



GENDER AND POWER IN INDONESIAN ISLAM

Leaders, feminists, Sufis and *pesantren* selves

Edited by Bianca J. Smith and Mark Woodward

Gender and Power in Indonesian Islam

The traditional Islamic boarding schools known as *pesantren* are crucial centres of Muslim learning and culture within Indonesia, but their cultural significance has been underexplored. This book is the first to explore understandings of gender and Islam in *pesantren* and the Sufi orders attached to them in Indonesia. By considering these distinct but related Muslim gender cultures in Java, Lombok and Aceh, the book examines the broader function of *pesantren* as a force for both redefining existing modes of Muslim subjectivity and cultivating new ones. It demonstrates how, as Muslim women rise to positions of power and authority in this patriarchal domain, they challenge and negotiate 'normative' Muslim patriarchy while establishing their own Muslim 'authenticity'. The book goes on to question the comparison of Indonesian Islam with the Arab Middle East, challenging the adoption of expatriate and diasporic Middle Eastern Muslim feminist discourses and secular western feminist analyses in Indonesian contexts. Based on extensive fieldwork, the book explores configurations of female leadership, power, feminisms and sexuality to reveal multiple Muslim selves in *pesantren* and Sufi orders, not only as centres of learning, but also as social spaces in which the interplay of gender, politics, status, power and piety shape the course of life.

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**Edited by
Bianca J. Smith and Mark Woodward**

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Series editor's foreword

The contributions of women to the social, political and economic transformations occurring in the Asian region are legion. Women have served as leaders of nations, communities, workplaces, activist groups and families. Asian women have joined with others to participate in fomenting change at micro and macro levels. They have been both agents and targets of national and international interventions in social policy. In the performance of these myriad roles women have forged new and modern gendered identities that are recognizably global and local. Their experiences are rich, diverse and instructive. The books in this series testify to the central role women play in creating the new Asia and re-creating Asian womanhood. Moreover, these books reveal the resilience and inventiveness of women around the Asian region in the face of entrenched and evolving patriarchal social norms.

Scholars publishing in this series demonstrate a commitment to promoting the productive conversation between Gender Studies and Asian Studies. The need to understand the diversity of experiences of femininity and womanhood around the world increases inexorably as globalization proceeds apace. Lessons from the experiences of Asian women present us with fresh opportunities for building new possibilities for women's progress the world over.

The Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) sponsors this publication series as part of its ongoing commitment to promoting knowledge about women in Asia. In particular, the ASAA Women's Forum provides the intellectual vigour and enthusiasm that maintains the Women in Asia Series (WIAS). The aim of the series, since its inception in 1990, is to promote knowledge about women in Asia to both academic and general audiences. To this end, WIAS books draw on a wide range of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, political science, cultural studies, media studies, literature, and history. The series prides itself on being an outlet for cutting-edge research conducted by recent PhD graduates and postdoctoral fellows from throughout the region.

The Series could not function without the generous professional advice provided by many anonymous readers. Moreover, the wise counsel provided by Peter Sowden at Routledge is invaluable. WIAS, its authors and the ASAA are very grateful to these people for their expert work.

Lenore Lyons, Series Editor
(*University of Sydney*)

Acknowledgements

This book is the product of ethnographic fieldwork that we, and the authors in this volume, have conducted individually and together from 2005 to 2012. The idea for an edited volume grew out of Smith's research on female leadership in *pesantren*, mystical groups and Sufi orders in Java and Lombok, which, combined with Woodward's expertise on Islam in Java, has materialized in the present volume. The visibility of Indonesian Muslim women and men writing about *pesantren* and gender issues in Bahasa Indonesia also pushed us to start working on this first ever volume in English that explores gender and women in the *pesantren* world.

It was not easy soliciting chapters on a topic that very little has been written about in English, partly because of the difficulty foreign researchers have accessing *pesantren* worlds. We wanted to include as many Indonesian scholars as possible, and many who we wanted to include unfortunately could not commit because English is a barrier for them. Thank you to our contributors for embarking on this project with us, most of whom are feminist products of the *pesantren* worlds we present in this volume and *pesantren* selves in the very best sense of the term.

