

The Meaning of the Term “Gus” in the Case of Gus Miftah: A Peircean Semiotic Analysis

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Abstract

Miftah Maulana Habiburrahman, widely known as Gus Miftah, is a preacher and the leader of the Ora Aji Islamic Boarding School in Sleman, Yogyakarta. A viral video in which he mocked an iced tea seller using the word “goblok” sparked public backlash and raised questions regarding his use of the honorific title “Gus.” This study aims to analyze the meaning of the word Gus attached to Miftah using Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotic framework. Employing a qualitative method through literature review and historical texts, the study explores the genealogical claims linking Miftah to Kiai Ageng Muhammad Hasan Besari. Using Peirce’s triadic model—Representamen, Object, and Interpretant—the findings indicate that Miftah functions as the object, Gus as the representamen, and the interpretant refers to a lineage of prominent kiai figures affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), used as personal branding. However, based on available records and family statements, Miftah has no blood relation to Kiai Ageng Besari and does not descend from any NU kiai lineage, casting public doubt on his claim to the Gus title. The study urges the public to critically assess religious figures’ claims to noble lineage and suggests further research into the genealogy of Kiai Ageng Besari, given gaps in available records since the 1960s.

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Article History:

Received: August 3, 2025

Accepted: January 9, 2026

Published: January 13, 2026

Publisher:

LPPM Institut Bisnis
dan Informatika
Kwik Kian Gie

Selection and Peer-review
under the responsibility of the
Editor Team of Jurnal
Komunikasi dan Bisnis.

Keywords

Gus, Kiai Ageng Besari, Miftah Maulana Habiburrahman, Charles Sanders Peirce’s Semiotics

 OPEN ACCESS

INTRODUCTION

A video of preacher and Presidential Special Envoy for Religious Harmony and Religious Facility Development, Miftah Maulana Habiburrahman—popularly known as Gus Miftah—went viral in early December 2024. The video showed Gus Miftah mocking and using harsh language toward an iced tea vendor (Awaliyah, 2024) during a religious gathering at Drh Soepardi Field, Sawitan, Magelang, Central Java, on 20 November 2024 (Khotimah, 2024). The public strongly criticized his behavior, particularly his use of the term “goblok” (“stupid”) toward the vendor. As a religious preacher, Gus Miftah is expected to convey religious teachings with empathy and moral integrity, especially in interpersonal interactions (Awaliyah, 2024).

Miftah Maulana Habiburrahman is a well-known religious figure and leader of the Ora Aji Islamic boarding school in Sleman, Yogyakarta. His popularity spans diverse segments of society (Prasongko et al., 2023). Gus Miftah is known for his unconventional preaching style, characterized by his attire (sarong, traditional shirt, blangkon, glasses, and a cane), and his use of dangdut music and humor in delivering religious messages (To, 2023). His "home visit" preaching method includes visiting unconventional places such as cafés, nightclubs, and red-light districts to reach audiences who are spiritually marginalized (Hidayah, 2021). He also embraces a multicultural approach that respects and upholds cultural diversity and differing interpretations of religious practices as a part of divine plurality (Husna, 2021).

This multicultural approach led to his appointment as Presidential Special Envoy for Religious Harmony and Religious Facility Development. According to Presidential Regulation No. 137 of 2024, the Special Envoy is tasked with maintaining religious harmony and fostering international communication grounded in moderation and tolerance (DetikJogja, 2024). Such a role demands excellent public communication skills, defined as the strategic delivery of messages to the public. As both a preacher and presidential envoy, Gus Miftah commonly delivers public messages in open spaces.

However, the viral video in which Gus Miftah insulted the iced tea vendor using the term “goblok” sparked widespread public outrage. Past videos resurfaced showing similar behavior, including derogatory comments toward senior artist Yati Pesek, reinforcing the perception that Gus Miftah lacks the decorum expected of a religious leader. He issued a public apology for his inappropriate behavior and resigned from his official position on December 6, 2024 (Khotimah, 2024).

