

## Beyond The Kitchen: The Socio-Religious Authority of Women in Javanese *Slametan*

Mohammad Muafi Himam<sup>1\*</sup> & Dina<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Al-Anwar Sarang Rembang, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Institute of Social Sciences, Ankara University, Turkey

Email: <sup>1</sup>[muafihimam@staialanwar.ac.id](mailto:muafihimam@staialanwar.ac.id); <sup>2</sup>[dinadina@ankara.edu.tr](mailto:dinadina@ankara.edu.tr)

### Abstract

This study challenges dominant anthropological accounts that depict *slametan* as a male-centered ritual, particularly those of Geertz, Sullivan, and Woodward. While previous studies emphasize male leadership in *slametan*, this research reveals the crucial role women play in structuring the ritual, particularly in food selection, scheduling, financial management, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. Through an ethnographic study in Pungpungan, Bojonegoro, this research argues that authority, rather than gender, determines leadership in *slametan*. Women in Pungpungan frequently occupy key roles in ritual decision-making, exemplifying how religious authority can emerge from cultural and social legitimacy rather than formal religious positions. By centering women's agency, this study broadens discussions on Islamic authority and offers a revised understanding of gender roles in Javanese religious traditions, affirming that *slametan* is not inherently male-dominated but shaped by those who hold ritual authority.

*Penelitian ini menantang narasi antropologis dominan yang menggambarkan slametan sebagai ritual yang berpusat pada laki-laki, khususnya dalam kajian Geertz, Sullivan, dan Woodward. Sementara studi sebelumnya menekankan kepemimpinan laki-laki dalam slametan, penelitian ini mengungkap peran krusial perempuan dalam menyusun ritual tersebut, terutama dalam pemilihan makanan, penjadwalan, manajemen keuangan, dan transmisi pengetahuan antargenerasi. Melalui studi etnografi di Pungpungan, Bojonegoro, penelitian ini berargumen bahwa otoritas, bukan gender, menjadi faktor penentu kepemimpinan dalam slametan. Perempuan di Pungpungan kerap menempati peran utama dalam pengambilan keputusan ritual, menunjukkan bahwa otoritas keagamaan dapat muncul dari legitimasi budaya dan sosial, bukan sekadar posisi keagamaan formal. Dengan menempatkan agensi perempuan sebagai pusat kajian, penelitian ini memperluas diskusi mengenai otoritas Islam serta menawarkan revisi pemahaman mengenai peran gender dalam tradisi keagamaan Jawa, menegaskan bahwa slametan tidak secara inheren didominasi oleh*

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\*Corresponding Auhtor: Mohammad Muafi Himam



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*laki-laki, melainkan dibentuk oleh individu yang memiliki otoritas ritual.*

**Keywords:** Women's Authority; *Slametan* Tradition; Javanese Culture; Gender and Ritual

## Introduction

*Slametan* is a deeply rooted tradition within Javanese society, performed for various purposes, including celebrating significant life events such as birth, marriage, and death, as well as seeking divine protection and blessings<sup>1</sup>. Generally, a *slametan* can be understood as a communal thanksgiving ritual where family members invite relatives and neighbors to partake in prayer and a shared meal. The term "tradition" itself originates from the Latin "*traditio*", which refers to a pattern of customs embedded within a culture or system of social norms<sup>2</sup>. Talal Asad conceptualizes tradition as a discourse that instructs the correct and established way of conducting certain practices, thereby shaping the perception of tradition as both historical and authoritative<sup>3</sup>.

In this context, tradition is often regarded as the most legitimate and virtuous form of cultural inheritance. *Slametan* stands out as a distinctive ritual in Javanese culture, which Clifford Geertz identifies as the central pillar of Javanese religious systems<sup>4</sup>. This assertion remains highly relevant, considering that *slametan* continues to serve a critical role in shaping social cohesion and spiritual practice among the Javanese. A fundamental component of the *slametan* ritual is food, which carries significant symbolic meaning.<sup>5</sup> The dishes served in *slametan* are carefully selected according to the nature of the event. For example, in a birth-related *slametan*, foods symbolizing purity and hope, such as tumpeng rice and red-and-white porridge, are prepared. Marriage-related *slametan* feature foods symbolizing longevity and affection, such as Sumsum porridge, Lemper, Jadah, and Wajik. Meanwhile, funeral-related *slametan* often

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (University of Chicago Press, 1976), 31.

<sup>2</sup> Ainur Rofiq, "Tradisi *Slametan* Jawa Dalam Perspektif Pendidikan Islam," *Attaqwa: Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan Islam* 15, no. 2 (September 1, 2019): 93–107, <https://doi.org/10.54069/attaqwa.v15i2.13>.

<sup>3</sup> Ismail Fajrie Alatas, "Dreaming Saints: Exploratory Authority and Islamic Praxes of History in Central Java," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 26, no. 1 (March 26, 2020): 67–85, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.13177>.

<sup>4</sup> Geertz, *The Religion of Java*.

<sup>5</sup> Mark R. Woodward, "The '*Slametan*': Textual Knowledge and Ritual Performance in Central Javanese Islam," *History of Religions* 28, no. 1 (August 1988): 54–89, <https://doi.org/10.1086/463136>.

include Tumpeng rice, Ingkung chicken, and Apem cakes, symbolizing separation and remembrance.

