

Negotiating Islam: A Study on the *Debus* Fatwa of the Indonesian Council of Ulama in Banten

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Abstract

Unlike most works which study and focus on discussing fatwa (religious edicts) produced by the Indonesian Council of Ulama (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, MUI) at the central level, I focus on one of the fatwas produced by MUI at the regional level. In this article, I examine a fatwa on *debus* (a traditional martial arts performance that is imbued with supernatural powers) issued by the provincial MUI branch in Banten during a regional meeting involving all MUI branches from Java and Lampung, held in August 2009 in Serang City, Banten. Based on the data collected from key informants and internet research, including contemporary analysis, I argue that although fatwas are non-binding, a fatwa can also be negotiated based on the political, social, and cultural circumstances of a region. In other words, the power and influence of religious authority can be mitigated when it collides with the interests of a powerful group in a society. I also argue that MUI branches at the regional level are closely linked to the national MUI office's policies and interests in upholding Islamic conservatism in Indonesia. This article provides further analysis dealing with religious authority in the Indonesian context, highlighting once again that this authority is never monolithic or absolute.

Keywords: religious authority, Islamic conservatism, fatwa, MUI, Banten

Introduction

This article examines the religious orientation of the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI) in Banten, especially during the period after the establishment of Banten province. The paper aims to highlight insights into MUI's attitude towards the Islamic agenda in contemporary Indonesia at a local level. After the collapse of the New Order regime in 1998, MUI at the central or national level redefined its orientation, political stance, and established new Islamic paradigms. One example of the changing attitude of MUI at central level was the shifting paradigm from the organization seeing itself as *khadimul hukumah* (servant of the government) to *khadimul ummah* (servant of the *ummah*). From then on, the central MUI positioned itself as the defender of conservative Muslims' interests and aspirations (Bruinessen, 2013) that appear to be experiencing growth and development since the fall of Suharto (Sakai & Fauzia, 2014). The rise of Islamic conservatism has challenged the Indonesian multi-religious state and has implications for Indonesian society, culture, and politics (Sebastian et al., 2020).

The concept of Islamic conservatism itself, to some extent, has become synonymous with political Islam or Islamism, spearheaded by hardline groups, that attempts to implement some form of Islamic law in the state. In this regard, Islamic conservatism can be defined as a combination of normative and practical issues derived from Islamic texts that stimulate literal understandings of the *syariah* (Islamic law and Islamic ethics) (Sebastian et al., 2020). The rise of Islamic conservatism in Indonesia has changed the face of Indonesia Islam from a liberal, tolerant, and open-minded discourse towards a more intolerant, extreme understanding of Islam and increasing desire of Muslims to live under Islamic law. According to Sebastian et al., (2020) furthermore, Islamic conservatism tends to reject other interpretations of Islamic doctrine as *bid'ah* (unlawful innovations in religion) while promoting a fundamentalist interpretation of the correct method (*manhaj*) in practicing Islam. In many Muslim and non-Muslim countries, Islamism or political Islam is affecting the future of Muslim societies and polities in political, economic, and social terms, including in Indonesia (Ayoob, 2008). In the Indonesian context, the fall of the New Order, followed by the transition to democracy, has been accompanied by increasing conservative attitudes of several Islamic organizations, including MUI, the NU *Garis Lurus* (the 'Straight Line' Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) faction), Majelis Muahhidin Council (The Indonesian Mujahidin Council – MMI), the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), the National Fatwa Defense Movement (GNPF), and transnational organizations such as Hizbut Tahrir

Indonesia (HTI), the Muslim Brotherhood-inspired Tarbiyah Movement, Salafism, and others.

One of the Islamic organizations that has played a pivotal role in shaping the conservative outlook of Indonesian Islam is MUI. The MUI founded in 1975 was an Islamic vehicle for the state – designed to secure, support, and ensure the implementation of the New Order’s policies, including promoting Pancasila as the state ideology. However, although MUI officially adhered to Pancasila as its ideology, it also produced exclusionary fatwa (religious rulings) and *tausiyah* (advice/recommendation) (Saenong & Nisa, 2022) that displayed a strict, literalist, and intolerant interpretation of Islam, such as fatwas on deviant sects in Islam, religious liberalism, secularism, and pluralism, Ahmadiyah, interfaith prayers, inheritance and marriage (Bruinessen, 2013). Some studies have revealed that some MUI fatwas promoted intolerance and upheld conservative Islamic views. Studying fatwas on pluralism, secularism, and liberalism, Piers Gillespie, for instance, argues that MUI practices conservative thinking that influences its fatwas (Gillespie, 2007). Meanwhile, Hicks (2014) finds that the fatwa on Liberalism was the result of the dominant role played by conservative elements within MUI. Another study dealing with MUI was conducted by Tim Lindsey. He proposes that MUI presents itself as a champion of a conservative and often populist orthodoxy that to some extent can challenge government policy (Lindsey, 2012). Underlining the course of democracy in Indonesia, Syafiq Hasyim demonstrates the paradox of MUI’s stance. During the New Order administration, MUI issued many moderate and democratic fatwas but after the collapse of the New Order, MUI’s fatwas have become more conservative and radical (Hasyim, 2020). Furthermore, MUI seems to utilize Indonesia's state ideology by influencing the government’s policy based on its “religious” interests and agenda (Saat, 2018). My study reveals that MUI at the provincial level applies conservative thought and considerations in issuing fatwa.

