

# Consuming and disputing Aisha song: the quest for pleasure & Islamic romance in contemporary Indonesia

Syamsul Rijal

*UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta*

*E-mail: syamsul.rijal@uinjkt.ac.id*

*DOI:10.18326/ijims.v12i1.1-29*

## Abstract

The increasing consumption of Islamic popular culture in Indonesia has marked the deepening Islamisation among the Muslim majority. Some scholars have observed the interplay between Islam and popular culture among Indonesian Muslim youths. However, only a few scholars have studied how a particular religious product has been debated and contested within a Muslim society. This article examines the conflicting responses over an Islamic song that describes romantic expressions between the Prophet and His wife, Aisha. It focuses on three groups: popular preachers, progressive writers, and YouTube audience. This study employs a digital ethnography method by observing various websites and social media and analysing their different responses. It is found that while some Muslim preachers and progressive writers have criticized the song's lyrics; most Muslim audience keep consuming the song and regard it as an ideal model of Islamic romance as expressed by the Prophet and His wife, Aisha. The various responses from the three groups represent the diversity of Indonesian Muslims with regards to Islam and popular culture. It also suggests that Muslim consumers do not

always follow the opinions of popular religious elites. The popularity of the song has resonated with the increasing aspiration among pious young Muslims who seek the basis of Islamic romance through the lives of the Prophet and His wife.

Meningkatnya konsumsi budaya populer Islam di Indonesia menandai semakin meningkatnya Islamisasi di kalangan mayoritas Muslim. Sebagian sarjana telah mengamati interaksi antara Islam dan budaya populer di dunia Muslim, termasuk di Indonesia. Namun, hanya sedikit sarjana yang meneliti bagaimana sebuah produk budaya Islam pop diperdebatkan dan dikontestasi dalam masyarakat Muslim. Artikel ini mengkaji respon yang beragam dan saling bertentangan terhadap sebuah lagu Islami, berjudul “Aisyah Istri Rasulullah”, yang dicover oleh Anisa Rahman dan beberapa penyanyi lainnya. Lagu tersebut menggambarkan ekspresi romantis antara Nabi dan istrinya, Aisyah. Studi ini berfokus pada respon tiga kelompok Muslim sebagai subyek: penceramah populer, penulis opini progresif, dan penonton YouTube. Dengan menggunakan metode etnografi digital, studi ini menemukan bahwa jika beberapa penceramah Muslim dan penulis progresif mengkritik lirik lagu tersebut, sebagian besar penonton Muslim justru tetap mengonsumsi lagu tersebut dan menganggapnya sebagai model hubungan romantis Islami yang ideal. Berbagai tanggapan dari ketiga kelompok tersebut mewakili keragaman umat Islam Indonesia terkait dengan Islam dan budaya populer. Hal ini juga menunjukkan bahwa konsumen Muslim tidak selalu mengikuti pendapat para elit agama. Popularitas lagu tersebut bergema dengan meningkatnya aspirasi di kalangan muda Muslim religius yang mencari justifikasi romantisme dalam Islam melalui kehidupan Nabi dan istrinya.

Keywords: *Aisha song; Islamic Romance; Piety; Popular culture*

## **Introduction**

At the end of March 2020, when Covid-19 started to hit Indonesia, an Islamic song entitled “Aisha, the Prophet’s Wife” became viral among the Indonesian public. Starting from the song cover in YouTube by Anisa Rahman, followed by other singers, the song has been shared in various platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp. The song popularity has also extended to Indonesian everyday lives where many

Muslims consume the song. Interestingly, found were several mosques in South Tangerang, Banten that frequently played the song at the times before the prayer was performed. The act of consumption of the so-called *lagu Islami* (Islamic song)<sup>1</sup> is not new in Indonesia. However, what makes it different this time is the criticism it sparked from a number of new preachers and Muslim progressive writers through YouTube and websites. This criticism is mainly centred on the lyrics of the song that contain depictions, which are regarded to disrespect and misrepresent Aisha.

The influence of Islam in Indonesia has increasingly manifested in various aspects of lives either in politics, economy, and culture.<sup>2</sup> In the realm of culture, one can see the proliferation of Islamic products and Islamic popular culture, such as Islamic soap opera, preaching (*dakwah*) programs, Qur'anic recital competition, and Islamic music. Plenty of Islamic songs with various genres have been produced since decades in Indonesia. Its forms have evolved and varied over a period of times starting from *gambus* traditional music, *qasida*, *nasyid*, to modern pop-music.<sup>3</sup> Despite its various genres, the songs lyrics contain Islamic values that are

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<sup>1</sup>David D. Harnish and Anne K. Rasmussen (2011) distinguish between music of Islam and Islamic music. The former refers to Arab songs that contain elements of Islamic teaching, while the later include "all kinds of folk and popular music in regional languages and in Indonesia, as well as newly composed music and popular music hybrids" that features Islamic characteristics. However, in this article I use Islamic music to both categories.

<sup>2</sup>See Greg Fealy and Sally White, *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2008; Noorhaidi Hasan, "The making of public Islam: piety, agency, and commodification on the landscape of the Indonesian public sphere", *Contemporary Islam*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2009), 229-250.

<sup>3</sup>For good discussion on *orkes gambus* and *nasyid* in Indonesia and Malaysia see Birgit Berg, "Musical Modernity, Islamic Identity, and Arab Aesthetics in Arab-Indonesian *Orkes Gambus*" and Bart Barendrecht, "Pop, Politics and Piety: *Nasyid* Boy Band Music in Muslim Southeast Asia", both chapters in Andrew N. Weintraub, *Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia*, London & New York: Routledge, 2011, 166-184, 235-256. See also Bart Barendrecht and Wim van Zanten, "Popular Music in Indonesia since 1998, in Particular Fusin, Indie and Islamic Music on Video Compact Discs and the Internet", *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, Vo. 34 (2002), 76-80.

considered as a *dakwah* i.e. conveying messages to the Muslims to follow God's messages.

