Islamic Music and Qur’anic Arts in the Time of the Corona Pandemic: Collaborative Research and Virtual Ethnography “in” Indonesia

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Abstract: This contribution describes collaborative research designed and implemented by a team of three scholar-teachers: two of us in Indonesia and one in Virginia. After a year in quarantine, each of us was challenged by the inability to continue our own ethnographic research projects on religious culture in Indonesia and the limitations on international collaboration effected by the corona pandemic. Using zoom meetings for planning and ‘virtual ethnography’ as a method of data collection, our collaborative research investigates the challenges presented by the pandemic among practitioners of Islamic music and Qur’anic arts, and educators in Indonesia’s Islamic universities. Three focused group discussions (FGD) in April and May 2021 brought together diverse voices on the effects of the corona pandemic on Islamic music, Qur’anic arts, and the social rituals where they normally occur. Open-ended questions allowed FGD participants to share their perspectives on the effects of the past year’s quarantine protocol on the social, cultural, economic, artistic, and ritual aspects of daily life in Indonesia, and the various innovations and best practices that have developed during these challenging times. In addition to collecting qualitative data from community individuals, our FGDs also allowed various scholars and practitioners to converse with one another. The geographic and institutional breadth of our research team is extended by the variety of invited participants in our FGDs. They are artists, religious leaders, and academics from the areas of Jakarta, Yogyakarta, Surakarta, Semarang, Malang, Bandung, Medan, Padang, Banda Aceh, and Manado. Through this series of conversations and with innovative, collaborative research methods we are re-thinking the parameters of ethnography at the intersection of society, culture, religion, gender, and the arts in Indonesia in the time of the corona pandemic.
Religious life permeates the Indonesian public sphere. Dependent as it is on the actions and interactions of individuals and communities in social contexts, aspects of religious, expressive culture, from ritual to recreation, were abruptly curtailed with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in Spring 2020. While the pandemic effected real life around the world, it also affected those of us who study it.

Compelled by quarantine and the vast physical distance of oceans and continents, three scholars, in Williamsburg, Virginia, USA (Rasmussen), Jakarta, Indonesia (Darmadi), and Jombang, East Java, Indonesia (As'ad), came together over the internet. Our scheduled zoom conversations focused on our joint fascination with the “corona-verse” that was evolving around us and our concern for the artists, educators, and practitioners whom we knew. Our scheduled sessions blossomed organically into a research plan to document a moment in time when a collective of our interlocutors, all of them in the business of religion, adapted and innovated in response to one impediment after another, many of them experiencing untold trauma, tragedy, illness, and death. Our attempt to catch the winds of the pandemic as they were blowing, chronicles the resilience and misfortune, triumph and frustration among a group of people known to us through Rasmussen’s previous fieldwork in Indonesia and Darmadi and As'ad's professional and community networks. It is, following Timothy Rice (2014), “It is, following Timothy Rice (2014), an ethnomusicology in times of trouble.” Our collective of physically immobilized men and women, situated in a geographic territory that spanned from the tip of Sumatra in Banda Aceh, through West, Central, and East Java, and all the way north to Manado, Sulawesi, became interlocutors in ethnographic research, carried out virtually, something that would have never transpired were it not for the methodological limitations that were foisted upon us in the early months of the corona pandemic.

Although Rasmussen’s fieldwork planned for 2020 and 2021 was cancelled, and while Darmadi and As'ad struggled to keep their university teaching and research programs afloat, new opportunities for social and professional connection and reconnection presented themselves both in spite of but also because of trans-global physical distancing. Our work, which began as an urgent need to find out, understand, and document, responds to some of the most pressing issues in the social sciences today in both the global arena and
among scholars in and of Indonesia (Achwan 2010; Syafruddin et al. 2017). Among other issues, our project responds to the following: the call to de-colonize the humanities (SEM Student News 2016; Kurniawan 2017; Brown 2020; Supratman 2021); to research collaboratively toward the creation of new knowledge (Lassiter 2001); to address the sustainability of oral traditions passed on in community (Giri 2022); and to register that knowledge in acts of coauthorship (Rubenstein 1991; Lassiter 2001). As we put people into conversation with one another, our methodology took on an aura of the public humanities with its objectives of applied and participatory-action research. On a more local level, the extraordinary initiatives, creative innovation, and necessary adaptation described by our participants who moved their piety online challenged the traditional skepticism of mass-mediated religious activity in Indonesia (Hussein & Slama 2018). Finally, this first collaborative, coauthored work is an attempt to correct the lopsidedness of power relations and knowledge creation in the Global North and South.

