Measuring Piety in Indonesia

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Reader’s Note: This paper is a slightly modified version of a chapter in my current book project, joint with R. William Liddle (Ohio State) and Saiful Mujani (State Islamic University – Jakarta).

1 Introduction

This paper presents an overview of piety among Indonesian Muslims, beginning with a conceptual discussion of what piety means before describing how we operationalize piety in a large survey of Indonesian citizens. Our conceptual treatment of piety as an individual-level phenomenon contributes to a growing literature on comparative public opinion in the Muslim world that has produced a range of useful empirical findings (Blaydes and Linzer 2008, 2012; Fish 2011; Jamal 2006; Tessler 2002; Furia and Lucas 2008; Tessler 2008; Tessler et al. 2012; Pepinsky and Welborne 2011), but which is nevertheless marked by a lack of attention to the conceptual foundations of what it means to be pious and how that might be captured in public opinion data. We then use the original measure of piety that we develop out of this conceptual discussion to provide a fresh perspective on questions that have long animated scholars of religion in Indonesia, from the relationship between piety and aliran (Geertz 1960) to support for democracy and sharia among Indonesian Muslims.

We have endeavored to minimize the technical details of our presentation, but we nevertheless view devoting attention to the statistical assumptions that underlie our measure of piety as simply unavoidable given our task of relating a contested concept to a quantitative measurement. We wish to confront explicitly the substantive criticisms that our measurement strategy inevitably will raise by acknowledging exactly how they relate to the statistical procedures that we use to create our measure of individual piety. In doing so, we clarify the
substantive conceptual foundations for what some might interpret as a superficial or mechanical approach to religion among Muslims in Indonesia.

2 What Does Piety Mean in Islam?

Measuring piety among Muslims requires a conceptualization of piety in Islam. This puts us into contested territory.

In principle, one could argue that there are as many conceptualizations of Islamic piety as there are sects and schisms in Islam. Authoritative statements of what Islamic piety means also carry political weight: witness the difference in interpretation of piety between Salafis in Egypt and Shia in Iran. Moreover, scholars who are not themselves Muslims struggle to conceptualize the religiosity of those who follow a faith tradition that is foreign to them (see e.g. Fish 2002: 21). Piety and religiosity are also subject to severe problems in terms of individual self-reporting. Asking people to rate their own piety recreates the problem of how they themselves define piety, which surely varies widely even among individuals who are members of the same faith community. It is also subject to social desirability bias, long understood to be a major problem in the study of individual religious behavior and participation (Hadaway et al. 1993; Presser and Stinson 1998; Brenner 2014). Even if individuals agreed on what piety means, they may overstate their own adherence to their faith.

Perhaps because of these challenges in conceptualizing piety among Muslims, most social science research on this subject has ignored conceptual issues entirely. Particularly worrying for our approach, existing public opinion research on piety or “religiosity” among Muslims glosses over the conceptual foundations of these variables and moves straight to measurement. The most thorough discussion of the conceptual foundations of religiosity of which we are aware is from Steven Fish, who attempts to compare religiosity between Muslims
and non-Muslims, notes that “defining religiosity is so difficult,” and then proceeds anyway by appropriating data from the World Values Survey (Fish 2011: 20, 3-45). Proceeding in this fashion ignores Sartori’s dictum that “concept formation stands prior to quantification” (1970: 1038). We provide some examples of how this generates narrow and, we think, inappropriate measures of piety in section 5 below. Here, we outline how we conceptualize piety among Muslims in general terms.

We begin with four key assumptions about piety. Although we do not explore piety among non-Muslims in Indonesia or anywhere else in this book, we do hold that these are general assumptions that should be equally relevant to the conceptualization of piety across faith traditions. Our assumptions are as follows.

1. Piety is a property of individuals.
2. Piety is unobservable.
3. Piety is multifaceted.
4. Piety is apolitical.

Assumption (1) may appear trivial but it is not. To be meaningful as a concept that predicts individual beliefs and behaviors it must be the case that piety is something located in the individual. We may of course speak of the collective properties of religious publics in terms of mass public opinion, but these are ultimately rooted in the beliefs of individuals. Assumption (2), on the unobservability of individual piety, reflects a particular conceptualization of piety that holds that at the individual level, piety is an internal mental state. Piety thus differs from demographic characteristics such as biological gender, height, or employment status that can be observed by both analyst and the research subject.
The importance of our assumption of the unobservability of piety becomes evident when we turn to assumption (3). This assumption holds that *even if we could* observe piety, there is no single belief or behavior that would capture it. As part of our assumption that piety is multifaceted, we also reject *by assumption* the view that religious observance, practice, or behavior is the sole essence of piety among Muslims. While we hold this assumption to be true of all religious traditions, this is a particularly important assumption in the context of Islam due to the perception among some scholars of Islam (both Muslim and non-Muslim) that Islamic piety is in essence a statement about practice. The term orthopraxy, for example, describes a Muslim’s adherence to normative ideals of religious practice, which may be contrasted to a focus on normative ideals about individual beliefs or orientations (see Cornell 1999: 88-9 for a discussion). Note, however, that assuming that piety is *multifaceted* is not the same as assuming that piety is *multidimensional*. We view the dimensionality of individual piety as an empirical question. In fact, in our discussion of the dimensionality of piety below, we will test empirically the hypothesis that we can characterize piety among Indonesian Muslims as varying along a single dimension. Likewise, our rejection of orthopraxy as the core determinant of piety among Muslims does not preclude us from finding that ritual practice, on the one hand, and self-professed beliefs, on the other, are distinct dimensions along which individuals vary. Again, this is a hypothesis to be tested.

