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Laughing through difference: Islamic-inspired memes in Indonesia's digital culture — humour, platform affordances, and the negotiation of religious difference

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From Oral Traditions to TikTok:

The Evolution of Meme-Like Forms and Religious Expression
in Indonesia

Having established the key definitions in Chapter 1, this chapter shifts to a historical and conceptual exploration of meme-like forms in Indonesia. Rather than treating memes as a purely digital phenomenon, it develops a framework for understanding memes as cultural agents by tracing their roots in pre-internet religious and cultural practices, while drawing selectively on memetic theory, cultural evolution, and anthropological debates on transmission and imitation.

Memes have become a prominent feature of contemporary religious and cultural discourse in Indonesia's digital public sphere. To understand their current forms and meanings, however, it is necessary to look beyond the internet and consider the dynamic network of religious symbols, cultural references, and everyday practices of which these memes are a part in Indonesia.

This chapter traces the historical and conceptual trajectories of meme-like forms in Indonesia, exploring how pre-internet practices, ranging from oral traditions and folklore to narrative and symbolic forms circulating before the 1990s, have evolved and re-emerged on digital platforms, from early online forums and IRC communities to contemporary social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok.¹⁷ In doing so, the chapter highlights how these forms possess a cultural life prior to the internet, while continuing to shape contemporary modes of religious expression in digital environments.

¹⁷ Internet Relay Chat (IRC) is a text-based communication protocol developed in 1988 and widely used in the 1990s and early 2000s for real-time group interaction. One of its most popular client applications was mIRC, particularly in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia.

Richard Dawkins (1976) originally introduced the term meme to describe units of cultural transmission, ideas, styles, or practices that replicate, mutate, and spread across a population. Viewed from this perspective, many pre-internet cultural forms in Indonesia already operated in memetic ways. Proverbs circulated widely because they were concise and adaptable; folktales evolved with each retelling; and *wayang* performances drew from a stable reservoir of characters and moral conflicts, while allowing *dalang* (puppeteers) to modify storylines in response to contemporary social and political events.¹⁸ These forms relied on repetition, variation, and communal uptake, mechanisms that closely resemble how digital memes circulate today.

Recognising this continuity helps us see memes not as a sudden digital rupture but as part of a longer cultural trajectory. What changes most visibly is the medium, while core logics of repetition, variation, and circulation remain recognisable across contexts. As Bolter and Grusin (1999) argue through the concept of remediation, older expressive forms are continually reworked through new technologies. Early digital artefacts such as emoticons and emojis (Davison in Börzsei, 2013), extended long-standing practices of symbolic shorthand; printed stickers, long used in Indonesia on cars, helmets, and public spaces to signal religious or moral messages, anticipated the personalised sticker packs and reaction images that circulate online today.

These transformations show how meme-like forms adapt to shifts in communication technologies while retaining their core purpose: sharing cultural values, negotiating norms, and making social commentary accessible to broad audiences. Whether expressed through oral storytelling, proverbial wisdom, sticker culture, or TikTok videos, these forms help Indonesians articulate religious belonging and navigate difference.

This chapter therefore examines how these pre-Internet meme-like traditions have shaped the development of Islamic-inspired memes in Indonesia. By tracing the movement from oral transmission to digital replication, it shows how religious identities continue to be communicated, contested, and reimagined across changing media environments.

In doing so, this chapter answers the first research question by mapping the meme-like forms that Indonesians have used to navigate religious and cultural issues over time, and how these forms have shifted alongside changes in media technologies. To conceptualise these continuities more systematically, the next section revisits Susan Blackmore's understanding of memes as cultural replicators.

¹⁸ Combining shadow play with narrative and music, *Wayang* is an ancient Indonesian puppet theatre. Performances often show stories from Hindu epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana as well as local folklore, conveying moral and philosophical themes using puppets fashioned of leather (*wayang kulit*) or wood (*wayang golek*). This art form is highly appreciated in Indonesia for both entertainment and cultural education.

Memes as Cultural Replicators: Revisiting Blackmore's Framework

Rather than repeating the contemporary definitions of memes discussed in Chapter 1, this section revisits earlier memetic theory to trace the longer cultural genealogy of meme-like forms and to clarify why imitation and replication are central to understanding pre-internet religious expression in Indonesia. Building on Richard Dawkins's (1976) original formulation, Susan Blackmore expanded this idea in *The Meme Machine* (2000), arguing that memes behave like cultural replicators that survive because people keep copying and reshaping them. For her, a meme does not need institutional backing or formal teaching to travel, it survives when it is memorable and easy to reproduce across situations. Songs, gestures, slogans, and certain rituals fall into this category because people learn them by watching others rather than by reading manuals.

Blackmore illustrates this with everyday examples. The "Happy Birthday" song is among the most accessible. Everyone knows how to sing it, and few people were ever explicitly taught how to do so. This song is rarely written down or officially taught in schools, yet it transcends languages, nations, and generations. As Blackmore explains, people do not need formal instruction or institutional support to learn and spread the "Happy Birthday" song; it circulates effortlessly because it functions as a highly successful meme capable of self-replication across contexts (Blackmore, 2000). It succeeds memetically because it is straightforward, emotionally resonant and widely mimicked. As she puts it, a meme becomes widely disseminated not because it is factual or good, but because it is easy to remember, easy to emulate, and adaptable enough to adjust to various contexts. In her words: "Memes are not simply ideas or phrases. They are behavioural directives recorded in brains and transmitted by imitation" (Blackmore, 2000, p.17).

This way of thinking helps explain why many Indonesian cultural expressions resemble memes long before the internet arrived. *Pantun*, *peribahasa*, folk stories, and the narrative structures in *wayang* performances were all designed to be retold and adapted. They circulated through repetition, improvisation, and shared memories. Performers might keep the core storyline but play with tone, emphasis, or moral focus depending on the audience. These older forms stayed alive precisely because communities kept renewing them.

Yet Blackmore's approach has clear limits when we examine more complex cultural environments. Her model treats memes as if they move on their own, as though imitation alone explains why something spreads. In practice, cultural transmission is rarely that simple. The life of a meme is shaped by many factors: local norms, the humour people find appropriate, the technologies they use, and the communities they participate in. These elements influence which ideas catch on, which ones fade, and which mutate along the way.

Scholars working on digital culture have tried to respond to these gaps. Galip (2024), for instance, argues that meme studies must move beyond the Dawkins–Blackmore lineage by attending to the platform-specific, cultural, and socio-political conditions in which memes circulate. Rather than treating memes as self-replicating units, Galip highlights how their production, modification, and visibility are shaped by digital infrastructures, algorithmic logics, and participatory user practices. From this perspective, replication remains a useful idea but requires refinement through interdisciplinary approaches that recognise how meaning-making is mediated by platforms and embedded within broader cultural dynamics.

This perspective is particularly useful for making sense of the Indonesian context, where meme-like forms appear across both offline and online environments. Islamic sayings, visual symbols, jokes, and digital remixes often gain traction because they resonate with local sensibilities and fit the technological channels through which people communicate. For this reason, I use Blackmore’s notion of memes as a starting point but treat memetic spread as something that is always shaped by media infrastructures, cultural norms, and everyday user practices. This situated knowledge allows us to understand more precisely how memes work across offline and online, pre-digital and digital, in socially and technologically embedded ways.

This approach sheds light on how older oral, visual, and performative forms interact with new digital practices. It helps explain how Indonesian users reinterpret long-standing religious expressions within the environments provided by Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, and how these expressions continue to evolve as platform cultures shift.

Pre-Digital Meme Ecologies: *Wayang*, Rituals, and Islamic Storytelling

Long before the emergence of digital platforms, Indonesian societies had already developed rich traditions of visual, oral, and ritual communication that conveyed values, satire, humour, and communal identity within what Geertz (1973) famously described as webs of meaning. Many of these traditions continue to coexist with contemporary digital media, although they have been adapted to new technological and social contexts. In this chapter, I use the term *pre-digital meme ecologies* to refer to these enduring traditions because they illustrate processes of cultural replication, adaptation, and circulation that resemble what Limor Shifman (2014) describes as the logic of memetic transmission. Practices such as wayang performances, Islamic storytelling (*ceramah* and *kisah nabi*), and proverbial sayings therefore provide historical examples of how religious and cultural meanings were repeatedly reproduced, reinterpreted, and shared long before the emergence of internet memes

The examples discussed in this section were selected purposefully rather than intended as an exhaustive survey of Indonesia’s rich pre-digital expressive culture.

This chapter focuses on *wayang*, proverbs, ritualised Islamic expressions, and folklore because they represent long-standing forms of cultural transmission that circulated widely before the emergence of modern mass media. Their repetitive, adaptable, and collectively shared character also makes them particularly suitable for tracing historical continuities between pre-digital cultural expression and contemporary digital memes. Other forms of popular culture, such as television dramas, films, comedy, popular music, or fashion, have likewise contributed to the circulation of Islamic ideas in Indonesia. However, because they emerged largely within the era of modern mass media, they fall outside the historical focus of this chapter, which is to examine earlier cultural forms that help illuminate the longer historical genealogy of memetic practices in Indonesia.

Proverbs like *Sepandai-pandainya tupai melompat, akhirnya jatuh juga* (“Even the cleverest squirrel will eventually fall”) functioned as more than moral instruction; they were frequently repurposed into humorous or satirical commentary on power, behaviour, or social critique. Such expressions are memorable, adaptable, and open to reinterpretation, qualities that help explain why they endure and continue to circulate across generations.

The exact memetic mechanism is also visible in oral storytelling traditions such as the tale of Si Kancil, the clever mouse deer, whose adventures vary regionally while retaining the central message of wit and cunning. Similarly, the story of *Bawang Merah dan Bawang Putih* (Onion and Garlic), a localised variant of Cinderella, reflects cultural values such as kindness and resilience, as it is retold across generations in diverse formats, from oral storytelling by elders during family gatherings, to printed versions in children's books and school textbooks, televised adaptations such as *sinetron* and animated films, and more recently, reinterpretations through YouTube animations, Instagram reels, and TikTok dramatisations. These tales exemplify how cultural content spreads, mutates, and survives, hallmarks of memetic life.

Among the strongest examples of memetic cultural expression is the traditional *Wayang Kulit*¹⁹. While anthropologists often describe its syncretic role in blending Hindu epics, Javanese cosmology, and Islamic moral teachings (Beatty, 1999; Ricklefs, 2006), from a memetic lens, *wayang* is also a system of cultural replication. As Ricklefs suggests through the notion of ‘mystic synthesis’, Islamic values were incorporated into existing cultural forms, such as *wayang*, allowing moral teachings to be disseminated without displacing older traditions. Characters like *Pandhawa* (virtue) and *Kurawa* (vice) function as archetypes, but their enduring popularity is also due to their ability to be reinterpreted and transmitted over time and through different media.

¹⁹ Wayang Kulit is a traditional Javanese shadow puppet theatre created from intricately carved and painted animal hides. It is performed by a puppeteer (*dalang*) with musical accompaniment. The puppet theatre often teaches moral, cultural, and religious lessons through stories from epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana

Dalang (puppeteer) often adapt dialogues to include satire, contemporary issues, and moral critique, showing how wayang continually renews itself through reinterpretation. This reinterpetive flexibility transforms wayang into a memetic system, where symbols are both preserved and continuously reshaped. As Blackmore (2000, p.16) argues, the memes that survive are not necessarily the most accurate but rather those with the most replicable and emotionally resonant qualities. This idea helps clarify why wayang's narrative motifs and characters endure: their memetic qualities make them suitable for repeated adaptation across generations.

