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THE METACULTURAL LOGICS OF RELIGIOUS RHETORIC IN MODERATE ISLAMIC PREACHING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF GUS BAHA AND GUS IQDAM

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Abstract

This study advances the concept of metacultural logics to explain how *pesantren*-based religious authority is produced, circulated, and reproduced in contemporary Islamic preaching in Indonesia. The research objects of this study are **two public religious sermons delivered by Gus Baha and Gus Iqdam**, prominent moderate traditionalist Muslim preachers, **as circulated through offline preaching forums and digital media platforms**. The article examines how rhetorical practices function not merely as persuasive strategies but as metacultural mechanisms embedded in the *pesantren* tradition. Employing a multi-method qualitative approach that integrates textual analysis of selected sermons and in-depth interviews with key informants, the study finds four interrelated metacultural logics shaping Gus Baha and Gus Iqdam's religious rhetoric: intertextuality, *sanad* (scholarly lineage), *gojlokan* (light teasing), and metaphor. Intertextuality operates as an epistemic logic through which *pesantren* knowledge is transmitted via layered textual engagement, while *sanad* functions as a moral-epistemological logic that defines religious authenticity through inherited scholarly genealogy. *Gojlokan* and metaphor serve as pedagogical and affective logics that translate *pesantren* ethics into vernacular and emotionally resonant forms. Beyond preserving and renewing the *pesantren* moral and epistemological foundations, these metacultural logics also enable the effective circulation of religious discourse in contemporary preaching contexts.

Keywords: *Metacultural, Religious Rhetoric, Islamic Preacher, Pesantren, Tradition*



A. Introduction

The dynamics of Muslim religiosity in Indonesia over the past two decades have drawn considerable scholarly attention due to the changing character of Indonesian Islam. Once celebrated for its tolerance and moderation, Indonesian Islam, since the early 21st century, increasingly exhibited more radical and conservative tendencies (Bruinessen, 2013). In the aftermath of the Soeharto regime, the country experienced widespread violent conflicts between religious groups. Terrorist organizations with apparent international ties orchestrated major attacks, including coordinated church bombings across the country on Christmas Eve in 2000 and the devastating Bali bombings in October 2002, which resulted in around 200 deaths and hundreds of injuries, many among foreign tourists.

In addition, the increasing influence of transnational Islamic movements competing with Indonesia's major organizations like Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) signals a shift toward conservatism. By 2005, this conservative trend had also become evident within NU, Muhammadiyah, and the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), as shown by their growing resistance to liberal and modern viewpoints that were once widely accepted within these institutions (Bruinessen, 2013).

The rapid rise of Islamic conservatism is also driven by its strong presence in the digital marketplace of ideas (Arifianto, 2020). Moreover, online TV and social media platforms affiliated with Salafist and Wahhabist thought have been highly effective in shaping and displacing moderate Islamic perspectives (Burdah, 2023). This is evident in the significantly high numbers of followers and subscribers on social media platforms that promote conservative Islamic views, such as *Yufid TV* (491,866 subscribers), *Rodja TV* (136,668), *Ammar TV* (405,345), Khalid Basalamah (999 thousand followers), and Syafiq Riza Basalamah (933 thousand) (As'ad, 2021)(Akmaliah, 2020). In contrast, online TV channels that promote moderate Islamic perspectives attract far fewer subscribers, including *TVMU* (7,173), *Aswaja Tube* (47,324), and *NUTV* (2,761)(Akmaliah, 2020).

However, in the late second decade of the 21st century, moderate Islamic movements reemerged to challenge the growing influence of conservative groups. The growing awareness among moderate Muslim activists of the need to engage in the digital sphere has proven effective in shaping religious discourse in cyberspace. For example,



the *Santri Gayeng* team and the *El-Yeka* Kudus Channel have curated and uploaded sermons by KH Ahmad Bahaudin Nursalim, popularly known as Gus Baha, allowing his messages to gain significant traction in the digital marketplace of ideas (Rohmatulloh et al., 2022; Hidayat, 2022). Similar initiatives have also been undertaken by the teams of K.H. Mustafa Bisri, Prof. Quraish Shihab, and KH Muhammad Iqdam Kholid, who is well known as Gus Iqdam.

According to a 2020 survey by the Alvara Research Center, the online religious teachings of Ustadz Abdul Somad and Gus Baha were among the most widely followed by the public, with 18.6% of respondents listening to Ustadz Abdul Somad and 15.7% to Gus Baha. They were followed by KH Mustofa Bisri (Gus Mus) at 8.3%, Abdullah Gymnastiar (Aa Gym) at 5.3%, and both Prof. Quraish Shihab and Ustadz Adi Hidayat, Lc., each with 4.9% (Fairuz, 2020).