Assumption (4) is probably the most controversial of our four assumptions. Some Muslims, for example, hold that Islam itself entails a conceptualization of an ideal form of government (see Esposito and Piscatori 1991: 434-8; Esposito and Voll 1996: 33-51). If true, then one might interpret the belief that sharia law is inappropriate as a basis for national government as an unpious belief. However, the theological basis for the claim that Islam is, say,
inherently democratic, or that a sharia-based legal system is obligatory for Muslims, is highly contested among Muslims and scholars of Islam as well. As such, our denial of Islamic piety as having a political component may—and probably should—be interpreted as itself a political statement (see Pepinsky 2014). We are unable to resolve the ultimate theological question of the relationship between Islam, law, and political order. Yet we proceed with our assumption that individual piety is apolitical because it renders coherent the question about the empirical relationship between individual piety and political beliefs. Consider the alternative. If we were to conceptualize piety as entailing a belief about the appropriateness of sharia or democracy for Muslims, then we could not ask whether more pious Muslims are more or less likely to hold those views. Fortunately, as we show below, we can probe the consequences of this assumption for our empirical analysis by exploring what would happen if we were to expand our conceptualization of piety to include beliefs about the relationship between Islam, politics, and sharia law.

With these four assumptions in hand, we are now prepared to define piety in Islam. This naturally requires attention to the theology of Islam itself. We hold, along with every other scholar of Islam, that as a purely theological matter, Islamic piety requires belief in and practice of the five pillars of Islam: belief in Allah and Muhammad as his prophet (Arabic Shahadah, Indonesian Syahadat), required daily prayers (Arabic and Indonesian Salat), obligatory tithing (Arabic Zakah, Indonesian Zakat), fasting during the holy month of Ramadan (Arabic Sawm, Indonesian Puasa), and intent to make the pilgrimage to Mecca if economically affordable (Arabic Hajj, Indonesian Haji). These are examples of practice and ritual, the adherence to which distinguishes pious from non-pious Muslims.

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1 We note here that Islamic political thought is divided among at least four positions: Islam is inherently compatible with democracy, Islam is inherently opposed to democracy, Islam makes no claim on the propriety of democracy, and Islam provides an alternative foundation for understanding democracy.
However, because we assume that piety is an unobservable interior mental state that is not reducible to ritual, we also believe that it is likely to be manifest in other beliefs or actions. These include individuals’ feelings about their own faith, their self-professed religious devotion, and their non-obligatory behaviors that are also inherently (if not exclusively) religious in orientation. We will turn to the specifics of these non-obligatory behaviors below in our discussion of measurement, but we argue here that as a theoretical matter, individuals who act in ways consistent with valuing their faith, or claim to feel closer to their faith, are more pious than individuals who do not. Recognizing this point does raise a tension, though. Because Islam is a global religion, any conceptualization of piety must be broad enough to transcend national boundaries. This is why the five pillars of Islam are so important for our conceptualization of piety. But we recognize that a conceptualization of piety must also be specific enough to reflect local or regional understandings of piety. In our case, then, our conceptualization must be sensitive enough to the way that religion is practiced in Indonesia to capture forms of religious belief or practice that have meaning to Indonesian Muslims, even if those beliefs or practices are not equivalently meaningful for Muslims elsewhere.

Our conceptualization of Islamic piety, in sum, encompasses ritual, orientation, and behavior. Ritual captures adherence to the pillars of Islam. Orientation captures individual beliefs about one’s relationship with faith. Behavior captures practices that carry no specific theological weight but which can reflect religious beliefs. This tripartite conceptualization, in turn, entails certain claims about our ability to compare piety across individuals. For example, an individual who regularly attends Friday prayers and professes that religion is very important in his life is more pious than an individual who regularly attends Friday prayers but professes that religion is not important in his life. An individual who regularly reads the Qur’an but does not fast during
Ramadan is less pious than an individual who regularly reads the Qur’an and does fast during Ramadan. Note that our definition does not tell us how much more pious these individuals are—we treat that as an empirical matter to be addressed below. And to reiterate, we do not assume that all of these facets of piety are of equivalent importance, or that they cluster along a single dimension of piety—those too are empirical matters to be addressed below. Our conceptualization of piety simply holds that ritual, orientation, and behavior all contribute to our understanding of an individual’s piety.

Just as important are the factors that our conceptualization of piety excludes. We deliberately exclude both social and demographic characteristics and beliefs and behaviors that are logically consequent to piety from our conceptualization of piety. For example, despite the belief among Indonesians that certain ethnic groups are more pious than others, we do not include one’s membership in a particular ethnic group as a component of piety. We also do not include self-identification into aliran as a component of piety (we discuss aliran and piety in greater detail in section 4 below). In terms of the many possible logical consequents of piety, we also exclude from our conceptualization any positions on the relationship between religion and politics (see our discussion above) as well as behaviors and beliefs such as using Islamic financial products, encouraging the wearing of the Muslim headscarf by women, membership in one or more Muslim organizations, or support for various positions on socially acceptable behavior by Muslims or proper punishments for violation of Islamic law. In doing so, we allow ourselves to ask whether individuals who are more pious are more likely to do or support these things.
3 From Conceptualization to Measurement

