Weeping Toughs and Pretty Militants: Living Islam and Negotiating Gender in a Muslim Militia (Banser)

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of gender, religion, and militarism within Banser, the paramilitary wing of GP Ansor, affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama—the world's largest Muslim organization. Drawing on extensive ethnographic fieldwork, it examines how masculinity and femininity are negotiated in this male-dominated but increasingly gender-diverse organization. Through a ritual analysis of training camps and ceremonies, the paper unpacks emotional expression, moral formation, and the performance of Islamic piety in ways that challenge both normative gender roles and essentialist conceptions of Islam. Building on Talal Asad's notion of Islam as a discursive tradition, the study develops a "linguistic model" to conceptualize Islamic variation as analogous to dialects—local articulations of a shared religious grammar. This model allows for an analysis of Javanese Islam as one such dialect, shaped by mysticism, hierarchy, and local understandings of gender. The paper also traces how militarized masculinity, inherited from Indonesia's nationalist and New Order legacies, intersects with traditional and Islamic ideals, producing hybrid forms of moral militarism. Finally, it examines how female participation—through structures like Denwatser (Detasment Wanita Banser) and Garfa (Garuda Fatayat)—both challenges and is contained by existing gender hierarchies. Banser thus emerges as a site where lived Islam is actively negotiated through embodied practice, emotional intensity, and the disciplining of gendered selves. This study contributes to the anthropology of Islam by offering a grounded, theoretically rich account of how Islam is lived and contested in contemporary Indonesia.

Introduction

Banser is a paramilitary sub-organization of GP Ansor, the younger men's organization that is part of Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia. Banser has a reputation of attracting tough men and more recently women. There is a stereotype that many of the men are reformed thugs who still favor the methods of their early years redirected for more noble aims. The stereotype continues that members are not well educated either in religious or general education. Like all stereotypes, this overstates the situation; some members are former santri, but most are not. Many have no more than a highschool education, but some have PhDs. There is regional variation but this research is focused mostly on Java. Regardless, it remains true the organization is more attractive to action-oriented people. This includes women who are tired of the "all talk and no action" approach they claim is typical of women's organizations. When women started joining the organization in the early 2010s, news articles called them pretty militants (Banser *cantik*), a diminutive that both problematized and devalued their participation despite the praising tones of the news stories (Mihrob 2018, for example).

At the end of a Banser training weekends, the trainee, trainers, and staff gathered outside the main building. The closing ceremony began with a military-like presentation of the graduating class to a "training inspector" marking their separation from their role as trainees and indicating that they are not yet full-fledged members of the organization. After collectively taking an oath,

each trainee was called forward to drink a bitter drink which was prayed over symbolizing the challenges and sacrifices they may encounter. They then kiss the flags of both NU and Indonesia and salute the training inspector, showing respect and gratitude for their guidance and mentorship throughout the training process. Overall, this event serves as a significant rite of passage (cf. Turner 1987) for the participants, intertwining tradition, spirituality, and commitment within the context of their affiliation with Banser.

As part of the re-integration phase, a reception line formed of the staff and trainers. Each trainee greeted each person in the reception line and would join the end of the line. The handshakes quickly became hugs and many of the trainee men start openly weeping and sobbing some wracked even more heavily as they hugged some of the leaders and observers (including myself). The women in attendance as both trainees and support staff for this young man's militia, called out encouragement ("*semangat*") to them. I witnessed this ritual several times and each time it highlighted several areas of confusion.

Confusion, as an ethnographic strategy in the vein of Vincent Crapanzano, centers on deliberately embracing and analyzing the disorientation experienced by both the ethnographer and the informant (Crapanzano 1986, 51–53). Rather than seeking immediate clarity or imposing pre-existing frameworks, this approach allows for a "thick description" of the very process of misunderstanding, miscommunication, and contestation. By dwelling in moments of ambiguity—whether linguistic, cultural, or social—the ethnographer can uncover deeper, often unarticulated, structures of meaning and power. The confusion often exists among the people observed and, in this case, allows us to more fully evaluate the discursive nature of a religious tradition. Confusion overlaps with contestation. There is never a single unified view on these matters.

The first point of confusion and contestation is the participation of women as both staff and trainees for this men's organization. Second, are the contrasting emotional responses between male and female trainees. Moreover, the strong emotional response from at least half the men contrasts with Javanese models of masculinity, Muslim masculinities, and the militarized masculinity that is normally of display with this organization. Moreover, gender norms are not only defined by Islamic values, but derived from local cultural scripts and Indonesian histories, which offers their own models of both masculinity and femininity

Therefore, the rest of this paper will seek to unpack the dynamics of the expression of gender in Banser to further understand the nature of lived religion and Islamic discourse and to look at the various elements found in one set of discourse within a Muslim organization. Specifically, it examines the ways gender is constructed by emphasizing different elements of the discourse. Related to this is the ways in which the participation of women threatens gender boundaries and allows us to ask who exactly feels threatened.