The articulation of Islam and popular culture in Indonesia has shifted from hostility to compatibility. When modernization project under Suharto era began, Islamic expression was seen as traditional and incompatible to the West with its popular cultures such as movies, fashions and music. During the era, a musician and singer Rhoma Irama modified and popularised a Malay local music, the co-called *dangdut*, inserting Islamic messages and competing with Western Rock music bands.<sup>4</sup> Since early 1980s, some Islamic movements emerged in campuses and warned the danger of Western influences, including pop-cultures that they see could corrupt youth's morality. As the result, moral panics had spread among some Muslim youths leading them to distance from the West and resort to Islam as a source of identity and morality.<sup>5</sup> However, since the second half of Suharto regime and afterwards, the upward mobility of Muslim middle class in the cities allowed a new trend to bridge between piety and modernity resulting in growing aspiration to become modern Muslim.<sup>6</sup> Hence, we can see in part the emergence of Islamic songs delivered by

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<sup>4</sup>Rhoma Irama, "Music as a Medium for Communication, Unity, Education, and Dakwah", in Andrew N. Weintraub, *Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia*, London & New York: Routledge, 2011, 185-192.

<sup>5</sup>Rifki Rosyad, *A Quest for True Islam: A Study of the Islamic Resurgence Movement among the Youth in Bandung, Indonesia*, Canberra: ANU E-Press, 1995; Noorhaidi Hasan, *Laskar Jihad: Islam, Militancy, and the Quest for Identity in Post-New Order Indonesia*, Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asian Program, 2006; Najib Kailani, "Kepanikan Moral dan Dakwah Islam Populer: Membaca Fenomena 'Rohis' di Indonesia", *Analisis*, Vol XI, No. 1 (2011), 1-16; Syamsul Rijal, "Indoctrinating Hizbiyyin: Seeking Certainty through An-Nabhanism", *AlJami'ah*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (2011), 253-279.

<sup>6</sup>James B. Hoesterey and Marshall Clark, "Film Islami: Gender, Piety and Pop Culture in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia", *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 36, (2012), 207-226; Hariyadi, "Islamic Popular Culture and the New Identities of Urban Muslim Young People in Indonesia: The Case of Islamic Films and Islamic Self-Help Books", Ph.D Thesis, The University of Western Australia, 2013; Ariel Heryanto, *Identity and Pleasure: The Politics of Indonesian Screen Culture*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2014.

Pop-Music such as Bimbo, Opick, Ungu, Wali or by rock music such as Gigi and Slank.

The advanced development in information and communication technology has allowed cultural flows and produced more enrichment in Islamic popular culture. The emergence of the Internet and its various social media platforms opens an opportunity to anyone to create and circulate messages and video contents. The ‘participatory culture’ of those media, especially YouTube<sup>7</sup>, has enabled the emergence of micro-celebrities ranging from religious preachers to singers. Those who have many viewers and subscribers allow them to obtain economic benefits as the result of AdSense and invitations from audience and national TVs. The case of preachers such as Abdul Somad Batubara, Maulana Nur, Khalid Basalamah, Felix Siau who gain their popularity through social media have confirmed this pattern.<sup>8</sup> In the world of music, a number of ordinary singers such as Raisa Andriana, Isyana Sarasvati, Sheryl Sheinafia, (to name a few) have risen to national popularity due to their video posting in YouTube. More recently, a number of religious singers along with their band have also emerged with a similar pattern, most notably the Sabyan Gambus. This band, with Khoirunnisa (Nissa) as the lead singer, has been popular in YouTube and its videos has been viewed by millions and subscribed by hundreds of fans. This band mostly covers Arabic songs from the Middle East and sung eloquently with quality music and backgrounds.

While many songs of the Sabyan have been welcomed by a larger Muslim audience, there is a recent song by a former Sabyan backing vocalist, Anisa Rahman, and other song covers, which has received criticism

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<sup>7</sup>Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Digital Media and Society Series*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009, 10.

<sup>8</sup>For good account on the rising popularity of Felix Siau, see Hew Wai Weng, “The Art of Dakwah: Social Media, Visual Persuasion and the Islamist Propagation of Felix Siau”, *Indonesia and the Malay World*, Vol. 46, No. 134 (2018), 61-79.

from several preachers and Muslim writers due to the lyrics and singer's impersonation. They considered the song unfair, impolite, and imbalanced in representing the wife of the Prophet. This dispute, however, does not involve religious authorities such as the state Ulama institution, Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), and the established Muslim organisations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. Most of the vocal critics come from popular preachers whose views are spread in YouTube and reported in online media and national TVs. Drawing on this controversy, this study raises several questions that will be addressed in this article: Why such controversy emerged in responding to an Islamic song? How did Muslim groups react against the song? Has this controversy led to a clash between Islam and popular culture suggesting the conservative turn of Indonesian Islam?

This article found that the controversy over the song lies in the issue of Aisha whose physical description in the song is related to ethics (*adab*) and gender role that spark debates within Indonesian Islam. It argues that despite the song's critical responses, a large number of viewers have been consuming the song which, for them, represents ideals of the husband-wife romantic love between the Prophet and Aisha. This is in line with the growing search of Islamic romance's basis from the prophet, which reflects the demand of rising piety among Indonesian Muslims. It further suggests that such controversy represents the diverse voices of Indonesian Islam ranging from conservative to progressive as well as to ordinary Muslims' interpretations.

