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The Muslim Researcher Reflections on Insider/ Outsider Research in Indonesia

Peniliti Muslim Refleksi Penilitian Insider dan Outsider di Indonesia

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Abstract

The article takes up the topic of religious insider and outsider research and looks especially at the issue of advantages and disadvantages of being a religious insider doing qualitative research in religious communities similar to one's own. As a case study serves my personal experience of being a convert Muslim woman doing research among Islamic communities in Indonesia. During research, I came to understand that the plurality of different Islamic practices found in Indonesia makes it difficult to become a 'true' and 'complete' insider to this variety of Islamic teachings and practices. My main argument is that, at least in the Indonesian context, it is impossible to be a complete religious insider to each aspect of the plurality of Islamic practices despite being an insider to Islam, a Muslim. This in turn leads me to discuss advantages and disadvanatges of being a religious insider.

Keywords: Muslim Researcher, Research Methodology, Research in Indonesia, Qualitative Research, Southeast Asia, Islam.

Abstrak

Artikel ini membicarakan tema tentang peniliti insider atau outsider dengan fokus peniliti yang beragama. Artikel ini khususnya menganalisiskan manfaat dan mudarat menjadi seorang insider yang mempunyai agama yang sama dengan orang yang ditiliti. Sebagai contoh saya memandang kasus personil saya sendiri sebagai peniliti Muslim mualaf yang melakukan penilitian diantara komunitas-komunitas Muslim di Indonesia. Melalui penilitian saya, saya memahami bahwa pluralitas praktek orang Muslim di Indonesia membuat sulit untuk menjadi seorang insider yang sebenarnya untuk semua keanekaragaman pemahaman Islam yang ada di Indonesia. Argumen utama saya adalah bahwa dalam kontex Indonesia, tidak mungkin untuk menjadi insider religi yang sebenarnya untuk seluruh aspek-aspek pluralitas Islam. Walaupun menjadi seorang Muslim sekalipun. Pemahaman tersebut membawa saya untuk membicarakan manfaat dan mudarat menjadi seorang insider agama.

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Introduction

In 2012, I embarked on my doctoral research project in Southeast Asian Studies about different Islamic practices and interpretations in Indonesia and how they constitute and are constituted in a unique religioscape. One of the first questions and concerns that arose from my supervisors, who came from the disciplines of history and anthropology, was the issue about my own Muslim identity. As a German Muslim who has only recently discovered Islam for herself in early 2008, I was seen as an insider to my field. I have been living and traveling in Indonesia since 2004, including research for my Bachelor thesis on women's micro businesses and research for my Master thesis about the implementation of normative Islamic values in everyday life of Islamic boarding schools called *pesantren*. Over time Indonesia, its people, culture and language became part of me. The melodious call for prayer, the white prayer gown, riding the motorbike everywhere, the traffic, the jam, the different smiles for different situations, the proper behavior, the heart-aching longing for *kampung halaman* (home), the smell of clove cigarettes, the melancholic pop songs sung on long distance busses, the sweet black coffee, became part of my own identity. At times I was so immersed in Indonesia that I was surprised to see my white European face in the mirror.

It was in 2008 when I decided to become Muslim. It was the outcome of a long search for my own spiritual identity that had already started in childhood. As it was, religion or spirituality had no place in my family that was brought up under the socialist-communist regime of the former German Democratic Republic and had internalized its anti-religious doctrines. From an early age I missed what I would simply describe as spiritual belonging, a divine protectedness. My search for spiritual belonging brought me in contact with various Christian sects in Germany, Buddhism (especially Theravada Buddhism as practiced in Thailand and Cambodia), Hinduism (as practiced in Bali) and several spiritual groups around the Sivananda Yoga movement in Germany, which not only includes physical excercise but also spiritual aspects and meditation. However, I did not find what I was looking for until I overcame my prejudices against Islam and started learning bits and pieces about it. In the end, something divine moved my heart and I accepted Islam. The first two years of my Muslim life were spent in

Yogyakarta, Indonesia. A place that is home to a great diversity of different Islamic groups, interpretations and practices. It was in Yogyakarta's religious plurality where I received my basic Islamic education and where I also learned that Islam in Indonesia is pluriform and that there does not exist one absolute true Islamic practice but different practices and teachings can be true at the same time and in the same place. It was this plurality that always fascinated me and that eventually led me to write my PhD research proposal. I felt that as a fellow Muslim I would have an insider status as a researcher. And this insider status came with certain responsibilities towards and expectations from my informants, which I will address in this article. However, I came to understand that it is exactly this plurality of different Islamic practices that makes it difficult to become a 'true' and 'complete' insider to this variety of Islamic teachings and practices. And that is the reason why, as I will explain in detail in this article, I use the term insider-outsider. My argument is that, at least in the Indonesian context, it is impossible to be a complete insider to each aspect of the plurality of Islamic practices despite being an insider to Islam, a Muslim.

The discussion on insider, also referred to as native research, has been mainly connected to the ethnic and/ or cultural background of the anthropologist.[1] The main question of discussion in this regard is who can actually be considered an insider or native anthropologist. Basically all agree that there is nothing like a 100 percent insider or native researcher. Regardless of their origin, all anthropologists experience gradations of endogeny throughout the course of their fieldwork[2] and depending on the context we are drawn closer to our informants or thrust apart[3]. However, what is missing in these discussions about insider/ native anthropologists are other aspects of belonging and inclusion; in this case the religious aspect of the researcher. What happens if a researcher is of the same or different religious belief as her research

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[1]Narayan, Kirin, "How Native Is a "Native" Anthropologist?,"*American Anthropologist* 95, no. 3 (1993): 671-86; Jacobs-Huey, Lanita, "The Natives Are Gazing and Talking Back: Reviewing the Problematics of Positionality, Voice, 3. and Accountability among "Native" Anthropologists," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 791-804; Kuwayama, Takami, "'Natives' as Dialogic Partners: Some Toughts on Native Anthropology," *Anthropology Today* 19, no. 1 (2003): 8-13; Tsuda, Takeyuki, "Is Native Anthropology Really Possible? (Respond to This Article at https://www.therai.org.uk/Publications/Anthropology-Today/Debate)," *Anthropology Today* 31, no. 3 (2015): 14-17.

