Religiosity and Consumerism: An Autopsy on Ideological Paradoxes in Islamic Religious Congregation

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Abstract.
The Majelis Taklim, rooted in Salafi principles, fundamentally interprets Islam based on the Al Quran and the sunnah of Prophet Muhammad. A significant number of Majelis Taklim members belong to the bourgeois class. This bourgeois inclination bears specific implications for the culture of consumerism and the ideology of capitalism, prompting a thought-provoking inquiry into the connection between the Salafi madhab and the culture of consumerism. To decipher this enigma, the concepts of Ideology and Consumerism become the theoretical framework in this research. This study adopts a phenomenological approach, utilizing statements from multiple subjects who are members of Majelis Taklim and also serve as the data sources. The data collection technique is an open interview to explore a more empirical narrative, and the data analysis technique used in this research is interpretation. The data analysis shows a paradox between the aspects of religiosity that are comprehended and the social practices in acts out. This paradox occurs because (1) high-branded products are a symbol of social class in their circle; (2) adopting a glamorous style does not violate Majelis Taklim doctrine; and (3) their entry into the community is driven by a desire to undergo hijrah and broaden social connections.

Keywords: salafi, religiosity, consumerism, capitalism, ideology

1. Introduction

From a narrowed point of view, religion is an instrument to perpetuate beliefs in manifestation, such as worship, laws, and rituals. In a spiritual context, religion is a mediation to touch the realm of metaphysics that cannot be explained with mathematical calculations, rational explanations, and academic references because it is faith. On the other hand, humans who carry religion also live in a social group or community; consequently, the touch of religiosity sometimes experiences paradoxes in social praxis. The paradox is the basis of how ideology (in this context, religion) is just a fantasy in Žižek’s perspective, and this is what happens in Islamic Religious Congregation.
The rise of the Islamic Religious Congregation (Majelis Taklim) illustrates the great interest of Indonesian muslims to make a hijrah (moving to better) that leads to a more religious life [1–4]. Majelis Taklim is one of the many non-formal Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, which is not so bound by fixed and definite rules, still takes into account effectiveness and efficiency, quickly brings results, and is full of benefits for building the strength or potential of the people, and has the aim of building knowledge, especially about Islamic teachings. Majelis Taklim is a forum for building spiritualism and personality that stabilizes all movements of muslim activities in Indonesia, so these Islamic activities must receive attention and support from the community [5–7].

In Surabaya, Majelis Taklim activities began to be organized in various elite areas and attended by muslim women (muslimah) from the upper middle class. One of Majelis Taklim, Majelis Taklim JN, adopts Salafi as the ideology. A Salafi refers to someone whose life is guided by the life of the Prophet, living a back-to-basic life and/or simplicity. Therefore, the way they dress, behave in social life, and religion follows as closely as possible to the time of the Prophet Muhammad and Al Quran, such as wearing shar’i (a closed garment with a loose robe that is black or dark in color to avoid excessive adornment (tabarujj) and it functions to evade attract and the attention of others) [8–10]. The ideology behind the outfit is humble and simple. The problem is that the women in the Majelis Taklim, whose ideology is Salafi, precisely smuggle consumerism practice, paradox to Islam as ideology.

The practice of consumerism cannot be understood as an elementary economic practice. It is no longer about how we buy things because of a system of needs but rather because of the power of symbols. There is no hyperbole; it is clear to revoke the postmodern claim that society is a symbolic realm. Society buys things because of the power of the symbol sneaking behind it. For example, if one buys expensive food at a classy café, we post it on social media. It is not the taste of the food or coffee that makes us proud to post it on social media but the power of the brand (symbol) of the food or coffee [11–13]. Thus, symbols have enormous consequences on our social relations. Symbols survive one’s fight in a social arena, and the symbol becomes a crucial capital in social life. With the power of symbols, people consume excessively and extravagantly to show their social class and power [14,15].

Theoretically, Žižek, in the book Mapping Ideology (1995), explained that ideology has three constructions [16]. First, ideology in itself (in itself). Ideology in this construction can be interpreted as the meaning of the unconscious result of doctrine and is destined to exist to convince us of the existence of sublime truth. Second, ideology is in itself to for-itself. Ideology in this construction shows the existence of the materialization of
ideology in practice through ideological institutions, such as religion, education, family, culture, politics, trade, and so on. Religion, for example, is not present through the mind but a mechanism such as lessons, rituals, society, and institutions that support it.