The memetic function of wayang becomes even more evident in Indonesia's political history. During the New Order regime, wayang was used to support ideological narratives: *Pandhawa* were cast as symbols of the state, while *Kurawa* became representations of dissent or opposition. Marshall Clark (2006) analyses Pipit Rochijat's *Baratayuda di Negeri Antah Berantah* (1977), revealing how mythological narratives were reworked to critique power, with the Kurawa being portrayed not just as villains, but also as humanised victims, an example of “wayang *mbeling*,” or subversive wayang (Clark, 2006). Clark describes wayang *mbeling* as a mischievous and radical reimagining of tradition, a means through which *dalang* (puppet masters) subvert official narratives and create space for critique within cultural structures (Clark, 2006).

Villagers affected by the 1965–1966 political violence interpreted the events through the lens of wayang, likening the massacre to a modern *Baratayuda* war. As Clark observes, “the 1965–1966 killings were perceived by some villagers as a modern *Baratayuda* war, with the Communists cast as *Kurawa*” (Clark, 2006, p.50). These cases demonstrate that wayang characters are not static symbols, but memetic entities that are constantly adapted to fit new socio-political realities.

In a similar vein, digital memes today continue this tradition of symbolic reframing. Through familiar religious figures, historical events, or fictional characters, memes are used to comment on contemporary issues, from corruption and sectarian tension to state policies and interfaith dynamics. As with wayang *mbeling*, meme creators often inject subversive humour or irony to challenge official narratives or to voice critiques that may otherwise be silenced in formal discourse. The logic remains consistent: symbols are not static, but mobile and reconfigurable across time and media. Whether it is the *Kurawa* symbolising communists in the 1960s or a fictional anime character representing a theological dispute on TikTok, the memetic mechanism is the same: to transmit cultural meaning through repetition, variation, and adaptation in response to current social conditions.

In this sense, wayang functions not only as a traditional art form, but as a cultural technology of memetic transmission. The reinterpretation of *Kurawa* and *Pandhawa*, as seen in political events or subversive performances like wayang *mbeling*,

reflects the same logic that underlies contemporary meme culture. Today's digital memes, whether they involve religious satire, political parody, or theological symbolism, similarly rework familiar narratives to reflect current tensions, critique authority, and provoke reflection. This continuity reveals that meme-making in Indonesia is not merely a byproduct of digital media, but part of a longer tradition of symbolic storytelling that adapts to changing platforms and publics.

Islamic expressions in Indonesia have also functioned memetically prior to the digital age. Oral storytelling, poetic recitations, and symbolic rituals, such as the *slametan*, *maulid*, or *sholawat*, became vehicles for transmitting Islamic values that were embedded within local cultures. One example is the case of *Sunan Kalijaga*, a Wali Songo figure known for using *wayang kulit* to spread Islam. While anthropologists label this approach as syncretism, the merging of Islamic teachings with local Javanese forms (Ricklefs, 2006), it also exemplifies memetic transmission. The story of Kalijaga's cultural strategy has been retold, adapted, and referenced across oral stories, da'wah, textbooks, and even digital platforms. Its longevity lies in its adaptability, embedding Islamic values in recognisable formats.

Similarly, *maulid* celebrations, as described by Beatty (1999), serve not only as devotional gatherings but as symbolic acts of collective memory and moral transmission. Practices like the recitation of *Barzanji*²⁰ function as shared symbols that both reflect existing religious values and shape future conduct. In Geertz's terms, they operate as *models of* religious life and *models for* moral action, carried across time through repetition and collective participation.

It is essential to note, however, the distinction: rituals like *slametan*²¹ or *Maulid* are not memes per se but instead *hosts* for meme-like transmission. Memes, in Blackmore's sense, are discrete, adaptable units (like a saying or symbolic gesture) that can be replicated independently, whereas rituals are broader cultural systems in which memes may reside.

²⁰ Barzanji is a tradition of reciting praises and the life history of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, usually carried out at religious events, such as the Prophet's birthday. The Barzanji text contains poems that tell the story of the birth, life, noble qualities, and miracles of the Prophet Muhammad, as well as expressions of love and respect for him. This tradition fosters love and respect for the Prophet and strengthens the bonds of faith within the Muslim community (NU Online, n.d.), <https://quran.nu.or.id/maulid/maulidul-barzanji>

²¹ *Slametan* is a Javanese communal feast involving prayers, symbolic foods, and recitations to mark significant life events or ward off misfortune. It blends Islamic ritual elements with local animistic and Hindu-Buddhist traditions (Beatty, 1999; Geertz, 1960).

Sholawat refers to the devotional recitation or singing of blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad. It is both a spiritual practice and a form of communal bonding that is widely practised across Indonesia.

Sekaten is a traditional Javanese Islamic ceremony held to celebrate the Prophet Muhammad's birthday (Maulid Nabi), often involving gamelan music, markets, and processions. It exemplifies the syncretic blending of Islamic reverence with local court traditions.

While traditions are broader frameworks that encompass rituals, beliefs, and repeated practices over time, memes function as discrete, replicable units of cultural meaning within those traditions. For example, a *slametan* is a communal ritual rich in symbolic acts. However, within it, one might find elements such as repeated phrases, prayer formulas, or even food symbolism, features that are easily imitated and transmitted beyond the ritual itself. In contrast, if a ritual is preserved only as a fixed routine with no meaningful adaptation or reproduction in other contexts, it may continue as a tradition but no longer functions as a meme. As Blackmore emphasises, the meme's vitality lies in its capacity to replicate, vary, and spread, not merely to persist (Blackmore, 2000).

To clarify the relationship between memes and longer-standing cultural traditions, this table does not treat them as oppositional categories but as different modes of cultural transmission. Drawing on a Geertzian understanding of culture as a system of symbols that both represent and shape social life, traditions are approached here as stabilising symbolic frameworks. Meme theory, by contrast, foregrounds replication, variation, and circulation as mechanisms through which meaning travels. The table below highlights these differences to show how memes and traditions operate through distinct, though occasionally overlapping, cultural logics.

Table 2.1. Key Differences Between Tradition and Meme

Aspect	Tradition	Meme
Definition	A broader cultural framework encompassing rituals, beliefs, and practices	A discrete, replicable unit of cultural meaning (e.g., image, phrase, gesture)
Form	Often framed as stable and formalized, though frequently reinterpreted or reinvented	Flexible, adaptable, and often informal
Transmission	Circulated across generations through repetition, ritualisation, and claims to continuity	Spreads rapidly through imitation and remixing, especially in digital environments
Adaptability	Change tends to be gradual and negotiated to preserve legitimacy	Encourages variation and mutation as a condition of survival
Function	Sustains continuity and legitimises religious or social authority through reference to inherited practices	Generates commentary, critique, and new meanings through circulation
Example	<i>Slametan</i> , <i>Maulid</i> , ritual prayer practices	TikTok videos, viral slogans, satirical images
Longevity Mechanism	Maintained through communal participation and normative obligation	Sustained through replicability, emotional resonance, and ease of imitation (Blackmore)

Source: Author's analytical synthesis based on (Blackmore, 2000), (Shifman, 2014), and anthropological theories of cultural continuity (Beatty, 1999; Geertz, 1960; Ricklefs, 2006).

Rather than opposing tradition and memes, this comparison functions as an analytical tool to clarify how memes operate alongside, within, or against traditional symbolic systems, a dynamic that becomes particularly visible in contemporary digital religious practices.

Visualising Pre-Internet Memes in the Digital Age

The transition to digital platforms has not only generated new memetic forms but also amplified and reconfigured older ones, breathing new life into longstanding cultural symbols. TikTok, in this sense, does not erase oral traditions or symbolic expressions. It reframes them with tools like filters, audio overlays, and rapid circulation, giving them renewed relevance in a contemporary digital landscape.

What we see on TikTok today, memes remixed and circulated to reflect current religious or cultural moments, is not entirely new; it is a continuation of this long-standing cultural practice. Digital platforms may have changed their speed and style, but the basic logic remains. The ideas survive when they are memorable, meaningful, and adaptable enough to take on many different forms.

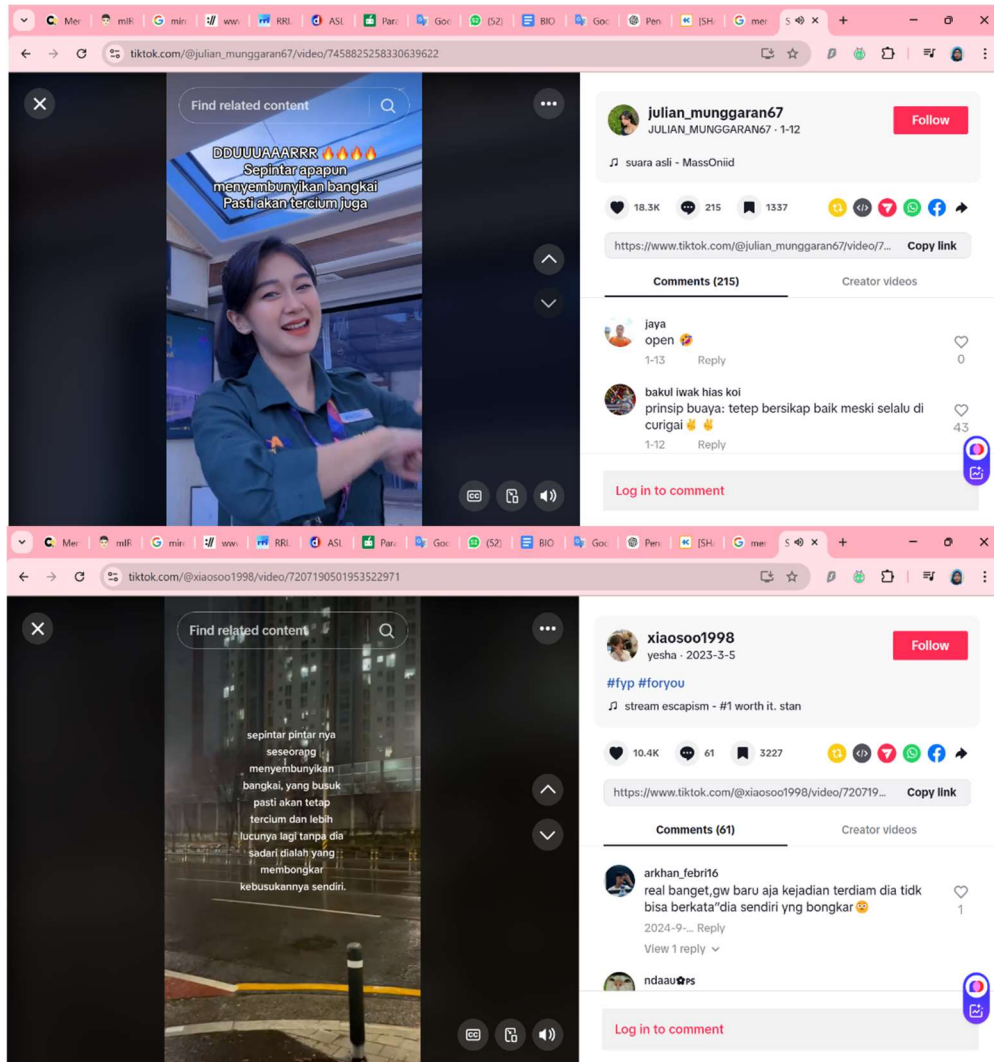


Figure 2.1. TikTok meme video drawing on a proverb about hidden wrongdoing
Source: TikTok @Julian_munggaran67 and @xiaosoo1998

To illustrate how traditional wisdom is remixed into digital formats, consider the adaptation of the proverb *Sepandai-pandainya menyimpan bangkai, baunya akan tercium juga* into TikTok meme videos. These videos employ dramatic reenactments, audio overlays, and visual humour to convey the proverb's moral message in a way that is emotionally resonant and socially relevant, particularly among younger audiences. This aligns with Blackmore's notion that successful memes are not

those that are true or sacred, but those that are memorable, repeatable, and adaptable across media and generations.