Our contribution to this special issue on music making and music research in the Pacific and South-East Asia during the COVID-19 pandemic covers eight aspects of our collective research and virtual ethnography conducted over about seven months in 2021. Following author introductions, we outline the project and frame our methodology, teasing out emergent themes and recognizing common ground between ourselves and our participants. The various scenarios recounted by our interlocutors in response to specific questions and in free-form discussions reveal unique adaptations, economic impacts, the challenges of the communal life of the religious boarding school or pondok pesantren, as well as some fantastic, crazy, and surprising stories. Our conclusions are provisional, but we believe they resonate far beyond the circles of our focus groups in terms of both time and space. We did not anticipate the severity of the third wave of the corona pandemic in Indonesia and elsewhere in the world, a phenomenon that seriously affected some of the participants in our focused discussion groups. We would like to dedicate our article to the memory of Irwansyah Harahap, and to his wife Ritahony Hutajuluh, both of them participants in our project.
Co-author introductions

Anne Rasmussen

I was awarded an American Council of Learned Societies fellowship in the spring of 2021. Ah! How wonderful, I thought, not to have to navigate the troubled waters on campus at the College of William and Mary during the pandemic. But the semester away from teaching that the fellowship provided was predicated on the summer of 2020 when I was supposed to be in Indonesia, on a fellowship supported by an American Institute for Indonesian Studies (AIFIS) grant, and engaged in collaborative research toward my next book, Monsoon Music: The Soundscape of Indonesian Islam in an Indian Ocean World. What was my project supposed to look like now? Who was I as a researcher without the possibility of fieldwork? All of the events that I had planned to attend in Indonesia – conferences, competitions, festivals – and the Indonesian colleagues with whom I had hoped to collaborate felt very far away. Since both Dadi Darmadi and Muhammad As'ad had invited me to participate in workshops and symposia originally planned for summer 2020, it was to them that I turned, first, for conversation and then collaboration.

Dadi Darmadi

I am a lecturer and researcher at the Islamic National University, Syarif Hidayatullah, in Jakarta, Indonesia, where I also serve as the Head of the International Office and Cooperation. I have worked with Anne Rasmussen on many occasions, collaborating with her research projects for over two decades. By early 2020, we were supposed to continue our collaborative research. We had outlined our plans, contacted most of the people and groups with whom we wanted to work, lined up all of our resources and the necessary documents, and secured the funding. After the disappointing summer of 2020 when everything was canceled, I began to think about research in times of COVID-19. I was curious about the implications of the COVID-19 lockdown on the research of students and colleagues across Indonesia and beyond. Surely the plans of many others had been interrupted as well. As the pandemic progressed, I started to see the many ways in which research partnerships and collaborative plans ended up having to be rescheduled, postponed,
or even canceled. We began online teaching and so-called blended-learning (even doing some kind of 'virtual ethnography'). We watched YouTube videos, including live music concerts, with positive (financial) outcomes and rave reviews. “What are these people doing? They look fantastic!” Ibu Anne and I shared some interesting stories and our experiences. That is how it all began.

Muhammad As'ad

I am a lecturer and researcher at Universitas Hasyim Asyari at Pondok Pesantren Tebuireng, in Jombang, East Java. My research interest is in various expressions of Islamic music in Indonesia. My latest study is on the shalawat performance in Surakarta, East Java, initiated by a Bā ‘Alawī preacher, Habib Syech bin Abdul Qadir Assegaf. I have been an admirer of the work of Prof. Anne Rasmussen for some time. Her works on Islamic music in Indonesia inspired me to study the diversity of Islamic music in my country. After meeting with her in Amsterdam in 2018, we had a productive communication that led to this collaborative research to understand how the corona pandemic affects Islamic music practitioners and Qur’an reciters. As the pandemic hits the economy hard, it is interesting to see how the musicians and reciters of the Qur’an adapted to the situation and survived during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even with limitations due to the lockdown and curfew from the government, the three of us were able to have meetings with several groups of musicians, Qur’anic reciters and researchers of music and ethnomusicology from all over Indonesia through an improvised method of virtual ethnography.

Methodology

Our work represents the cooperation of four institutions: The College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, USA; Universitas Islam Negri Syarif Hidayatullah (the State Islamic University) in Jakarta, Indonesia; Universitas Hasyim Asyari at Pondok Pesantren Tebuireng, in Jombang, East Java, Indonesia; and AIFIS, whose staff and board supported our collaboration by contributing some modest funding and encouraging our participation in their first international conference in Islamic Studies held jointly with Michigan State University.
Following a memorandum of interest among our four institutions, we convened three focus group discussions (FGDs) via Zoom. The first FGD on 1 April 2021 brought together practitioners of Islamic musical arts (called seni musik Islam in Bahasa Indonesia, the national language). The second FGD, which was held during the month of Ramadan on 22 April 2021, engaged professional reciters of the Qur’an called Qori’ (m.) and Qori’a (f.), who often also teach Qur’anic recitation, train contestants preparing to compete in the national system of competitions, and judge or otherwise organize such competitions in Qur’anic arts. The third FGD occurred just after the Lebaran vacation, on 3 June 2022, and brought together colleagues in Indonesia who study and teach Islamic studies, including culture and the arts.

We (the researchers) met via Zoom approximately 15 times, each for at least two hours, to plan and then process each FGD. The number and frequency of our meetings, given our disparate locations, was an extraordinary luxury in comparison to on-the-ground fieldwork in Indonesia, where life is busy, distances are far, and traffic is prohibitive. The trade-off for the kind of deep ethnographic research in which all three of us have engaged was the artificial construction of a much more controlled time and space. And while the discussions among the three of us and during the events we organized were rich and concentrated, the busy noisiness that characterizes ritual and social life in Indonesia were lacking. The research, while rich in discursive fodder, is not the kind of fieldwork that produces narratives in the ethnographic present, redolent with multisensory descriptions of people in context, followed by explanations through the interpretive lens of the intrepid anthropologist.

