
**COMMODIFICATION OF MERIT:
REIMAGING GOD(S) THROUGH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE
TRAINING CLASSES IN PAITON PROBOLINGGO**

Mushafi Miftah

[Universitas Nurul Jadid Paiton Probolinggo]

email: cak.mushaf@gmail.com

Abstract

Material wealth, good health, and efforts to make money are central, but not solely, to the flourishing of religious commodifications. Pola-Pertolongan-Allah is a business-based-religious training which argues that strong beliefs in fate and luck are essential to the efficacy of the rituals, which is believed to generate 'practical benefits' for the participants of training. By paying for IDR500,000 – IDR1,500,000 / meeting for private class, and IDR150,000 / three hours for public classes, 'the devotees' will get also some kinds of bonus, including additional handbooks of taubid, practical guide of various shalat patterns. PPA, by doing so, has successfully made the participant to be instrumental in performing meritorious acts to secure future happiness for themselves and their descendants, but still must depend on their fate and moral luck if they are to have the best possible outcomes. PPA, which operates with Multi-Level-Marketing recruitment system, stands in the increased commercialization of Muslim community in Probolinggo. This study finally figures out that commodified religious mode and technique of merit making could be subverted and employed to negotiate and express their religious-economic class identities.

Keywords: *Pola Pertolongan Allah, Merit, Training Class*

Introduction

“I want to know God and to reach God's merit. By knowing and reaching God's merit, I get full-serenity”. That's one of participant's responses in Oneness Training (*Pelatihan Ketaubidan*), namely PPA (*Pola Pertolongan Allah*), at Star Hotel Banyuglugur Situbondo, January 15th, 2016. Almost all PPA participants have similar expectations. Some of them have a reason that their involvement in the PPA is mostly caused by their financial problems, such as debt, business bankruptcy, partly by love or household problems. Such expectation has risen up, since banners and publications of PPA indeed provide a tremendous vision for the participants.

Exactly at 06:30 p.m., participants began to prepare for going to Banyuglugur Star Hotel Situbondo, signing that a PPA training event will immediately started. Some of committees looks busy in preparing for the training. In the hotel yard, there are lots of women participants coming from the *pesantren*, crowding to the arena. There are some accessories displayed at roadside of entrance into the hotel, such as T-shirts, brows, hoods; all of them are available for sale during the event. The hotel is like night market in which many people crowded to buy, sell, and select the merchandises.

Coming into the hotel, one will see big banners “Welcome to PPA Trainee” displayed in every corner of the yard, almost similar with a national event. At the left of the lobby door, religious guide-books lined up like a bazaar, available to serve buyers and visitors of the PPA event. At the corner of the room, some of PPA alumnae testimonies are also displayed. These displays seems to invite people in thinking how various the life problems, and how important their participation in PPA to solve that problems.

At 07:00 p.m., a meeting room in the hotel is eventually quite. Almost all participants get ready for the live training. The trainers are sitting in the available seats, facing the participants who cannot wait to hear their tutorials on *taubid*. Right after delivering welcoming speech, a tutor begins to ask the participants to imagine a miracle and majesty of God; the ways God created heavens, earth, humans, and life. The atmosphere keeps silent.

As they listened a very convincing tutor's exposure in explaining on how to get God's merit, the participants seemed so enthusiastic. Sometimes, a tutor also plays a game about God's miracles through His power. During the game, the participants looks to be increasingly amazed about God's simulated greatness in creating human and power of life. In addition to games and oral presentation, practical guides are also available for the participants. “Because of everyday busyness, people often forget that there is Creator of universe, but they rarely involved Him in their activities and their settlements of the problem.”¹

PPA: Oneness Training or Business Training?

Pola Pertolongan (PPA) is a training class held firstly by Yusuf Mansur and Reza Rendy in 2013, and now almost entirely organized throughout Indonesia. Until now, it has been more than 100 batches with thousands of alumnae, ranging from ustadz, teachers, businessmen, owners of companies, doctors, nurses, officials, *santri*, students, etc. The participants of PPA are usually people who need to change their lives. They believe, by joining PPA training classes, everything is possible to achieve, such as going to Mecca,

¹ Reza Rendy, *interview*, District Coordinator at Hotel Bintang Banyuglugur Situbondo, 1 January 2016.

buying a car, and changing a financial situation. These expectations are based on Islamic teaching that God could easily respond to all of *ummah's* intentions only if they kept close to Him.

