



## The Reconfiguration of Digital Piety in Aceh: A Case Study of Teungku Inong on Instagram

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### ABSTRACT

#### Keywords:

*digital piety,*  
*mediated religious*  
*authority,*  
*pious agency,*  
*female religious*  
*leadership*

This article examines how *teungku inong*—female Islamic educators and leaders in Aceh—use Instagram to mediate religious authority and piety within a historically male-dominated religious field. Employing a qualitative interpretive approach, the study draws on visual discourse analysis of selected Instagram posts from three *teungku inong*, focusing on visual composition, bodily comportment, spatial arrangement, and accompanying captions. The analysis is grounded in scholarship on digital religion, pious agency, and mediatization, particularly concepts of embodied piety, mediated authority, and critical but compliant agency. The findings demonstrate that Instagram does not generate new religious authority but operates as a mediating infrastructure that extends, archives, and amplifies authority already established offline. Epistemic authority is visualised through academic conferences, *majelis taklim*, and public forums; genealogical and institutional legitimacy is reinforced through references to *sanad*, proximity to senior ulama, and participation in formal religious bodies; while social



engagement—such as environmental initiatives and women’s advocacy—functions as an extension of embodied moral discipline into the public sphere. Conceptually, the article argues that digital piety in this context is best understood as continuity and reconfiguration rather than rupture. Instagram translates embodied and relational practices into visible, repeatable, and networked forms, enabling *teungku inong* to consolidate religious authority across offline and online domains while remaining grounded in established religious norms.

## Introduction

Aceh, the only province in Indonesia to formally implement Islamic law, is characterised by a religious landscape shaped by strong institutional hierarchies and deeply entrenched gender norms (Feener, 2013; Salim, 2020). Formal arenas of religious authority—such as state-sanctioned councils, public preaching forums, and official religious institutions—remain overwhelmingly dominated by male ulama (Srimulyani, 2012). Within this configuration, *teungku inong*—female religious leaders affiliated with *dayah*—have historically occupied a paradoxical position: their contributions are substantively central to religious life, yet institutionally marginal in dominant representations of Islamic authority. Through teaching, ritual guidance, and spiritual care—often conducted in domestic, communal, and semi-public settings—*teungku inong* have long played a crucial role in the transmission of Islamic knowledge and ethical formation in Acehnese society (Kloos, 2017; Srimulyani, 2016). However, these forms of authority have typically remained less visible and weakly recognised, constrained by patriarchal norms and hierarchical regimes of religious legitimacy (Cardozo et al., 2022).

Since the post-conflict period following 2005, broader social transformations and the expansion of digital media have reshaped the conditions under which religious practices become visible and publicly legible. Rather than displacing established religious traditions, digital platforms—particularly Instagram—have

provided new infrastructures through which existing practices can be mediated and circulated. Activities such as teaching, mentoring students, leading *majelis taklim*, and engaging in community service are increasingly documented and shared as visual artefacts. Through images that foreground bodily comportment, spatial arrangements, and affective interaction, these practices are not simply recorded but re-presented in ways that enable wider publics to witness, interpret, and engage with forms of piety that were previously bounded by locality and limited audiences (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021b; Hirschkind, 2006).

Despite the growing prominence of Muslim women in digital religious spaces, the visual mediation of women's religious authority in Aceh remains insufficiently examined. Existing scholarship on Islamic authority in Southeast Asia continues to privilege formal institutions and male leadership (Feener, 2013; Salim, 2020), while studies of Muslim women's piety have largely focused on ethical self-cultivation within domestic or private spheres (Mahmood, 2005). Even analyses that address Muslim women's moral and social activism (Rinaldo, 2013) have paid limited attention to how embodied forms of piety are visually mediated, circulated, and authorised through digital platforms. As a result, the mechanisms by which female religious authority is extended, stabilised, and publicly recognised in digital contexts remain under-theorised.

This article addresses this gap by examining how *teungku inong* in Aceh use Instagram to mediate religious practices. It investigates how embodied activities—such as teaching, ritual participation, institutional involvement, and social responsibility—are translated into visual forms that are accessible, repeatable, and publicly recognisable. The central research question guiding this study is therefore: How do *teungku inong* in Aceh mediate and visualise embodied piety through Instagram in ways that extend established forms of religious authority?

Conceptually, the study draws on scholarship on pious agency (Mahmood, 2005), critical but compliant agency (Rinaldo, 2013), and digital religion—particularly the notions of mediated piety and hypermediated religious spaces (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021a; Evolvi, 2017). Within this framework, Instagram is understood not merely as a tool for *da'wa* but as a mediating infrastructure through which religious authority is extended, archived, and amplified. Visual symbolism, affective proximity, and embodied ethical conduct operate together

to make women's religious leadership visible while remaining anchored in established norms of *adab*, modesty, and institutional legitimacy.

Empirically, the article is based on a qualitative visual analysis of Instagram posts produced by three *teungku inong*. By examining visual composition, bodily posture, spatial relations, and accompanying captions, the analysis demonstrates how pedagogical practices, genealogical affiliations, and forms of social engagement are digitally mediated. These mediated practices do not constitute a rupture with *dayah* traditions; rather, they rescale and reconfigure existing modes of authority within a networked public sphere.

By foregrounding the mediated continuity of religious authority, this study contributes to broader debates on Islam, gender, and digital media. It shows how female religious leaders negotiate visibility and legitimacy within patriarchal religious fields by extending embodied piety into digital space without abandoning normative frameworks. In doing so, the article offers insight into how Muslim women's religious authority is consolidated and circulated in contemporary mediatized societies—both in Aceh and beyond.

## Method

This study employs an interpretive qualitative design with visual discourse analysis to examine how religious practices are mediated through Instagram. It is grounded in the framework of *mediated piety* (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021a), which conceptualises piety not merely as individual belief but as religious practice shaped, organised, and publicly rendered recognisable through digital mediation. From this perspective, social media function as infrastructures that structure how religious practices are displayed, circulated, and stabilised as legitimate forms of religious authority. Instagram is conceptualised as a visual, relational, and archival mediating space. Platform features—such as visual legibility, continuity of posting, and ease of circulation and archiving—shape how piety is produced and received. Accordingly, the analysis focuses not only on what religious practices are shown, but also on how they are visually configured to be recognised as pious and authoritative by digital publics.