Third, the externalization of ideological ideas refers to the practical implementation of ideologies that consistently fail to totalize their presence. For example, democracy is sublime and grand in idea but always flawed and lacking in practice. These ruptures should not make the subject stop desiring the ideology; then fantasy comes to support it. Its presence makes the subject continue to desire even though the subject knows that it is impossible to realize in a real and comprehensive manner.

This is the problem of fantasy; it is not about what we know but what we do. Members of the Islamic Assembly who were subjects in the study knew that the Prophet Muhammad set an example of living a simple life in Islam. Still, they precisely affirm Chuck Palahniuk’s Fight Club famous quote, “We buy things we don’t need with money we don’t have to impress people we don’t like”. It is not just about culture, taste, or community; it goes deeply. This consumptive drive to buy high-branded stuff exposes how symbols strip off the ideology, the paradox between what they know and what they do. This is the root of the problem in this research: religious communities such as Majelis Taklim with Salafi ideology are also exposed to consumerism, even though this culture is contrary to Islamic ideology, which teaches humility and simplicity. In other words, ideology is not knowledge but practice. Ideology is not an army of symbols but a real practice that is manifested by our bodies in its implementation in society. This is the embryo in this research that muslim women in Majelis Taklim get pleasure in learning religion while, in practice, they do not learn at all related to the substance of Islam.

2. Method

The approach in this study is phenomenological. Phenomenology explains individuals’ experiences by interviewing a number of them. Phenomenological studies assume that each experiences a phenomenon with their consciousness. In other words, phenomenological studies aim to explore the subjects’ most profound consciousness regarding experiences in the phenomena. The data in this research are statements from interviews with several subjects who are members of Majelis Taklim. They are wives of conglomerates who live in Surabaya. To respect their privacy, their names are exposed covertly with nicknames. The data collection technique is an open interview to explore a more empirical narrative, and the data analysis technique used in this research is...
interpretation. It functions to theoretically dive into the issue and plunge it into a more profound analysis.

3. Result and Discussion

This part contains the result and the discussion. The result discusses the points of how Majelis Taklim exposes paradox, and the discussion is about the analysis of how it happens.

3.1. Symbol, Social Class, and Culture

The data analysis shows that Majelis Taklim has a pivotal issue triggering a paradox between the aspects of religiosity as understanding and the social practices in acts out. This paradox occurs because (1) high-branded products are a symbol of social class in their circle; (2) glamorous style does not violate Majelis Taklim doctrine; and (3) they enter the community because they want to do *hijrah* and expand social relations.

In society, people are held hostage to symbolic interaction. The nature of humans as relational beings is strongly tied to the awareness of symbols. The problem is that symbols have power, and the power of symbols refers to social class. Therefore, some symbols refer to the upper class and the lower class. In a wasteful culture, an item is not seen for its usefulness and needs but for the brand. That is why there are brands that symbolize the upper class and are synonymous with the lower class. In short, high-branded products are a symbol of social class in their circle, and they work in the circle of the members of Majelis Taklim, as this research discusses.

Religious understanding concerns metaphysical, heavenly, and divine matters, so the members of Majelis Taklim think that the branded goods they buy or consume do not violate any religious understanding or purpose. They ponder that no contradiction or paradox exists between a glamorous lifestyle and religion or Islam. They are not in debt; they can afford to buy and can be more at ease with their religion. Moreover, their friendship circle is a group of women or wives of conglomerates. Therefore, expensive goods and luxurious lifestyles are merely ways to maintain relationships (silaturahim) with friends in the sect environment. In short, the glamorous style does not violate the Majelis Taklim doctrine from the members’ perspective. The problem is they know how the Prophet Muhammad lived, how Islam teaches good things in life, and how Allah asks us to be with Him. Simplicity and Humility are two of the most elementary things they know about Islam, but they feel that what they are doing is not violating.
Majelis Taklim is one of the non-formal religious education institutions that aims to increase faith and piety for Muslims to Allah SWT. The learning process leads to the formation of noble morals for its congregation and the realization of mercy for the universe. In other words, Majelis Taklim is a forum to deepen religious knowledge, spiritual insights, and become better Muslims. That is the goal generally conveyed by people who join Majelis Taklim, and the JN Majelis Taklim studied in this research is no exception. To summarise, they join the community to do hijrah and expand social relations. Hijrah refers to the movement from a bad state to a better state.