Early Digital Symbols: Emoticon to Emoji

Although this dissertation focuses on Islamic-inspired memes on public social media platforms, emoticons, emojis, and WhatsApp sticker practices matter as a prehistory of digital vernaculars. This section draws on digital ethnographic reflections and informal conversations with Indonesian internet users who were active in early online spaces such as mIRC and Kaskus during the 2000s. They illustrate how Indonesian users became accustomed to communicating affect, piety, and belonging through small, repeatable visual units, communicative habits that later inform and resonate with meme-making and platform-based circulation.

The earliest forms of digital visual expression, such as Scott Fahlman's :-) and :- (introduced in 1982, offered users a simple way to signal tone and emotion in text-based environments. These symbols were quickly adopted in Indonesian digital spaces, from mIRC and early mailing lists to Kaskus forums, and became part of the everyday visual vocabulary that structured early online interaction. Their rapid spread shows how users were already learning to communicate through small, replicable visual cues long before the emergence of full-fledged internet memes.

As internet access expanded globally, similar visual conventions began to shape local online cultures, including in Indonesia. Early forums and chatrooms provided new spaces where users experimented with humour, tone, and identity through these simple digital cues. Though they did not directly carry religious meaning, emoticons became part of the expressive repertoire in Indonesian online communities such as Kaskus and mIRC, where humour, sentiment, and subcultural identity began to be negotiated through visual expression. Kaskus (founded in 1999) was one of Indonesia's earliest and most influential online forums, known for its vibrant communities and unique local slang (*Bahasa Kaskus*), such as *Pertamax* (the first comment on a thread, often competed for), and *Agan/Aganwati* (respectful ways to address male and female users). mIRC widely used in the early 2000s, facilitated real-time group chats and early digital social interaction. A typical opening phrase was "ASL PLS" (Age, Sex, Location – Please), used to initiate conversations with unknown users. These accounts shed light on how emoticons shaped early online interaction in Indonesia. As one informant who was active on mIRC in the early 2000s recalled, "we used emoticons all the time, sometimes just a ':-)' was enough to show we were joking," highlighting how minimal visual cues could substitute for tone and intent in text-based interaction.

In these spaces, users adopted emoticons not only to signal humour or friendliness but also to negotiate subcultural identity, express teasing, or soften disagreement. Icon like :) for smiling, :P for teasing, XD for laughter, and T_T

for crying, became part of a shared visual repertoire among Indonesian users who were learning how to build sociality in emerging digital environments.

Despite a decline in usage, emoticons have served as the foundation for more elaborate and visually engaging forms of digital communication. These more complex and expressive forms of communication have made possible the development of more sophisticated tools, including emojis, GIFs, and stickers, which offer richer visual expressions. As the digital environment matured, these simple icons evolved into richer, more adaptable media for conveying not just tone, but cultural and religious values as well.

Although emoticons can be considered an early example of replicable digital expression, its classification as a "meme" remains a matter of contention. Some argue that emoticons, such as :-) and :- (were more akin to symbolic shorthand than full-fledged memes, lacking the re-mixable and referential qualities typically associated with memetic culture (Davison in Börzsei, 2013).

Global developments in digital visual expression did shape the landscape, but mostly as background influences. Early viral animations like the Dancing Baby (1996) or the Hampsterdance GIF spread internationally and demonstrated how looping images could circulate rapidly across online forums. At the time, internet penetration in Indonesia was still limited, and these examples were only encountered by small groups of urban, early adopters, especially in North America (Collins, 2018). They are relevant here not because they defined Indonesian online culture directly but because they mark the technological shift that later enabled more complex visual communication.

The more significant transition occurred in the early 2010s, when smartphones and messaging applications began to dominate everyday communication in Indonesia. The adoption of Android devices and the growing affordability of mobile internet accelerated the use of emojis.²² By then, emojis had already been standardised through Unicode, enabling cross-device use, and platforms such as WhatsApp (launched in 2009 and widely adopted in Indonesia during the early 2010s) helped normalise emoji as an everyday layer of digital expression, including within religious circles.

²² The emergence of emoji shortly afterwards also reshaped digital expression. Developed by Shigetaka Kurita in 1999 for NTT DoCoMo's i-mode platform, the first emoji set quickly spread beyond Japan and was later adopted into global messaging apps such as Apple's iMessage, WhatsApp, and Facebook Messenger (Danesi, 2016; Seargeant, 2019).



Figure 2.2. The newly rendered *Dancing Baby* and selected remixes by Kreationismistern, Yuuki Morita, Yonk, and Kid Eight.²³
Source: CNN (2023)

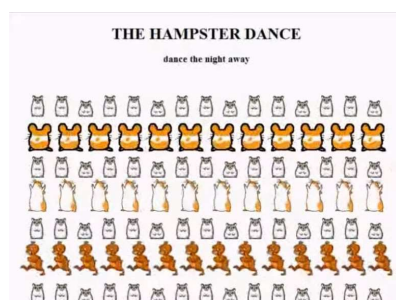


Figure 2.3. The original *Hamsterdance* website²⁴
Source: CBC Art (Collins, 2018)

Initial enthusiasm for emojis often portrayed them as a universal visual language capable of bridging linguistic and cultural differences (as discussed by Danesi, 2016; Evans, 2017; Seargeant, 2019). Yet empirical studies challenge this assumption. Miller et al., (2016) revealed that users often interpret the same emoji differently, even when viewing identical renderings. In their study, only 4.5% of emojis received consistent sentiment ratings, and in 25% of cases, users disagreed on whether the emoji expressed a positive, neutral, or negative emotion. This suggests that rather than eliminating ambiguity, emojis can introduce new layers of (mis)interpretation. Supporting this, Guntuku et al. (2019) found significant cultural differences in emoji usage across Eastern and Western countries. For instance, emojis related to food, drink, and leisure activities were used and interpreted differently, reflecting deeper cultural distinctions in everyday life.

These findings challenge what several scholars have described as the popular *myth of emoji universality*, the belief that emojis constitute a universal visual language transcending cultural and linguistic boundaries (Danesi, 2016; Evans, 2017; Seargeant, 2019). Rather than functioning as a shared visual code, emojis acquire meaning through cultural context and user practice. For example, in many Western cultures, the 🙏 emoji is used to convey prayer, whereas in Japan and Indonesia, the same emoji is inherently understood as expressing gratitude (thank you) or a kind request, illustrating how local customs and practices influence the use of emojis. Like language, emojis carry local knowledge and cultural resonance,

²³ Early examples of viral digital content, often cited as precursors to contemporary memes, appeared in the mid-to-late 1990s. Commentators such as Will Fulton (Thrillist) and Will Leitch (OneZero (2021)) frequently point to the *Dancing Baby* GIF (1996) as one of the earliest internet memes due to its rapid circulation and repeated remixing, a status further cemented by its appearance in the television series *Ally McBeal* (Higgins, 2017).

²⁴ Around the same period, *Hamster Dance*, created by Deidre LaCarte, became another widely shared GIF across early web communities (Collin, 2018), illustrating how looping animated visuals began shaping early online humour within the limits of the late-1990s internet.

however, unlike language, their meanings are more weakly stabilised and more dependent on platform design, visual convention, and situational use.

This ambivalence echoes earlier experiments at visual standardisation, such as Otto Neurath's ISOTYPE, which sought to create a universally readable pictorial language.²⁵ Yet even ISOTYPE's minimalist icons were shaped by cultural and ideological contexts, revealing that pictograms never fully escape local interpretation (Jansen, 2009; Youvan, 2023). Emoji work in a similar way, they look simple and neutral, but their meanings depend heavily on local norms and everyday communicative practice. The idea of emoji universality, therefore, does not hold up when confronted with actual user behaviour.

Yet the very ambiguity that limits emoji's universality also enables creativity. Users repurpose and reinterpret emojis in ways that sometimes even reshape design standards. As emoji libraries expand to include symbols tied to politics, culture, and religion (Stark & Crawford, 2015), they increasingly function as semiotic tools in global digital communication, tools that are expressive, adaptable, and culturally inflected rather than universally legible.

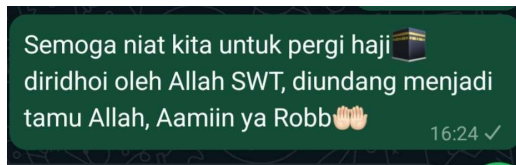
These findings are important in the Indonesian context, where emojis are starting to be used not only to express emotions, but also to give religious color to everyday conversations. Indonesian users frequently adopt emojis in their daily communications, particularly in religious contexts, as smartphone usage and instant messaging apps like WhatsApp and LINE gained widespread popularity in the early 2010s. Emojis such as the crescent moon (🌙) star (⭐), the palm position depicting prayer (🙏), or even the Kaaba (🕌) symbol are used in Islam-related messages. The inclusion of religious symbols such as the Kaaba (🕌) or prayer hands (🙏) on emoji keyboards was not a coincidence. They were facilitated by encoding in the Unicode Standard, which is a universal character system employed by a majority of significant technology companies to enable consistency across devices and platforms. As Stark and Crawford (2015) argue, emojis are ideologically loaded, not ideologically neutral, and are acts of socio-cultural negotiations undertaken in the name of the Unicode Consortium.²⁶ Since the mid-2010s, the Consortium has been presented with an increasing number of proposals aimed at expanding emoji depictions that include symbols relevant to Islam and other religious traditions (Unicode Consortium, n.d.).

As emojis began to enter everyday conversation, Indonesian Muslim users quickly adapted them to the context of worship and religious communities. Emojis are often included in greetings during Ramadan or Eid al-Fitr. WhatsApp users often

²⁵ International System of Typographic Picture Education

²⁶ The Unicode Consortium is a non-profit organisation that standardises characters and emojis for consistent cross-platform communication (see unicode.org for official updates).

combine the crescent moon emoji (🌙) and mosque (🕌) to add a visual element that enriches traditional greetings, demonstrating a desire to integrate cultural and religious identity into digital spaces. Here is an example of the use of emojis in the daily chat, one of the informants (a female lecturer in her 30s) with her sister.



Translate:

May our intention to perform the Hajj be granted by Allah SWT, and may we be invited as His guests. Aamiin, Ya Lord.”