The transformation of the preaching model among traditionalist Muslims has led to the emergence of several young preachers, such as KH Muhammad Iqdam Kholid—popularly known as Gus Iqdam—who has gained considerable popularity across different generations, including millennials, Generation X, and baby boomers (Supriono, 2023). Data reveals that within three years of launching Gus Iqdam's official YouTube channel in April 2020, it had attracted 1.19 million subscribers, with his preaching videos accumulating 82,584,967 views. By 2024, the 'Gus Iqdam Official YouTube' channel continued to grow steadily, reaching 1.54 million subscribers and amassing a total of 157 million views from approximately 817 uploaded videos (Youtubers.me, 2024; Social Blade, 2024). In addition to his strong online presence, Gus Iqdam's offline religious gatherings at *Majlis Sabilu Taubah* consistently draw tens of thousands of attendees.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on Islamic conservatism and digital religious activism in Indonesia, existing studies have predominantly focused on ideological content, political alignments, and patterns of online mobilization. Far less attention has been paid to the cultural and rhetorical mechanisms through which moderate Islamic messages gain authority, resonance, and sustainability within an increasingly competitive religious public sphere. This gap is particularly significant given that moderation in Indonesian Islam is not merely a doctrinal position but a culturally embedded practice shaped by long-standing *pesantren* traditions. As conservative and



Salafist actors continue to dominate digital religious spaces through highly professionalized media strategies, understanding how moderate preachers successfully circulate alternative religious discourses becomes an urgent scholarly task. Without such analysis, discussions of Islamic moderation risk remaining normative or prescriptive, rather than empirically grounded in the communicative practices that enable moderation to endure and adapt in contemporary media environments.

This study specifically examines the metacultural dimensions of Gus Baha and Gus Iqdam's preaching rhetoric. Gus Baha and Gus Iqdam were selected as the focal cases of this study for three interrelated reasons. First, both figures represent distinct yet complementary generational expressions of traditionalist Islam rooted in pesantren culture: Gus Baha embodies a classical scholarly authority grounded in deep textual mastery, while Gus Iqdam exemplifies a younger generation of preachers who translate pesantren values into accessible and affective modes of communication. Second, both preachers have demonstrated an exceptional capacity to bridge diverse audiences, including traditional Muslims, urban middle-class listeners, and individuals formerly affiliated with conservative or radical Islamic movements. This cross-audience appeal makes their preaching particularly relevant for examining the metacultural logics that enable moderation to circulate beyond its conventional social bases. Third, the extensive digital circulation of their sermons provides a rich empirical site for analyzing how pesantren-based religious rhetoric operates simultaneously in offline religious gatherings and online media platforms. Together, Gus Baha and Gus Iqdam offer analytically productive cases for understanding how metacultural logics function in sustaining and rearticulating moderate Islamic preaching within Indonesia's evolving religious public sphere.

Against this backdrop, examining the metacultural dimensions of moderate Islamic sermons offers critical insight into how religious moderation is not only articulated, but also culturally sustained and reproduced.

B. Methods

To examine how metacultural logics operate in religious rhetoric, this study employs a multi-method qualitative research design. Multi-method qualitative research



refers to the use of two or more qualitative approaches within a single study to achieve a deeper and better-rounded understanding of the research subject (Mik-meyer, 2020). This design is particularly suitable for investigating metacultural logics, as such logics are not directly observable but must be inferred through recurring patterns of discourse, narrative strategies, and interpretive practices embedded in religious preaching. Accordingly, this study combines textual analysis of selected sermons with in-depth interviews, allowing for an integrated examination of rhetorical forms, cultural meanings, and reflexive interpretations surrounding Gus Baha's and Gus Iqdam's preaching practices.

In this regard, the textual analysis was employed to examine video and transcripts of sermons by Gus Baha and Gus Iqdam in order to understand the rhetorical patterns of both Islamic preachers. This study analyzes two religious sermons. The first is a sermon by KH Ahmad Bahaudin Nursalim (Gus Baha) titled "*Ngaji Kebangsaan: Tafsir Islam Damai untuk Keharmonisan*", delivered at the Islamic University of Malang (UNISMA) on August 31, 2020, and uploaded to the Unisma Official Public Relations YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5uUpJBMdjqE>. The second is KH Muhammad Iqdam Kholid's (Gus Iqdam) sermon from "*Rutinan Selasa Malam Majelis Sabilu Taubah*" on January 22, 2024 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JLzsk7IAgk8>). Meanwhile, in-depth interviews with five informants were conducted to explore the metacultural dimensions of Gus Iqdam's and Gus Baha's preaching rhetoric.

The data analysis was carried out through thematic analysis. It is a technique that systematizes the process of reading texts by coding segments—labeling or categorizing parts of the data—to generate and organize themes for deeper interpretation (Alejandro & Zhao, 2024). This method aims to identify, analyze, and interpret recurring patterns of meaning through repeated engagement with the textual data. Practically, in this study, thematic analysis began with organizing textual data into thematic networks, then proceeds to examine these networks to identify recurring patterns, and ultimately interprets the patterns that emerge.



C. Results and Discussion

Results

1. Configuring Gus Baha and Gus Iqdam's Religious Preaching

This section examines how the religious rhetoric of KH Ahmad Bahaudin Nursalim (Gus Baha) and KH Muhammad Iqdam Kholid (Gus Iqdam) operates through distinct metacultural logics rooted in *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) tradition and the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) milieu. In the context of religious preaching, metaculture denotes the underlying values, norms, traditions, symbols, language, and shared knowledge that may not be explicitly stated but are implicitly understood and accepted by both preachers and their audiences. This shared cultural framework guides how religious messages are constructed, delivered, and interpreted. Metaculture thus fosters a sense of connection or identification between speaker and listener, which is essential for effective religious rhetoric (Pernot, 2006). As Burke notes, persuasion occurs when a speaker is able to “talk his language... identifying your ways with his” (Burke, 1969,55).

