraints of genre, see music as a vehicle for *dakwah*, or Islamic religious instruction intended to deepen faith and understanding. Both gender and religiosity are essential aspects of Qasima and its individual performers' local celebrity status, as is the integration of *dangdut* flavor into the band's core repertoire of religious music, which the band's management describes as *qasidah*. In fact, the band name “Qasima” is a shortening of Qasidah Irama Melayu, or “Qasidah music with a Melayu rhythm,” formed by taking the first syllable of each word. The genre category of qasidah is considered “a catch-all for a range of popular and hybrid Muslim musical genres,” though since at least the 1990's qasidah has come to be associated with the all-women uniformed band *qasidah modern* (modern qasidah) format pioneered by Nasida Ria of

Semarang.³ Meanwhile, *Irama Melayu* (Melayu Rhythm) is a term synonymous with the danceable beat of *dangdut*, the Indonesian ‘music of the people’ known both for its popularity among working class Muslim Indonesians and for the objectification and sexualization of its women singer-dancer performers.⁴

A dangdut fan even before spending time in Indonesia as an assistant English teacher in the Sumatran city of Bandar Lampung, I had learned many classic dangdut songs for karaoke after having been introduced to the genre by a classmate in the Oberlin College gamelan. Dangdut karaoke videos made an excellent study tool for beginning Indonesian language, and provided much amusement to Indonesian friends and colleagues. Later, I was involved in Indonesian-American music promoter Rissa Asnan’s project “Dangdut in America” that recruited U.S. dangdut singers.⁵ It was this experience, in which all aspects of my appearance became subject to the whims of promoters in the name of representing both the US and dangdut, that sparked my interest in the range of performances of identity and gender among women performers in the genre. This interest led me to the phenomenon of dangdut performed not only in conjunction with music signaling Muslim piety, but by women musicians who choose to veil, instead of the more familiar all-men backing band with women singers in mini-dresses. These are all attributes found at the intersection of qasidah and dangdut, or more generally of dakwah and ‘the music of the people’, as performed by all-women ensembles in Central Java.

At this intersection between gender, popular music performance, and dakwah lie the three central questions guiding this thesis. First, how do Central Javanese women musicians navigate

³ Rasmussen, *Women, the Recited Qur’an, and Islamic Music*, 86.

⁴ Weintraub, *Dangdut Stories*; Decker, *Performing Gender to Dangdut’s Drum*.

⁵ More information about Dangdut in America can be found on their website, <https://www.dangdutinamerica.com/>.

and shape the space between religious and secular entertainment? Second, what motivates these musicians to include signs of Muslim piety in their public performances of gender? Finally, what is it about the performances of these musical acts that engenders the development of *musicking* communities? I will explore each of these questions through the lens of three distinct musical acts which share the following characteristics: 1) women musicians who choose to wear the hijab, 2) the incorporation of secular and dakwah elements in performance, and 3) the existence of strong musicking communities.⁶ First, I will highlight Mutik Nida's self-professed mission to elevate the status of dangdut through the incorporation of veiling and Qur'anic recitation, and her ability to single-handedly attract dangdut fans who had previously looked down upon the genre. In the second case study, I will show how Qasima attempts to make music with religious messaging palatable to young, mostly rural, audiences by mixing the symbols of dangdut and qasidah and capitalizing on the attractiveness of young women performers. Finally, I will follow Nasida Ria, the Semarang group known for popularizing the all-women qasidah modern band format on a national level, as their management and musicians navigate the waning popularity of their style of qasidah.

Gender and Genre

Recognizing that "genre" is a fluid object dependent on the lived experience of those interpreting signs such as the vocal timbre of a singer or the costuming of a musician, it is more useful to view the communities in my case studies as linked by the shared characteristics described above rather than by music genre. Reinforcing the symbolic inaccuracy of genre terms, Nasida Ria manager Haji Gus Choliq Zain explains Nasida Ria's music as rooted in *nasyid*,

⁶ Small, *Music of the Common Tongue*, 13. More explanation on page 15. "*Musicking*" is "to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance."

another term recognized as a genre of Islamic music in Indonesia, and also as *qasidah* or *qasidah* modern.⁷ Mutik Nida, despite having her musical upbringing in Nasida Ria Management's youth training programs, describes herself as primarily a dangdut musician, though her abilities as a Quranic reciter (*qori'ah*) and conveyer of dakwah through *sholawat* (sung prayers) and other religious music set her apart from typical *biduans* (dangdut singers). While some nationally popular senior dangdut singers have adopted the veil after their careers were already established, it is still uncommon for dangdut singers to veil, even as it has become nearly ubiquitous among Indonesian Muslim women.⁸

In Indonesian, the words *musisi* or *pemusik*, meaning musician, generally refer to instrumental musicians, excluding vocalists. The roles of Javanese women in music- whether religious or secular, popular or traditional, or at any point along the spectra of those contrived dichotomies- are described and analyzed in the work of many scholars. Roles associated only with women include: *pesindhén* in *gamelan* (gong ensemble); *ronggeng* or *taledhek* in social song and dance; *biduan* in dangdut.⁹ All of these roles involve singing, and some are often associated with promiscuity and sometimes with sex work. While common as vocalists, albeit in these often-marginalized positions, Javanese women instrumentalists are not as well-represented, both in literature and in life.¹⁰ Moreover, men's voices, such as that of the musicologist Andrew

⁷ Before hearing this, I was familiar with *nasyid* as a religious A Capella vocal genre performed only by men. See Ishaidy S.K., "Negotiating Mass Media Interests and Muslim Audiences."

⁸ Decker, "Hidden for Their Protection", 58.

⁹ Walton, "Female Street Singers"; Weintraub, "Sound and Spectacle of Dangdut Koplo"; Foley, "The Ronggeng, the Wayang, the Wali, and Islam." A *pesindhén* is a woman singer with a Javanese gamelan. *Pesindhén* also often perform comic dialogues with the *dhalang* (puppeteer) at shadow theater performances. *Ronggeng* and *taledhek* both describe women or male-to-female transvestite singer-dancers who perform on the street or at mixed gender social dance events. *Biduan* refers to any singer accompanied by music, but is commonly used to refer to women singers of *dangdut* music.

¹⁰ Lindsay, *Javanese Gamelan*, 44-45.

Weintraub and that of the performer Rhoma Irama in dangdut, still dominate in the discourse around the gendered roles of women who perform dangdut. In scholarship of “traditional” Javanese and Balinese music, such as gamelan and *wayang* (shadow theater), much work has been done by and about women.¹¹ Recent studies of women musicians from elsewhere in the world focus on the work and lives of musicians who often do not receive as much attention in androcentric “non-gendered” works on regional and national musics.¹² The women musicians I interviewed all noted that their gender and ability to play instruments, along with dakwah elements in their performances, are the aspects that set their performances apart from other acts.

The terms “women” and “Islamic music” may seem incompatible to a reader unfamiliar with the diversity of global Islam. In some international Muslim discourses, the female voice is *aurat*, or something shameful which must be hidden.¹³ This view is not common, however, in Indonesia. In *Women, the Recited Qur’an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia*, Ann Rasmussen writes that “a remarkable aspect of Indonesian Islamic practice-- one that some might find objectionable or simply disbelieve-- is the involvement of women in the work, rituals, and popular expressions of Islam.”¹⁴ Rasmussen argues that through participation in Qur’anic recitation and Islamic music, Indonesian women assert their importance in religious nationalism and navigate their place in global Islam. Like the female voice, instrumental music and dancing can be considered *haram* (forbidden) by certain ulama in multiple *mazhab*, or schools of Islamic jurisprudence.¹⁵ Indonesia’s two largest Muslim associations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and

¹¹ Downing, *Gamelan Girls*; Weiss, *Listening to an Earlier Java*.

¹² Jenje-Makwenda, *Women Musicians of Zimbabwe*; Merchant, *Women Musicians of Uzbekistan*.

¹³ Rasmussen, 208.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 16.

¹⁵ Lahpan, “The Lawfulness of Music.”