Figure 2.4. Examples of emoji use in digital communication

The message combines text with the Kaaba emoji (🕌) and the supplication hands emoji (🙏) to express a prayer related to the intention to perform the Hajj.

In this context, the Kaaba emoji anchors the message in the sacred theme of pilgrimage, while the supplication hands visually reinforce the act of prayer concluded with *Aamiin ya Rabb*. Together, these emojis do not merely decorate the message but intensify its affective and religious tone, allowing the sender to signal sincerity, piety, and shared moral orientation. At the same time, their use indexes participation in a shared Muslim communicative repertoire, reinforcing a sense of belonging within a digital ummah during significant religious moments such as Hajj or Ramadan.

While this study aligns with Bai et al. (2019) and Godard & Holtzman (2022) in recognising the semiotic richness of emojis, particularly their ability to convey emotional and cultural meanings in religious contexts, it also engages with the limitations raised by Stark and Crawford (2015). The religious emojis used in WhatsApp or Instagram, such as the Kaaba or prayer hands, may appear expressive and contextually meaningful, especially during events like Hajj or Ramadan. However, their availability, standardisation are governed through Unicode, while their visual implementation is determined by platform providers such as Apple, Google, Meta, and other largely Western-based technology companies. This means users can imbue emojis with local religious meaning, but the range of available symbols and their visual conventions remain shaped by corporate infrastructures.

Stark and Crawford’s point is relevant here. Despite the limits imposed by platform-level design, Indonesian users in religious settings often reinterpret and repurpose emojis creatively. This capacity for creative reinterpretation has, at times, moved beyond personal use and even influenced emoji design standards. One clear example is the creation of the ‘Person with Headscarf’ emoji (🧕), emerged in response to user demands for better religious representation (🧕), approved by the Unicode Consortium in 2016 following a proposal by Rayouf Alhumedhi, a Saudi teenager who wished to see the hijab represented in digital

spaces (Vonberg et al., 2017). This moment marked a shift toward more inclusive emoji design, alongside other changes such as the introduction of skin tone modifiers, which similarly emerged from debates around representation, visibility, and cultural difference in digital communication. Together, these developments reinforce the role of emojis as tools not only for personal expression but also for negotiating cultural, racial, and religious visibility within global platform infrastructures.

As emojis became more integrated into daily communication, their use in religious contexts also expanded. WhatsApp, in particular, has helped share religious emotions through text and images, thereby strengthening cultural and spiritual ties. WhatsApp groups within the Islamic community have evolved as platforms for sharing spiritual support, moral guidance, and religious teachings. The group, such as the *Alumni Haji Mandiri* (Mandiri Hajj Alumni) and the *Amal Jariyah* Group (the jariyah charity group), helps to strengthen ties among its members. Often centred on Islamic worship rituals, these groups centre on congregational prayers at the mosque, fostering a feeling of community and shared religious commitment.²⁷



Translate:

The dawn is truly beautiful when the *Shubuh* prayer is performed at its earliest time and in congregation at the mosque'

As narrated from Buraidah al-Aslami, the Prophet Muhammad said: 'Give glad tidings to those who walk to the mosque in the darkness of night, that they will receive perfect light on the Day of Resurrection.' (Hadith narrated by Abu Dawud and Tirmidhi)."

Figure 2.5. Motivational message circulated within a digital group

This message motivates group members to engage in the *Subuh* prayer at the mosque collectively. Within Islamic communities, such as Hajj alumni groups or charity organisations, it is customary to share messages like this to serve as reminders and foster stronger relationships among members by collectively observing recommended Islamic worship practices. This phenomenon reflects how digital communication platforms, especially messaging apps like WhatsApp,

²⁷ The author has been an active member of this WhatsApp group since its formation, long before this research began. My role as both participant and observer has provided me with ongoing, informal access to the group dynamics and communications. All data presented have been anonymised and selected from non-sensitive interactions.

have evolved as central means of preserving spiritual ties and promoting religious observance, using the philosophy that together one stands strong. Using these channels, group members can regularly share inspirational and religious materials, thereby strengthening their sense of community and shared responsibility in fulfilling their religious obligations.

In this WhatsApp group, the practice of reminding each other highlights the importance of togetherness in the execution of worship. Teaching activities are still actively carried out in the *Subuh* prayer in congregation in Islam, which gets many rewards. In addition to religious WhatsApp groups, this habit is also widely used among general high school alumni or social communities, such as sending a friendly reminder for *Subuh* prayers. An informant, a member of the Smaga'95 Surakarta group (alumni of SMA Negeri 3 Surakarta, class of 1995), shared in an informal interview that he routinely posts digital stickers and short reminders to encourage the members of the WhatsApp group to join *Subuh* prayers or attend *Jumatan* (Friday prayers). As a fellow group member, I have also observed this pattern, which reflects how religious practice is maintained and encouraged within alumni digital communities. Similarly, ingrained patterns within close communities, such as Hajj Alumni or charity groups, demonstrate that collective prayer fosters a stronger sense of solidarity and social responsibility among them.

Indeed, such practices echo the daily digital religiosity noted by Eva Nisa, particularly in her ethnography of the "One Day One Juz" (ODOJ) movement, where group reminders through WhatsApp served as both spiritual encouragement and moral discipline within Muslim online piety networks (Nisa, 2018b). Technology helps these spiritual connections grow more actively and responsively. The rapid and straightforward form of communication, quick messages, emojis and stickers, allows for continuity in everyday worship and solidifies group religiosity. However, this sense of efficiency should not be viewed solely through the prism of functional efficiency; the sense of intimacy, immediacy, and emotional ties that come as a byproduct of these nudges is also part of the game. According to Nisa (2018a) and Slama (2017), digital platforms not only structure religious behaviour but also shape affective relationships among believers, making religiosity feel more present and lived in the everyday.

The mosque emoji () does more than simply depict a place of worship; it operates as a semiotic shorthand that reinforces the moral and communal tone of the message. Within Islamic communication, the mosque symbol evokes not only physical space but also the collective act of worship and belonging it represents. When used in digital invitations to prayer, it visually anchors the message in a shared religious context, providing affective resonance and reinforcing the sender's sincerity and piety. In this way, digital symbols such as the mosque emoji extend traditional modes of religious expression into everyday digital communication, transforming ritual reminders into acts of mediated devotion.

While emojis are designed as simplified, universal symbols, their visual references inevitably reflect particular cultural aesthetics. The mosque emoji, for instance, resonates with many Indonesian users because domes and minarets are also common in Southeast Asian mosques, even though local variations, such as tiered roofs or Javanese-inspired forms, differ significantly. This simplification illustrates a broader tension within emoji design, the attempt to create globally recognisable symbols that nevertheless privilege certain visual traditions over others (Guntuku et al., 2019; H. Miller et al., 2016).

In Indonesia, mosque architecture itself is remarkably diverse and deeply rooted in local culture. Mosques such as the *Menara Kudus* Mosque in Central Java, which has Hindu-Javanese architectural elements, or the Grand Mosque of West Sumatra, whose roof resembles a traditional *Minangkabau* house, are examples of how Islam has adapted to local cultures. Unfortunately, because emojis have to be made as universal as possible to be used in various countries, these local cultural elements are not visible in the current representation of mosque emojis.

Emojis enhance the message's appeal and alleviate monotony by introducing colourful, emotionally charged visuals that complement or replace words. For example, a simple heart (❤️) can quickly signal affection or agreement without the need for elaboration. In a digital environment saturated with information, these visual cues help messages stand out in busy chat groups or on social media, where numerous messages are shared quickly. Their visual form makes it easier for people to spot and remember the message. Religious emoji can instantly situate a message within a religious context, allowing recipients to process its meaning more intuitively than with words alone. Their symbolic clarity and familiarity can also support cognitive recall, as the brain tends to retain and retrieve visual content more efficiently than plain text (Bai et al., 2019; Danesi, 2016).

The widespread adoption of smartphones and messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter further embedded emojis into everyday communication practices (Ling, 2012). Beyond expressing emotion, emojis have increasingly taken on cultural and religious nuances in daily interaction.

As discussed above, emojis function as routine markers of religious tone in Indonesian Muslim communication. Rather than reiterating their symbolic meanings, the discussion now turns to the limits of emoji standardisation and how these constraints prompt users to adopt more flexible and locally grounded visual forms.²⁸

²⁸ While much of this section focuses on private messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, similar affective affordances are also visible on public platforms. On Facebook for example, reaction emojis expand beyond the single 'like' to offer a small repertoire of socially legible responses (e.g.,

However, the limitations of emojis as universal symbols have become the starting point for the birth of more local visual expressions, namely stickers, which allow users to negotiate cultural and religious identities more freely. Stickers on WhatsApp, LINE, or Telegram allow for more variation. Because individuals or communities can create stickers, their designs are more flexible and reflect a more specific cultural identity. Many users in Indonesia create and share Islamic-themed stickers featuring typical elements, such as the *peci* and *sarung*, or local cultural themes, including *bermaaf-maafan* (apologising) and the culture of *sungkeman* towards parents celebrating Eid al-Fitr.²⁹ This shift illustrates how digital expression, initially constrained by standardised emoji systems, evolves into more contextual and culturally grounded visual forms.



Figure 2.6. WhatsApp sticker images for *sungkeman* during Eid al-Fitr 2021

Source: https://suryamalang.tribunnews.com/2021/05/11/daftar-stiker-wa-whatsapp-lebaran-selamat-hari-raya-idul-fitri-gambar-lucu-saling-memaafkan?page=all#goog_rewarded (Suryamalang, 2021)

The limits of emoji standardisation are precisely what make other vernacular formats attractive. When users need more local details, faces, clothing, gestures, or culturally specific humour, they often turn to stickers. Unlike emojis, stickers are not constrained by Unicode standardisation and can be produced by communities themselves. In this sense, stickers function as a crucial transitional form between standardised visual symbols and fully memetic formats, preparing the ground for the Islamic-inspired memes analysed in the following sections.

♥ 'love', 😲 'wow', 😞 'sad'), which users can mobilise to signal sympathy, approval, or shared joy in religiously charged moments.

²⁹ The tradition of asking for forgiveness during Eid al-Fitr is an important part of Muslim culture in Indonesia. After a month of fasting, Muslims ask for forgiveness from each other to purify themselves and strengthen their relationships. *Sungkeman*, especially in Javanese culture, is a form of respect for parents and elders by kneeling and kissing their hands as a symbol of humility and asking for blessings.

Stickers and Visual Language of Digital Islam

As technology and social media platforms evolved, the circulation of visual content opened new possibilities for cultural and religious expression. The popularity of digital stickers in messaging apps, such as LINE stickers (Everypixel Journal, 2023) and BBM stickers (Kuittinen, 2014), gained momentum by drawing on a longstanding sticker culture (StickerYou, 2025). These stickers, whether digital or physical, have been used to convey humour, beliefs, and identity in public spaces. From bumper stickers on vehicles to slogans painted on trucks or *angkot*,³⁰ such visual texts serve a memetic function, replicating cultural messages with simplicity, recognisability, and resonance.

While this dissertation focuses on digital memes, it is important to note that many Indonesians have long interacted with visual texts in their everyday environments, especially in urban settings. Since the late 1990s, during my teenage years in Solo, Central Java, I have frequently used public transportation such as *angkot* and city buses. Through this experience, I became familiar with the widespread presence of stickers across bus shelters, vehicle interiors, and public walls. These stickers included a variety of content: anti-corruption slogans, religious messages, political campaign materials, and even humorous or commercial texts like *sedot WC* (Septic tank pumping service). While I do not claim to know when this practice began, these recurring visual elements shaped my early awareness of how text and image can serve persuasive or communal functions in public life.