It would not have been possible to write this book without having access to extensive networks of Indonesian scholars who work in the field of *pesantren* studies. We would like to kindly thank our colleagues at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University Yogyakarta and Gadjah Mada University for their support over the years. Very special warm thanks must also be extended to our series editor Lenore Lyons, to Linell Cady and Carolyn Forbes from Arizona State University, USA and to Sue Blackburn and Stuart Robson from Monash University, Australia.

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Introduction

De-colonizing Islam and Muslim feminism

Bianca J. Smith and Mark Woodward

In love, nothing exists between breast and Breast.

Speech is born out of longing,

True description from the real taste.

The one who tastes, knows;

the one who explains, lies.

How can you describe the true form of Something

In whose presence you are blotted out?

And in whose being you still exist?

And who lives as a sign for your journey?

Rabi'ah Al-Adawiyah (717–801 CE)

(Upton 1988)

This book is about Islam, female leadership, Sufism, power, sexuality and feminist praxis in the world's most populous Muslim society – Indonesia. Analysis of the roles women play in one institution, the *pesantren* (a traditional Islamic boarding school for the study of the Qur'an, Hadith and other classical Islamic texts) and the ways in which it shapes their lives and identities is the heart of this volume. Each chapter explores some combination of these topics in one or more *pesantren* and/or the ways in which what we call '*pesantren* selves' shape other institutions and discourse systems.

By calling attention to the importance of gender in *pesantren* culture, we also seek to advance a larger effort to de-colonize the anthropology of Islam and Muslim feminism in Indonesia. The chapters in this collection emerge out of post-colonial debates about feminism and Islam, particularly those articulated by the feminist anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (2001). In response to Edward Said's (1978) seminal post-colonial work, *Orientalism*, Abu-Lughod (2001: 101) stated that it 'was not meant to be a work of feminist scholarship or theory. Yet it has engendered feminist scholarship and debate in Middle East studies as well as far beyond.' Regrettably, the dichotomization of the Arab East and the West and the flourishing of Arab feminism at the intersection of the two has established the hegemony of Middle Eastern (and South Asian) voices in feminist studies of Islam. Arab

feminisms, like Arab Islam, have been judged to be the authentic ones. Essentializing Islamic feminism along Arab, South Asian (diasporic) or Western lines threatens to form yet another hegemonic discourse. This raises concerns about women's marginalization of other women, in particular that of Muslim women by Muslim women.

The authors in this collection attempt to confront this hegemony by deconstructing categories that deny the authenticity of Indonesian Islams and those that enable the confusion of Arab, South Asian and Muslim feminisms. We consider the applicability of Western and Middle Eastern feminist theory to Indonesian cases. *Pesantren* and *pesantren*-based Muslim feminisms cannot be understood in isolation from the social, political and religious systems of which they are components. Similarly, the lives of the people who teach, learn and live in them are shaped, but not determined, by feminism and the *pesantren* experience.

This volume illustrates a diversity of feminist voices in Indonesia that remain largely unknown for three reasons: The first is that Indonesian scholars are less inclined to write in English than their Arab and South Asian counterparts (Blackburn *et al.* 2008). This is a legacy of Dutch colonialism. English has not been naturalized to nearly the extent that it has in former British colonies. The second is that many Indonesian feminists are more concerned with praxis than academic discourse. The third is that the Arab-centrism of Islamic studies and Western perspectives on Islam more generally, make it possible for Western feminists to ignore non-Arab Muslim discourse with impunity. Further, Western and European female anthropologists' misreadings of non-scripturalist Islam as nominal in Indonesia prior to the 1990s contributed to the under-representation of Muslim women in scholarship on Islam and Indonesia, following typologies and paradigms established decades earlier by male scholars in the colonial and post-colonial literature (Smith 2008).

The *pesantren* and feminist thought and practice emerging from it are not well known except to a small community of specialists. One of our purposes in this volume is to work towards rectifying this situation. Our point is not simply that there are Indonesian examples or cases worthy of consideration, but also that the pervasive Arab-centrism of the academic study of Islam has led to the marginalization of Indonesian (and Southeast Asian) Islams and Muslim feminisms. This marginalization is the product of a colonial Orientalist discourse that views the Islams of the region as inauthentic because they differ from those of the Arab heartland. Here, the tropes of Western colonialism merge with the discourse of a new Wahhabi, and especially Saudi Arabian, cultural and religious colonialism that also views Indonesian and Southeast Asian Islams as inauthentic and confounds Islam with Arab culture. This is a double-edged sword because it allows scholars primarily concerned with Islam to ignore Southeast Asia, and Southeast Asianists to ignore Islam. This means that in the burgeoning literature on women and/in Islam, Indonesian and other Southeast Asian Muslim women are marginalized.