Ethnographic and Historical Background

Banser is the paramilitary wing of Ansor, the young men's organization for Nahdlatul Ulama (Renaissance of the Scholars; NU). NU has been long committed to Indonesia as a non-shariah state as well as multi-religious and multi-ethnic nation (Barton 2002, Bush 2009). Ansor aims to train non-radical Muslim leaders with a range of expertise and foci. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) was established in 1926 by several leaders of the pesantren (traditional Islamic boarding school) based traditionalist, or classicalist (Lukens-Bull 2005:14) community to support and coordinate the efforts of that community in the context of Dutch colonialism (Fealy and Barton 1999) and to counter the spread of Wahabism. NU has several autonomous units that are responsible for different segments of NU's mission including young men, young women, school age children, university students, and traditional Islamic education, among others. These organizations, like Ansor, receive advice and guidance from the NU national leadership, but do not receive directives. Banser is a semi-autonomous organization under Ansor; it can and does receive directives from the Ansor national leadership. Ansor, in general, is loyal to NU – culturally if not always organizationally (there have been historical disagreements; Anam 1996 23-24, 81-82).

Banser often guards Christian churches, and businesses from being targeted by extremists like the Islamic Defenders Front (Fron Pembela Islam). In June 2000, it was prepared to send forces to defend Christians against attacks from `a Muslim militia called Laskar Jihad. Further, Banser volunteers have been responders to "shock" events like earthquakes and volcanic

eruptions. In 2014, they have worked with local and national security forces to prepare to counter ISIS if it were to come to Indonesia. Elsewhere, I have explored the legacy of the organization's involvement in the 1965-66 massacres of alleged communists (Lukens-Bull 2005). Because of this past, some Indonesians and Western observers remain concerned about them return to such action. Lukens-Bull and Al Makin (2025: 218-219) have discussed the reasons why this is unlikely including changes in national laws, training protocols, and organizational structure. In the past, units were largely recruited and directed by local kyai. Since 1998, training and command structure have been centralized on the main office in Jakarta. The goal is to reduce regional and factional variation in the goals, training, and modus operandi of branch units. While events like the 2018 burning of "HTI flags" in Garut may still occur, national leadership acts swiftly to reinforce the idea that units should not act on their own but seek guidance from the national office (Lukens-Bull and Makin 2025: 231). Criticism of Banser rarely comes from within NU, when it does, it concerns specific missteps and not about the goals or structure of the organization. Non-Muslims I have met generally have positive experiences and impressions regarding Banser. There are some Indonesians who favor the position that there should be no paramilitary organizations in Indonesia and their roles should be played exclusively by the police. However, police and military leaders themselves often praise the efforts of Banser and see the organization as auxiliary forces. In short, the opinions about Banser are contested and varied.

It is difficult to describe Banser members without resorting to stereotypes. There are some generalities, but they are basic in the extreme. One must be a Muslim and be recommended by a kyai or another NU figure. There can be flexibility in the basic requirements of being between the ages of 18 and 40 and male, as we have already seen. Women have found avenues to contribute through Denwatser and Garfa. Garfa, or Garda Fatayat, is a parallel organization to Banser organized through NU's young woman organization called Fatayat.

I have worked with Ansor since the summer of 2014 examining its history, interviewing leaders, and attending events from the local to the national scale and has interviewed various leaders in the NU community going back to the mid-1990s. I attended many different Ansor events including fast-breaking events, rallies, and trainings. During my 2018-2019 fieldwork, I observed several Banser basic training programs, several advanced leadership courses, two specialist trainings and the first Garfa training. During these weekends, I took part as able, engaged in discussion with both participants and trainers, and interviewed leadership.

Understanding Variation in Islam

The understanding of what it means to a particular gender varies widely between Muslim cultures. Some recognize and accept third and non-binary gender, while others are openly hostile. The range of practices such as a female circumcision include such an extensive range of implementations that it is problematic to include them in the same category. Female circumcision ranges from the entirely symbolic (cutting a vegetable placed over the genitals) to very bloody (Newland 2006). Appropriate attire for both men and women also has tremendous variation. These variations are not based on the text, but on the interpretation and integration of the text within particular cultural contexts.

An early attempt to theorize religious diversity was Redfield's (1956) distinction between great and little traditions — between the orthodox religion of the urban elite and the folk practices of the rural masses. This model proved influential in early studies of Islam (Eickelman 1982), but it also reinforced a division of labor in which anthropologists focused on local rites while leaving scriptural analysis to Orientalists (Bowen 1993a, 1993b). As el-Zein (1977) and others have noted, the model implicitly privileges elite interpretations and frames popular religion as derivative, distorted, or superstitious. Talal Asad (1986) moved the anthropology of Islam forward with his framing of Islam as a discursive tradition. Unlike static models, the discursive tradition framework emphasizes continuity, debate, and the interpretive practices that tie present-day Muslims to foundational texts and past authorities. This concept offers a middle ground between the extremes of essentialism (Islam as a singular essence) and relativism (Islam as whatever Muslims say it is).