Geertz' seminal work describes the *slametan* as a male-dominated ritual, reinforcing the notion that men occupy the central role in religious ceremonies. He notes that "the ceremony itself is all male. The women remain mburi (behind—i.e., in the kitchen), but they inevitably peek through the bamboo walls at the men, who, squatted on floor mats ngarepan (in front—i.e., in the main living room), perform the actual ritual, eating the food the women have prepared".<sup>6</sup> This description has profoundly shaped scholarly interpretations of *slametan*, often framing it as a rigidly gendered practice in which men exercise religious authority while women occupy a peripheral role in ritual proceedings. Similarly, Woodward highlights that *slametan* rituals are conducted primarily by men, who lead the prayers, recite Fatiha, and act as the primary hosts for the invited male guests. This description has profoundly shaped scholarly interpretations of *slametan*, often framing it as a rigidly gendered practice in which men exercise religious authority while women occupy a peripheral role in ritual proceedings.

Moreover, traditional interpretations of the Qur'an have historically contributed to systemic gender inequality by restricting women's roles in both religious and public spheres. These interpretations, often shaped by patriarchal cultural contexts rather than the core egalitarian principles of Islam, have reinforced the notion that leadership, authority, and religious decision-making are the exclusive domain of men. Some interpretations have positioned women as secondary to men, denying them the right to defend themselves, marginalizing them within the domestic sphere, and normalizing their subjugation under male authority, including the acceptance of polygamy.<sup>7</sup> This perspective extends to ritual practices such as *slametan*, where women have often been relegated to supporting roles, primarily in food preparation, while men have been positioned as the central religious figures leading prayers and overseeing the ceremony. However, ethnographic evidence challenges this rigid division, revealing how women in certain Javanese communities assert significant authority in organizing and shaping *slametan*, thereby redefining their role in religious and communal life.

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<sup>6</sup> Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Khabib Solihin et al., "Feminist Interpretation and the Struggle for Women's Rights in Public Space," *Islamic Review: Jurnal Riset Dan Kajian Keislaman* 12, no. 2 (October 17, 2023): 119–34, <https://doi.org/10.35878/islamicreview.v12i2.914>.

This study seeks to examine the role of women as authoritative figures in determining the selection of food for *slametan* rituals in Pungpungan. While *slametan* encompasses numerous aspects, this research focuses specifically on the processes of food preparation and the factors that contribute to the recognition of women as authoritative figures in this domain. The study aims to address key research questions: How do women influence the organization of *slametan* in Pungpungan? How is their authority in these rituals established and maintained? The objectives of this research are structured hierarchically. The primary goal is to gain a comprehensive understanding of women's roles in *slametan* traditions in Pungpungan, Bojonegoro. This will be achieved through ethnographic observations of *slametan* ceremonies, in-depth interviews with women involved in these rituals, and an analysis of textual sources. A secondary objective is to identify the socio-cultural factors that contribute to the perception of women as holders of ritual authority in *slametan* traditions. By fulfilling these objectives, the research aims to offer valuable insights into the gendered dynamics of religious and cultural practices in Javanese society.

Existing anthropological accounts on religious authority in Indonesia, particularly those by Geertz,<sup>8</sup> Sullivan,<sup>9</sup> and Woodward,<sup>10</sup> have largely portrayed *slametan* as a male-centered ritual culture, reinforcing the notion that men occupy the central role in religious ceremonies. However, rather than viewing *slametan* through the lens of cultural continuity alone, Hilmy emphasizes the significance of political, economic, and institutional structures in shaping religious authority.<sup>11</sup> This study challenges the prevailing interpretations by arguing that *slametan* is not inherently male-dominated. Instead, authority—rather than gender—determines who leads and organizes the ritual. Chao's ethnographic research demonstrates that in Yogyakarta, religious ceremonies are often managed by women, revealing that leadership in ritual settings is not exclusive to men.<sup>12</sup> Building upon this insight, this study examines the role of women in structuring *slametan* and asserts that when women hold authority

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<sup>8</sup> Geertz, *The Religion of Java*.

<sup>9</sup> Norma Sullivan, *Masters and Managers: A Study of Gender Relations in Urban Java* (NSW, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Woodward, "The 'Slametan': Textual Knowledge and Ritual Performance in Central Javanese Islam."

<sup>11</sup> Masdar Hilmy, "TOWARDS A RELIGIOUSLY HYBRID IDENTITY? The Changing Face of Javanese Islam," *JOURNAL OF INDONESIAN ISLAM* 12, no. 1 (June 1, 2018): 45, <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2018.12.1.45-68>.

<sup>12</sup> En-Chieh Chao, *Entangled Pieties: Muslim-Christian Relations and Gendered Sociality in Java, Indonesia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

within the ritual context, they emerge as central figures in its execution and preservation.

This research contributes to the growing body of literature that challenges androcentric perspectives on religious authority in Indonesia. While Burhani<sup>13</sup> explores the transformation of Islamic authority through technological and social shifts, and Kloos<sup>14</sup> examines gendered religious leadership in Aceh, neither directly addresses how women exert authority in communal rituals like *slametan*. Similarly, Ismah<sup>15</sup> and Alatas<sup>16</sup> discuss female religious scholars and historical legitimacy in Islamic contexts, yet do not interrogate the gendered dimensions of *slametan* leadership. By focusing on a case study from Pungpungan, Bojonegoro, this study provides an ethnographic account that foregrounds women's agency in determining and maintaining religious traditions. This approach broadens academic discourse on religious authority by demonstrating that leadership in ritual contexts is not inherently gendered but contingent on who holds social and cultural authority. Through this lens, the research offers a revised understanding of *slametan* as a flexible and inclusive religious practice rather than one monopolized by men.

## Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach with an ethnographic case study design to critically examine women's authority in *slametan* rituals in Pungpungan, Bojonegoro. Drawing on Spradley's ethnographic method, fieldwork was conducted over ten months, allowing the researcher to engage in immersive participation within the community. Through extensive participant observation, the researcher attended various *slametan* events, documenting interactions, decision-making processes, and ritual structuring via field notes and voice recordings. To develop an insider perspective, the researcher actively participated in communal activities, particularly in food preparation and event coordination. Additionally, total of eleven in-depth interviews were conducted

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<sup>13</sup> M. Najib Burhani, "Plural Islam and Contestation of Religious Authority in Indonesia," in *Islam in Southeast Asia: Negotiating Modernity* (Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), 140–63.