There is a solid line of Western-derived discourse on Indonesian Islam that began during the Dutch colonial period, continuing into the present,

much of which focuses on the analysis of Javanese and Malay language religious texts (Drewes 1969; Florida 2000; Ricklefs 2006; Soebardi 1975). Yet, at least until recently, Islam has been less than fully visible in scholarship concerning Indonesian cultures and social life. Here, dominant paradigms rooted in Arab-centric perspectives on Islam minimize its impact on Indonesia. This view, which owes much to an alternative variant of Anglo-Dutch Orientalism and is forcefully articulated in the writing of Clifford Geertz (1960), led generations of ethnographers to neglect the study of Islam in the constitution of Indonesian personal and collective identities (Woodward 2010).

Arab-centric perspectives on Islam in Indonesia further explain the lack of feminist inquiry into *pesantren* and Sufi orders affiliated with them. Until recently there has been relatively little scholarship on women and gender in *pesantren* and almost none on Sufism. This is also in part because *pesantren* and Sufi orders are patriarchal institutions that offer little space for women in public contexts. Zamakhsyari Dhofier's (1999) study of the *pesantren* tradition in East Java provides a framework for understanding *pesantren* culture and especially the central role of the *kyai* (male Muslim leader) in its social structure. *Kyai* are charismatic Muslim leaders and scholars whose status within the *pesantren* is much like that of the king in a traditional Javanese state. The work by Saipul Hamdi, Asna Husin, Bianca J. Smith and Eka Srimulyani (in this volume) complements Dhofier's by providing insight into the gendered aspects of *pesantren* and shows the important role women play in the reproduction of *pesantren* culture. Their work parallels that of other feminist scholars whose research on Middle Eastern and South Asian cultures describes Muslim women in leadership positions and the strategies they employ for resisting and negotiating with male dominance. Our focus on *pesantren* in this volume moves beyond the existing literature. Chapters by Mustaghfiroh Rahayu and Inayah Rohmaniyah include accounts of new forms of organization and study of Islam, including *pesantren* that are residential facilities for university students and others rooted in Salafi or Wahhabi teachings as well as traditional boarding schools. Chapters about Aceh and Lombok reveal the role of non-Javanese cultures in forming *pesantren* selves and lifestyles.

By engaging with Arab and South Asian Muslim feminisms, we bring Indonesia into a transcultural debate about Islamic feminism. Indonesian Muslim women have been marginalized in these debates by tendencies to essentialize Muslim women in terms of Arab or South Asian women's experience. Indonesian discourse on women and Islam differs from the Arab and South Asian varieties, due to cultural and political differences. In Southeast Asia human rights abuses and atrocities such as honour killings, dowry murder, female genital mutilation and public stoning are not practised.

Feminist anthropologists have shown that bilateral kinship systems common in Southeast Asia afford women levels of social autonomy, economic agency and access to inheritance and land unknown in the Middle East (see

Errington 1990; Firth 1995; Karim 1995). These systems also contribute to the establishment of complementarities that value both male and female. This is not to suggest that Indonesian women are free from abuses that follow patriarchy, but that the stereotyped array of abuses and violent practices associated with Islam in other places are not present in Southeast Asia. This problematizes the assumption that Islam is the source of such abuse. It challenges Arab and South Asian Muslim feminists to further consider the cultural roots of patriarchal practice.