This study employs digital ethnography method by considering websites and social media as a research site.<sup>9</sup> It has carried out online observation

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<sup>9</sup>See Sarah Pink et.al, *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*, London: Sage, 2016; Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller, *Digital Anthropology*, London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2012.

from April to September 2020. In order to examine various responses of Muslim groups to Aisha song, it observes media websites, such as Islami and IbTimes, as well as YouTube official accounts from some preachers and popular singers. It pays a particular attention to the opinions of a number of preachers and progressive writers as well as the comments of audience at YouTube. By examining their different responses and arguments, this study relates them to the social and cultural context of young Muslims in contemporary Indonesia.

The first part of this article provides a brief discussion on cover song culture and its relationship with Islamic popular culture in Indonesia by taking the case of Aisha cover song. The second part discusses the response of popular preachers to the song and analyses their underlying arguments and reasons. The third part examines the response of audience to the song at the YouTube account of Anisa Rahman and analyses motivations behind their consumption. The last part provides conclusion and a critical analysis on the various Muslim response to Islamic popular culture as well as its meaning to the contemporary state of Indonesian Muslims.

### **Cover song culture and the origin of Aisha song**

Covering songs has been a long practice within the popular culture. It is defined as “the musical practice of one artist recording or performing another composer’s song.”<sup>10</sup> It sometimes happens that a cover singer becomes more popular than the original one. In the West, covering songs began in the mid-1960s, became familiar in 1980s in the form of cover compilations and tributes, and later became a subgenre of music market in 1990s.<sup>11</sup> With the invention of Internet, covering songs has even become more rampant as anybody can upload his or her song cover in YouTube,

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<sup>10</sup>George Plasketes, *Play it Again: Cover Songs in Popular Music*, USA: Ashgate, 2010, 1.

<sup>11</sup>George Plasketes, “Look what they’ve done to my songs: Covers and tributes, and annotated discograph, 1980-1995”, *Popular Music and Society*, Vol.19, No.1 (2008), 79-80.

Instagram, and other platforms under the reason of self-expression, preservation or commercialization.

In Indonesia, song covering has existed not only for 'secular' songs but also for religious ones. During New Order era, covering songs was not a common practice on national TV. It started to grow after the fall of Suharto regime that paved the way for private TV stations providing a music program of song memories. With the rapid development of the Internet, especially YouTube, many song covers that modify old songs with new voice and musical arrangements have proliferated. Via Vallen was among pop-song covers who have attracted millions of viewers on YouTube allowing her to become a national celebrity. With regard to Islamic songs, the Sabyan Gambus is currently well known for its best covering of Arab songs. The band consists of six millennial Muslims in which Nissa serves as the lead vocalist and Anisa Rahman as the backing vocalist. Their music genre is modern *gambus* that combines traditional Arab-Malay and modern pop-music. The band started their career by performing religious music at Weddings in Jakarta and the surrounding. Their name became popular to public after uploading their music content through their official channel at YouTube. Their first song entitled *Ya Habib al-Qolbi* was watched 173 million times in 2018.<sup>12</sup> While composing their own song, the Sabyan started their career by mostly covering Arabic songs and *salawat* (praises to the Prophet) ones. The most trending of their song cover that has gained wider audience is *deen salaam* (religion of peace) whose original singer is Sulaiman al-Mughni from United Arab Emirates. The song, however, became more popular in Indonesia than in the Middle East. In YouTube, a Sulaiman's video was watched 872.957 times until 6 September 2020.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Husein Abdulsalam, "Sabyan Gambus dan Asal Usul Musik Gambus", Available at: <https://tirto.id/sabyan-gambus-dan-asal-usul-musik-gambus-cL1R>, accessed 6 September 2020.

<sup>13</sup>See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zInuu9mvzuM&list=RDzInuu9mvzuM&start\\_radio=1&t=17](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zInuu9mvzuM&list=RDzInuu9mvzuM&start_radio=1&t=17), accessed 6 September 2020



However, when it was covered by Sabyan Gambus, the new video was viewed over 279 million times until 6 September 2020.<sup>14</sup> This indicates the case of how a particular Islamic song cover could gain more success than the original singer.

### *The origin of Aisha song & its lyrics*

The Internet with various social media platforms has accelerated both globalization and glocalization of cultural products and practices. In this context, the Aisha song cover has spread from Malaysia to Indonesia. According to various online news, and confirmed by its official YouTube, the song was composed and released by a Malaysian Projector Band on May 2017.<sup>15</sup> The song's original lyric did not contain religious messages as it does now. Its lyric was about a man who truly loved his girlfriend but he was sad to find that she betrayed him. The lyric was later changed by a Malaysian YouTuber, Hasbi Haji Muh Ali, or popularly called Mr. Bie, and uploaded it on YouTube in August 2017 with the permission from the song's original composer and label. The song's title was also changed from "Aisha - One, two, three, I Love You" to "Aisha the Prophet's Wife." Two years later, on 14 July 2019, a YouTuber from Riau, Siti Mu'allimah covered the song and attracted around 328 thousand viewers up to 10 September 2020. The song did not become viral in 2019 until it was covered by the former Sabyan backing vocalist, Anisa Rahman, on 23 March 2020, followed by other singers. On early April 2020 the song cover has attracted millions of viewers and thousands of subscribers. Anisa Rahman, for instance, attracted more than 47 million viewers while Nissa Sabyan obtained more than 112 million viewers from March to September 2020. This song has also become a trending topic in social

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<sup>14</sup>See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OMD\\_LSELAM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OMD_LSELAM), accessed 6 September 2020.