[2] Jacobs-Huey, "The Natives Are Gazing and Talking Back, 2002.

[3] Narayan, Kirin, "How Native Is a "Native," 1993.

subject and informants? What if she is of the same religion but from a different cultural background? How do the labels insider/ native can be applied in this respect? And can a researcher with the same religious background as her research subjects always be an insider to the diversity and pluriformity of the respective religion?

The deep knowledge of the local, the familiarity with different Islamic practices and my own immersion in Islam and in the process of acquiring Islamic knowledge seemed to be a promising precondition for successfully conducting research and obtaining deep insights into the practice of Islam in Indonesia. Although I reflected on my own Muslim identity and how this might impact on my research, I could not anticipate the different challenges I actually encountered during my time in the field, which I will elaborate later. Unexpected challenges, in terms of vulnerability, emotions, access and personal issues, during fieldwork are a phenomenon experienced and felt by many researchers doing qualitative research[4]. Before going to the field I wondered whether my informants would truly accept my being Muslim[5]. This proved to be a baseless concern. I also worried that my own understanding of Islam would conflict with that of my informants or that I would constantly have to go through the process of questioning my own understanding of Islam. In fact, both concerns became central during my research when I discovered that I was also an outsider to certain Islamic practices besides being an insider to Islam.

Following, I will discuss my researcher identity of being both an insider and outsider and how it is connected to my identity as a fellow and newly reverted Muslim. Connected to this, special thought is also given to negotiating intentions in the field. I argue, that despite being seen as an insider researcher because of my Muslim identity (by for example my academic surrounding), I am also an outsider to some of the

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[4]Pollard, Amy, "Field of Screams: Difficulty and Ethnographic Fieldwork." *2009* 11, no. 2 (2009-10-06 2009); Ballamingie, Patricia, "The Vulnerable Researcher: Some Unanticipated Challenges of Doctoral Fieldwork." *The Qualitative Report* 16, no. 3 (2011): 711-29; Bamu, Beryl Ndongwa, Elisabeth De Schauwer, and Geert Van Hove, "I Can't Say I Wasn't Anticipating It, but I Didn't See It Coming in This Magnitude: A Qualitative Fieldwork Experience in the Northwest Region of Cameroon." [In English]. *The Qualitative Report* 21, no. 3 (2016 Mar 23 2016): 571-83.

[5] I was worried to be seen as pretending to be Muslim to be able to obtain insight information, similar to what was said about the (in)famous Snouk Hurgronje (1857-1936); Dutch scholar of Oriental cultures and languages and advisor on Native Affairs to the colonial government of the Netherland East Indies. Researched and wrote extensively about Islam in colonial Indonesia.

different Islamic practices I have studied in Indonesia. Because, and this is especially true for Indonesia, Islam is pluriform[6]. To be an insider to every aspect of this pluriformity is basically impossible. Before turning to the discussion to underline my argument above, I briefly introduce Indonesia and how the particular historical materiality of this space shaped some of my research and myself.

The Background: Islam in Indonesia and Being a Muslim (Researcher) in Indonesia

Indonesia is the world's largest archipelago and with around 200 Million Muslims (approximately 88 percent of the population) the most populous Islamic country in the world. Located between the Indian and Pacific ocean it has been part of important trading routes for centuries. Partly due to these trading routes Indonesia has been part of translocal networks spanning the Indian ocean long before the formation of modern nation states[7], which resulted in a vibrant culture that accommodates all five major religions, local beliefs and syncretic forms of worship. Indonesia declared independence from the Dutch colonial power in 1945. In Indonesia, tradition and local etiquettes of behavior (*adat* and *adab*) like respect for the elder, respect for the learned and religious authorities, which are oftentimes but not exclusively male, fixed gender roles (the man being the provider for the family but almost everywhere in Indonesia women are also active outside the house and contribute to family income) form important pillars of Indonesia's diverse societies.

Doing research in Indonesia as a Muslim researcher, I also needed to be aware of the diversity and pluriformity of Islamic practices in Indonesia. These range from syncretistic forms still interwoven with non-Islamic traditions, rituals and beliefs, to reformist Islam inspired by the Egyptian reform movement and the Muslim Brotherhood[8]. From

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[6] Houben, Vincent J. H, "New Area Studies, Translation and Middle Range Concepts," In *Area Studies at the Crossroads: Implications for Science Studies*, edited by K. Mielke and A.K. Hornidge: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017.

[7] Freitag, Ulrike, "Conclusion: The Diaspora since the Age of Independence," In *Hadrami Traders, Scholars, and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750-1960s.*, edited by U. Freitag and W.G. Clarence-Smith. Leiden, New York, Köln: Brill, 1997; Freitag, Ulrike, and Achim von Oppen, "Introduction: 'Translocality': An Approach to Connection and Transfer in Area Studies.". In *Translocality: The Study of Globalising Processes from a Southern Perspective*, edited by U. Freitag and A. von Oppen. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010.

[8] A transnational political Islamic movement that originated in Egypt. It was founded in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna. The organization gained supporters throughout the Muslim

fundamental[9] forms of Islam like Salafi Wahhabism[10], aiming at purifying Islamic practices from anything not in line with their interpretation, to political Islam in various forms ranging from moderate (in form of official political parties) to the calling for an Islamic caliphate.

What is generally considered "traditional"[11] Islam in Indonesia follows the Shafi'i school of law, Ash'ari doctrine[12] and a *Tasawwuf* (Islamic spirituality) inspired by, among others, Imam Al Ghazali (1058-1111). This definition of traditional is also the emic perspective, according to my observations in Indonesia between 2014 and 2016. This traditional Islam is usually labeled as belonging to the *Ahl al-Sunna wa'l*

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world and also influenced different Muslim groups in Indonesia like the *dakwah* movement and the political party Partai Keadilan Sejaterah (PKS).

