

## Marketing Islam: Entrepreneurial Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism in Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

Indonesia -- the world's most populous Muslim majority country and third most populous democracy -- has experienced both a widespread Islamic revival and democratic transition over the last several decades. Just prior to the fall of Suharto's authoritarian New Order regime (1965-1998), Indonesia accepted a USD \$40 billion financial bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). As part of the package, Indonesia underwent massive privatization of state-owned companies. At the same time, the Islamic revival in Indonesia promoted Islamic models of entrepreneurship and capital accumulation. Against this political and religious backdrop, celebrity preacher Aa Gym branded himself as the ideal mix of pious preacher and savvy entrepreneur, and promoted a decidedly Islamic vision of ethical entrepreneurship at once reminiscent of, yet not easily reducible to, the secular-liberal logics of neoliberalism. This photo essay juxtaposes theory and image, ethnography and entrepreneurship, Islamic ethics and the spirit of capitalism.

**M**ax Weber's classic book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, considers the connections between piety and prosperity.<sup>1</sup> With respect to religious belief and entrepreneurial practice, Weber argued that "the supposed conflict between other-worldliness, asceticism, and ecclesiastical piety on the one side, and participation in capitalistic acquisition on the other, might actually turn out to be an intimate relationship."<sup>2</sup> At least for the Calvinists, Weber argued, the "modern economic order is... the result of the expression of virtue and proficiency in a calling."<sup>3</sup> Whereas Weber was concerned specifically with Calvinist belief and entrepreneurial spirit, in a footnote he contrasts Islam's understanding of predetermination with Calvinist belief in predestination and declined to make any claims about the connection between piety and prosperity in Islam (a study Weber intended, but never fully carried out).<sup>4</sup> In

this photo essay, I extend Weber’s analysis and reflect on the extent to which we might speak of an Islamic spirit of capitalism. Through both text and image, I will describe how Islamic models of capital accumulation are intimately connected with an ethics of entrepreneurship rooted in Qur’anic text and the legacy of the Prophet Muhammad. In doing so, I argue that there is indeed an Islamic ethics of capitalism that cannot be reduced to the global spread of capitalism and neoliberal logics of the free market.<sup>5</sup>



Promotional image for celebrity preacher Abdullah Gymnastiar (Aa Gym). Image courtesy of Abdullah Gymnastiar.

To elucidate these connections between work and worship, capital and charity, this world and the hereafter, I will tell the story of the rise, fall, and re-branding of Indonesia’s most popular Muslim televangelist, Kyai Haji Abdullah Gymnastiar. Known affectionately across the Indonesian archipelago as “Aa Gym” (elder brother Gym), Gymnastiar achieved fame and fortune with his religious message of *Manajemen Qolbu* (Heart Management). *Manajemen Qolbu* (trademarked as “MQ”) blends Sufi ideas about the heart with the self-help slogans of Western popular psychology.<sup>6</sup> With over twenty businesses related to his personal and corporate brand, Aa Gym also had the reputation as a shrewd entrepreneur. This mix of piety and prosperity served him well during Indonesia’s post-authoritarian moment that witnessed a surge in what has been referred to in Indonesia as the “Islamic economy,” or *ekonomi santri*.

This photo essay juxtaposes text and image to discern how Aa Gym’s rise to fame sheds light on broader themes that connect Islam, ethics, and fortune. As a visual anthropologist, I experiment here with the possibilities of visual storytelling and digital scholarship. Whereas the text situates this case study within theoretical discussions about neoliberalism, capital accumulation, and subject formation, the images themselves are both visual data and theoretical argument as visual footnotes from the field that aim to connect reader with research and researcher. David MacDougall refers to ethnographic films and photographs as a “form of visual quotation” and reminds us that “images and written texts not only tell us things differently, they tell us different things.”<sup>7</sup> Taken together, the images are intended as an ethnographic montage of the world of Islamic self-help in Indonesia – the disciples, preachers, and products to the brands, taglines, and promises. As Jay Ruby observes, the power of images is not that they “speak for” or “speak about” our interlocutors as much as they “speak alongside” them.<sup>8</sup> These images serve as an invitation for reader to join researcher into one – certainly not the only -- visual archive of Islamic entrepreneurship. One important dimension of digital scholarship is the opportunity to provide more primary materials with which the reader can engage, reflect, and even critique the written ethnography. As with the case of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson’s ground-breaking visual documentation in Bali, to share the visual archive is to also allow space for viewing against the grain, in which previously unseen images, at least by the ethnographer in the field, can be mined for their ethnographic richness and theoretical implications.<sup>9</sup> The images included here are a combination of primary documents and photos taken over the course of two years of fieldwork (2005-2007) conducted in Aa Gym’s Islamic school, TV studios, and Islamic training complex.