This long-standing familiarity with sticker culture reveals how Indonesians have long employed short, repeatable visual formats to assert values, identities, and commentary, much like today's digital memes. The transition from these material expressions to online formats should not be seen as a rupture, but as part of a continuum. It reflects the ways in which symbolic and participatory media have evolved across platforms, adapting to new technologies while retaining local modes of humour, morality, and critique.

Stickers attached to motorcycles and cars, for example, reflect identity and political stance through slogans like *Aku Pancasila* (I am Pancasila, referring to Indonesia's state ideology) or *NKRI Harga Mati* (The Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia is non-negotiable). Others, such as *Peace* or similar messages, convey anti-violence sentiments and promote social harmony. During regional and national election periods, stickers featuring candidate portraits or political party logos are also commonly used to signal political allegiance. These examples demonstrate how even the simplest visual forms can operate as tools for social and political expression in everyday public spaces.

³⁰ *Angkot* (short for *angkutan kota*, or “city transport”) refers to a form of informal, shared public minivan transportation widely used in Indonesian urban areas. It typically follows semi-fixed routes and serves as an affordable mode of transit, often operating without strict schedules or centralised regulation.



Figure 2.7. “NKRI Harga Mati” sticker displayed on a private vehicle
Illustrative visualisation based on everyday observations.

In more personal settings, stickers found in books or notebooks often contain motivational quotes, such as *Semangat pagi!* (Morning spirit!) or *Stay Positive*, designed to uplift and inspire the user. Islamic-themed cartoon stickers, depicting children in hijab or Muslim dress, offer gentle visual affirmations of religious identity, especially among younger audiences. Public stickers with slogans like *Anti Korupsi* (Anti-Corruption) or *Save the Earth*, commonly found on walls or communal spaces, move beyond simple statements: they perform advocacy by raising awareness, prompting reflection, or subtly urging collective responsibility. Meanwhile, humorous local stickers, such as *Kesabaran tidak ada batasnya* (Patience has no limits), reveal how Indonesians often use humour to navigate tension, offering momentary relief and a sense of shared cultural resilience.

Much like their physical predecessors, such as slogans on trucks, bumper stickers, or wall posters, digital stickers are concise, visually striking, and contextually meaningful. Scholarships on street-based visual practices show that such interventions do more than decorating public space. As Nicholas Ganz (2015) demonstrates in *Street Messages*, forms of street visual expression, including graffiti, stencils, and posters, carry layered political, cultural, and social meanings and often function as tools of commentary or resistance. Physical stickers operate within this broader visual ecology, translating similar logics of brevity, repetition, and symbolic intervention into everyday environments.

In the digital realm, this visual culture has been translated into digital stickers, which function as shorthand for communicating emotion, identity, and commentary. Unlike emojis, which are more limited in detail and nuance, digital stickers offer larger, more expressive visuals that combine humour, stylistic diversity, and cultural specificity (Vandergriff, 2013). In Indonesia, their rapid rise in popularity stems from their ability to vividly and effectively express emotion and ideas, operating not only as personal communication tools but also as potent mediums for cultural and religious expression.

In Indonesia, the use of digital stickers is skyrocketing, since WhatsApp introduced the sticker feature in late 2018. Within just a year, Indonesian users began producing and circulating a wide range of Islamic-themed stickers, especially during Ramadan and Eid, integrating faith-based expressions into everyday digital communication, featuring illustrations of religious figures, prayers, and typical expressions that reflect Indonesian Muslim culture. These stickers enable more emotional and cultural digital communication, which can depict religious nuances more vividly and expressively (Kato et al., 2018). For example, in family or religious community WhatsApp groups, stickers such as "*Barakallah fiikum*" (May Allah bless you) or images of praying hands are often used as a form of prayer and emotional support in conversations. When someone is recovering from illness, it is common to receive stickers like "*Syafakallah*" (May Allah heal you), which function as digital surrogates for collective prayer and communal care. In this digital age, Islamic stickers in online chat rooms show how religious traditions and expressions continue to evolve and adapt to technology, creating new ways for people to connect and share meaning in their daily lives.

Various smartphone apps such as *Sticker.ly*, *Wemoji*, and *Personal Sticker for WhatsApp*, third-party tools commonly used worldwide, including by Indonesian users, enable the creation of customised sticker packs, support the trend of creating and sharing personalised stickers. These tools allow users to transform images, such as photos of family members, local expressions, or religious illustrations, into stickers that reflect their personal, cultural, or religious identities. In Indonesia, many Muslims use such apps to create stickers that depict moments surrounding the call to prayer (*adhan*), integrating both visual cues and religious expressions into their digital communication.

For example, stickers may feature a child in a white prayer outfit saying *Tuh Adzan... Sholat dulu yuk!* (That's the adzan... Let's go and pray!), or an animated figure with the text *Maaf off dulu... Kita Sholat yukkk* (Sorry, logging off... Let's pray). Another example features a cartoon boy and girl in Muslim attire, accompanied by the caption *Saatnya Sholat...* (It's time to pray). These images depict the call to prayer not through sound but through culturally familiar visual representations, transforming everyday chat interactions into moments of religious encouragement. They also demonstrate how ordinary people and ordinary everyday forms and objects, not just institutions or religious leaders, participate in shaping the religious digital landscape through creative, culturally rooted sticker content.

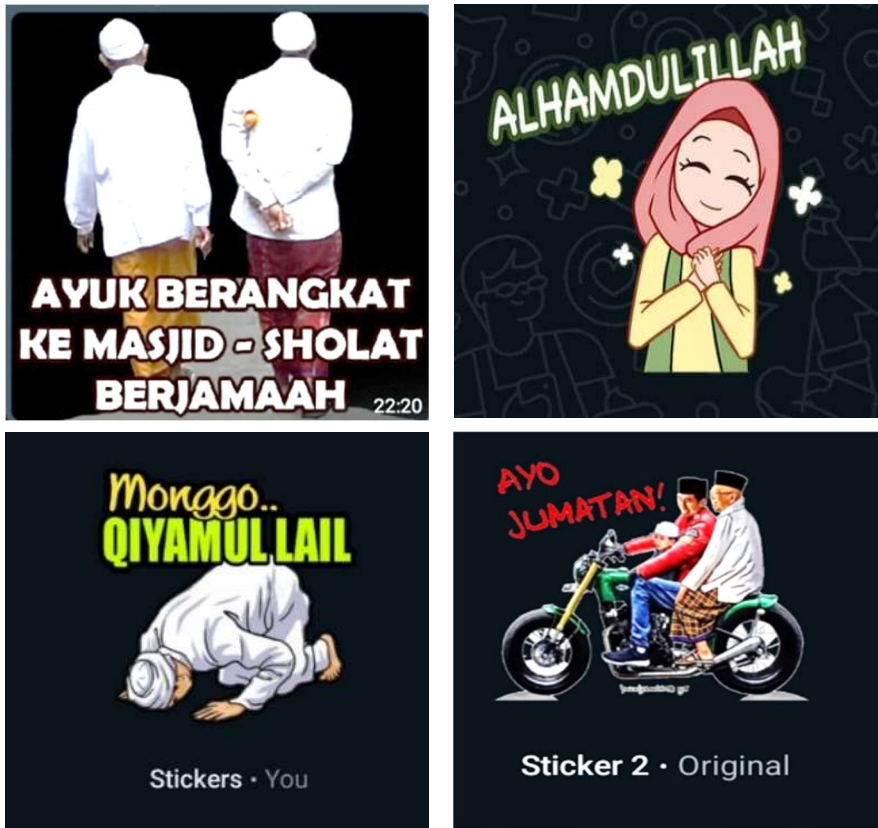


Figure 2.8. Examples of Islamic-themed digital stickers
Source: Various WhatsApp Groups

One of these WhatsApp stickers depicts three men wearing traditional Islamic attire riding a motorcycle. The sticker includes "AYO JUMATAN!" in Indonesian, which translates to "Let's go to Friday prayers!". This sticker cleverly merges wit with cultural allusions, portraying a prevalent scenario in numerous Indonesian communities, where congregating for Friday prayers is frequently undertaken collectively and holds significant social moments, the inclusion of men adorned in *sarongs* and *peci*, traditional cloths from Indonesia. The stickers also subtly hint at class differences and resource-sharing practices, where combining transportation is a common way to maximise limited means. This practical approach, in turn, reflects camaraderie and adds a layer of "street credibility," as it depicts the everyday realities of life that are down-to-earth for many Indonesians. Its playful tone, combined with meaningful cultural messages, makes it entertaining and reflective of societal norms. and gives this sticker a prominent cultural aspect, making it instantly recognisable to its audience.

Within digital communication, stickers like this offer a more nuanced and culturally significant means of conveying emotions and ideas, in contrast to standard emojis. In late 2018, after WhatsApp introduced its sticker feature,

Islamic-themed stickers have gained significant popularity in Indonesia, due to their ability to convey religious messages and values in a casual but spiritually resonant way. These stickers communicate a message and incorporate a cultural context that is readily comprehensible to users. This mode of communication enables individuals to integrate religious components into their daily interactions.

Another example is the *Madura Anti-COVID-19* sticker pack, developed to promote public health while reinforcing Madurese cultural identity. These stickers feature characters wearing sarongs and traditional headgear, humorous expressions, and proverbs in the Madurese language. Slogans such as *Jha' kalowaran mon tada' parola* (Don't go out without a good reason) or *Senga' korbân Corona bannya la'!* (Don't become Corona's next victim!) effectively blends humour with serious health messages. Several stickers also incorporate Islamic expressions, such as *Aamiin...*, or reflect the concept of *ikhtiar*, an Islamic theological principle emphasising human effort alongside trust in divine will. These subtle religious undertones reveal how stickers become vessels for both cultural and spiritual meaning. The sticker pack circulated widely through WhatsApp during the pandemic, shared informally in family and community groups or downloaded via popular sticker-making apps, showing how local communities adopt digital tools to reinforce both health awareness and cultural belonging.

Their visual design, combining comic-style illustrations with expressive gestures, makes these health messages both engaging and accessible. As Noordyanto and Ramadani observe, such culturally embedded stickers serve not only communicative functions but also bridge personal interaction and collective identity, particularly in contexts of social urgency, such as the pandemic (Noordyanto & Ramadhani, 2020).



Figure 2.9. “Madura Anti COVID-19” sticker package
Source: Noordyanto, N., & Ramadani, N. (2020)

Similar trends can be seen beyond Indonesia. In East and Southeast Asia, for instance, LINE sticker packs featuring ethnic or culture-based designs have become identity markers among youth, particularly in Japan, Thailand, and Taiwan, where LINE is a dominant messaging platform (Jasjfi, 2020). In Japan, seasonal and Shinto-influenced stickers are commonly exchanged during New Year celebrations; in Thailand, Buddhist-themed or Thai-script humour stickers circulate widely during major festivals; while in Taiwan, Indigenous and Hokkien-language stickers have gained popularity as expressions of cultural pride. Across these contexts, stickers serve as visual affirmations of belonging, moral values, and group solidarity. Whether used in daily conversations or during festive occasions, these stickers help reinforce cultural pride and religious identity in everyday communication.