<sup>15</sup>See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7aRDIV2DUk>, accessed 20 June 2020.

media as many Indonesian celebrities such as Syakir Daulay, Via Vallen, and Andre Taulany also helped to popularise the song. Interestingly, due to it's trending, some YouTubers from several countries in the Middle East have covered it in Arabic version and obtained thousand views on average.

The Aisha song lyric is apparently about the Prophet's wife Aisha and her romantic interactions with her husband. Many commentators in YouTube praise the song and express their interest and hope to follow the Prophet's romantic love to Aisha. To capture the meaning of the song, below is the English translation of the lyrics:<sup>16</sup>

Noble, exquisite and stunning beauty  
With your flawless radiant skin with blushing cheeks  
She is Aisha, daughter of Abu Bakr  
A wife of the messenger of God

How sweet the Prophet loves you  
That he sips the drink from the same glass  
When you are upset, the Prophet teases you by pinching your nose

O Aisha, how romantic is your love story with the Prophet  
The Prophet used to run racing together with her  
You were always there till he took his last breath  
You were beside the Prophet

O Aisha, how romantic is your love story with the Prophet  
Unlike love story novel which starts from hate

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<sup>16</sup>This translation I adopt from an anonymous audience in YouTube who recommended that in comment sections. He or she said that it was taken from Hafizee Ideris as a translator. It is so far best translation that I found in YouTube. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPf0CH1u5ck>. Accessed 19 May 2020.

You are the beloved wife

O Aisha, Humaira, the Prophet loves and cares for you

His love for you is so sweet that he used to rest on your lap  
And you teased him by braiding his hair

O Aisha how romantic is your love story with the Prophet  
How playful you were with him  
You were always there till he took his last breath  
You were beside the Prophet

O Aisha, how romantic is your love story with the Prophet  
Unlike love story novel which starts from hate  
You are the beloved wife  
O Aisha, Humaira, the Prophet loves and cares for you)

The song above is simple and easy to listen to. From the word style expression, the lyrics use “you,” in reference to Aisha instead of “she” in order stress her presence and closeness to the audience. Since Aisha is presented with the Prophet, what emerges in the audience’s mind is the imagination of the happiness and love expression between the Prophet and Aisha through playful and romantic body movements and interactions. Despite its controversy, the lyrics are taken from Hadith texts that inform the Prophet and his wife, Aisha, during his lives.

### **The response of popular preachers: ethical reason?**

The new popular preachers have a growing influence among Muslim population in relation to any issue of political, social, and cultural one. The newly freedom of expression and highly accessible forms of communication

helps the emergence of new religious actors who contest political and religious authority while offering various options of Islamic voices in Indonesia.<sup>17</sup> The uses of social media by preachers have amplified their messages and help to bolster their authority and marketability among certain audience. The case of local elections in Jakarta and mobilization of anti-Ahok protest is among examples to see preacher's influence on Muslim societies.<sup>18</sup> As this paper is concerned, preachers also have a say on the case of Aisha song. Their remarks on popular culture are sometimes due to the question arising from their audience, and they seek to answer them. Their videos are then uploaded on YouTube and later become viral. The videos are widely viewed and shared and later become a national issue as national media, especially online ones, publish them. Several opinions vary among the preachers from those who criticize the lyric and singer's performance to those who support them with the cause of *dakwah*. However, the most shared criticism comes from Yahya Zainul Maarif or popularly known as Buya Yahya. Therefore, I will discuss his criticism more than other preachers.

Buya Yahya was the first preacher who criticizes the song through his YouTube Official video. He graduated from Al-Ahghaff University in Yemen. He currently lives in Cirebon, where he founded an institute for developing *da'wa* and the Pondok Pesantren Called Al-Bahjah<sup>19</sup>. His popularity started to rise due to his creative use of the Internet and social media. From his background and his sermon messages, Buya Yahya could be categorized as

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<sup>17</sup>Dale F. Eickelman and John W. Anderson, *New Media in the Muslim World: the Emerging Public Sphere*, USA: Indiana University Press, 1999, 1-2; For good account on contestation of religious authority in contemporary Indonesia see Norshahril Saat and Najib Burhani, *The Santri: Challenges to Traditional Religious Authority in Indonesia*, Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020, 2-3.

<sup>18</sup>See Ken Miichi, "Urban Sufi and Politics in Contemporary Indonesia: the Role of Dhikr Associations in the anti-'Ahok' Rallies", *South East Asia Research*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (2019), 225-237.

<sup>19</sup>"Profil Buya Yahya", Available at < <https://buyayahya.org/profile> > accessed on 31 August 2020.

a traditionalist as he often preach traditional Islam which is identical with the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)'s religious orientation. However, his sermons on YouTube points that he used to criticize some moderate Muslim figures such as Said Agiel Sirodj and Quraish Shihab. In some occasions, he endorsed the conservative preacher Habib Rizieq Shihab with his infamous group, the Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam, FPI), as well as allowed Muslims to participate in anti-Ahok rally in Jakarta arguing that the motivation is purely to defend Al-Qur'an.