The profit-sharing marketplace at Aa Gym's Islamic school sold Islamic books, clothing, and souvenirs ranging from calendars and bumper stickers to prayer beads and novelty clocks.

Photo by author.



Islamic souvenirs

Photo by author.



Much to my surprise, Aa Gym clocks sold especially well.

Photo by author.



Aa Gym explained the importance of Qolbu Cola in terms of an Islamic response to the centuries of economic domination by European colonialism. Others explained Qolbu Cola in terms of personal branding and multi-level marketing. Photo by author.



Promotional images of Aa Gym and his self-help slogans were ubiquitous around the Islamic school and training complex. Photo by author.



Aa Gym owned a multi-level marketing firm that sold household products and women's cosmetics under the label "MQ Blessings" (MQ Baroqah).

Photo by author.



Aa Gym dolls were very popular. The writing is a passage from his hit song “Take Care of Your Heart”: “Take care of your heart, do not soil it; Take care of your heart, lantern for this life.” Although beyond the scope of this article, Aa Gym’s Islamic self-help psychology was deeply informed by Sufi understandings of the heart.

Photo by author.

Both image and text describe how Aa Gym frames the relationship between Islam and commerce, preacher and disciple, producer and consumer. I consider how the Islamic self-help industry influences religious experience and entrepreneurial practice by raising the questions: To what extent might the incorporation of popular psychology into middle-class training programs engender an autonomous, neoliberal subject? How commensurate are Islamic ethics of entrepreneurship with individualizing logics of neoliberalism? And how might this renewed emphasis on the enterprising self also recalibrate the prophetic tradition, opening the possibilities for new imaginations of the Prophet Muhammad as the ultimate entrepreneur? By bridging text and image, reader and researcher, written ethnography and visual archive, perhaps we can better understand both the resonances and points of departure between Islam, neoliberalism, and the spirit of capitalism.

Over the last couple of decades, scholars have sought to understand how new trends in psychological expertise and religious practice are embedded in larger assemblages of global capitalism and the exporting of neoliberal logics. Aa Gym offers *Management Qolbu* as an Islamic psycho-therapeutics for this world and the hereafter, and thus offers a unique ethnographic context through which to return to Weber’s concern with the link between “inner-worldly asceticism” and capital accumulation.

Taking cue from Nikolas Rose’s work on the moral-political work of “psy-discourses” (1989) and Michel Foucault’s concept of “technologies of self” (1988), I examine Islamic idioms of entrepreneurship and capital accumulation as they are summoned, articulated, and mobilized amid the broader privatization of both economic and religious subjects.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, I discuss how Aa Gym draws from Islamic idioms of psychology to encourage trainees to fashion two, complementary dimensions of subjectivity – the enterprising and virtuous self. Nikolas Rose brings a Foucauldian knowledge/power approach to understanding how psychological expertise shapes subjectivity:

‘psy’ – the heterogeneous knowledges, forms of authority and practical techniques that constitute psychological expertise – has made it possible for human beings to conceive of themselves, speak about themselves, judge themselves and conduct themselves in new ways.... Psy, here, is not simply a matter of ideas... it has a very significant role in contemporary forms of political power, making it possible to govern human beings in ways that are compatible with the principles of liberalism and democracy.<sup>11</sup>

Elsewhere, Rose has argued that psychological expertise is being used to justify, even to naturalize, neoliberal logics of the free market and a belief in an autonomous, self-enterprising subject.<sup>12</sup>