Those results exponentially drive this research agenda on the spot. There is a strong paradox between what they know and what they do. They learn about Islam but practice something in contrast to Islam implied taught. This becomes the claws of this research to peel out the layers of discussion deeper and more deeply.

3.2. Religiosity and Consumerism: Fantasy Ideology

Historically, the congregation members were friends of the owners of the institutions, especially parents of Al-Hikmah and Al-Azhar students. The parents who send their children to these educational institutions are known to come from families with mostly upper-class socioeconomic status because of the high school fees. Therefore, the Majelis Taklim JN congregation members come from upper-middle-class women. According to senior members of the congregation and the core group, the increase in the number of members of the Majelis Taklim is due mainly to friendships among existing members. Mrs Herman, the wife of the former East Java Police Chief, is one such member. Likewise, Mrs Untung, the wife of the former East Java Police Chief, is also a member. As a majelis taklim JN congregation member, she also organizes the same recitation activities at her home in the Gayungsari area.

The JN activity schedule is every Monday, week 2 and week 4, and Thursday, week 2. Activities are carried out starting at 09.00 until completion. On average, the activity ends before the noon prayer, approximately 11:30 a.m. Based on the time of the study, most congregation members are not bound by time or working hours in certain offices or agencies. The women are wives of businessmen, housewives whose husbands’ jobs are well-established financially, businesswomen who are no longer directly operating their companies, and women who have retired. Feby, one of the resource persons, said that the congregation of this Majelis Taklim are well-established wives. She called it “Kita punya Side Job (We have a side job)”. Some other members are former officials, namely former officials from the East Java Provincial government office. The information
is also confirmed by Mrs Ani’s explanation that the congregation of the Majelis Taklim assembly comes from the upper middle class.

As explained in the Dynamics of Majelis Taklim JN section, the study activities are held on Mondays, the second and fourth weeks, and Thursdays, the second week. These activities begin at 09.00 and end at 11.30 before the Dhuhr prayer. If it is looked at the implementation schedule, people working in agencies, companies, or other places where working hours are bound are influential working times. Therefore, it can be ascertained that those who attend the study are people or congregations with free time to carry out the study. The Majelis Taklim seems to be a leisure class.

From the exploration of these backgrounds, it can be interpreted that their children’s schools are high-fee schools, their husbands are businessmen and officials in their respective institutions, and they have side jobs. This indicates that they come from an upper-middle economic class background. Feby also said that most of her friends in the Majelis Taklim neighborhood own private cars, such as Toyota Fortuner, Honda Jazz, and Suzuki Ertiga. The average price of these cars is 200 million to 700 million. Feby also mentioned that many of her friends use iPhones and that it is not something to be proud of, “Kendaraan Pribadi itu kan kewajiban, ya Bu, HP iPhone sekarang juga bukan hal yang mewah … (Private vehicles are needed, iPhones are now also not a luxury …)” In other words, if these classy items are considered ordinary, they have a considerable income, or at least they must be from the upper-middle class.

Apart from the items they own, the fashion style they wear also represents their social class. The thing that gets quite a spotlight from the members of this Majelis Taklim is the luxurious Syar’i fashion style and the bags they carry. In general, it can be said that all the members wear Syar’i muslim clothing, loose-fitting clothes with a wide hijab covering the chest and the back hanging down. Some of them wear the veil. This observation is confirmed by the following explanation from a member of the congregation, “Semua jemaah di sini mengenakan Syar’i … tidak ada yang tidak bersyar’i. Sebagian kecil jemaah mengenakan cadar… Tapi yang mengenakan cadar yang nggak banyak-banyak amat… yaah nggak ada 20% Bu … Dulu Bu… kita masih ingat, pada awalnya yaa… nggak semua bersyar’i Bu… hanya sebagian. Tapi akhirnya bersyar’i semua… yaaa… karena kita semakin ngerti dari mengikuti kajian ini bahwa syar’i menjadi kebutuhan kita Bu. (All the worshippers here are wearing Syar’i … no one is not wearing Syar’i. A small percentage of the congregation wears the veil… But those who wear the veil are not very many … well there are not 20% … In the past … we still remember, in the beginning, yes… not all wore Cadar Niqab … only some. But eventually we all became Syar’i …
yes... because we understand more and more from participating in this study that Syar’i is our need)."

Figure 1: Muslim Clothing, Cadar, and Branded Stuff Worn by Jemaah Majelis Taklim JN Surabaya.