This controversy has led the public to question the appropriateness of the honorific “Gus” in referring to Miftah. “Gus” is a respectful title traditionally given to sons of esteemed Islamic scholars (kyai), or to santri (students) known for their deep religious knowledge. It may also refer to a kyai's son-in-law or a young kyai considered likely to become a respected religious figure in

the future (Ningrum, 2024). With this title comes the expectation of serving as a moral and religious role model through both teachings and exemplary behavior.

In contemporary Indonesian society, kyai are not only spiritual leaders but also function as political and social influencers (Thoriquttyas, 2019). As the offspring of kyai, individuals bearing the title "Gus" often occupy political positions to boost electoral success, despite ambiguities in knowledge production and social roles (Sutopo, 2016). Consequently, "Gus" figures are perceived as superior in both religious authority and social status. Yet Gus Miftah, instead of upholding these expectations, has frequently used coarse humor that many interpret as offensive and demeaning, prompting some to argue that he no longer merits the "Gus" honorific.

Guided by this context, the present research—"The Meaning of the Term 'Gus' in the Case of Gus Miftah: A Peircean Semiotic Analysis"—seeks to answer the core question: What is the semiotic meaning of "Gus" in the persona of Gus Miftah?. This research aims to explore the meaning of the title "Gus" as used by Miftah Maulana Habiburrahman through the lens of Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory. Peirce's theory examines signs as carriers of meaning, where meaning arises from the interpretation of those signs (Aryani & Yuwita, 2023). Peirce's semiotic model, also known as the triadic or "triangle meaning" model (Nurma Yuwita, 2018), comprises three core components: Representamen (the sign itself), Object (the referent), and Interpretant (the meaning constructed by the interpreter) (Firmansyah, 2022). Peirce refers to a sign as the Representamen; the concept, object, or idea to which the sign refers as the Object; and the meaning derived from the sign—whether impressions, thoughts, or feelings—as the Interpretant (Pitoyo et al., 2021).

In this study, the title "Gus" is analyzed as the Representamen, Gus Miftah as the Object, and the constructed meaning of the title in the context of his persona and actions as the Interpretant. Similar studies have been conducted using Peirce's model. For example, Nurma Yuwita (2018) explored representations of nationalism in the film *Rudy Habibie*, concluding that nationalism was expressed through various signs such as Habibie's dedication to national progress, his parents' values, and his poetic expression of patriotism. Another study by Pitoyo et al. (2021) analyzed the semiotics of the "red zone" during the COVID-19 pandemic in Jakarta using Peirce's framework. Here, the red color was the Representamen, Jakarta the Object, and public interpretation of risk based on limited information as the Interpretant. Aryani & Yuwita (2023) also applied Peirce's model in a study of traffic signs, particularly the "Dead End" symbol, demonstrating that colors, shapes, and labels are socially constructed signs whose meaning is determined by collective human perspectives based on real-world contexts.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic analysis method and a literature study approach. The qualitative approach is understood as a research procedure that yields descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words and observable behavior (Moleong, 2017). Semiotic analysis is defined as a process of examining signs and their meanings. Semiotics encompasses three main areas of study: signs; codes, or systems that organize signs; and culture (Pitoyo et al., 2021).