A discursive tradition, in Asad's formulation, is not merely a set of beliefs or rituals. It is a field of debate over what practices are legitimate, what constitutes orthodoxy, and how to apply core texts — the Qur'an and Hadith — in changing social contexts. These debates are embedded in institutions, practices, and social relations. For example, disagreements over veiling, women's

leadership in prayer, or even participation in national politics are not marginal but central to Islamic discourse, and they occur globally in settings as diverse as Cairo, Jakarta, and New York. Still, Asad has been criticized for focusing too heavily on texts and elite discourse. As Gilsenan (1982), Abu-Lughod (1989), and others remind us, local practices, emotional experiences, and oral traditions also shape Islamic life. Islamic discourse is not only produced by ulama and theologians but also by lay believers, preachers, parents, activists, and teachers — those who live Islam in everyday settings. Or as we are examining here, how people carry out the activities of a paramilitary multipurpose brigade.

Building on Asad's notion of Islam as a discursive tradition, I propose a "linguistic model" that treats variation in Islam as analogous to dialects within a language. These perspectives allow us to move beyond essentialist or dichotomous models of "great" and "little" traditions, toward a more nuanced account of Islam's plural expressions.

Feminist anthropologists have pushed the anthropology of Islam to account more fully for women's agency, affective labor, and embodied religiosity—not as secondary to male religious authority but as central to Islamic subject formation. Lila Abu-Lughod's ethnography of Bedouin women in Egypt challenged the tendency to treat Islamic societies as monolithically patriarchal and instead showed how women actively negotiate power through poetry, veiling, and kinship (Abu-Lughod 1986, pp. 11–15). Later, in her critical essay "Zones of Theory," she called on anthropologists to recognize how gendered power operates not only through formal institutions but also through ethnographic representation itself (Abu-Lughod 1989, pp. 269–271). Saba Mahmood further shifted the conversation by arguing that agency under Islamic piety movements must be conceptualized beyond liberal paradigms of resistance. Her ethnography of the women's mosque movement in Egypt demonstrated how moral agency can be cultivated through submission and discipline within religious traditions (Mahmood 2005, pp. 29–34). These contributions call for a reconceptualization of Islamic discourse not only in terms of texts and ritual practice, but also in how pious selves are cultivated, contested, and embodied—across gendered lines. In the context of Banser, this feminist lens invites us to analyze how women's participation in Garfa and Denwatser is not merely a disruption of male space, but a complex negotiation of moral authority, emotional labor, and public religiosity.

Dialects of Islam: A Linguistic Model

To further conceptualize Islamic diversity, I have proposed a linguistic model in which variations in Islamic expression are treated as dialects of a shared religious language (Lukens-Bull 2005: 23) In this model, what unites Muslims is not uniformity of practice or belief but participation in a discursive tradition from which diverse expressions can be drawn. This approach moves beyond the folk/elite divide and offers a dynamic way of understanding local and global Islam. Following Saussure's (1972) distinction between langue (the structural system of language) and parole (individual speech acts), I suggest that "discursive Islam" functions as langue — an abstract system of signs, values, and practices imagined by believers — while "expressed Islam" functions as parole — the lived, situated articulation of Islam in particular contexts. Just as language allows for dialects, so too does Islam accommodate variant forms, each shaped by history, culture, and interpretation.

A dialect gains prestige not because of inherent values but because it is endorsed by state institutions, educational systems, and cultural authorities (Bourdieu 1991 Woolard 2016). Analogously, Islam Nusantara becomes a legitimate religious dialect through state support (Menchik 2016 Burhani 2012), NU's bureaucratic structures, and is circulation through pesantren, Banser training, and national identity discourse. In Indonesia, the category of "moderate Islam" operate similarly: it presents itself as the neutral middle ground while actively marginalizing alternative Islamic voices Furthermore, the NU/Banser "dialect" is not monolithic. Fealy (2003, Hefner (2000) and van Bruinessen (1994) all emphasize that NU contains multiple regional and class-based subcultures – from East Javanese pesantren traditionalism to urban-nationalist Ansor branches – each with distinct idioms of piety, discipline and authority. These internal differences produce what may be understood an intra-organizational Islamic dialect, shaped by local histories, networks of kyai, and patterns of class mobility.

Concepts of Masculinity

Banser's gender norms are not only shaped by Islamic values but also by Javanese cultural scripts, which offer their own models of masculinity and femininity. Both of these sources are further impacted by context.