Muhammadiyah, currently take a broadly permissive stance as long as the music does not promote prohibited behavior.¹⁶ This reflects the generally moderate views of these organizations, which in turn characterize a predominant generalization about Islam in the Indonesian archipelago-- that it is more tolerant than its Arab, African, and South Asian counterparts, and more accommodating of the diverse local cultural practices present before its arrival.¹⁷ In “Past and Present Issues of Islam within the Central Javanese Gamelan and Wayang Kulit”, Sumarsam shows that Javanese arts such as wayang (shadow plays), rather than simply coexisting with Islam, wove Islam into their fabric and became tools for dakwah and subjects of Sufi mystical discourse in the works of 18th and 19th century court poets.¹⁸ Quoting from *Serat Centhini*, “a 19th-century, multi-volume literary work that earns its reputation as an encyclopedia of Javanese culture”, Sumarsam provides portraits of the hybrid percussion and vocal ensemble, *terbangan*, and gamelan performing together at a center of Islamic learning.¹⁹

Rhoma Irama is often called the “king of dangdut,” and he has exerted a moralistic and androcentric force on dangdut for decades. Mohammed Shofan, who wrote a biography of Irama,

¹⁶ Sumarsam

, “Islam in Central Javanese Gamelan and Wayang Kulit,” 66-70. Considered a modernist Muslim organization, Muhammadiyah draws its foundational teachings from Muhammad Abduh of Al Azhar University in Cairo in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Muhammadiyah’s Yogyakarta-based modernization project in the early 20th century encouraged local Muslims to turn away from local traditions and “return to the fundamental truths of the Qur’an and Hadiths. Muhammadiyah only recently welcomed local arts such as *gamelan* and wayang. In contrast, NU is considered a traditionalist Muslim organization, meaning that it “accept[s] and accommodate[s] preexisting beliefs and customs,” including the widespread presence of local and hybrid performing arts at Javanese *pesantren*, or Islamic boarding schools, throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

¹⁷ Hefner, *Civil Islam*, 14. “From early on, ... the mainstream tradition recognized that there were different ways of being Muslim, and different balances of divine commandment and local culture (*adat*).”

¹⁸ Sumarsam, 62-63.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

compares his incorporation of dakwah into dangdut lyrics with the early Islamization of Java by the *wali sanga* (nine Islamic teachers): “Rhoma reminds us of Sunan Kalijaga , who used Islamic dakwah by adapting wayang with the goal of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (ordering that which is good and forbidding that which is wrong) and ... composing several poems, among them *Dandanggula Semarang* which combines Arab and Javanese melodies.”²⁰ Weintraub highlights connections between Arab-Indonesian music forms, symbols of Islam, and the development of the dangdut genre, specifically mentioning the prevalence of women’s singing and percussion ensembles in the early twentieth century. These ensembles utilized Arabic language lyrics and the *rebana*, a frame drum that often signifies Islam in Indonesia.²¹ My approach focuses on the personal experiences and community impact of performances by women musicians who navigate a space between and among dangdut and dakwah.

Performing Gender, Engendering Communitas

The act of participating in a musical performance, even as a listener or audience member, can transform mundane elements of everyday life and create communities based on shared experience. To describe this view of music as a wide range of social activities, ethnomusicologist Christopher Small coined the term *musicking*. In Small’s words, “to music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance or by dancing.”²² In this sense, each of the

²⁰ Shofan, *Rhoma Irama: Politik Dakwah dalam Nada*, 123. The title *Dandanggula Semarang* refers to the *dandanggula* type of Macapat verse form, and the Central Javanese city of Semarang.

²¹ Weintraub, *Dangdut Stories*, 38-39.

²² Small, *Music of the Common Tongue*, 13.

communities I have chosen to focus on in this thesis is defined by musicking. More specifically, each musicking community is formed around women musicians who perform musical dakwah.

Through musicking together, people develop common experiences and community bonds. Thomas Turino argues that the performing arts are integral to individual identity formation and integration into communities in his book, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*.

The performing arts are frequently fulcrums of identity, allowing people to intimately feel themselves part of the community through the realization of shared cultural knowledge and style and through the very act of participating in performance. Music and dance are key to identity formation because they are often public presentations of the deepest feelings and qualities that make a group unique. Through moving and sounding together in synchrony, people can experience a feeling of oneness with others... Studies of expressive cultural practices like music and dance from different societies can help us achieve a balance between understanding cultural difference and recognizing our common humanity.²³

Turino's framework, in which music dissolves barriers and creates common frames of reference within communities with shared musical experiences, draws from Victor Turner's foundational performance studies concept of *communitas*.

Turner's *communitas* framework privileges ritual contexts, which present "a moment in and out of time," and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond that has

²³ Turino, *Music as Social Life*, 18.

ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties.”²⁴ *Communitas* describes the bond formed between the participants in liminal spaces, in which the structure of social hierarchy is suspended. In the context of entertainment events held within a globalized and industrialized society, like twenty-first century Indonesia, the term may take on a more general sense. Turino asserts that the experience of oneness while participating in a good performance “is akin to what anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) calls *communitas*, a possible collective state achieved through rituals where all personal differences of class, status, age, gender, and other personal distinctions are stripped away allowing people to temporarily merge through their basic humanity.”²⁵ I will describe the formation and performance of identity, and coalescence of musicking communities, using Turino’s framework of music as social life and interpretation of *communitas*.

Methodology

As an area studies thesis, this research is inherently multidisciplinary. Preliminary research in Spring of 2018 involved historical research on the origins of *qasidah* modern using archived periodicals, a survey of relevant secondary source materials, and analysis of social media videos, postings, and messages as performance. The bulk of the research presented in this thesis comes from ethnography conducted over twelve days in August 2018. During that time, I stayed in Semarang and traveled around the *Pantura* region of Central Java, and as far south as Magelang, to attend performances and conduct interviews in Indonesian with musicians and

²⁴ Turner, “The Ritual Process,” 96.

²⁵ Turino, 18.

fans.²⁶ I attended five performances and conducted seven interviews. In the cases of Nasida Ria and Qasima, I connected through the band's management, traveled, observed rehearsals, conducted interviews, and participated in performances as a guest of the band. I connected with Mutik Nida through members of the Semarang branch of her fan club, Mudalovers, and attended a performance as part of the Mudalovers community. After this brief period of field work, limited by the schedules of an intensive Indonesian language program at Universitas Malang in East Java, and the University of Michigan academic calendar, I kept in touch with musicians and fan communities through social media. Like many fans of these musicians and groups, I initially experienced their performances through social media posts on YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. The platforms of these media technologies represent a virtual field, and the discourse of comments and posts represent another sort of performance in the case studies to follow.

Mutik Nida, Drum Queen: “Dangdut packaged in a hijab”

A few miles outside of Kendal, toward the Java Sea through rice paddies extending to the horizon, Mutik Nida, *Ratu Kendang* (Mutik Nida, Drum Queen), was hired to perform with a small band at an August 23, 2018, wedding reception.²⁷ The rural scenery around the wedding, and the placement of the stage and event tent among a cluster of houses, constituted the quintessential image of a dangdut party at a *pesta hajatan* (party for celebrating a life event). Unlike a typical wedding band, however, the Drum Queen had attracted an entourage of loyal

²⁶ *Pantura* is a word-syllable acronym for *Pantai Utara*, or North Coast along the coastal highway, *Jalan Pantura*. The *Pantura* region is known for its dangdut performance circuit, and especially for hypersexual *dangdut koplo* performances. Mutik Nida describes Pantura's reputation as *kasar*, or “rough.”

²⁷ Mutik Nida's title, *Ratu Kendang*, translates literally from Indonesian as Drum Queen. The longer tagline version of her title is *Ratu Kendang Bikin Goyang*, the Drum Queen who Makes You Dance.

fans who are neither paid performers nor invited guests, yet became part of the entertainment by dancing in unison before the stage. When I arrived with members of the Kendal chapter of Mutik Nida's Mudalovers (from **Mutik Nida**) fan club, the performance was already underway, with a stage erected near the event tent where wedding guests sat and enjoyed refreshments and entertainment. The wedding guests had tapered off as it was late in the afternoon, but a quietly attentive audience filled the first few rows of seats. The neighborhood children gathered next to the stage where the Mudalovers danced in loose unison, following the cues of Yogik, a club member (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Mutik Nida descends from the stage to join her fans in dance at a semi-private performance in Kendal (left). Yogik leads the Mudalovers (right). Credit: RPM Video Shooting

The band had minimal instrumentation: keyboard, guitar, flute, drums, and two singers in addition to Mutik Nida. The two singers, a man and a woman, shared emcee duties, making announcements promoting the entertainment company that produced the performance and wishing the newlyweds a happy life together. The man sported long hair, dark jeans, and a black blazer over a dark t-shirt. The woman singer wore full makeup, heels, and a sparkly sleeveless knee-length gown. With the set of canister drums as her throne, Mutik Nida was the clear focus of attention, and is given the stage by the emcees so that she could perform several dangdut songs on drums and vocals, with the keyboardist accompanying her. The canister drums that Mutik Nida plays are typical of dangdut backing bands—a set of five pitched drums visually

similar to Indian tabla and placed on stands so that the player may play while standing or sitting in a chair.

After the performance, Mutik offered a ride back to Semarang in a comfortable touring van with her fiance-cum-manager, Ramli, and driver. This way, we could conduct an interview while on the road without interrupting her tight schedule. Still a university student at only twenty-four years old, Mutik Nida had an air of confidence, tacitly demanding hard-earned respect with her demeanor. With a performance schedule booked for the next six months, fan clubs across the nation, and a budding fashion business, she was efficient, prepared and direct with her responses. When I asked Mutik Nida about how she views her place in the world of dangdut, she replied,

There are a few bad actors in Indonesian dangdut who like to sell their bodies. What I mean is that they don't wear appropriate clothes on stage. So, many people look at dangdut like that, with a suspicious eye, like it's about women selling themselves or something like that. But, there are also so many [dangdut singers] who have a great voice and present themselves well-- who put quality first. I'm one example. I want to make it so that dangdut can come packaged in a hijab, can be packaged in such a way... to improve that image of dangdut, that image where people look at it with disdain. That's what I want.