The most important course of PPA training is to embed personal awareness about God's oneness, unity, and power into the participants' personal feeling. Everything, which comes in and comes out, is possible to happen, only because of God's willing. Therefore, it is obligatory for people to remember God in every time and place. Through this process, they are surely able to re-present God in every activity, and able to be as close as possible with God as a pinnacle of their achievements.

Since the first establishment of PPA, it produced thousands of alumnae in several cities in Indonesia; one of them is located in Probolinggo. A member of PPA from Probolinggo said,

"PPA training is not merely about to provide motivation or inspiration, but also to give solutions and to encourage participants to be close to God. One of the PPA's great visions is to restore the inner relationship with God and to encourage people to believe in God's involvement in their problems. PPA is also built as a counterweight to much training which tends to abolish God's oneness in their material presentation."²

To join PPA classes is being easy; by paying for IDR500,000 – IDR1,500,000 / meeting for private class, and IDR150,000 /three hours for public classes, 'the devotees' will get also some kinds of bonus, including additional handbooks of *tauhid*, practical guide of various *shalat* patterns. The first 10 registrants will be given 50% discount, and 100% money back guarantee if they are disappointed after following PPA class. The private class is 10-12 hours with limited participants and 100% money back guarantee if not satisfied. The alumnae of PPA who want to participate it are not obliged to pay registration fee, because they have an alumnae card available free for life (paid for pax hotel only).

Each class contains 20 to 25 members. The private class is a special learning class, consisting of materials on how to invite God's merit to solve empirical problems, such as debt, business, career, relationships, etc., or to provide solutions in an Islamic manner, for instance on how to reach a desired object depending on God's willing. This class is different from *pengajian*, motivation training, or formal classes, since its package is designed to be very interesting, very fun, inspirational, making participants to be active in seeking secret keys of God's merit. The class also provides games relating to God's oneness in order to ensure that participants get amazed with it.

Event Organizing (EO) of PPA is assigned to prepare everything, including market accessories, invitation for trainers and participants, decision for the location, even a budget of the event. This EO gets a coordinating line with regional coordinator in central PPA at Jakarta. This is regional coordinator's task to provide guidance on strategic blueprints for PPA events.

PPA: God Based Business Training

² Syafiqah Adhimi, *interview*, alumnae of PPA Probolinggo on 25 August 2017.

The phenomenon of god based training, recently occurred in many regions of Indonesia, including Probolinggo, has been going on for a long time. This training is firstly built to provide solutions for all problems through recognizing secrets of God's promise. In Probolinggo, PPA participants are mostly from *pesantren*. To approach them, PPA team firstly keeps in touch with leader of *pesantren* to provide an explanation on their presentation methods, materials, in improving *aqidah*. This persuasive approach successfully get supports from several *pesantren* in Probolinggo, and it is a reason that PPA participants are commonly from *santri*.

According to Regional Coordinator PPA Probolinggo, Nyai Hamidah Wafie, PPA training program has a positive impact on building of ordinary people's, including *santri*'s, consciousness about God's merit in solving their problems. This training becomes a medium by which *santri* are able to get closer with God under any circumstance. "Only if God's willing exists, everything will happen."

"Many members of society has been in declined spiritual values; they tend to believe in shamanism (*dukun*) than God Almighty; it is a reason why I join PPA. For example, want to be a rich, go to *dukun*; want to have position, go to *dukun*. Meanwhile, everything is under God. We have to involve God in everything we do. If you want to develop a business, you don't have to go *dukun*, it is important to participate in PPA training because this program can be a medium by which you know God better."³

Meanwhile, according to Maulana Hakiki, one of PPA activists in Probolinggo, PPA training is a practical method to know God, so that all affairs are not far from Allah. PPA provides a training to be always conscious of God. "It is also true, if you want to succeed and develop your business, PPA can help you to know the ways you can deal with the problems under any circumstances."