Rather than the researchers procuring invitations to events, each participant of the FGD received a formal letter of invitation and then a confirmation of their participation with links to our Zoom sessions. In line with Indonesian protocol, we created certificates of participation for everyone and also offered subsidies for certain of our participants who required support for access to the internet. The FGD, a format which is usually done face-to-face, generally transfers well to an online format such as Zoom. In some cases, our participants were connecting with friends and associates, in other cases, they were meeting each other for the first time. Of course, holding these meetings via Zoom was far less expensive and time-consuming for our
research team than it would have been if these events had been held face-to-face.

Our 30 participants represent a wide variety of institutions:

- From Java: State Islamic Universities (Universitas Islam Negri or UIN) including UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta; UIN Maulana Ibrahim, Malang; and UIN Sunan Gunung Jati, Bandung. Representatives also attended from the High Institute of Arts (Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia), Yogyakarta, and from the Institut Ilmu al-Qur'an, Jakarta (Institute for the Study of the Qur’an), a women’s college for Qur’anic studies.
- From Sumatra: the Institut Seni Budaya (Institute for Cultural Arts) Indonesia, Aceh, the University of Syiah Kuala, Aceh and the University of North Sumatra, Medan.
- From Sulawesi: the State Islamic University, UIN, Manado

The academic areas of interest and expertise among our participants include all kinds of Islamic studies from various disciplinary perspectives, including sociology, anthropology, politics, interfaith studies, ethics, gender, local religions, and jurisprudence. The academic disciplines of music, ethnomusicology, theater, dance, traditional arts, and Qur’anic arts were also represented.

Many of the people who joined our FGDs play multiple roles, even if they identify themselves with only one title. Among our professional reciters (Qari’, Qari’ah), for example, we have people:

- who are university professors or students
- who direct and manage Islamic boarding schools or Pondok Pesantrens
- who coach in and judge Qur’anic recitation competitions called Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur’an
- who guide and advise regarding the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, and Umroh, the lesser pilgrimage)
- who lead study groups (Majelis Taklim)
- who manage mosques
• who serve as officers and advisors in organizations, for example, Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest Islamic social organization in Indonesia founded in 1926
• who are members of the National Council of Religious Leaders (Majelis Ulama Indonesia)
• who work as preachers or speakers (da’i)
• who work as professional reciters

The musicians among our group of participants are creators of and collaborators in the following genres of Islamic music (seni music Islam).

Gambus: a genre focusing on Arabic and Muslim-themed music, named after the gambus lute, also known as the ‘ud in Arabic

Qasidah Rebana: a genre of Islamic-themed music, often performed by women’s groups who sing and play instruments, particularly the rebana, a frame drum unique to Indonesia

Hajir Marawis: a genre of Islamic-themed music involving the hajir drum and several marwas / pl. marawis, which are played in rapid, interlocking patterns

Sholawat: songs in praise of the prophet Muhammad performed in a number of styles by professional and amateur groups; solawat singing can be an aspect of community ritual or religious-themed programming

Gamelan Dakwah: describes the ensemble established by Kiai Kanjeng and its musical director Novi Budianto beginning in the 1990s, which uses traditional instruments of the gamelan along with other Indonesian and non-Indonesian instruments

They are also instrument makers, coaches and teachers in schools and universities, and founding members of important groups, such as:

• Kiai Kanjeng, (Emha Ainun Nadjib), Yogyakarta, Java
• Nasida Ria, Semarang, Java, now in their fourth generation of professional female qasidah groups
• Suara Sama, Medan, Sumatra (Irwansyah Harahap and Ritahony Hutajullu)
• Tani Maju, Malang, Java
• Safaraz & Corona Gambus Bands, Jakarta
• Orkes Gambus, El Fatah, Jombang, East Java
• JAMURI (Jama'ah Muji Sholawat Putri, Female Sholowat Praise Ensemble) Solo, Java
• Sholawat Habib Syech, anchored in Solo, Java

**Figure 1.** A screen shot of our focused group discussion, April 22, 2021, with professional reciters of the Qur’an, most of whom play multiple roles such as for example teachers and community leaders.

All three FGD sessions were recorded and lasted between two and three hours. In order to prepare for the joint presentation at two international conferences in July and August, 2021, each of the three of us used our own methods to analyze and interpret our data, namely, the recorded testimony of our participants. Muhammad As'ad arranged for the transcription of each session into Bahasa Indonesia, the national Indonesian language, at the Universitas Hasyim Asyari, and then coded the transcriptions using a three-step coding technique: open, axial, and selective coding. The open coding was used to break down the data and create initial categories with the intention “to consider all possible meanings” (Straus and Corbin 2008:59). Afterwards, axial coding was applied to analyze the categories and put them together with some related codes into one group. Subsequently, selective coding was conducted to find key categories which appear during the process of open
and axial coding. All of these processes were done in Atlas.ti, a software for analyzing qualitative data. In the first step, he categorized the FGD session data into small parts of sentences, phrases or words (in vivo codes), such as “performing with a limited audience,” gaining “technical skills,” or “making videos.” Next, he used the process of axial coding where statements were categorized into groups, such as “performing during covid.” Finally, he tried to connect these codes and groups to find key themes that ran through the collective discourse of our virtually held discussions. Each of the three FGDs took on a life of its own. The 13 questions that we sent to the participants in advance served as springboards for the interaction that unfolded at each event. Themes of the pandemic also emerged in conversation between the participants and from individual stories. We outline several of them here.