Data were collected through systematic observation and manual archiving of posts from three Instagram accounts—@ummizikriati, @ummihanisa637, and @ummirahimun—selected through purposive sampling. Case selection

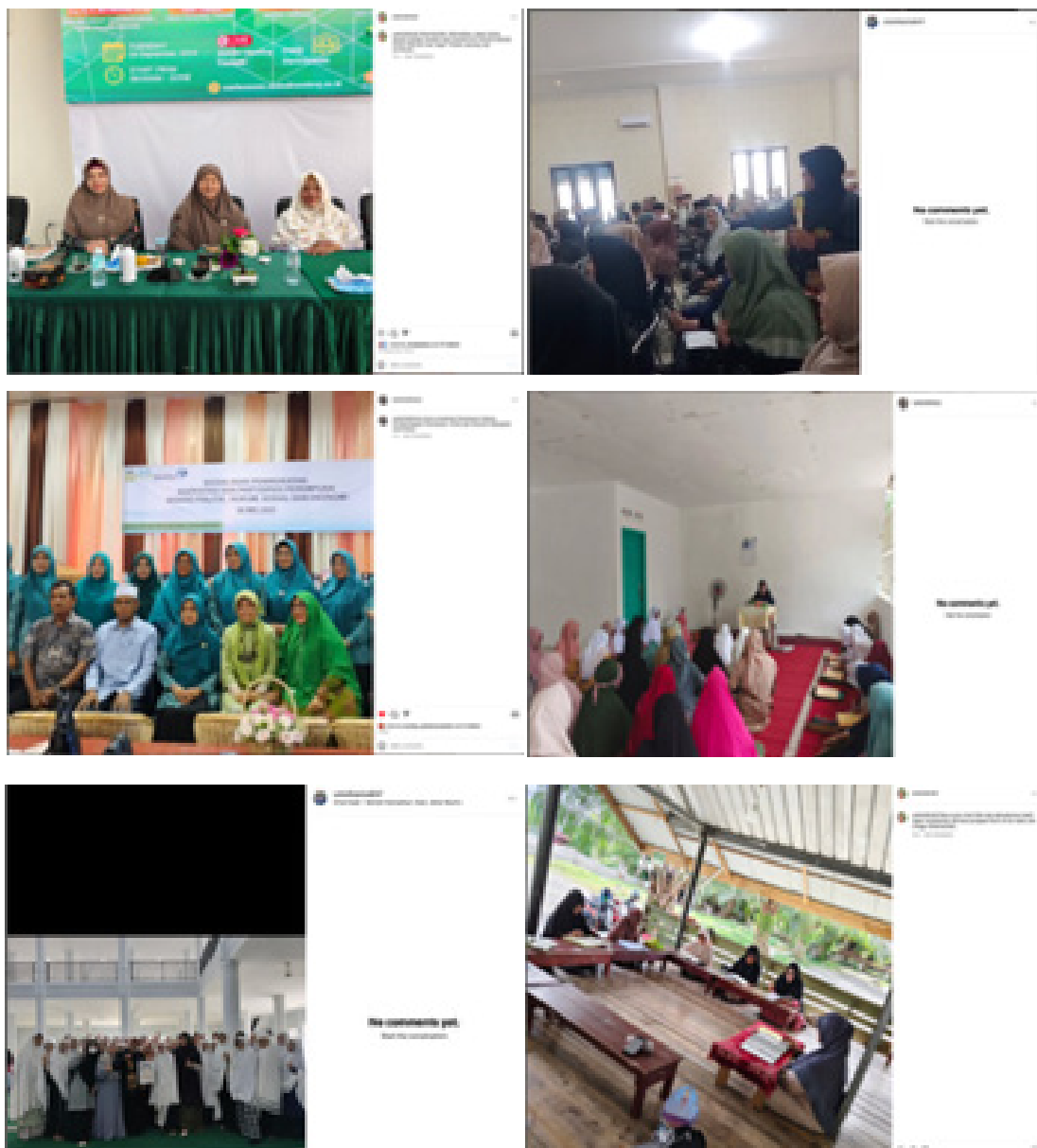
was guided by four criteria: affiliation with recognised *dayah* networks in Aceh; active involvement in religious education and community-based religious practices offline; sustained use of Instagram to document religious activities; and a predominance of visual content depicting embodied religious practices rather than personal, commercial, or purely textual preaching posts. These accounts are treated as analytically rich cases rather than statistically representative samples.

The data corpus comprises 280 Instagram posts published between July 2024 and July 2025, capturing a full annual cycle of religious activity, including routine pedagogical practices, ritual events, institutional participation, and socially oriented initiatives framed as religious ethics. Posts were first grouped according to these four criteria. From each category, posts that most clearly exemplified dominant visual patterns were selected for in-depth analysis, based on representativeness of embodied practice, visual composition, and relational orientation rather than frequency or popularity. Posts that were primarily personal, promotional, or unrelated to religious practice were excluded to maintain analytical focus.

Visual analysis integrates Gillian Rose's (2016) critical visual methodology with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) *Visual Grammar*. Each post was examined in relation to its context of production and circulation, followed by close analysis of visual elements—such as bodily posture, gesture, gaze, attire, framing, visual distance, and spatial configuration—as semiotic resources through which piety and religious authority are constructed. Analytical categories were developed inductively from recurring visual patterns and interpreted through the lens of mediated piety to explain how religious practices are translated into repeatable, recognisable, and stabilised forms of authority in digital space.

Throughout the research process, critical reflexivity was maintained regarding positionality and interpretive bias. All analyses were consistently situated within the socio-religious context of Aceh to ensure sensitivity to local norms, institutional structures, and power relations shaping women's religious practices.