"Generally, PPA introduces 5 methodical patterns, that essentially argues that if you want to involve God in every problem you deal with, it will be easy for Him to solve it. These five patterns are almost always found in those who reached His merit, then if you successfully applied all of them, you will get an unexpected and surprising miracle."⁴

PPA is designed as a oneness training (*pelatihan ketauhidan*) to help its members in knowing better and more about God, also to know secrets of how to open 'a door of livelihood' (*pintu rezeki*). PPA is only a mediator for those who want successful business. It is not PPA of course, but God who determined everything, and PPA gets a position to facilitate people in order to always remember God in the different time and place.

According to Abd. Rashid, a lot of magic obtained after PPA training is all the problems faced by God's help can be resolved well and eased.

³ Hamidah Wafie, *interview*, District Coordinator PPA Probolinggo on 20 August 2017.

⁴ Maulana Hakiki, *interview*, member of PPA Probolinggo 25 August 2017.

"After joining PPA, I realized I got many mistakes in business, and it's worth if God exhausted all of them. Since then, I have to ask Allah for forgiveness and tried hard to clean up all my possessions from the *haram*. It is so difficult, but I have to make sure that there is no *haram* objects stacked in my body. I discuss with my wife, and we agreed to return all treasures we get from *riba* .. it is ok I am lost, but it is important that I am purified in God's eye. Our mortgage is given back to the developer, two cars we returned to the lease, all my credit cards are mercilessly closed, I had to move quickly to pay off my other debts. Until one day comes, I get an offer for working in Saudi Arabia, with the rest of money I intend to go there."⁵

According to Abd. Rasyid, one of PPA officers in Probolinggo, people who have difficulty in business are recommended to join PPA private class, and under God's willing, all difficulties could be resolved. At least, they feel peaceful because they involves God in every manner. Rendy, a PPA founder and trainer, has introduced a new method of improving *taubid* which is never available in other motivation seminars to increase their faith, so they are possible to open a curtain (*tabir*) between God and themselves.

PPA: Commodifying Merit

As explained above, PPA is a oneness training aimed to facilitate its members in order to involve God in every business. However, PPA is not only about training, it is a selling business, offering some accessories and books. In every PPA event, an economic activity is inseparable. It is so-called religious commodification in which sacred symbols are used to gain material, financial, profits.⁶

The term *commodification* refers to a process in which something which has no economic value is given value, and hence market value can replace social values. A commodity is not merely about useful or not, but also marketable or not.⁷ The commodified products are things which are not for sale, but—after they are commodified—they are possible to be for sale. PPA commodified supernatural things, such as God's help, God's merit, and God's blessing.⁸ During training, participants are encouraged to re-imagine God to be problem solver for their difficulties of life. The social relations between trainers and trainee, or between God and human, are reduced to material exchange relationship.

⁵ Abdur Rasyid, *interview*, member of PPA Probolinggo 25 August 2017.

⁶ Greg Fealy, "Consuming Islam : Commodified Religion and Aspirational Pietsm in Contemporary Indonesia," Greg Fealy & Sally White (eds), *Expressing Islam : Religious Life and Political in Indonesia* (Singapore : ISEA, 2008); Max Weber, *Etika Protestan dan Semangat Kapitalisme* (trans. TW. Uotomo Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2006), xxxv.

⁷ David Smith, & Evans Philps, *Das Kapital for Beginners*, (Karta: Resist Book, 2004), 33; cf. Pattana Kitiarsa (ed), *Religious Commodification in Asia: Marketing Gods* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1-12.

⁸ George Ritzer, *Teori Sosial Postmodern* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Juxtapose dan Kreasi Wacana, 2008), 144.