Within Gus Iqdam and Gus Baha's religious rhetoric, metaculture encompasses the cultural values, traditions, social norms, and local knowledge systems that influence both the way they convey religious messages and how their audience receives them. Here, “metaculture” goes beyond general notions of culture; it represents a collectively held understanding that is often implicit, yet deeply familiar to the listening community, particularly among those affiliated with *pesantren* and NU.

Gus Baha's sermon analyzed in this study, *Ngaji Kebangsaan: Tafsir Islam Damai untuk Keharmonisan*, is characterized by dense textual engagement and a strong emphasis on Qur'anic exegesis, classical Islamic scholarship, and *pesantren* intellectual traditions. His preaching style foregrounds intertextual reasoning, drawing extensively on the Qur'an, hadith, tafsir, kitab kuning, and the works of prominent classical and NU scholars. The structure of his sermon reflects a dialogical mode of reasoning, where religious arguments are built through layered references, interpretive debates, and historical precedents.

In delivering his message on peaceful Islam and national harmony, Gus Baha repeatedly invokes authoritative figures such as the Prophet Muhammad, the salaf al-sālih, medieval Muslim intellectuals, and NU founding figures like KH Hasyim Asy'ari and



KH Faqih Maskumambang. His use of these references situates his sermon firmly within the pesantren epistemic tradition, where religious truth is understood as cumulative and discursively produced. Humor, metaphor, and *gojlokan* are employed selectively to soften complex theological arguments, making them accessible without undermining their scholarly depth.

By contrast, Gus Iqdam's sermon, delivered in the Rutinan Selasa Malam Majelis Sabilu Taubah, exhibits a more affective and audience-oriented style, while remaining grounded in classical Islamic sources. His preaching centers on moral virtues, particularly generosity (*sakho*), which he elaborates through Qur'anic references, hadith, and classical ethical texts such as *Taisir al-Khallāq* and *Wa Haqīqat al-Jūd*.

Gus Iqdam's rhetorical delivery is marked by frequent humor, direct interaction with the audience, spontaneous storytelling, and the strategic use of metaphors drawn from everyday life. Unlike Gus Baha's dense intertextual exposition, Gus Iqdam emphasizes narrative clarity and emotional engagement. Nevertheless, his authority is consistently reinforced through references to canonical texts, respected scholars, and his pesantren lineage, ensuring that accessibility does not come at the expense of legitimacy.

The following analysis demonstrates how this *pesantren*-based metaculture materializes through four interrelated logics, intertextuality, *sanad*, *gojlokan*, and metaphor, which together organize the production, circulation, and reception of religious discourse.

2. Shared Metacultural Logics Underlying *Pesantren*-Based Preaching

2.1. *Intertextuality as a Central Metacultural of Logos*

In classical rhetorical theory, intertextuality operates as a *logos* appeal that refers to the use of reasoning, evidence, and logical structure to persuade audiences. In public speaking, intertextuality refers to the speaker's use of references to other sources, such as quotations, mentions of other authors' works, notable figures, and related materials (Bazerman, 2020; Li & Guo, 2021). In other words, these intertextual references serve as a persuasive strategy used by the speaker to present supporting evidence for their claims.

In the religious rhetoric of moderate-traditionalist scholars, intertextuality becomes the primary vehicle of *logos* because it demonstrates their mastery of sacred



and scholarly discourse, ensuring that each statement resonates with the cumulative authority of the Islamic intellectual tradition.

Within Gus Baha's rhetoric, *logos* is expressed through a dense web of intertextual references such as Qur'anic verses, hadith, *tafsir*, *kitab kuning*, and classical NU scholars. Indeed, based on the textual analysis of Gus Baha's religious preaching about compatibility between Islamic teachings and Indonesian identity at *Ngaji Kebangsaan: Tafsir Islam Damai untuk Keharmonisan* delivered at UNISMA Malang on August 31, 2020, he referred to several sources to emphasize that Islam upholds the values of peace and tolerance. These sources included the "pocket books" he distributed to the audience, as well as classical Islamic texts such as *Tafsir al-Ṭabarī*, *Al-Ḥuṣūn al-Ḥamīdiyyah*, *Al-Jāsūs fī Bayān Ḥukm al-Nāqūs*, and *Ḥazz al-Ru'ūs fī Radd al-Jāsūs 'an Taḥrīm al-Nāqūs*. Gus Baha also drew on other intertextual references to strengthen his arguments, including stories of the Prophet Muhammad, the angels, the *salaf al-ṣāliḥ* (pious predecessors), Sufi orders (*ṭarīqāt*), and medieval Muslim intellectuals such as Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, Ibn Khaldūn, Imām al-'Amīdī, Imām Sufyān, Imām al-Shādhilī, and Imām al-Sanūsī. He also cited the nine saints of Java (*walisongo*) and prominent *kiai* from Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), including KH Hasyim Asy'ari, KH Faqih Maskumambang, and KH Maimun Zubair (Mbah Moen).

In this regard, Gus Baha began his explanation by referring to the figures of *Walisongo* (the nine saints) who never opposed or questioned the compatibility between Islam and Indonesian identity. He stated:

The mission of the saints is da'wah. Everywhere, da'wah encounters differences—differences in religion, schools of thought (madzhab), traditions, and cultures. These differences should not be opposed, but rather embraced as opportunities for da'wah).