## 1. Epistemic Authority and Communal Pedagogy



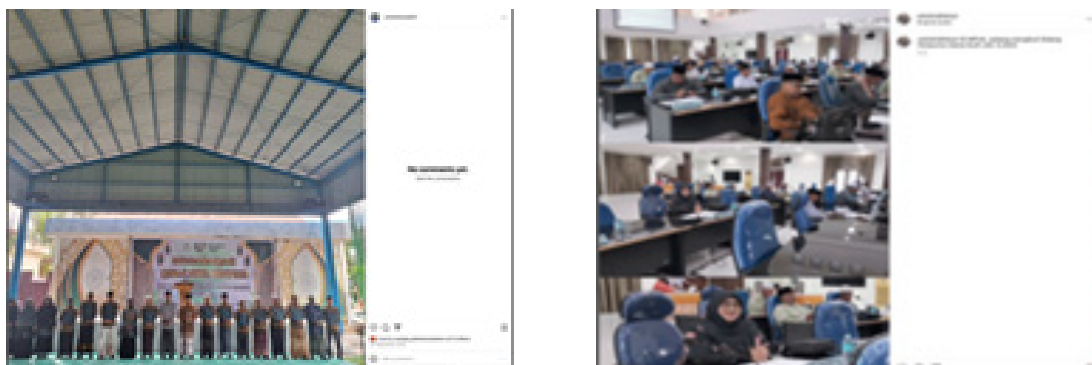
Source: Instagram posts @ummizikriati, 25 September 2024; @ummihanisa637, 29 April 2025; @ummirahimun, 8 May 2025

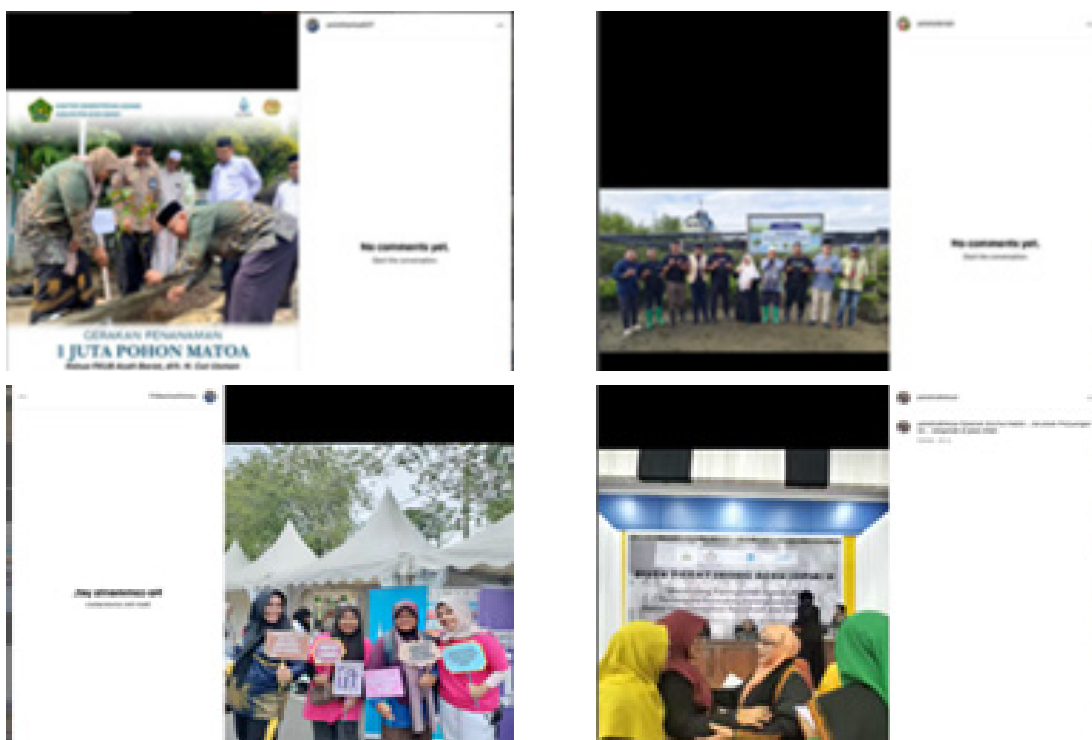
## 2. Lineage, Institutions, and Religious Legitimacy



Source: Instagram posts @ummizikriati, 24 June 2024; @ummihanisa637, 11 April 2025; @ummirahimun, 18 February 2025.

## 3. Social Engagement and Public Expressions of Piety





Source: Instagram posts @ummihanisa637, 22 April 2025;  
@ummizikriati, 22 February 2025; @ummihanisa637, 1 December 2024;  
@ummirahimun, 3 November 2024.

## Result and Discussion

### *Teungku Inong* and Religious Education in Aceh

Before analysing visual expressions of digital piety, this section situates the three *teungku inong* within Aceh's religious field by outlining the forms of authority they already exercise offline. This contextual grounding is essential, as the religious meanings articulated through Instagram are inseparable from the pedagogical, institutional, and social positions they have previously established.

Instagram posts constitute the primary empirical focus of this study, not because of digital visibility alone, but because of the religious authority already consolidated offline. All three are female ulama with clear *dayah* affiliations, extended trajectories of religious education, and recognised pedagogical and institutional roles within Aceh's Islamic educational landscape (Maulina et al., 2025). Their digital practices, therefore, function not as decontextualised expressions of personal piety but as visual mediations of authority grounded in lived religious practice.

This finding aligns with scholarship on digital religion, showing that social media more often articulates and circulates existing religious authority than generates new authority autonomously (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021a; Hutchings, 2017).