In Islam Observed, Clifford Geertz uses the figure of Sunan Kalijaga, one of the legendary Wali Sanga (Nine Saints) of Java, as an emblem of the Javanese religious style—a style that contrasts sharply with the more legalistic, textualist, and puritanical expressions of Islam found in places like Morocco. Since Wali Sanga legends influence both the pesantren community and courtly (Keaton) cultures, they become core role models throughout Javanese society. Kalijaga employed wayang (shadow puppetry), traditional music, and other local art forms to subtly introduce Islamic ideas (Geertz 1968: 32–33). Kalijaga's approach to da'wah was not confrontational but integrative and deeply attuned to existing cultural sensibilities. Further, Kalijaga represents the mystical orientation of Javanese Islam, one that emphasizes inwardness, intuition, and personal experience of the divine rather than formal doctrine or ritual compliance (1968: 34–35). He is seen as valuing inner harmony, subtle beauty, and non-confrontational ethics. This aestheticized religiosity is reflective of Javanese ideals of spiritual refinement (*halus*) and restraint (1968: 37–38). Geertz does not treat Kalijaga as a historical figure in the strict sense but as an ideal type—a cultural symbol expressing the ethos of traditional Javanese Islam. He is one model, one type of both religiosity and masculinity. Using the linguistic analogy proposed here, I argue that Kalijaga represents a particular dialect of Islamic expression. Since, Kyai are considered the inheritors of the Wali Sanga, this dialect is that of the pesantren community, which strongly connected to Nahdlatul Ulama and by extension to Banser.

Geertz was not trying to offer insights on how Muslim masculinity expresses itself in different Muslim societies, or as I am proposing here, different Muslim dialects. However, by examining what makes certain men worthy of the appellation Wali (Saint), he was in fact, laying out at least one model for masculinity in each society/dialect while also illuminating divergent models of masculinity in each context. Whereas Moroccan piety and masculinity are often expressed through confrontation and proclamation, Javanese counterparts are articulated through serenity, hierarchy, and self-discipline. These contrasting forms of religious and gendered expression underscore the localized dialects of Islam and masculinity, even within a shared religious tradition.

Javanese men determine their relative status to someone to whom they are speaking by a "process of weight and comparison" called *unggah-ungguh*. The questions asked are "Who is this person? Who am I? What is he to me?" (Errington 1985:5). The Javanese language is "the means for indicating to the world what sort of person one is," and is, "essential for good interpersonal relations" (Wolff and Poedjosoedarmo 1982:2). The language levels and the process of *unggah-ungguh* organize the "rules of social relationship" (Moedjanto 1990:69). Violation of the norms of speaking can destroy relationships and create an unharmonious state or society (Moedjanto 1990:69). Blackwood argues that the relative of Javanese women is not based on their interactions with each other but on their husbands' relative status. This process of negotiating status between men is introduced to boys at an early age. At about age 6, children, but boys especially are expected to speak the higher forms of Javanese to their fathers. The loving doting father instantly becomes an authority figure to whom one can only say "yes, sir" Daughters face this too, but it is less harshly enforced. (H. Geertz 1961). Tense relationships between fathers and sons often cumulate in the sons seeking the refuge of a pesantren education. Clearly relationships between men in Java are sometimes problematic and always tied to hierarchy.

In Banser, everyone is called by the same term, "Ndan" (short for comandan) and in many ways men get to interact with each other on more equal terms and in less guarded ways. The strong emotional reaction to the training weekend may reflect experiencing this kind of same-gender interaction and camaraderie for the first time. It is common in Banser meeting for men to talk about how they missed (kangen) each other and the time they spend in uniform. Given that Banser activities are voluntary, even for the trainers, fraternity and fellowship seem to be one driving force for participation. Given the transformative and liminal aspects of the entire training weekend and the ceremonies in particular, this sort of "communitas" (ala Turner) is exactly what we would expect.

Militarized Masculinity and Religious Authority

Whereas Kalijaga, the Wali Sanga, and Kyai serves as a counterpoint to the scripturalist or modernist Muslim figures Geertz associates with Morocco and with reformist currents in Indonesian Islam (e.g., Muhammadiyah) (Geertz 1968 50–52), more activist expressions of religiosity and masculinity are also present in Java and find their way into Banser. As a paramilitary organization. Banser operates at the intersection of military discipline and Islamic devotion. Members are trained not only in physical defense and logistics, but also in moral and theological obedience to kyai (religious elders) and the principles of Islam Nusantara. The concept of *kebal* (invulnerability to harm) reflects the sacralization of the male body, reinforcing a masculinity that is both mystical and martial. This is not in contrast to Javanese masculinity, but it is a particular operationalization which de-emphasizes the stoic and quietist reflection of wali/kyai and highlights the warrior aspect.

During the War for Independence, Ansor (then known as ANU) was disbanded, and the youth of NU were reorganized into Laskar Hizbullah (Army of God) and in many ways the modern Ansor organization could be considered the post-Independence continuation of Laskar Hizbullah (Salim 2004: 39, 43; Kusuma 2011:33)). The Ansor NU (ANU) symbol is remarkably like the LH symbol and so ANU is LH and vice versa (Salim 2004: 43). In an October 22, 1945, meeting the Leadership of NU decided that fighting against the Dutch was a legitimate Jihad (Anam 1996:63, and many other sources).