Another intertextuality carried out by Gus Baha is by directly quoting Imam Zuhri's statement. In this case, Gus Baha emphasized the originality of the text and narrative from Imam Zuhri that he read, stating, *"I have not changed anything in this text; it is exactly as it appears."* He also mentioned the name of the renowned *fiqh* scholar Imam Malik, highlighting his connection to Imam Zuhri: *"Imam Zuhri was Imam Malik's teacher—I repeat, Imam Zuhri was Imam Malik's teacher."*



These direct quotations and references to *hadith* and *fiqh* scholars serve as forms of intertextuality that function as part of Gus Baha's rhetorical appeal, reinforcing the authority and authenticity of his sources. In the narrative from Imam Zuhri cited by Gus Baha, it is stated that during the Treaty of *Hudaibiyah*, the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) submitted a request to the disbelievers to halt the war for ten years and allow open discussion about Islam. Gus Baha interpreted this as evidence that Islam values peace over conflict or war. He reasons that in times of war, people are unable to think clearly and have no opportunity to engage in meaningful discussions about the truth of Islam. In contrast, peaceful conditions enable open dialogue and debate, which benefit the spread and understanding of Islamic teachings.

To support his explanation of the truth of Islam, Gus Baha referred to *Tafsir al-Maraghi* and the book *Al-Ḥuṣūn al-Ḥamīdiyyah*. *Tafsir al-Maraghi* was used to explain a specific verse of the Qur'an: *Bal naqdzifu bil haqqi 'alal bathili fa yadmaghuhu faidza huwa zahiqun* (QS. Al Anbiya: 18). In this regard, Gus Baha refers to an Arabic dictionary to explain the meaning of the word *naqdzifu* in the verse, which he interprets as "arbitrarily," in contrast to "structured." He explains:

Qadzafa, as I understand it, means takallama bilā dalīlin—to speak without evidence. Qadzafa basically means doing something however you like. This implies that even if the truth of Islam—or the truth of ḥaqq—is presented arbitrarily, it will still prevail. All the more so if it is presented in a structured way. There were many companions who lived in China, and today many pious people choose to live in America, in England. And they remain confident, because wherever you place the truth, it will still be the truth. It will still find its moment of victory.

Furthermore, to strengthen his argument, Gus Baha refers to several renowned Muslim intellectuals and scholars, such as Ibn Battuta and Ibn Khaldun, who demonstrated that the Qur'an is the only book that contains scientific truths—covering topics such as the origin of humanity, *falaq* (astronomy), geography, and geology. He also refers to Imam al-ʿAmūdī, a Muslim mathematician, and to the book *Al-Ḥuṣūn al-Ḥamīdiyyah*, which was once taught by Mbah Maemon (KH Maimun Zubair). Through this source, Gus Baha explains the truth of Islam—particularly the concept of *tawḥīd* (monotheism)—using mathematics and drawing. He explains:



There are Muslim scholars who are experts in drawing. They draw freely—buildings, animals—however they like. These scholars say that a proper drawing must begin from a single point. That point represents the point of existence, namely Allah SWT. This universe—whether it be the earth, the sun, Mars, or other celestial bodies—originates from that point of existence: Allah SWT. This shows the greatness of our scholars. Whether they teach mathematics or drawing, all of it becomes a means to explain *tawhīd*. That is part of peaceful Islam, a beautiful Islam—there is no need for war to force people to convert, and no need for provocation.

In addition, one form of intertextuality in Gus Baha's concept of "peaceful Islam" is his mention of KH Hasyim Asy'ari, along with his ideas and his manuscript *Jāsūs fī Bayān Ḥukm al-Nāqūs*, which he juxtaposes with KH Faqih Maskumambang and his book *Ḥazz al-Ru'ūs fī Radd al-Jāsūs 'an Taḥrīm al-Nāqūs*. These references are used to explain that differences of opinion within Islam—particularly in the *pesantren* tradition—are inevitable and need not lead to conflict or violence. Gus Baha explains that KH Hasyim Asy'ari prohibited the use of the *kentongan* or *beduk* (traditional wooden drum) as a call to prayer, as stated in his manuscript *Jāsūs fī Bayān Ḥukm al-Nāqūs*. Meanwhile, KH Faqih Maskumambang is presented as offering a counter-argument in his book *Ḥazz al-Ru'ūs fī Radd al-Jāsūs 'an Taḥrīm al-Nāqūs*, defending the use of the *kentongan* for that purpose. Gus Baha remarked:

The differences of opinion between Mbah Hasyim and Mbah Faqih Maskumambang are well-known—even documented in writing—where they criticized each other and held differing views).

The mention of these two *ulama*—both important figures in *pesantren* traditions and in the NU community—is part of his intertextual metaculture. Because the audience, composed largely of NU members, is already familiar with these scholars and their ideas, Gus Baha is able to reinforce his message by appealing to shared beliefs about the authority and intellectual diversity of the *ulama*. This reinforces his broader explanation of the *pesantren* tradition, which is widely understood within the NU community. As Gus Baha put it: "*The hallmark of pesantren is that it allows differences of opinion.*"

Another aspect of intertextuality in Gus Baha's lecture on "peaceful Islam" is his use of *conceptual language*—phrases that reflect particular ways of thinking and



communicating—such as: “*perbedaan itu lazim* (differences are normal),” “Islam is *dīn al-‘aql* (a religion of reason),” “al- Qur’an itu modern (the Qur’an is modern),” “*Islam tidak anti sosial* (Islam is not anti-social),” “*Islam kultural* (cultural Islam),” and “formal Islam.”

