Is Green Islam going to support environmentalism in Indonesia?

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Fig. 1. Students studying in a pesantren.

Various newspaper and scholarly articles have appeared in the past few years which enthusiastically claim that a Green Islam is emerging in Indonesia and that this movement is going to have a major positive impact on pro-environmental behaviour. ‘Indonesia: The home of “Green Islam”‘ is one jubilant headline (Gelling 2009), and the opening sentence of another article runs: ‘A green, eco-centric approach to understanding Islamic teaching is revolutionising environmental protection in the world’s most-populous Muslim-majority nation’ (Bodetti 2018).

The same articles argue that Indonesia has evolved into ‘a unique laboratory’ combining Islam and environmentalism, and therefore can act as a model for other Muslim-majority countries like Bangladesh, Egypt and Turkey. To add scholarly credentials to the argument, Austin Bodetti cites Australian sociologist Pam Nilan saying that, ‘There is no doubt that the new Islamic environmental consciousness strengthens the whole ecological movement in Indonesia.’ Kristina Großmann (2019) admits that Green Islam is not yet in a position to challenge the state development agenda based on fossil fuels, but does say that small-scale Islamic socio-ecological projects have been successful.

In contrast to this optimism, on the basis of our observations of daily life in Indonesia, we question the belief that such a powerful Green Islam is emerging. For example, one of us (Ibnu Fikri) attended the dagderan festival in Semarang, in the capital of the province of Central Java, in 2016. The dagderan festival was a public ceremony organized to celebrate the beginning of the fasting month, Ramadan, in which thousands of participants paraded from the town hall to the biggest mosque in the city. At the height of the festival, the Governor of Central Java beat the big mosque drum (bedug) to announce that the fast would commence the next day. After the ceremony had ended and the thousands of people had gone away, the ground around the mosque was littered with piles of plastic bottles and cartons left behind by the believers, who had brought their own snacks and drinks to the event. The visitors had not bothered to throw the waste away in the many rubbish bins provided, even though they had just been reminded of the importance of cleanliness during Ramadan.

Judith Schlehe and Vissia Ita Yulianto give similar descriptions of waste left behind after ceremonies at which the speakers had reminded the audience of the environment. They quote ordinary Indonesians who do not think the environment, or throwing away waste in particular, is significant: ‘It is not important’, tidak apa-apa (Schlehe & Yulianto 2020: 45). Kompas, the acknowledged quality newspaper in Indonesia, pays little attention to climate change, which is considered less of a threat to society than terrorism, refugees or corruption (Wahyuni 2017). It is perhaps not surprising that, in a global comparative survey, Indonesia came out as the country with the highest percentage of climate change deniers in the world, ahead of such notorious competitors as the USA and Saudi Arabia (Milman & Harvey 2019).

If great expectations of Green Islam seem to be contradicted by behaviour in daily life, this raises the question of what ‘Green Islam’ means to most Indonesian Muslims. Can we expect Islam to play a role in green activism in Indonesia, a country facing terrifying environmental challenges? In this article, we begin with an explanation of what various authors mean by Green Islam and what initiatives have been taken in this direction in Indonesia. In the next section, we give examples from our own fieldwork of how several groups of Muslims in Semarang live and experience the nexus between religious ideas and human-environment interactions.

We argue that, in the cases studied, contrary to the scholars and journalists writing about Green Islam, Muslim religious frameworks do not lead to an activist environmentalism. There is no reason to expect that Islam is a major force for pro-environmental behaviour, and we are therefore doubtful about the potential of Green Islam in the short run. Many people, however, interpret their diverse interactions with the environment in religious terms, and Islam does certainly support and legitimize behaviour which is good for the environment, albeit more in the form of unforeseen side-effects.

To see Green Islam in its proper context, it should be noted that Indonesia has a long history of environmentalist activism, in which Green Islam is only a recent offshoot. Possibly the first NGO in the field, the Netherlands-Indische...
Vereeniging tot Natuurbescherming (Netherlands-Indies Society for Nature Protection), was established in colonial times and lobbied for the establishment of nature reserves in the 1910s (Cribb 1997: 398). WALHI and SKEPHI are examples of secular NGOs that became very vocal in the late 20th century protesting against deforestation, logging, monocrop culture replacing primary rainforest, pollution caused by mining, and state denial of (customary) land rights. Their activism had clear moral undertones, but not in religious terms; environmental critique was one of the few options open to discuss nepotism and corruption of the authoritarian regime of that time (Colombijn 1998). Green Islam has shifted the focus from large-scale environmental damage by destructive forms of production to the incremental effect of wasteful consumption or small-scale pollution by ordinary citizens.