The Al-Bahjah YouTube denotes that Habib Yahya received a question on the lyrics of Aisha song from his audience. He answered that the song composer might have good intentions to introduce Aisha to Muslims so that she could become a role model for them. However, he said that the song composer and the singer's performance are mistaken in depicting Aisha figure through merely a physical representation. For him, the song lyrics are too detailed in describing Aisha's body parts. He argues that all of this description is unethical for Aisha as she is the mother of Muslims (*ummahat al-mu'minin*) as mentioned by al-Qur'an. Therefore, he suggested as follow:

It would be better if someone could change the song's lyrics in order to present the special characters of Aisha such as a responsive, affectionate, firm and cheerful woman. Besides, one should also emphasize her respected position as an intelligent woman, an Islamic law thinker (*mujtahida*), and a hadith transmitter.<sup>20</sup>

His suggestion informs the audience that physical description can harm the noble position of the Prophet's wife. For Buya Yahya, describing Aisha's body parts, such as telling her lip, her rosy cheek, and nose could

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<sup>20</sup>Al-Bahjah TV, "Lirik Lagu dan Video "Siti Aisyah Istri Rasulullah" Menuai Kontroversi? Inilah Tanggapan Buya Yahya", Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLVrwlDPFW8&t=217s>, accessed 20 June 2020.

lead audience to imagine her body parts—something that is unethical and sinful to do as a Muslim. He also adds that a singer who performs in the video clips—who makes up her face and imitates Aisha’s physics—can also lead audience to imagine her beauty, her body, and her performance as representing Aisha, and therefore, this can disgrace her honor.<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly, after Buya Yahya has criticized the song on 4 April 2020, two days later in YouTube emerged a video by Yusuf Subhan, a preacher in Batam, who has sung the song with revised lyrics. This video has attracted about one million views and inspires some YouTube singers to cover the song with such new revision. In his video, the title is “The Prophet’s Wife Sayyida Aisha: New Lyrics Directed by Buya Yahya”.<sup>22</sup> It seems such title invites curiosity of many YouTube audience to watch the video. Despite its viewers are far behind to Anisa and popular song covers, several comments under the video support the singer and remark that the new lyrics are appropriate, polite, and respecting the honor of Aisha. In the new lyrics, several words related to physical signs of Aisha are removed. Those include ‘exquisite,’ ‘stunning beauty,’ ‘radiant skin,’ and ‘blushing cheeks.’ Moreover, words related to romantic gesture or expressions such as ‘pinching your nose,’ ‘rest on your lap’ and ‘braiding his hair’ are also removed. The Prophet’s reports (hadith) dealing with Aisha and the Prophet are actually similar to the words found in the lyrics. Some people might say that it has no problem as the words are in fact from the Prophet. However, Buya Yahya expressed his worry about singing bluntly with romantic expressions or bodily descriptions leading to disgracing Aisha’s honor.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Al-Bahjah TV, “Lirik Lagu dan Video...

<sup>22</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9n4BNW4xp5M>, accessed 31 August 2020.

<sup>23</sup>Al-Bahjah TV, “Lirik Lagu dan Video “Siti Aisyah Istri Rasulullah” Menuai Kontroversi? Inilah Tanggapan Buya Yahya”, Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLVrwlDPFW8&t=217s>, accessed 20 June 2020.

Some other preachers provided different responses to the song. A rising star preacher Abdul Somad opines in his YouTube that the lyrics might sound impolite for audience, yet they are the way millennial Muslims communicate their love to the Prophet's wife. In this sense, he sees the song as useful for promoting Islamic messages (*dakwah*) but he also realizes that there is a gap between the older and younger generations in expressing their love to their 'mother' Aisha. Therefore, he suggests people use beautiful and polite language to introduce the Prophet's wife.<sup>24</sup> When the revised version is out, he praises such attempt and hope more songs a like arose in the future. Another young preacher Felix Siau, however, does not object to the song. Instead, he sees the song can serve as an effective *dakwah* medium for introducing Aisha to the Muslim audience. He argued "the song's lyrics are relevant (to Muslim youth) making them being amazed and eager to follow Aisha and to get inspiration from her romantic love with the Prophet instead of following that of Song Hey Kyo and Song Joong Ki (Korean celebrity couple)".<sup>25</sup> This suggests that despite the song's controversy, some preachers appreciate the song as a medium of spreading Islamic messages due to the fact that there are contending views on music among ulama.

### **The response of young progressive Muslim writers**

The controversy over Aisha song is not only raised by popular preachers, but also by many young writers in various online media. Some of them wrote in online media linked to young progressive Muslim activists who are culturally connected to Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), such as [www.islami](http://www.islami).

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<sup>24</sup>Penjelasan Ust. Prof. Abdul Somad, Lc. Tentang Lirik Lagu Aisyah, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpHBIjCz9Rg&t=5s>, accessed 105 June 2020.

<sup>25</sup>Tempo.co, "Lagu Aisyah Istri Rasulullah Viral, Felix Siaw Buka Suara", available at: <https://seleb.tempo.co/read/1329229/lagu-aisyah-istri-rasulullah-viral-felix-siau-buka-suara>, accessed 31 August 2020.

co, [www.alif.id](http://www.alif.id), [www.SantriNews.com](http://www.SantriNews.com). Although being dominated by NU, it should be stressed that the contributors in those sites may come from various Islamic backgrounds. Due to the fact that many articles responding to the song are largely found in [Islami.co](http://Islami.co), I shall focus to such online media. Another progressive media that will be examined in this section is from Muhammadiyah young activists i.e. [www.ibtimes.id/](http://www.ibtimes.id/).

Islami was founded in 2013 and managed by young Muslims graduated from *pesantren* aiming at spreading information and progressive ideas that support tolerance and peace within Indonesian societies. As stated in the website, it is driven by rising anxiety over the increasing provocations and hates spread in social media that could lead them to violent conflict. Therefore, it sought to counter such provocative websites in order to spread the peaceful messages of Islam as underlined by the Prophet who emphasized ethics and humanity.<sup>26</sup> The presence of this website linked to NU is not a new phenomenon. It is as an extension of progressive NU linked NGOs and institutions in the past such as P3M, Lakpesdam, Rahima, and LKiS, which promote democracy, tolerance and pluralism, gender equity, and peace.<sup>27</sup> It seems that Islami tries to revive NU's progressive movement in cyberspace, which has been declined for several years.