At the time, Mutik Nida was at the height of fame for her novel representation of dangdut stardom as a young woman performer who not only plays the drums while she sings, but chooses to wear the hijab.²⁸ Hailing from Semarang, Mutik started drumming with pencils on the edge of

²⁸ While many Indonesians use the term "jilbab" to describe the Muslim women's religious head covering, Mutik generally uses the more internationally recognizable term "hijab."

elementary school desks, and as a middle schooler played with Nasida Ria Management's short-lived *qasidut* (a shortening of "qasidah" and "dangdut") project.²⁹ In August of 2018, her performance schedule had been booked six months in advance since the beginning of the year, and she had been invited to perform in Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan, and even Malaysia. Some of these were family wedding receptions like the event I attended, but others were public concerts and festivals with audiences numbering in the thousands. Mutik Nida did not name herself "*Ratu Kendang*" (Drum Queen). She explained that the title was given to her by her religious teacher, a *kyai* (male Islamic scholar and teacher) who gives sermons at *tasyakuran* similar to those described in this paper. The source of her title and her knowledge of drumming, Qur'anic recitation and *sholawat* repertoire, were points that Mutik made sure to stress in our interview. She emphasized that her passion is for *dangdut*, but that her skill as a *qori'ah* and her *sholawat* repertoire are indispensable to her identity as a performer. Mutik recalled an instance in which a fight broke out at a rowdy *dangdut* concert. The band stopped, and she began to sing *sholawat* above the din of the audience. In her account, the men who had gotten into a physical altercation gave up the fight when she turned their attention toward God.

While Mutik Nida is unquestionably a unique figure in *dangdut*, her stance on the appearance and behavior of women performers echoes that of *dangdut* singers from previous generations. In *Diary Dangdut*, singer Ikke Nurjannah describes feeling the male gaze while performing but countering *dangdut* stereotypes, writing that "we need to know the trick to 'sell' ourselves in a respectable way."³⁰ Just as Mutik attributes her rise to stardom to the support of a male religious and musical figure, Nurjannah also gained clout through association with Rhoma

²⁹ Author interview with Gus Choliq Zain, August 25, 2018.

³⁰ Nurjannah, *Diary Dangdut*, 71.

Irama and U.S. American researcher, Andrew Weintraub. The idea of “selling oneself” in dangdut is described by other singers in the genre, as well.³¹ Another way of viewing the self-promotion and differentiation necessary to achieve success beyond the local level is the concept of “innovation” described by Andrea Decker.³² Dangdut singers often create a signature dance move or vocal embellishment to make their act memorable. Mutik Nida and her fans define two personal signatures that set her apart from others: playing the drums and veiling. Mutik told me that, especially during the Muharram month of the Islamic calendar, many hosts of performances will only consider hiring women performers who veil. She attributed her fully booked performance schedule to her own veiling, a quality not shared by most other dangdut singers.

In February of 2018, Mutik Nida was featured in front of an enthusiastic studio audience on the popular national talk show, “*Hitam Putih*” (Black and White), where she performed a cover of “*Sayang*,” (Darling) a new hit song popularized by Via Vallen.³³ In the video, when she stops playing, the show’s host Corbusier exclaims, “I have one question, and it’s not for Mutik, but for the audience-- I was enjoying her incredible playing from over there, and I had a question. Who told you to shout out “o- a- o- e-”?” The audience laughs hysterically, and Corbusier asks Mutik whether she gave them the command without his noticing, and she emphatically denies it. “So, where did it come from?” asks the host again, and the view cuts to a segment of the audience full of young women, all shouting out their answers. Mutik responds that it was “a call from their souls,” and Corbusier chimes in, “Oh, it was just out of instinct. Don’t you all have any more elegant instincts? She was singing so well, and then everyone started shouting ‘o- a- o- e-.’ Ok, ok- no problem... but then all of a sudden everyone goes ‘E- E-

³¹ Paramida, “Menyongsong Generasi Baru Dangdut.”

³² Decker, “Performing Gender.”

³³ Net TV Live, “Mutik Nida, Ratu Kendang.”

E- E-.' What's the deal with that?" Mutik replies that it was the "soul of dangdut" that the audience was enjoying, as if a joyful spirit had entered the crowd and compelled them to shout these syllables out together in anticipation of the climax of certain musical phrases.³⁴ For readers familiar with Javanese gamelan, these called out syllables are reminiscent of *alok*, the syllables called out before or after strikes of the gong and other key structural instruments.

Corbusier's words indicated distaste for the actions of the audience, poking at the apparent inelegance of their behavior, and either feigning or revealing his ignorance of a common form of audience participation in dangdut performances. To lack or pretend to lack an understanding of live dangdut performance culture is to place oneself in a social category apart from this "music of the people." Corbusier also appears surprised to see that an entire section of the audience is made up of Mutik's Jabodetabek (Jakarta-Bogor-Depok-Tangerang-Bekasi) fan club members, as if it were difficult to fathom such an outpouring of support just to see this one drummer-singer who traveled to the studio from halfway across the island of Java in Semarang.

Corbusier also digs into the topic of *saweran*, the practice of audience members directly giving money to a singer-dancer, most notably in the context of dangdut shows. To my knowledge, the recipients of saweran include only women or male-to-female transvestite performers – in short, the object of saweran performs a female gendered role, at least in that moment. Saweran is often a forum for men to flaunt their wealth and masculinity by publicly displaying the amount of money they are willing to give to the performer, and it is often implied that the saweran is made in exchange for increasingly erotic dancing.³⁵ Not all *penyawer* (doers

³⁴ The rhythm and types of syllables are dictated by specific drum queues, beyond the scope of this paper. See Weintraub, "The Spectacle of *Dangdut Koplo*."

³⁵ Bader and Richter, "Dangdut Beyond the Sex"; Browne, "Gender Implications of Dangdut Kampungan."

of saweran) are men, however. Women also approach singers to hand them tips for the band. The practice's detractors point to saweran encounters where a male audience member touches the singer or places the bills in her bra or waistband as evidence of the commodification of women performers' bodies through saweran.³⁶ With these associations in mind, the hint of condescension in Deddy Corbusier's expression becomes comprehensible as he asks Mutik Nida about saweran.

When I asked Mutik about the relationship between her choice to wear the hijab and her identity as a performer, she highlighted the realms of possibility that open up to her as a veiled woman, stating that "the most meaningful part of being a *hijaber* musician is that I can sing while drumming, bring a little bit of dakwah into the performance, bring a touch of Qur'anic recitation in ... That's the positive value of being an artist. It's not just about entertaining people - it's a form of worship." Mutik sees her work as a musician as inherently connected with her religiosity. Sharing her musical craft is both a personal form of worship and a way of bringing religious value to audiences attending entertainment events that are mainly secular in nature. Mutik's fan communities also point to her veiling and ability as a qori'ah as reasons for their fanship, in addition to Mutik's impressive ability to simultaneously drum and sing dangdut songs.

An influencer not only in the social media sense (and she is also an influencer in that sense, regularly sponsored by cosmetic or fashion products), Mutik tangibly impacts the lives of her fans and audiences. She is at the center of an international network of fans, the Mudalovers who commit to showing support at her performances and helping to secure invitations for out-of-Java gigs. The Mudalovers utilize dozens of regional Facebook groups and other social media

³⁶ Ibid.

such as WhatsApp to attract and organize members. I was able to join several members of Mudalovers Kendal at that afternoon wedding party performance by introducing myself in the fans Facebook group and asking if any other members were thinking of attending. Since it was a small weekday event, only a few members responded. Among them were a trio of women Mudalovers, Sri, Olip and Alvi. Olip and Alvi gave me a ride to the show after a taxi dropped me off in the center of Kendal. A shared admiration for Mutik Nida and love for dangdut music made it easy to get along with fan club members, especially the women in the group. A week after attending the wedding party performance, I attended a get-together for the Kendal division of Mudalovers, held in front of a lingerie store outside of Kendal. The division's founder, Sri, was a business intern at the shop. In attendance were five fan club members, three women and two men. Everyone wore tee shirts with Mutik Nida's image and the words "*Ratu Kendang*," (Drum Queen) but the ages and backgrounds of each member varied widely. Yogik, a Kendal man in his thirties who often leads coordinated dance at Mutik Nida shows, has worked abroad as a laborer and follows several local dangdut divas in addition to Mutik Nida. Olip, a mother in her late twenties taking care of her pre-school aged daughter alone while her husband supported the family with long-term contract work on an international freight ship, was a committed member of the Kendal Mudalovers fan club when I carried out my field work. Alvi was a twenty-two-year-old student at Walisongo National Islamic University in Semarang, a classmate of Mutik's.