We want to make one additional point at the outset. Many of the authors writing about the potential of Green Islam remark that Indonesia is the most-populous Muslim country in the world (Bodetti 2018; Gade 2012: 264; Mangunjaya & Praharawati 2019; McKay et al. 2013: 23; Quadir 2018: 126). This point supposedly emphasizes the importance of Indonesia as pioneer of Green Islam. We should, however, avoid the suggestion of a homogeneous population of believers ready to adopt Green Islam, and would like to remind the reader of the varying degrees to which Muslims in Indonesia mix Islamic ideas with pre-Islamic traditions, like forms of animism, especially in the island of Java. Furthermore, we should not forget the Islam statistik, people who, when registering their religion, as is compulsory in Indonesia, have done so as Muslim, even though they follow another religion, one that is not officially recognized.

**Green Islam initiatives in Indonesia**

The notion of Green Islam is a variant of the older idea that religion has a major impact on human-environment interactions. In both Islamic and Judeo-Christian cosmological models, a dualism exists between a divine creator and a non-material human soul, on the one hand, and material nature, on the other. Scholars have pointed out that this dualism is a root cause of an exploitative attitude of humans towards nature. However, others have observed that in Abrahamic religions God has appointed humans as the steward of His creation and hence the same transcendent dualism becomes a primary factor in environmental awareness (Biel & Nilsson 2005: 178; Reuter 2015).

A similar point can be made for Islam. In Islamic theology, humans are custodians (khāliṣfah), responsible for preserving God’s creation (Schlehe & Yulianto 2018: 17). The Qur’ān indeed does contain many verses which encourage a harmonious interaction between humans and their environment. A favourite scriptural passage says that, ‘even when doomsday comes, if someone has a palm shoot in his hand, he should [still] plant it’ (Reuter 2015: 1223). The hadith (reports of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad) gives more examples: for example, in the sunnah ‘this world is sweet and appealing, and Allah placed you as vice regents therein. … So be careful of … this world’ (cited by Hassan & Ali 2012: 91). The Qur’an strongly condemns wastefulness, and large-scale pollution is prohibited by Islamic law (Hassan & Ali 2012; Quadir 2018: 122): ‘And We created not the heaven and the earth and all that is between them in vain’ (Mangunjaya & McKay 2012: 289). The key concept here is mīzān, the teaching that ‘God created this earth in a harmonious, balanced condition’ in which all entities have a purpose and a place; the earth is subject to human stewardship, but humans have the potential to ‘disrupt and damage this [balanced] condition’ (Mangunjaya 2010: 46; see also Quadir 2018: 121).

Earlier Austronesian religions include a form of animism in which such a sharp division between a spiritual creator and material creation is not drawn. Nature and place-specific ancestors are considered the sacred sources of all life. These earlier religions, although not officially recognized as such by the Indonesian state, continue to hold sway, and consequently the ‘spiritual geography of the [Indonesian] countryside … is dotted with countless sacred (keramat) sites that are linked together through mythical narratives of origin’ (Reuter 2015: 1221). Thomas Reuter argues that a greening of Islam (and Christianity) would be easier in Indonesia than in the West, because people can understand the greening of religion as a return to old indigenous animistic or Hindu-Buddhist religious attitudes towards a sacred natural world.

While in Islam a sharp dividing line exists between humans and nature, or soul and material things, several authors point out that, generally speaking, no contradiction is felt between Islam and ecological science in Indonesia. Both ecological activists and religious groups share the view that irresponsible industries and corrupt or negligent state officials, who do not enforce environmental laws, are the cause of environmental damage (Gade 2012: 265; Mangunjaya & McKay 2012: 289; Reuter 2015: 1223).