Like *islami*, *ibtimes* also emerged as a response to increasing messy messages from several social media that contains hoaxes, hate speeches, and unintellectual Islamic discourses. The website calls itself as *wasatiya* (the middle) Islamic media that has a commitment to spread moderate and contextual Islamic messages by accommodating aspects of Islam

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<sup>26</sup>Redaksi, "Tentang Islami.co", Available at: <https://islami.co/tentang-islami-co/>, accessed 1 September 2020.

<sup>27</sup>See Carool Kersten, *Islam in Indonesia: Contest for Society, Ideas and Values*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 64-70; Laode Ida, *NU Muda, Kaum Progresif dan Sekularisme Baru*, Jakarta: Penerbit Erlangga, 2004.



(*keislaman*), modernity, and Indonesian-ness (*keindonesiaan*). It defines *wasatiya* as positioning Islamic teaching in the middle of two extreme poles by emphasizing the values of justice, virtues (*fadhil*), goodness, and moderation. Targeting millennial Muslims, the media expects to be alternative journalist channel that respects journalist ethics and Islamic values. By doing so, the media seeks to bring prosperity, justice, harmony, democracy and peace in Indonesia.<sup>28</sup>

Several articles in *Islami* have responded critically to the song lyrics. There were five articles coming out on April, a month when the song had become widely viral. Their criticism to the song is based on progressive interpretation of Islamic sources that emphasize gender equality and justice. The article of Nafizul Haq entitled “The Prophet’s Wife Aisha Song and Commodity of New Popular Culture”<sup>29</sup>, for instance, regards the song as the product of market demand which subordinates the position of women in society, and, therefore, gender bias. He further argues that the song positions women merely in the domestic area in which Aisha acted only as an object to the Prophet. The physical descriptions of Aisha such as her beauty and rosy cheeks as well as her piety, for the writer, only confirms the male imagination of ‘ideal woman.’ This tendency, for him, helps to weaken the role of Muslim women in the public sphere. He adds that male Muslim interpreters have justified such patriarchal view on women with religious texts. Therefore, he considers the song as a way to undermine Aisha as a commodity of men.

Other writers criticize the unfair description of Aisha that focuses only on her beauty and physics as well as her romantic love with the Prophet.

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<sup>28</sup>“Tentang IBTimes.ID – Kanal Moderasi Islam”, Available at <https://ibtimes.id/tentang-kami/>. Accessed 1 September 2020.

<sup>29</sup>Nafizul Haq, “Lagu Aisyah Istri Rasul dan Komoditas Budaya Populer Baru”, Available at: <https://islami.co/lagu-aisyah-istri-rasul-dan-komoditas-budaya-populer-baru/>, accessed 1 July 2020.

Zamzami, for instance, asked readers to capture complete qualities of Aisha as reported in history. He described that Aisha has a number of special qualities such as: strong memorization of details, deep understanding and analysis, problem solving ability and communication skills.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, argued the author, after the Prophet's death, Aisha emerged as a great teacher and expert in Qur'anic interpretation (*tafsir*). To show that Aisha's expertise, he adds:

“Some companions praised the special figure of Aisha. Abu Musa Al-Ash'ari for instance, said if we found difficulties in understanding a hadith, we would consult to Aisha to verify the truth and ask her about the right understanding of the hadith... Due to her intellectual capacities, she had a respected position among people, either women or men.”<sup>31</sup>

In line with Zamzami, another writer, Al-Baweany, states that Aisha was among a great transmitter of hadith among the Prophet's companions. It was reported that she was in the fourth position (among seven) after Abu Huraira, Abdullah bin Umar, and Anas bin Malik. Al-Baweany mentioned that Aisha had reported 2210 hadith during her lifetime. Considering Aisha lived with the Prophet, therefore, many of her transmitted hadiths were related to the Prophet's deeds such as ablution, prayer, pilgrimage, and so forth.<sup>32</sup>

Writers in ibtimes also have quite similar concerns and arguments with those in Islami. Besides emphasizing the intellectual capacity as done by Islami, some writers move further to consider Aisha as a figure of leading Muslim women and activist in the history of Islam. Saputro is the main

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<sup>30</sup>Mukh. Zamzami, “Yang Hilang dari Lirik Lagu Aisyah Istri Rasulullah”, Available at: <https://islami.co/yang-hilang-dari-lirik-lagu-aisyah-istri-rasulullah/>, accessed 3 July 2020.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup>Muhammad Syamsuddin Al-Baweany, “Kontribusi Sayyidah Aisyah dalam Tafsir Al-Quran Yang Jarang Diketahui”, Available at: <https://islami.co/ini-kontribusi-sayyidah-aisyah-dalam-tafsir-al-quran-yang-jarang-diketahui/>, accessed 1 July 2020.

writer, who considers Aisha as an inspiring female activist in juxtaposition with other Indonesian female figures such as Nyai Ontosoroh (an important figure in a popular novel by Pramoedya Ananta Toer), Kartini, and Siti Walidah.<sup>33</sup> Saputro elaborates one third of his article dealing with Aisha's intellectual capacity. He then adds that many great female leaders in history showed their intellectuality and activism and inspired later generation. He mentioned that fictional figure in Pramoedya's novel, Nyai Ontosoroh, as well as real Indonesian figures such as Kartini and Walidah, all love learning and reading. Kartini learned from her brother and her religious teacher, but also learned from her correspondence letter with her friend in the Netherlands. All of this, stated the writer, allowed her to fight for women's education right and emancipation among her society. He also linked Aisha with Siti Walidah, one among founders of women organization wing of Muhammadiyah,<sup>34</sup> The naming of Aisyiyah was aimed at following the steps of Aisha. This organization helped to provide education and awareness to Muhammadiyah cadre members. Thus, this article indicates that the author considers Aisha as an ideal progressive Muslim women and an inspiration for Muslim women.