Sri and Alvi grew up in Kendal but were currently students at universities in Semarang. Both veil on a daily basis. Each time we met, Sri and Alvi sported long sleeve shirts with skinny jeans, and both wore their hijabs in a fashion that covers the head, neck, and sometimes part of the shoulders and upper chest. Olip attends many dangdut performances in addition to Mutik

Nida's. She has been inspired by Mutik Nida to don a hijab each time she attends one of the Drum Queen's performances, and more often in her everyday life. The discourse on veiling in Indonesia has undergone change since veiling outside of expressly religious contexts first entered the mainstream among Muslim Indonesian women in the 1990's.³⁷ Brenner and Jones, in 1994 and 2010 respectively, describe veiling as a trend gaining traction among educated middle-class women. Now veiling is nearly ubiquitous among Muslim women in Indonesia, and rather than the question of whether to veil, the question of *how* to veil is becoming more relevant, with more full-coverage hijab styles, the face-covering *cadar* (covers the lower half of the face), and even the *burqa* (covers the entire body with a small opening for the eyes) becoming popular in some circles. The entry of veiling into village dangdut performances is one example of the current popularity of veiling at all social strata. During my field work, I did not veil unless those around me deemed it appropriate for a non-Muslim: when entering a mosque or attending a prayer event, but not for any of the performances described here.

After enjoying snacks, chatting, and taking photos together, Alvi and Sri sat down with me for a recorded interview. The whole group went out for karaoke afterward, shouting out dangdut and American rock lyrics together until late at night. Despite being students at the same university, Alvi discovered Mutik through YouTube's suggested videos algorithm, and only found out that they were classmates when a friend posted a photo on campus with Mutik. Coincidentally, I became aware of Mutik in the same way, although Alvi and I were separated by thousands of miles, and Alvi did not regularly watch dangdut or qasidah videos. I supposed that Mutik was appearing in my YouTube suggestions because I often listened to dangdut

³⁷ Brenner, "Javanese Women and the Veil"; Jones, "Materializing Piety"; Hasbullah, "Cultural Presentation of the Middle Class."

performances on this platform and had watched many videos of qasidah artists local to Mutik's hometown of Semarang while researching the genre in the Spring of 2018. Alvi assumed that Mutik showed up for her because of her location and their common place of study. It speaks to the strength of the digital communities centered around Mutik Nida's celebrity that even local fans only became subjects of the Drum Queen after finding her through social media networks.

Sri, a founder of the Kendal Mudalovers branch, explained what initially drew her into the Mudalovers group, as someone who had never before considered herself a fan of either dangdut or qasidah:

It's rare to find a girl who plays drums and sings. Even girls who play drums are few and far between, let alone one who is not only a great singer, but who can sing qasidah and who can be a qori'ah. I found out about Mutik Nida through social media- through Instagram...From then on, I was interested and became a fan. At that time, I was the only fan in my area as far as I knew. I met others who were interested through the Mudalovers Facebook group, and only then started going to her shows. I probably wouldn't be a fan of Mutik Nida if she only performed qasidah. I like all genres of music, but before, I was mostly into pop. I didn't like dangdut at all. I didn't really like qasidah. I only started getting into those genres when I found out about The Queen. Now I like dangdut. There aren't very many young people nowadays who are into qasidah.

Mutik Nida's instrumental ability is her primary draw, since the role of the drummer in a dangdut group is still incredibly male-dominated. Her gender attracts attention to her performance, and the *way* that she performs her gender also attracts attention from audiences.

Alvi pointed out that "there are a lot of haters on social media. People out there say The Queen is cold, stuck-up, or conceited. Maybe it's because she's pretty. I don't think it's because she wears

the hijab.” My impression of Mutik was that she treats performing as a serious profession. While she smiles on stage and engages jovially with the audience, she maintains a boundary between private and professional lives-- something which other performers may blur through easy access to private messaging on social media. It is difficult to imagine a male musician being subject to criticism for being “cold,” and the very word that Alvi used, *jutek*, is a term I have never heard applied to a man.

Mutik’s solo act, and her focus on dangdut with a morally upright twist, make her especially exciting to fans who are not interested in the uniformed all-women *qasidah putri* (women’s qasidah) groups they associate with older generations. Sri explained that many of Mutik Nida’s fans support her expressly because she chooses to veil, and that this further differentiates her from the scores of women dangdut vocalists, not to mention her mastery of the drums: “singers now like to show off their- well, you know- but Mutik Nida, she doesn’t. That’s her advantage over the others.” Her ability to recite the Qur’an and her characteristic mixing of dangdut and qasidah repertoire also drew Alvi and Sri into her fan base. These attributes bring to mind Thomas Turino’s framework of “music and dance [as] key to identity formation because they are often public presentations of the deepest feelings and qualities that make a group unique.”³⁸ In this case, the fun of live dangdut mixed with Mutik’s persona of a successful, independent, and devout musician, resonates deeply with her fan base.

Sri and Alvi see Mutik Nida as at the vanguard of a potential movement in Indonesian entertainment, especially in dangdut, toward more representation of women who dress modestly, and are known for their musical talent. Sri pointed out that, in her opinion, women performers who dress modestly, and especially those who veil, attract more women as fans and audience

³⁸ Turino, 18.

members. Just as Mutik's talent and persona attracted them to a genre which had never interested them previously, Sri and Alvi were excited to think about a future in which there are more performers like Mutik Nida-- performers who take both their musical craft and their Muslim identity seriously, and who take the time to interact with their fans.

Qasima Magelang: "Qasidah for the young generation"

Founded in 1984, Qasima places equal emphasis on secular and dakwah-imbued entertainment. Recall the opening anecdote, in which the group's set list included a clear split between the earlier set of *musik religi* (religious music) and the later set including both pre-planned repertoire and audience requests for covers of dangdut, pop, reggae, and *campursari* songs. Unlike Nasida Ria, who rose to national prominence through the distribution of their many recordings, Qasima was only a live performance band until the release of their first album less than ten years ago. Even with two albums with Menara Records, and one album on the major dangdut label Nagaswara, Qasima's work is largely disseminated through social media (YouTube, Instagram, Facebook) and live performance. Since its inception, Qasima has been managed and led by women, first by Ibu Haji Sri Andariyah and now by her daughter Anidya Dwi Astuti.³⁹ Founder, Ibu Haji Sri Andariyah is still the music teacher at Magelang's Muhammadiyah school, and often Qasima's personnel come from among her top students. Anidya Dwi Astuti, known as "Umi Anidya" (Mother Anidya) by fans and the group's musicians, is not only the group's manager and event coordinator, but the composer and arranger of many Qasima songs, and their former drum set player. Although indirectly linked to a Muhammadiyah school, Qasima auditions do not require competence in Qur'anic recitation.

³⁹ Qasima, "Biografi".

Qasima brands itself as “Qasidah for the Young Generation.” According to the Qasima website, Qasima’s stated mission is to “serve up Islamic art suited to modern times through the use of technology.”⁴⁰ Rather than performing only covers of old qasidah modern songs, Qasima revisits qasidah modern songs with a sped-up *koplo* (dangdut subgenre) beat and also performs their own and others’ dangdut songs. Andariyah and Anidya create many of these arrangements and teach the repertoire to the musicians, who range in age from thirteen to their mid-thirties.

Unfamiliar with qasidah, and uninterested in dangdut, a friend with a humanities degree from one of Indonesia’s top universities was amused by my research topic and interest in these genres associated with working class origins. For her, dangdut was already an undignified topic of study, but “God forbid you’re into *dangdut koplo*, Rebecca!”⁴¹ To her astonishment, yes, I was interested in dangdut koplo as well. When I showed her some of my favorite Qasima YouTube videos, she shared her impressions. “Tacky,” she said, “the outfits, the hijab styles...They’re outdated and tacky.”⁴² Like many of the humanities students at Universitas Malang, where I participated in an Indonesian language intensive program in the months prior to my field work in Semarang, she preferred more cosmopolitan international and Indonesian bands and did not relate to qasidah or dangdut genres with supposedly older, rural audiences. To her, Qasima and other qasidah putri groups and their followings represented a demographic very

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Weintraub, “Sound and Spectacle of ‘Dangdut Koplo’”. If dangdut is the music of the working class in Indonesia, then dangdut *koplo* is the dregs of even that genre in terms of class associations. Dangdut koplo features exaggerated tabla sounds, a faster tempo than other dangdut, and often goofy sound effects like car horns. Per Weintraub, the subgenre originates from East Java, but I have often heard it associated with the Pantura region.

⁴² She used the words “norak” and “jadul”, respectively meaning “tacky” and “outdated” or old-fashioned. The word “norak”, like its synonyms “kampungan” in Indonesian and “ndeso” in Javanese, implies low class status and an association with both rural villages and poor urban neighborhoods.

different from her own. My experience traveling with Nasida Ria and their junior group, Qasidah Ezzura, confirmed this stereotype of the typical qasidah fan being rural “*ibu-ibu pengajian*” (older ladies who attend prayer groups). However, the same could not be said of Qasima or Mutik Nida, with their young, mixed-gender fan bases.