Institutionally, the three *teungku inong* serve as active *dayah* leaders—positions that, in Aceh, constitute primary markers of religious legitimacy. Hanisah Abdullah (Umami Hanisah) leads Dayah Diniyyah Darussalam in West Aceh; Rahimun (Umami Rahimun) leads Dayah Ar-Rahmah in Aceh Besar; and Zikriati (Umami Zikriati) leads Dayah Darul Muta'allimin in Meulaboh. Beyond functioning as educational institutions, *dayah* operate as sites for producing scholarly hierarchies, *sanad* (**chains of transmission**), and **religious authority**. *Dayah* leadership thus implies recognised epistemic competence and moral eligibility to guide religious communities (Azra, 2004; Dhofier, 1980; Feener et al., 2016), providing a structural foundation for authority exercised both offline and online.

This authority is enacted primarily through sustained pedagogical practice. All three teach classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*), lead Islamic study circles (*majelis taklim*), primarily attended by rural women, and mentor students and adult congregants through regular text-based study sessions (*beut-seumeubeut*). Yet their pedagogical authority takes distinct forms. Umami Hanisah is widely recognised for teaching classical texts and mentoring female students in a *dayah* deliberately designed as a space of education and post-conflict recovery. Umami Rahimun has built her authority through long-term, community-based teaching, beginning with a home study circle that gradually developed into a *dayah* and became a local religious reference point. Umami Zikriati combines *turāth* instruction with a more open and publicly oriented pedagogical approach, reflecting her academic background and organisational networks. Across these cases, pedagogical authority emerges as embodied and relational, grounded in physical presence, continuity of instruction, and communal recognition rather than symbolic claims alone (Maulina et al., 2025).

Their religious legitimacy is further reinforced through varying degrees of institutional involvement. Umami Hanisah holds a formal position as the only woman in the Ulama Consultative Council (*Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama*–MPU) of West Aceh, directly participating in regional religious decision-making. Umami Zikriati is active in ulama forums and Islamic organisations, extending her authority into broader public leadership domains. Umami Rahimun, while representing a

small minority of women within provincial-level religious structures, maintains strong offline visibility through *dayah* leadership and extensive community-teaching networks in Aceh Besar. These trajectories illustrate that *teungku inong* authority is distributed across formal recognition and community-based legitimacy, consistent with analyses of the pluralisation of contemporary Islamic authority (Bano & Kalmbach, 2012; Eickelman, D. F., & Anderson, 2003).

Against this backdrop, the three figures represent a spectrum of female religious authority in Aceh, firmly established offline and mediated through Instagram in different ways. Social media in this context does not create authority, but mediates, extends, and reorganises authority rooted in *dayah* affiliation, scholarly lineage, pedagogical practice, and institutional recognition. Without attention to these offline positions, their visual practices risk being read merely as expressions of personal piety.

Building on this foundation, the following analysis examines how the digital piety of *Teungku Inong* operates as a pedagogical and authoritative practice within a visual medium. Rather than asking whether Instagram produces new forms of piety, the analysis focuses on how established forms—self-discipline, pedagogical ethics, and affective relations with congregants—are translated and renegotiated through images, brief narratives, and performances of everyday religious life. Digital piety is thus understood as a continuation of women's religious leadership rooted in the *dayah* tradition, now operating within Aceh's contemporary social media landscape.

### Epistemic Authority and Communal Intellectual Production

Epistemic authority constitutes a central dimension of digital piety as articulated by *Teungku Inong* on Instagram, closely tied to processes of communal knowledge production. Through posts featuring academic conferences, *majelis taklim*, and public forums, the three *teungku inong* consistently position themselves as legitimate teachers and transmitters of Islamic knowledge, as well as facilitators of collective learning processes. What is foregrounded in these visual materials is not personal charisma or individual spiritual experience, but an authority grounded in pedagogical practice, interpretive engagement, and the circulation of religious knowledge within recognisable pedagogical settings.

**In this context, Instagram functions as a medium that expands the visibility and reach of pedagogical labour without detaching it from the communal foundations upon which authority is established.**

As informal yet structured sites of learning, *majelis taklim* occupy a significant position in women's religious education and community formation in Indonesia, particularly in Aceh. These gatherings are inclusive, bringing together women from diverse social and economic backgrounds in sustained processes of religious learning (Latief & Madjid, 2022). In the Instagram posts analysed, *majelis taklim* do not merely serve as visual backdrops but function as performative arenas in which communal intellectual labour is publicly staged. Through the documentation of teaching sessions and intellectual engagement, *Teungku Inong* transforms everyday pedagogical practices into visible and recognisable claims of epistemic legitimacy. The repeated visibility of these spaces signals continuity, competence, and accountability—key elements in the construction of epistemic authority within Islamic traditions. In this context, communal intellectual production refers not merely to shared presence or dialogue, but to the collective legitimation of religious meanings, the normalisation of epistemic authority, and the reproduction of ethical–pedagogical norms through repeated, publicly visible practices of learning.

Umami Zikriati's posts illustrate how epistemic authority is mediated through the intersection of communal pedagogy and formal scholarly participation. In a post dated 18 August 2024, she appears seated at the same level as her congregation in an open learning circle, wearing simple *syar'i* attire and engaging in discussion-based teaching. This arrangement minimises hierarchical distance and frames knowledge transmission as interactive and relational. Authority is enacted through proximity, dialogue, and the orchestration of collective learning rather than through overt markers of rank. This pedagogical authority extends into formal scholarly arenas through her participation in academic conferences—most clearly visible in a post dated 25 September 2024, where she appears as a panel speaker, framed by an official event banner. Instagram mediates continuity between these contexts, positioning her as a credible interpreter of Islamic knowledge whose authority moves fluidly between dayah-based pedagogy and public academic discourse.

Umami Hanisah's epistemic authority is articulated through visible participation in communal and semi-institutional forums. In mosque-based *majelis taklim* and

public academic events, she is frequently positioned centrally—either standing among participants while speaking or framed against a uniformly dressed congregation. In a public academic forum on 29 April 2025, she stands among participants holding a microphone and confidently articulating her views. Her modest attire signals moral discipline, while her speaking gesture and directed gaze emphasise active engagement in public discourse. The medium shot situates her within the broader community while still marking her as the primary subject. In another post dated 29 March 2025, she is shown standing at the centre of a uniformed congregation inside a mosque, foregrounding solidarity, unity, and collective presence as sources of legitimacy. As Rose (2016) suggests, such compositional choices transform the image into a curated site of meaning-making, projecting an imagined religious community to both physical and digital audiences. Across these posts, authority is enacted not only through teaching but through sustained participation in public debate and institutional dialogue, reinforcing epistemic leadership as communicative and relational.

