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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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This dissertation examines how Islamic-inspired memes shape and reflect religious and cultural differences in contemporary Indonesia, focusing on the intersections of humour, digital media, and everyday religious expression across social media platforms. Drawing on material from Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, it shows how memes are not simply vehicles for entertainment, but sites where religious meanings are worked through, negotiated, and sometimes contested in public.

Rather than approaching memes as isolated digital objects, the study follows their circulation, reception, and reinterpretation across platforms and social contexts. From light-hearted religious humour circulating around Eid and Ramadan to the highly contested Borobudur Stupa meme, the analysis traces how seemingly playful content can take on moral, political, and legal significance as it moves through platformed publics. These cases reveal how religious expression online is shaped not only by belief, but also by algorithmic visibility, platform norms, and wider histories of religious sensitivity in Indonesia.

The dissertation is organised around four interconnected questions. First, it situates contemporary Islamic-inspired memes within longer trajectories of cultural transmission, showing how pre-digital forms such as folklore, *wayang* and ritual humour share memetic logics of repetition, adaptation, and moral commentary. Rather than replacing these older forms, digital memes build upon them, translating familiar expressive practices into new media environments.

Second, by comparing Facebook and Twitter, the study examines how platform affordances and user practices jointly shape religious humour and critique. Facebook's group-based architecture encourages sustained, community-bound discussions, while Twitter's rapid circulation foregrounds immediacy, contestation, and public scrutiny. Across both platforms, memes acquire meaning through use, response, and reinterpretation, highlighting the role of user agency in shaping digital religious discourse.

Third, the dissertation turns to TikTok to explore how religious difference is navigated through playful citizenship. Focusing on Ramadan-themed content and jokes around NU–Muhammadiyah distinctions, it shows how humour operates as a low-stakes mode of engagement that allows difference to be acknowledged without direct confrontation. TikTok's algorithmic circulation enables such content to travel beyond established networks, creating moments of cross-group visibility that are less common on other platforms.

Finally, this dissertation examines the limits of humour as a mode of engagement across lines of religious difference by centring a case in which satire did not mitigate tension but instead exacerbated it. The Borobudur Stupa meme illustrated how humour can harden into controversy when a satirical reference to a Buddhist symbol circulated widely within a Muslim-majority digital public, triggering moral outrage, legal debate, and intense scrutiny of the public figure who amplified it. This case demonstrates how humour's effects depend not only on content, but on context, circulation, and power. What appears playful in one setting may be read as offensive or dangerous in another, particularly when religious symbols and public authority intersect.

Across these chapters and empirical materials, the dissertation contributes to digital anthropology by treating Indonesia not merely as a site of data, but as a context that puts existing theories to work. Concepts such as groupness, benign violation, and playful citizenship are examined through lived digital practices, showing how they are reshaped by religious pluralism, platform dynamics, and local moral frameworks. Rather than proposing a new theory, the study demonstrates how established concepts acquire different emphases, limits, and explanatory power when situated in everyday digital religion in the Global South.

The findings suggest that humour in digital religious life cannot be understood in isolation. It emerges through circulation, amplification, and interpretation within platformed environments, and its consequences range from connection and reflection to conflict and exclusion. Responsibility for managing these effects does not rest with a single actor, but is distributed across users, public figures, platforms, and regulatory frameworks.

By foregrounding memes as cultural agents rather than trivial content, this dissertation offers a nuanced account of how religious life in Indonesia is shaped through digital media. It shows how humour opens spaces for negotiation and belonging, while also revealing the limits of play in contexts marked by unequal power and religious sensitivity. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions on digital religion, platform governance, and the anthropology of the contemporary public sphere.