The rupture of everyday life

All 30 participants were ready with stories of where they were and what they were doing at the moment of lockdown. Dasrizal, a Jakarta-based, internationally renowned Qari’ from Padang, West Sumatra, was attending a provincial-level competition in Qur’anic recitation (Musabaqah Tilawat-il Qur’an) in Banggai, Central Sulawesi when the government announced the enactment of large-scale social restrictions (Pembatasan Social Berskala Besar). Had Dasrizal and his entourage not been able to secure a flight from Sulewesi back to Jakarta immediately, they would have been forced to remain for at least several weeks due to the suspension of air travel.

Hasani Said, also a prominent Qari’, was on duty as a guide for Umrah pilgrims in Mecca and Turkey. They felt lucky that they got air tickets to immediately return to Indonesia three days before the Pembatasan Social Berskala Besar was implemented there, and were not held back or stranded, adrift in Saudi Arabia like thousands of other Umrah pilgrims.

Dindin, a lecturer in Karawitan (Javanese gamelan traditions) at the Institut Seni Budaya in Aceh, was on a study assignment in Solo, Central Java, which was declared a black zone (zona hitam) because of the COVID case rate. He made the split-second decision to return to Aceh to be with his family, and to continue his studies online.
Pandemic dynamics

Due to the mandate to socially distance, most concerts, ritual gatherings, official events, and family celebrations, including weddings and funerals, had to be canceled. It is fair to say that all of our participants, even those with official full-time jobs, benefit from various part-time employment or side jobs (kerja sampingan). Thus, the cancellation of all gigs, events, rituals, parties, concerts, gatherings, etc. had an impact on every one of our participants.

Regulations from government officials were “fluktuatif” (constantly in flux), we were told, and advice from religious leaders and even civic institutions was contradictory. Not surprisingly, there was a great deal of confusion around Ramadan (23 April to 23 May 2020) and the Hajj (22 July to 19 August 2020). As the fasting month of Ramadan approached, the government’s response seemed slow. Even though mass organizations, such as Muhammadiyah, were bold and clear from the start, giving warnings about the dangers of a pandemic, Islamic organizations broadcast many different opinions. Overall, crowds were prohibited from congregational rituals in mosques and other places. The hajj was completely cancelled for Indonesians, who normally send upwards of 200,000 pilgrims to the hajj every year (more than any other country).

Adaptation

Our participants, particularly those with regular teaching obligations, identified numerous problems and challenges with the mandatory pivot to online learning. Several university instructors explained that although their institutions purchased software called the “Academic Information System,” it was not user-friendly and not all instructors were able to learn how to use it. Instead, many people moved their teaching and communications with students and colleagues to the platforms they were already using, that included Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok.

In spite of the ease of using familiar technologies, many students admitted that their level of understanding of lecture materials was low because technologies such as WhatsApp, by far the most common platform among people of all generations in Indonesia, were limited to sending messages and
sharing documents, PowerPoint presentations, and videos. As an alternative, one professor, Asep M. Iqbal from UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung in West Java, created his own YouTube channel, “Sociology Explains,” to allow students to access his lectures anywhere, anytime and as many times as they needed to in order to master the course content; other professors did the same.

Due to the real-time, interactive capability of Zoom, this application became popular (and eventually, more readily available); however, using Zoom also presented problems because it requires a good internet connection and a large internet quota. Both instructors and students left the big cities and campus to return home to regions with weak broadband connectivity, consequently, not all of them had access to good internet services. Issues of injustice and inequality became abundantly clear.

This weighed heavily on the minds of certain of our consultants. Professor Ibu Nadroh, for example, made a distinction between the types of institutions where she teaches, including those where the infrastructure for adaptation to COVID-19 is very minimal. Her concern is paraphrased here: “We want to build a better young generation but are we really going to ask our students to buy internet packages (pulsa) when they should be helping their families with the farming, helping their parents with anything?”

**Daring and luring**

The dichotomy between live and virtual delivery and experience is perfectly encapsulated with the pair of singkatan DaRing, Dalam Jaringan (“inside the network,” what we would call virtual, remote, or online) and LuRing, Luar Jaringan (“outside the network” or offline, what we would call live or face-to-face). The terms daring and luring peppered the discourse of our participants regarding their COVID-19 experience. One further distinction to be made is whether daring activities are synchronous (in real time) or asynchronous.

It was not just that the Academic Information System required a steep learning curve; many of our participants commented that even those who were tech savvy were just tired of talking in front of their computer screens all day with no reaction. We heard the expression: kurang hangat, there is no warmth, no chemistry. Leo Zainy from Universitas Negeri Malang adapted
the millennial slang term “ghosting” to the ensemble of black/blank screens that greet him every day in the virtual classroom, and he described the tricks he designed to try to keep students engaged. Ethnomusicologists and musicians Ritahony Hutajulu and Irwansyah Harahap from Universitas Sumatra Utara, Medan, and Ari Blothong from Institut Seni Indonesia, Yogyakarta, mentioned the challenge of teaching music to students who did not have instruments at home, a challenge that Anne and many of her colleagues also faced.