The *pesantren* tradition: history, structure and gender

Pesantren are traditional Javanese Islamic boarding schools. In most respects they are similar to the *madrasah* of the Middle East and South Asia. They are also known as *pondok* or *pondok pesantren* (often abbreviated *ponpes*). There are similar schools in other parts of Indonesia and throughout Muslim Southeast Asia. In Aceh they are called *dayah*. In Minangkabau areas of Sumatra they are known as *surau* and in Malaysia, the southern Philippines and southern Thailand as *pondok* (Liow 2009; Hamid 2010; Woodward and Yayah 2009). In other parts of Indonesia, including in Lombok, Sumbawa, Bali and Kalimantan, they are referred to as *pesantren* and/or *madrasah*. Throughout the region they are centres of Muslim education and culture. In Indonesia, the term *santri* is used to refer to observant Muslims in a general sense, but its core meaning is Muslim student. *Pesantren* means ‘a place for *santri*.’ *Pondok* is a Javanese/Indonesia/Malay/Arabic word meaning ‘hostel’. In Malay and some dialects of Indonesian, the word *pondok* can also mean ‘hut’.

There are at least 220 million Indonesian Muslims, more than three times the total number of Egyptians, and more than ten times the number of Saudi Arabians. There are at least 16,000 *pesantren*. Just as Indonesia is the world’s most populous Muslim country, the *pesantren* system is the largest Muslim educational network. When one considers the fact that there are similar schools in neighbouring countries with closely related religious and cultural traditions, the figures are even larger. Most *pesantren* are located in rural areas, though there are thousands in urban areas.

Abdurrahman Wahid (1974: 40–47) has described the *pesantren* system as the core of a Javanese subculture. This volume expands on his observation in two ways. It moves the discussion beyond Java, and, to a lesser extent, beyond Indonesia. It also focuses on gender and the construction of gendered *pesantren* selves. This self is both a collective and private one that integrates *pesantren* and non-*pesantren* life as a Muslim design, constructed in the contexts of modernities, political Islam and culture. We can think of a ‘*pesantren* self’ in two ways. One is a collective representation of modes of social action typical of *pesantren*. More complex notions of self-subjectivity and agency emerge as *pesantren* people interact with the larger society. The deployment of the *pesantren* self in social interaction is complex. The border between private senses of self- and public representation is blurred. Interlocutors do not

always recognize *pesantren* selves. An example is that of women who do not cover their hair, but dress modestly. On the other hand, those who have constructed *pesantren* selves are often capable of recognizing *pesantren* others through subtle behavioural clues others miss. *Pesantren* people can also recognize others who are non-*pesantren*-oriented.

Pesantren selves emerge from social interaction as well as from the study of Islamic texts and communal religious practice. Some *pesantren* are culturally conservative concerning gender issues, reproducing traditional patriarchal structures and patriarchal *pesantren* selves. Others cultivate new Muslim subjectivities and are used by Muslims concerned about gender justice and equality to transform culture and society. These lead to the construction of implicitly or explicitly feminist *pesantren* selves. The chapters in this book explore configurations of female leadership, power, *pesantren* feminisms and sexuality to reveal multiple Muslim selves in the context of *pesantren* and Sufi orders, not only as centres of learning, but also as social spaces in which the interplay of gender, politics, status, power and piety shape the course of life.

The majority of *pesantren* are affiliated with Indonesia's largest Islamic organization Nahdlatul Ulama (founded in 1926). Many Sufi orders (*tarekat*) are also attached to *pesantren*. The Nahdlatul Ulama organization has approximately 80 million members and followers. Indonesian (and Southeast Asian) Islam is almost exclusively Sunni and the Syafi'i school of law (*mazhab*) is nearly universal, except among groups such as Muhammadiyah (the second largest Islamic organization, founded in 1912, with approximately 40 million members) that are derived from nineteenth-century Egyptian reform movements based on the proposition that the Qur'an and Hadith are the only authoritative sources for Muslim jurisprudence. Prior to the twentieth century, Sufism was a dominant element in Southeast Asian Islamic thought and ritual practice (Ricklefs 2006; Woodward 1989). The rise of modernist or reformist Islams in the early decades of the twentieth century led to sharp debates concerning both mystical understandings of Islam and local modes of ritual and devotional practice.

The origins and early history of the *pesantren* tradition are obscure. There are few sources on Muslim education in Java and elsewhere in Southeast Asia predating the nineteenth century. Martin Van Bruinessen (1994a) has suggested that the *pesantren* system, as we now know it, developed in the nineteenth century. Prior to that time mosques, royal courts and the homes of religious teachers were the primary loci of Islamic education. The oldest documented *pesantren* were established in the mid-eighteenth century. The first Dutch study of education in Java, conducted in 1819, indicated the presence of organized Muslim schools only in a few centres in Java, especially Madiun and Ponorogo (Van der Chijs 1864).