To date however, there have been few studies and little analysis of MUI's fatwas at the regional level. Many studies related to MUI and its fatwas focus on fatwas produced by MUI at the national level. Despite these academic contributions to understanding MUI fatwas in contemporary Indonesia, these studies lack analysis and understanding of the dynamics of fatwa production at the local level. In other words, there is still a lack of studies on the issuing of fatwas by MUI at the provincial level in Indonesia. This article aims to fill this academic gap and enrich the findings of previous studies on fatwa.

In this article, I analyze the dynamics surrounding a fatwa issued by MUI's provincial branch in Banten on the practice of *debus* (a traditional martial arts performance that is imbued with supernatural powers). Among Bantenese, *debus* is a popular practice that has been handed down for generations. It is not only related to religious rituals due to the involvement of *dhikr* (recitations) but is also a popular form of entertainment for Bantenese. The issuing of a fatwa on *debus* provoked opposition from *debus* performer groups and other elements of society in Banten. In this paper, I argue that although fatwas are not binding, they can also be produced based on the political, social, and cultural circumstances of a region. In other words, the power and influence of religious authorities can be mitigated when they collide with the interests of a powerful group in a society. Second, the process of the issuing of the *debus* fatwa by MUI Banten also shows a shared trend in conservative attitudes between MUI at the national level and local MUI branches.

Religious Authority: Ulama and Fatwā

Religious authority is an extensive concept, since it can encompass various forms such as notions, texts, individual persons, or institutions. Moreover, the concept of religious authority in the form of a fatwa institution in Islam has changed from one generation to the next (Kaptein, 2004). This authority is also one of the fundamental elements of all religions, not just Islam and Christianity (Yusuf H.R. Seferta, 2008). Religious authority functions as a symbol to unite its adherents, prevent dissension and uncertainty, and provide legal assurance. According to Krämer, religious authority engages power, chance, right as well as the capability to create and interpret religious texts, including the method to interpret the religious texts (Krämer & Schmidtke, 2006). Krämer's explanation, to some extent, describes a similar situation to that in Islamic history, where the initial concept of religious authority was pioneered by the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632).

During his prophethood, Muhammad possessed two types of authority – political and religious – because he could interpret the Qur'ān as the first legal source into his daily activities and at the same time could determine, advise, and outline appropriate actions for Muslims not only in terms of religious rituals but also in terms of political and social behavior. In his hands, moreover, Islamic teachings were defined and further became an obligation to be practiced by Muslims as the second source of Islamic law. After the Prophet Muhammad's death, the two types of authority practiced during his life were maintained by the four rightly-guided Caliphs known as *al-Khulafā' al-Rāshidūn*.

Unlike at the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the *al-Khulafā' al-Rāshidūn*, in which religious authority and political authority were in the hands of a centralized institution, religious authority in the period after the last caliph of the *al-Khulafā' al-Rāshidūn* devolved to individual ulama and muftis. This was because, during Umayyad and Abbasid dynasty, Islam spread to several continents which brought different political, social, and administrative problems. The presence of ulama became more crucial, because the problems faced by the *ummah* (Muslim community) not only related to ritual practices in which the solutions can be found directly from the Qur'ān and Sunnah, but also related to more complicated problems for which the answers were sometimes not clearly stated in the sources of Islamic law. In this period, ulama started to enjoy religious authority in Islam and later they played significant roles in preaching and at the same time guiding the *ummah*.

To deal with such complicated problems, the *ummah* demanded that the ulama, as the successors of the prophets, give them advice and solutions based on Islamic law. In this regard, it would be important for Muslims to ask for religious opinions from qualified ulama who possessed a better understanding on Islamic law. The opinions or advice produced by ulama became an interesting topic because they outlined aspects such as the development of religious understanding, the history, and sociopolitical circumstances of the times. Thus, Kaptein remarked that the ulama's point of view on a special issue given to the petitioners could be called a fatwa (Kaptein, 2005).

Mozaffari likewise argued that fatwa are a response to a question concerning a particular problem of Islamic law issued by a qualified religious authority. He emphasized that fatwa issued by a mufti or ulama have a different function to a *qāḍi's* (judge) decision in a court. A fatwa is not an order, it is non-binding, and does not have legal consequences, while a *qāḍi's* decision is an order and a decision issued by "executor authority" in the court which must be implemented (Masud et al., 1998; Mozaffari, 1998). The demands for religious opinions from ulama, furthermore, have been handed down from one generation to the next generation since ulama are believed by the *ummah* to be the "heir of the prophets" and that religious authority, to some degree, is in the hands of ulama.

Islam and *Debus* in Banten

Banten is a relatively a new province compared to other provinces in Indonesia. Located on the westernmost tip of Java, the region has a long history. It was a Muslim sultanate that lasted for nearly three centuries (1527-1813) and by the 17th century it gained the glory and prosperity by becoming one of the largest international trading centers in the archipelago (Tjandrasasmita, 2016). Banten also had a long tradition of resistance and rebellion against the Dutch colonial administration (Ota, 2006). Banten is also the region where society is closely linked to Islam and the Islamic worldview. Islam has played an important role in Banten since the 16th century, when Hasanuddin became the first ruler of the Banten sultanate (Priyadi, 2013). According to Van Bruinessen, Banten had the reputation of being more self-consciously Muslim than the other parts of Java and perhaps of the archipelago (Van Bruinessen, 1995). Finally, Banten is well known for its mysticism as embodied in *tarekat* (mystic orders) (Kartodirdjo, 1970; Van Bruinessen, 1995). After the Dutch occupied Banten, three forms of informal leadership emerged, including *kyai* (ulama), *jawara* (men who practice traditional martial arts and are believed to have supernatural powers), and *priyayi* (aristocrats). *Kyai* and *jawara* still exist until today and have an important role during all periods of Indonesian history (during the colonial period, Old Order, New Order and Reformation Era) (Priyadi, 2013).