Umami Rahimun's posts foreground community-based pedagogy as a key site of epistemic transmission. In a post dated 14 July 2024, documenting her leadership of a village-based women's *majelis taklim*, she is positioned at the front of an orderly, seated congregation, with the camera placed behind the audience and oriented toward the teaching space. This compositional choice situates viewers within the learning environment itself, producing what Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) describe as a participatory gaze. Authority is enacted through spatial organisation, calm bodily comportment, and the orchestration of collective attentiveness, framing knowledge as relational and immersive. Her epistemic authority is further extended through broader intellectual engagement in a post dated 8 May 2025, in which she appears seated prominently in the front row of a women's intellectual forum addressing political, legal, social, and economic issues. Her central placement and visual alignment with other women reinforce continuity between religious pedagogy and social advocacy, presenting knowledge as ethically grounded and socially responsive.

Importantly, this digital articulation does not detach religious authority from its offline foundations. Across the three cases, authority is shaped by trajectories of *dayah*-based education, sustained pedagogical labour, and the development of embodied ethical discipline over time. These dispositions—formed through

long-term teaching, ritual practice, and community engagement—constitute the conditions under which authority is recognised offline. Instagram extends these established practices, recontextualising pedagogical spaces such as *majelis taklim*, academic forums, and intellectual engagements as semi-public performances. Rather than replacing traditional authority, digital piety reshapes its scale, visibility, and circulation, enabling locally grounded forms of epistemic leadership to reach wider and more diverse publics.

Taken together, Ummi Zikriati, Ummi Hanisah, and Ummi Rahimun demonstrate a shared configuration of epistemic authority within the same communal–pedagogical arena. Differences among them lie not in the arenas they occupy, but in how authority is enacted through the organisation of participation, interpretive guidance, and the visibility of pedagogical labour. These variations reflect internal differentiation within a common structure of communal authority rather than distinct models of religious leadership. This shared configuration underpins a model of digital piety grounded in epistemic authority, communal pedagogy, and embodied moral practice. Variations in visual style and forum type function as adaptive strategies for communicating a shared pedagogical ethos across contexts. Instagram does not replace pedagogical authority; rather, it renders routines of teaching and guidance visible and repeatable, enabling *teungku inong* to **emerge as credible yet relational public intellectuals within the contemporary digital landscape of Aceh.**

### **Lineage, Institutions, and Religious Legitimacy**

While pedagogical practices establish the moral and epistemic authority of *teungku inong*, the legitimacy of this authority is stabilised through genealogical and institutional references. In this context, chains of knowledge transmission (*sanad*), proximity to senior ulama, and involvement in formal institutions such as MPU do not operate as independent forms of piety. Rather, they function as cross-practice mechanisms of legitimation that authorise and reinforce authority already exercised through teaching, leadership in religious gatherings, and social relations. Genealogy thus operates as a central axis of legitimacy, cutting across pedagogical, affective, and epistemic dimensions while anchoring them within Aceh's hierarchical religious structure (Badaruddin & Mahyuddin, 2021; Tamjidnor et al., 2025; Yusuf et al., 2021).

Within the landscape of female religious leadership in Aceh, genealogical connections to senior ulama remain among the most decisive sources of legitimacy (Pavlovitch, 2018). The three *teungku inong*—Ummi Zikriati, Ummi Hanisah, and Ummi Rahimun—consistently foreground such relationships through Instagram posts, making them integral to their visual strategies of authority. In the *dayah* tradition, religious legitimacy is not determined solely by mastery of Islamic knowledge, but by recognised attachment to authoritative *sanad* and **personal proximity to figures positioned** at the apex of religious authority. Once mediated visually, these relationships are no longer confined to private spaces or limited forums, but become visible, interpretable, and subject to validation by much wider publics.

Ummi Zikriati's post from 24 June 2024, for example, depicts her performing the *salim* gesture (**hand-kissing**) toward a senior ulama at close range. **This bodily gesture is imbued with meanings of *adab* (proper conduct) and deference, while simultaneously marking her position within a genealogically legitimate teacher–student relationship.** Within Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework of visual grammar, the scene constitutes a narrative actional process indexing a ritualised act of respect—an embodied practice deeply embedded in the santri habitus of Aceh. Following Mahmood (2005), piety here is not merely an internal belief but a disposition cultivated through bodily discipline. When mediated through Instagram, this gesture functions as a public declaration that Ummi Zikriati's pedagogical authority is rooted in a recognised *sanad* and **legitimate scholarly lineage.**

Ummi Hanisah presents a different, yet functionally comparable, genealogical strategy. In her post from 11 April 2025, she is shown seated close to an elderly ulama in a domestic setting. Her subordinated bodily positioning—despite visual salience created through contrasting clothing colours—reaffirms *dayah* etiquette and respect for senior authority. Presence within the ulama's private space signals personal closeness and privileged access to religious networks. In Bourdieusian terms (1990), this relationship can be read as the accumulation of symbolic capital **that strengthens** Ummi Hanisah's claim to legitimacy within the chain of reproduction of religious authority.

By contrast, Ummi Rahimun adopts a more low-profile visual strategy. In her post from 18 February 2025, she stands at the back of a home gathering with

a senior ulama, wearing a long black hijab and avoiding direct engagement with the camera. This composition situates her within a conceptual relational process, positioning her within the continuity of authority without foregrounding personal self-presentation. Such a visual choice may be interpreted as a form of humble piety, which reinforces adherence to *adab* **and recognition of religious hierarchy**.