It is true that many Qasima performances take place in rural villages, and many of their fans hail from these out-of-the way locales. However, managers and many of the musicians of Qasima either hold or are pursuing degrees from major universities in Semarang and Yogyakarta. The Qasima entertainment empire appears to be incredibly profitable, providing not only the band itself, but also sound system and stage rentals as well as professional photo and video services. In 2018, when I visited them, Qasima management raked in a minimum rate of over twenty-three million rupiah (approximately \$1500 USD) per performance, a huge sum considering the exchange rate.⁴³ In all of my email communications with Umi Anidya, the group’s manager and artistic coach, responses were always impeccably polite and written in formal Indonesian. She and her brother Anang, the Sound and Lighting Manager, were academically interested in my research and requested a term paper I had written on the qasidah genre. The background of Qasima guitarist Sifa is another example of the gap between the *norak* (tacky) stereotype and the identities of Qasima personnel. At the time of my field work, Sifa was a high achieving second-year civil engineering student in Semarang who also managed to maintain a busy rehearsal schedule in Magelang, play performances across Central Java multiple times each week, and occasionally even tour outside of Java. Current and former Qasima

⁴³ In August of 2018, one U.S. dollar was equal to 14,700 rupiah. I was not able to ascertain how the fee is distributed between managers, sound and lighting engineers, and musicians. It would be interesting to see how the earnings of qasidah singers and musicians differ from their counterparts in dangdut, where the “*biduan*”, or women singers, often take home much more than the men in the band (see Weintraub, *Dangdut Stories*).

musicians participate as freelancers in a regional network of women performers, with former guitarist Anna having played in Mutik Nida's qasidah putri group, Mutik Nida Club. Qasima's label as "Qasima for the Young Generation" extends to its musicians, who eventually age out of the group in the interest of maintaining the interest of a young fan base. While Qasima musicians do not automatically age out of the group when they marry or have children, Umi Anidya stopped performing when she reached her mid-thirties. Sifa and Isna, the group's star vocalist who was thirteen years old at the time of my field work, do not plan on making lifelong careers out of performing. They see their current work as an enjoyable and lucrative stepping stone to future professional careers, and leave marketing and costuming decisions up to the management.

While my friend assessed Qasima's costumes as tacky and out of pace with modern times, this description clashes with Qasima's mission as quoted above. Qasima leadership and musicians also characterize themselves as innovative and modern, and the band's fashion advisor, Mas Chamunk, was excited to talk to me about the inspiration behind his costume choices and desire to differentiate Qasima from "typical" qasidah putri groups. When I asked about Qasima's appeal and power to retain a large community of fans, Mas Chamunk, the group's costume designer, and Umi Anidya both answered that Qasima fans must be drawn to the group because of the musicians' youth and beauty. I asked if modest costumes and veiling were part of the appeal, and if Qasima had more women fans than the average dangdut group. They insisted that most fans were men, and they became fans because they are attracted to the women in the group. This echoed Mutik Nida's fans, who also insisted that they as women were in the minority in the Mudalovers community. Any women fans, said Mas Chamunk, are probably also just impressed by seeing a musical group composed of pretty young women. He mentioned that the group's social media accounts occasionally receive messages from as far as

Turkey, Africa, and China. The group's management were proud to now count me as the United States outpost of their fan community, though my specific interest in the *dakwah* aspect of their mission prompted many questions.

On the drive from Qasima's "basecamp" in Secang to the performance described earlier, Umi Andya's brother and the manager of Qasima's sound and lighting division, Mas Nanang, asked me about my motivation for writing about Qasima. He agreed that groups of women musicians should receive attention for their unique contribution to but was concerned about my interest, as a foreign and non-Muslim researcher, in the role of Islam in Qasima's performances. As a non-Muslim, Mas Nanang asked that I focus on the performance's entertainment value and refrain from analyzing their religious messaging. While entertainment and *dakwah* both play a role in creating Qasima's community of musicians and fans, I take Mas Nanang's input seriously in that I do not presume to judge or analyze the religious practice of Qasima's members or the expressly religious elements of their performance. In their instrumentation and Umi Anidya's arrangements, Qasima leans heavily toward dangdut and rock. In the performance I attended in Pringapus, performer banter with the audience focused on behavior in the current moment rather than instructing audience members in how to behave outside of the performance space.

To recall the vignette of a Qasima performance from the opening of this paper, Qasima's frontwomen make a clear distinction between the types of behavior encouraged during the religious section of their performances and the types of behavior allowed after the religious section has concluded. In some sense, this may be a way to manage at least some of the possible tensions between popular music and religion. During the religious section at the Pringapus show, the frontwomen told the audience not to get too excitable and did not encourage dancing or audience participation such as singing along. When an audience member shouted out a request

for a dangdut song, Dwi Chrisna reminded the audience that this was still the time for religious music, and that there would be space for dangdut later. While performing dangdut and pop, Qasima's singers work the audience, insisting that they dance, but not to have so much fun that they lose control of their behavior. The lyrics of one of Qasima's original songs, "Gas Pol" (Step on the Gas), exemplify the festive yet politely restrained mood that Qasima endeavors to create at their concerts.⁴⁵ The song "Gas Pol" defines itself as a dangdut song in its lyrics, with invitations for the audience to dance to the fast *koplo* beat (fig. 3). The word "pol" in the title "Gas Pol" is a rendering of the English "full" which also creates a play on words as it is the final

Gas Pol Qasima Cipt. Ipan Halen	Step on the Gas Qasima Composed by: Ipan Halen
Digas pol pol pol pol pol gendangane Direm pol pol pol pol pol emosine Kasih pol pol pol pol pol penarine Yo ayo kita joget rame-rame	Step on the gas, drums Step on the brakes, uncontrolled emotion Put your thumbs in the air, dancers Come on, let's dance together
Koor: Di sini kita berjoget ria Dengan irama dangdut gembira ria Bergoyang suka suka Anda Jangan ada yang ributkan suasana	Chorus: Here we are, dancing merrily To the dangdut beat that's so joyful Dance as you wish But don't you stir up the atmosphere
Instr.	Instr.
Di gas pol pol pol pol pol goyangane Direm pol pol pol pol pol mabukane Disenggol gol gol gol kanan kirine Yo ayo kita joget rame-rame	Step on the gas, dancing Step on the brakes, drunkenness Nudge to the left and to the right. Come on, let's dance together
Ga boleh ada yang tawuran Kalau tawuran orkesne cepat bubar Ga boleh ada yang emosi Kalau emosi ditangkap pak polisi Kalau emosi ditangkap pak polisi	You're not allowed to get in a fight, If you do, the band will pack up and leave You're not allowed to lose control of yourself If you do, the police will catch you If you do, the police will catch you

Fig.3. The lyrics to "Gas Pol" in Indonesian (left) and the author's translation (right).

⁴⁵ Qasima, "GassPoll-Qasima Launching Album."

syllable of the Indonesian word “*jempol*” (thumb). Dancing with the hands in thumbs up position is characteristic of the *joget* dance typical of dangdut concerts.⁴⁶

The clear dangdut flavor of “Gas Pol” and the invitations for the audience to dance put the content in line with Qasima’s intent to attract young audiences and provide popular entertainment. The sung instructions to avoid disruptive behavior and alcohol reinforce the idea that a Qasima performance has narrower and more tightly enforced social guidelines than the implied “other” dangdut performances. The song “Gas Pol” comes from Qasima’s 2016 premiere album on Menara Records of the same name, which also features songs such as “*Cantik Muslimah*” (The Beauty of a Pious Muslim Woman) and “*Akhlak Mulia*” (Virtuous Morals), showing that Qasima is not only concerned with providing a good time but also with promoting similar messages to those advanced by more dakwah-centered qasidah modern groups such as Nasida Ria. Menara Records releases VCDs by qasidah and sholawat ensembles as well as full recitations of the Qur’an.

The gender and appearance of Qasima personnel are also highlighted in the band’s description on its official website, a description cited in most media coverage of the group: “the Qasima Magelang personnel is dominated by beautiful young girls who wear the *hijab*, which is key to the group’s identity.”⁴⁷ As opposed to the identical costuming of the stereotypical qasidah putri group, many of Qasima’s costuming themes emphasize performers’ individuality. Figures one and four show one of Qasima’s sets of costumes, their semi-casual “cowgirl” set. These are the costumes described in the opening of this paper and are the same costumes my friend judged

⁴⁶ Weintraub.

⁴⁷ Qasima, “Biografi.”

as “tacky.” Qasima’s costumes also include uniform sets of the highly ornamented one-piece *gamis* (floor-length Arab style dress) as worn by Nasida Ria and Qasidah Ezzura in figures five and seven. Even when wearing identical costumes, however, each Qasima musician styles her hijab differently. These slight differences allow for each musician to have a more recognizable appearance, and therefore to maintain an individual fan base. For example, within the cowgirl costume set, some musicians wear floor length denim skirts with blouses, while others wear skinny jeans with a long tunic or vest. Members of Qasima’s primarily male fan base can choose which performance of femininity is most appealing and join the relevant fan club, though some may join a group based on genuine admiration for a particular performer’s musical skills alone.