<sup>14</sup> David Kloos, "The Salience of Gender: Female Islamic Authority in Aceh, Indonesia," *Asian Studies Review* 40, no. 4 (October 7, 2016): 527–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2016.1225669>.

<sup>15</sup> Nor Ismah, "Destabilising Male Domination: Building Community-Based Authority among Indonesian Female *Ulama*," *Asian Studies Review* 40, no. 4 (October 15, 2016): 491–509, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2016.1228605>.

<sup>16</sup> ISMAIL FAJRIE ALATAS, *What Is Religious Authority?* (Princeton University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1b3qqfw>.

with women recognized for their participation in *slametan*, alongside with male religious figures, including Kyai and mosque administrators, to capture broader perspectives on gendered religious authority. Participants were identified through purposive and snowball sampling, particularly key figures such as Bu Mun and Bu Titik, who are regarded as authoritative figures in the community.

The study employs Ismail Fajrie Alatas' concept of exploratory authority to theorize how women in *slametan* acquire and maintain religious authority. Specifically, this study operationalizes exploratory authority by examining three key dimensions. First, it analyzes the recognition of women's exploratory capability, where their authority is legitimized by their extensive knowledge of ritual practices. Second, it explores the role of ritual Islam in expanding authority, particularly how women's participation in religious food preparation solidifies their influence, paralleling the way religious figures derive authority through contributions to broader religious economies. Finally, it investigates the economic role in crystallizing religious authority, as women's involvement in *slametan* is often linked to their economic activities, reinforcing their legitimacy as ritual decision-makers in both social and financial domains.<sup>17</sup>

## Result and Discussion

### Women in the Javanese Tradition

The role of women in Javanese society has been shaped by a complex interweaving of cultural, religious, and social influences. According to Muniarti, the representation of Javanese women is metaphorically depicted in the Serat Centhini, where the five fingers symbolize the ideal roles of a wife. The thumb (*jempol*) signifies complete obedience to the husband, the index finger (*penudul*) suggests that a wife should never deviate from her husband's guidance, the middle finger (*penunggul*) represents the duty of a wife to elevate her husband's dignity, the ring finger (*jari manis*) underscores the importance of always being gentle and pleasant, and the little finger (*jejenthik*) illustrates the expectation for a wife to be skilful and adept in serving her husband<sup>18</sup>. Javanese society has historically been patriarchal, as reflected in its leadership structures and inheritance customs.

The priyayi class in Javanese society encompasses both men and women who act as cultural gatekeepers and intermediaries between commoners and

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<sup>17</sup> Alatas, "Dreaming Saints: Exploratory Authority and Islamic Praxes of History in Central Java."

<sup>18</sup> A.P. Murniati, "Perempuan Indonesia Dan Pola Ketergantungan," in *Citra Wanita Dan Kekuasaan (Jawa)* (Kanisius, 1992).

higher authorities, including the monarchy and colonial rulers. Geertz described priyayi as both political-administrative elites and custodians of Javanese cultural values. However, despite their prominence, priyayi women remained subordinate to their husbands in terms of spiritual, moral, and social status.<sup>19</sup> Brenner further elaborated that priyayi women were traditionally expected to conform to their husbands' decisions without dissent, reinforcing gender dynamics that prioritized male authority while preserving cultural traditions.<sup>20</sup> Within Javanese families, women play a crucial role in financial management. Hildred Geertz highlighted that while men's opinions were valued, the final responsibility for major financial decisions often rested with women. This dynamic suggests that, despite the overarching patriarchal framework, women wield substantial power in household economic management. This unique distribution of power illustrates how Javanese women navigate and exercise agency within societal constraints.<sup>21</sup>

The introduction of Islam to Java significantly influenced gender roles, merging religious precepts with existing Javanese traditions. Clifford Geertz,<sup>22</sup> Anthony Reid,<sup>23</sup> Mark Woodward,<sup>24</sup> Robert Jay,<sup>25</sup> and Leonard Y. Andaya<sup>26</sup> documented various Islamization processes, including religious syncretism, Sufi teachings, and administrative transformations, which altered social and religious structures in Java. Notably, Dewi emphasized the crucial role of priyayi women in embracing and integrating Islamic values, which fundamentally shaped the process of Islamization in Java. These women played an essential role in transmitting Islamic teachings within the household, reinforcing the fusion of Javanese culture and Islamic principles<sup>27</sup>. The adoption of Islamic customs

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<sup>19</sup> Geertz, *The Religion of Java*.

<sup>20</sup> Suzanne A. Brenner, "ONE. Why Women Rule the Roost: Rethinking Javanese Ideologies of Gender and Self-Control," in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men* (University of California Press, 2019), 19–50, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520915343-004>.

<sup>21</sup> Hildred Geertz, *Keluarga Jawa*, 3rd ed. (Jakarta: PT. Grafiti Pers, 1985).

<sup>22</sup> Geertz, *The Religion of Java*.

<sup>23</sup> Anthony Reid, *Charting the Shape of Early Modern Southeast Asia* (ISEAS, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Mark R. Woodward, *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta* (University of Arizona Press, 1989).

<sup>25</sup> Robert R. Jay, Emil H. Vajda, and Hans-Dieter Evers, "Javanese Villagers: Social Relations in Rural Modjokuto.," *American Sociological Review* 35, no. 4 (August 1970): 784, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2093977>.