Taken together, these genealogical representations demonstrate that symbolic piety is not merely the preservation of tradition, but a performative arena in which female ulama combine the symbolic capital of *dayah* heritage with digital technologies. Instagram operates as a visual archive where moments of reverence, intimacy, and interaction with senior ulama are widely circulated. As Campbell and Tsuria (2021b) note, within the context of mediated piety, religious authority is no longer constructed solely through physical encounters, but also through the circulation of images that connect local experiences to broader audiences. The differing visual strategies—ritual gesture in Ummi Zikriati's case, personal closeness in Ummi Hanisah's, and low-profile presence in Ummi Rahimun's—demonstrate that genealogical legitimacy is highly contextual, shaped by religious habitus, personal identity, and symbolic calculation.

Beyond personal genealogy, the legitimacy of *teungku inong* is **further reinforced through formal institutional affiliation, particularly participation in the MPU**. Both Ummi Hanisah and Ummi Rahimun strategically display their involvement in this forum through Instagram posts, constructing visual narratives of female inclusion within a religious institution historically dominated by men. In Ummi Hanisah's post from 28 September 2024, institutional legitimacy is mediated through a conceptual analytical process. The symmetrical composition of MPU members on stage signifies organisational structure and collective authority, with Ummi Hanisah positioned within this unified whole. Her *syar'i* attire, **composed bodily posture, and indirect gaze frame her as a subject aligned with institutional norms. Visual symmetry and compositional balance convey stability, order, and the legitimacy of shared authority**.

By contrast, Ummi Rahimun's post from 21 May 2025 mediates institutional legitimacy through a narrative actional process. She is depicted seated among fellow MPU members, documents placed before her, actively engaged in deliberation.

The closer camera framing reduces the social distance between the subject and the viewer, producing a sense of presence and sincerity. Her foregrounded position and clear facial expression emphasise her role as an active contributor to decision-making, representing a form of intellectual–procedural piety grounded in competence and participation.

Overall, *sanad*, proximity to senior ulama, and institutional affiliation operate as interconnected mechanisms of legitimation that authorise the pedagogical and relational authority of *Teungku Inong* as a female ulama in Aceh. Rather than displacing affective or epistemic authority, genealogical positioning functions to validate and stabilise these forms of authority within Aceh's hierarchical religious field. As Suwendi et al. explained, Islamic educational institutions play a central role in safeguarding the integrity and continuity of Islamic teachings (Suwendi et al., 2024); within this institutional context, *teungku inong* are positioned as key agents in preserving and transmitting knowledge from senior ulama to successive generations. Through digital mediation, these legitimating mechanisms become more visible, archived, and widely circulated, enabling *teungku inong* to consolidate their authority as legitimate female religious leaders—firmly anchored in *dayah* tradition while simultaneously operating within the affordances of contemporary media environments.

### **Social Engagement and Public Expressions of Piety**

Beyond pedagogical and genealogical domains, the analysis identifies forms of piety oriented toward social engagement and public ethics. Practices such as environmental initiatives, women's advocacy, and participation in civic forums do not mark a departure from religious piety; rather, they extend embodied moral discipline into the public sphere, translating commitments cultivated through pedagogical and genealogical practices into visible responsibility toward society and the environment (Kloos, 2016, 2017). Through visual documentation of social involvement, *Teungku Inong* frames ethical responsibility, environmental care, and gender advocacy as integral dimensions of religious life. In these representations, piety is no longer confined to ritual performance or instructional settings, but is articulated through acts of stewardship, solidarity, and public moral engagement. Instagram thus becomes a site where religious devotion is translated into social

action and rendered visible as part of an expanded moral repertoire.

This dynamic is particularly evident in posts related to environmental engagement. Umami Hanisah's post from 22 April 2025 frames ecological care not as a peripheral activity, but as a direct extension of religious duty. The image captures her body in motion, bending toward the soil in a gesture that visually fuses care for the earth with moral responsibility. Her modest *syar'i* attire maintains continuity with her public religious identity, while her positioning alongside other community figures signals that environmental stewardship is understood as a shared ethical obligation. Here, piety is enacted through tactile engagement with nature, transforming an ecological act into a visible moral performance.

Umami Zikriati's post from 22 February 2025 articulates a similar ethical orientation through a different visual strategy. Rather than depicting physical interaction with the environment, the image employs spatial symbolism: a front-facing group formation in front of a mangrove conservation site functions as a visual pledge of collective commitment. Umami Zikriati's placement near the center subtly signals authority, yet the uniform alignment of bodies emphasizes solidarity over individual protagonism. The direct gaze toward the viewer invites digital audiences to recognize environmental preservation as part of a shared moral horizon. Taken together, these posts show that social-ecological piety can be articulated either through embodied action or symbolic alignment, both of which integrate environmental ethics into religious leadership.

Public expressions of piety are likewise evident in visual documentation of participation in women's networks and social advocacy forums. In these contexts, the body functions as an active medium of religious and social engagement, conveying piety not through private devotion but through visible alignment with collective causes and shared struggles. Umami Hanisah's post from 1 December 2024, for instance, situates her within a relaxed, community-based advocacy event alongside other women activists. Her casual attire—a blue T-shirt paired with loose trousers and her signature scarf—signals an adaptive form of piety that aligns religious identity with grassroots engagement. Informal posture and ease of interaction communicate approachability, reinforcing an ethic of solidarity grounded in everyday social relations. By contrast, Umami Hanisah's post from 29 October 2024 positions her within a more formal women's congress, where she appears in traditional ethnic dress and faces the camera directly. Compositional

centrality, frontal gaze, and proximity to peers visually affirm her embeddedness in culturally grounded leadership networks. Here, piety is articulated through representational authority and collective visibility, rather than informality.