Militarized masculinity refers to a cultural model of manhood that emphasizes discipline, loyalty, physical strength, readiness for violence, and sacrifice for the nation or a religious cause (Higate 2003; Zalewski and Parpart 2008). In Indonesia, this form of masculinity has deep historical and political roots, shaped by colonial resistance, authoritarian regimes, and post-reformasi contestations over nationalism and Islam (Blackburn 2004; Barker 2008; Ryter 2005). The idea of the heroic male fighter is central to Indonesia's national mythology. From anti-colonial guerrilla warfare to the revolutionary period following independence in 1945, ideal Indonesian masculinity has often been linked to military or militant engagement (McGregor 2007). Male bodies were constructed as defenders of the homeland (pembela tanah air), embodying both physical strength and patriotic commitment (Wieringa 2002). Under Suharto's New Order regime (1966–1998), militarized masculinity became state ideology. The military (TNI) did not merely defend the nation; it governed it. Civil-military relations were organized under the doctrine of dwifungsi (dual function), whereby the military played both defense and sociopolitical roles (Crouch 2007; Kingsbury 2003). Male soldiers were framed as moral guardians of national order, with masculinity aligned with obedience, discipline, and protection of stability (Barker 2008).

Conversely, state ibusim became the hegemonic model for women. State Ibuism in Indonesia refers to a gender ideology promoted by the New Order regime (1966–1998) that positioned women primarily as wives and mothers, emphasizing their domestic and reproductive roles in service of national development. Coined by Julia Suryakusuma (1996), the term captures how state policies and organizations—such as Dharma Wanita and PKK (Family Welfare Movement)—mobilized women within a framework of controlled femininity aligned with state interests. Rather than fostering female agency, State Ibuism instrumentalized women's roles to support male-dominated authority and preserve political stability. This ideology marginalized women's participation in public and political spheres while idealizing submissive, nurturing motherhood as the essence of Indonesian womanhood. Feminist scholars such as Blackburn (2004) and Wieringa (2002) have critiqued State Ibuism for depoliticizing women's movements and constraining gender equality efforts. Its legacy persists in subtle ways, continuing to shape gender norms and expectations in contemporary Indonesia.

During the 2019 Fulbright conference in Jakarta, after I presented my preliminary findings and some of the songs and chants used by Banser some attendees who identified as graduates of a military academy told me that many of the songs and chants borrow heavily from the Indonesian military. I have confirmed this by comparing videos of the original military song "Tinggaalkan Ayah, Tinggalkan Ibu" ("Leave your father, leave your mother") to the Banser March, "Izinkan Ayah, Izinkan Ibu" ("Give your permission Father, give your permission Mother"). The only difference between the two anthems is that the latter one swaps out reference to the nation for references to religion and NU. There are other ways in which Banser is imitating the Indonesian military including some of their training activities even to the point of imitating live fire exercises using fireworks.

In Asad's model of Islam as a discursive tradition, it is difficult to place these influences. Either we must recognize the militarized gender of the Soeharto era as a non-Islamic part of the discourse, or as just local culture. However, as already shown, this kind of masculinity is not really the model favored by the Javanese who dominate Banser. It is also incorrect to identify it a non-Muslim. It is part of global military masculinity as interpreted by Muslims in Indonesia to meet the needs of the state. This is where the dialect model come in. Militarized gender norms are one dialectal expression of how to be men and women.

Banser, as the youth paramilitary arm of NU's GP Ansor, embodies a distinctive synthesis of militarized and Islamic masculinity. It supports a strong theological commitment to Ahlusunnah wal Jamaah, Sunni Islam's traditionalist strand, while adopting the posture and performance of a military organization. In this sense, Banser members are imagined as mujahidin in a national, not global-jihadist, framework. Their masculinity is moralized: they do not struggle for individual gain or sectarian aggression, but in defense of Islam Nusantara—a pluralist, archipelagic, and uniquely Indonesian Islam. As such, Banser masculinity is juxtaposed against both secular liberalism and transnational Salafi jihadism.

Yet such emotional expression is neither anomalous nor contradictory. Rather, it aligns with a broader global scholarship on militarized masculinity that highlights the centrality of emotion, affective bonding, and ritualized vulnerability in the making of "tough" male subjects. Researchers have long noted that military and paramilitary institutions actively cultivate shared emotional experience as a foundation of solidarity. Higate (2003) each demonstrate that male bonding in such organizations is produced not only through discipline and physical hardship but also through controlled forms of emotional release.

Banser's "weeping toughs" thus participate in a global pattern in which emotional intensity is a constitutive feature of military-style masculinity rather than an exception to it. The end-of-training tears mark what Athall (2018) calls "affective becoming," where emotional performance stabilizes new identities. Within Banser, the embrace of vulnerability is not merely tolerated—it becomes the site where a particular moralized, Islamic, and communal masculinity is forged.