Teaching Qur’anic recitation normally constitutes a very intimate and physical teacher-student exchange and many reciters commented on the challenges they faced. The internationally renowned Qur’anic reciter, Maria Ulfah, described the tedium of teaching “lagu al Qur’an” online (dalam jaringan). Her students normally respond as a group: a great big class in full voice, imitating her examples of Arabic melody, the maqamat, over and over. She selectively calls on individuals to perform solo for the class in this florid style of recitation called mujawwad, a style of recitation for which Maria Ulfah is famous. But on Zoom, she must ask each student to unmute and perform individually. Students who followed online classes from public spaces were obliged to wear masks and the inability to see students’ mouths presented an additional challenge. When teaching the perfect marriage between tune and text, a reciter must attend to the details of tajwid and makhraj al-huruf, namely, the treatment of the text and the way the Arabic letters are formed and pronounced, respectively (Rasmussen 2010: Chapter 3).

Professor Yayha Mohammad from UIN Maulana Ibrahim, Malang, made everyone laugh with his confession. To paraphrase Professor Yahya: “We also aren’t confident that we are delivering the best teaching via zoom and we have pity for our students who are trying to present and participate in class through terrible, weak internet connections. In the end we inflate their grades. The student who might have gotten a B+ gets an A and the student who should get a B- gets a B+.”

Pivoting to life online presented challenges to all, but the discovery and the intensification of new daring technologies was clearly energizing for many participants as well. Dr. Wiwi told us about the 35 tadarrus (religious instruction) videos that she made for Ramadan 2020, each one including a two-minute prayer followed by a five-minute lecture. She also described the
challenges for Muslimat NU, the women’s organization of Nahdlatul Ulema, the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia. “Many of these women are between 50 and 80 years old,” Dr. Wiwi exclaimed, even the head of the organization, Penasehat Muslimat NU, is 75 herself. In a month we had anywhere from five to ten activities including IT workshops to make sure that everyone could figure out how to use zoom and join in on the action. So there has been a huge increase in IT literacy among Muslimat NU.

Dr. Wiwi contributed yet another amusing anecdote. She was attending an event via cell phone while driving in her car and the reciter who was scheduled in the program was absent, for whatever reason. So, she pulled her car over as soon as it was safe to do so and contributed a recitation from the Qur’an through her mobile phone, an act that was unimaginable prior to the pandemic.

Both Mrs. Rahmawati from UIN Manado and Kiai Rif’at from Pondok Pesantren Al Falah in Cicalengka, West Java, lamented the absence of events that are focused on Qur’anic recitation, namely the Haflah al-Qur’an (recitation gatherings or parties) and the Musabaqoh Tilawat-al-Qur’an (competitions in Qur’anic recitation). At these events, which often involve travel across the archipelago, male and female reciters meet up with their colleagues, teachers and former students to network and enjoy seni baca al-qur’an (the art of reciting the Qur’an). Kiai Rif’at hosted a virtual Halflah al Qur’an Global and reciters were able to join from all over the world. He said: “this provides a way for us to be creative. It’s not as beautiful as live because we can’t use the sound system with volume, echo, and delay effects, but in my opinion, we are able to see and hear the authenticity of the voice and even though we are far away from one another, we feel an emotional connection in our Zoom room. We feel very, very close.”

Similar to professional reciters, musicians experienced the near complete cancellation of all of their performances and an interruption in their livelihood. They also adapted in ways that were unthinkable prior to the pandemic. Nasida Ria, now in their fourth generation of women performers of Qasidah, experienced a 90 % reduction in livelihood that they normally earned at festivals, weddings, and other family, civic, and ritual settings. Zuhad Mahdi, their production manager, told us about their strategy to release new content twice a day on Facebook and Instagram and three times a week on YouTube. Like musicians worldwide, social media provided ways for fans
to connect even more intimately with artists. Nasida Ria posted themselves with their kids, casually dressed, in rehearsal, and just hanging out.

Over the course of the pandemic, musicians all over the world experimented with making music alone/together online and establishing a soundprint and virtual presence on the internet. Suara Sama, the group featuring Ritahony Hutajulu and Irwansyah Harahap, released a new music video and a series of 12 educational programs on world music and the special musical traditions of Sumatra. Another silver lining of the pandemic, members of Safaraz Band, Wawan and Irul, told us, was the opportunity to stay home and practice and work on a new repertoire. Not all musicians went virtual, however; some of our participants also acknowledged that there were far fewer restrictions on social gatherings in more rural locations, and that, in some cases, social and religious ritual, for better or worse, went on uninterrupted.