Our conceptualization of piety as a broad, multifaceted property of individuals requires us to develop a measure that fits those characteristics. Accordingly, to measure piety, we collected data on various aspects of respondents’ religious beliefs and religious behavior from a large, nationally-representative survey of over 2400 Indonesians. Consistent with our conceptualization of piety described above, some of these include conventional understandings of piety in Islam as orthopraxy, narrowly defined in scriptural terms. These include praying at the obligatory daily times and fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. Others include behaviors that are not strictly understood as required of all Muslims but which may help to reveal further distinctions in piety among respondents, including performing non-obligatory prayers (shalat sunnah), studying the Qur’an (mengaji), or attending community religious meetings (pengajian). Still others include self-professed piety and the importance of religion. A list of these items, and the distribution of their responses as percentage of total (Muslim) respondents, appears in Table 1.
Our main takeaway point from Table 1 is that there is substantial variation across most indicators. While 80% of respondents always fast during Ramadhan, only 66% report that they always pray at the required times daily, and even fewer report that they are “very pious” (sangat taat beragama Islam) or that they attend Friday prayers. Taken together, these results give us confidence that we can distinguish different levels of piety across our survey respondents. Of course, it could still be the case that some form of social desirability bias leads respondents to overreport the extent to which they adhere to Islamic orthopraxy in their daily lives. But this is
not a central concern for us, as our main goal is to develop a conceptually-grounded measure of piety that allows us to compare across individuals, not to estimate the “true” level of compliance with Islamic teachings among Indonesian Muslims.

These items also clearly reflect the Indonesian context. Items such as participation in ritual prayers for the deceased (tahlilan) would have no particular meaning in the Arab Middle East or in Central Asia. In other parts of the Muslim world, moreover, items such as communal religious meetings might not be meaningful for women, who are frequently excluded as a matter of social practice from communal religious practices and rituals. We will return to this observation in the conclusion of the book of which this paper is just one portion, but we highlight it here to emphasize that in the step from conceptualization to measurement we are forced to confront the specific national context in which Islam is practiced in order to produce a valid measurement of individual piety within that context.

As we suggested above in our conceptual overview of piety, no single indicator should be taken as the true or proper measure of piety. This follows from our assumption that respondents’ “true” piety is not observable to us. But the eleven indicators are all highly intercorrelated (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.778$) across respondents, suggesting that when analyzed together they will identify a common—yet unobserved—trait that corresponds to our conceptualization of piety. Accordingly, we use principal component analysis to reduce these indicators to an index that reflects the diversity of the survey responses while capturing the commonalities among them (Jolliffe 2005; Jolliffe 2002). All indicators load strongly onto the first principal component, with an eigenvalue of slightly above 3.5 and which explains 32% of the variance in the eleven indicators. We define a single new variable, $PIETY\ INDEX$, as the first principal component of
these indicators. *PIETY INDEX* is the main measure of individual religiosity that we use throughout our book project.\(^2\)

### 3.1 Dimensionality

As we have emphasized so far, the task of measuring piety cannot be separated from the task of conceptualizing piety. We have taken a broad view of what piety means, and this inevitably has consequences for the measures that we produce, and in turn, the conclusions that we will draw from them. We have also made statistical choices that might have consequence for the index that we construct. In this subsection we subject one of those statistical decisions to greater scrutiny: the decision to ignore the “additional” principal components that could in principle capture additional unobserved dimensions of piety. In the following sections we ask whether our measure of piety is excessively broad, including aspects of religious experience and behavior that are not properly related to piety, or that it is excessively narrow, excluding religious experiences and behavior that should be related to piety.

Recall that we have defined *PIETY INDEX* as the first principal component of the eleven indicators in Table 1. Implicit in this choice is a conceptualization of piety as a single variable that varies along a single dimension. It need not be this way. We might define piety as two interrelated concepts, perhaps “practice” and “belief,” as might be more suitable in the study of Christianity. However, as we show here, our data do not give us much reason to think that there is meaningful variation in the data beyond that which we capture with the first component of our eleven indicators. In other words, even if we were to impose a multidimensional

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\(^2\) Principal components analysis assumes that each component is a continuous variable, which is not true in our case. Fortunately, we find substantively identical results when we use multiple correspondence analysis (MCA), analogous to PCA but more suitable for categorical data (Le Roux and Rouanet 2010). The rank correlation coefficient between *PIETY INDEX* and the individual scores from the first dimension of the MCA analysis is 0.985.
conceptualization of piety on our data, those further dimensions would not describe the responses to our survey well.

One way to think about the statistical task of extracting information about the structure of piety among our respondents is to ask “how much information about piety do we wish to retain?” If we wanted to retain 100% of the information contained in our eleven indicators, we would keep all eleven components, which together explain 100% of the variation. However, our interest is not to do this, but as is the case in any data reduction procedure, to extract the underlying structure of piety from our survey responses. From that perspective, our question might be reformulated as “how many dimensions do we need to capture the underlying information that exists in the data?” This formulation highlights the inherent subjectivity in deciding the optimal or “correct” number of dimensions of piety based on the data itself rather than a theory.

Jolliffe (2002: 111-8) discusses the statistical issues associated with choosing proper subsets of components. One rule of thumb, “Kaiser’s rule,” is to retain any components whose eigenvalues are greater than 1. The second and third principal components of our eleven piety indicators have eigenvalues of slightly larger than 1, indicating that they may capture additional dimensions of piety as revealed in the data. But a scree plot (Figure 1) shows that even though the second and third components cross the boundary suggested by Kaiser, the first component explains the majority of the variation among the indicators.
This is consistent with the hypothesis that there is a single underlying dimension of piety that our measure \textit{PIETY INDEX} is capturing from among the data.