Ummi Rahimun's posts further extend this pattern of socially engaged piety. In her post from 12 October 2024, she appears in traditional Acehese black attire with gold embroidery during a formal women's congress. The vivid contrast between garments and tactile gestures—handshakes and embraces—serves as a visual marker of relational intimacy and symbolic affirmation. Her central placement within the frame underscores her dual position as both participant and authority figure in gender-focused religious discourse. In a subsequent post from 3 November 2024, Ummi Rahimun is shown participating in a rights-based advocacy forum addressing human trafficking. The frontal, horizontal arrangement of bodies integrates her seamlessly among activists and officials, visually dissolving hierarchical distinctions between ulama and civic actors. This compositional choice foregrounds shared moral responsibility over institutional rank.

When circulated on Instagram, these images acquire an additional layer of mediated piety. They function not merely as visual records of participation, but as performative acts that actively reconfigure the scope of female religious authority. Through visual mediation, embodied discipline—expressed in bodily comportment, attire, gesture, and spatial positioning—is extended into digital space, allowing piety to operate simultaneously in physical and virtual realms. The visual grammar embedded in these images (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006)—including gaze direction, compositional centrality, proxemics, and clothing symbolism—serves as a semiotic resource through which moral credibility and communal solidarity are communicated.

By positioning themselves within collective frames of environmental action, gender advocacy, and civic engagement, *teungku inong* articulate a form of piety that is situationally responsive, publicly visible, and ethically expansive. This mode of religious expression reinforces their legitimacy as female religious leaders whose moral authority traverses the boundaries of the sacred and the civic. In doing so, their practices resonate with Rinaldo's (2013) argument that Muslim women's agency often operates through negotiated participation in public religious life, where piety is enacted not only through devotion, but through sustained engagement with social and political concerns.

### **Digital Mediation and the Reconfiguration of Religious Practice**

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Instagram functions as a mediating infrastructure through which the religious practices of *teungku inong* are reorganised and made publicly legible. Situated within broader scholarship on digital religion, this analysis recognises that the expansion of digital media has transformed the conditions under which female *ulama* engage religious publics by providing new platforms for visibility, interaction, and influence, without fundamentally altering the bases of religious authority (Subchi et al., 2022). Instagram, therefore, does not introduce a new religious logic; rather, it reconfigures how established forms of authority are extended, archived, and amplified across publics.

From the perspective of mediatization theory, religion in a deeply mediatized society is not displaced by digital media, but increasingly articulated through media logics that reorganise scale, temporality, and audience reach (Marei, 2024). The Instagram practices analysed in this study illustrate how digital piety remains firmly anchored in dayah-based traditions while being re-presented in visually accessible, repeatable, and publicly legible formats. Pedagogical authority, genealogical legitimacy, and social engagement are not transformed into something qualitatively different; rather, they are translated into mediated forms that extend their reach without undermining their normative foundations. In this sense, social media serves as a key arena through which female *ulama* establish and sustain their presence in increasingly competitive religious fields while continuing to draw legitimacy from established traditions (Subchi et al., 2022).

This continuity is particularly evident in how Instagram functions as an extension of embodied religious practice. Teaching sessions, council meetings, ritual encounters, and community initiatives are first enacted offline through disciplined bodily comportment and ethical conduct, and only subsequently mediated digitally. Instagram extends these practices beyond their immediate spatial and temporal limits, allowing them to be witnessed by audiences who are not physically present. Digital piety, in this sense, does not replace embodied devotion but depends on it as its primary source of legitimacy. This dynamic aligns with Mahmood's (Mahmood, 2005) understanding of piety as a modality of embodied action, in which ethical subjectivity is cultivated through repeated bodily practices, even as these practices become digitally mediated. Analytically, media thus function not as a substitute for religious practice, but as a mechanism that

enables embodied authority to circulate beyond its original settings. This reading can be situated alongside discussions of how female religious leaders negotiate the temporal and spatial demands of public leadership and private responsibilities, for whom digital platforms offer flexible modes of sustaining visibility without displacing embodied authority (Sari et al., 2025).

At the same time, Instagram operates as an archive of religious authority. Once uploaded, images of *majelis taklim*, MPU deliberations, or social advocacy events persist beyond the immediacy of their occurrence, allowing religious practices to be stored, revisited, and circulated over time. This archival capacity stabilises authority by producing a cumulative visual record of sustained pedagogical and public labour. As posts accumulate, they generate a narrative of continuity, consistency, and long-term commitment through which authority can be recognised, recalled, and reaffirmed. Crucially, this archival visibility does not confer authority in itself; rather, it documents and consolidates forms of authority already established offline through pedagogical practice, genealogical positioning, and institutional involvement. Such dynamics are particularly salient in contemporary contexts where the authority of *ulama* is increasingly negotiated amid the rapid circulation of religious claims online, prompting shifts in how authority is recognised and exercised (Ichwan et al., 2024).

Beyond archiving, Instagram also serves as an amplifier of religious authority by enabling the circulation of these documented practices to wider, more diverse publics. Through likes, comments, and shares, moments of religious leadership are scaled up beyond local communities and *dayah* networks. This amplificatory logic introduces a dialogical dimension to authority: recognition is no longer confined to institutional endorsement but is also negotiated through audience engagement. As Campbell and Tsuria (2021a) argue, mediated religion involves not only representation but also public witnessing, where authority is continually affirmed through interaction and visibility. In this study, audience responses function as micro-validations that reinforce the legitimacy of *Teungku Inong* as a religious leader.

Within this mediating framework, the distinct Instagram strategies of Ummi Zikriati, Ummi Rahimun, and Ummi Hanisah should be understood as contextual adaptations of a shared logic rather than as divergent models of piety. Ummi Zikriati's visual emphasis on horizontal learning circles amplifies an egalitarian pedagogical ethos already present in women's *majelis taklim*. Ummi Rahimun's careful display

of genealogical proximity and institutional participation archives and reinforces her embeddedness within recognised structures of Islamic authority. Umami Hanisah's integration of institutional roles and civic engagement extends religious authority into the public ethical domain, foregrounding social responsibility as an integral dimension of piety. In all three cases, Instagram mediates authority by making existing practices more visible and durable, not by redefining their moral content.