<sup>26</sup> Barbara Watson Andaya, "Delineating Female Space: Seclusion and the State in Pre-Modern Island Southeast Asia," in *Other Pasts: Women, Gender and History in Early Modern Southeast Asia*, ed. Barbara Watson Andaya (Honolulu: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, "Javanese Women and Islam: Identity Formation since the Twentieth Century," *Southeast Asian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2012): 109–40, [https://doi.org/10.20495/seas.1.1\\_109](https://doi.org/10.20495/seas.1.1_109).

among Javanese women is exemplified by the increasing use of the jilbab as a marker of religious identity. Dewi noted that the jilbab was initially popularized among aristocratic women, signifying a shift in religious practices and societal norms. However, during the New Order era, the government imposed restrictions on wearing the jilbab in public institutions, reflecting broader political tensions regarding Islamic re-identification. This restriction illustrates the intersection of gender, religion, and state control in shaping women's public and private expressions of faith.<sup>28</sup>

Contrary to these restrictive ideals, Javanese women have historically exerted influence through their roles in domestic and economic spheres. The kitchen, often perceived as a private space, is a significant social arena where women develop *srawung*—the art of social interaction. The saying “wong wedok kuwi kudu srawung” (Javanese women must be adept at socializing) encapsulates the importance of women's ability to navigate social relations<sup>29</sup>. Through these interactions, women reinforce familial and communal bonds, subtly asserting their agency within a patriarchal framework. The paradox of Javanese women's roles is further highlighted by Thomas Stamford Raffles, who documented that Javanese men commonly delegated financial matters to their wives. Raffles observed that women dominated market transactions, handling economic responsibilities while men played a secondary role in household finances. This economic agency contrasts sharply with societal perceptions of women as subordinate, illustrating the nuanced and multifaceted nature of gender relations in Java.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Slametan* Tradition in Pungpungan**

The *slametan* ritual in Pungpungan follows the broader Javanese tradition but with localized adaptations. Geertz categorizes *slametan* into four main types: those related to life-cycle events such as birth, circumcision, marriage, and death; those associated with Islamic holidays like Idul Fitri and Maulid; those tied to communal activities such as village clean-ups; and those performed for personal reasons such as illness, travel, or changing one's name. However, these classifications do not rigidly apply to every Javanese community, as local traditions often shape and modify *slametan* practices. In Pungpungan, *slametan* surrounding life events is particularly significant, especially those related to death. Funerary *slametan* typically follow a structured schedule, occurring on the

<sup>28</sup> Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi.

<sup>29</sup> Risa Permanadeli, *Dadi Wong Wadon: Representasi Sosial Perempuan Jawa Di Era Modern*, 1st ed. (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Ifada, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> T.S. Raffles, *The History of Java*, vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1817).



third, seventh, fortieth, hundredth day, and continuing to the first, second, and thousandth-day commemorations. Some families conduct weekly *slametan* leading up to the fortieth day as an extended tribute to the deceased. Over time, these rituals have come to be known locally as *kenduri*, reflecting both a linguistic and functional evolution in the tradition. The organization of *kenduri* in Pungpungan depends on its scale and purpose. A smaller *kenduri* held every *sepasaran* (36-day cycle) typically involves 30-50 attendees, whereas a larger annual *kenduri*—often called *haul*—may gather over 100 people. Guest lists for *kenduri* are carefully curated, often involving family members from two neighboring RTs, though some families extend invitations beyond these limits. The scale of the event is a reflection of social standing, family bonds, and communal engagement.

While *kenduri* is formally structured with printed invitations, another funerary ritual in Pungpungan, *tahlilan*, operates informally. *Tahlilan* refers specifically to weekly prayer gatherings for the deceased, held on Thursdays and lasting until the fortieth day. Unlike *kenduri*, *tahlilan* invitations are conveyed verbally, typically announced immediately after funeral proceedings. Attendance is considered an obligation for neighbors, reinforcing the communal spirit of the event. Warisino notes that *tahlilan* is increasingly framed within an Islamic context, with its name deriving from *tahlil*, the recitation of *la ilaha illallah*. This underscores how Javanese religious traditions continuously integrate Islamic principles while maintaining local customs<sup>31</sup>. The recitation of Surah Yasin and *tahlil* is central to *tahlilan*, but its format varies depending on the number of participants and whether food is provided. Humaedi observed that *tahlilan* without a communal meal often omits Surah Yasin, focusing solely on the *tahlil* recitation. This demonstrates the adaptive nature of the ritual, where elements can be adjusted based on practical considerations and community expectations<sup>32</sup>.

Thus, *slametan* in Pungpungan embodies both tradition and adaptation. While rooted in long-standing Javanese customs, its practices reflect shifting religious influences and local interpretations. The distinction between *kenduri* and *tahlilan* illustrates how Islamic teachings have been incorporated into pre-existing rituals, ensuring that these ceremonies remain vital components of both religious and social life in the village.

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<sup>31</sup> Andi Warisno, "Tradisi Tahlilan Upaya Menyambung Silaturahmi Authors" 2, no. 02 (2017): 69–97.

<sup>32</sup> Alie Humaedi, *Islam Dan Kristen Di Pedesaan Jawa* (Badan Litbang dan Diklat Departemen Agama RI, 2008).

## Women's Exploratory Authority in the *Slametan* Tradition

The *slametan* tradition in Pungpungan Village provides a compelling case study of how Javanese women wield authority within a ritualistic and communal context. Unlike in many patriarchal structures where religious and cultural ceremonies are predominantly male-led, in Pungpungan, women take an active role not only in the logistical planning but also in decision-making aspects of *slametan*. Women in Pungpungan play a crucial role in structuring the sequence of the ritual, ensuring that every component aligns with traditional expectations and religious requirements. They are responsible for selecting the appropriate date and time for the ceremony, ensuring that it follows both Javanese and Islamic calendrical systems. Srifariyati and Subhi argue that gender roles in Javanese Islam are not static but continuously shaped by theological interpretations and socio-economic transformations.<sup>33</sup> This highlights how Islamic values in Java provide opportunities for women to assert authority in religious and communal spaces, countering the notion that Islam inherently subordinates women.