Besides intertextuality, Gus Baha also employs figurative language. Figurative language refers to expressions that are not meant to be taken literally. It includes a wide range of rhetorical devices, such as metaphor, simile, metonymy, hyperbole, and irony. Almost all religious discourse employs figurative language, as religion and spirituality deal with both the profane and the sacred—realms that go beyond the purely physical world. As such, explaining religious concepts without the use of figurative language is nearly impossible. The metaphors often connect one idea to another or relate abstract concepts to the experiences of well-known figures or *ulama*, thereby making the subject matter easier for the audience to understand and internalize. Some of the metaphors used by Gus Baha include: “*agama itu rileks* (religion is relaxed),” “*agama itu menyenangkan* (religion is fun),” and descriptions of Allah using the concepts of *madlahir al-jalāl* (manifestation of majesty) and *madlahir al-jamāl* (manifestation of beauty). He also uses expressions like “*Allah gojlok-gojlokan karo makhluq’e*” (Allah joking with His creation), which reflect a unique blend of theological insight and cultural familiarity.

Similarly, Gus Iqdam’s sermon also demonstrates intertextuality by drawing from various Islamic textual sources that elaborate on the Qur’an. These include Qur’anic interpretations (*tafsir*), prophetic *hadiths*, classical Islamic texts (commonly known as *kitab kuning*), references to prominent Islamic figures or saints, the use of conceptual religious language, and both direct and indirect quotations from sacred texts that he conveyed throughout his sermon.

Specifically, in the sermon analyzed in this study, Gus Iqdam focused on the moral character of the Prophet Muhammad, particularly his generosity (*sakho*). To support his discussion, he referred to several classical Islamic texts, including *Taisirul Khallaq* by Hafidz Hasan al-Mas’udi and *Wa Haqiqatul Jud* by Imam al-Husairi. To convey the meaning, purpose, and benefits of generosity (*sakho*) to his audience, Gus Iqdam referenced numerous *hadiths* of the Prophet Muhammad. These included a *hadith qudsi* reported by Imam Ibn Asaakir, as well as authentic narrations (*shahih*) from Bukhari, Muslim, Al-Thabrani, and Tirmidhi. One of the *hadith qudsi* cited by Gus Iqdam states:



Jabir reported that the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said, “Jibril said that Allah (SWT) said: *‘Verily, this is the religion (Islam) that I am pleased with for Myself, and it will not be upheld except through generosity and good character. Therefore, honor this religion with these two qualities.’*”

Gus Iqdam also cited a hadith to illustrate the Prophet Muhammad’s exceptional generosity, highlighting how he gave to others without any fear of becoming poor: “*Yu’thi ‘athaa man laa yakhsyal faqr*” — he gives without fear of poverty. In addition, Gus Iqdam quoted a *muttafaqun ‘alaih* hadith stating, “*Khairunnas anfa’uhum linnas*” — “*The best of people are those who bring the most benefit to others.*”

Another form of intertextuality that Gus Iqdam incorporates into his rhetorical-logos strategy is referencing prominent religious figures and scholars in his sermons, such as Habib Husein (leader of *Majlis Roso*), Habib Syech from Solo, and Gus Azmi. He mentions them as illustrative examples when explaining the concept of *sakho*, encompassing both material and non-material forms of generosity.

Based on the explanation above, it is understood that intertextuality serves as the central logos-based rhetorical appeal in both Gus Baha and Gus Iqdam’s religious preaching. In this regard, they often blend traditional references with popular idioms or contemporary metaphors, creating what might be called ‘vernacular intertextuality’, namely a dialogical reasoning that bridges sacred texts with everyday realities. This approach embodies logos as contextual intelligibility, making religious reasoning emotionally and culturally meaningful for audiences.

The commentary of a respondent further supports this reality, Alfi (personal interview in Sidoarjo, July 22, 2024) stating, “I enjoy listening Gus Baha’s religious preaching (*pengajian*) because he is able to translate complex philosophical and theological ideas into everyday language that ordinary audiences can easily understand”.

Additionally, this intertextuality of both Islamic scholars serves a more performative and affective form of logos. It means that although his delivery is easily comprehended, their authority still depends on references to canonical texts and respected scholars, which authenticate their interpretations. This reality is supported by the commentary of a respondent, asserting that the appeal of Gus Baha’s preaching because to his depth of mastery over diverse Islamic sources, including the Qur’an



exegeses, hadith, *tafsīr*, and classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning), as well as the works of classical NU scholars (Alfi, personal interview in Sidoarjo, July 22, 2024).

It is interesting to note that logos appeals are not individual acts of argumentation but cultural performances of collective knowledge (Kailani, 2012; Sunarwoto, 2017). In this context, both Gus Iqdam and Gus Baha's intertextuality functions not only as a textual strategy but also as a metacultural mechanism. Through intertextuality, they reproduce the cultural logic of *pesantren* knowledge transmission, where religious understanding emerges from layered commentaries, debates, and reinterpretations. This recursive engagement with texts embodies a metacultural consciousness, as Gus Iqdam and Gus Baha's rhetoric reflects and sustains the culture of interpretation itself. In other words, both traditionalist-moderate scholars' intertextualities is to preserve the epistemic depth of *pesantren* reasoning itself.

2.2. Qur'anic Expertise, Kiai Authority, and Sanad as Sources of Ethos

A preacher's ethical and intellectual credibility, called *ethos*, plays a crucial role in shaping how audiences perceive a speaker's trustworthiness and likability, often evaluated through indicators such as competence, goodwill, character, moral integrity and reliability (Zhuang, 2023). Key components of *ethos* include trust, respect, and shared identity with the audience, authority, expertise, and a solid reputation.