The difference between ecological scientists and Muslim interpretations is that, from a Muslim point of view, ‘environmental harm … is typically claimed to have been caused by ethical failure’ (Gade 2015: 164). Monika Arnez (2014: 78) likewise concludes that there is consensus in the Muslim world that the environmental crisis ‘is a result of having lost Islamic values and ethics’. If humans have been appointed custodians of God’s creation, it cannot be assumed that they automatically fulfill this role properly. Muslim environmentalists are not driven by worldly concerns, but by an Islamic vision of the relationship of humans with God and His creation (Quadir 2018: 120).

The logical consequence of the analysis of the environmental crisis in ethical terms is that any solution must come from ethical improvement. Whether environmental damage is attributed to personal habits and lifestyle or wasteful industries like logging, the overall conclusion is that it is ‘imperative to educate public attitudes and perceptions about the environment’ (Gade 2012: 265). Ethical improvement can be achieved in two ways. The first is by observing Islamic law and the second is leading by example.

Since the early 2000s, Islamic legal experts in Indonesia have been making an effort to develop environmental jurisprudence (fikih lingkungan in Indonesian, or fiqh al-ḥāṭ’ah in Arabic). This jurisprudence is not a statutory law, but takes the form of a fatwa (non-binding legal opinion) issued by a religious authority in response to a request from somebody in society to address a social problem. The power of a fatwa depends on the authority which issues it. In Indonesia, the highest authority to issue fatwas is the national Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI, Indonesian Ulama Council), which in the 2010s delivered fatwas on recycling water for ablutions, the protection of wildlife to balance the ecosystem (the first ‘biodiversity fatwa’) and proper waste management. Another fatwa declared that burning the forest (as was done by companies who wanted to establish new plantations on forest land) was haram, forbidden. As early as 2006, a local branch of the MUI had issued a fatwa declaring logging in the island of Kalimantan forbidden (Gade 2015; Mangunjaya & McKay 2012; Mangunjaya & Praharawati 2019; Mangunjaya et al. 2018; McKay et al. 2014).

Ethical improvement lies at the heart of pesantren (non-state, Islamic boarding schools). In a pesantren, a religious leader (kyai) gives his students religious and moral instruction. Nowadays, a growing number of pesantren...
are including practical environmental training in their programmes and both Muslim mass organizations in Indonesia, the Nahdatul Ulama and the Muhammadiyah, have developed new curricula which include material lessons in religious teachings (Schlehe & Yulianto 2018: 17). Pesantren are especially active in reforestation and water conservation, two activities which are crucial to the desert environment in which Islam was born. Pesantren Nurul Hikam in Nusa Tenggara Barat province, for instance, has planted 600,000 seedlings of various species. Possibly the first pesantren to do this was Pesantren Guluk-Guluk, established on the island of Madura in 1887, but arguably the best known is Pesantren Ilmu Giri, which launched a reforestation programme with outdoor lessons. Its founder became something of a celebrity at the UN Climate Change Conference in Bali in 2007. Yet another pesantren declared a riverbed in its compound a harim (inviolable zone). The importance of these pesantren is that they not only teach new attitudes, but have also changed actual behaviour (Arnez 2014: 80, 89; Gelling 2009; Mangunjaya & McKay 2012: 296, 298).

The Indonesian government has acknowledged the possible support it can get from Islamic leaders in raising environmental awareness among its citizens. The Minister for Environmental Affairs, Gusti Muhammad Hatta, appointed 90 pesantren ‘eco-pesantren’ to spearhead environmental policies (Arnez 2014: 89-92). Peter Gelling (2009) exclaimed that this ‘ever-growing network of pesantrens going green [makes] Indonesia the unlikely pioneer of environmental Islam’; however, Kristina Großmann (2019) mentions an environmental pesantren which does not want to be incorporated into the state programme of eco-pesantren. The Ministry of Forestry has also tried to build on dakwah (religious outreach) by deploying 5,000 religious teachers to preach against illegal logging, but their role has been limited and whether it has had any effect is unknown (Mangunjaya & McKay 2012: 303; McKay et al. 2014).

For the moment, we have to conclude that Islamic environmental jurisprudence is considered useful in Indonesia, because state laws can be, and indeed are, circumvented and corrupted. To the Muslim way of thinking, this is not compatible with Islamic law; in the end, humans must face the judgement of God. Precisely because the environmental crisis is interpreted as a moral crisis by most Indonesians, Islamic law fills a void, a task at which other non-Islamic solutions have so far failed.