Crucially, this reconfiguration does not constitute a rupture with tradition. The women's careful adherence to norms of modesty, *adab*, and institutional etiquette reflects what Rinaldo (2013) describes as critical but compliant agency. Digital visibility is strategically managed so that media exposure strengthens, rather than destabilises, religious credibility. Instagram thus becomes a space in which authority is expanded without being desacralised, and where women's religious leadership is normalised through repetition, familiarity, and ethical consistency.

In sum, the mediatization of piety observed in this study illustrates how religious authority in contemporary Aceh is reconfigured through media rather than displaced by it. Instagram functions simultaneously as an extension of embodied practice, an archive of religious labour, and an amplifier of moral authority. Through these mechanisms, *Teungku Inong* can consolidate and scale its leadership while remaining grounded in established pedagogical, genealogical, and ethical frameworks. This analysis underscores that, in this context, digital religion operates through continuity and recalibration rather than rupture, reshaping how authority is seen and shared without altering what ultimately legitimates it.

### **Gendered Negotiations of Religious Authority**

The analysis shows that *Teungku Inong* **exercises** religious authority within a field that is structurally and symbolically gendered: authority in Aceh is historically coded as masculine, tied to formal preaching, institutional leadership, and presumptive epistemic legitimacy. Female authority, therefore, operates under different conditions of recognition, requiring repeated demonstrations of competence, lineage, and moral discipline to secure a similar status. This dynamic aligns with scholarship that reads women's pious practices as forms of embodied agency enacted under constraint rather than as straightforward acts of emancipation (Mahmood, 2005; Rinaldo, 2013).

Pedagogical labour—teaching, mentoring, and sustaining *majelis taklim*—emerges as a primary site for negotiating gendered expectations. For *Teungku Inong*, pedagogy not only produces knowledge but also functions as a discipline through which moral credibility is continually performed and validated. Because male authority is often taken for granted in institutional settings, women's repeated investments in embodied, relational teaching become necessary proof of legitimacy. Yet, this same modality also risks reproducing a gendered division of religious labour that associates women primarily with care and education rather than doctrinal adjudication. This ambivalence echoes findings from studies of Muslim women's public religiosity, where pedagogical work simultaneously empowers and circumscribes women's authority (Mahmood, 2005).

Genealogical and institutional displays—visual references to *sanad*, proximity to senior ulama, and participation in councils—function as gendered mechanisms of legitimation rather than mere markers of tradition. For *Teungku Inong*, such displays must be made visible to counter assumptions that authoritative knowledge is intrinsically masculine; the effect is a continual symbolic labour that secures acceptance while reproducing the hierarchical order within which it operates. In this regard, the women's visual strategies reflect strategic navigation: they deploy lineage and institutional affiliation instrumentally to stabilise their presence within a field that privileges male forms of capital (Rinaldo, 2014).

Digital mediation intensifies and reconfigures these negotiations (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021a; Evolvi, 2017; Marei, 2024). Instagram does not dissolve patriarchal asymmetries; it reorganises them through platform logics that privilege certain forms of femininity—modesty, affective labour, and restrained visibility—as markers of acceptable authority. As such, *teungku inong* **accrue recognition not by transgressing gender norms but by embodying them in highly legible ways that render female leadership publicly palatable. This observation aligns with mediatization accounts**, which show that digital platforms extend and reframe religious practice—archiving, amplifying, and scaling visibility—while simultaneously being shaped by cultural norms and algorithmic regimes.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that female religious authority in Aceh is produced through ongoing gendered negotiations rather than rupture or unqualified empowerment. Digital visibility can extend reach and durability, but the forms of recognition it affords are contingent on disciplined conformity

with moral and institutional expectations. By making these processes visible, this study contributes to debates on pious agency and digital religion: it shows how women's mediated piety re-scales authority within patriarchal fields—expanding the scope of female leadership while keeping its terms largely shaped by existing gendered logics.

## Closing

Digital mediation has reshaped the conditions under which female ulama engage religious publics by providing new platforms for visibility while simultaneously intensifying negotiations around authority, legitimacy, and role expectations. Within this evolving landscape, female religious leaders are not simply empowered by digital media but are required to adapt their practices in ways that remain intelligible within established religious norms.

This article has examined how *teungku inong* in Aceh use Instagram to mediate religious authority and piety within a religious field shaped by strong institutional hierarchies and gendered norms. Drawing on visual discourse analysis of Instagram posts, the study demonstrates that digital media do not replace established forms of religious authority; rather, they reconfigure how embodied pedagogical practices, genealogical legitimacy, and social engagement are made visible and publicly recognisable.

The findings show that epistemic authority is produced through sustained communal pedagogy in *majelis taklim*, reinforced by connections to *sanad* and formal religious institutions, and extended through public expressions of ethical and social responsibility. Instagram enables these practices to circulate beyond local settings while remaining grounded in *dayah* traditions and norms of *adab*. Differences in visual strategies among Umami Zikriati, Umami Hanisah, and Umami Rahimun reflect variations in positioning and audience engagement within a shared pedagogical arena, rather than fundamentally different models of religious leadership.

By foregrounding continuity rather than confrontation with *dayah* traditions, this study contributes to discussions on Islam and digital media in Indonesia by showing how women's religious authority is negotiated, stabilised, and extended through digital mediation. Instagram expands the visibility and durability of female religious leadership while leaving intact the normative structures through

which legitimacy is recognised. In this sense, digital platforms operate not as sites of rupture, but as infrastructures that recalibrate the public presence of women ulama in Aceh and render their authority more widely legible within contemporary Muslim societies.

This study is limited by its focus on three highly visible *teungku inong* and its emphasis on visual content from a single platform, Instagram, which may not capture the full diversity of women's religious practices or audience interpretations. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating ethnographic interviews with religious actors and followers, undertaking comparative analyses across platforms such as TikTok or YouTube, and pursuing longitudinal or cross-regional studies to further illuminate how gender, media, and Islamic authority intersect over time beyond the Acehnese context.

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