[9] Different scholars have attempted to give names to the Islamic pluriformity found in Indonesia, among others Geertz (1960), Woodward (1989, 2001), Riddell (2001), Ali (2007), van Bruinessen (1999, 2008, 2009). The categories range from santri vs. abangan to traditionalist vs. modernist, political vs. cultural Muslim, fundamentalist vs. liberal, great tradition vs. little tradition, and local vs. global Islam (Ali, 2007). Other categories include normative and mystically inclined Islam (Woodward, 1989). Woodward (2001) proposed that there exist five basic Islamic orientations: indigenized Islam, traditionalism, modernism, Islamism and neo-modernism. Riddell (2001) suggests almost the same categories: modernism, traditionalism, radical Islamism and neo-modernism. Neo-modernist, similar to neo-traditionalist, aim to bridge traditionalism and modernism.

[10] Salafi Wahhabism displays a marked distance from any of the four established legal schools of thought (Ind.: *mazhab;* Arab.: *madhab/* pl.: *madahib*). This also translates into opposition to *taqlid* (following an Islamic scholar who is competent in interpreting the shari'a; often dumbed as 'blind following' by these groups in Indonesia), and a preference for following the Qur'an and Sunnah only. They propagate a 'universal' form of Islam that is based solely on the Qur'an and Sunnah and that, it is claimed, closely follows the example of the Prophet Muhammad. In anti-Wahhabi circles since the 18th century the following critique has been put forward: the Wahhabis interpret the Qur'an according to personal opinion, they disrespect the Prophet, they do not respect the views of authoritative *ulama*, they consider everybody since the 13th century to be infidels, except those who agree with them (Commins, 2006: 136).

[11] "Traditional" here refers to the historically established and cultivated forms of practicing Islam in Indonesia.

[12] Ash'ari doctrine is one of the theological schools in Sunni Islam, founded by Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (d. AD 936 / AH 324). Alongside the Maturidi school of theology, it is considered to be one of the orthodox schools of theology in Sunni Islam. Famous followers, also relevant to the Indonesian context, are among others: Imam Al-Nawawi and Imam Al-Ghazali.

Jama'a.[13] On an institutional level it is mostly, although not exclusively, represented by the Islamic organization of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU).[14] However, *Ahl al-Sunna wa'l Jama'a* is a contested label and other groups like Salafi Wahhabism also lay claim to it. Additionally, Indonesian decentralization reform resulted in the implementation of Shari'a law in Aceh and in Bulukumba, South Sulawesi. Because of this plurality, it was somehow expected of me, doing field research, to position myself and my Islamic belief; it was not enough to be just a fellow Muslim. It was important what kind of fellow Muslim I was.

At the beginning of my research, it was difficult to position myself. Due to the diversity of Islamic practices in Yogyakarta, I was influenced by various Islamic teachings and movements. I felt I was in-between. I could not fully associate myself with traditional Islam nor with 'modernist'[15] or fundamental forms of Islam. In a way, my research was also a personal journey towards my own Muslim identity, similar to what has been described with the researcher's search for her own identity

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[13] Broadly translated to the adherents to the Tradition of the Prophet and the Community. *Ahl al-Sunna wa'l Jama'a* (in Indonesian abbreviated with ASWAJA) is an essential term in the broader Islamic discourse, and serves as a mode of identification with the supposedly correct way of practicing Islam. It is a contested term because it seems often to be used to legitimize and strengthen a certain mode of practicing Islam. Furthermore, within the inner Islamic debates in Indonesia, competing definitions exist. For the Indonesian context, a broad definition of ASWAJA was given at the NU Bahsul Masail in 2002. To ASWAJA belong those Muslims who consistently and firmly adhere to the Sunnah of the Prophet and the way of life of the companions in the fields of doctrine, practice and ethics (Laffan, 2005). One member of the meeting added, based on a classical Islamic text called *Jawhar al-tawhid*, that *Ahl al-Sunna wa'l Jama'a* are those Muslims that "adhere to the Qur'an and that which the Prophet and his Companions adhered to, as well as the Pious Forbears and their descendants" (Laffan, 2005: 106).

[14] The biggest Islamic mass organization in Indonesia, founded in 1926 as a response to the rise of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia. It has over 40 Million members. NU also is a charitable body funding schools and hospitals as well as organizing communities to help alleviate poverty.

[15] Academic research often superficially draws a distinction between traditional Islam and reformist Islam, or traditionalists and modernists (here reformists and modernists tend to be treated as equals). Indonesian Muslims tend to draw the same distinction, but instead of referring to traditional Islam, they refer to the organization NU (Nahdlatul Ulama). Furthermore, instead of using modernist/ reformist Islam, they refer to the Muhammadiyah organization. Indonesian Muslims, especially on the island of Java, do not only call themselves Muslim, but when asked usually add any one of the two labels - NU or Muhammadiyah, regardless of whether they are members of the respective organization or not.

through her research[16] and research as a process of self-engagement.[17] Besides obtaining data for my research project, I also learned about the different Islamic thoughts and practices from a spiritual perspective. As my research progressed, I started becoming more and more inclined towards traditional Islam, as described above, and which is followed by the majority of Indonesian Muslims, independently whether they affiliate with any concrete organization or school of thought.[18] In addition, I became increasingly interested in the inner dimensions of Islam and the teachings of self-reform in order to become a better person and to become closer to Allah, commonly referred to as *Tasawwuf* or Sufism. In this respect, I was a religious insider when it came to being Muslim, my religious "macro-identity,"[19] but going deeper into the different Islamic groups and practices, or what can be described as the Islamic micro-level, I was an outsider to some of them.

Although from the rest of the Muslim world often perceived as being located in the Muslim periphery,[20] Indonesia is seen as a center for Islamic knowledge by many Indonesian Muslims because it is the unique localization of Islam in Indonesia[21] that can only be learned in Indonesia.

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[16] Reinharz, Shulamit. *On Becoming a Social Scientist.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1979.

[17] Gray, Barbara. "The Pathways of My Research: A Journey of Personal Engagement and Change.". *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 25, no. 5 (1989): 383-98.