In Banten, the ulama and Bantenese society share a very close relationship because ulama (*kyai*) not only act as religious leaders but also assist of the Muslim community to solve their life problems (Tihami, 2010). The ulama became important actors not only in religious matters but also in political and social matters, promoting cohesiveness among Bantenese. We can see this in some Bantenese ulama such as *Kyai Wahab Afif*, *Kyai Aminuddin Ibrahim*, *Kyai Maimun Ali*, and other ulama especially when they participated in the struggle to establish Banten province. Besides ulama who participate in the political sphere, there are also some charismatic ulama who became leaders of *tarekat*, including *Abuya Dimiyati* and *Abuya Bustomi* in Pandeglang and *KH Munfasir* in Serang. In addition, there are also hundreds of ulama who lead Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) – modern and traditional – under the *Forum Silaturahmi Pondok Pesantren* (FSPP/Forum of Islamic Boarding Schools), reflecting Banten's position as a conducive place for the effective transmission of Islamic teachings.

Despite the close relationship between Islam and ulama, however, most Bantenese Muslims and many Indonesian Muslims in general to some extent still believe in

magic and superstition. Muslims in Banten, for example, believe in the capability of shaman (*dukun*) who can cure their diseases and solve life problems, such as helping traders to increase their income, assisting a man or woman to find their future partner or performing black magic against an enemy. In addition, they accept some superstitious beliefs, such as believing that the sound of birds crowing means someone will pass away in the near future, or that it is necessary to provide food to shrines in a village before hosting a wedding or circumcision. Some locations in Banten are known as sacred places for meditating to obtain invulnerability or wealth, such as in Ujung Kulon and Panaitan Island. Invulnerability can also be obtained through the help of a local shaman or mystical kyai, found in some villages in Banten. For most Bantenese moreover, if someone possesses invulnerability, this indicates a high level of spirituality, which increases their social status as well.

Debus is one of the most popular performances involving displays of invulnerability and has been handed down from generation to generation since the sultanate era (Arifin, 1993; Van Bruinessen, 1989). According to Atjeh, *debus* is derived from Arabic language “*dabbus*” which means needle or thumbtack (Aboebakar Atjeh, 1985). However, other definitions have been proposed to define *debus*’ technique and performance. Vredendregt for example described *debus* as a performance to prove and display invulnerability (J. Vredendregt, 1973). Meanwhile, Van Bruinessen stated that the techniques included in *debus* are an eclectic combination of Islam and pre-Islamic magic because the magical recitations in *debus* include Islamic Arabic recitation together with Javanese and Sundanese magical recitations (Van Bruinessen, 1995). In addition, Miksic argued that all invulnerability elements in the *debus* performance are accomplished through “ascetic practices” and religious belief (Miksic, 2005).

The emergence of *debus* as a public performance furthermore can be seen as the result of the combination of Islam and pre-Islamic teachings. Some Islamic elements from *ṭarīqah* (mystical order) teachings and pre-Islamic components have been combined to produce the performances. In this sense, *debus* can be regarded as a ‘holy alliance’ between Islam and local pre-Islamic teachings. *Debus* are not only one of Banten province’s symbols and icons, particularly after Banten became Indonesia’s thirtieth province, but they also have a role as “political” entertainment, as many politicians and political parties invite *debus* performers as part of their political campaigns to entertain constituents (Rohman, 2013).

MUI Banten's *debus* fatwa

The controversy surrounding MUI Banten's *debus* fatwa began in 2003 when MUI Banten received a request from privately-owned TV stations to look into *debus* performances in Banten (Ahmad, 2004). According to Zakariya Syafe'i, one of the members of MUI Banten's research and development commission, Kyai Wahab Afif, the chair of MUI Banten, asked the commission to conduct research on *debus* based on the assumption that the performances are now different from the original invulnerability performances influenced by the *ṭarīqah* (interview with Zakaria Syafe'i). Unlike invulnerability performances based on the *ṭarīqah*, in which performers stab one another with a blade, nowadays *debus* performances include a variety of tricks.

MUI Banten established a team to conduct research on *debus* to see how the practice had evolved, to ensure the *'aqīdah* (doctrine) of the Muslim community was protected from deviant practices (interview with Aminuddin Ibrahim). A letter from MUI Banten, no. 67/MUI-BTN/SK/XII/2003, outlined the formation of a research team on '*Debus and Issues Related to Witchcraft, Mysticism and Similar Practices*' (*Tim Peneliti Tentang Debus dan Masalah-Masalah yang Berkaitan dengan Ilmu Santet, Mistik dan Sejenisnya*). Several MUI officials were involved in this research, which began on 1st December 2003. The team investigated *debus* groups in Banten province in three regionally important centers, namely the Walantaka group in Serang municipality, the Anyer group in Serang district and the Kadudodol group in Pandeglang district.

The first attempt to issue a fatwa on *debus* and internal debates during the 2004 fatwa commission meeting

After conducting research for one year, the team presented its research findings at an official meeting of MUI Banten. The team produced the following findings and recommendations:

1. *Debus* is part of 'popular religion' in Bantenese society. It has elements from traditions evolving from *ṭarīqah* teachings but also from local traditions in Banten. To ensure the acceptable development of *debus* and to avoid performances which contravene *tawḥīd* (correct monotheism) as the main doctrine in Islam, ulama must 'align' (*meluruskan*) the essence of *debus*, so that it conforms to *ṭarīqah* teachings and does not run counter to Islamic doctrine.