**Economic impact**

Although our team was somewhat reluctant to address issues of economic impact, we found that our participants were ready to discuss this sensitive issue. Our interlocutors identified two groups. The first includes people who also have a primary job and perform as reciters, teachers, or musicians as a side job, and the second includes the community of people who perform as reciters, musicians, or teachers in Islamic communities as their only job. Those with steady employment were able to survive because performing Islamic ritual and music was only additional income for them. Dasrizal Marah Nainin, a lecturer at Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta, for example, who is also a well-known national, award-winning Qur’anic reciter, stated that even though many invitations to perform Qur’anic recitations were canceled, he was able to survive because he had his income from teaching at the university. A similar story was revealed by Mukaromah, a shalawat performer from Solo, Central Java. She and her group JAMURI normally perform almost every week, and during the month of Rabī al-Awwal, the third month in the Islamic calendar when the birth of the Prophet Muhammad is celebrated, Mukaromah and JAMURI perform shalawat every day! All of these routine performances were forbidden by the government during the lockdown, but luckily, since she works as a trader in one of the markets in Solo, her income was unaffected.
Both Dasrizal and Mokaromah commented that their friends and colleagues who depend on the informal, gig economy were severely affected by social restrictions and event cancellations. Dasrizal commented that reciters at the district or community level who also teach Qur’anic recitation at mosques and Islamic schools were suddenly unemployed due to the lockdown and curfew policy from the government. Not only schools were forced to convert to online-only meetings teaching, so were routine gatherings and classes at mosques. Face-to-face meetings were forbidden. Since payment for these services is usually on the spot and in cash, this kind of informal economy came to a standstill. In normal times, these kinds of teacher/reciters at the district and community level would be invited at least once a week to community gatherings, including weddings, circumcisions, birthdays, and religious meetings, and their performances would also be a source of income.

The month of Ramadan was perhaps the most disruptive to the rhythms of religious life in Indonesia. Qur’anic reciters normally lead tarawih prayers for 30 nights in a row. These activities and the income they generate were suspended indefinitely as reciters and teachers stayed home and tried to adapt to the new daring reality. To try to soften the blow for his colleagues, Dasrizal contacted the National Zakat Agency (Badan Zakat Nasional) to ask whether they have any charity or subsidy programs that could be provided to Qur’anic reciters who had lost their jobs during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020.

Khoirul Anwar, an ‘ud (also gambus) player and maker, and Wawan, a nay (flute) player in the band Safaraz, contributed unique stories. Anwar explained that his orders for ‘ud production, along with invitations to perform during the pandemic, declined drastically. He and many of his colleagues accepted this as a “fate from God.” “We have to take it for granted and keep believing and praying everything will be normal again,” Anwar told us. Wawan joined in, estimating an at least 50% reduction in income for him and his fellow performers of Gambus music due to lockdown and curfew policies in Jakarta. They also pointed out that while such government policies were strictly implemented in big cities like Jakarta, in the suburban regions of Jakarta, such as Bogor, Bekasi, and Depok, the policies were loosely executed. The Safaraz band was, thus, able to remain active at weddings and other religious celebrations that were still being held outside the city.
The particularity of the Pondok Pesantren (Religious Boarding School)

The institution of the Indonesian boarding school, Pondok Pesantren (s. and pl.), is unique in the Islamicate world. The nearly 27,000 schools nationwide collectively generate a rich cultural context shared by millions of Muslims who have, at some point in their lives, attended such schools, even if only for a few years. With their emphasis on collective living and learning, and abundant ritual, the institution is a distinctive feature of Islam Nusantara and certain among them have played a unique role in the country’s resistance to colonial rule and eventual independence, and to international diplomacy. In the 1970s, Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), Indonesia’s first democratically elected president (1999–2001), popularized the term “Islamic boarding school as a subculture” (pesantren sebagai subkultur). Although many pesantren are affiliated with other, larger institutions, such as Indonesia’s two largest Muslim social organizations, Nahdlatul Ulema and Muhammadiyah, pesantren leaders (called kyai) usually have considerable localized networks and they and their wives (called nyai) are typically members of recognized familial and educational lineages.

“I miss reading the Qur’an at the pondok with my friends, because it’s more fun to study together,” said Dadi Darmadi’s nephew, a santri, (pesantren student), and who, like thousand other santris, was sent home from the pondok in March 2020 to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Although distance learning from home (pembelajaran arak jauh) was the expectation, it was a challenge for most students and families. Through the medium of WhatsApp groups, however, the students’ parents and the guardians began to voice their concerns, weighing the pros and cons of pelajaran daring (online learning). They complained to pesantren officials asking that the students return to the pondok. Of course, families worried about the risk of COVID-19 at the pesantren where social distancing is an impossibility, but, at the same time, they could see their children getting tired and bored at home with too much free time, too little space, and often limited bandwidth for good internet connections. Another anomaly of the return home policies enforced by the government is the fact that pesantren life eschews the use of mobile phones among its students. In spite of varying access to bandwidth in their home
regions, the free-range, on-line-all-the-time, reality of being at home was at cross-purposes with the principles of the pesantren education in which families were invested.\textsuperscript{10}

Kyai Hajji Rif'at Syahid, director of Pondok Pesantren Al-Qur'an Al-Falah, in Cicalengka, West Java, a community of about 3,000, put another spotlight on the rupture in many social, cultural, and economic aspects of pesantren life. He explained that many pesantren have dynamic industries. They maintain subsistence economies that may also include profit-generating economic activities beyond meeting their own needs. Such microeconomies are supported by all those living inside the realm: students, teachers, guardians of students, the kyai’s family, neighbors, and so on. Thus, in addition to the interruption to religious ritual and education at the pesantren, the very economies of Islamic boarding schools and their communities were tossed into precarity.