Another way to visualize the unidimensionality of our measure is to simply average all of the eleven indicators of piety that we used to construct \textit{PIETY INDEX}. If there is really only a single underlying dimension of piety in our responses, then that average (an index which weights each indicator equally) should tightly match the index constructed from the first principal component. Figure 2 shows a scatterplot of the simple average of those eleven indicators—a new variable that we denote as \textit{PIETY MEAN}—against \textit{PIETY INDEX}.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{scree_plot.png}
\caption{Scree Plot for \textit{PIETY INDEX}}
\end{figure}

This scree plot shows the eigenvalues obtained from a principal components analysis of the eleven piety indicators in Table 1.
There is little doubt that PIETY INDEX captures extraordinarily well the variation that exists in the data. Scatterplots (not shown) of PIETY MEAN versus the second and third principal components of the eleven piety indicators reveal that the correlations between the two are far weaker.

Our conclusion from this discussion is that our data contain within them little evidence that there are meaningful dimensions of piety beyond that which is captured by the first principal component of our indicators. This is reassuring given our conceptualization of piety, but it does not rule out the possibility that there might be meaningful variation among Muslims that is
captured by the other dimensions in our data. We leave it to future research to propose a conceptualization of piety that captures such additional aspects of Muslims’ religious lives.

3.2 Breadth

Our choice to include a wide range of indicators of piety also might engender a separate criticism, that we are including features of Muslims’ religious life that are not proper indicators of piety. A narrow interpretation of Islamic orthopraxy might hold that attending communal Qur’anic study sessions—while a laudable activity that reflects an individual’s commitment to his/her faith—is not itself an indicator of how pious one is. Particularly in the Indonesian context, ritual prayers for the deceased (tahlilan) fall into a class of activities termed wasilah, understood by modernist Muslims in Indonesia as activities that do not strictly follow from the core of Islamic teachings as embodied in Qur’an and the hadith (Inayah and Woodward 2012: 124). Some modernists\(^3\) believe that tahlilan are in fact not Islamic, and might consider routine participation in tahlilan to be a measure of an individual’s lack of piety. By conceptualizing piety as broadly as we have, and defining our index accordingly, we thus risk polluting our measure of piety with other facets of Indonesians’ religious lives that are either not measures of piety at all, or that reflect particular (and contested) understandings of piety that are particular to the Indonesian context.

We are unable to settle any debates about the true nature of piety, although as noted above, we reject the position that there is a single universal conception of true Islam that exhaustively defines the features of a pious Muslim. Accepting that position amounts to imposing an external value judgment on the very things that people believe are elements of their own religious expression. To the extent that people believe that participating in tahlilan is an

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\(^3\) We describe modernist and other grouping of Indonesian Muslims in the next section.
expression of their religious identity as Muslims, we wish to capture that in our measure, not exclude it.

We can, however, examine how our measure of piety would change if we were to include within our measure only those indicators that match a narrow, scripturalist interpretation of piety as orthopraxy. We do that by restricting the indicators of piety to four: prays at obligatory daily times, fasts during Ramadan, attends Friday prayers, and pays zakat. We then follow the same procedure as that used to create PIETY INDEX, extracting the first principal component of the four indicators and defining it as NARROW PIETY INDEX. In Figure 3 we use a scatterplot to compare the values of PIETY INDEX and NARROW PIETY INDEX.
As Figure 3 shows, the two measures are very highly correlated. There is, naturally, greater
nuance in the broader PIETY INDEX, which is particularly visible at higher values of NARROW
PIETY INDEX and which allows the broader measure to capture gradations of piety that the
narrower measure cannot. But with a rank correlation coefficient of 0.826 between the two
indices, any individual ranking of piety across our survey respondents does not much depend on
which index we use. We therefore conclude that even allowing for objections to the breadth of
our index of piety, at least within our large and representative sample of Indonesians, the

This figure compares the PIETY INDEX with NARROW PIETY INDEX, a variable that is defined
identically to PIETY INDEX except for it draws only on a limited subset of indicators (see text for
discussion). Spearman's rank correlation coefficient = 0.826 (p < .0001).
inclusive conceptualization of piety is not polluting our index with irrelevant facets of Muslims’ religious life that affect the content of our measure.

A separate critique is that in excluding political attitudes from our conceptualization of what makes an individual pious, we have created an excessively narrow measure of piety. We maintain that for conceptual purposes it is essential to distinguish conceptually between what piety is and what piety might cause. However, we need not depend solely on our assumptions, we can also explore how our index would change if we were to include data on individuals’ beliefs about politics. In section 5 below we describe a series of survey items about individuals’ beliefs about the relationship between Islam and politics. Here, we focus on three questions about sharia in Indonesia and the proper role of Islam in Indonesian politics (see Table 3 and subsequent discussion for full question wordings).

To explore whether or not excluding politics from a conceptualization of piety is consequential for our measurement, we follow the same procedure as we used to create PIETY INDEX one more time, but this time we also include the three political variables. The first thing to note is that the unlike the case of PIETY INDEX, we now find evidence that these fourteen indicators load onto two components. This can be seen by comparing the top two graphs in Figure 4 below.
What does this second component pick up? Almost exclusively the three new political variables, which load heavily onto the second component and only slightly on the first component. We can see this clearly when we plot how each variable loads onto each of the two first principal components of \textit{BROAD PIETY INDEX} (see the bottom-left graph in Figure 4). When we plot the first component of \textit{BROAD PIETY INDEX} against \textit{PIETY INDEX}, we also see that the two indices are very tightly correlated (see the bottom-right graph in Figure 4). As might be
expected, the second component of *BROAD PIETY INDEX* is only loosely correlated with *PIETY INDEX* (Spearman’s rank correlation coefficient = -0.010).