In his excellent ethnography of a state-owned steel factory in Muslim-majority Indonesia, Daromir Rudnycky describes how celebrity human resources manager Ary Ginanjar summons the language of Islamic psychology (through the training program ESQ, or Emotional and Spiritual Quotient) to help factory managers increase the efficiency and productivity of workers during the company's shift towards privatization.<sup>13</sup> In ESQ Training, Islamic virtues of punctuality, cleanliness, and honesty were offered as remedies for (supposedly) lazy laborers and corrupt managers. Rudnycky advances the useful concept of "spiritual economies" to characterize "the way in which economic reform and neoliberal structuring are conceived of and enacted as matters of religious piety and spiritual value."<sup>14</sup> However, Rudnycky joins other scholars who are careful not to cede too much power to neoliberalism as a monolithic, agentive, and hegemonic force.<sup>15</sup> In Rudnycky's reckoning, "the creation of a spiritual economy in Indonesia... is an unprecedented assemblage that is as much the Islamization of neoliberalism as it is the neoliberalization of Islam."<sup>16</sup> Likewise, the ethnographic episodes and images considered here reveal the ways in which global psychological expertise and management theory is made Islamic. Taking this a step further, I would also add that I am not sure neoliberalism is even the best way of conceptualizing the emergence of what proponents refer to as the Islamic economy. Whereas such a conceptual approach makes sense in the context of a state-owned steel factory in the midst of privatization, the case of Aa Gym and the longer history of Islamic entrepreneurship in Indonesia tell a larger story. As I will argue, Islamic self-help programs do indeed resonate with neoliberal ideals of the enterprising self, yet their specific teachings about fate, free will, and the hereafter constitute an indigenous form of Islamic entrepreneurship that is not reducible to the global spread of neoliberalism.

Aa Gym carefully crafted his personal brand as a pious family man and doting husband, which made him especially popular among Indonesian women. So, when Yamaha executives wanted to express their appreciation to their female customers in Indonesia for making the *Mio* motorcycle one of the most successful in Indonesia among women, they hired Aa Gym to preach to stadium crowds of customers in eight major market cities. The customer campaign tagline – "Touching your Heart" -- resonated with Aa Gym's personal brand of *Manajemen Qolbu*.

With nearly 200 million Muslims, Indonesia is the most populous Muslim-majority country – and third largest democracy -- in the world. Like elsewhere in the world, Indonesian Muslims experienced a religious revival during the 1980s and 1990s. Aa Gym rose to fame in the wake of the state's easing of media restrictions in the aftermath of Suharto's authoritarian New Order regime. Suharto was Muslim, yet weary of the potential for political Islam to encroach on his power and fortune. During most of Suharto's rule, Indonesia only had one television channel, the state-run TVRI. All religious programs were censored and required to promote the nationalist state ideology of



Mio motorcycle on display at Aa Gym sermon for Yamaha event. Aa Gym's admirers consistently told me that they listened to Aa Gym because he "touched their hearts." Corporate marketers know very well the market value of the ability to touch hearts. Prior to conducting ethnography, I would never have imagined that I would conduct research at a Yamaha corporate event. Yet this single image offers clues to a global assemblage linking faith and fortune. Methodologically, the study of piety and prosperity must seek out religion in the marketplace as much as looking for the market in religious texts and beliefs. Photo by author.

*Pancasila*.<sup>17</sup> During the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, Suharto embraced what he termed “cultural Islam” and endorsed the founding of an Islamic newspaper, bank, and Association for Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals, ICMI.<sup>18</sup> Indonesians pride themselves on their moderate understandings of Islam, and Aa Gym wanted to challenge Western Islamophobia by branding his version of Islam as soft and moderate – an Islam of the heart, not the caliphate.

With the widespread proliferation and privatization of media during post-New Order Indonesia, television producers and advertisers enthusiastically embraced Islamic programs. In the process, Islam accrued a certain market value, and celebrity preachers became household names across Indonesia. Aa Gym, easily the most popular television preacher of the early 2000s, branded himself as both pious and prosperous -- devoted family man and shrewd entrepreneur. He trademarked *Manajemen Qolbu* as MQ and sold products ranging from MQ corporate training to Qolbu Cola and MQ Shampoo. Millions of viewers tuned in for his Sunday television show, over one hundred radio stations broadcast his morning program, and thousands of spiritual tourists and corporate trainees flocked to his Islamic school each week. Aa Gym’s reputation as a savvy entrepreneur resonated with the aspirations of middle class Muslims seeking both piety and prosperity.<sup>19</sup> Aa Gym was included among the “50 Most Important Muslims” worldwide and with a 91% approval rating at the pinnacle of his popularity. He embodied the ideals of modern Muslim masculinity in Indonesia, and millions of his followers, mostly women, spent much of their time, and money, consuming Aa Gym’s TV shows, DVD videos, and household goods.



Women Qur’anic study group purchasing Aa Gym sermons and religious paraphernalia. Aspirational piety and Islamic consumption is not simply about purchasing religious commodities. Equally important, faithful devotees consume the brand narratives and personal lives of celebrity preachers and icons of piety.