Within the framework of Islamic preaching, expertise in Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*) functions as a profound form of *ethos* appeal, namely a rhetorical strategy through which preachers establish their credibility, authority, and moral integrity. Based on the textual analysis of Gus Baha's religious lecture at *Ngaji Kebangsaan: Tafsir Islam Damai untuk Keharmonisan*, he actively reinforces this credibility by highlighting his expertise in Qur'anic exegesis, "*Ini memang agak aneh, orang menekuni tafsir kayak saya ini sampai berjilid-jilid kitab...*(This is indeed a bit strange, people like me who study *tafsir* even go so far as to write volumes of Islamic books...)".

As a memorizer of al-Qur'ān (*ḥāfiẓ*) and an exegete (*mufasssir*), Gus Baha embodies a deeply embodied form of religious authority. In the *pesantren* worldview, *ḥifẓ* al-Qur'ān is not merely a cognitive achievement but a spiritual discipline that signifies sincerity (*ikhlaṣ*), humility (*tawāḍu'*), and moral steadfastness (Bruinessen, 2013; Feener, 2007). Thus,



Gus Baha's memorization serves as a source of ethos, namely a demonstration of spiritual credibility and moral trustworthiness that precedes argumentation.

Gus Baha also affirmed his position as *kiai* who holds a prominent position within the religious community in order to construct an ethos appeal of his religious rhetoric. This is found when he shared his personal experience with officials of a ministry from Jakarta.

I am often contacted by aides from the minister saying, 'Gus, there will be guests from Jakarta on this date.' But I always have to remind them, 'they chose a date that suits their schedule without considering whether I'm available. 'I said no, because he had no yet spoken with proper language and humility. Eventually, he came back and said, 'Gus, what time are you free? We'll adjust.' I said, 'Now that's good manners... haha.

Further, in *pesantren* tradition, *sanad* (chain of transmission or scholarly lineage) holds a crucial role in ensuring the authenticity, legitimacy, and continuity of religious knowledge. *Sanad* is both a marker of authenticity and a source of authority for preachers. *Sanad* serves as a powerful form of *ethos* that affirms that their religious interpretations are rooted in legitimate scholarly authority. Gus Baha frequently asserting his *sanad* background as a student of KH Maimun Zubair and a representative of *pesantren* traditions.

Gus Iqdam also often refers to his educational and spiritual background, as well as his family heritage to assert his *sanad*. For example, he mentions being an alumnus of the Ploso Islamic Boarding School in Kediri and highlights his wife, Ning Nela, who comes from the renowned Lirboyo Islamic Boarding School. His credibility is further reinforced through references to his close relationships with respected Islamic scholars (*kiai*) and *habaib*. Moreover, his ability to read and interpret classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*) strengthens his scholarly authority.

The findings from the textual analysis above align with a respondent's statement that the core values of the *pesantren*, conveyed either explicitly or subtly throughout Gus Iqdam's and Gus Baha's preaching, such as *tawadhu'* (humility), *ta'dzim* (respect for religious scholars), *ittiba'* (emulating the example of teachers or *kiai*), and the importance of scholarly lineage (*sanad*), are regarded as key factors motivating the *jamaah* to become their devoted followers (Riyadh, personal interview in Jombang, July 27, 2024). In this



context, the integration of textual mastery and ethical embodiment situates the authority of both preachers within a broader metaculture of ethos, wherein Qur'anic scholarship is inseparable from moral integrity and the pedagogical chain of transmission (*sanad*) that underpins the *pesantren* epistemic tradition.

2.3. Metaphor and Humor as Pathos Appeals in Religious Rhetoric

In delivering messages, speakers often employ techniques that evoke and influence audiences' emotions to create receptivity toward a message called *pathos* (Aristotle, 2007). In religious preaching, *pathos* appeals are not merely emotional manipulations but affective strategies that connect the speaker's message to the audience's lived experiences, moral sentiments, and cultural imagination. Analogy, metaphor, and humor are *pathos* emotional appeals to engage the audience.

According to (Meyer, 2000), rhetorical humor functions as *pathos* because it generates positive emotions, laughter, warmth, and trust that open the audience to persuasion. Gus Baha frequently uses both humor and metaphor in his sermons. He often incorporates wordplay into his humor, using satire, self-deprecating jokes, or even gentle roasting such as using the phrase *cangkem elek* (meaning "foul mouth" or "rude speech") as a metaphorical critique of certain Islamic groups that frequently accuse others of heresy and disparage the traditions upheld by NU communities and *pesantren*.

Gus Baha also uses humor and analogy when he explains the permissibility of a husband kissing his wife while fasting during Ramadan. To illustrate the origin of this ruling, he humorously recounts how the Prophet Muhammad's companions sought clarification by asking the Prophet's wives about their personal experiences, referencing their physical features in the process, then he makes analogy from this story for explaining *istinbath fiqh* (the process of extracting Islamic law):

One of the companions asked a rather amusing question. He approached Maimunah—who, though beautiful, was older—and said, 'O Mother of the Believers (umm al mukminin), Maimunah, what is the ruling on kissing one's wife during the fast of Ramadan?' She replied, 'I don't know... I've never been kissed by the Prophet during Ramadan.' Then they asked Saudah, who was elderly as well. Finally, they asked Aisha—who was younger and known for her beauty. It was actually the Prophet's wife who suggested, 'Ask Aisha.' Aisha responded, 'Yes, the Prophet used to kiss me during Ramadan, and he still continued his fast.' From this, scholars concluded that kissing does not invalidate the fast.