Pesantren residential patterns and the physical location of Muslim scholarship in Javanese cities may offer insight into the sociological development of the *pesantren* system. In Yogyakarta, Kudus and other old centres of Islamic learning, there are *kyai* who do not have *pesantren* but teach (*ngaji*) in their

homes or in mosques. These houses often contain a prayer room (*musholla*) and a single large classroom that can accommodate as many as fifty *santri*. These establishments are found in the *kauman* (neighbourhoods populated by *ulama* and other *santri* families found in older Indonesian cities) located in the vicinity of the cities' principle mosque. They can also be found in the vicinity of mosques established and controlled by the Sultanate in strategic locations throughout its territory. Some of these, especially in Mlangi near Yogyakarta, have developed into small *pesantren*.

Oral tradition in *pesantren* in East and Central Java maintains that the schools were originally centred around the *kyai*'s house and mosque. *Santri* who came to study under a *kyai*'s tutelage built small *pondok* large enough for one or, at the most, two students. This tradition is preserved in Patani in South Thailand, where there are schools with several hundred modern versions each housing a single student, and in Aceh, where every *santri* is required to build her or his own hut at some schools. Students are required to live in these *pondok* to encourage study and discourage frivolous socializing.

Some *pesantren* have only a handful of students. One of the largest, Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo in Kediri in East Java, has more than 10,000. *Pesantren* students are as young as 4 or 5 years of age. There is no upper age limit and many *pesantren* also cater to university students and adults. In many traditional *pesantren* there are no admission standards, no formal classes and no examinations or grades, at least in religious subjects. Students study particular texts under the tutelage of a *kyai* until they have mastered and, in many instances, memorized them. *Pesantren* education is rooted in the textual traditions of Sunni Islam, and at the same time the oral transmission of textual knowledge and wisdom lies close to the heart of *pesantren* culture. Typically a *kyai* reads from a text and comments on its meaning and on fine points of Arabic grammar. When he decides that a *santri* has mastered a particular text, the *kyai* confers certification (*ijazah*), allowing the student to teach it, and transmit the wisdom associated with it, to the next generation. The core texts are in Arabic, though some were written by scholars from Southeast Asia. There is also a long history of writing commentaries in both Javanese and Malay.

Every *pesantren* is unique. The Islamic texts pupils study and the devotional practices they are required to observe vary considerably, reflecting the learning religious orientation and practices of the *kyai*. Curricula vary greatly but usually include some combination of classical Arabic grammar, Qur'anic studies – including memorization, recitation and exegesis, Islamic law, theology and mysticism. These texts are known collectively as *kitab kuning* ('yellow books'; classical Islamic texts) because of the colour of the paper they are printed on. Some are written by Indonesian and other Southeast Asian scholars; others are reprints of works published in Cairo and Beirut (Van Bruinessen 1994a).

One of the most basic, and most widely studied, of the *kitab kuning* is *Alfiyah ibn Malik fi Annahwi wa Asshorfi*, a poetic work on Arabic grammar

by the Spanish scholar Ibnu Malik (1204–74). It is studied throughout Indonesia and in Malaysia and South Thailand. It is regarded as being the key to higher Islamic learning. In addition to providing examples of complex grammatical principles essential for understanding other *kitab*, it also makes theological points about the nature of faith (*iman*) and intercession (*wasilah*). Memorization also has tangible rewards. It is widely believed that *santri* who accomplish this task will find wealth, a beautiful wife, or both. Legal texts (*fiqh*) are the most widely studied. They provide guidance for living a proper Muslim life in both the ritual and social senses of the term. Ritual performance is among the major topics considered in *fiqh* texts. Guidance on how to perform purification rites, obligatory and supererogatory prayers and fasts are among the frequently discussed topics. Social relations are another important concern. Marriage and the regulation of sexuality are important topics. Works on manners and comportment (*adab*) are also important. They are among the most important sources for the constitution of hierarchy and patriarchy in the *pesantren* world. Many of these texts emphasize the teacher–student relationship. One of these texts, *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim*, is widely known not only in Southeast Asia, but throughout the Sunni Muslim world and is available in English translation (Von Grunebaum 1947). Others that figure significantly in the education of female *santri* concern domestic relationships and are intended to prepare adolescent girls for future roles as pious and deferential wives and mothers able to transmit core *pesantren* values to young children. There are similar texts on domestic relations addressed to male *santri*.