The broader discourse on women's leadership in Islam underscores this dynamic, as religious authority is often negotiated beyond formal positions of power. Feminist interpretations of Islam have sought to challenge patriarchal readings of religious authority. Solihin et al. examine how reinterpretations of Islamic texts have contributed to a more inclusive understanding of women's roles in religious leadership.<sup>34</sup> While classical Islamic jurisprudence traditionally reserves leadership roles for men, contemporary scholars argue that the Qur'an and Hadith do not explicitly prohibit women from holding positions of religious influence. Amina Wadud<sup>35</sup> critique patriarchal readings of Islamic texts, contending that gender hierarchies in religious leadership are more a result of historical and cultural structures than theological necessity. Ethnographic studies across Muslim societies support this perspective, demonstrating that women actively engage in religious leadership through alternative spaces such as ritual organization, community education, and economic stewardship. In the Javanese context, women's authority in *slametan* and other communal religious practices reflects these alternative forms of

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<sup>33</sup> Srifariyati and Muhamad Rifa'i Subhi, "The Complexity Role of Muslim Women in Java," *AL-MAIYYAH: Media Transformasi Gender Dalam Paradigma Sosial Keagamaan* 16, no. 1 (2023).

<sup>34</sup> Solihin et al., "Feminist Interpretation and the Struggle for Women's Rights in Public Space."

<sup>35</sup> Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

leadership, where legitimacy is derived not from formal religious titles but from social and economic influence.

A key manifestation of this influence is women's control over the selection and preparation of food, a central element of the *slametan* ritual. The dishes served during *slametan* carry deep symbolic meanings, with each ingredient reflecting particular cultural or spiritual values. Women in Pungpungan ensure that these elements are meticulously followed, reinforcing their role as custodians of tradition. This practice extends beyond mere food preparation to the preservation of cultural knowledge passed down through generations. Additionally, women in Pungpungan often oversee the financial aspects of *slametan*, managing budgets and coordinating contributions from family members. Their ability to organize financial resources for these events demonstrates not only managerial expertise but also an implicit acknowledgment of their leadership within household and communal structures. By intertwining economic management with ritual authority, these women consolidate their position as central figures in both religious and social life, demonstrating that leadership in *slametan* is exercised through cultural legitimacy rather than formalized religious hierarchy.

Furthermore, the transmission of *slametan* knowledge from elder women to younger generations ensures that these traditions remain integral to Pungpungan's social fabric. Women take on the role of educators, teaching daughters and granddaughters about the significance of each ritual action and the proper way to execute them. This intergenerational transmission secures the endurance of the tradition, with women serving as its primary stewards. The authority of women in *slametan* is particularly evident in the way they mediate between different social groups within the village. They act as intermediaries between religious leaders, community elders, and younger participants, ensuring that the ritual is inclusive and maintains its spiritual essence. This mediating role positions them as key figures in fostering social cohesion, further solidifying their influence beyond the domestic sphere.

In Pungpungan, the timing of *slametan* is often flexible, adjusted to accommodate family members who may need to travel. For instance, Mbak Roh postponed her husband's 100-day tahlilan from Saturday to Sunday to allow her eldest son, who was away on business, to attend.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, in Pungpungan, determining the appropriate time for *slametan* is often entrusted to elders like Mbah Mi, a 78-year-old woman known for her expertise in selecting

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with Mbak Roh (Siti Zahroh), August 2024. Mbak Roh is one of the women who learned to make snacks from Bu Mun and has now developed her own snack business.

auspicious dates for rituals, particularly weddings. Traditionally, *slametan* had to be held on a predetermined auspicious day, and if it could not be conducted on that date, a smaller event would be held to symbolically fulfill the obligation, with a larger *slametan* planned later. One example is Haji Muslih, who faced a scheduling conflict for his late wife's 1000-day commemoration, which fell in the middle of Ramadan. Due to fasting restrictions, By the advice from Bu Mun, he postponed the main *slametan* but distributed meals to 250 mosque attendees on the originally planned date as a substitute. This adaptation reflects the evolving nature of *slametan*, allowing it to fit within contemporary social and religious constraints while maintaining traditional integrity. The 1000-day commemoration remains a significant milestone in Javanese culture, often requiring families to prepare large-scale meals, typically involving beef as a staple ingredient. Historically, beef consumption in rural Java was rare outside of Idul Adha, making it a symbol of festivity and reverence.<sup>37</sup>

Food plays a central role in *slametan*, carrying both practical and symbolic meaning. Geertz identified staple foods such as meat, chicken, and fish, alongside rice-based dishes like Bubur merah putih and Tumpeng, which symbolize purity, prosperity, and communal harmony. Offerings, known as *sesaji*, serve not merely as decorations but as religious symbols, reflecting deep spiritual meanings.<sup>38</sup> One significant food in *slametan* is Apem, often associated with divine forgiveness due to its phonetic resemblance to *afwun* (Arabic for forgiveness). Bu Mun explains that Apem is included in *tablilan* as a symbolic plea for the deceased's sins to be absolved.<sup>39</sup> Other staple dishes include Ayam ingkung and Sego wuduk, which are commonly shared with neighbours as part of the communal ritual. Sumardi highlights how these dishes symbolize purification, reflecting the belief that the deceased should be spiritually cleansed through prayers and offerings.<sup>40</sup>

The preparation of Ayam ingkung requires a male chicken, as using a female is considered inappropriate. The chicken is positioned to resemble a person in prayer, with its legs folded and head upright, symbolizing humility and devotion. The meticulous preparation process is believed to enhance the ritual's

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Bu Mun, August 2024

<sup>38</sup> Budiono Herusatoto, *Simbolisme Dalam Budaya Jawa*, 6th ed. (Yogyakarta: Hanindita Graha Media, 2005).