The kyai of Pesantren Al-Wasliah in Garut argued hopefully that a message which speaks to the brain can be ignored, but a religious message which speaks to the heart cannot. The framing of fitwa, often referring to Q’ur’anic verses or the hadith, means that they are suitable for dakwah or dissemination (Gade 2012: 267; Gade 2015: 172). However, we must subscribe to the dry conclusion of Schlehe and Yulianto (2018: 19) that ‘reality on the ground, the attitudes of the vast majority of people, is not very much affected by these sophisticated ethical considerations’. We explore this reality on the ground in greater depth in the next section, for the city of Semarang, a city of 2 million residents in the island of Java.

**Everyday interactions with the environment**

Data were collected through a methodology of ethnographic fieldwork, conducted in 2015-2016. We took ‘Green Islam’ as a sensitizing concept when Ibnu Fikri entered the field. Fieldwork consisted of the usual mix of participant observation and qualitative interviews, but predominantly of ‘deep hanging out’, among four groups of people with different mixes of intense interaction with the physical environment and explicit religious ideas about human-environment relationships. Talks with interlocutors were held in colloquial Javanese and Indonesian. In addition, Freek Colomijn has done research on environmental issues in the cities of Surabaya and Semarang (but mostly the former) intermittently since 2009, in which Islam repeatedly and spontaneously came up in discussions.

Fikri has done research in one pesantren, in which environmental concerns were very different from those of the Green Islam sketched above. From a biomedical perspective, the crowded living conditions in the boarding school formed an unsavoury environment (Fig. 1), but discussions about cleanliness centred neither on the environmental conditions inside the pesantren nor on the ecological problems outside. Instead they focused on ritual purity. It was important, for instance, that water used for ablutions was taken from a container with the prescribed minimal size of 2 kulah (a tub of 60 × 60 cm). Whether the water was green and mossy was of no import if the tub was of the required size. When a student was sick and could not use water from the tub, tayammum (dry ablation) was a good alternative. One of the religious leaders showed how it was done: after pronouncing the intention in Arabic, he placed his palm of his hand on a dusty wall and wiped off the dust from his forehead to his beard. The dust is insanitary from a medical-hygienic perspective, but clean from a ritual point of view. Students could wear the same clothes for days on end, because they were ritually clean, but did change their clothing after they felt it had been defiled by drops of urine.

Although the discussions held in this pesantren were far removed from the debates in eco-pesantren, in another way the teachings of religion and environment-friendly behaviour worked perfectly together: the pesantren encouraged an austere lifestyle and wanted its students to abstain from excessive and wasteful consumerism, a doctrine instilled by a combination of curriculum, sanctions and routine. This modest attitude greatly reduced the ecological footprint of the students (santri). Despite the fact that they themselves would not call this effect ‘pro-environment behaviour’, their small footprint cannot be reduced to an incidental byproduct. On the contrary, it was the result of conscious teaching and ideology.

Further research was undertaken among members of the local branch of Lembaga Dakwah Islam Indonesia (LDI, Islamic Da’wah Institute Indonesia). This organization does undertake some tree-planting activities (Fig. 3), but its green dakwah is also strongly driven by a desire to be accepted by mainstream society. The LDD was banned by the state in the past and its green dakwah has helped it to regain legitimacy. Internally, the LDDII was also very much concerned about the cleanliness of its mosque and facilities for ablutions. In the past, LDII members were particularly concerned about other Muslims who might not have cleaned themselves of impure material before they visited the LDII mosque. While the LDII leadership had more explicit ideas about Green Islam than any of the other groups with whom Fikri did fieldwork, their ideals were not inspired by environmental activism.
Mangunjaya, F.M. 2010. Developing environmental awareness and conservation through Islamic teaching. *Journal of Islamic Studies* 22(1): 34-49.

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— et al. 2018. Protecting tigers with a fatwa: Lesson learned faith base approach for conservation. *Journal of Conservation Biology* 7(1): 78-81.

McKay, J.E. et al. 2014. Practise what you preach: A faith-based approach to conservation in Indonesia. *Oxys* 48(1): 23-29.

Milenau, O. & F. Harvey 2019. US is hothead of climate change denial, major global survey finds. *The Guardian*, 8 May.

Quadir, T.M. 2018. Islam and sustainability: The norms and the hindrances. In *Routledge handbook of the history of sustainability* (ed.) J.L. Caradonna. Abingdon: Routledge.