At the start of the new school year in 2020, the Ministry of Religion issued a learning guide for Islamic boarding schools and religious education during the pandemic. They outlined the main provisions that apply to learning during the pandemic: expectation that Islamic boarding schools form a task force to accelerate the handling of COVID-19, that they have facilities that meet health protocols, and that anyone in the Islamic boarding school environment must be safe from COVID-19. Special provisions from the Ministry of Religion were necessitated in part by the denial among religious communities regarding the dangers of the pandemic and the need to social distance and quarantine. During 2020, the Association of Islamic Institutes (Rabithah Ma’ahid Islamiyah), stated that more than 400 teachers, religious leaders (ulema), and kyai had died from COVID-19. Many boarding schools, particularly in Java, became super-spreaders.

**Fantastic, surprising, crazy, touching Covid stories**

Before we move to our concluding remarks, we would like highlight some of the crazy, fantastic, surprising stories that emerged among our virtually convened community of colleagues. Our first FGD among practitioners of Islamic Musical Arts on 1 April 2021 was a lot of fun. We were surprised when Ibu Mokaromah of JAMURI, Surakarta, Central Java, joined us from the office of Mayor Gibran Rakabuming Raka, at the complex of the Wali Kota Solo.
When she unmuted, we could hear her group singing and playing rebana in the background – their first live appearance since the lockdown. The result was as if she was reporting from a live music festival, which, in fact she was, something that fell on our socially distanced ears as a novel phenomenon.

So many stories from among the participants touched our hearts. One woman, who had just lost her husband, told us of the need for her to take over the management of a mosque, the various majelis taklim (study groups) that he led, and his position on the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (the Indonesian council of religious leaders) while still in her mourning period. In fact, she joined our FGD even though her mourning period had not officially ended, a signal perhaps, that even with her husband's death, “life goes on.” Another professor told us about her daughter who was living abroad and was prohibited from returning to Indonesia to give birth. A mother and daughter – separated and powerless.

The musicians of the Yogyakarta-based group Kiai Kanjeng, after a time of separation, began to meet for regular keroncong jam sessions at the invitation of group leader Ari Blothong, who invited the members of his musical community to his neighborhood.\textsuperscript{11} They observed very strict COVID-19 protocol and broadcast their music around the world on Instagram and YouTube. He stated: “Even though there is no money involved and maybe even no fans listening, the important thing for us is that we are creative, that we are busy, and that we are happy.”\textsuperscript{12}
Nasida Ria, pictured above in Figure 2 first released their song Damailah Palestina (Peace Palestine) in the late 1980s in response to the Palestinian Intifada. In a clever media move, the fourth generation of Nasida Ria, who go by the name Ezzura, made a video remake of the song in May 2021 at the time of another lopsided conflict. The remake and reboot of Damailah Palestina presented a newly positioned sociopolitical statement about Palestinian human rights and statehood, while resonating with the support for the Intifada that the song first made in the 1980s.

And we all had a really good laugh in our first discussion when Abdul Aminuddin Aziz, the vocalist of Orkes Gambus Al Fatah, based in the historically significant Pondok Pesantren Tebuireng in Jombang, East Java, told us about a moment during a wedding reception. In a moment of collective joy, the participants forgot themselves and began dancing on the floor to the music of O.G. Al Fatah. Once the crowd realized their transgression, they
were abruptly reprimanded and reminded to maintain social distancing and adjust their masks.

**Some conclusions**

This research is a step in documenting the process that we all lived through, and one whose end is far from certain. Just like luring (face-to-face ethnography), virtual ethnography conducted through internet communication technologies can be complex. Getting participants on board to meet at a particular time that suits everyone and ensuring that everyone has access to the required technology and bandwidth requires patience and understanding. At the moment of the meeting, many things can go wrong, including absenteeism due to miscommunication or technology failures, unfamiliarity with online protocol, for example, muting, and noisy and distracting background spaces. While zoom interviews and conversations among only two or three people have the potential of high fidelity and intimacy of interaction with few distractions, it is sometime difficult to read people in larger group meetings without the advantage of sharing physical space and observing the body language, including utterances of agreement and approval or disagreement. One wonders: Were they engaged? Were they bored? Did they get to speak up enough? Would they have spoken differently during a live meeting? On the other hand, because we had established lines of communication with our participants by both email and WhatsApp during the course of our research project, our social messenger in-boxes were filled with bright notes, photos, and links to the activities of our generous participants, who, we felt, were extremely enthusiastic about the attention we gave to their stories and their work.

What are the long-term effects of the global pandemic on Islamic musical arts, Qur’anic arts, and education in both realms? And what is the long-term impact on the way we do research and engage in the creation of knowledge? The sustainability of many traditions and practices that heretofore seemed ‘natural’ for anthropologists to document in situ have been cast into a state of precarity with a ‘return to normal life’ still far in the future. Anne has thought a lot about the privilege of international travel which is often reserved for foreign researchers for whom ‘fieldwork’ is a given, built into the system, expected for original publication, and supported by grants
and academic institutions. At the height of the pandemic, travel, no matter how well supported by granting agencies and academic sabbatical leave programs, was no longer an option. Clearly, Anne was not in Indonesia and, among our participants, none of them were in physical proximity to one another either. Given that our disciplines (e.g., anthropology, ethnomusicology) with their built-in hierarchies of access (and knowledge creation) are constantly questioning the imperialist and colonialist underpinnings of what we do, the COVID-19 era has been a time when researchers from the Global North have been put in our place, both figuratively and physically. Researchers from Europe and North America were stuck in quarantine, just like everyone else in the world, including people who do not usually have the resources or expectations for international travel as a part of their work. Denied the privilege of mobility, these researchers were then required to come up with methodological alternatives using the same set of tools as their interlocutors and international colleagues, namely, the internet. These challenges were also manifest on the national level; ethnographic field work in Indonesia among Indonesians was also curtailed, and faculty, we were told in our FGDs, were advised to help their students choose doable projects that did not require travel or face-to-face interactions.