At the same time, these emotional practices must be understood within Javanese and Indonesian affective frameworks. Several local idioms illuminate why the scene carries such cultural resonance and why participants describe it as personally transformative. Expressions such as kangen (to miss someone deeply) articulate forms of emotional longing that, while common in everyday life, take on heightened significance within male homosocial settings. When Banser members declare that they will "miss" one another or that they already feel kangen for the training environment, they engage in a culturally recognized mode of articulating intimacy without subverting masculine norms. Similarly, calls of *semangat*! ("spirit" or "keep going!") often shouted by women on the sidelines—provide a socially sanctioned form of emotional encouragement that bridges the boundaries between toughness and tenderness.

The gestures that accompany these emotions also draw on established Javanese repertoires of feeling. Hugging, though not conventionally emphasized in Javanese male interaction, becomes acceptable in liminal ritual contexts, echoing Turner's theorization of communitas. Meanwhile, the act of *salim*—touching one's forehead to the hand of a respected elder—reinforces hierarchies even as the emotional atmosphere temporarily suspends everyday norms of restraint. Scholars such as Hildred Geertz (1961), Mulder (1998), and Keeler (2017) demonstrate that Javanese masculinity typically values self-control (*halus*), emotional composure, and deference within hierarchy (*unggah-ungguh*). The visible disruption of these norms—through tears, embraces, and collective vulnerability—signals the extraordinary status of Banser training as a transformative moral passage.

Importantly, Banser men themselves highlight these emotional dynamics as meaningful rather than embarrassing. Many describe the experience as a rare moment of unguarded connection, forged through hardship, discipline, and shared religious purpose. In their accounts, crying is not evidence of weakness but of sincerity, piety, and the overwhelming weight of the vows they have taken. The emotional fluidity of these rituals thus reveals how Banser masculinity integrates elements of mystical devotion, militarized identity, and Javanese affective practice.

By interpreting the "weeping toughs" scene through both global militarized masculinity scholarship and local emotional idioms, we see that masculinity in Banser is neither rigid nor monolithic. Instead, it is a negotiated, embodied practice in which emotion—far from being antithetical to toughness—is central to the production of male solidarity, moral authority, and Islamic commitment.

Kebal and Mystical Training

Moreover, the mysticism of *kebal* (invulnerability to physical harm) adds a spiritual dimension to masculine prowess. A common element of Banser training includes a sense of being able to do impressive feats or sense of self confidence and camaraderie. This starts with mundane "military" activities like marches, mud crawls, and other physical challenges. There are also opportunities to engage in more impressive feats that involved mind over matter and sometimes spiritual power (*kebal*). The line between mystical power training (*kebal*) and mind over material is sometimes (deliberately) blurry. *Kebal* training, always includes doa, dziker, and sholawat. After invoking divine protection, participants in invited to join in dangerous actions with stated belief that they will be protected. One training I saw involved pouring air keras (acid) into a porcelain bowl with coins inside; at once the combination started to smoke. Those participants who so desired, came up and rubbed the same acid (from a different container) of their face and hands. After a few moments, they rinse off. The belief is that their faith and *kebal* keeps them safe. At other times and places such training can include being impervious to cuts from knives.

On one weekend, in Tegal, Central Java, a fire-walk was conducted. Prior to the fire-walk there was training on *tahlilan* (a prayer for the dead) and a short practice of it. This spiritual preparation aimed to create a harmonious state of mind and a sense of belonging before engaging in the act of fire walking. This ritual, though unconventional, reflected a symbolic act of testing one's trust in faith as a shield against physical harm. The evening fire walking session differed from the *kebal* training's spiritual depth, focusing more on technique and physical practice. The lack of *kebal* involvement and emphasis on technique highlighted a pragmatic approach. The explanation of thoroughly wetting one's feet before walking and stepping firmly with the whole foot highlighted a practical aspect aimed at successfully completing the fire walk. Despite that it was not as heavily spiritualized, many people think of this as a real demonstration of spiritual power. Women did not take part during this weekend, but those who had in other training sessions, referred to it as "walking through a puddle of water" emphasizing the power and control gained through experience.

Kebal training and even the fire-walk is an important part of the militancy part of Banser training. It empowers members to take risks and be brave in the face of danger. Coupled with beliefs in martyrdom (syahid) and a promise of eternal reward in case the protections of *kebal* are not enough, members are willing to put their lives on the line to advance the causes of the organization. It also strengthens their commitment to NU in general, which culminates in the oath taking ceremony. It could be argued that this emphasizes a particular brand of masculinity, but we must embrace the ethnographic confusion that women also take part.

According to Ward Keeler, inner strength, or potency (*kakuwatan batin*), is a central concept in Javanese theories of hierarchy and power (1987:39). *Kakuwatan batin* refers to an individual's ability to channel the raw immaterial power (*kasekten*) that abounds in the world (Keeler 1987:39). Anderson argues that Javanese notions of power are fundamentally different than Western conceptions of power. What Westerners divide into concepts like power, legitimacy, and charisma are unified in the Javanese notion of *kasekten* (1990:20n).