2. Because of the changing nature of *debus* performances, from a spiritual exercise to encourage the spread of Islam (*da'wah Islam*) to a form of entertainment and a cultural symbol of Banten, further research is required to investigate its conformity with Islamic law and to prevent further unwelcome change.
3. The Islamic legal stance regarding invulnerability as practiced in *debus* is uncertain. It is a complicated problem and requires further research. Therefore to avoid a biased decision, MUI Banten should invite experts in Islamic jurisprudence, *ṭarīqah* practitioners and *debus* performers to determine the status of *debus* according to Islamic law (Ahmad, 2004).

MUI Banten officials then agreed to present the research findings to a fatwa commission meeting a few days later.

On 28 December 2004, MUI Banten held a fatwa commission meeting. This was followed by a discussion of the research findings by MUI Banten leaders, which included fatwa commission members, the *debus* research team and district/municipality representatives of MUI (interview with Aminuddin Ibrahim). Kyai Aminuddin Ibrahim, one of the chairmen of MUI Banten, presented a paper to the fatwa commission. He also reviewed the results of the *debus* research and outlined several findings from the research report, namely (Ibrahim, 2004):

1. *Debus* is an eclectic combination of Islamic and pre-Islamic culture.
2. *Debus* has changed and developed alongside local culture.
3. *Debus* performances can be performed by anyone – not just Muslims but also non-Muslims.
4. In addition to *debus* demonstrating physical skills and training, *debus* can also involve asking for assistance from spirits, angels, prophets and saints.
5. *Debus* mixes Qur'ānic verses with *jangjawokan* (incantations) and mantras and invites *Uyut* (ancestor) Widara Tamplong, *Uyut* Santika Cimahi Ujung Kulon and *Embah* (grandparent) Khaer (to help them undertake the performance perfectly).
6. *Debus* involves seeking assistance from supernatural beings.
7. *Debus* applies *wird* and *tawassul* (the recitation of al Fātiḥah or other short surahs from the Qur'ān) to Allah, the spirits of saints and sheikhs.
8. *Debus* changes some Qur'ānic, verses such as the first verse of *al Kawthar* to suit its incantations. The meaning of the first verse becomes 'the command to perform prayers to saints called Walba and Warba'.
9. *Debus* practices *wird* (litanies) which are not purely for the sake of Allah.

Basing his argument on Sayyid ‘Abd Raḥmān bin Muḥammad’s work, Kyai Aminuddin Ibrahim concluded in his paper that *debus* is part of *khawāriq al-‘ādah*¹ and it uses *tawassul* (Ibrahim, 2004). The former means ‘contrary to human understanding of nature or reason’ (Millie, 2014) which, according to Sayyid ‘Abd Raḥmān bin Muḥammad, can be divided into four types of power. The first is *mu’jizah*, powers possessed by Allāh’s prophets who acquire this power innately. The second is *karāmah*, powers possessed by perfect Muslims who automatically follow the prophet Muḥammad’s teaching innately. Another type is *istidrāj*, power possessed by those who are *fāsiq* (great sinners). The last type is categorized as *sihr*, power obtained through learning by those who are infidels or ignorant of Islam. Finally, *tawassul* which means a ritual during which the recitation of *al Fātiḥah* (or other short surahs from the Qur’ān) is conducted for the benefit of Muslims in order to become closer to Allah (Millie, 2008).

Comparing Kyai Aminuddin Ibrahim’s presentation at the fatwa commission meeting with the research team’s recommendations, I argue that Kyai Aminuddin Ibrahim went further by suggesting that *debus* is categorized as *khawāriq al-‘ādah*. In addition, he raised the issue of *tawassul* practice in *debus* performances, which has become a highly critical and sensitive issue because traditionalist organizations, notably Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), practice *tawassul* as part of their rituals.

At the meeting, Kyai Aminuddin Ibrahim proposed that *debus*¹ invoking assistance of pre-Islamic gods and the mediation of the devil through *jangjawokan* is part of *sihr* (sorcery) which can result in the performers practicing *shirk* (polytheism), which is forbidden according to Islamic teachings. Therefore he suggested the commission should write a fatwa concerning this issue (interview with Aminuddin Ibrahim). Interestingly, all attendees at the meeting, including Kyai Rafei Ali, a prominent NU *kyai* in Banten as well as chairman of MUI Banten’s fatwa commission at the time, agreed with the paper and the proposals on *debus* (interview with Aminuddin Ibrahim). However, after I consulted with Zakaria Syafe’i (a member of MUI Banten’s research team), he said that Kyai Ahmad Syatibi Syarwani, one of NU Banten’s advisory scholars, argued that issuing the fatwa would create tensions in Banten because *debus* had already become a Bantene tradition (interview with Zakaria Syafe’i).

¹ *Khawāriq* is derived from *kharāqa-yakhruqu-kharqun*, meaning to oppose, be against, or be different. The meaning of *al-‘ādāt* is custom or tradition. *Khawāriq al-‘ādāt* literally means extraordinary things beyond the customary.

Nevertheless, most of the attendees at the fatwa commission meeting agreed with Kyai Aminuddin Ibrahim and decided to write a draft for the *debus* fatwa. After the fatwa committee had completed the draft, the chairman and general secretary refused to sign it because they worried about the political implications if the fatwa was issued by MUI Banten (interview with Aminuddin Ibrahim). It seemed that they were influenced by Kyai Ahmad Syatibi's concerns regarding the tension that would emerge and the response from the Bantenese if MUI Banten released the official fatwa.

I assume there was agreement among ulama at the fatwa commission meeting that Islamic law forbade the *debus* groups from seeking mediation from gods other than Allah, invoking *jinn* (spirits) or performing *sihr* because such practices are forbidden in Islam as they lead to *shirk* (polytheism). However, because they could not decide how to deliver the message to the Muslim community, as well as due to their concerns about the possibility of negative responses from the community, they decided to postpone the release of the fatwa and wait for a more appropriate time.