[18] My PhD research looked at the issue of Islamic practices and although Islam in Indonesia is pluriform, there exist common parameters found within these practices, which allow us to make more generalizing statements like 'traditional Islam' or 'reformist Islam'. And looking at these parameters, scholars have concluded (Azra 2004, Laffan 2011, Houben 2016) and I agree with them, that traditional Islam is practiced by the majority of Indonesian Muslims.

[19] De Fina, Anna. "Researcher and Informant Roles in Narrative Interactions: Constructions of Belonging and Foreign-Ness." *Language in Society* 40, no. 1 (2011): 27-38.

[20] Eickelman, Dale F. , and James Piscatori. "Social Theory in the Study of Muslim Societies." In *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration and the Religious Imagination*, edited by Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori. Berkeley, Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1990.

[21] See for example:
1. Woodward, Mark. *Java, Indonesia and Islam*. Muslims in Global Societies. Springer, 2011.
2. Lukens-Bull, Ronald. A Peaceful Jihad: Negotiating Identity and Modernity in Muslim Java. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
3. Srimulyani, Eka. Women from Traditional Islamic Educational Institutions in Indonesia: Negotiating Public Space. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012.
4. Seise, Claudia. Religioscapes in Muslim Indonesia: Personalities, Institutions and Practices. Berlin: Regiospectra, 2017.

Various local Islamic scholars were also known beyond Indonesia and especially in the centers of Islam in Mecca and Cairo.[22] It is in different places around Indonesia, especially in the thousands of *pesantren* and informal study circles held in different places, as well as in the family, where Islamic knowledge is transmitted and learned.[23] These *pesantren* and study circles reflect the high diversity of Islamic thought in Indonesia. Thus, as a white, young revert Muslim woman from the non-Muslim country Germany, I came to a center of Muslim knowledge and practice. And at the same time, this diversity of Islamic thought and practice also interested me personally. In this sense, what is often perceived as the researcher's authority in choosing her field, research question and analyzing her data[24] was, I felt, outweighed by the status as my perceived status of a 'religious newcomer'.

As a 'religious newcomer', my informants assumed, they had to teach me about what they perceived as the 'right' and 'correct' form of practicing Islam. In this sense, one major role my informants assigned to me was that of *their* student. Although the 'right' or 'correct' form of practicing Islam did not differ tremendously, there are certain key practices, as I would like to call them, which determine the 'right' for one group and the 'correct' for another group. For example, whoever

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[22] See for example:

1. Azra, Azyumardi. The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern 'Ulama' in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. Asian Studies Assoc. of Australia in assoc. with Allen & Unwin, 2004. Dissertation (1992).

2. Laffan, Michael. The Makings of Indonesian Islam: Orientalism and the Narration of a Sufi Past. Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011.

[23] 1. Bruinessen van, Martin. "Pesantren and Kitab Kuning: Maintenance and Continuation of a Tradition of Religious Learning." In *Texts from the Islands. Oral and Written Traditions of Indonesia and the Malay World [Ethnologica Bernica, 4]*, edited by Wolfgang Marschall, 121-45. Berne: University of Berne, 1994.

2. Bruinessen van, Martin. "Traditionalist and Islamist Pesantren in Contemporary Indonesia." In *The Madrasa in Asia: Political Activism and Transnational Linkages*, edited by Farish A. Noor. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008.

3. Lukens-Bull, Ronald. A Peaceful Jihad, 2005.

4. Srimulyani, Eka. Women from Traditional Islamic Educational Institutions in Indonesia, 2012.

5. Seise, Claudia. Religioscapes in Muslim Indonesia, 2017.

[24] 1. Clifford, James. "On Ethnographic Authority." *Representations*, no. 2 (1983): 118-46.

2. Wellman, David. "Constituting Ethnographic Authority: The Work Process of Field Research, an Ethnographic Account." *Cultural Studies* 8, no. 3 (1994/10/01 1994): 569-84.

reads Surah Yasin (the 36th part of the Qur'an) on Thursday nights, adds the additional *qunut* supplication during the morning prayer, prays twenty plus three prayer cycles for the special Ramadan prayer, celebrates the Prophet Muhammad's birthday (*Maulid*), engages in the remembrance of a person's death, or goes on *ziarah* (visitation of shrines and tombs), among other practices, is usually considered and categorized as following the 'correct' practice of traditional Islam (as described above) in Indonesia. Whoever does not follow and even opposes these practices is usually considered as practicing some form of modernist Islam or following Salafi Wahhabism. One of my informants, for example, opposed the practices associated with traditional Islam and considered them bad innovations to the true teachings of Islam. My other two main informants engaged in these practices on different scales. All three wanted to convince me that their understanding of Islam was the 'correct' one. After my first informant discovered that I took part in *Maulid* celebrations at my second field site, he did not follow through with an invitation he initially gave to me. He wanted me to give an inspirational talk to the teaching staff about my conversion story at his Islamic school. This example shows how serious, at times, this issue of 'correct' Islamic practices became during my research. This example also shows that on the one hand I belonged and indeed considered myself to belong while, on the other hand, I was not considered to belong because I engaged in Islamic practices different to the respective interpretation my informant preferred. I will now further elaborate on this insider-outsider aspect.

The Insider-Outsider Muslim Researcher

"No one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of society."[25]

My religion is attached to me; similar as not-believing is attached to other researchers. My religion influences the topics I choose for research, the way I conduct research, the way I talk to my informants, the way I analyze my data and the way I eventually write about my research.[26] Here, the religious or believing researcher is not different to the atheist or agnostic researcher. True believing or not believing as it is

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[25] Said, Edward, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).
[26] Gray, Barbara, "The Pathways of My Research, 1989.

is something very personal. And as Edward Said remarked (in the quote above), the researcher cannot be detached from circumstances of life, and for the current case especially religion. The question is, whether it needs an insider, one in whose inner consciousness an experience of religion can be found, to truly grasp and understand what a religious person is talking about.[27] Can it be an advantage to share the same religious belief as the person we try to understand? And how much can we truly be an insider while sharing the same belief? I observed that on the one hand, it is a matter of perspective whether one is considered an insider or outsider and on the other hand, from the researcher's perspective it is a matter of belonging. So, from an outsider-to-Islam perspective I was considered an insider (because I am Muslim), while from an insider-to-Islam perspective my position was ambivalent. I, myself, felt as an insider when I embarked on this research project but later felt that I was also an outsider to some of the Islamic practices and interpretations I encountered because I did not share them in my personal understanding of Islam.