Women in Baser: Challenging and Reinforcing Gender Roles

There are interesting and important developments around the involvement of women in this militia movement. It is useful   a few of them in as far as they put our discussion of masculinity into contrast. Women are seen as moral anchors of the family and community but not typically as defenders or public agents. Female Banser members thus challenge this model—not by abandoning -modesty or caretaking—but by expanding their domain of responsibility to include public service, disaster response, and religious protection.

Denwatser and Garfa are two gendered avenues through which women engage Banser's mission. Denwatser is the women's detachment within Banser. Established in the 1960s as "Barisan Perempuan NU Militer," it was reactivated in 2017 to address contemporary challenges and multiple unmet needs. First, NU events are gender segregated, and someone needs to organize the women's side of the seating area so that there is enough room. Second, because women can be popular speakers they need a bodyguard detail to move them through the throes.

In practice, this means a shoulder-to-shoulder phalanx that is in physical contact with their protected. This job requires other women to guard women preachers (Nyai). Third, during events where there is food, the Banser members should receive a share. However, without female counterparts, it is often awkward for them to go to the women's side, where the food is prepared, to ask. Denwatser members also participate in security, disaster response, and community service activities. In many of these situations, women which to deal with other women. Maintaining the separation of genders required by certain understandings of piety, requires some women to cross into the male sphere. No one debates the need for women to take on these duties but are instead concerned about structural issues as well appropriate behavior including attire.

Denwatser in controversial, in part, because it reports to Banser, which in turn reports to Ansor, which makes it structurally part of the young men's organization. Garfa, established under Fatayat NU, was designed as a counterpart to Banser, focusing on protocol, emergency response, and disaster assistance. While it offers a more structured space for women, it also reifies boundaries. One could argue that a form of feminism is at work. As Garfa, the women are part of a parallel and cooperating organization instead of a subordinate one in Denwatser.

There are some who are concerned with more interaction between the genders. Some of this cannot be avoided because it allows other women to have less interaction with men. However, some argue that women should ideally be trained separately form the men. There are some who express concern that Banser women are just looking for a husband. But a Denwatser leader in Tegal argued that as long as its not someone else's husband and they keep it halal, there is no problem with this. In fact, activists marrying activists is the ideal situation for the larger NU organization.

Final, there is debate about the uniforms worn by women. The Denwatser uniform is no different than the Banser uniform except to a hijab tucked into the uniform shirt. It still has a belt at the waist that can accentuate the female figure. Garfa's uniforms, for instance, are designed to avoid a militaristic look, with looser cuts and non-tucked tops, signaling that while women may be active, they are not meant to be "soldiers." During the first Garfa training in 2019, in Yogyakarta, I was told that one idea was to have skirt with snaps that could be converted to culottes when more mobility was needed.

The introduction of Garfa (Garda Fatayat) is an attempt to manage this disruption. By creating a women-only, quasi-paramilitary space, NU leaders (especially in Fatayat) can affirm women's importance while reinforcing gender boundaries. Garfa's uniforms are deliberately less military in appearance, its tasks are limited, and its structure firmly placed under Fatayat, not GP Ansor. This compartmentalization allows Banser to retain its masculine identity while acknowledging women's contributions—without having to share institutional power.

Women's Voices, Media Representations, and Gendered Agency in Banser

Although Banser is structurally a male paramilitary corps, the everyday participation of women complicates that organizational boundary. Official NU organs repeatedly reiterate that "there are no female Banser members because Banser is specifically for men" (NU Cirebon 2022). Yet in practice, women serve as bodyguards, crowd managers, disaster responders, protectors of nyai, and ceremonial security staff. The gap between stated doctrine and lived reality becomes a generative ethnographic space.

This tension became explicit in 2022, when GP Ansor leadership publicly announced that there was no space in Ansor and Banser for women and that they needed to participate through Fatayat (NU Online 2022). This clarification did not end women's involvement: it redirected it. In Cirebon, for example, the leadership "wholeheartedly handed over" their Denwatser members to Garfa, explaining that women should now "be guided and developed by Fatayat NU" (NU Cirebon 2022). The transition was justified not as exclusion but as organizational alignment—and framed by Fatayat as evidence of women's "high dedication to NU" (NU Online Jabar 2022). In practice, such structural reorganizations reveal anxieties about gender boundaries: allowing women to serve, but not as fully equivalent to Banser men.