These results from an exploration of a broader conceptualization of piety that encompasses political beliefs do not allow us to conclude that our assumption that piety is apolitical is appropriate. They do, however, reassure us that—at least in the Indonesian context—it does not much matter whether we assume this or not. If we were to assume that piety entails an orientation towards politics, then the data tell us that whatever notion of piety this is picking up is completely separate from that which we capture with our focus on ritual, orientation, and behavior. We return to this discussion in more detail in section 5 below.

4 *Aliran, Ethnicity, and Piety*

Scholars of Indonesian Islam since Geertz (1960, 1959) and Jay (1963) have remarked on the heterogeneity of religious life among Muslims in Java, and proposed a broad classification scheme to capture major groupings of Muslims. These groupings are denoted as *aliran*, or streams, in Indonesian Islam. *Aliran* are not themselves descriptions of religiosity, but rather of the organizational forms associated with specific groups. In Geertz’s (1959: 37) classic formulation, “An *aliran* consists of a political party surrounded by a set of voluntary social organizations formally or informally linked to it.” In this section we ask whether there are, in fact, differences across *aliran* and other identity groups in individual piety. Our close examination allows us to make nuanced conclusions about variation both between and within groups.

We begin by reviewing the differences among the three Muslim *aliran* identified in the literature: *abangan*, *santri*, and *priyayi*. The source of their heterogeneity is the syncretic character of Javanese Islam, which mixes animistic, Hindu/Buddhist, and orthodox Islamic
beliefs and practices. In this context, the abangan (in Javanese literally the red ones)\(^4\) are understood as the most animistic, that is, strongly marked by the local spiritualist beliefs and practices that long predate the arrival of Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam in the archipelago. Other labels for the abangan are “nominal” or “statistical” Muslims.\(^5\) By our operational definition of Islamic piety, abangan respondents should be highly impious.

To be sure, there is debate about the lineage of abangan as a distinct social category. Ricklefs, for example, argues that the emergence of abangan as a social category is a relatively recent phenomenon.

By the early nineteenth century a synthesis of 1. firm Islamic identity, 2. observation of Islam’s five pillars, and 3. acceptance of indigenous spiritual forces, all within the capacious boundaries of what Javanese understood Sufism to be, was found not only among the elite but also...among Javanese commoners (Ricklefs 2006: 37).

The Javanese Muslims described here would not have considered themselves to be abangan. It was only over the course of the nineteenth century that the category of abangan came to be understood as a reflection of the emergence of another group, the santri. As Van Bruinessen (1999) convincingly argues, moreover, the very distinction between “Islamic” and “pre-Islamic” or “un-Islamic” practices—both in the minds of foreign observers and among Indonesians themselves—is often historically inaccurate, rooted in a scripturalist view of Islam that neglects the diversity of the varieties of Islamic practices that have influenced Indonesian Islam.

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\(^4\) The santri were originally known as putihan (whites), and it is from here that the term abangan emerges, as “reds,” denoting those Muslims whose religious beliefs and practices were at variance with the pure (white) Islam of the orthodox (Ricklefs 2006).

\(^5\) Jones (1980: 312) provides one typical formulation, although she does not employ the term abangan: “For the majority of Indonesians who profess Islam, being Muslim entails no strict adherence to or particular knowledge of Islamic doctrine as laid down in the Qu’ran, the hadith or traditions of the Prophet, and the syariah or body of law derived principally from the other two sources. For these nominal or ‘statistical’ Muslims, Islam is little more than a thin veneer of Arabic phrases over a Hindu-Buddhist-animist base. Its adherents are Muslims, to be sure, because they identify themselves as such, but the religion they practice is a syncretic, Javanese variant that bears little relation to its West Asian prototype. Rather than the religion providing an all-embracing framework for their daily life, it is their life with all its attendant rituals and beliefs built up over centuries that provides the framework for the religion.”
There is also debate about the continuing strength of *abangan* culture today, more than a half-century after the research on which *aliran* analysis was based. In the late 1980s, the anthropologist Robert Hefner reported a strong trend toward Islamization of the *abangan* in Pasuruan, east Java. He concluded more broadly that “the social forces unleashed under the New Order [the Suharto dictatorship that began in 1966] may contribute to the partial realization of one of the Muslim community’s primary religious goals, the Islamization of Java” (Hefner 1987: 551). Since that time, many observers have commented on the public signs of growing piety among Indonesian Muslims, such as increased mosque construction, wearing of Islamic clothing by Muslim women, and attendance at Friday prayers. Given the findings of historians such as Ricklefs and anthropologists such as Hefner, it may turn out to be the case that the existence of a large number of self-conscious *abangan* was characteristic of only a brief period in modern Javanese/Indonesian history.

Members of the group known as *santri* espouse an orthodox Sunni version of Islam (there are few Shia or other Muslim sects in Indonesia). In its narrowest meaning, in Javanese, a *santri* is a student in a *pesantren* or traditional boarding school, but the term has long been applied to pious and/or orthodox Muslims in general. These are the people who are reputed to pray five times daily, fast during Ramadan, pay zakat, and to study the Qur’an both individually and collectively. They should therefore score very high on our indicators of piety.