Taking the commonly understood label of insider/native anthropologist regarding ethnicity or culture as described above, I would be considered an outsider or non-native. Although, I have lived in Indonesia for quite some time and are married to an Indonesian man, I would not be counted to be an insider or native. I might be, although not by birth but due to my longterm stays and familial ties in the region, regarded as bi-cultural,[28] partial native anthropologist,[29] semi-native[30] or an 'outsider within.'[31] However, when taking my religion into account, I am an insider researcher at first glance. As a Muslim woman, I belong to what Muhtadi describes as the 'imagined *umma*,'[32] following Anderson's 'imagined communities.'[33] According to Prophetic narrations, all Muslims are considered to be part of one body, and to be brothers and sisters. Therefore, this makes me, a Muslim woman from Germany, on

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[27] Evans-Pritchard, Edward E, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1965).

[28] Narayan, Kirin, "How Native Is a "Native" Anthropologist?," 1993.

[29] Jacobs-Huey, Lanita, "The Natives Are Gazing and Talking Back, 2002.

[30] Tsuda, Takeyuki, "Is Native Anthropology Really Possible?," 2015.

[31] Zempi, Irene, and Imran Awan, "Doing 'Dangerous' Autoethnography on Islamophobic Victimization," *Ethnography* 0, no. 0 (2017): 1466138117697996.

[32] Muhtadi, Burhanuddin, "The Quest for Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 37 (2009): 623-45.

[33] Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities* (London, New York: Verso, 2006 (1983).

the macro-level, the global scale of the Muslim *umma*, an insider to the same. In other aspects, however, I might be considered to be an outsider. I am inside the religion, Islam, but outside the culture.[34] However, this religious insider-ness, of course, as the cultural or ethnical insider, can only be partial and depends on the context of the research. Similar to Mulderig[35] who decided to accept Islam after doing research in Morocco and then returned to conduct research for her doctoral thesis, I felt that by being a convert to Islam, I could obtain a different insight to my field.

As an religious insider researcher, I wanted to write something that spoke from within Islam as compared to speaking about it and in a way I wanted to overcome or produce something, in the sense Edward Said (1979) explained it, against the notion of writing about Islam as the Other. I did not want to write an or engage in Islamic anthropology,"[36] but I aimed at contributing a different perspective to the discourse on Islam in Indonesia. For example, different scholars on Islam in Indonesia have argued that the peaceful and moderate Islam in Indonesia is being threatened by radical and extremist tendencies.[37] These studies suggest that Indonesia is being islamized and that radical Islamic movements prevail. From my personal experience in Indonesia, I knew that radical tendencies exist but that they are not as huge as portrayed in some of

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[34] However, following Narayan (1997) who says, researchers who work in the same field for years can also embody the knowledge and sentiment of a native, having lived in Indonesia for a total of more than four years, I might fall into that category as well.

[35] Mulderig, Chloe M, "Feeling Like "Fullah": The Challenges of Being a Religious Convert and Anthropologist," *Journal of Contemporary Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (2011): 115-19.

[36] Ahmed, Akbar S, "Defining Islamic Anthropology," *Anthropology Today* 65 (1984): 1-4; Ahmed, Akbar S., *Toward Islamic Anthropology: Definition, Dogma, and Directions* (Ann Arbor: New Era Publications, 1986).
3. Tapper, Richard, "Islamic Anthropology" and the "Anthropology of Islam," *Anthropological Quarterly* 68, no. 3, Anthropological Analysis and Islamic Texts (1995): 185-93; Kilani, Mondher, "Is a Peripheral Anthropology Possible? The Issue of Universalism," *Kroeber Anthropological Society* 101, no. 1 (2010): 98-105.

[37] See for example: Bubalo, Anthony & Greg Fealy, "Joining the Caravan?: The Middle East, Islamism and Indonesia," In *Lowy Institute Paper* (Double Bay: Lowy Insitute for International Policy, 2005); Barton, Greg, *Indonesia's Struggle: Jemaah Islamiyah and the Soul of Islam* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2004); Kolig, Erich, "Radical Islam, Islamic Fervour, and Political Sentiments in Central Java, Indonesia," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 4, no. 1 (2005): 55-86; Sidel, John T. Riots, *Pogroms, Jihad: Religious Violence in Indonesia* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006); Noorhaidi, H., "Laskar Jihad: Islam, Militancy, and the Quest for Identity in Post-New Order Indonesia," In *Unpublished doctoral dissertation* (Cornell University, 2006).

these studies. I have observed that these minorities, which are made the focus of mostly political scientists, do not have any major effect on what the majority of Indonesian Muslims believed, observed and practiced. And here I agree with Houben who argues concerning Muslims in Indonesia that "a majority within a non-secularized Indonesian modernity will continue to practice plurality as before."[38]

Furthermore, I had to handle different research identities in addition to my non-research self. I became the student who seeks Islamic knowledge, the 'adopted' daughter who needed advise, the new Muslim, the *dakwah* (proselytizing)-subject who did not know about the 'true' Islam, the fellow Muslim who sympathizes with the 'correct' form of Islam, the fellow Muslim that needs help, the new Muslim and public speaker who told motivating stories, and sometimes I was the researcher who just wanted facts. Alone with my material, alone at home, I was the ordinary Muslim who just wants to please Allah and who was now confused with all the different teachings, interpretations and practices and who needed to reposition her own Muslim identity. I was both an insider and outsider to my field. I was an insider because I was a fellow Muslim. I was an outsider that tried or was pushed to be an insider when faced with different Islamic practices and interpretation that I was expected to incorporate in my own Muslim identity. I was an outsider because of my white skin and my status as a new Muslim compared to my informants who were born Muslims. This status automatically included the perception that I needed to be informed, that I did not know about the 'correct' way to live my Muslim identity. From my side it required constant humility with regards to my own knowledge and conviction concerning Islamic practices. Following, I will explain some of these tensions and research identities further, looking especially at 'advantages' and 'disadvantages' of being an insider researcher.