There are several points worth noting in this case. The first concerns the *debus* research team's first recommendation. Finding that *debus* performances have evolved, with many of their practices now contrary to the main doctrines of Islam, the team recommended the ulama to 'align' (*meluruskan*) the essence of *debus* with or close to *ṭarīqah* teachings. This point indirectly suggests MUI Banten should take action against *debus* performances that do not conform with Islamic doctrine. In other words, the first point of the recommendations paved the way for MUI Banten to go further and examine *debus* in the context of Islamic law.

Tarīqah teachers and *debus* performers were noticeably absent from the fatwa commission meeting. MUI Banten appeared to ignore the *debus* research team's third recommendation that the presence of these two groups was important, at least to cross-check and confirm the team's research findings. This was probably due to the difficulty experienced by MUI Banten in choosing which *debus* groups should be invited, because there are multiple groups in the province. MUI Banten also seemed reluctant to invite *ṭarīqah* teachers to the meeting because many are opposed to politics and to some extent opposed to MUI because they see MUI as a representative of the government. These factors probably contributed to MUI Banten not inviting the *ṭarīqah* and *debus* teachers.

The second attempt: The 7th MUI regional coordination meeting (Rakorda) of Java and Lampung Branches

MUI organizes regional branch coordination meetings (Rapat Koordinasi Daerah/Rakorda) in Indonesia by geographic zones. These zones are Region I, encompassing Java and Lampung minus East Java, Region II encompassing Sumatra minus Lampung, Region III consisting of MUIs in Kalimantan, Region IV encompassing MUIs in Sulawesi and Region V consisting of MUIs from East Java and eastern Indonesia. These forums can be used as a medium to disseminate fatwas issued by the central MUI council and to discuss issues concerning the Muslim community (Amidhan & Sam, 2010).

MUI Banten held a regional meeting in Serang, the capital of Banten province, from 10-12 August 2009, attended by all the branches from Java (minus East Java) and Lampung. There were three commissions at the 7th MUI Region I Rakorda, namely Commission A discussing recommendations and organizational consolidation, Commission B discussing priority programs and Commission C discussing fatwas. MUI Banten saw the meeting as an opportunity to obtain as many perspectives on *debus* as possible. Therefore at the fatwa commission forum attended by representatives from provincial and district-level MUIs from Java and Lampung, Kyai Aminuddin Ibrahim, re-presented his paper on *debus* to a fatwa commission meeting attended by around thirty people (interview with Amas Tajudin, one of the participants of the Rakorda).

His presentation highlighted the same issues as his previous presentation at the 2004 fatwa commission meeting. He presented *debus* as *khawāriq al-‘ādah* with *wasīlah* (spiritual mediators) as one of the important elements of *debus*. However, according to Amas Tajudin, the meeting stopped discussion on *wasīlah* after an objection was raised by Kyai Rafe’i Ali, who insisted the meeting should continue without mentioning *wasīlah* because it offended NU participants (interview with Amas Tajudin). Thereafter, the focus of the meeting was just on *debus*.

Unlike the first fatwa commission meeting in 2004, in which all participants agreed that *debus* groups that invoke *jinn* (spirits) and use *jangjawokan* (magical mantras) to obtain invulnerability were deviant, during this meeting, H. Amas Tadjuddin – the secretary Serang municipality’s MUI and one of the NU chairmen from Serang municipality – raised objections. He proposed several counterpoints to Aminuddin Ibrahim’s presentation, including:

1. *Debus* is the Banten community's entertainment and anyone can master it as long as they follow Islamic teachings, as exemplified by Sulṭān Ḥasanuddīn's disciples.
2. *Debus* is a direct practice of *ṭarīqah mu'tabar* (an authoritative *ṭarīqah* with a clear genealogical chain connected to the prophet Muḥammad), developed by NU members who mostly practice Naqṣabandiyyah and Qādiriyyah *ṭarīqah*.
3. *Debus* uses *jangjawokan* derived from Sundanese, Malay and other local languages but the literal meaning of the mantras do not have to be understood. Instead, the most important aspect is its spiritual meaning. As long as *debus* groups ask Allāh for invulnerability, they are allowed to use *jangjawokan*.
4. The *Debus* categorized as *ḥarām* (prohibited) by MUI Banten because they call for assistance from *jinn* and *shayṭān*'s (the devil), require further research, because asking *jinn* for assistance is *ikhtilāf bayna al ummah* (a point of debate among Muslims concerning its position in Islamic law).
5. The interaction between *jinn* and humans cannot be categorized as prohibited because the cooperation between *jinn* Muslims and Muslims can be regarded as *tawassul* (an act of mediation). NU believes *tawassul* is *ḥalāl* (permitted) because Allāh commands Muslims to ask for help and assistance through *ṣalāt* (prayers) and *ṣabr* (patience), but this practice is not considered *shirk* (polytheism) even though Muslims are not asking for help directly from Allāh. In this way, *jinn* in *debus* performances can be regarded as *wasīlahs* (mediators) which is not necessarily prohibited.

The dissenting opinion put forward by Amas Tajudin caused a heated debate at the meeting because he insisted *debus* cannot be categorized as *ḥarām* whereas most kyai at the meeting argued that *debus* that invoke *shayṭān*'s assistance are prohibited (interview with Amas Tajudin). After the heated debate, the ulama (except Amas Tajudin) finally came to the conclusion that *debus* can be divided into three types:

- 1) *Debus* groups that derive invulnerability from *ṭarīqah* such as *Rifā'iyyah*, *Tijāniyyah*, *Sammāniyyah* and Ibn 'Alwān ('Alwaniyyah,) and use self-discipline, prayers, and Islamic *wird* to strengthen their '*aqīdah* and *ma'rifah* (gnosis). This kind of *debus* is far removed from *shirk* (polytheism) and *sihir* (magic), which are in direct opposition to Islamic teachings. This first group is allowed, according to the ulama. This is the type of *debus* that functions as a form of Islamic cultural tradition.