The *commodification* is firstly popular as trading concept in 1970s, but it became a factor contributing on the formation of capitalism.⁹ The proponents of capitalism believe that personal values are possible to be transformed into exchange values, changing private relationships into public and commercial ones. It is a reason that religion, as firstly private and sacred value, is possible to be commodified into public and commercial one.¹⁰

Religious commodification is a result of *consumer ritualized symbolic practices*, which consists of five supporting factors:¹¹

1. Consumption of religious symbols creates religious objects possible for sale through social processes and networks. A simple example is selling religious books. To support its business, PPA published many books on God's power, help, merit, and blessing. These books are displayed and available for sale in every PPA events. Some of them are obliged for PPA participants to have during the training. Anyone who reads this book is regarded as able to understand God's majesty and power.
2. Consumption of religious symbols creates a religious defense in the social community. The profane activities are objectified after they have been defended like a product. PPA packaged it by giving discourses, motivations, and materials on God's oneness. These monotheistic discourses are then made into guide-books for the participants, and it is a reason that religion must be defended even it is packaged in training classes, since it gives a spiritual values.
3. Consumption of religious symbols creates a religious performance. PPA is the best example on how religious performance has been organized. Displaying banners, logos, live show, films, and other motivational material, PPA has successfully encouraged participants to involve with trainer's performance in practicing the simplest ways to get closer with God. The training, whatever it is designed, is commonly aimed to preserve inner-personal piety of participants in order to be able to reach the training's vision.
4. Consumption of religious symbols as a search for financial profit and psychological serenity. PPA provides a promise of psychological tranquility. By knowing God, participants will realize that their life problems are resulted from God's test over their spiritual commitment. For PPA committees, this training can be a source of financial gain. The amount of fee registration, for instance, is an example of how they get a financial support from those who want to join the class; it is also true with other financial strategies, such as selling books.

⁹ Zebrina Pradjnaparamita, "Komodifikasi tas belanja bermerek: Motivasi dan Identitas Kaum Shopaholic Golongan Sosial Menengah", *Thesis*, (Surabaya: Magister Kajian Sastra dan Budaya, Fakultas Ilmu Budaya, Universitas Airlangga, 2012), 16.

¹⁰ Commodification is also related to the ways people to be rational, since more released they are from identity and rationality, more failed they take, and they became instrumentalist. Sindhunata, *Dilema Usaha Manusia Rasional: Kritik Masyarakat Modern oleh Max Horkheimer dalam Rangka Sekolah Frankfurt* (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1983), 121; cf. Francis Fukuyama, *The Great Disruptions: Hakikat Manusia dan Rekonstitusi Tatanan Sosial*, (Jakarta: Penerbit Qalam, 2007), 4.

¹¹ In *Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx (1848) defines commodification as callous cash payment; it is process of social value exchange; it is process of selling what could be sold, not selling what should be sold. For Marx, everything is possible to be commodified, to be invested, reproduced, consumed, and distributed. Religion, as something which is not marketable, became something that could be sold. One of religious commodifications is using jilbab, since the values of hiding private body became exchange rate in jilbab industries. Riezqie Hasanah, "Pola Komodifikasi Agama: Studi Tentang ESQ Leadership Center," *Thesis*, (Jakarta: Universitas Negeri Jakarta, 2010).

5. Consumption of religious symbols as a rational service developer. This is a result of theories of modernity, such as McDonalization. Religious practices are produced as rational as possible in order to be acceptable among urban community. By packaging Islamic preaching into oneness training, PPA is more acceptable among urban communities. PPA's religious package is widely used in every region of Indonesia, so it successfully creates a franchise program of PPA.

Vincent Miller notes a possible commodified axis of religion.¹² The first is an infinite human desire for "goods" as a feature of consumerism. The consumerism requires an marketable object and uses "the most ready-made cultural element to limit the elements of exchange". It needs commodification of music, images, and religious objects apart from their first traditions. PPA training always provides some pictures, posters, and cassettes containing an explanation on God's merit. EO is responsible to provide the photos of religious figures and tapes of religious lectures.

To promote benefits of PPA training, trainers usually present some testimonials from participants who have already felt advantages of following the PPA class. The testimonials are not only displayed through posters or banners, but shared through participant social media groups, like Whatsapp, BBM, and Telegram. Testimonials are often used as a strategy to convince the participants that PPA can be a medium to change their life to be better than before.¹³

John Drane discusses the issue of religious consumerism from different angles. Based on Ritzer's theory of McDonaldisation, he argues, religion finds itself trapped in a rational iron cage system. Since most societies are based on these rationalized processes, it is not surprising that the system is applied in religious life, "We like rationalized systems, and try to apply them in everything from ideology to the ways we welcome guests in Sunday services (in Church-ed)."¹⁴ It is also true that PPA always welcomed participants with the magnificent and powerful package of program. The sparks on greeting and welcoming are spread over the entrance side of the rooms, making it more attractive.