Figure 1 is the muslim clothing worn during the study at the JN taklim assembly. Muslim clothing or muslim fashion looks luxurious and is indeed a branded item. The muslim clothes they wear are Shafira, By_Oky, and other brands. They consume various brands of muslim fashion; one is By_Oky, the product of one of the members, the principal administrator. By_Oky Butik produces muslim clothing, categorized as expensive; the bag’s price is around IDR 2 million (the monthly salary rate in Surabaya is around IDR 4 million. By_Oky Butik’s products can be seen on Instagram. Many members of the congregation are wearing these kinds of products.

Theoretically, consuming expensive stuff can increase competition in the social arena. In Bourdieu’s perspective, society is a group of individuals trapped as hostages in an arena. The arena here refers to the space of battle, and what is being contested is capital. One of the most competent capitals to supply individual power is symbolic capital. Anything with symbolic or representative value can be considered symbolic capital [11,17].

For example, when people go to an expensive restaurant, they are not buying the food but the high price. The high price is a booster for their psychological side to feel that they are upper class because they can afford to eat in an expensive place. From there, cultural phenomena such as selfies in luxurious places are happening.
In addition, expensive shoes, bags, and other items that are consumed tend to be bought not because of need but desire or desire. The desires of others influence our desires. This is the bridge between what we consume and ideological fantasies, paradoxically, when Islamic studies provide sufficient lectures and strengthening of faith in how Allah and His Messenger commanded us not to live luxuriously or spend lavishly (QS. Al Isra: 27), not to live full of pride or flexing (QS. Luqman: 18), to live (QS. Al Furqon: 67), and the Islamic lifestyle exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad SAW on matters of wealth.

Discussing the religious aspect, Feby sees that what the preachers convey is very easy to understand. They saw that what they were doing was not violence. However, some people said they knew their actions might not reflect what the Prophet Muhammad taught. This is as stated by Mrs Indri (not her real name), “Nabi Muhammad SAW sangat sabar, santun, dan hidupnya sederhana. Tapi membeli barang ini (tas mahal) kan kebutuhan ya, kita juga nggak enak jika teman-teman lain beli, saya nggak beli beli sendiri (Prophet Muhammad SAW was very patient, polite, and lived a simple life. But buying this item (an expensive bag) is a necessity. We also feel bad if other friends buy it, but I am the only one who doesn’t buy)”. This drags a sharp point they know, but they still do it.

We need to shift a while to spill some perspective before executing the root. The social phenomenon of becoming more religious cannot be separated from transnational Islamist movements from other countries, including Salafi, Wahabi, Jamaah Tabligh, Ikhwanul Muslimin, and others. The phenomenon of Hijrah in Indonesia continues to roll, especially for the younger generation. Hijrah is a new choice for a muslim’s life. Indonesian urban public culture has become more Islamic. The presence of Indonesian public culture in several big cities seems to portray an increasingly religious Indonesian society in public. Many majelis taklim groups carry out da’wah activities with their group members or organise Majelis Taklim that are open to the public [1,9,18–20]. It is also the logical consequence of how Social Media celebrities promote how to dress in fashion, and of course, exist [10,21,22]. Their findings related to the religiosity of urban communities, including in bookstores; Islamic books are increasingly popular, and many of them have become national bestsellers. Likewise, we often find people reading the Quran using the latest gadgets in any condition, even in public transport and if they have to stand. This condition shows the phenomenon of migration towards a more religious life.

The Hijrah movement in Indonesia has become a trend in society [1]. One form of Indonesian muslims’ efforts to make hijrah is participating in recitation activities.
Being active in recitation activities means changing the meaning of life and culture and becoming a person who seeks to distance himself from bad deeds to change towards a better life that is Islamic. Majelis Taklim, a non-formal Islamic education institution with various programs, carries many recitation activities. The program is prepared and implemented to develop and foster the community's religious life, which is currently a phenomenon towards a more religious life in the midst of the Indonesian muslim community. Therefore, Majelis Taklim is a series of activities that are believed to be one of the ways to bring hijrah, change, and transformation to improve themselves to be closer to the Creator. Likewise, in this study, by participating in the study at Majelis Taklim JN, what meaning is obtained by the congregation that will ultimately lead them to hijrah, whose essence is a transformation.

In a practical context, the value of a religion is morals. Morals are an implicit manifestation of a believer's obligation to worship. For example, a muslim is obliged to fast. Fasting means restraining hunger and drinking for a certain period. It is not about restraining hunger and drinking but rather restraining lust because muslims can become more patient by restraining lust. So, fasting increases the level of patience. This patience will show in the character of a muslim. In other words, a religious commandment must refer to increasing the level of morals and goodness of a person in the real world: society.