Overall, these examples show that digital stickers are more than playful images; they are extensions of longstanding traditions of cultural expression, updated for the digital age. As visual, context-sensitive, and emotionally resonant tools, they also offer a new mode of visual *da'wah*, one that creatively blends religiosity, humour, and community engagement. This opens the door to a closer examination of how Islamic-themed stickers contribute to the broader *da'wah* economy within digital infrastructures.

Islamic Stickers and the Da'wah Economy

In Indonesia, digital stickers have emerged as a favoured medium for religious expression in messaging apps like WhatsApp. Islamic-themed packs with cute and adorable cartoon characters, student stickers, advice from Ulama, calligraphy, aphorisms, and special Ramadan stickers, have become increasingly popular. For example, on *Sticker WA Islami Lengkap*, a widely downloaded app with over 500,000 installs (play.google.com).³¹ These stickers facilitate richer digital communication that blends emotion and faith (Kato et al., 2018).

Muslim application developers, individuals, and communities in Indonesia have begun creating sticker packs that contain Islamic preaching messages, advice from clerics, and even distinctive Islamic-related humour. Several stickers feature popular religious figures, including Habib Luthfi, Gus Dur, Mbah Maimun, Gus Baha, Ustadz Abdul Somad, Ustadz Maulana, and Ustadz Adi Hidayat. In these stickers, they are depicted with distinctive quotes or short prayers

The “Fun Ramadhan with Ustadz Maulana” pack, for instance, was officially launched on LINE as a paid sticker set in 2016, reflecting a monetised form of religious engagement. Users could obtain it through the LINE Sticker Shop during its release. In contrast, WhatsApp-based stickers such as *Nasihat Ulama* (Clerical advice) are freely circulated by followers and communities, often outside any formal economic structure.

³¹https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?hl=en_US&id=com.mungmedia.stikermuslim, accessed 15 June 2025



Figure 2.10. “Fun Ramadan with Ustadz Maulana” sticker package
Source : <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/625367098246708402/>



Figure 2.11. “Nasehat Ulama” (clerical advice) sticker featuring Ustadz Adi Hidayat
Source: Play Store Application

The presence of such stickers underscores what Eva Nisa describes as *lucrative da'wah*, a form of religious engagement that operates within the logic of digital consumer culture (Nisa, 2018a). Even when distributed freely, these stickers enhance the visibility and informal branding of religious figures, illustrating how *da'wah* is increasingly intertwined with market dynamics.

Users, often followers or admirers of popular preachers, who create and circulate stickers serve as cultural intermediaries, translating religious authority into visual formats that resonate with younger, digitally literate audiences. For instance, one sticker featuring a cartoon of Ustadz Adi Hidayat with the caption "*Eits Hati-bati Jaga Lisan Anda!*" (Hey, be careful...watch your words) was described by a user as "*ngena banget, pas buat sharing kalau ada yang mulai emosi di WhatsApps grup*" (Really hits the mark, perfect to share when someone starts getting emotional in a WhatsApp group). Such responses show how users not only circulate these stickers but also attach specific emotional or pedagogical value to them.

For many young Indonesia Muslims, who create and share such stickers, sticker-making becomes both an act of devotion and a way to participate in the informal *da'wah* economy. This was affirmed in my informal conversations with several young clerics and Islamic educators in Solo and the surrounding area, who described such practices as part of a broader, more adaptive model of preaching, one that reflects the rhythms and affordances of contemporary digital life.

These practices, however, also expose deeper ethical tensions. While Islamic teaching emphasises *ikhlas* (sincerity) in religious acts, digital platforms are built to maximise engagement, extract data, and generate profit. LINE's paid sticker packs exemplify formal monetisation, whereas WhatsApp's sticker-sharing model, though non-commercial at the user level, still operates within platform capitalism. Everyday activities such as sending, receiving, and forwarding stickers produce valuable metadata about social interaction patterns, which feeds into Meta's wider data ecosystem and sustains its surveillance-based business model (Srnicek, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018; Zuboff, 2019). In this sense, "free" refers only to the absence of monetary exchange among users; at the platform level, sticker circulation continues to generate economic value.

Developers may profit through advertising, commissions, or premium downloads. While criticism of sticker-based *da'wah* remains relatively muted, parallels can be drawn to earlier forms of digital religious commodification. In the mid-2000s, several Indonesian mobile operators introduced paid SMS services offering Qur'anic verses or daily Islamic reminders. Although not widely documented in mainstream media, these services prompted informal concerns in online forums and community discussions, where some questioned the ethics of charging for sacred content and argued that divine messages should not be commercialised. Such reactions illustrate an early unease about monetising religious material, an anxiety that aligns with broader critiques of the marketisation of faith (Einstein,

2008). In this context, the use of Islamic stickers becomes entangled in broader techno-economic infrastructures. On one hand, they offer accessible, visually engaging means of religious expression. On the other hand, they raise important questions: can sincerity be preserved in systems optimised for profit? How should Muslim users negotiate their faith within the logics of platform capitalism?

Based on my fieldwork, responses to these tensions vary. Some users cultivate a form of *digital piety*, using stickers and other tools cautiously while reflecting on intention, sincerity, and the appropriate boundaries of religious expression online. Others take a more pragmatic approach, treating digital media as efficient instruments for da'wah, where relevance and outreach matter more than concerns over commodification. These divergent orientations not only shape everyday user practices but also influence how religious authority is interpreted and negotiated in digital spaces.

While the popularisation of Islamic-themed stickers through commercial apps may increase visibility and user engagement, it also raises questions about how religious authority is changing. Some critics worry that when religious content becomes a commodity, its sacredness is diluted, and religious figures are reframed through branding and consumer appeal, potentially weakening forms of authority grounded in scholarship and spiritual integrity. Others, however, see this not as a collapse of authority but as its adaptation to digital infrastructures, where being visible, emotionally resonant (affect), and relatable to everyday users (relatability) has become a new basis for moral influence.

This shows that Islamic-themed stickers are not merely decorative. They are dynamic cultural artefacts that mediate the intersection of faith, identity, and market forces, prefiguring the rise of even more complex and multimodal forms of religious expression, such as memes.

Tracing Meme Histories: Global Origins, Local Adaptations, Indonesia's Viral Moments

Digital stickers, with their concise, expressive visuals and cultural specificity, have laid the groundwork for more complex and dynamic forms of online religious expression. As participatory media, they have encouraged users to remix, personalise, and circulate content infused with faith, humour, and identity. Islamic-themed stickers, in particular, have made religion more accessible and emotionally resonant within everyday communication. As digital cultures evolve, so do their expressive forms. Memes build on similar visual and affective logics that underline sticker use. Both rely on concise imagery, emotional cues, and culturally recognisable references. While stickers introduce users to rapid, visually driven communication, memes extend this mode by adding humour, irony, intertextuality, and social critique. This shift marks an important development in the visual turn toward playful da'wah, where religious ideas are communicated

through symbolic, reflexive, and often humorous formats that appeal especially to younger, digitally literate audiences.

To understand the broader significance of memes in Islamic digital expression, I first trace their global and historical roots. Before the structured formats of internet memes became widespread, various viral visual and textual artefacts circulated across ‘the early web’, what scholars have retrospectively called *proto-memes*, early viral content that operated in meme-like ways despite lacking a standardised structure (Phillips, 2012, 2015). These were often humorous, absurd, or re-mixable digital objects shared via email, forums, or early websites, laying the groundwork for the memetic logics that would later flourish on platforms like 4chan, Reddit, and eventually TikTok.

As discussed earlier, early viral artefacts such as the *Dancing Baby* (1996) and similar looped animations marked an initial shift toward shareable visual culture online. Revisited here, these artefacts are not treated as isolated curiosities but as early manifestations of memetic logic. Despite lacking standardised templates, they circulated through repetition, mutation, and collective recognition, core features that would later define internet memes. Phillips (2012), for instance, uses “protomeme” to describe viral fragments such as the phrase “*fuckin’ magnets*” from a popular music video, which spread rapidly and became embedded within existing online vernaculars despite not conforming to a fixed meme template.

While early digital artefacts such as the Dancing Baby marked the beginning of meme-like content online, the rise of platforms like 4chan in the early 2000s introduced a more community-shaped mode of meme-making. De Zeeuw and Tuters (2020) describe this as *vernacular meme culture*, a space where a distinctive style of creativity emerged, one marked by anonymity, quick remixing, and humour that often only makes sense to those inside the community. What began in small anime and manga forums gradually developed into a broader culture of experimentation, where users tested the limits of parody, provocation, and playful transgression. These practices helped form an aesthetic that later circulated far beyond 4chan, influencing how memes came to be created and understood across many digital platforms.

The influence of this style of creativity can be seen in several memes that later entered mainstream culture, such as Rickrolling or Pepe the Frog, both originating from 4chan before circulating globally (Phillips, 2015).³² These examples show

³² Rickrolling is an internet prank in which a misleading link redirects users to Rick Astley's music video *Never Gonna Give You Up*, which originated on 4chan in 2007. It showcases how humour can spread online and become a lasting cultural phenomenon. Pepe the Frog, a character by Matt Furie from the comic *Boys Club*, gained popularity on 4chan in 2008 as a versatile meme. Over time, it took on various meanings, including controversial uses by extremist groups, highlighting how memes can evolve beyond their creators' intent.

how 4chan's anonymous and unstructured environment enabled a distinctive kind of creative freedom that shaped wider meme aesthetics across digital platforms.



Figure 2.12. Screenshot of the *Never Gonna Give You Up* music video on YouTube (2009)
Source: Rick Astley, *Never Gonna Give You Up* (official music video), RCA Records.



Figure 2.13. Pepe the frog meme
Source: in.pinterest.com (Rantman, 2019)

However, this same anonymity also caused various problems. The lack of moderation on 4chan has made the platform a breeding ground for illegal content, hate speech, and announcements of real-world violence (Bernstein et al., 2011). Scholars such as Gabriella Coleman argue that anonymity is a double-edged condition, it enables playful experimentation and collective creativity, but at the same time reduces accountability, making exclusionary and aggressive practices more likely (Coleman, 2014).

This paradox is well illustrated in the documentary *Feels Good Man* (2020), which traces the journey of *Pepe the Frog* from an innocuous comic character to a controversial symbol co-opted by extremist groups. The combination of unfiltered creativity and controversy has made 4chan a unique but often problematic place in the history of internet culture. Despite its undeniable role in meme innovation, its reputation as a trend incubator has been overshadowed by multiple controversies.

The trend of internet memes continued to gain traction in 2009 with the circulation of Joseph Ducreux meme, an 18th-century French portrait painter known for his unusually expressive self-portraits. His portraits were widely recirculated online with humorous and ironic captions, forming one of the early viral examples of the image macro format.

This format, characterised by re-mixability, irony, and user participation, became foundational for what we now recognise as modern internet memes (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). While the *Joseph Ducreux* meme did not originate from 4chan, it

exemplifies a meme format whose visual and textual conventions were shaped by earlier vernacular cultures of meme-making. Platforms like 4chan in the early 2000s helped popularise the image macro template, a picture paired with humorous or absurd captions, often in bold white Impact font with black outlines. These captions often feature quotes from popular songs or satirical commentary on everyday life.