PPA: Commercializing God's Grace

PPA is truly an Islamic religious preaching to convince people for having no dependence on other than God. PPA became an instrument of religious socialization since it provides a way of religious communities to perform their various rituals. Thus, PPA can be regarded as a medium of propaganda in the field of spirituality through oneness training. However, in such religious denominations, an ultimate goal of religion is no longer prioritized, because commercializing God's grace through PPA training is instrumental in achieving material gains. The commodification of Islamic values into 'profane training like PPA' is always contested since religion is firstly regarded as sacred.

The successful PPA program is a result of people's trust in it. A religious program is considered as a way to get appreciation from community. It is public interest which can be the main factor determining sustainability of PPA. To make sure that people did appreciate it, PPA formed district coordinators (*Korda*) to maintain PPA programs in many

¹² Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*, (London; Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004), 84.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁴ John Drane, *The McDonaldisation of the Church: Spirituality, Creativity, and the Future of the Church*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd 2001), 41; cf. Vincent Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication*, (London: Sage Publication, 2009), 129.

regions. The coordinators are also assigned to recruit participants to provide spiritual solutions through promoting oneness as ultimate goal of life. This strategy is effective enough to attract participants' sympathy. Not only because it provides oneness as empirical solution, but also it can motivate participants through some testimonials during recruitment process. These testimonies became miracles by which PPA gets participants from various backgrounds. The PPA advertisement through multiple testimonials is a result of commercializing spiritual grace into financial sphere. The testimony, in this case, becomes an important way to invite participants and to gain income.¹⁵

PPA training is initiated not necessarily to implement religious awareness through inculcation of *tauhid* values, nor to meet participant's needs to Islamic religious knowledge, but importantly a financial arena to increase capital accumulation. The commodification is not only based on production of commodified products and services, but on distribution and consumption of them.¹⁶

PPA training is characterized into five aspects, i.e. efficiency, production, distribution, consumption, and promotion. The successful commodification is determined by the process in which something which has no economic value at the first time is transformed into having financial value, and it will be successful only if these five aspects could be met.¹⁷ PPA, to some extents, have met these aspects during its long time process.

In terms of efficiency, PPA formed a fast-paced process of training through EO. All tasks are instantaneously finished by EO in accordance with location of the event. Participating this training, people do not need to go mosque or certain religious education institutions to study religion in front of *kiai*. By PPA event, people just pay IDR 500,000 to 1,500,000 to be part of the training. People also did not need to spend much time by reading religious books, because PPA have provided them during the event.

People seems to prefer PPA training than learning, studying, and working in front of *kiai* or *ustadz* or *guru*. It points out that PPA participants make use of the program only as a trend of instant training to solve practical problems of life, such as getting better position in job market or getting easy to go sacred pilgrimage (*haji* or *umrah*). To realize this desire, they do not hesitate to pay much money in order to participate in the training. Today's urban people tend to involve with a new trend of religiosity, as stated by Riezqy Hasanah in *Pattern of Religious Commodification: A Study of ESQ Leadership Center*, that religious values are commodified to search for meaning of life, intellectual debate, and improvement of insight as a solution of psychological problems suffered by many urban community.¹⁸

The production analysis puts PPA's marking of merchandises, products, accessories, into a long-term process of creating a marketing strategy in order to make them more fashionable. Many products of PPA are regularly invited, ranging from brows, drinking waters, T-shirts, to books. Whereas, under deeply examination, PPA books are not much different from other psychological books and theological books on *tauhid* for sale in many book stores.

¹⁵ Vincent Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication*, 139.

¹⁶ Noerman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, (London and New York: Longman, 1995), 6-17.