Gus Baha also employs satire to highlight the importance of dialogue and critical thinking in Islamic preaching. He does so by contrasting the characters of the Prophet Muhammad and Abu Jahal humorously:

Try to guess—who is actually in the right: Muhammad or Abu Jahal? From the beginning, Muhammad never told a lie, while Abu Jahal not only enjoyed deceiving people but also had a habit of bossing others around.

Gus Baha also frequently uses light teasing (*gojlokan*) in his humor to make his religious interpretation relatable and resonant for audiences as well as capture their attention. In one instance, he directed *gojlokan* at an academic audience from UNISMA:

Islam should not be discussed with arrogance. This marks the difference between graduates of Islamic boarding schools and those from universities. While university students often emphasize that Islam is rahmatan lil 'alamin (a mercy to all creation), they ironically struggle to explain the concept in natural way).

Similarly with Gus Iqdam. He often playfully teases members of the congregation as part of his *pathos* strategy to reinforce his message. He once remarked,

The Prophet, if gathered among us, is like a pearl, a diamond. But Tato? He's like a rough stone, a sritil stone, a Gombong stone. As for me, I'm a quality stone—granite, I'm sorry, but Margono... he's a kidney stone!" (The congregation laughed).

All respondents in this study acknowledged the importance of humor in helping them relax and retain what was conveyed. One respondent, Fauzi (personal interview in Rembang, August 27, 2024), said, "Gus Baha often teased senior students during *Reboan* recitations. "But Gus Baha's jokes were always relevant to the topic being discussed, which made it easier for us to remember".

In regard to Gus Iqdam, a respondent Saiful (personal interview in Tuban, August 5, 2024), described that Gus Iqdam's style of preaching is 'popular,' as the discussions were closely related to everyday life. The humor that emerged in his lectures was also often connected to the audience.

Additionally, to engage the audience emotionally (*pathos*), Gus Iqdam effectively applies personal stories sharing, using metaphors to clarify his messages, offering words of encouragement, distributing gifts to audiences, and engaging in direct dialogue with the audience through question and answer (Q& A) sessions. Riyadh's comment on the



humorous style of Gus Iqdam's sermons, noting that he has a style of humor that differs from other *kiai*. Gus Iqdam's jokes often arise in response to questions asked directly by the congregation during his sermon (interview, 27 July 2024).

Within the *pesantren* metaculture, both metaphor and humor function not merely as stylistic devices but as cultural enactments of critiques and pedagogy. *Santri* can channel their anxieties, question authority, and critique social taboos through metaphor and humor. They express a moral sensibility rooted in *hikmah* (wisdom articulated with gentleness) and *akhlaq* (ethical conduct) as guiding principles of communication (Abdullah et al., 2020; Mir, 1991). In this sense, metaphor and humor constitute a metacultural form of pathos, an emotional rhetoric embedded in the ethical and pedagogical ethos of traditional Islamic scholarship, where persuasive discourse is inseparable from moral refinement and didactic intention (Meyer, 2000).

3. Differentiated Rhetorical Registers in Gus Baha's and Gus Iqdam's Sermons

Based on the explanation above, a comparative reading reveals that both Gus Baha and Gus Iqdam utilize intertextuality, *sanad*, metaphor, and humor, although with distinct emphases. Gus Baha uses intertextuality primarily as a logos-based appeal, constructing arguments through authoritative references to classical scholars, Qur'anic commentaries, and historical debates within Islamic scholarship. His rhetoric performs *pesantren* epistemology, where truth emerges through scholarly continuity rather than individual opinion. Gus Iqdam also mobilizes intertextual references, but these are selectively curated to support ethical exhortation and emotional resonance. His rhetorical strength lies in *pathos*, particularly through humor (*gojlokan*), metaphor, and participatory interaction, which foster intimacy and accessibility without abandoning textual legitimacy.

Sanad functions as a shared ethos resource for both figures. Gus Baha emphasizes scholarly lineage through intellectual mastery and Qur'anic expertise, while Gus Iqdam foregrounds biographical and relational *sanad*, educational background, family ties, and proximity to respected *kiai* and *habaib*.

Beyond individual differences, the findings reveal that both preachers operate within the same metacultural logics of *pesantren*. Intertextuality functions as a



metacultural mechanism that reproduces *pesantren* modes of knowledge transmission. *Sanad* operates not merely as credentialing but as a moral genealogy that authenticates authority through humility and ethical continuity. Humor and metaphor function as culturally sanctioned pedagogical tools that translate abstract theology into lived experience. These shared logics enable religious discourse to circulate effectively across traditional and digital publics while maintaining *pesantren* epistemic authority.

Discussion

The circulation of religious discourse is never neutral or purely linguistic, but it depends on the metacultural logic of the community as it always embedded in a cultural system that shapes its meaning, authority, and reception (Silverstein, 2014). Indeed, it is “a culture about culture,” which interacts in various ways with broader cultural systems (Urban, 2001) or a form of “cultural commentary” rooted in local traditions, beliefs, and practices that shapes what kinds of expressions will circulate easily, be accepted, and reproduced, because they resonate with the existing cultural-meta frameworks (Tomlinson, 2004). Therefore, metaculture plays a significant role in determining whether discourse circulates or fails within a certain community, depending on how well it aligns with the underlying cultural logics.