Today’s *santri* are divided between traditionalists and modernists. The traditionalists, perhaps two-thirds of the total, are adherents to the Syafii jurisprudential school, one of four major schools of interpretation within Sunni Islam worldwide and the only prominent one in Indonesia. Over the centuries since Islam first came to Indonesia, the traditionalists have also
adopted practices which many Muslims consider heterodox accretions from local culture. *Tahlilan*, ritual prayer for the deceased, is one of those practices.

Islamic modernism came to Indonesia as a part of the late nineteenth century reform movement in the Middle East associated with the Egyptian cleric Mohammad Abduh. Its goals were purificational in two senses: advocating return to the Qur’an and Hadith as the unmediated word of God (which meant challenging the Syafii clerics’ legitimacy as interpreters of the holy book and traditions of the prophet); and rejecting the many pre-Islamic Indonesian beliefs and practices common among the *santri* of the day.

Importantly, Ricklefs also documents the emergence of the concept of the *abangan* as a reaction against *santri* modernism, in which the *abangan* were understood not simply as those who retain non-Islamic elements in their religious lives, but also as those who actually fail to adhere to the tenets of Islam. Many of those to be termed *abangan* in the nineteenth century “began to abandon Islamic prayer and only observed other Islamic rituals in the name of community solidarity” (Ricklefs 2006: 53). This is a description of *santri* and *abangan* as differing in their piety as Muslims: relative to *santri*, *abangan* are actually less Muslim, and *santri* are not just purer, but more pious.

The third group of Muslims are known as *priyayi*, denoting a small bureaucratic class whose members held formal governmental office in pre-colonial and colonial Java. Their religious beliefs and practices still retain the strong Hindu and Buddhist influences of precolonial Javanese court Islam. Like the *abangan*, the *priyayi* should be highly impious by our operational definition of Islamic piety.

The position of the *priyayi* relative to *abangan* and *santri* is perhaps the most contested aspect of *aliran* as an organizing framework for understanding Indonesian Islam, with *priyayi*
referring to a distinction in social class rather than in religious belief or behavior (Koentjaraningrat 1963), and evidence of both orthodox Islam and traditional Javanese mysticism as having important influences on priyayi cultural and religious beliefs (Sutherland 1975). Although we recognize this longstanding critique, we retain the discussion of priyayi as a separate stream in order to remain as true as possible to the classificatory scheme of Geertz and others.

One further caveat before we proceed to presentation of our findings. We are well aware that the categories abangan, santri, and priyayi were developed specifically for the analysis of Javanese culture and may not be meaningful to other Indonesians. Indeed, the terms abangan and priyayi in particular are from the Javanese language. We nonetheless asked non-Javanese to self-identify as abangan, santri, or priyayi. In doing so we hoped to learn which if any of the categories do cross ethnic lines and to explore the reasons why they do so. The answers might reveal much about contemporary Indonesian Islamic culture and politics.

We might hypothesize, for example, that the concept of santri travels best. Some non-Javanese cultures are reputed to be strongly Islamic, and the term santri is common in the Indonesian language and many regional languages in addition to Javanese. We might also hypothesize that, over the last fifty years, the term abangan has become increasingly commonly used in the Indonesian national political discourse to characterize weak or non-observant Muslims. In other words, non-Javanese Muslims who self-identify as weak or non-observant might recognize this term and apply it to themselves.

Finally, we might hypothesize that the term priyayi travels least well. Its strongest meaning refers to the Javanese court officials whose offices were abolished after the declaration of Indonesian independence in 1945. For many Javanese, therefore, the term has only historical
significance. A second meaning, hereditary aristocracy, has never been relevant to the many non-Javanese societies in which there is no comparable social group. Further, in no non-Javanese society which did have a hereditary aristocracy was that group called priyayi.

Now to the findings. Our survey data allow us to examine variation in piety across aliran by showing the distribution of PIETY INDEX across abangan, santri, and priyayi. We do this using violin plots (Hintze and Nelson 1998), which allow us to display information about the full distribution of values across subsets of respondents rather than focusing solely on average values. Figure 5 shows the distribution of PIETY INDEX across respondents who self-identify as each of the three groups, as well as among those who do not identify with any of the three (we address this group in greater detail below).
Two notable features of Figure 5 stand out. First, the white circle in the middle of each plot, corresponding to the median value of piety for each group, shows that santri as a group score higher on our index of piety than do either priyayi or abangan. This is consistent with descriptions of santri as not just “purer,” but “more pious” than abangan. It also helps to reassure us that our measure of aliran is valid. However, just as important is the spread around that median, and here we see a wide range of variation among santri as well as abangan and priyayi. Our data reveal that there are many individuals who describe themselves as abangan.
who are as pious as most santri, and there are also substantial numbers of santri whose level of piety is comparable to that of the average abangan. Having derived a measure of piety that is conceptually distinct from aliran, we see that differences across aliran are picking up something other than differences in piety alone. The description of abangan as less religious Muslims than santri is a statement of averages only, and therefore, identifying as santri is not itself an indicator of a respondent’s piety.

Could this finding be a function of our decision to code all Indonesians as falling into an aliran framework, rather than Javanese only? The classic works on aliran in Indonesian Islam focused on Islam in Java, and among the Javanese, rather than Islam more broadly, and it is not immediately clear what it means for a non-Javanese to identify as abangan or priyayi, even if—as we discussed above—the term santri is understood more broadly. In Table 2 we show how different ethnic groups identify by aliran.