In social life, society is held hostage to an unavoidable capitalistic form of life. Capitalism tends to contradict religious teachings, especially Islam. In the Islamic context, Islam teaches trade, not capitalism. Islam's recognition and appreciation of individual ownership and the many materials in Fiqh Muamalat, such as Qard (loans), Wadi'ah (deposits), Ijarah (rent), Hibah (gifts), Hiwalah (transfers), Mudharabah (profit sharing), and others that are valid today. This has encouraged the development of the private sector as the pillar of the capitalist economy.

It differs from the socialist system that makes cooperatives the pillar of the economy. This Islamic way cannot work in line with modern capitalism. Capitalism puts consequences on the culture of consumerism. This consumerist ideology propagandizes people to consume things from desire, not need. This degrades the economic sector to the culture. The way ideology works must be in covert agenda. It sneaks inside all apparatuses; in this case, Majelis Taklim becomes the womb of how consumeristic ideology is imprinted. The Majelis Taklim does not teach this ideology, but it is the society carrying it as a way to survive in their circle arena. Therefore, it is not a big surprise to see that ideology, once again, is not about what we know but what we are doing.
Žižek, in his book, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (2008), mentioned that the most basic definition of ideology comes from Marx's *Capital*, namely sie wissen das nicht, aber sie tun es or they do not know it, but they are doing it. Marx saw that people are trapped in ideology because they do not know, but for Žižek, it is not about knowledge (knowing or ignorance) but about the act out or the practice; they know, but still, they are doing it. This condition is referred to as a symptom of ideological fantasy. Fantasy is not a condition of lack; instead, fantasy designs how a desire exists and desires an object that will give the subject pseudo-pleasure [16].

The pseudo-pleasure is called jouissance, enjoyment-in-sense (enjoyment), to borrow a Lacanian psychoanalytic term to capture the conjunction of meaning offered by ideology. Žižek gives an example of when someone uses money. He knows there is nothing magical about money, as its materiality is only a social expression, but people endeavor to acquire it. The meaninglessness of money explains that money is an illusion, but what makes us continue to desire it, even though we know about the illusion, is fantasy. In other words, what makes ideology seem real is the construction of fantasy that supports our reality. Illusion structure is practical and honest for social relations to mask, cover, or hide some kernel (antagonism in Laclau and Mouffe) that cannot be supported. The function of ideology is not to offer us an escape point from reality but to offer us social reality as an escape from a traumatic and honest core.

Simply speaking, experience or knowledge makes people understand that their actions are wrong. If the subject follows the known reality, he will lose desire, and the effect of losing desire is a moment of emptiness. That is, losing something considered a goal and a way of life. Therefore, for the subject to keep moving, desire must be supported by a kind of pseudo-reality. The figure creating the storyline for the desire to ignore the known is fantasy. In other words, what keeps us going with democracy, even though we know that government-run democracy is broken, is fantasy. What surprises us when we learn that we die is the work of fantasy that makes us forget that death is inevitable. The ideological fantasy of capitalism makes the members of Majelis Taklim continue to live a glamorous, wasteful, and worldly life. They still see that worldly affairs are as important as the simple life choices taught at Majelis Taklim. This is the paradox that is the answer to this research.

### 4. Conclusion

The Salafi-based Majelis Taklim fundamentally understands Islam based on the Al Quran and Prophet Muhammad's sunnah. Many members of the Majelis Taklim are bourgeois.
This bourgeois nature has particular relevance to the culture of consumerism and the ideology of capitalism, thus stimulating a provocative question about the knot between the Salafi madhab and the culture of consumerism. There is a paradox between the aspects of religiosity comprehended and the social practices in acts out. This paradox occurs because (1) high-branded products are a symbol of social class in their circle; (2) glamorous style does not violate Majelis Taklim doctrine; and (3) they enter the community because they want to do hijrah and expand social relations. Those results escalate how we think of religiosity, especially how it is immaculately scaffolded into an institution. Religiosity seems to explain its body where its existence is about transforming the faith, not policy, maturing behavior, not imposing with recitations, and making manner, not its paradox. Ideology, once again, is what we do, not what we know. If we declare our religiosity, we need to act as it is, not only as a storage of knowledge, because the real faith is to practice it. After all, we have been transformed by it.

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