Another writer, Anny, not only discusses Aisha's respected intellectuality but also her capacities in religious and political matters.<sup>35</sup> She says that Aisha had high curiosity and never stopped asking her teachers until the answers satisfied her. In relation to politics, she used to criticize the caliph Uthman b. Affan's policies due to political and social unrests that happened under his rule. One of her criticism was about the appointment

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<sup>33</sup>Royaldo Saputro, "Membayangkan Aisyah Istri Rasulullah Seperti Nyai Ontosoroh, Kartini, atau Siti Walidah", Available at: <https://ibtimes.id/membayangkan-aisyah-istri-rasulullah-seperti-nyai-ontosoroh-kartini-atau-siti-walidah/>, accessed 2 July 2020.

<sup>34</sup>Muhammadiyah is one of the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia with modernist orientation.

<sup>35</sup>Anny, "Aisyah Ibu Spiritual Kader Perempuan Muhammadiyah", Available at: <https://ibtimes.id/aisyah-ibu-spiritual-kader-perempuan-muhammadiyah/>, accessed 2 July 2020.

of state officials who lacked of expertise and responsibility in carrying out their duties. In the case of religious matters, Aisha was critical to the practices of temporary marriage (*nikah mut'ah*) among companions after the Prophet's death. She referred to the Qur'anic verse, Al-Mu'minun: 5-6, to indicate that a Muslim can only have sexual intercourse with his legal wife or his slave. In another case, the writer also touches upon Aisha's being critical to the hadith's content reported by Abu Huraira. The hadith stated that the source of bad luck comes from women, horses, and houses. Hearing this hadith, Aisha directly rejected the hadith that undermines the position of women. She argued that it was not what the Prophet had meant, but addressed his criticism to the ignorant Quraish society who regarded women as a source of bad luck in life.<sup>36</sup> This indicates that the writer emphasizes the critical character of Aisha that was not represented in the song. It also appears that both writers see Aisha as an emancipatory figure who tried to liberate women from the previous male-dominant culture.

### **The responses of YouTube's audience**

Indonesian singers who cover Aisha songs have enjoyed plenty of viewers and comments. Anisa's video on 6 September 2020, for instance, has reached 47.597.514 viewers and received 40.551 comments. Most comments show their enjoyment and appreciation to the singer due to her melodious voice, her performance styles, and the song's lyric, which describes the Prophet's love expression to her wife Aisha. Based on an online observation, about 50% comments have been pertained to Anisa's best voices and performance, 10% on various issues, while about 40% of comments point to the song's lyrics pertaining to the Prophet's romance with Aisha. The criticism of Buya Yahya and progressive activists has not

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<sup>36</sup>Anny, "Aisyah Ibu Spiritual Kader Perempuan Muhammadiyah"...

affected on discontinuing the rising viewers. In fact, more viewers have been coming after April's controversy and supporting Anisa's performance. I found only one viewer who criticized the song and suggested using sayyida (lord) in the lyrics, while another viewer suggested the first wife, Khadija, should also be represented through song. The majority of commentators support and praise the singer, her song lyrics, and her performance. This indicates that the pleasure aspect of listening and watching the singer's performance as well as religious-romantic messages in the song's lyrics are all interplayed in increasing the singer's appeal.

It is no doubt that the singer's voice is one among important elements in the production of viewers and listeners. Anisa is no exception; the majority of viewers on her official YouTube account praise her melodic voice. Anisa was only a backing vocal when she joined the Sabyan Gambus and was not as popular as its lead singer, Nissa. However, when she quitted from the group and launched her new cover song Aisha, her name has been on fame. To her fans, Anisa has a special character of voice that suits with Aisha song. She has a crooked voice that is pleasurable to some audience. For this song, many audience consider her voice better than other song covers:

Among various cover song versions. I think this one is the most exciting to listen. The combination of musical arrangement and her beautiful voice makes me excited to hear. Please cover other songs too (Sely Kania S4, April 2020).

After listening to Sabyan's version, I move to this channel. To be frank, I prefer this (Anisa's version). It's sweeter as it has a crooked sound (not dangdut anyway). Most importantly, it's more suitable with this song (Andi Nur Zam Zam, April 2020).

Anisa's voice is powerful. It's melodious, sweet, and touching. Anyone has different taste. I'd rather love Anisa's voice. It has a soft hoarseness that leads to eargasm. For Nisa Sabyan, her voice is so soft and less powerful.

It's just my opinion (Queensha K. Rifdha, April 2020).

Most of the viewers' comments on the song's lyrics point to their religious aspiration for the compatibility between Islam and romance. The Prophet Muhammad is the central figure here as he is considered by Muslims not only as the messenger of God but also as a moral model in everyday life. Generally, Muslims see him as representation of religious ideals and, therefore, the issue of love or romance is not much discussed as this is regarded as 'secular space' and prone to the Western popular culture. However, the contemporary development of Islamic popular culture in the last two decades, in the form of novel and movie, has introduced an Islamic romance that guides a couple to marriage or romance after marriage.<sup>37</sup> The presentation of the Prophet as a romantic model in the popular culture has not emerged yet. Therefore, when Aisha song has arisen, this strengthens the historical justification of 'Islamic romance' as exemplified by the Prophet himself and her wife. In this sense, the Prophet is seen as an ideal husband who treated his wife gently and romantically. The admiring comments in YouTube could be seen as follow:

Maa shaa Allah (God has willed), her voice...the first part of the song makes me crying...how sweet was the story of the Prophet and Aisha...Thanks Anisa for singing this beautiful song, with beautiful voice (Myta Laili, April 2020)

People say that Dilan and Milea, Romeo and Juliet were the most romantic couple, yet when they listen to this song their heart will be touched because the most romantic love is the Prophet's (Leon PJ71, April 2020).