Despite these institutional constraints, women themselves articulate their participation as deeply meaningful. A widely circulated profile in Ponorogo described fifty-year-old Denwatser member Siti Ni'matul Muntamah as a resilient figure who continues to serve after decades of membership (Aswaja News 2024). Her narrative foregrounds women's ability to embody commitment, discipline, and religious service, countering the assumption that these qualities are

inherently masculine. Younger women echo similar themes. One 21-year-old Denwatser member featured in Pos Kota attracted attention for assisting with security during a Christmas Mass, where her presence was described as "noticeable" and "active," challenging assumptions regarding who may publicly perform protection in a multireligious context (Pos Kota 2018). The media fascination with the aestheticized label Banser *Cantik* captures a dual dynamic: admiration for women's participation coupled with a trivialization of their labor through gendered beauty discourse.

Women's testimony further underscores that their work is not symbolic but operational. Denwatser women regularly escort high-profile female preachers (nyai) through dense crowds, functioning as gender-appropriate security personnel. As one NU-affiliated outlet recognized the important role Denwatser place in serving and protecting female preachers at large NU events (Suara NU 2021). In these moments, women uphold gender segregation norms—since men should not physically guard women speakers—while simultaneously crossing into what has historically been a male-controlled domain: embodied, front-line security work. This duality illustrates a core anthropological insight: women's agency may emerge precisely through the navigation of religious and gendered constraints.

Garfa, established under Fatayat NU and now absorbing many former Denwatser members, occupies a parallel but distinct organizational terrain. Its mission is articulated in terms of service, protocol, and community protection rather than militarized discipline. During Ramadan, Garfa Tegal distributed hundreds of iftar packages "as part of NU women's service to society," highlighting the integration of humanitarian effort and Islamic piety (Times Indonesia 2023). This shift toward highly visible, community-oriented activity allows Garfa to claim authority without assuming the full martial aesthetic associated with Banser. Yet the very creation of Garfa reinscribes gendered boundaries, keeping women's units structurally separate from GP Ansor, even as their operational labor mirrors aspects of Banser's mission.

Historically, women's para-military roles in NU have existed under various names—including Fatser, Fatsus, and Danwatser—reflecting a recurrent institutional ambiguity regarding how women's security labor should be structured and recognized (Bangkit Media 2020). These earlier formations, now largely forgotten or absorbed into later organizations, demonstrate a longer genealogy of women's participation that is repeatedly reorganized rather than firmly integrated. This pattern signals unresolved tensions: women's contributions are necessary, visible, and widely appreciated, but consistently positioned as auxiliary rather than equal.

Taken together, these media and organizational sources reveal that women articulate their service not as a challenge to Islamic norms but as an expression of pious agency consonant with NU's values. Their presence destabilizes militarized masculinity by demonstrating that courage, discipline, emotional openness, and public service are not gender-bound qualities. At the same time, institutional responses—denials of "Banser Perempuan," the transfer of Denwatser to Garfa, and the framing of women's participation as auxiliary—show persistent efforts to reassert gendered hierarchies and preserve Banser's masculine identity.

Understanding women's participation in Banser therefore requires attending to the discursive field in which their labor is represented, contested, and reclassified: from Banser *Cantik* headlines that flatten complexity, to Fatayat narratives positioning women as disciplined protectors, to women's own testimonies of devotion, sacrifice, and bravery. These voices illuminate how gender boundaries are simultaneously challenged and reinforced, and how women's agency is negotiated within the lived moral and organizational worlds of NU's security culture.

Conclusion

Banser offers a powerful site for examining how Islam, gender, and nationalism are embodied and negotiated in contemporary Indonesia. As a paramilitary organization shaped by Javanese mysticism, Islamic orthodoxy, and nationalist militarism, Banser cultivates hybrid expressions of masculinity and piety that defy essentialist models. These include rituals of camaraderie and emotional release, mystical training in *kebal*, and the performance of militarized masculinity infused with moral discipline and religious devotion.

Framing Banser through Talal Asad's concept of Islam as a discursive tradition and expanding it with a linguistic model allows us to see these practices as dialects—locally inflected, yet part of a shared religious grammar. Within this framework, the participation of women in Denwatser and Garfa complicates binary gender roles, challenging institutional hierarchies while simultaneously

reinforcing some boundaries. Rather than asking whether these roles empower or constrain, this study foregrounds the ambiguity, contestation, and lived complexity that mark Islamic practice.

Banser thus exemplifies how Islam is not only interpreted but enacted through the everyday work of training, ritual, emotion, and gendered labor. In doing so, it affirms the value of grounded ethnography in exploring how Islam is not simply believed, but lived, embodied, and continuously negotiated. The dialect model offered here not only explains diversity but helps to expand our understanding of contestation. In religion, as in language, certain dialects are the power dialects, that is the version preferred by those in power.

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Ronald Lukens-Bull: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data Curation, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Visualization, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

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Submission/originality statement

This manuscript is an original work that has not been published previously and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. Various artificial intelligence tools, including MS Word Editor, Gemini, and ChatGPT, were used solely to improve the clarity and quality of writing, primarily for suggestions for improvement and, at later stages, as simulated peer-review support. The final content, interpretation, and conclusions remain entirely the author's own.

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