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Bu Mun, August 2024

<sup>40</sup> Eka Sumardi, "MAKNA SIMBOL INKGUNG DAN SEGO WUDUK DALAM TRADISI SELAMATAN DI KECAMATAN PUTRI HIJAU KABUPATEN BENGKULU UTARA" (UIN FAS BENGKULU, 2021).

effectiveness.<sup>41</sup> In Pungpungan, both Nasi tumpeng and Nasi uduk remain essential components of *slametan* for some families. According to Murdijati, the term Tumpeng is derived from the Javanese phrase *tumapaking panguripan-tumindak lempeng-tumuju Pengeran*, meaning “living righteously towards God.” It symbolizes a life of devotion, reinforced by its conical shape, which represents spiritual ascent.<sup>42</sup>

Authority in *slametan* extends beyond cooking to the broader role of women in organizing and managing these rituals. Khaled Abou El Fadl's framework on authority distinguishes between general and specialized authority. While religious scholars (Kyai) hold doctrinal influence, figures like Bu Mun acquire social authority through economic success and leadership in ritual organization. This concept of "exploratory authority" recognizes that influence is not limited to inherited or religious roles but can be actively constructed through social networks and economic participation.<sup>43</sup>

Women's roles in *slametan* are further reinforced through *rewang*, a communal labor system where neighbors assist in event preparations. Traditionally, *rewang* is an informal yet essential mechanism for maintaining social cohesion, ensuring reciprocal assistance during major life events. Sullivan notes that *rewang* operates as a female-dominated network, where participation reaffirms social status and community bonds.<sup>44</sup> In Pungpungan, women strategically allocate tasks based on seniority, with older women overseeing main dishes while younger participants handle side dishes and logistics. Despite modernization, *rewang* remains a vital practice, although participation patterns have shifted. Previously, women attended without invitation, but now hosts must explicitly request assistance. Economic shifts have also altered engagement; market vendors join *rewang* later in the day after managing their stalls, whereas housewives participate from morning until the event concludes. Pudjianto describes *rewang* as not merely labour but a cultural expression, allowing women to maintain visibility in their communities.<sup>45</sup>

Through their organizational skills, economic agency, and culinary expertise, women in Pungpungan wield significant influence over *slametan*. Their roles extend beyond domestic responsibilities to shaping religious and cultural

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<sup>41</sup> Sumardi.

<sup>42</sup> Murdijati Gardjito, *Serba-Serbi Tumpeng : Tumpeng Dalam Kehidupan Masyarakat Jawa*, ed. Intarina; Erwin, Lily T. Hardiman, 1st ed. (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, n.d.).

<sup>43</sup> ALATAS, *What Is Religious Authority?*

<sup>44</sup> Sullivan, *Masters and Managers : A Study of Gender Relations in Urban Java*.

<sup>45</sup> Rizky Pudjianto, “Perempuan Jawa: Representasi Dan Modernitas,” *Indonesian Journal of Sociology and Education Policy* 2, no. 2 (2017): 125–32.

practices, ensuring the continuity and adaptation of Javanese traditions. This evolving yet enduring female authority in *slametan* underscores the complex interplay between gender, ritual, and social structure in Pungpungan's cultural landscape.

### **Ritual Food and the Expansion of Women's Authority in *Slametan***

In the tradition of *kenduri* in Pungpungan, the selection of food is largely managed by experienced women who are entrusted with this responsibility by the community. Men often defer decisions regarding food preparation to these women, recognizing their expertise in both culinary skills and the cultural expectations surrounding *slametan*. For instance, Bu Mun is frequently consulted when determining appropriate *kenduri* menus. Figures like Kyai Misbah, a *takmir* leader,<sup>46</sup> routinely seek her advice, demonstrating the deep-seated trust in her culinary and cultural knowledge. A significant instance of Bu Mun's influence occurred when Haji Muslih, preparing for his wife's seribu hari (1000-day commemoration), hesitated to include Apem due to concerns that many guests would not favour it. In response, Bu Mun suggested an alternative snack, Lumpur salju, which maintained the ritualistic essence of Apem while offering a more palatable option.<sup>47</sup> This illustrates how women in Pungpungan do not merely execute traditions but also adapt them to contemporary sensibilities.<sup>48</sup> This also reflects Geertz's observations on the role of women as informal leaders in Javanese society, particularly in social and religious functions where culinary expertise reinforces social cohesion.<sup>49</sup>

Bu Mun demonstrated her authority when Kyai Misbah approached her regarding food for a *pengajian* featuring a visiting *kyai* from Sarang, Rembang. The event combined religious lectures, *istighosah*,<sup>50</sup> and a gathering of *jamaah*. Kyai Misbah requested *prasmanan*<sup>51</sup> with chicken dishes, but Bu Mun, drawing on her knowledge of cultural preferences, advised against it. She observed, "For an event with *santri*,<sup>52</sup> where the tradition is to eat from shared trays, the best

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<sup>46</sup> Takmir leader is the leader and manager of the mosque, elected by its congregation. The Takmir is an organization responsible for maintaining and prospering the mosque.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Bu Mun, August 2024

<sup>48</sup> Asti Inawati, "PERAN PEREMPUAN DALAM MEMPERTAHANKAN KEBUDAYAAN JAWA DAN KEARIFAN LOKAL," *Musawa Jurnal Studi Gender Dan Islam* 13, no. 2 (December 3, 2014): 195, <https://doi.org/10.14421/musawa.2014.132.195-206>.