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6 A formal t-test of the difference in means of PIETY INDEX for santri versus priyayi-abangan finds that santri on average more pious than priyayi-abangan (t = -14.54, p < .0001). A rank-sum test similarly finds that the distribution of values of PIETY INDEX is higher among santri than priyayi-abangan (z = -13.77, p < .0001).
These figures confirm that most priyayi in our sample are indeed Javanese, but also that substantial numbers of non-Javanese identify as abangan and that a substantial number of Javanese identify as santri. Even if the aliran framework was originally applied to ethnic Javanese, it appears to have spread to many of Indonesia’s most populous ethnic groups as well. Likewise, even if santri were originally the minority among Javanese Muslims, today they form a substantial majority.

We can also compare piety for Javanese and non-Javanese according to each aliran group. We do this in Figure 6, using density plots to compare the shapes of the distribution for each subgroup.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Abangan</th>
<th>Priyayi</th>
<th>Santri</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Don't Know</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Javanese</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>577</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sundanese</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madurese</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bugis</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betawi</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batak</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minang</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bantenese</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>654</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>1,016</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>2,248</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table shows the distribution of aliran across ethnic groups.
Consistent with the results in Figure 5 above, Figure 6 shows that abangan of any ethnicity score lower on our index of piety than do santri of any ethnicity. However, Javanese abangan are less pious on average than non-Javanese abangan, while there is no general difference for Javanese and non-Javanese who identify as santri. Together, it is unlikely that the great variation in piety among both santri and abangan is a simple consequence of ethnicity.
5 Piety and Political Islam

Our discussion so far has focused on what piety is and how we can measure it. Having developed a measure of piety that allows us to characterize how religiosity varies across Indonesian Muslims, we now explore the relationship between piety and political beliefs related to Islam. Our focus in this section is deliberately broad, examining different beliefs about the relationship between Islam and politics across all Muslims in Indonesia before turning to examine how piety varies across those respondents with differing beliefs about that relationship.\(^7\)

At the outset we emphasize that our index of piety differs strikingly from most commonly used measures of religiosity in existing work on public opinion and democracy in the Muslim world. Most existing research, in fact, relies on a single indicator to capture piety.\(^8\) Jamal (2006: 55), for example, uses “one question [in] gauging the effect of Islamic religiosity on support for democracy and Islamism. This measure examined levels of attendance of religious services.” This is consistent with Tessler (2002: 237), which uses “personal religiosity, or mosque involvement,” to measure individual piety. Benstead (2014: 10) uses “support for Shari’a law,” which she equates with “support for an Islamic state.” Tessler does include an index of religious beliefs, but only one that captures the beliefs about the compatibility of religion and public office. Our approach would consider each of these measurement strategies to be inadequate for the task of measuring individual piety. Single indicators such as mosque attendance are simply too narrow to capture the diversity of individual religious behaviors. Indicators such as “support for Shari’a law,” or opinions about the proper level of religiosity for politicians in public office, on the other hand, are measures of what piety might cause, not what it is. Whatever the strengths

\(^7\) In Pepinsky, Liddle, and Mujani (2012) we studied how Islamic party brands affect individual vote choice. Our current work allows us to update that finding by exploring the heterogeneous effects of party brands across individuals with different levels of piety.

\(^8\) The closest parallel to our index is Blaydes and Linzer (2012), which focuses on anti-Americanism rather than public support for democracy.
of the other approaches, our argument so far in this paper has demonstrated that they are not suited to our task of characterizing the consequences of individual piety for political attitudes.

Our main political beliefs of interest concern the appropriateness of sharia law (hukum syariah) in Indonesian politics, the importance of Islam in general for Indonesian politics, and the propriety of democracy for Indonesian politics. The precise wordings of four basic questions are included in Table 3, in English and in Indonesian. For each, the possible answers included “Strongly Disagree,” “Disagree,” “Agree,” “Strongly Agree,” and “Don’t Know.”

Two questions capture sharia law in ways that reflect the context in which it is discussed in contemporary Indonesia. One, which we denote with the variable SHARIA, reflects the basic issue of Indonesia’s constitutional architecture and its relationship to sharia. This debate, which has oriented Indonesian political Islam at least since independence with the proposed inclusion of the so-called “Jakarta Charter” (Elson 2009) in the 1945 constitution, reemerged as an open political question in 1998 (Fealy 2004). Another, LOCAL SHARIA, focuses on regional sharia legislation. This issue, too, is not new in Indonesian politics, but unlike the unsuccessful efforts of Islamists after 1998 to amend Indonesia’s constitution to include explicit mention of sharia, several local jurisdictions have successfully passed “sharia ordinances” (Buehler 2013).

9 For example, it is entirely reasonable to ask if individuals who support sharia law also support democracy. Our critique is simply that this is not a test the relationship between piety and opinions about democracy.

10 The key phrase in the Jakarta Charter is “kewadjiban mendjalankan sjari’at Islam bagi pemeloek2-nja,” which translates as “with the obligation to carry out Islamic law for its adherents.” As Fealy (2004: 119, note 7) notes, there is some degree of semantic ambiguity in this phrase about whether this requirement holds that Muslims must themselves comply with sharia, or alternatively, that Muslims implement sharia law that applies to all Indonesians. Most Indonesian Islamists follow the latter interpretation, although a system based on the former could in principle be implemented, perhaps following the Malaysian model.
Two other questions turn away from sharia in particular to focus on Islam and democracy more generally. *PRO-ISLAM* captures respondents’ general outlook toward the role of Islam in Indonesian political life. This is an important complement to the question about sharia law, for it is possible that some respondents may disagree that Indonesian law must be made consistent with sharia but nevertheless wish that Islam was more important in Indonesian politics. Finally, *PRO-DEMOCRACY* simply asks whether democracy is the best form of government for a
country like Indonesia, which helps to determine the baseline level of support for democracy in an abstract sense.