*Fig. 4. Qasima’s “cowgirl” semi-casual costume set.
Photo credit: Nagaswara Records.*

Qasima musicians perform gender for an audience not only on stage at performances, but backstage when fans ask for video mementos recorded on cell phones, and in daily life over their social media accounts. Because of this constant broadcasting to online fans, appearance and personality trademarks are tantamount. Each member of Qasima has her own fan page on Facebook and her own official Instagram account. In filmed performances, conscious smiles at the camera, “duck faces,” and peace signs abound.⁴⁸ Through individual fan pages for each

⁴⁸ Ahira Studio, “Keloas- Soimah Qasima.”

member of the group, fans can direct posts and messages directly toward their favorite musician. Thirteen-year-old singer, Isna, for example, had thousands of fans on the “Isna QASIMA fans community” Facebook page in 2018. Many of these fans are adult men.

On Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, videos and photos of Qasima personnel are posted daily on their own accounts and on central accounts managed by Qasima entertainment staff. These videos are not restricted to performances but also include everyday activities like eating together with friends, hanging out together after rehearsal, or monologues where fans are invited to interact via on-screen surveys or comments. Through social media, the personal lives of Qasima musicians become public performances for Qasimania, their fan base. Fans form an image of the musicians through a combination of what they see at performances and the curated feed available to them on social media.

On one online forum labeled “Hijab Lovers Must Join in-- Members of this Musical Group are all Pretty and ‘Wife-able,’ to Boot,” anonymous commenters debate whether the musicians of Qasima are worthy of being wife material.⁴⁹ One writes that “I wouldn’t want to have a musician for a wife. They live from stage to stage. They’d be so focused on their music that they’d neglect their duty to study religion.”⁵⁰ Another questions the musicians’ intent in choosing to veil, writing “isn’t the point of wearing a jilbab so that guys *don’t* check you out?”⁵¹ Since gender and veiling are so central to Qasima’s group identity, these aspects become grounds for anonymous online fans and “haters” to turn these young women into objects of desire or disdain. The title of this forum, “Hijab Lovers Must Join In”, shows that the choice to veil can

⁴⁹ Kaskus.id, “Hijab Lovers Wajib Masuk; Personil Group Musik Ini Cantik-Cantik gan, istriable pula”

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid. Emphasis added.

paradoxically subject women performers to sexualization, or create a perception that their worth lies in their capacity to make good wives and mothers. Others question their choice to veil. In the same forum, commenters shame typical dangdut singers for their choice to dress provocatively. There is no winning since each anonymous, but likely male, commenter presumes that their image of the ideal woman is that to which all women must conform. While the comments of anonymous online personalities do not speak to the personal motivations of Qasima musicians to veil or associate with religious identity markers, these comments do show that their audiences see these aspects as integral to the group's identity, and sometimes as a primary reason for becoming a fan.

These online communities lack the affect that is a requisite of *communitas* as set out by Turner, since they are based on the written discourse of online forum and social media platform posts rather than the shared experience of attending a performance. As such, online communities such as the Facebook groups and Kaskus forum described above cannot engender *communitas* in Turner's sense, in which shared experience dissolves social hierarchies. In these online groups, Qasima fans share their individual experiences through videos, photos, and written posts. While group members may not share the experience of listening to or watching Qasima performances at the same time in physical space, they share the implied experience of having been so impressed by Qasima- whether through attending a live performance, watching or listening to a recording, seeing photographs of the group, or some other point of exposure- that they were motivated to join an online group centered on Qasima fandom.

Virtual fan communities also allow distant audiences to identify each other and connect for the purpose of meeting in person. In the public Facebook group, "QASIMA (Qasidah Irama Melayu) Magelang," fans have organized and publicized events where Qasimania fan club

members sing, dance, eat, and pray together with the musicians, management, and crew of Qasima. A moderator of the public Facebook group extended an open invitation to the group's membership of over 20,000 in 2018, posting a digital flyer advertising a communal prayer with Qasima and writing "Kopdar Qasimania is happening again, guys. Come on, let's unite the ranks. Don't forget January 14, 2018, starting at 13:30 Western Indonesian Time at the Qasima base camp in Secang, Magelang."⁵² Qasima Management later posted a video on YouTube documenting the 2018 "Kopdar" meet-and-greet event. The video shows clips of fans lining up to shake the hands of each Qasima performer, dancing and singing together, and listening to speeches from Umi Anidya and Qasima musicians.⁵³ It also includes interview segments with attendees from regional Qasimania fan club branches. One of these fans, identified as Aris from Qasimania East Java, comments "I hope that this type of event can be held again, and that it will continue to strengthen the bonds between and among Qasimania and Qasima through *silaturahmi*. I also hope that this event provides positive motivation for Qasima."⁵⁴ A Qasima sound crew member also describes the event as *silaturahmi*, a gathering with the purpose of maintaining or strengthening family or social ties among Muslims.

Qasima management, musicians, and fans form a tenuous community. While based in the semi-rural outskirts of Magelang and performing programs primarily of dangdut covers frequently in very small mountain villages, many of Qasima's musicians and management have benefited from higher education at major institutions in Yogyakarta and Semarang. The group's

⁵² QASIMA (Qasidah Irama Melayu) Magelang Moderator, "Salam qasimania." *Kopdar* is an abbreviation for "Kopi Darat", literally "land coffee," an event where a community which generally socializes remotely is able to meet in person (on land rather than in cyberspace or over the airwaves).

⁵³ Qasima Management, "Kopdar Qasimania."

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

founder, Ibu Haji Sri Andariyah, who still participates in an advisory capacity, is a music teacher with both undergraduate and graduate degrees in religion. Qasima fans, largely young men in rural areas, have direct access to musicians through their individual social media fan networks, which allow fans to share individual experiences and to organize in-person events which solidify community ties. The performers on stage and audience below share the performance space across lines of class and gender, yet the lyrics of songs such as “Gas Pol,” and the content of frontwoman banter directed toward the audience, show that Qasima is intent on policing audience behavior. Vella Zain of Qasidah El Hawa expressed the underlying sentiment, also exhibited in Qasima performances, that performers must provide a good example to their audiences in order to fend off chaos: “dangdut singers in tiny mini dresses, they’ll get groped. [Qasidah musicians] are more respected on stage, even if the music is dangdut.”⁵⁵ While boundaries between performer and audience remain clear during Qasima performances, backstage interactions like the exchange of video messages and conversations between musicians and fans after a show indicate that the shared experience of Qasima performances breaks down some many of the divisions which are verbally enforced in frontwoman-audience banter. In-person *silaturahmi* events where Qasima management, musicians, and fans eat, dance and pray together may also allow for *communitas* through dissolution of the hierarchical performer-audience relationship.

⁵⁵ Qasidah El Hawa is a qasidah putri group founded by Ibu Vella, the daughter of H.M. Zain who founded Nasida Ria. The group name El Hawa refers to Hawa (Eve) the wife of Adam and mother of humanity.

Nasida Ria: Confronting a Generational Divide in Qasidah

Hours after arriving in Semarang in August 2018 and checking into a hotel near the center of the city, a message arrived in my ongoing WhatsApp conversation with Pak Zain (Bapak Haji Gus Choliq Zain), the manager of legendary Semarang-based qasidah modern group, Nasida Ria. The group was doing a show for a wedding celebration in a neighborhood on the outskirts of the city in a few hours, and I should come meet the musicians if I planned on writing about them. Bapak Zain met me at the roadside as I arrived by motorcycle taxi, and we walked a few hundred feet through a narrow residential alley toward the booming speakers of the performance, set up on a temporary stage in front of the host's home. The audience was seated in the ubiquitous green plastic chairs typical of *tasyakuran*, attentively facing the stage. The sound of the band reverberated deafeningly from the walls of nearby houses, heavily amplified by towering stacks of speakers on either side of the stage (fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Nasida Ria performs at a Semarang wedding party.

I sat by the younger sister of the bride, also a relative of one of the musicians, who was just out of high school and had grown up with Nasida Ria as the soundtrack of life event

celebrations in her community. The women of Nasida Ria are mostly of her grandmother's generation, excepting Bapak Zain's twenty-three-year-old daughter, Nazla. With a deep, commanding voice, the frontwoman spoke between songs, alternately joking with the crowd and reminding the crowd of their religious and moral imperatives. While the messaging seemed most relevant to younger audiences, I could not help but notice that most of the faces in the crowd were those of men and women in their fifties or older.