Photo by author.

Aa Gym marketed himself as the ideal family man, preaching the need for husbands to control their anger. On national television, he even serenaded his wife Ninih, in English, with the Everly Brothers song, “Let it be Me.” Aa Gym’s simple, humorous, and pragmatic sermons focused on how to cultivate a happy and harmonious family. In the picture below, Aa Gym and his wife Ninih Mutmainnah, in front of a huge portrait of their smiling family, shared their religio-therapeutic formulas for family bliss with several women’s Qur’anic study groups visiting through Aa Gym’s “spiritual tourism” retreat weekends. Indeed, I spent much of my weekends, standing in line with these women as they waited to get their picture taken with Aa Gym and Ninih. After that, a tour guide escorted them around the corner to MQ Photo where they could print their photo, for a price of course.

On the public stage, Aa Gym served as the moral exemplar of Muslim masculinity – shrew entrepreneur and devoted family man. *Manajemen Qolbu* provided a religious therapeutics for the desires and anxieties of middle-class women trying to manage the affective economies of marriage and family.<sup>20</sup> The inter-subjective preacher-disciple relationship was marked by the affective tone of a “heart to heart” in which Aa Gym (as master of his own heart) created the hybrid persona of a preacher-psychologist who promised to soothe modern anxieties about emotional labor and family turmoil.

A huge following of middle-class women adored Aa Gym. Preaching to stadium crowds (of mostly women), Aa Gym would always begin singing his trademark song – “Take Care of Your Heart” – and then extend the microphone to the crowd, motioning to thousands of women who sang the chorus. This inter-subjective preacher-disciple relationship was marked by the affective tone of a “heart to heart” (*curahan hati*) in which Aa Gym (as master of his own heart) created the hybrid public persona of a preacher-psychologist who promised to soothe modern anxieties about emotional labor and family turmoil.

Aa Gym built his own brand of Muslim masculinity, and his religious authority hinged on his image as moral exemplar. This public image and preacher-disciple relationship would eventually come back to haunt him.

In sermons and training seminars, Aa Gym narrated his life story as evidence of the efficacy of *Manajemen Qolbu*. Beyond the home and office, Aa Gym also portrayed himself as an adventurer and rugged outdoorsman who sought hi-velocity thrills by skydiving, horse-riding, and even riding as co-pilot in a F5E-Tiger fighter jet. He gallantly performed courage and tenacity that, according to him, were crucial for entrepreneurial success. While on the road, he typically introduced himself with a seven-minute video autobiography (what he refers to as his *Qolbugrafi*), “Aa Gym: Just As He Is.” With a catchy soundtrack, the video biography is a montage of Aa Gym at work and play – in the boardroom, skydiving with Indonesian special forces, scuba diving, playing paintball during an outbound corporate training seminar, spending time with family, and hanging out with rickshaw drivers on the roadside. Then words flash on the screen: “There is no success without bravery.” Aa Gym consciously nurtured this personal brand. Indeed, Indonesia’s leading marketing guru, Hermawan Kartajaya, affectionately referred to him as a “spiritual marketer.” In this poster that hangs on the bookstore wall in his Islamic school, Aa Gym provides advice on how to market oneself:



Aa Gym and his wife Ninih sharing their formulas for a happy family. The performative style of these exchanges self-consciously drew from melodramatic television serials known as *sinetron*. Aa Gym’s television company also produced a fictional account of Aa Gym’s family, titled “The Smiling Family,” thereby blurring the lines between fact and fiction, personal piety and virtual virtue. Photo by author.



Aa Gym told his life story through images such as the time he co-piloted an F5E-Tiger fighter jet. He was one of several new preachers who became celebrities by embodying a certain hip and modern form of piety. Image courtesy of Abdullah Gymnastiar.



Poster, "Successfully Marketing Yourself  
with the 3-As:

Aku (I) am safe and reliable for you;

I please/satisfy you;

I am helpful to you."

Photo by author.