'Advantages' of being an insider researcher

I argue that to share the same religious belief can be an advantage when researching people's religious practice. I propose that in certain cases, the religious insider is able to add to a certain discourse and put certain claims in a different perspective. In particular, in a space like contemporary Indonesia as a practicing Muslim and having lived in Indonesia for a total of four years, including 16 months of research, I

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[38] Houben, Vincent J. H, "Islam and the Perception of Islam in Contemporary Indonesia," *Occasional Paper Series* No. 3, (2015). p. 8.

have come to develop an understanding of different Islamic practices and interpretations, the different discourses and how they speak back to what I have experienced living there. Although I am not an insider to all of these practices and interpretations in terms of my own practice, I feel that I can more easily understand them compared to a complete outsider. Because of that I was able to speak back to the claims made by different scholars that Indonesia is being islamized, that radical and militant forces are on the rise and that the moderate, tolerant and peaceful character of Islam in Indonesia is being threatened. Through my research I tried to show that this is not the case.

As I argued above, coming to the field as a religious insider, has the advantage of speaking back to academic discourses from within a different perspective, at times being able to go deeper into certain subject matters but also to simply gain and sustain access to research sites and informants. Gaining access to a Muslim community has also been discussed by Hamzeh & Oliver[39] who discuss four 'entry markers' for the researcher who is of Arab origin, has a Muslim name but did not practice Islam, namely being Muslim enough, being modest enough, *inshaAllah* (God willing) and *haram* (forbidden).

Because I had a basic background of Islamic practice and belief, I was able to ask questions that revealed information that an outsider would probably not have been able to retrieve. And because my informants knew and felt that I shared the same belief, they spoke to me as to a fellow believer. Here, me having several identities (Muslim researcher, fellow Muslim, student of Islam) worked to my advantage in understanding my informants and their living realities, something also observed by Isabella Ng, a resident to Hong Kong, who describes herself as a native but "not quite that native considering the subject I was about to study - the status of indigenous women in Hong Kong" researcher with multiple identities.[40] For example, one of my informants described his heart being connected to Allah so much that it seemed that part of it is with him and part of it is somewhere in the heavens. This is due to the extensive *dzikir* (remembrance of Allah's name either silently or with the tongue) he performs, he explained. Because I wanted to understand what

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[39] Hamzeh, Manal Z., and Kimberly Oliver, "Gaining Research Access into the Lives of Muslim Girls: Researchers Negotiating Muslimness, Modesty, Inshallah, and Haram," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 23, no. 2 (2009): 165-80.
[40] Ng, Isabella, "To Whom Does My Voice Belong? (Re)Negotiating Multiple Identities as a Female Ethnographer in Two Hong Kong Rural Villages," *Gender, Technology and Development* 15, no. 3 (2011/11/01 2011): 437-56.

he meant, I started to follow his method of *dzikir* and after some time I was able to understand through spiritual experience what he tried to explain to me with words. This understanding was possible due to my status as insider and my multiple identities mentioned above.

I feel that especially doing field work in the region of South Sumatra was easier due to my identity as a Muslim woman. Very few tourists visit this region and people are rather suspicious when it comes to foreigners. Especially my research in one *pesantren* was only possible because of my status as a Muslimah, as my key informant at this school informed me about. He told me that they would not have agreed to a non-Muslim researcher because they were afraid of being misunderstood and falsely interpreted. Another example is my participation in a *Maulid* celebration exclusively for women, which was held by the *Habaib*[41] community in Palembang, South Sumatra. Through my contact person at the local Islamic University who asked for permission on my behalf and who assured the organizers that I was myself a Muslim woman who wore the headscarf and who was trustworthy, was I able to attend the celebrations. My role as a religious insider researcher clearly opened the door to these celebrations and enabled me to conduct research in a setting that was otherwise closed to non-participants.

However, on the contrary, being a non-believing/ other-believing anthropologist researching a certain religion can also come with its own advantages. The difference in belief can open up a different understanding of a religion. For example, my second supervisor, who researched Islamic education in Tadschikistan, told me that she struggled with her informants continuous attempts of trying to convert her to Islam. This experience can provide us with an insight about Islam, which I, as a Muslim researcher, will never be able to provide in this intensity. Therefore, I would like to propose that when it comes to researching religion, both insider and outsider anthropologists can share with us profound insights that the other side might not be able to retrieve in such a depth. It is a matter of perspective of which neither insider nor outsider is superior to the other.

As a Muslim researcher, I was not only the researcher but also the fellow Muslim. This influenced the way I approached my informants, the

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[41] *Habaib* are descendants of former immigrants from contemporary Yemen who came to Indonesia from the 18th century onwards until the formation of the modern nationstate of Indonesia in 1945. In addition, they also claim to be descendants of the Prophet Muhammad.

way I interacted with them, the questions I asked or did not ask and the way they explained things to me. One major difference was what my informants assumed I know already about basic Islamic knowledge and tenants[42], because of the simple fact that I am a practicing Muslim. We shared a common base, shared a common belief system. This can be both an advantage as well as a disadvantage. Because I did not even think asking about basic principles, for example how to become a Muslim (because I obviously know that), I might have missed interesting insights. However, I could focus on more detailed discussions. For example, with my informant in Yogyakarta I would discuss how Islamic doctrine can be described through cultural symbolism (which I describe as Javanese Islamic symbolism). My informant did not need to clarify to me Islamic doctrine, which saved a lot of time and this in turn could be used going deeper into the subject matter.

Many of my informants were ready to help me to enrich my research simply because I am a fellow Muslim and they felt obliged to help me as their sister in Islam. However, it is important to understand that being a fellow Muslim (and an insider researcher) means that one belongs to the global Muslim family and this comes with responsibilities. To do research as a Muslim among Muslims means that I do not only have to follow ethical guidelines connected to my research but also the ethical guidelines connected to my belonging to the imagined *umma*, the imagined Muslim community. One important aspect is the Islamic maxim that other Muslims should be save from one's own (bad) words and actions.