In keeping with the event's occasion, Nasida Ria's musicians played several songs with lyrics that spoke to themes of marriage: "*Jangan Main Cerai*" (Don't Play Around with Divorce) and "*Pengantin Baru*" (Newlyweds). Transitioning into "*Jangan Main Cerai*," Nasida Ria's keyboardist queued sound effects reminiscent of a windy or stormy night, while playing droning low notes in an organ tone. The frontwoman, whom I would later know as Ibu Rien, belted out above the drone in a dramatic speaking voice: "Don't play around with divorce. Divorce is *halal* (permitted), but it is hated by God...let us strive to avoid divorce because God will be wrathful toward those who divorce. Never humiliate a woman, because you were also born from the womb of a woman."⁵⁶

To the unmarried women in the crowd, the band offered up "*Kehormatan Wanita*" (A Woman's Honor), a song with lyrics in the voice of a woman who "gave up her honor" to a man who left her alone to suffer the consequences of her alleged negligence. The speaker in "*Kehormatan Wanita*" cautioned other women not to make the same mistake of surrendering their honor out of lust. The performance was only a few days after Indonesian Independence Day

⁵⁶ Recording of Live Performance, August 19, 2018. *Jangan main cerai, ya. Bercerai itu halal, akan tetapi dibenci Allah... mari kita berusaha menghindari perceraian karena allahpun akan murga pada orang yang bercerai. Jangan menghinakan seorang wanita, karena kau juga lahir dari rahim seorang wanita.*

on August 17, so the band played “*Merdeka Membangun*,” (Independence is Building) a Nasida Ria original celebrating the Indonesian nation’s independence and reminding those in power that independence implies a responsibility to build up the nation without contributing to inequality or participating in corruption. The Nasida Ria repertoire that evening also included songs such as “*Jasa Ibu*” (The Duties or Merit of a Mother), “*Wajah Ayu Untuk Siapa*” (Who is that beautiful face for?), and “*Wanita dan Kecantikan*” (Women and Beauty).



Fig. 6. Masjid Kauman, the center of the neighborhood where Nasida Ria was born

Founded in 1975 by Kyai Haji Mohammed Zain, a Semarang leader in Indonesian traditionalist Muslim organization Nahdlatul Ulama, Nasida Ria was a pioneering group in the qasidah modern “girl band” format. The group had its beginnings in the neighborhood surrounding *Masjid Kauman* (Kauman Mosque), Semarang’s oldest mosque, dating to the mid-eighteenth century (fig. 6). H. M. Zain was a teacher of Qur’anic recitation, and it was his top students who became the first members of Nasida Ria. Unlike Mutik Nida or Qasima, Nasida Ria focuses on the didactic element of their repertoire’s lyrical content and requires all members to be proficient in Qur’anic recitation before performing in any of the groups under Nasida Ria central management. Having already been profiled by a handful of Indonesian and foreign researchers, manager Bapak Haji Gus Choliq Zain and the frontwomen of the senior Nasida Ria ensemble and junior group Qasidah Ezzura were accustomed to interviews and welcomed

international attention. Pak Zain stressed that the moral messages espoused by Nasida Ria's repertoire, while intended as dakwah to deepen the faith and understanding of fellow Muslims, are also relevant to non-Muslims.

The original Nasida Ria, a group of nine young women, was initially chosen from H.M. Zain's best students of Qur'anic recitation. The women, from underprivileged backgrounds, lived in the Nasida Ria boarding house and received religious and moral training along with their musical rehearsal.⁵⁷ Speaking with me, musicians who had joined in the 1980's and 90's worried that the younger generation would miss out on important spiritual lessons and the rigor of rehearsal since they no longer live together at the "Nasida Ria dormitory."⁵⁸ Ibu Sofie, the band's keyboard player, mentioned that competition was once tight for potential members auditioning to join Nasida Ria, but now the junior division actively searches for new members and cannot count on the decades-long commitment once common among Nasida Ria musicians. Members were expected to master at least three instruments in order to facilitate their performance practice of rotating singers and instrumentalists for each song. Nasida would go on with changes in personnel to record 34 albums released on cassette tape and one CD produced by Piranha Records, a German world music label. Their opus currently totals over four hundred songs. By 1984 Nasida Ria was known in some traditionalist Muslim circles for their qasidah modern dakwah in Bahasa Indonesia, made popular by their song "*Perdamaian*" (Peace). They appeared

⁵⁷ Net TV Jawa Tengah, "Legend! Nasida Ria, Pelantun Asli Lagu Perdamaian ini Tetap Bertahan Hingga Sekarang."

⁵⁸ The "Nasida Ria dormitory" was located at H.M. Zain's home in Semarang. While Nasida Ria musicians lived, studied, and rehearsed there, H.M. Zain resisted referring to the informal boarding school as a *pesantren*.

repeatedly on national television programs during the 1980's and toured in Germany in 1994 and 1996.⁵⁹

According to author and music commentator, Dharmo Budi Suseno, "The instrumentation of Nasida Ria is similar to that of a dangdut group, in general, with not only drums, flute, electric guitar, bass, but also keyboard. The only difference is that they use violin to back up the melody. The musicians and vocalists, all in jilbab, strongly imply that qasidah music is more suited to carry religious messages."⁶⁰ In addition to the musicians' costuming, the Arab quality of the sound, lent by unison violins playing without vibrato and the vocal use of Arab tonalities, communicates Islam to Indonesian listeners.⁶¹ When Nasida Ria performs dangdut, it is often dangdut songs composed by Rhoma Irama, whose performances were banned from national television in the early 1980's because of his advocacy for greater integration of Islamic values into the government. Rhoma Irama, in addition to being "the king of dangdut", also campaigned for the Islamic PPP party, in opposition to the ruling Golkar party of President Suharto's authoritarian New Order. As Suharto began to ally with Islamic political leaders in the 1990's, there was a reversal: Rhoma Irama and dangdut in general were accepted as a "national music" of Indonesia. Known as a gatekeeper and enforcer of women's morality in the world of dangdut, it is not surprising that Nasida Ria chooses to perform such Rhoma Irama songs as "*Emansipasi Wanita*" (Women's Liberation) and "*Keramat*" (Sacred Place) with lyrics explicitly addressing women's roles as mothers and wives.

⁵⁹ Harmaj, "Profil Group;" Supardji, "Perdamaian Bersama Nasida Ria."

⁶⁰ Dharmo Budi Suseno, *Dangdut Musik Rakyat*, 41.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* This equation of Arab-ness with Islam frustrates some observers, who notice that even love songs, when performed with Arab instruments such as the *gambus* (stringed instrument similar to a lute), are perceived as Islamic.

The women who joined Nasida Ria as teens in the 1970's have trained two subsequent generations of personnel and are now helping to train a fourth generation of Nasida Ria musicians in their junior division, Qasidah Ezzura. The original Nasida Ria, while now composed mostly of women who joined in the 1980's and 90's, still actively performs at venues from neighborhood weddings to town squares to major music festivals. Nasida Ria has also attracted a cult following among Jakarta hipsters, who have created memes out of screenshots from the group's old music videos, poking fun at the moralistic lyrics and what they consider to be outdated costuming.⁶² H.M. Zain, the founder of Nasida Ria, became the patriarch of a qasidah putri empire, including not only Nasida Ria and its subsequent generations but also its sister groups Nida Ria and Qasidah El Hawa. Vella Zulfa Zain, the daughter of H.M. Zain and sister to Gus Choliq Zain, founded Qasidah El Hawa in the early 1990's. The group still performs at weddings and other events.

While H.M. Zain himself has already passed away, I met his brother at an event at Ibu Vella's home, just blocks from Semarang's Masjid Kauman. He explained their motivation for starting women's qasidah bands at a time when having women play the flute in a religious context was scandalous to some observers.⁶³ Their idea was that a band of young attractive women performing songs that teach Islamic ways of living would catch the attention of more audiences. Ibu Vella explained that "sometimes the advantage of having women play [the instruments] is as soon as we get on stage, people already show respect. If it's qasidah, qasidah musicians, we wear modest clothing when we get on stage. People can judge for themselves. If

⁶² Titah, "Ramalan Futuristik Nasida Ria."

⁶³ While Nasida Ria itself was not formed until 1975, H.M. Zain led a mixed-gender precursor ensemble with different instrumentation. His brother mentioned that they faced criticism for women playing the flute in the 1960's.

they want to [dance as if at a dangdut show], if they want to try any funny business, they know better”⁶⁴ The group that Vella leads, Qasidah El Hawa, focuses more on covers of Arab pop and dangdut songs than on the didactic songs written by Nasida Ria songwriter, Abu Ali Haidar.

Nasida Ria’s core repertoire consists of songs written by the late Kyai Ahmad Buchori Masruri, under the pseudonym Abu Ali Haidar. Kyai Ahmad Buchori Masruri was the Central Java regional head of the traditionalist Muslim organization, *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU), and was a friend of former Indonesian president, Abdurrahman Wahid (“Gus Dur”).⁶⁵ “Jangan Main Cerai” (Don’t Play at Divorce), as described earlier in this section, is representative of Abu Ali Haidar’s songs on gender roles and interactions between men and women. As in many of Nasida Ria’s didactic songs, the speaker takes on the role of a mother sternly reminding her children of their responsibilities as religiously observant and morally upstanding individuals. The music and lyrics of “Jangan Main Cerai” were written by Abu Ali Haidar, the songwriter for many of Nasida Ria’s most popular songs. Songs such as “Kehormatan Wanita” and “Jangan Main Cerai” describe women as precious, prone to succumbing to temptation, in need of vigilant protection, and deserving of men’s respect primarily because of their role as mothers.