My interest in the role of marketing bridges conversations in Islamic studies about new media and religious authority with anthropological inquiries into "market Islam" and branding as social practice.<sup>21</sup> Expanding on French scholar Patrick Haenni's concept of "*L'Islam de Marché*," Daromir Rudnyckyj advances the useful concept of "market Islam" as a lens through which to understand religious practice in the broader social context of privatization and neoliberal economic policy in Indonesia.<sup>22</sup> As previously noted, Rudnyckyj provides invaluable insights into the religio-economic ways in which privatizing companies invest in Islamic training to discipline workers and cultivate higher productivity. I would like to broaden the scope of market Islam in order to investigate the ideas and practices that go into marketing products and public icons as Islamic. In this respect, I am more concerned with the *marketing of* Islamic entrepreneurship than the broad structures of economic globalization in which Islamic self-cultivation occurs.

With an eclectic mix of Qur'an and global pop psychology, a new generation of popular preachers garnered new forms of religious authority and ushered in new forms of religious practice. In Indonesia's marketplace of modernity, Aa Gym developed a range of Islamic training courses under MQ's theological umbrella and corporate brand. Clients ranged from middle management at state-owned companies to soon-to-be-retiring employees in search of new sources of income. Much like the Arabic-Indonesian-English hybrid *Manajemen Qolbu*, MQ Entrepreneur Training based its curriculum on a combination of Quranic passages, stories and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, and a heavy dose of New Age and corporate management seminars.



Fire-walking training with Anthony Robbins and Tung Desem Waringin. No promotional event was too big for Waringin. Years later, he fell out of favor when, as part of a promotional stunt, he dropped cash from a plane to the masses below. Showing off one's opulence contrasts with Islamic ideals of humility and such charity was perceived by most as insincere. Courtesy of Tung Desem Waringin.



Aa Gym was always looking for new inspiration and material. He asked his top three MQ trainers to attend this Fire-walking Training seminar featuring American legendary self-help guru Anthony Robbins, author of *Awaken the Giant Within* and self-help guru to Hollywood Stars. On the Monday after Anthony Robbins' Fire-walking Training (live via hi-definition TV), Aa Gym invited these MQ trainers to share their experiences at their weekly sermon and motivational session for approximately 500 employees. One by one, these trainers described what they learned about Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) and what it felt like to walk on fire. The goal of NLP, they told the audience, was to create that “magical moment” that would provide the positive thinking necessary to surmount future challenges. As Sena Lesmana described:

“Sure, I was scared that I would get burned. But, you see, that’s just it. You use *NLP* to overcome your fear. You tell yourself that you will not be burned. Before I walked on the fire, I said *bismillah* and then when I finished I yelled out, *Alhamdulillah!* See, you can do whatever you set your mind to doing”

By uttering these words in Arabic, Sena framed his intent and accomplishment in a language of Islamic ethics, transforming fire-walking into an Islamic technology of self. Building on his “magical moment,” Sena subsequently paid USD \$1,500 to become a licensed trainer of the “Indonesian Firewalker Trainers Association,” and later incorporated Fire-walking Training into MQ Entrepreneur Training.



Sena explains NLP to a group of fire-walking trainees at the Islamic school.  
Photo by author.



Entrepreneur Revolution with Tung Deslem Waringin and H. Abdurrahman Yuri.  
Courtesy of H. Abdurrahman Yuri.

the “fast track” of capital accumulation and make their dreams come true. Based on the game’s glorification of the American dream (myth) of meritocracy, one *might* conclude that MQ Entrepreneur Training fosters a neo-liberal subject who controls her own destiny in terms of capital accumulation. Such a conclusion, however, would assume that the game’s logics are somehow uniformly internalized by docile trainees. It would also assume a necessary causal link between techniques of self-engineering and religious subjectivity. If only ethnography were so neat and tidy.



MQ Entrepreneur Trainees playing board game “Cashflow Quadrant.” Photo by author.

where they can purchase their dreams (ranging from a ski house to a beach house). During the debriefing session following the game, the charity dimension was framed in terms of Islamic teachings about charity

MQ Entrepreneur Training frames capital accumulation as both economic and ethical pursuit. On February 27 2006, Indonesian get-rich-quick guru Tung Deslem Waringin and “MQ Master Trainer” Abdurrahman Yuri co-presented a seminar at Daarut Tauhiid: “Entrepreneur Revolution.” Pak Waringin’s presentation was almost entirely based on American financial self-help guru Robert Kiyosaki’s book, *Rich Dad, Poor Dad: What the Rich Teach their Kids about Money that the Poor and Middle Class Do Not*.<sup>23</sup> Kiyosaki presents a “Cashflow Quadrant” model to reveal the secrets of capital accumulation. In the quadrant, one could be a salaried employee, a self-employed worker, a business owner, or an investor. Only by becoming an investor, Kiyosaki says, can one earn passive income, “have their money work for them,” and finally reach financial freedom.