In general, studying *kitab kuning* under the guidance of a *kyai* is believed to be a source of understanding and blessing as well as knowledge. This is one of the factors distinguishing *pesantren* education from that attainable at secular and even Islamic schools and universities. There are three basic teaching methods, two of which emphasize the oral transmission of knowledge and a third which provides experience in reaching collective decisions in accordance with the principle of consensus (*ijma*) that is one of the four recognized sources of Islamic law, the others being the Qur'an, Prophetic tradition (*sunnah*) and analogy. The *bandongan* or *weton* method is the most basic form of instruction. When teaching in this mode, the *kyai* reads from the text one word at a time, commenting on grammatical and semantic points that are essential for *santri* to understand. *Santri* make copious notes on their own copies of the text. It is in this way that oral tradition is preserved in written form. For the most advanced *santri* who have mastered Arabic grammar, that is the language of instruction.

In most cases, the *kyai* reads the text in Arabic and makes comments in the appropriate local language. Many Javanese *kyai* insist that Indonesian and Malay do not have sufficiently rich vocabularies to explain the complexities of legal and theological works. Not surprisingly, Malay scholars strongly disagree. Some *kyai* have begun to use Indonesian because *santri* come from increasingly diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds and some of today's

Javanese *santri* cannot speak Javanese fluently. Most *kyai* continue to insist that instruction begin with the Arabic original and that published Indonesian translations of *kitab kuning* are not reliable. Patani in South Thailand provides an important exception to this general rule. There, *Kitab Jawi*, Malay language texts written in Arabic script, are held in great esteem. One *pondok* teacher Woodward interviewed in 2008 adamantly insisted that *Kitab Jawi* are as authoritative as Arabic language legal and theological texts.

Sorogan is an instructional method through which *santri* learn to read or recite texts correctly. It emphasizes pronunciation. Depending on the context in which this method is used, it can be more advanced or more basic than *bandongan*. In advanced classes in *pesantren*, *santri* who have acquired basic knowledge of a text read it to the *kyai*, who corrects mistakes. *Mushawarah*, or discussion, is the method through which *santri* learn to arrive at consensus concerning solutions to *fiqh* questions. The *kyai* poses a question and either guides *santri* through the processes of arriving at a consensus or leaves them to their own devices and evaluates their efforts.

Every *pesantren* has its own set of collective devotions (*mujahadah*), in addition to those required by *shari'ah*. These generally include recitation of particular portions of Qur'an (especially *Surah Yasin*), supererogatory prayers and fasting, recitation of litanies or of selected Qur'anic/Arabic texts and Arabic devotional poetry. Visiting the graves of the *kyai*'s ancestors is often held to be obligatory. Some, but not all, *pesantren* are affiliated with Sufi mystical orders.

Prior to Indonesian independence from the Netherlands in 1945, they were the only educational institutions available to the majority of the population. Until the late 1970s and early 1980s, many *pesantren* taught only religious subjects. But as secular education has become increasingly important, most have introduced non-Islamic or general subjects. The modernization of the *pesantren* education system had already begun in the 1930s. *Pesantren* Tebuireng was founded in 1899 by Kyai Hasyim Asy'ari (1871–1947). Asy'ari was one of the founders of Nahdlatul Ulama and is widely regarded as having been one of the most important Indonesian Muslim scholars of the twentieth century, and as a Sufi saint. He introduced instruction in secular subjects in 1929. Many other *pesantren* soon followed his lead, though a lack of qualified teachers hampered the reform process.

Educational modernization accelerated after Indonesian independence and especially after 1975, when the Indonesian government mandated six years of general education for all students and offered subsidies to *pesantren* that chose to offer a secular curriculum (Lukens-Bull 2005). There were, however, provisions for *pesantren* to offer an entirely religious curriculum. Some chose this option, but a combination of secular and Islamic education became the norm. Many *pesantren* now include *madrasah*, which often overshadow programmes offering traditional religious education. Many offer middle and high school programmes that are the equivalent of those available in government schools. Some offer vocational training as well. The 1975 reforms also enabled