Reuter, T.A. 2015. The green revolution in the world’s religions: Indonesian examples in international comparison. *Religions* 6: 1217-1231.

Schlehe, J. & V.I. Ulianto 2018. Waste, worldviews and morality at the South Coast of Java: An anthropological approach. *Freiburg: Southeast Asian Studies*.

— & — 2020. An anthropology of waste: Morality and social mobilisation in Java. *Indonesia and the Malay World* 48: 40-59.

Walyuni, H.H. 2017. Mainstream climate change issues: Challenges for Indonesian Islam. *Pacific Journalism Review* 23: 80-95.

The group with the biggest environmental impact consists of the waste-pickers (*pemulung*) who work at the Jatibarang landfill of Semarang. They sort out and collect plastics, paper, glass and other recyclables and their activities have a positive environmental effect because waste-picking is a first but essential step in a circular economy (Fig. 4). Unfortunately, they are not given proper social recognition for their crucial role in reducing the amount of solid waste and simultaneously regaining precious resources which can be recycled. Quite the contrary, *pemulung* have a low social status and many middle-class people denigrate their work. They have built their own prayer house (*mushollah*) at the landfill, partly for convenience, partly because mosques in the neighbourhood would not have been particularly happy with their presence (Fig. 5).

Another *mushollah* was built for them by the landfill management, but still apart from the adjoining community. Importantly, they themselves define their work in very different terms. On the practical level, in the midst of filthy waste and foul odours, the *pemulung* community consider solid waste a commodity. From a religious perspective, at least as far as the Muslim majority among them is concerned, they have convinced themselves that the profession is a *halāl* (ritually pure) way to earn a livelihood. The *halāl* interpretation of their work has helped them to accept living surrounded by dirt and health hazards. Therefore, we can conclude that *halāl* is not only interpreted in the form of *halāl* food – as is customary – but also in the construction of jobs and income. Nevertheless, it would be too far-fetched to consider their attitude a contribution to the abstract idea of Green Islam. As a rule, the *pemulung* themselves did not think about the environmental impact of their work.

The last group among whom Fikri did fieldwork was a group of women who had embraced the concept of *sedekah sampah* (alms from solid waste). They collected garbage and sold recyclables to help other Muslims in the form of scholarships, capital loans and donations to the orphanage the women already ran (Fig. 6). Inspired by religious ideas, these women were also doing this to raise pro-environmental awareness and behaviour. In comparison to the total flow of waste in the city, *sedekah sampah* is insignificant, but it is a telling example of the relationship between Islam and environmental awareness. The Islamic motivation distinguishes the concept of *sedekah sampah* from other community initiatives for waste management, such as the waste bank (*bank sampah*) or environmental NGOs, which focus on solid waste management for strictly environmental reasons. Although the goal of the women is to encourage people to care about the environment in the first place, in the case of *sedekah sampah*, there was the additional goal of donating the revenue from the sales to people in need, in the form of scholarships, orphanages and venture capital for the middle to lower classes.

In the cases studied, Muslims were making more or less elaborate interpretations of their interactions with their physical environment. Islam is one normative framework which helps them to make sense of their world. However, their behaviour and interpretations of their own activities are far removed from the Green Islam described in the enthusiastic newspaper items. We have not found any evidence that Green Islam will have a major impact on most ordinary believers in Indonesia. Nevertheless, people do make use of Islam to interpret their interactions with the environment, and their religious convictions can have unintended, positive effects on the urban ecosystem. We could demonstrate such effects for students living in pesantren, waste-pickers and participants in *sedekah sampah*.

It is conceivable that a future Green Islam will become a far stronger movement than it is today, when more Muslim leaders feel the need to take a critical stand towards wasteful behaviour of the masses and the political and economic elite, or Islam might be side-lined by secular environmentalists. The connection between Islam and environmental action can also be made from the other end, by Muslim activists who do not frame their action in theological terms, but might discover Islam as a new source of inspiration.

We do not claim our cases represent the whole of this ‘most-populous Muslim country’, not even the Muslim population of Semarang. In fact, the contrary is true. We have merely tried to show that the relationship between Islam and human-environment interactions can be much more down to earth in the few cases which we have studied than the promise of a Green Islam.