Following this seminar, MQ Entrepreneur trainers added the “Cashflow Quadrant” board game to their curriculum. By playing the game, participants are supposed to realize that *anyone* can become rich and “get out of the rat race.” The game’s rules are designed such that even a janitor (my job when I played) is eventually able to get on

My observations of trainees actually playing this game, as well as the debriefing sessions that followed, suggest a different explanation, one that honors how trainers and trainees play with multiple models of entrepreneurial ethics and capital accumulation. Islamic training brings us into the realm of the ludic, where trainees play with the resonances between the entrepreneurial ethics of Islam and the individualism of Western self-help. One of the interesting rules of the game is that if a player lands on a “charity” space, they can donate ten percent of their income for an extra roll of the dice (Kiyosaki’s gentle nudge towards tithing, perhaps). Charitable giving would enable them to collect their next paycheck even faster, “get out of the rat race,” and get a step closer to entering the game’s “fast track,”

(*zakat, infaq, waqaf*). Trainees were asked to discuss occasions when, after giving charity, they actually found themselves on the receiving end of fortune.

One trainee referred to the popular seminar “the Power of Giving” (led by television preacher Yusuf Mansur) in which people were asked to donate whatever they felt they could. In the following days and weeks, as Mansur’s story goes, they would experience for themselves Allah’s promise that they could increase their own fortune by giving to others. As one trainee put it, “I am as certain as certain can be that without Allah’s hand, people will not attain riches... the more you donate [to charity], the more you will get in return.” Another woman chimed in: “It’s true. Once, I was thinking about how I wanted to build a home for orphans – just an intention (*niat*), not yet the actual building. The next week my husband got a large raise at work.” Yet another trainee cautioned, “This is all great, but we should also remember that fortune is not always about money. In the words of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, something as simple as a smile can become charity.” The trainer concluded the debriefing session by saying that giving charity is an integral part of obtaining fortune, in its many forms, in this life and the hereafter. In other words, capital accumulation is not simply about one’s worldly dreams of a ski house in Aspen; it is about preparing one’s home in the hereafter. Trainers and trainees re-inscribed the game -- with its logics of self-enterprise and glorification of individual initiative -- with Islamic idioms of fortune and ethics, charity and obligation, piety and prosperity.

“MQ Master Trainer” Abdurrahman Yuri (who goes by Adeda) led the next session titled “The Concept of Business Ethics Based on Manajemen Qolbu.” He differentiated between three eras of business: the secular era, the mixed era, and the era of integration – where business and religion are one. In this third era, Adeda proclaimed, piety is an important factor in determining one’s financial success. He discussed the secrets of capital accumulation by summoning Islamic texts that connect piety (*taqwa*) with fortune (*rezeki*). Adeda began quote from the Qur’an, Al-Thalaq (2-3): “And whosoever fears God, He will appoint for him a way out, and He will provide for him from whence he never reckoned.”

MQ Entrepreneur Training posits three different kinds of fortune. Most central to the present discussion

is the kind of fortune that depends on self-initiative, or *ikhtiar*. Trainees are encouraged to “maximize their self-initiative” (*menyempurnakan ikhtiar*) in order to “meet up with their fortune” (*menjemput rezeki*). Adeda quoted the Qur’an passage Ar-Rad (11): “God does not change the fate of a people, until they change their own fate” (i.e. God helps those who help themselves). Muslim trainers summoned this verse time and time again in a variety of contexts and training programs across Indonesia. The verse was an important source of Islamic textual authority that also resonated with neoliberal ideals of the self-enterprising entrepreneur.



Dzikir (Mindfulness of God); Fikir (Think); Ikhtiar (Self-initiative).

This plaque hangs over the door of MQ Entrepreneur Training.

Photo by author.

This concept of self-initiative, however, does not easily conform to the idea of an unencumbered individual whose efforts alone can guarantee success. Nor can it be reduced simply to God's will. Rather, fortune is thought to be allocated by God and our task as humans is to exert self-initiative to secure that fortune – not just by chasing after riches, but by leading pious lives as devout Muslims. Aa Gym promotes self-initiative as part of a tripartite formula for success in this life and the hereafter: *Dzikir*, *Fikir*, *Ikhtiar*. *Dzikir*, mindfulness of Allah; *Fikir*, our cognitive capacity; and *Ikhtiar*, self-initiative. Faith in self-initiative alone -- without mindfulness of God – carries us further from God and ensures neither earthly riches nor heavenly redemption.