<sup>49</sup> Geertz, *Keluarga Jawa*.

<sup>50</sup> Istighosah is a religious ritual practice performed collectively for a specific purpose.

<sup>51</sup> A buffet system of serving meals in which food is placed in a public area where the diners serve themselves.

<sup>52</sup> Indonesian term for a student of Islam. Characteristics of a santri include being a devout and correct Muslim, dedication to the five pillars of Islam, rigid adherence to rituals such as prayer

choice is Sambal terong (grilled eggplant)." This was an unconventional choice for mosque events, yet Kyai Misbah trusted her expertise. On the night of the event, 26 large trays of Nasi sambal terong<sup>53</sup> with eggs were served, and the meal was widely praised. The success of this recommendation led to the adoption of Sambal terong as a staple dish for subsequent *pengajian* gatherings, further solidifying Bu Mun's role as an authority in ritual food selection.

The significance of women's roles in *bancaan* also emerges in their control over social obligations and reciprocity. Javanese tradition dictates that participation in a neighbor's *rewang* creates a moral expectation of reciprocation. Those who contribute labor are entitled to similar support in return, reinforcing community solidarity.<sup>54</sup> This unwritten code sustains the continuity of social bonds, making *rewang* not only a labor practice but also a mechanism of social integration. Another crucial element is the practice of food distribution during *kenduri*. Custom dictates that meals are sent to relatives and neighbors, particularly those who may not be able to attend. Unlike daily meals, *kenduri* offerings feature premium ingredients like beef and chicken, underscoring the event's significance. This aspect of food-sharing, deeply embedded in Javanese communal life, reinforces familial ties while simultaneously elevating the host's social standing.

Reflecting on her mother's legacy, Bu Mun continues the tradition of distributing food beyond immediate attendees. Her late mother, Kaji Sumi, instilled the importance of food-sharing as a means of sustaining kinship. Today, Bu Mun ensures that every major *kenduri* includes such distributions, reinforcing both religious and social obligations. In doing so, she upholds a practice that merges Islamic principles of charity with Javanese hospitality.<sup>55</sup> Ultimately, the influence of women in Pungpungan's *kenduri* extends far beyond the kitchen. As key decision-makers, cultural transmitters, and logistical coordinators, they shape the very structure of these events. Their contributions, while often understated, are fundamental to maintaining and adapting Javanese traditions in an evolving social landscape. Through figures like Bu Mun and Bu Titik,<sup>56</sup> *slametan* in Pungpungan remains a living tradition—rooted in heritage yet responsive to contemporary realities.

### **Economic Agency and Religious Authority in *Slametan***

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and fasting, and little concern for animistic and mystical beliefs. John L. Esposito, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>53</sup> A dish of boiled rice served with a special sambal recipe and grilled eggplant.

<sup>54</sup> Sullivan, *Masters and Managers: A Study of Gender Relations in Urban Java*.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Bu Mun, August 2024

<sup>56</sup> The first child of Bu Mun, who also continues Bu Mun's business in the catering industry.

Women's authority in *slametan* extends beyond ritual participation into economic domain. As Fauziyah and Farisi illustrate, religious spaces are not only sites of spiritual engagement but also economic and social negotiation. Women in Java often use their positions within religious structures to cultivate economic networks, such as catering businesses and communal food preparation, which reinforce their legitimacy as decision-makers in religious settings. This economic agency allows them to determine the appropriateness of ritual offerings and structure *slametan* according to local needs and traditions.<sup>57</sup>

In the village of Pungpungan, Bojonegoro, the economic dimension of women's involvement in *slametan* is evident in their roles as financial organizers, resource allocators, and food providers. Women do not simply prepare meals; they manage the entire economic structure that sustains the ritual. When a *slametan* is organized, women are responsible for sourcing ingredients, often relying on their market networks to ensure that the ritual meal adheres to both economic feasibility and religious propriety. Their deep knowledge of pricing, seasonal availability, and customary food offerings places them in a central decision-making role.

During ethnographic fieldwork, I observed how women in Pungpungan collectively strategize to fund a *slametan*. In cases where a family lacks financial resources, women coordinate contributions from neighbours or extended family members, ensuring the ritual's successful execution. This cooperative financing structure, locally referred to as *urunan*, exemplifies how women exercise economic agency to reinforce their authority in religious settings. Moreover, some women have turned their expertise in *slametan* food preparation into small-scale catering businesses, further integrating religious practice with economic sustainability. These businesses, run by respected women in the community, have solidified their status as key ritual decision-makers, as families often defer to their judgment on the appropriateness of food offerings and distribution methods.

A compelling example of this economic-religious authority is seen in the case of Bu Titik, a highly regarded figure in the village known for her expertise in traditional Javanese confectionery. Over time, Bu Titik built a reputation for making high-quality ritual food, leading to increasing orders from community members. Her influence extended beyond merely preparing food; she advised

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<sup>57</sup> Nur Laily Fauziyah and Taufiq Al Farisi, "Women and Religion: A Gender Perspective in Religious Practice," *JLM: Jurnal Ilmiah Mahasiswa Pendidikan Sejarah* 9, no. 2 (May 31, 2024): 665–70, <https://doi.org/10.24815/jimps.v9i2.30670>.



on which dishes were suitable for different religious events, such as *slametan*, *mantenan* (weddings), or *tahlilan*. This ability to determine the appropriateness of offerings gave her a form of economic and religious authority, where families actively sought her guidance when planning ritual meals.