By the time *Ducreux* memes gained popularity on platforms such as Reddit and memegenerator.net, they were drawing from a well-established memetic logic seeded by earlier subcultural hubs like 4chan. In this sense, 4chan catalysed a vernacular infrastructure and remix culture that influenced how memes were structured, circulated, and consumed in the following decade.

Although the exact timeline of meme culture's arrival in Indonesia remains uncertain, many sources refer to a Merdeka.com interview with Poerwanto, described in the article as a “meme activist”, who is considered one of the early advocates of meme culture in the country. In the interview, he noted that memes have been increasingly popular in Indonesia since 2008 (Aliansyah, 2014). In this period, meme-like content circulated primarily through websites and forum-based platforms rather than social media. One such example is *yeahmahasiswa.com*, a student humour website that began circulating satirical content related to academic life around 2009. As social media platforms became more central to everyday digital interaction in the early 2010s, this content increasingly migrated to Facebook. *Yeahmahasiswa.com* officially joined Facebook on 11 February 2011 and, and currently records around 16,000 followers, indicating its resonance with a broader student audience.

This trajectory reflects a broader pattern in Indonesia's digital culture, in which early meme practices developed on websites and forums before being consolidated on social media platforms as they became dominant spaces for circulation and participation.

It shows various memes about parodies and satire of students' daily lives, such as the drama of working on theses, final assignments, and cumulative achievement indexes. Compared to “Shit Academics Say”, both platforms focus on humorously portraying the struggles and experiences within academic life. However, *Yeahmahasiswa.com* began presenting satire about the lives of Indonesian students in 2009, long before the global phenomenon like Shit Academics Say that emerged on January 7, 2014. This shows that the academic meme culture in Indonesia has developed earlier, with content that is very relevant, close to local student experiences and has become part of digital culture in Indonesia.

The meme phenomenon then developed in a broader direction. Internet users then replicated this meme into various variations that discuss various topics,

including contemporary politics. Furthermore, users also spread this meme through social networks and other internet sites.

Starting in 2012, the use of memes in Indonesia became increasingly visible, particularly through Facebook-based communities such as 1CAK and Meme Comic Indonesia (MCI). Based on my digital ethnography on Facebook, 1CAK's page, created on 29 September 2012, functions as a major hub where users share rage comics and humorous images on a daily basis. At the time of my observation, the page had approximately 466,000 followers, which suggests its sustained relevance within Indonesia's meme ecosystem. Many users describe 1CAK as a local version of the HongKong based website 9GAG,³³ reflecting how the platform adapts global meme formats into local cultural contexts. The community terms used by followers, *wancaker* (male users) and *wancakewati* (female users), further indicate how 1CAK has cultivated its own internal vernacular, reinforcing its role as a participatory space for meme exchange and experimentation.

While much of meme history has been dominated by Western platforms like 4chan or Reddit, Indonesian users are not merely passive recipients of global trends. The viral spread of "Om Telolet Om" in 2016, illustrate how digital humour from the Global South can travel widely and, at times, shape global meme currents.

The phrase first circulated locally among children calling out to passing bus drivers to sound their modified horns, but its online spread drew extensive coverage from Indonesia and international media, including *The Jakarta Post*, NPR, *The Seattle Times* (AP), and Mixmag Asia, which highlighted how international DJs and social media users engaged with the meme (MixMag Asia, 2016; Penman, 2016; The Associated Press, 2016; Wreksono, 2016). International DJs such as DJ Snake amplified the trend through social media, while users even posted the phrase on Donald Trump's Facebook page after the 2016 U.S. presidential election (MixMag Asia, 2016)

³³ An online comedy site that displays various visual media, both images and videos, founded on 1 July 2008, by a group of Hong Kong administrators with 41M followers (GAG Facebook)

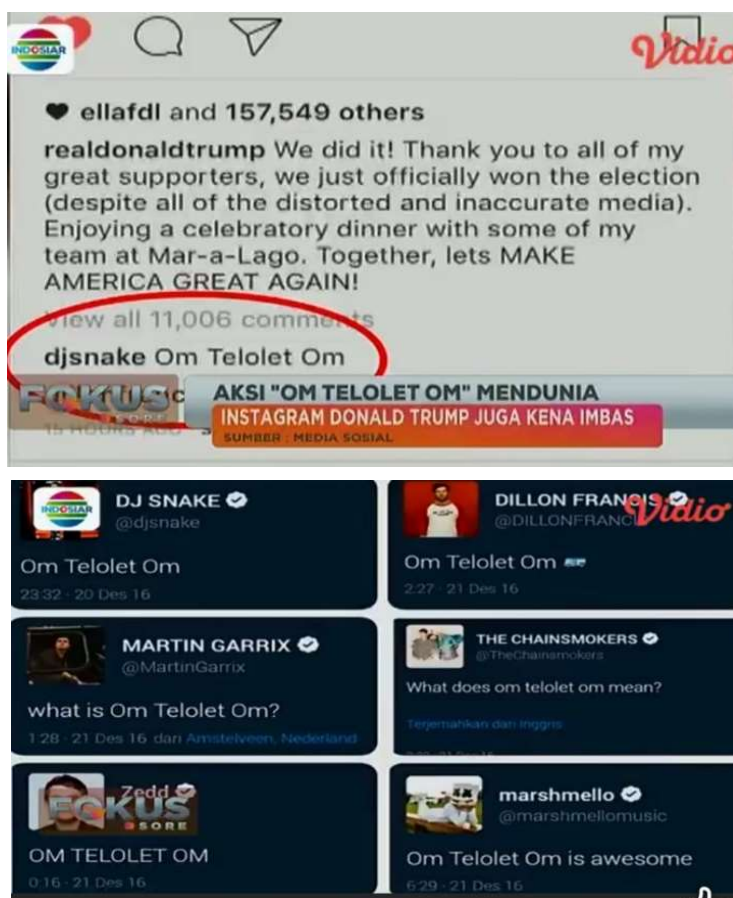


Figure 2.14. International circulation of the “Om Telolet Om” phenomenon
Source: Facebook @Fokus Indosiar, <http://bit.ly/2dawNxP> #FokusIndosiar

The reception of “Om Telolet Om” was mixed, celebratory in many contexts, but at times treated more as a cultural curiosity than as a creative contribution from the Global South. Even so, its rapid circulation shows how Indonesian humour can travel globally and invite creative reinterpretation.

More recent examples reinforce this dynamic. In 2025, the Pacu Jalur boat-race dancer from Riau, popularly known online as “Anak Coki”, became a global meme after videos of his energetic prow-side dancing circulated on TikTok and Instagram (BroBible, 2025; Seasia, 2025).³⁴ Although his movements are embedded in a local ceremonial tradition, the performance was recontextualised as a playful, remixable digital spectacle and taken up by users across Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America. Similarly, the *Tabola Bale* dance challenge from Maluku spread widely across TikTok in the same year, supported by millions of views on YouTube and Instagram Reels (ANTARA, 2025; VOI, 2015).

³⁴ The *Pacu Jalur* is a heritage practice dating back to the 17th century, is recognised as part of Indonesia’s intangible cultural heritage (Kementerian Pariwisata Republik Indonesia, 2025).

These phenomena, much like “Om Telolet Om,” reaffirms the agency of Indonesian digital creators and cultural practices in shaping memetic flows on a global scale. It challenges the conventional centre–periphery dynamics in internet culture by demonstrating that cultural exports from the Global South are not only consumable but also trendsetting. The case of the *Pacu Jalur* dancer thus reinforces the bidirectional nature of digital culture, where traditional performances are re-contextualised and celebrated in new media spaces. Although no systematic research has yet explored its global reception in depth, the meme’s broad adoption across diverse cultural contexts exemplifies how digital humour can operate with flexible and layered meanings.

If “Om Telolet Om”, *Pacu Jalur*, and song and dance *Tabola Bale* exemplify Indonesia’s capacity to influence global meme flows through playful and localised humour, Islamic-inspired memes represent another dimension of this creative agency: the fusion of religious devotion with digital expression. These memes do not merely imitate global formats; rather, they adapt, localise, and infuse memetic forms with theological, ethical, and cultural meanings specific to the Indonesian Muslim experience.

Emergence of Islamic-Inspired Meme Communities in Indonesia

Islamic-inspired meme communities began to emerge on Facebook in mid-2012, making significant contributions to the development of Indonesia’s digital landscape. One of the earliest and most influential groups was “Meme and Rage Muslim Indonesia”, founded on 28 August 2012. In a short time, this group managed to gather 86,000 followers, making it a pioneer in the spread of Islamic-themed memes in Indonesia. This success marked an important moment in how *da’wah* began to utilise digital space as a new medium to convey religious messages creatively.

Several factors contributed to the rise of these communities. Increasing internet penetration played a major role. Based on data from MarkPlus Insight internet penetration in urban cities in Indonesia increased from 30–35% in 2010 to 40–45% in 2011. This increase was primarily driven by young people aged 15–30 years, who accounted for 50–80% of the total internet users in each surveyed city.³⁵ With this increased access, social media such as Facebook became a new space that allowed the spread of creative content, including Islamic-inspired memes.

Following this initial emergence, new communities began to appear. Meme Comic Santri, established on 8 November 2012, was inspired directly by global platforms

³⁵ MarkPlus Insight, “Indonesia Urban Internet Users Survey,” *Marketeers Magazine*, November 2013, (Marketeers, 2013) cited in <https://www.slideshare.net/waizly/markplus-on-internet-user-in-indonesia-2013-marketeers-nov-2013-edition>. Accessed 10 September 2025.

such as 9GAG. In interviews with its founders,³⁶ they explained that 9GAG's humorous, easily shareable format offered a model that could be adapted for da'wah, by packaging Islamic messages in ways that were light, playful, and relatable to young Muslims. This reflects how Indonesian Muslim youth drew from global digital cultures while grounding their content in local religious values.

Similarly, Meme Comic Islam, founded on 25 March 2013, shared the goal of making Islamic teachings more approachable through humorous, easy-to-understand da'wah media on Facebook. They frame their da'wah activity as a means of seeking *ridho Allah* (divine approval expressing spiritual sincerity through everyday digital practice).³⁷ The topics raised are often related to Muslims' daily lives, such as prayer, fasting, the importance of Islamic values, and social phenomena such as dating. This relaxed approach has succeeded in attracting the attention of the younger generation, who often feel that conventional methods of da'wah are less relevant to their lifestyle. Through these communities, Islamic memes became a way for young Indonesians to comment on prayer, piety, romance, and everyday moral dilemmas in a format that felt lighter and more socially acceptable than formal preaching.

After this early wave (2012–2013), a second wave of communities emerged between 2017 and 2022, further strengthening the presence of Islamic-inspired memes in the online space. Groups such as *Meme Comic Santri Indonesia*, established on 10 November 2017, and *Meme Dakwah Indonesia*, founded on 25 June 2021, are a few of the many groups young Muslim users have highly recognised. Other significant communities include *Meme Dakwah Islam* (founded on March 30, 2020), *Meme Dakwah Islam Indonesia* (started on 2 June 2021), *Meme Dakwah Kebutuhan Iman* (created on 29 January 2022), *Meme Islamic Centre Indonesia*, *Meme Comic Santri Nusantara* (established on 2 May 2020) expanded the presence of Islamic-themed visual culture online.