- 2) *Debus* groups that derive invulnerability from physical exercise, skill and speed without involving mantras, magic or cooperating with spirits, *shayṭān* or ghosts. Ulama have agreed to allow performances by these groups.
- 3) *Debus* groups that blend invulnerability performances with pre-Islamic local traditions originating from teachings from Buddhism, Hinduism and Animism. These groups also use mantras. Most of the language used is Sanskrit or Kawi (old Sundanese), which the performers do not understand. These groups try to Islamize the *jangjawokan* by reciting the *basmalah* (opening line of chapters of the Qur'ān) at the beginning and the *shahādah* (Islamic statement of faith) at the end of the mantra. For instance, to summon the holy spirit's assistance, they recite: '*Kukus kaula kukus tunjung, seungitna maratan langit, endahna maliawarna. Kaula nyuhunkeun ku para malaikat opat, kalima pancuran tengah ka luhur ulah ka bawa ka awun-awun, ka handap ulah nyeureup ka sagara, panghadirkeun Uyut Widara Tampolong, Uyut Santika Cimahi Ujung Kulon. Embah Khaer...kudu hadir di tempat ieu* (My smoke is Tunjung's smoke [it can be the name of a place in Parahiyangan's story or the name of a flower], its smell encompasses the sky, its beauty reflects color. Your slave beseeches to the four points of the compass, to five fountains, to the sky do not bring clouds, to the ground do not sink into the ocean, please wait for Uyut Widara Tampolong and Uyut Santika Cimahi Ujung Kulon (the names of gods). Grandparent Khaer...must arrive at this place). Moreover, some of the incantations used to protect performers from danger have been modified by inserting Qur'ānic verses such as: *Innā 'aṭaynāka al kawthar faṣalli liwali Walba wali wali Warba* meaning 'Praise be to *wali Warba wali Warba*' (p.59). It should be: 'Praise be to God'.

Attendees at the regional meeting declared the third type of *debus* group to be against Islamic teachings. The meeting then recommended to all Muslims everywhere, especially those who live in Banten, to avoid the third kind of *debus* because it involves the practice of polytheism and magic which are against Islamic teachings and will destroy them (i.e. both practitioners and those watching) in this world and in the Hereafter.

At the end of the meeting on 12 August 2009, the Rakorda committee organized a press conference to announce the results of MUI Java and Lampung's two-day

meeting. Representing Commission C on fatwas, Kyai Aminuddin Ibrahim announced that they had discussed *debus* and other performances similar to *debus*. His press statement included:

‘...after discussing *debus*, MUI Java and Lampung concluded that some aspects of *debus* performances are allowed according to Islamic teaching and others are not. *Debus* performances that are prohibited according to Islamic teachings are those which invoke *jinn* and the devil’s assistance and recite mantras derived from impure Qur’ānic verses. These practices can be categorized as *sihr* which leads to *shirk*. However, if invulnerability is derived from physical exercise, this is allowed as long as it does not involve the use of mantras.

There were several reasons behind MUI Banten’s decision to issue the *debus* fatwa. One was that *debus* and other performances imitating *debus* are now readily accessible to the public via electronic and print media as well as other media. Furthermore, Kyai Aminuddin Ibrahim stated that, ‘in fact, *debus* has had a negative effect on the Muslim community – in a general sense and Indonesian Muslims in particular – especially on the younger generation, ‘*aqīdah* Islamiyyah (Islamic doctrine) and the pillars of civilized society.’ He added that ‘the government and the Muslim community have not yet examined the implications of *debus* and other performances resembling *debus* vis-à-vis Islamic law’(Mad, 2009)

From his statement released after the meeting, it seemed that Kyai Aminuddin Ibrahim did not cover the outcome of the fatwa commission meeting in its entirety. The above statement, for instance, did not mention the first category of *debus* permitted, according to Islamic law. The content of his statement suggested a formal fatwa had already been released.

Responses after the Rakorda press conference

On the afternoon of 12 August 2009, several local and national online newspapers published stories that that the MUI regional meeting attended by 150 ulama had issued a fatwa stating that *debus* was prohibited according to Islamic law. The news provoked reactions on the internet via comments on blogs, on Facebook and on mailing lists, with some supporting and others rejecting the fatwa. The following table illustrates the responses for and against the reports that MUI had released a fatwa stating that *debus* were *ḥarām*.

For and against the *debus* fatwa on the internet

| For | Against |
|--|---|
| For those who confess himself as a Muslim, it is better to follow the decision of ulama because the regulation (fatwa) is not for non-Muslims. | Watch out! Indonesian tradition are at risk of extinction. Following this fatwa on <i>debus</i> , will <i>Reog</i> (a traditional Javanese dance combined with magic), <i>Jatilan</i> (traditional Javanese horse trance dance) and <i>Wayang</i> (puppet show) also be subject to prohibition? |
| MUI does not intend to remove Indonesian cultures. In fact, it states the fact released by ulama who do not want the <i>ummah</i> to become deviant. | MUI intends to forbid all Indonesian traditional cultures. It would be better if MUI honestly admitted their attention to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia. Many Indonesian traditions are indeed derived from Hinduism and Buddhism. |

On 14 August 2009, Banten’s provincial governor, Ratu Atut Chosiyah, the daughter of Hasan Sohib, a prominent Banten *jawara*, claimed in a very subtle way that the practice of *debus* should be preserved because it has become a cultural asset for the Bantenese and it has also been passed down through the generations (Burhani, 2009). Her statement subtly indicated that the local government viewed MUI’s *debus* fatwa as an attempt to marginalize the practice in Banten. Interestingly, the governor comes from a family of influential *jawara* in Banten, which probably influenced her view of MUI’s fatwa.