This concept of women’s primary role as mothers and wives was reinforced in the mass ideology of Indonesian authoritarian president Suharto’s New Order regime between 1966 and 1999.⁶⁶ The concept of *kodrat*, or the natural God-decreed duties of each gender, was enforced in wife’s auxiliary organizations, the *dharma wanita*, to many male-dominated professions such as the military. Nasida Ria perform songs such as Rhoma Irama’s “*Emansipasi Wanita*” which

⁶⁴ Ibu Vella used the word *sungkan*, which I translated as “knowing better”. *Sungkan* is the feeling, born out of a sense of respect, of being ashamed to do something.

⁶⁵ NU Online Jawa Tengah, “Kiai Ahmad Buchori Masruri”

⁶⁶ Julia Suryakusuma, “State and Sexuality in New Order Indonesia”; Latifah and Ary Budianto, “Lasqi and the Questions on Islamic Women Leadership.”

directly references *kodrat* as a reason for women “not to overstep the bounds set in fate by God” in pursuing work outside of their primary duty as homemakers.⁶⁷ In a paper for the 2011 Bogor conference, *Is Indonesian Islam Different?*, Latifah and Ary Budiyanto posit that women’s qasidah was an instrument of New Order hegemonic Islamization in the 1990’s, writing that “the New Order insistence on ‘proper roles’ for women as wives, and mothers meant that qasidah became part of the apparatus of the gender arrangement of New Order Era in which the performing arts were not exempt.”⁶⁸ The women of Nasida Ria command respect as they play their role as mothers and grandmothers of the nation. Before ascending the stage to a position demanding the attention of their audience, they spend hours perfecting their performance of womanhood, from heavy stage makeup to elaborate matching costumes which communicate both femininity and modesty. The appearance of coiffed hair under the jilbab is achieved through wearing fitted elastic caps with a padding-filled cone extending backwards from the head.

A week after attending the Nasida Ria performance described above, I joined junior group Qasidah Ezzura on tour to Tegal and noticed a difference in the subject matter of the songs they chose to perform, but very little difference in the group’s audience. The audience lived up to the qasidah stereotype of “*ibu-ibu pengajian*,” a sea of four or five hundred women, mostly in their fifties and older, with large one-piece jilbabs of the ready-to-wear style that just needs to be pulled on over the head and shoulders. A small number of men attendees, scattered, along the perimeters of the audience. Instead of focusing on didactic themes centering on the roles and duties of women, the group’s set list included many secular covers, including Bollywood song “*Tum Hi Ho*” and the innocuous dangdut song “*Kereta Malam*” (Night Train), with lyrics about

⁶⁷ The full text in Indonesian of the song lyrics can be found easily online.

⁶⁸ Latifah and Ary Budiyanto, “Lasqi and the Questions on Islamic Women Leadership.”

the convenience and pleasant experience of taking the overnight train from Jakarta to Surabaya to visit relatives. The only songs on the Qasidah Ezzura set list with explicit religious messaging were “*Perdamaian*” (Peace), “*Kerukunan Beragama*” (Harmony between Religions), and “*Rasulullah*” (Prophet of God). Instead of explaining how women should behave, or how men should behave toward women, like many of the songs Nasida Ria performed at the August 19th wedding party, these songs focus on peace, interfaith cooperation, and inner faith.



Fig. 7. The personnel of Qasidah Ezzura (left) and their audience in Tegal (right).

Qasidah Ezzura’s young frontwoman, Nazla, occupies a very different emcee role as compared to Ibu Rien’s commanding and preacherlike presence. Nazla’s banter with the audience was humorous, like Ibu Rien’s, but never ventured into the territory of authoritatively laying down the law of God. Instead, Nazla spoke gently and respectfully in a higher register of her voice. The audience members were older than her for the most part. At twenty-three, Nazla was the leader and the oldest of the Qasidah Ezzura musicians. Several of the players were still in elementary school at the time. Nazla spoke for Indonesian women in general, and as a representative of the ensemble, when I interviewed her. My questions about whether there are negative stereotypes of women musicians touched a nerve for her, and she responded “no way! We have human rights, you know. It’s totally free, whether you’re a man or a woman. There

aren't any boundaries... Women don't need to just stay at home. They're free to pursue careers."⁶⁹ When asked about whether women have any advantages over men, or special responsibilities, as musicians, she replied that "male musicians are certainly more skilled, but women musicians are less common. Women musicians are a rarity."

Despite the set list at the Tegal event focusing on faith in God and interreligious understanding rather than the specific gendered duties of upstanding Muslim men and women, Qasidah Ezzura has now recorded songs espousing these themes that are not in the Nasida Ria repertoire. In 2020, Qasidah Ezzura released a new album in honor of Nasida Ria Management's forty-fifth anniversary. The album included the tracks "*Istri Solehah*" (Pious Wife) and "*Wanita Tiang Negara*" (Women are Pillars of the Nation). While Qasidah Ezzura and Nasida Ria do not enjoy widespread earnest popularity among younger audiences, their music and messages resonate with many. Upon learning that I had spent several days with the musicians of Nasida Ria, a twenty-something year old friend from my stint as an English teacher in Bandar Lampung on the island of Sumatra, exclaimed "I listened to them all the time as a kid! I learned so much from the ladies of Nasida Ria!" Regardless of whether Pak Zain achieves his goal, with the help of his daughter, Nazla, of reviving the popularity of the qasidah genre among young audiences, it is undeniable that the original group's music impacted at least one generation of listeners in Java and across much of the Indonesian archipelago.

Audiences at live Nasida Ria performances experience a sense of religiosity that dissolves social distinctions, as conveyed through song lyrics and performer-audience banter invoking wide-ranging religious and moral guidelines and reminders. At a large town square

⁶⁹ Interview with Nazla Zain, August 25, 2018. Nazla used the term "*Ibu-ibu*" to designate women here. This term connotes older women, typically those who have married and had children.

performance by Nasida Ria that I attended in Brebes, frontwoman Ibu Rien invited an enthusiastic woman up to the stage to sing her favorite Nasida Ria song with the group. Young men in the audience helped her up to stage height, as she appeared to be in her late seventies and unsteady standing up from her seat on the ground in the midst of the crowd. Ibu Rien gave her a microphone to introduce herself and to name her favorite song. She chose to sing “*Nabi Muhammad Mataharinya Dunia*” (Prophet Muhammad, the Sun of the World), missing many of the entrance queues and with a wavering voice. With patience, the musicians continued to play, and Ibu Rien filled in the missing pitches and lyrics on a second microphone. The audience participant sang earnestly, absorbed in the lyrics of worship, and the audience members below joined in the chorus, remaining seated and swaying calmly. Just as at the two other Nasida Ria associated performances I had attended, the Brebes audience featured undifferentiated seating. All audience members received the same type of seat, or all audience members sat on the floor. While older women made up most of the audience, there were men in attendance, who mostly stayed to the edges. No VIP area was provided, and even the family or officials that commissioned the performance sat together with the rest of the audience. The popularity and age of Nasida Ria’s recordings mean that live audiences are often already deeply familiar with Nasida Ria songs and lyrics even if they have never attended a live show before. Audience members sing along together, regardless of gender, age, or class, moved by the musicians’ performance and the messages conveyed in lyrics and in performer-audience banter between songs.

Conclusion

In the case of each of the musicking communities described in this paper, the performance of a certain kind of femininity in dress and through behavior on and off stage is the centerpiece of the “feeling of oneness” or realization of unique group identity inherent in music as a social phenomenon. Mutik Nida speaks the languages of dangdut and qasidah in dress and repertoire, creating a unique plexus of identities for audience members who may shy away from both the sexualized reputation of dangdut and the didactic and inflexible connotations of qasidah. Qasima also bridges the worlds of dangdut and qasidah, creating a field of local opportunities for young women musicians to gain experience and earn money while avoiding some of the harshest criticism reserved for dangdut performers who do not dress modestly. In the case of Nasida Ria’s Semarang-based qasidah empire, four generations of women musicians have found employment and meaning in spreading messages of ideal gender roles to a receptive nation of audiences.

Also in each of these cases, men in positions of power have played some role in composing the music and lyrics, advising on costumes, and curating the type of dakwah espoused by the women on stage. Flawlessly made-up and adorned women, especially young women, are seen by many of the musicians and managers I interviewed as effective conveyors of dakwah expressly because of their physical attractiveness. It is implied that men will listen to their messages because they see the conveyor of the message as a stand-in for a wife or a mother, and that women will listen because the conveyor of the message embodies an ideal of femininity. These women musicians could be considered as enforcing the patriarchal women’s *kodrat*, made into the business of the state during the New Order. Even so, they are active agents in their dakwah. Mutik Nida sees her work as “a form of worship”, and Ibu Vella of Qasidah El Hawa describes her appearance and actions on stage as “trickling down into the audience.” It is

undeniable that the women in each of my case studies are powerful in their own right. They see meaning in their work as musicians, and inspire community among those who admire their talent in performing music, gender, and dakwah. While I did not have the time and resources to incorporate the views of more audience members and fans of all genders in this research project, future work on the topic should take into account how these varied points of view speak to their varied experiences of music, gender, religion, and community.

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