While the analysis of what people circulate online has long been a research methodology among scholars of culture, our study goes far beyond aggregating and analyzing words and images that are already ‘just out there’ on the internet. Instead, our study has resulted in some deep ethnography on the experience and use of daring (online) technologies in daily life, not only for the transfer of information but also to facilitate the togetherness that is required for ritual, rehearsal, performance, and a participatory social life (see also Jones 2020). Our FGDs have put participants into conversation with one another in ways that are satisfying and meaningful. And while the three of us will probably take this research in various directions, we have attempted to show the ways in which religious sociality is deeply embedded in Indonesian society and how religious practice is adaptive and resilient.

We have also endeavored to embrace collaborative interdisciplinarity, to “vigorously decolonize Islamic studies in Indonesia,” to exemplify “deliberate celebratory but also humble methodological eclecticism” and to “amplify native, authoritative voices.” Such qualities are aspects of this research that were brilliantly underscored by anthropologist and AIFIS President Robert
Hefner in his discussion after our panel at the first international jointly-held conference of AIFIS and Michigan State University.\textsuperscript{15}

The archiving and sharing of digitally born materials are certainly objectives of the digital humanities and our material is ready to share – with the permission of the participants – for other researchers to process and ponder. But such open-access, digital-born research begs the question: What kinds of permitting protocol should be put into place for virtual collaborative ethnography? The stories we have collected will endure. Similar to the stories of war, independence, the great depression, or natural disasters, such as the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, people will remember moments, the rupture, the loss, the innovation, the disappointment, and the joy inherent in simply surviving through this time of the corona pandemic.

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**Notes**


2. In 2021, the month of Ramadan occurred between 12 April and 11 May.

3. See a sample letter of invitation here: https://sites.google.com/email.wm.edu/annekrasmussen/research/islamic-music-and-quranic-arts-in-the-time-of-the-coronavirus-av-examples (last accessed 3 April 2023). The web page dedicated to this article includes other images and documents related to our work.

4. Most of our participants have internet service in their homes or offices; others buy internet packages that allow them temporary access to the internet. Our subsidies were for those who requested the support to purchase an internet package in order to participate in our meetings.

5. A singkatan is like an abbreviation or acronym, but in Bahasa Indonesia, the convention often uses a syllable from each word to create a new word.
'Daring' and 'luring' are excellent examples of this phenomenon.

6. While Qur’anic recitation is solo in performance, it is the collectivity of practice that gives the learning reciter the courage to perform as a soloist, which is the goal for Maria Ulfah's students.

7. Irwansyah Harahap’s 12-part video series may be seen here: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL-Dg94-YmL1apalvZFP2QRST1PZ7u_rRb. Last accessed 18 February 2023. Here is a testimony for the release of Malikul Quddus. https://www.instagram.com/tv/COFr_RCpOMa/?igshid=MDJmNzVkJmY%3D (accessed 18 February 2023). And here is a link to the Spotify site of Suara Sama, who released four new songs during the pandemic: https://open.spotify.com/artist/6AvehMD3el7PcNRqJ7uV2?si=EqopVO_oQ9aM-SCM0FSyREQ&utm_source=whatsapp&nd=1. Last accessed 18 February 2023.

8. According to the Ministry of Religion (Kementrian Agama), the number of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia was 26,975 units as of April 2022. By province, the largest number of Islamic boarding schools is in West Java: 8,343 units. The second position is occupied by Banten with 4,579. There are 4,452 Islamic boarding schools in East Java. Central Java and Aceh have 3,787 and 1,177 Islamic boarding schools, respectively. Source: Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs

9. Islam Nusantara refers to Indonesian Islam or Islam of the Archipelago. Islam Nusantara is a combination of a model of thinking and understanding, as well as an approach to practicing Islamic teachings that are implemented through cultural considerations or traditions that have long developed in Nusantara, before it is known in modern times as Indonesia. Those who ascribe to the use of the term Islam Nusantara generally respect and accept women as partners in religious life and embrace the arts as an organic component of local norms, values, and traditions. The term is more closely associated with affiliates of Nahdlatul Ulema.

10. Dadi Darmadi and Anne Rasmussen visited Pondok Pesantren Al Amin in Riau Province, Sumatra, in August 2022. The kyai and nyai of the pesantren told about their no entry, no exit policy. After a short stay at home, students returned to the pesantren, which specializes in hydroponic agriculture, par-
particularly vegetable and mushroom cultivation. They reported zero COVID-19 cases during this time of complete isolation from the outside world.


12. This link takes you to an informal performance of Tombo Ati, one of the most standard pieces in their repertoire, performed in the kroncong style. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdxY5rUU5EE. Last accessed 3 April 2023.


15. The conference, held virtually and in English and Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia), was scheduled so that participants in at least four continents and several time zones could participate.
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