In addition, one responsibility I had to fulfill were requests for sharing my personal story. For example, my key informant in Yogyakarta, Java invited me several times to speak about how I discovered Islam. This usually happened without prior notice. I would attend one of his religious gatherings and at the end of his talk he requested me to come forward to tell the audience about why I had become a Muslim and handed me the microphone. I was pushed in my "situational role"[43] of a public speaker and my personal spiritual journey had to be made available in the public space. The audience would love

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[42] The five pillars of Islam are: the Shahada - the declaration of faith in Allah and His Prophet: "There is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God", the five daily prayer, zakat - mandatory alms-giving, fasting in the month of Ramadan and the hajj - pilgrimage to Mecca for those who can afford it.
[43] De Fina, Anna, "Researcher and Informant Roles in Narrative Interactions: Constructions of Belonging and Foreign-Ness." *Language in Society* 40, no. 1 (2011): 27-38.

that and listened attentively. I felt that by fulfilling these 'obligation' I could give something back to my informants and my research field because I knew that Indonesian Muslims (as most born Muslims) love convert story and find them spiritually uplifting. This example illustrates that different aspects of my identity were essential for my research project. I was able to tap into and bring to the fore these different aspects for research purposes. The malleability of this proved to be an advantage of being an insider Muslim researcher. In the following part I will discuss further that to be a fellow Muslim also means that I have to protect my Muslim informants from my bad actions. While this is, of course, part of ethical standards that all anthropologists should abide by,[44] the religious component adds gravity to it. With the example of my experience how even intentions become a matter of negotiation, I will illustrate how the conflict of being a Muslim researcher doing research among Muslims impacted on my research.

'Disadvantages' of being an insider researcher and negotiating intentions

Although sharing the same belief makes a researcher an insider in one aspect, other aspects, as discussed above, might set her apart from the people she researches. These include for example her newness to the faith and her status as a convert. Here, *da'wah* (missionary) activities form one example that I would describe as 'disadvantages'. They can be encountered by non-believing or other-believing researchers researching a certain religious groups[45] but which, to a certain extent, also affected me as a religious insider researcher. I felt these *da'wah* activities weighed heavy on me because I felt that I always had to (re)-negotiate and justify my own convictions and choices about Islam. Connected to my newness to the faith was also the issue of being perceived as a student of religion who needs to be instructed and taught about the right form of Islam and the right form to practice Islam, which I will not elaborate further in this article[46]. Furthermore, the expectation that I will use my

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[44] Campbell, John R., "The 'Problem' of Ethics in Contemporary Anthropological Research." *Anthropology Matters Journal* 12, no. 1 (2010): 1-17.

[45] Crane, Hillary K., "Flirting with Conversion: Negotiating Researcher Non-Belief with Missionaries," In *Missionary Impositions. Conversion, Resistance, and Other Challenges to Objectivity in Religious Ethnography*, edited by Hillary K. Crane and Deana L. Weibel (Lanham: Lexington, 2013), 11-23.

[46] However, I would like to propose the possibility of using the student identity as method in doing research, especially when doing research in Asian societies. In Asian

research to help spread the message of Islam also weighed heavy on me and I would describe this as a disadvantage of being a religious insider researcher, which I will elaborate further below.

Connected to my identity of Muslim researcher was the issue of *ibadah* (worship) and my research being seen as an act of worship by some of my informants. In Islam, it is believed that even worldly acts can become acts of worship with the right intention[47]. The following example will show that even something hidden and subtle as our intention (*niat*) can become a matter of negotiation in our field. In this sense, one of my informants assumed that my research was conducted "within the framework of *ibadah* and (with) the intention to spread the revival of the values of the Sunnah of the Prophet (Muhammad)." This was his first reply via sms after I had asked him whether I can come to his Islamic boarding school to conduct research. He expected of me that I would utilize my research to spread the "correct message of Islam". He viewed me as a tool to reach an audience he would otherwise not be able to reach. He had studied in Saudi Arabia and had actually planned to go to Germany after his studies to do work of *da'wah*. However, due to several circumstances he ended up going home to Indonesia instead. For him, me doing research at his institution seemed to be a lucky coincidence to continue doing *da'wah* in Germany. After I assured him that I did not intend anything negative he replied that the true Islamic teachings have been left and shunned and even viewed with hostility by the Muslim community. He added that he felt fortunate and happy that somebody tried to reimplement and re-purify the following of the Prophet Muhammad. However, my intention was, as already mentioned above, to write back to some of the research on Islam in Indonesia that suggested that Islam in Indonesia was becoming radical, fundamentalist or even militant.

My informant's message shows that from the very beginning it was assumed that I shared the same conviction and interpretation as him and the way he tries to implement it in his Islamic boarding school as a whole. But what kind of understanding or interpretation of Islam was expected of me was not made clear and only in my extensive

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societies, traditionally, a teacher has a high position in society, is respected and honored. Therefore, one should consider about becoming a student if the research layout would fit to a student-teacher-relationship.

[47] For example, eating with the intention to feed the body so it becomes strong enough to stand in long prayers during the night is given reward by Allah compared to eating without any intention except fulfilling one's base desires, to not feel hungry anymore.

conversations with my informant and the other teachers was I able to grasp what was meant with the "true Islamic teachings" mentioned in his short text message. However, his short message via handphone made me feel uncomfortable because I felt that throughout my research I had to show and pretend that I was of the same opinion as he is. I told him several times that I did not mean to use my research to reach out. However, he still expected I would do so because he said that just by writing about Islam, I am already reaching out because people would read it and "who knows, maybe Allah opens their heart through your writing". I could not really argue with him about this point further because, as it is, that would be beyond my control. However, what was more difficult in dealing with this particular informant was that he expected me to share *his* understanding of Islam and that this seemed to be a prerequisite about conducting research with him and his *pesantren*. Although at the point of doing intensive research with him it was only a feeling that he would discontinue our 'relationship', my feeling proved right when I told him that I attended the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday; something he objects to. Although I wanted to return to do more research at his school, he did not reply to my messages anymore; a sign of his discontent. In this situation, my outsider status compared to my insider status became dominant and besides being an insider I was thrust apart from my informant[48] because some of our Islamic interpretations were not the same.