In the context of these study findings, the data confirm that religious sermons within moderate-traditionalist preachers are not merely about delivering religious texts, but must also engage with local cultural elements, collective experiences, and the wisdom of *pesantren*. In this regard, the religious rhetoric is not just about what is said (the message), but how it is said such as the form, the chain of authority, the intertextual references, and why it resonates.

Within this framework, Gus Baha and Gus Iqdam’s religious rhetorical styles embody the core metacultural values of the *pesantren* tradition: first, *sanad* (scholarly lineage or chain of transmission). *Sanad* is an important aspect of the Islamic scientific legacy in preserving science’s legitimacy. The legitimacy is grounded in genealogies of knowledge transmission, where authority derives from a continuous chain of teachers. In *pesantren*, *sanad* plays an important role in preserving the legitimacy of the Qur’anic and religious teachings authenticity brought by Nusantara scholars (*ulama*) until they are



passed on to the Prophet (Jamil, A., & Khaled, 2022). This reflects the *pesantren's* metacultural logic that equates authenticity with inherited scholarship rather than individual charisma (Azra, 2022; Zayadi & Hafizallah, 2023). However, the concept of *sanad* in Islamic scholarly tradition extends far beyond a technical verification of knowledge; it embodies an ethical-spiritual system rooted in *tawadhu'* (humility) and *ta'dzīm* (reverence) toward teachers and predecessors. The moral integrity of *sanad* reflects the conviction that knowledge is a divine trust (*amānah*) transmitted through ethical lineage, not merely intellectual chains. Al-Zarnūjī (2001) states in *Ta'līm al-Muta'allim* that true benefit accrues only when the learner approaches with reverence and service to the teacher. Similarly, Ibn Jamā'ah emphasizes in *Tadhkirah al-Sāmi' wa al-Mutakallim* that the rights of the teacher surpass even those of the parents, because the teacher is a cause of one's eternal life, thus underscoring the primacy of respect and obedience. Moreover, al-Ghazali asserts in *Ihya' Ulu al-Din* that knowledge is attained only through humility and lowering oneself before the teacher, as the earth humbles itself to receive rain and thereby brings forth fruit. In short, these classical scholars' voices reveal that *sanad* is not simply an intellectual lineage but also a moral genealogy (Al-Hakim, 2020). This reality aligns with (Tomlinson, 2004) statement that metacultural authority depends on the performance of sincerity and moral alignment with communal values.

Second, *Intertextuality* as epistemic depth. Both preachers' extensive use of Qur'anic exegesis, hadith, and *kitab kuning* exemplifies a logos appeal grounded in the *pesantren's* metacultural ideal of *tafaqquh fi al-din* (deep understanding of religion). This intertextual practice is not an individual intellectual act but a collective epistemology, reflecting the communal logic of *pesantren* reasoning. Third, humor and vernacular language. Their use of Javanese idioms, light teasing (*gojlokan*), and everyday metaphors demonstrates pathos that resonates with *santri* audiences. Humor here functions as a pedagogical and emotional register consistent with the *pesantren's* metacultural ethos of *hikmah* (wisdom through gentleness) and *akhlaq* (ethical demeanor).

D. Conclusion

Based on the analysis above, it can be inferred that the rhetoric of Gus Baha and Gus Iqdam structured around four interrelated elements: intertextuality, *sanad* tradition,



light teasing (*gojlokan*), and metaphors. These rhetorical elements functions not merely as a persuasive strategy but also as a metacultural mechanism through which *pesantren*-based knowledge, authority, and moral reasoning are continuously enacted and reproduced. In this sense, the preaching practices of Gus Baha and Gus Iqdam operate simultaneously within and through the metacultural logics of the *pesantren* tradition.

Through intertextuality, which is prominently, manifested in their religious sermons by an extensive use of intertextual references, including several Quranic exegeses, *hadith*, *kitab kuning*, and the works of classical NU scholars, they actually reproduce the cultural logic of *pesantren* knowledge transmission, where religious understanding emerges from layered commentaries, debates, and reinterpretations. Meanwhile, the *sanad* tradition not only plays an important role in gaining legitimacy while preaching, but also as a metacultural logic that defines religious authenticity through inherited scholarly genealogy. Likewise, *gojlokan* and the use of everyday metaphors operate as a pedagogical and emotional register in the *pesantren*'s metacultural tradition.

Further, theoretically, this study advances scholarship on *da'wah* communication, rhetoric, and cultural studies in three main ways. First, it reformulates Islamic preaching rhetoric as a practice of metaculture, outperforming the instrumental device of persuasion. Intertextuality, *sanad*, humor, and metaphor are not merely as rhetorical tools but metacultural mechanisms through which *pesantren* knowledge and authority are continuously reproduced. Second, the study promotes the concept of metacultural differentiation within the same Islamic tradition, demonstrating how multiple rhetorical styles can coexist without eroding epistemic coherence. This finding challenges binaries often found in Islamic *da'wah* studies that oppose “scholarly” versus “popular” Islam or “traditional” versus “digital” *da'wah*. Third, by grounding its analysis in metacultural logics, this study contributes to broader debate on the politics of religious discourse circulation, demonstrating how *pesantren*-based religious authority is adapted, sustained, and mobilized in the context of contemporary *da'wah*.

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