¹⁷ Evans Philips & David Smith, *Das Kapital For Beginners*, 16. During process of transformation into values, religion is always related to the ways mass media, readers/followers, market, and nation have own interests. See also Isma Adila, "Spesialisasi dalam Ekonomi Politik Media," *Jurnal Ilmu Konomikasi*, 1(10), April 2011, 93-95.

¹⁸ Riezqie Hasanah, "Pola Komodifikasi Agama: Studi Tentang ESQ Leadership Center", 23.

Participants are psychologically trapped in models or techniques to make them more enthusiastic about the ways to achieve God's merit. The instructors sometimes interrupt it with interactive games containing of the simulation on how God helps His servants. This strategy serves a successful bait to make them getting more attention on simulation games. This simulation on the ways God blessed people is designed to increase of participation level to PPA. It is expected to have a balanced impact between enthusiasm to purchase PPA products and strategy of training in make sure that purchasing products is considered as voluntarily donation (*infaq*).

In terms of distribution, PPA actively produces a good perception among participants. PPA coordination in regional levels is aimed to disseminate community's positive belief that this training can be a solution in every problem of life. PPA trainers always offer reflective solutions for participants related to problems they encountered. The solution in question here is training how the participants have awareness of all the problems originally from God. Therefore, in order to make the problem ceptet solved, participants are invited to get closer to God. More convinced this simulation is granted, more convinced the participants believe in the positive result of PPA, then more distributed idea of getting closer to God with practical PPA training.

PPA is successful not only to highly disseminate positive impact on the public, it also has a very significant role in increasing an economic surplus. This success publication is a result of production and consumption. By distributing messages through training and books, increasing sales of products and services, PPA is possible to distribute positive image among participants. Until now, PPA has thousands of alumni spread in various regions of Indonesia.

In terms of consumption, PPA produced many religious symbols possible for sale to consume them through social processes and networks in society. Of course, PPA actors take advantage of this opportunity to get a maximum profit. A simple example is selling religious books and other accessories. The religious books, and accessories, such as t-shirts, veils, and brows are often displayed in PPA event, in order to sustain a continuity of PPA programs.

Most of religious communities, especially Muslims, in Indonesia became a very promising spiritual market to create new business opportunities in selling religious values. This potential market created a religious training event more quickly acceptable among Indonesian people. The function of religion as a spiritual guide for community, a preservation tool for theological vision from period of Prophet up to now, and a functional support for personal evaluation is to maintain what is good (*makruf*) and to prevent what is wrong (*munkar*), and it is what PPA trainers have provided it for participants.

The tariff allocation for each private class of PPA is possibly under analysis of using sociological perspective. First, a functional perspective puts religion into profane realm. Today religion is no longer a sacred thing, but a tool of financial commercialization. However, it does not mean that religion has nothing to do with modernized technological development, as stated by proponents of secularism. Conversely, it indicates how resilient religion responds to modernity. A demarcation between the sacred and the profane are blurred, and PPA is a simple example on the ways modernized people make use of sacred things, such as blessing, merit, to get material and spiritual health.

In Probolinggo, the main targeted audiences of PPA are *santri*. Many students in some *Pesantren* Probolinggo become members. Their involvement in PPA training seems paradoxical, but also natural at the same time. *Santri* are considered as people who has

scientific qualification of Islam, both science and spiritual. The religious books, ranging from classic to modern, are actively taught for almost 24 hours in *Pesantren*. However, as explained above, contemporary *santri* are those who have experienced ‘modernized and spiritualized devices’ could not restrict from these events which combined sacred and profane solutions.

Closing

PPA is a oneness based training with some features of commodified products. The development of technological sophistication has an great impact on the ways people tend to increase a spiritual awareness with modernized methods and devices. As a result, many people felt to be pious and religious after participating private training classes.

This religious tendency is successfully exploited under many religious training through providing private and public class programs with some costs. What they make use of it is to make a promise on material and spiritual health, a situation in which many people are easily invited to know secret keys of God’s door, blessing and merit. PPA, in this case, is successful in comodifying God’s merit in order to generate a practical solution to hungry spiritual urban people and even *santri* in Probolinggo through private and public training classes.

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Interviews

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