So, while interacting with him, my feeling was that I had to pretend that I shared the same understanding of what the "true" Islam and Islamic practices were or at least I had to pretend that I was eager to learn and share them. I somehow felt that my intentions, a part of my inner self, usually not visible to other people, were forcefully turned to the outside. Agreeing to my informant's precondition to conduct research in his Islamic boarding school as part of my *ibadah* and to spread the message of the "true" Islam put me internally in a precarious situation that made me feel not being true to my own self. Was I being dishonest? This question seems to have occupied others as well (see for example Crane, 2013, on a Buddhist ritual[49]; Wiegele, 2013, about a charismatic Catholic community in Manila).[50] The posed pre-condition of conducting

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[48] Narayan, Kirin, "How Native Is a "Native" Anthropologist?," 1993.
[49] Crane, Hillary K. "Flirting with Conversion, 2013.
[50] Wiegele, Katherine L. "On Being a Participant and an Observer in Religious Ethnography: Silence, Betrayal, and Becoming." In *Missionary Impositions. Conversion, Re-*

research as part of my *ibadah* was emotionally challenging because it tackled my very own Muslim identity; my Islamic commitment to be true to my words and actions, to safeguard my fellow Muslims from my own (bad) actions and not to engage in spreading defamation (*fitnah*) about my fellow Muslims who were also my informants. In addition, my informant's precondition also put me in a vulnerable position (Behar 1996) because, as I described above, it put my research and even my academic future (described as professional vulnerability by Ballamingie[51]) at risk. Similar to what Rabinow described about an episode during his research in a Moroccan village that almost resulted in the refusal of gaining entrance,[52] my informant was in the position to discontinue our field relationship, which he eventually did after I told him that I took part in a *Maulid* celebration. In other words, in my informants eyes, I was not 'Muslim enough', to use one of Hamzeh's entry markers mentioned above.[53] Or I did not practice and internalized fully what he described as the "true" Islam and therefore forfeit the access I gained due to my insider status.

Being aware of the fact that the researcher's intention might become a matter of negotiation is important before leaving for the field. We need to ask ourselves how we deal with informants who try to interfere with our intentions and if we let them interfere. How do we communicate our intentions and how do we communicate intentions different to those expected of us?

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sistance, and Other Challenges to Objectivity in Religious Ethnography., edited by Hillary K. Crane and Deana L. Weibel, 83-92. Lanham: Lexington, 2013.

[51] Ballamingie, Patricia. "The Vulnerable Researcher: Some Unanticipated Challenges of Doctoral Fieldwork." *The Qualitative Report* 16, no. 3 (2011): 711-29.

[52] Rabinow, Paul. *Reflections of Fieldwork in Morocco.* California: University of California Press, 1977.

[53] Hamzeh, Manal Z., and Kimberly Oliver. "Gaining Research Access into the Lives of Muslim Girls, 2009.

Conclusion

I have described 'advantages' of being a religious insider being roughly of two types. The first type is connected to access and the second type is connected to obtaining data. In addition, I have argued that besides being a religious insider due to my own identity as a Muslim women, I was still an outsider to certain Islamic practices. I tried to grasp these issues by referring to myself as an insider-outsider Muslim researcher. When I had the opportunity to attend the *Maulid* celebration already mentioned above, I wore a dress in the wrong color, which I was told by one participant after the event[54]. This shows that despite my insider status, which granted me access to the *Maulid*, I was still an outsider to this specific form of Islamic practice and especially its regiments concerning dress code.

Concerning data, due to my own personal involvement with Islam and the search for *my* Muslim identity, I was able to also engage in critical discussions with my informants and could therefore, by including these discussions in my writing process, open up my informant's way of thinking and where and how certain Islamic discourses actually develop. With one of my female informant, for example, I discussed the issue of what she described as 'worshipping graves'. In her point of view, and the school of thought she follows, visiting graves is equal to worshipping graves because people would make supplication to the dead person in the grave (asking something of him/ her). I argued with her that most Muslims would make supplication for the dead person, which is a huge difference. My discussion with her exemplarily illustrated a major debate between two different schools of thought in Islam. This was only possible due to my own religious insider status. Our discussion, although within the framework of my research, was a discussion between two Muslims who tried to convince the other side of their own point of view. However, this example also shows my outsider status vis a vis my informant. Here, I argue that it was precisely because of my insider-outsider status that I was able to engage in a critical discussion of this kind.

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[54] I wore a light beige dress and only noticed at the event that everybody wore a black dress. By wearing black during *Maulid* celebrations, as was explained to me later, the women followed the Prophet Muhammad's daughter Fatima, who is said, usually wore black. The participant who drew my attention to this matter then invited me to other *Maulid* celebrations. For these celebrations I made sure that I bought a black dress, which was noted and appreciated by the participants.

Concluding, I have argued that to be a religious insider researcher can be an advantage when conducting research among the same religious community because it can help to gain easier access and/ or to obtain valuable detailed information and profound understanding of certain phenomena. However, I have also argued that to share the same religious belief and to be of the same religious group is not enough to be an insider for the width of diverse and pluriform religious practices found within the same religion. This resonates with the observation that native anthropologists experience gradations of endogeny[55]. What I have described for the religious insider-outsider researcher is especially true for my case study in Indonesia. But I assume that my observations regarding religious insider-outsider research in pluriform religious settings in other regions of the world might be similar. Therefore, I suggest that concerning insider research about religious practices, one can never be a one hundred percent insider besides sharing the same belief on a macro-level. Especially in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and pluriform Islamic setting, there is a great chance that there will be practices to which one is not an insider besides sharing the same religious belief.

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[55] Jacobs-Huey, Lanita. "The Natives Are Gazing and Talking Back", 2002.

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