Trainees are admonished that entrepreneurship is an ethical pursuit linking self-cultivation with both capital accumulation and charitable giving. Riches can become blessings (*berkah*) only when earned ethically. Thus, when played by trainees in MQ Training, the “Cashflow Quadrant” is not merely a secular board game on how to get rich. Trainers transform the game into a technology of self that mediates Islamic teachings on faith and fortune. In this reckoning, capital accumulation requires both worldly work and heavenly devotion. This marks a crucial distinction between the discursive practices of MQ Training and the neoliberal logics of Western financial gurus and self-help psychologies.

MQ Entrepreneur Training emphasizes particular Islamic teachings that *resonate* with neoliberal tenets of individualism and capital accumulation. Thinking in terms of “resonance” allows us to acknowledge similarities between multiple models of subjectivity, without losing sight of their points of departure. The resonance between transnational psychology and Islamic training helps to explain how imported theories of psyche and success can provide the legitimacy for novel forms of Islamic authority (trainer, self-help preachers) without merely reproducing a self-enterprising neoliberal subject.

The commodification of Islamic self-help training also recalibrated preacher-disciple relationships. Aa Gym was not simply the founder of MQ, he was its exemplar. In the process, Aa Gym's religious authority was intimately linked with his brand equity. Aa Gym's brand traded on an exemplary sort of moral authority, yet even this was embedded in an ethical relationship between preacher and disciple, producer and consumer. So, when news broke that Aa Gym had secretly married a second wife, it became a national scandal. His female followers felt betrayed and lamented that Aa Gym's public image as loyal husband and loving family fan was just for show. Over the course of nearly 200 interviews, women framed the conversation in terms of the Islamic ideal of sincerity, or *keikhlasan*. Thousands of Aa Gym's female followers took to social media,

shredding his image in front of gossip television cameras, urging women to boycott his television shows, books, and household products. Within a couple weeks, Aa Gym lost his television contracts and his self-help empire began to crumble.

In the immediate aftermath of the scandal, Aa Gym's Islamic school became a ghost town. This area of the Islamic school complex had been a bustling market of approximately twenty food stalls, part of a profit-sharing arrangement Aa Gym had with local food vendors. The sign in the background promotes a program to love one's teachers. Photo by author.





Taken aback by his dramatic fall from public grace, Aa Gym proclaimed the permissibility of polygyny in Islam, yet he also quietly reflected on and atoned for his marketing strategy of promoting himself as moral exemplar. He turned to Islamic psychology to try to understand his downfall as God's punishment for showing off his piety, or *riya*. In other words, no matter how large one's fortune (and Aa Gym's was substantial), God can always take it all away. Had he put himself before God? Was near-bankruptcy now his fate? Now a decade later, Aa Gym continues to publicly atone for his shortcomings, many of his female followers no longer harbor resentment, and he has even returned to television. He now has over two million Twitter followers, spiritual tourists have returned once again, and he has re-gained his fortune. Nonetheless, he privately worries about once again falling for the shiny lure of stardom.

Thus, the rise and fall of Aa Gym illuminates not just the ethical formation of enterprising selves, but also the ways in which the preacher-disciple relationship itself is commodified and, in the process, religious authority becomes linked with brand equity. Even in a world of virtual virtue, pop preachers are still expected to practice what they preach. Just as the Protestant ethic apparently has no monopoly on the "spirit of capitalism," the psy-discourses of neoliberalism do not simply reproduce pre-packaged models of self-enterprising religious subjects.

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#### NOTES

1 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner, 1958).

2 Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 42.

3 Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 53-54.

4 Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 218.

5 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

6 In this essay, I am more interested in the entrepreneurial aspects of *Manajemen Qolbu* than its lineage in Sufi thought. Elsewhere I have discussed the latter in detail. See James Bourk Hoesterey, *Rebranding Islam: Piety, Prosperity, and a Self-help Guru* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 49-55.

7 David MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

8 Jay Ruby, "Speaking For, Speaking About, Speaking With, and Speaking Alongside: An Anthropological and Documentary Dilemma," *Visual Anthropology Review* 7 (2): 50-67.

9 Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, *Balinese Character, a Photographic Analysis* (New York: The New York Academy of Sciences, 1942).

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