Although the names of several communities, such as *Meme Comic Santri* and *Meme Comic Santri Indonesia*, may suggest close associations with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) or pesantren traditions, these communities are independently managed and bring together contributors from diverse regions of Indonesia. Interviews with meme creators indicate that content is generally inspired by everyday religious experiences, sermons, popular culture, and current social issues rather than by the official perspectives of particular Islamic organisations. Consequently, while many memes draw on religious humour and visual references commonly associated with pesantren life and santri culture, these references circulate beyond formal

³⁶ Zoom, 5 September 2022

³⁷ *Ridho Allah* refers to a concept in Islam where a Muslim strives to do everything with the intention of seeking Allah's pleasure or blessings. In the context of Islamic memes, communities such as *Meme Comic Islam* emphasize that their dakwah activities are not only aimed at spreading religious messages but also considered an act of worship, with the hope of gaining rewards and Allah's approval.

organisational boundaries and are used by creators with diverse personal backgrounds. For this reason, the present study focuses on the practices of meme production and circulation within these communities rather than on the organisational affiliation of individual creators.

Some of these communities have built large followings, while others have remained more niche. Based on my observation of their posting patterns, the difference is often less about content style and more about consistency. Pages with high engagement, such as Meme Dakwah Kebutuhan Iman, tend to post several times a day, ensuring continuous visibility within Facebook's algorithmic feed. By contrast, other pages upload irregularly, sometimes going days without new content, which limits their reach and slows follower growth. This pattern aligns with scholarship on social media algorithms, which shows that platforms prioritise active accounts and frequent posting when determining what becomes visible to users (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2014). Despite this variation, their collective presence has significantly expanded and diversified Islamic meme culture in Indonesia. Meme Comic Santri has gathered more than 46,000 followers, while Meme Dakwah Islam Indonesia (137,000), Meme Dakwah Kebutuhan Iman (204,000), Meme dan Rage Muslim Indonesia (85,000), and Meme Dakwah Islam (4,500) show different levels of engagement. These numbers illustrate how algorithmic rhythms and posting consistency shape the circulation and popularity of Islamic-themed memes, especially among younger users on social media.

As previously explained that global digital trends have greatly influenced the rise of Islamic memes in Indonesia. The popularity of platforms such as 9GAG played a significant role. The platform's mission to "make the world happier" through humorous content inspired Indonesian creators to develop similar content with a religious twist. This approach was particularly effective in engaging the youth demographic in Indonesia by making da'wah content more relevant and engaging.

In addition, Islamic meme accounts from abroad, such as "*Salab!!!* 5 a day, keep the shaitaan away" (founded in the UK on 8 February 2012) and "American Muslim Memes" (managed from the UK and Qatar since 26 February 2012), also became significant sources of inspiration, particularly for Indonesian meme creators. Based on interviews with the founders of *Meme Comic Santri*, these international accounts served as early models of how Islamic teachings could be communicated through humour and visual formats. While not necessarily widely consumed by the broader Indonesian audience, their influence was nonetheless pivotal in shaping the creative direction of early local Islamic meme communities. Their success demonstrated the potential of this content format, motivating Indonesian creators to adapt it to local contexts and sensibilities.

Before turning to TikTok, it is important to briefly acknowledge the role of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in the circulation of Islamic-inspired

memes during the 2010s. On these platforms, memes predominantly circulated as image–text combinations, relying on captions, hashtags, and comment-based interaction to convey humour, critique, and religious expression.

While these platforms were central to the consolidation of meme culture in Indonesia, they largely maintained a format in which visual content remained static and meaning was articulated primarily through textual framing. A more detailed comparison of Islamic-inspired memes on Facebook and Twitter, including their platform-specific affordances and modes of engagement, is developed in Chapter 3.

TikTok marks a different moment in this trajectory. Rather than extending existing meme formats, TikTok reconfigures memetic expression through short-form video, performativity, and algorithmic visibility.

Emergence of TikTok and the Transformation of Islamic-inspired Memes

While TikTok is examined in depth in Chapter 4 as the primary site of empirical analysis, it is introduced here to mark a broader shift in memetic form and platform logic within the longer history of digital religious expression.

If Facebook-based meme communities relied heavily on static images and text, TikTok brought Islamic meme culture into a more audiovisual, performative mode. TikTok's rise in Indonesia during the late 2010s introduced a new phase in the evolution of meme-like expressions. Its short-form video structure, remix tools, and algorithmic distribution reshaped how users create and circulate cultural and religious messages (Abidin, 2020; Zeng & Kaye, 2022). Unlike earlier platforms that relied on static visuals or captioned panels, TikTok normalised a more fluid and performative style of expression, where sound, gesture, and visual effects play an essential role in constructing meaning.

Based on my long-term digital observation on TikTok since 2020, this shift is immediately visible in Islamic-inspired content. Messages that were previously delivered through stickers, text-based memes, or rage comics now appear in short clips where creators speak directly to the camera, layer reminders over popular audio tracks, or use visual filters to emphasise tone and emotion. These stylistic shifts do not represent a break from earlier Islamic meme practices; rather, they expand their expressive range into a format that privileges mood, rhythm, and aesthetic immediacy.

This development contrasts with the earlier wave of Islamic meme communities on Facebook (2012–2013), which primarily relied on humour and text to communicate religious values. TikTok’s audiovisual character encourages a more personal and affective mode of *da’wah*. Creators embed religious messages within atmospheric cues, music, pacing, colour tones, making the content feel closer to everyday emotional life. Such transformations reflect the broader process of platformisation in which digital infrastructures shape cultural forms and practices (Klinger & Svensson, 2015).

TikTok’s participatory ethos further intensifies this evolution. Features such as duets, stitches, and sound remixes invite users to respond, reinterpret, or collaborate with existing Islamic content. As I frequently observed during my digital ethnography, a single religious reminder can trigger a chain of reinterpretations, parodies, harmonised recitations, or aesthetic remixes, demonstrating how meme-like forms on TikTok travel not only through sharing but through active engagement and creative transformation.

At the same time, TikTok’s algorithm broadens the reach of Islamic content beyond intentional audiences. Religious clips often appear on the For You Page even for users who do not follow religious accounts, illustrating how algorithmic curation, rather than explicit seeking, shapes exposure (Cotter, 2019). This dynamic differs from earlier platforms, where visibility was more dependent on following a page or being part of a community. The implications of this shift, especially for authority and interpretation, will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Seen in the larger historical arc traced throughout this chapter, TikTok represents a continuation rather than a rupture. Indonesian Muslims have long adapted religious messages to the expressive forms available to them, from oral storytelling and proverbs to stickers and image-based memes. TikTok extends this lineage into a highly visual, fast-paced environment where religious ideas circulate through sound, gesture, and participatory creativity. While the sociocultural dynamics of these practices need deeper discussion in later chapters, the platform’s emergence marks an important stage in the evolving meme ecology in Indonesia.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced how meme-like forms in Indonesia long predate the internet and how they have gradually migrated into digital environments. Starting from oral traditions, wayang narratives, proverbs, and rituals, it showed that many cultural expressions already behaved memetically: they were repeated, adapted, and recontextualised as they moved across time and social settings. Rather than

treating digital memes as a sudden break, this historical lens reveals a line of continuity in how Indonesians have used compact, recognisable forms to convey moral lessons, express criticism, and negotiate religious difference.

Revisiting Blackmore's notion of memes as cultural replicators and placing it alongside more recent work that foregrounds platforms, infrastructures, and user practices, the chapter argued that memetic life is never purely a matter of "ideas that want to spread". In the Indonesian context, whether we look at wayang characters, Islamic stories, or ritual phrases embedded in *slametan* and *maulid*, memetic transmission is always situated in local norms, power dynamics, and media regimes. As an analytical distinction, the differentiation between "tradition" and "meme" helps clarify this process: traditions provide the broader frameworks and ritual settings, while memes are the smaller, mobile units (phrases, images, gestures) that can detach, travel, and reappear in new contexts, including digital ones.

The move into digital communication did not erase these earlier logics but layered them onto new technical infrastructures. Early emoticons, and later emojis, introduced small visual cues that helped Indonesians express tone, intimacy, and piety in text-based environments. Their use in WhatsApp groups, Hajj alumni circles, and everyday family chats shows how religious feeling and communal discipline can be mediated through tiny icons on a screen. At the same time, the standardisation of emoji through bodies like the Unicode Consortium underscores that even apparently simple symbols are shaped by corporate and geopolitical decisions, and not only by users' creativity.

Stickers pushed this development further by opening space for local and religious specificity. Islamic-themed sticker packs, Madurese anti-COVID campaigns, and prayer-reminder stickers illustrate how users translate familiar visual tropes, *peci*, *sarung*, motorbikes, local language, humorous slogans, into a digital vernacular of faith and everyday life. These practices blur the line between devotion, play, and commerce. As Islamic stickers enter the circuits of paid LINE packs, app stores, and data-driven platforms such as WhatsApp, they become part of what Eva Nisa calls a lucrative form of *da'wah*, where piety is lived through tools that are also entangled in platform capitalism.

From there, the chapter followed how this visual and affective repertoire sets the stage for more complex memetic forms. Global "proto-memes" and early meme cultures on sites like 4chan and 9GAG provided templates for remixable humour, but Indonesian users did not simply consume these trends. Local actors experimented with formats and quickly developed their own styles: from *yeahmahasiswa.com* and 1CAK to the "Om Telolet Om" phenomenon, *Pacu Jalur* dance clips, and the *Tabola Bale* challenge. These cases show that Indonesian digital culture participates in, and sometimes redirects, global meme flows rather than sitting at the margins.

Within this broader landscape, Islamic-inspired memes emerge as a specific strand where digital creativity intersects with devotional life. Facebook communities such as *Meme dan Rage Muslim Indonesia*, *Meme Comic Santri*, and later *Meme Dakwah Indonesia*, turned meme templates into vehicles for da'wah, humour, and moral reflection geared especially toward younger Muslims. Their reach and rhythm are deeply shaped by platform logics: pages that post frequently and fit Facebook's engagement metrics thrive; others remain marginal despite similar content. In this sense, Islamic memes are not only cultural artefacts but also products of algorithmic visibility and everyday user labour.

The arrival of TikTok marks the latest turn in this trajectory. Short-form videos, sound-based remixing, filters, and the For You Page extend memetic practice into a more performative, affect-driven mode. Islamic reminders, jokes about prayer, or playful takes on NU–Muhammadiyah differences are no longer confined to static images but unfold through gesture, voice, and music. TikTok's infrastructure allows these clips to reach users who never actively seek religious content, reshaping how religious messages circulate and how authority is experienced in daily scrolling.

Seen across these shifts in medium, the chapter has answered the first research question by mapping a series of meme-like forms, from proverbs, *wayang*, and ritual phrases to emojis, stickers, Facebook memes, and TikTok videos, that Indonesians use to express, contest, and rework religious identities. Across shifts in medium, certain logics remain, such as repetition, variation, humour, and symbolic condensation. What changes are the infrastructures, economic arrangements, and participatory practices that enable some memes to flourish while others remain local or invisible. The following chapters build on this historical groundwork by examining in greater detail how platform-specific dynamics on Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok shape the creation, circulation, and reception of Islamic-inspired memes in contemporary Indonesia.