Meanwhile, rallies were held calling on MUI to annul its fatwa. One was organized by university student associations including Banten’s FAM (Student Action Front) and IPNU (The Nahdlatul Ulama Students Union) (Yusuf, 2009; Zin, 2009). Meanwhile, the head of the Gagak Lumayung *pencak silat* (martial arts) school in Bandung stated the fatwa was irrational because there are no rules on *debus* in the Qur’ān (Inilah, 2009).

Debus groups in Banten also responded to the news. Jumintra, a *debus* teacher at the Macan Liar school who claims his group practice ‘white’ *debus*, argued the fatwa

created unrest among Banten *debus* groups because the public would come to view *debus* as a deviant practice, if the fatwa were to be believed. He also stated that most performances were derived from the Qur'ān although he admitted no *debus* group uses incantations from the Qur'ān alone. Arguing that it was impossible to categorize *debus* in the way that MUI Banten had, he suggested the organization should issue a fatwa on a popular magicians' competition on commercial television station RCTI, rather than banning *debus* performances (Interview with Jumintra).

Responding to increasing tensions in Banten, MUI Banten used all its formal meetings to explain the fatwa's content. The first meeting was organized for 18 August 2009 in the chamber of Banten's religious affairs office, attended by more than 170 Bantenese provincial leaders such as the governor, military commander (Danrem), provincial police chief (Kapolda), the head of Banten province's tourist office and Bantenese ulama. Interestingly, after MUI Banten delegates explained that *debus* can be divided into three groups, as established at MUI's Region I Rakorda meeting, no objections were raised (interview with Aminuddin Ibrahim). Another meeting to explain the fatwa was organized by the NU-affiliated Ansor Youth Movement and Banten province's tourism and culture office who invited *debus* performers (interview with Aminuddin Ibrahim). In short, the press conference following MUI's 7th Rakorda increased tensions in Banten and created instability among Banten's *debus* practitioners.

Another press conference as the exit strategy

On 26 August 2009, after several discussions on how to refute reports that MUI had issued a fatwa banning *debus*, MUI Banten issued a fatwa-like press release to put an end to the controversy in Banten. The associated press conference was attended by MUI Banten officials such as Kyai Tb. Rafe'i Ali, Kyai A. Wahid Sahari, Kyai A.S. Maftuh Abubakar, and general secretary Dr. Sybli Syarjaya. The press release consisted of eleven parts: (1) A description of the popularity of *debus* in Banten; (2) the origin of the word *debus*; (3) the emergence of *debus*; (4) a description of the *debus* team's research; (5) a list of MUI officials involved in *debus* research team; (6) the *debus* research team's report; (7) a report on MUI Banten's discussion at the fatwa commission in 2004; (8) an explanation of MUI Region I's Rakorda in 2009, at which the *debus* fatwa was proposed; (9) clarification of the fatwa commission's conclusions following its meeting about *debus* (mentioned above); (10) a statement declaring an official report on MUI Region I's Rakorda had not been published because it needed further revision and (11) a statement from MUI Banten

criticizing those who responded to the conclusions of MUI's Rakorda without first seeking confirmation from MUI Banten.

Having scrutinized the press release, I would argue that it can be regarded as a fatwa-like document for at least two reasons. First, point number nine of the press release clearly states that the third type of *debus* contains magic and polytheism. The MUI Region I Rakorda 'recommended' to all Muslims everywhere especially those who live in Banten to avoid this third kind of *debus* because it practices polytheism and magic, which is against Islamic teachings and will lead to the destruction of its practitioners and those watching 'in this world and in the Hereafter.' This recommendation is similar to central MUI's *tawṣīyyah* (recommendation) format which is less powerful than an official fatwa (Van Bruinessen, 2013). Moreover, Ichwan in Van Bruinessen (2013) stated that the format of *tawṣīyyah* is less formal and official and more like a press release.

MUI Banten also cites verses from the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* forbidding Muslims to practice magic and polytheism although it did not offer any interpretation of the verses, nor did it show the chain of the transmitters nor the source of the *ḥadīth*. The press release can theoretically be seen as an informal fatwa confirming MUI's position on this issue: it intended to announce to the public that the third type of *debus* is prohibited according to Islamic law. Due to political pressure from students, *debus* groups and to some extent, the local government, MUI Banten decided to postpone issuing the official *debus* fatwa.

Responses to the *debus* fatwa from Muslim organizations and ulama

As already pointed out, MUI Banten's *debus* fatwa created tension in Bantenese society. The main group that rejected the fatwa were the *debus* groups in Banten, because they were the main object of the fatwa. In this section, selected responses to the *debus* fatwa will be cited. I will start by quoting the responses from a Muhammadiyah official in Banten province.