In Figure 7 we show the basic breakdown of responses to each question among Muslims respondents. The results for *SHARIA* and *LOCAL SHARIA* show that most Indonesian Muslims do indeed favor making Indonesian law consistent with sharia. They also believe, however, that democracy is the most appropriate form of government for Indonesia.

*Figure 1: Political Beliefs among Indonesian Muslims*

These figures show the distribution of responses to four questions about political beliefs (see Table 1 for definitions). Sample includes only Muslims, $N = 2,241$. 
More revealing than the beliefs of Muslims overall is the relationship between piety and these beliefs. In Figure 8 we use violin plots (as in Figure 5) to compare piety across respondents giving each response to each of the four questions.

**Figure 2: Piety and Political Beliefs**

![Violin plots showing responses to questions on Sharia, Local Sharia, Pro-Islam, and Pro-Democracy](image)

These figures show violin plots of PIETY INDEX for subgroups of Muslims defined by their responses to the questions described in Table 1 and Figure 1. The shaded region is a density plot showing the full distribution of PIETY INDEX across each group, while the box and whisker plots within the shaded regions show medians, interquartile ranges, and adjacent values. The dotted vertical line denotes the average of PIETY INDEX across all Muslims.

The plots in Figure 8 show that piety has remarkably little purchase in explaining beliefs about sharia law, the importance of Islam in politics, or beliefs about democracy in general. Some of Indonesia’s most pious Muslims agree with implementing sharia law, but many pious Muslims
disagree strongly as well. The same is true for democracy. These results amount to a convincing rejection of any simple story linking piety to political beliefs among Indonesian Muslims.

Of course, the wide variation in piety across all levels of responses to all questions does not preclude the possibility that there are differences “on average.” Recall first that the vast majority of respondents to each question provided moderate responses, meaning that they neither strongly agree nor strongly disagree with these beliefs. Among these moderates, those who favor sharia are slightly more pious than those who do not, but the difference between the two is not highly statistically significant (for SHARIA, \( p = .046 \); for LOCAL SHARIA, \( p = .070 \)).\(^1\) There is no significant difference whatsoever between the level of piety for PRO-ISLAM (\( p = 0.322 \)). Relative to those relatively few Muslims who disagree that democracy is the most suitable form of government for a country like Indonesia, those who agree that it is are on average more pious (\( p = .011 \)). But among those relatively few Muslims who hold more extreme views, those who strongly disagree with implementing sharia in Indonesia are actually more pious than those who simply disagree (for SHARIA, \( p = .014 \); for LOCAL SHARIA, \( p = .045 \)).

Taken together, these results are weakly supportive of a basic claim that individual piety is related to political beliefs about sharia, the importance of Islam in politics, and democracy. But by inspecting the full distribution of piety across respondents, we also learn that much as in the case with the relationship between piety and ethnicity and aliran, these differences “on average” can obscure the wide variation in piety that exists in our data across respondents espousing each of these beliefs.

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\(^1\) \( p \)-values here and throughout this paragraph are from t-tests comparing the average levels of PIETY INDEX for those responses are either “Agree” or “Disagree.” Results are qualitatively similar for rank-sum tests, but \( p \)-values rise in each case.
6 Conclusion

This paper has provided a panoramic overview of piety among Indonesian Muslims. Its contributions are both conceptual and empirical. Conceptually, we have advanced a distinctive argument on what it means to be pious in Islam, one that focuses not just on orthopraxy but also on beliefs and other varieties of religious behavior. Our empirical contribution, in turn, is to apply this conceptualization to a large survey population in order to characterize piety across Indonesian Muslims. Explicating how we conceptualize piety, and then translating that directly into our measurement procedures, allows us to address some of the most important critiques of survey-based measures of Muslim piety: that it implies a unidimensional and therefore reductionist perspective on what piety means; that it is excessively broad, encompassing aspects of religious life that do not fall within the “core” of Islamic orthopraxy; and that it confuses indicators of piety itself with other beliefs about what Islam may require.

Armed with our unique measure of piety, we also make two contributions to the study of Indonesian Islam. We have shown that there is much wider variation in individual piety within various aliran than across aliran. This should lead scholars of Indonesian Islam to rethink the common characterization of Indonesian Muslims as “statistical” or “nominal” Muslims simply because they self-identify as abangan or priyayi rather than santri, hopefully laying to rest enduring preconceptions of syncretic religious traditions as diminished or degenerate forms of Islam. We have likewise shown that individual piety is not a strong predictor of Muslims’ beliefs about the proper relationship between faith and politics in Indonesia, a country in which the majority of Muslims support democracy as well as a greater role for Islam in public life. This finding complements others drawn from public opinion data in the Arab world that religiosity does not predict support for or opposition to democracy (Tessler 2002; Benstead 2014; Jamal
2006), but rests on a more conceptually appropriate understanding of piety than does existing work. As such, it should help scholars of Islam and politics the world over to derive more appropriate empirical methods for testing the relationship between religiosity and support for democracy.

References