One day, while I was sitting among a group of women preparing ritual food—Bu Titik, Bu Karyati, Bu Istianah, Bu Aziza, Bu Umi, and Bu Yun— Bu Titik was approached by Bu Kaji Is, who sought advice on an upcoming *ziarah* (pilgrimage) with her *tahlil* group. She asked, "What kind of food would be suitable for this event?" Bu Titik carefully inquired about the details, including the duration and location of the *ziarah*, before recommending Nasi liwet wrapped in banana leaves with Galantin as the main dish. She confidently suggested, "I've just perfected my Galantin recipe—people will love it!" Bu Kaji was accepting her advice, illustrating how food selection is not just a practical decision but also a demonstration of ritual expertise that reinforces authority.

These cases exemplify how women in Pungpungan do not merely participate in ritual but actively shape its execution through their economic knowledge and religious expertise. By advising on food offerings, coordinating financial resources, and influencing communal practices, they reinforce their legitimacy as ritual decision-makers. This intersection of economy and ritual authority mirrors broader patterns of Islamic religious leadership, where financial stewardship is a fundamental component of legitimacy. Just as Kyai derive influence from their ability to secure funding for *pesantren*, women in Pungpungan consolidate their authority by overseeing the financial and logistical aspects of *slametan*. Their economic contributions extend beyond the immediate household, positioning them as indispensable figures in the religious and social structure of the village. This study, therefore, argues that the crystallization of women's authority in *slametan* is inseparable from their economic agency, reinforcing the idea that leadership in religious settings is not merely theological but also deeply embedded in financial and social capital.

While this study focuses on Pungpungan Village, ethnographic evidence from other Javanese communities further supports the argument that women play a central role in structuring and maintaining *slametan* rituals. En-Chieh Chao's research in Salatiga reveals a strikingly similar pattern: women not only oversee the preparation of ritual food but also hold decision-making power over key aspects of religious and communal events. Chao documents how women actively shape the organization of *pengajian* and communal prayer meetings, further demonstrating that women's ritual authority extends beyond logistical support and into the realm of religious leadership. Women such as Bu

Eka and Mbak Catur in Salatiga, who lead religious singing and Qur'anic recitation, play a decisive role in shaping the religious landscape of their communities, reinforcing the idea that *slametan* is not an exclusively male-dominated ritual.<sup>58</sup>

Similarly, in Pungpungan, women like Bu Titik and Bu Mun exert significant authority over *slametan* through their expertise in food preparation and ritual organization. Their ability to determine appropriate ritual offerings, manage communal finances, and provide guidance on event structuring mirrors the patterns observed in Salatiga. These findings challenge earlier anthropological narratives that framed *slametan* as a rigidly male-centered practice. Instead, the evidence from both Pungpungan and Salatiga underscores a broader trend in Javanese Islam where women's agency is deeply embedded in religious traditions. This comparative perspective strengthens the argument that women's authority in *slametan* is not an anomaly but a widespread phenomenon, shaped by socio-economic structures and local religious practices.

The findings of this study challenge dominant anthropological accounts of *slametan* as a male-centered ritual and contribute to broader discussions in gender studies, religious studies, and anthropology. Women's increasing religious and economic authority in *slametan* reflects a shift in Javanese gender ideologies. Smith-Hefner highlights how Javanese women navigate between modernity and traditional expectations, asserting greater agency in religious and social life.<sup>59</sup> Dewi similarly notes that Islamic discourse in Java has evolved to allow greater female religious leadership.<sup>60</sup> Rather than reinforcing patriarchal constraints, *slametan* provides a space where women negotiate gender norms, positioning figures like Bu Mun and Bu Titik as central ritual decision-makers based on their social capital and economic control.

Beyond Java, the findings align with broader patterns of gendered religious authority in Southeast Asia. Andaya argues that women have historically played significant roles in religious and economic spheres across the region, countering assumptions that Islam universally marginalizes them. In *slametan*, this historical precedent remains visible as women leverage their control over ritual food

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<sup>58</sup> Chao, *Entangled Pieties: Muslim-Christian Relations and Gendered Sociality in Java, Indonesia*, 90–92.

<sup>59</sup> Nancy J. Smith-Hefner, "Language Shift, Gender, and Ideologies of Modernity in Central Java, Indonesia," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 19, no. 1 (June 8, 2009): 57–77, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1395.2009.01019.x>.

<sup>60</sup> Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, "Javanese Women and Islam: Identity Formation since the Twentieth Century."

preparation to assert religious authority.<sup>61</sup> By situating *slametan* within these broader gendered religious dynamics, this study underscores that women's leadership in Javanese Islam is not an anomaly but part of a larger transformation in religious, economic, and cultural power structures.

## Conclusion

This study affirms the crucial role of women in the *slametan* tradition in Pungpungan Village. Through their management of food and ritual offerings, women not only serve as primary agents in preserving traditions but also act as key figures in establishing social and religious standards within the community. Their authority extends to strategic aspects, including the selection of appropriate dishes, the scheduling of events, and the arrangement of menus in accordance with the type of *slametan* and the socio-economic conditions of the host family. Their influence is further demonstrated by their ability to innovate and adapt traditions to contemporary societal needs. Moreover, the recognition of women's authority in the *slametan* tradition is evident in the way their expertise is acknowledged and respected by the broader community, including men. Overall, this study reinforces the central and strategic role of women in maintaining and adapting the *slametan* tradition in Java. They do not merely function as event organizers but as custodians of cultural continuity, ensuring that ritual practices remain meaningful and adaptable to societal transformations. The authority of women in *slametan* serves as a reflection of their capacity to integrate cultural and religious values into daily life, fostering social harmony and reinforcing the interconnectedness between tradition and contemporary community dynamics.

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<sup>61</sup> Andaya, "Delineating Female Space: Seclusion and the State in Pre-Modern Island Southeast Asia."

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