'...I agree because the process of *debus* is not *dīniyyah* (based on Islam), the Prophet Muhammad did not practice it and many components of *debus* are heretical. Therefore I agree with the fatwa. The prophet Muhammad only taught his community to participate in sports such as swimming, horse-riding and archery and not invulnerability performances. *Debus* is not compatible with Islam (*laysa min al Islām*)...' (interview with Hasan Alaydrus)

A Banten HTI official stated that:

‘...as long as *debus* involve physical ability, inner strength, invulnerability derived from physical training, this is permitted. However if *debus* harnesses supernatural powers which are irrational, even if it uses phrases from the Qur’ān, *dhikr* and *salawāt*, it can be categorized as *sihr* because the Prophet Muḥammad did not provide any example of how to obtain extraordinary powers...*debus* is not derived from Islam because many *debus* performers nowadays are ‘far’ from Allah...’(interview with Yasin Muntahar)

Kyai Munfasir, leader of the Padarincang *pesantren* who performs ‘total’ *ṭarīqah* teaching by keeping his distance from politics, issued a fascinating statement. He said he did not know much about *debus* or the use of invulnerability skills in *debus*. However, he opposes the practice of using rituals pertaining to magic, such as asking a *jinn*’s assistance to obtain power (Interview with Mufti Ali).

However, Kyai Tb. Yusuf, leader of the al Mubarak *pesantren* in Serang did not agree with MUI Banten’s *debus* fatwa because he believes *debus* are the Banten ulama’s legacy to Banten Muslims from the sultanate era. He also suggests MUI Banten should involve all the Banten ulama in the province if they want to issue a fatwa forbidding *debus*.

Conclusion

The Jakarta-based central MUI’s influence has had a very clear influence on MUI Banten’s approach in many ways. Many researchers suggest MUI has changed its attitude towards the government by becoming more independent especially regarding religious deviance among Indonesian Muslims. MUI’s stance in this respect is clear from a statement issued by MUI chairman Kyai Sahal Mahfudz, who declared MUI had a clear position regarding religious deviance (Gillespie, 2007). This stance, along with others elements of central MUI, such as its vision statement and the names of its commissions and autonomous bodies, have been adopted by MUI Banten. At the press conference on the *debus* fatwa for example, MUI Banten’s general secretary stated that MUI’s main role is to protect the Muslim community’s ‘*aqīdah*’ from bad influences. This statement is identical to that of central MUI’s chairman’s statement.

This approach became more interesting when MUI attempted to turn its attention to the local traditions, such as that in Banten. Although MUI found that there were some un-Islamic practices in the third type of *debus* group, practitioners find it impossible to restrict themselves to *debus* that practices the *ṭarīqah*'s teachings alone. This is also true of *debus* practitioners who claim to be of the 'white' persuasion, basing their practices on the Qur'ān. In other words, they suggest there are no purely Islamic *debus* groups in Banten. Furthermore, there are so many Islamic teachings in *debus*, as described in Rohman (2013), that it is impossible to draw a distinction between *debus*, *ṭarīqah* and Islam. For lay Muslims in Banten of course, the fatwa is unacceptable because they see *debus* as an Islamic and a Bantenese tradition. Their question is perhaps, how can the ulama who are experts on Islam, forbid Islamic practices?

Of course, there is more to MUI Banten's investigation of *debus*. In my opinion, the *debus* research followed by attempts to issue a fatwa in 2004 and 2009 are also connected to the ongoing debates around the implementation of shari'ah (Islamic Law) in Banten. After the formation of Banten province, local folklore emerged to suggest the Banten sultanate became prosperous and successful because it implemented shari'ah through the sultanate's constitution.

During the provincial parliamentary session in Banten in 2002, Muslim organizations including MUI Banten, under the direction of P3SIB (*Panitia Persiapan Penerapan Syariat Islam Banten*, the Committee for the Preparation of Shari'ah Implementation in Banten), failed in their attempt to propose the implementation of shari'ah in Banten province as the motion failed to gain support from enough members in the Banten Provincial People's Representative Council (DPRD). MUI Banten and other Muslim organizations in Banten keep trying to increase support and publicize the importance of shari'ah Islam in Banten, for example, by organizing 'Bantenese Muslims congresses' (Kongres Umat Islam Banten, KUIB) in 2005 and 2006. The agenda for these meetings included a debate on the implementation of shari'ah in Banten. This situation perhaps has led to MUI Banten taking a firmer stance towards rituals considered to be un-Islamic.

It is also interesting to note that support for the *debus* fatwa came not only from modernist organizations in Banten such as Muhammadiyah and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, but also from Kyai Munfassis, one of the most influential Muslim scholars in Banten for his *ṭarīqah* teachings. Modernist organizations in Indonesia have tried to oppose local traditions categorized as *shirk* and *bid'ah*. The issuing of MUI

Banten's *debus* fatwa aligns with their view concerning local traditions in Banten. Therefore Muhammadiyah and HTI welcomed MUI Banten's fatwa. However, Kyai Munfassis's opinion that *debus* includes elements of magic is similar to that put forward by the modernist organizations. His stance on *debus* can be explained for two reasons. First, his *ṭarīqah* probably does not practice invulnerability skills. J. Vredenburg (1973) indicated that not all *ṭarīqahs* in Banten practice *debus*, nor are they necessarily 'pro' *debus* given that members of the Qādiriyyah *ṭarīqah* usually refer to members of the Naqshabandiyyah *ṭarīqah* 'people who walk around with bowed heads and separate themselves from the world' and 'gentle people' (orang halus). Although we cannot be sure about Kyai Munfassis's *ṭarīqah*, we can assume that he does not associate himself with *ṭarīqahs* that teach invulnerability skills. The second reason is that Kyai Munfassis claims that *debus* performances nowadays use *sihr*, contrary to his teaching that forbid his followers from performing magic (interview with Mufti Ali, the disciple of kyai Munfassis).

Therefore, I conclude that the controversy surrounding the *debus* fatwa has challenged religious authority in Banten and showed how religious authority in the province is fragmented and contested.

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