I really idolize a husband figure like the Prophet...I really adore Him who loved all her wives... how romantic was his marriage life (Nis Anisa1583,

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<sup>37</sup>See Mohd. Zariat Abdul Rani, "Islam, Romance and Popular Taste in Indonesia: A Textual Analysis of *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* by Habiburrahman El-Shirazy and *Syahadat Cinta* by Taufiqurrahman Al-Azizy", *Indonesia and Malay World*, Vol. 40, No. 116 (2012), 59-73; Syamsul Rijal, "Dakwah Novel and Commodification of Islam in Indonesia: The Case of Verses of Love", *Jurnal Al-Hadharah* Vo. 9, No. 18 (2010), 65-78.

June 2020).

The facial expression and gestures of Anisa in singing the song also adds the credits of her appeal. The way Anisa sings by smiling and enlivening the song, for some audience, has represented Aisha's happy and friendly character. Some audience considered her performance is better than other song covers who sing with serious and sad mimic. In their imagination, Aisha was cheerful and happy with the Prophet, and therefore, she should be represented likewise. Some audience commented:

...This version is the most natural with appropriate mimics and expression and smiles from Anisa Rahman. She could describe the lyrics containing cuteness, love, and romance of Aisha and the Prophet, which makes us proud of Aisha's beauty. God has willed...May God reward the song composer with mercy, goodness and blessing... I cannot stop crying when I listen to the lyrics and it's suitable melody (JQ Saini March 2020)

This is the best version. It's soft, cool and touching in the way she sings. Both lyrics and expression are well delivered...you are cool sister. All the best for you Sis! (Jaya Maulana, May 2020)

She sings very sincerely while smiling as if she is expressing the love story of the Prophet. It makes me crying...For me, this song cover version is the most heart-touching (Kiki Krisnawati May 2020).

From the audience comments, we can see that romantic interaction between the Prophet and his wife Aisha in the song lyrics has become an important part of the song's popularity. The description of Aisha's physics and her interaction with the Prophet conveys a message to audience that both are also human couple like ordinary people who express love and romance. Although being criticized by some preachers and progressive activists, the video has been positively welcome by majority of Muslim audience in social media. In this regard, it has a particular appeal to young Muslims, either male or female, who aspire to be pious and romantic.

## Conclusion

This article has described the Aisha song and analysed the response of three Muslim groups consisting of popular preachers, progressive writers, and Islamic song's audience. It found that the positive response from larger Muslim audience over the song has indicated that their position contrasts to the preachers and progressive writers. The first group could be seen as conservative preachers who strictly maintain Islamic ethics (yet, this matter is still debatable among ulama themselves), while the second one is a progressive group who base their argument from Islamic tradition and gender perspective. The first camp uses ethical consideration in viewing the song's lyrics that may ruin the honour of Aisha. This view seems to be based on Sunni theology that opposes Shi'as critical attitude towards Aisha. The second camp, however, criticizes the song since it ignores other important capacities of Aisha. Moreover, they see the song tends to subordinate Aisha's role only in domestic area rather than in public one where Aisha used to perform her intellectuality and leadership.

The audience's comments on YouTube illustrates that the rationale behind their consumption lies in pleasure (voice and performance) and religious-romantic lyrics. Most comments do not ask critically about the lyrics, but just express their enjoyment and their admiring to the singer and her song. For them, the basis of Islamic romance is there and it was exemplified by the Prophet and His wife. Many of the audience admire the Prophet's romance and aspire to follow that in their family life.

This study illustrates that the position of larger Muslim audience lies beyond conservative and progressive poles reflecting the general pattern of Indonesian Muslim societies nowadays. The current Indonesian Muslims are becoming more pious yet consumptive. The proliferation of various Islamic products have been available and accessible though offline and online markets allowing them to perform their pietistic identity and



social status at the same time. Indonesian Muslim societies are now more preoccupied with conventional religious teaching and rituals than being interested in critical thinking on Islamic teaching and its histories. Neither they are interested in conservative tenets that hamper their passion in consuming Islamic products. It is in this context, the emergence of Aisha song appeals to Muslims, especially the youths, who seek justification for Islamic romance. Whether it is unethical or not, it is not the point for them. For the audience, the song is pleasurable and consuming it is apart of expressing faith and enjoying the romantic messages from the song. It is, therefore, understandable that the progressive group has less impact on them since the main message for them is seeking pleasure, guidance, and justification for love or romance in Islamic version.

The case of Aisha song also raises the issue of elite Islam vs. ordinary Islam. It shows that religious leaders and preachers do not always have influence on Muslim societies. Moreover, their opinion or Islamic messages cannot represent the voice of Muslim majority. Ordinary Islam, however, is flexible and sometimes has its own logic. They are shaped by both global and local influences, be it social, religious or economic ones, that enable them to have distinctive understanding and taste of religious products. In this sense, the presence of Aisha song is a way of consuming pleasure as well as expressing and deepening their faith through listening and singing the song. Hence, this sort of song's consumption strengthens the general trend that young Indonesian Muslims aspire for being pious and modern.

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