The researcher applies Charles Sanders Peirce's Semiotic Theory to analyze the meaning of the term "Gus" as used in the name *Gus Miftah*. Peirce's Semiotic Theory is known for its triadic model—also referred to as the "triangle meaning semiotics" (Nurma Yuwita, 2018)—which consists of three components: the Representamen (or Ground), the Object, and the Interpretant (Firmansyah, 2022). In this study, the title "Gus" is analyzed as the Representamen, *Miftah* as the Object, and the socio-cultural meaning of the title "Gus" in the context of Gus Miftah as the Interpretant. A literature study approach is also employed to explore the lineage of Kiai Ageng Besari. The data obtained through this literature review are further elaborated using Peirce's semiotic framework to interpret the meaning of the term "Gus" in reference to Gus Miftah.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Muslim communities in East and Central Java recognize the term "Gus" as an honorific title typically granted to the sons of Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) caretakers or *kyais*, who are acknowledged for their Islamic knowledge but have not yet assumed the title of *kyai* themselves. According to the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (KBBI), the term "Gus" derives from "Bagus," an aristocratic title or a form of address for noble youths, akin to "Bagus" or "Den Bagus."

The third King of the Kasunanan Surakarta, Sri Susuhunan Pakubuwana IV (1788–1820), was addressed as Sinuhun Bagus or Sunan Bagus because he ascended to the throne at a young age and was known for his good looks (Adiprojo 2023). Sunan Bagus was a young preacher who frequently delivered sermons at the Great Mosque of Surakarta. Due to his close ties with religious scholars, he was also known as Sinuhun Wali.

Based on this historical fact, the term *Gus* came to be understood as a young man of noble descent who possesses sound knowledge and understanding of Islam. In subsequent periods, the use of the term shifted to refer to the sons of *pesantren* caretakers or *kiai*. One prominent figure to receive this title was Abdurrahman Wahid, grandson of Kiai Hasyim Asy'ari, founder of the largest Islamic mass organization in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Abdurrahman Wahid was popularly known as Gus Dur (Oetama & Wahid, 2010).

At the NU Congress in Situbondo in 1984, KH Abdurrahman Wahid was elected Chairman of the NU Executive Board (PBNU) (Solahudin, 2012). Although he had become a senior *kiai*, KH

Abdurrahman Wahid preferred to be called Gus Dur—a familiar title from his youth when he was known as an Islamic intellectual. The title *Gus*, as in Gus Dur, became a significant phenomenon in the country, almost granting legitimacy to all *kiai*'s sons in East and Central Java. Following Gus Dur's rise in East Java, another notable figure emerged in Rembang: KH Ahmad Mustofa Bisri, caretaker of the Raudlatut Thalibin Pesantren in Leteh, Rembang, Central Java, known as Gus Mus. Technically, the title *Gus Mus* was no longer appropriate due to his age, but the public had become accustomed to using the title (Roziqin et al., 2009), and it continued to be heard in public discourse.

In politics, another son of a pesantren caretaker entered the political scene through Gus Dur's political party, *Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa* (PKB). He was Abdul Muhaimin Iskandar, son of Muhammad Iskandar and Muhassonah Iskandar, and a great-grandchild of NU's founder through his maternal line, KH Bisri Syansuri, founder of Denanyar Pesantren in Jombang (Sumardi et al., 2024). Although a descendant of a pesantren founder, Muhaimin Iskandar was rarely referred to as *Gus*. Instead, he was more commonly known as *Cak Imin*, reflecting East Javanese culture where young men are addressed as *Cak*. The use of *Cak Imin* strengthened his identity among NU's younger political cadre. However, during the 2024 presidential election, Muhaimin Iskandar adopted the title *Gus Ami*.

This title was appropriate, considering his lineage connected to *kiai* and pesantren founders. The title *Gus* had first been given to his elder brother, Halim Iskandar, known as *Gus Halim*, who served as a member of the East Java Regional Parliament (DPRD) and as the Minister of Villages and Transmigration under President Joko Widodo from 2019–2024. The title *Gus* for the sons of *kiai* in East and Central Java appears to function as a public magnet. It commands great respect and ensures that their messages, grounded in the Qur'an and Hadith, are followed. With the rise of such figures, a new public persona emerged—Gus Miftah.

Gus Miftah, whose full name is Gus Miftah Maulana Habiburrahman, is a young preacher from Yogyakarta. His name gained prominence because he chose a marginalized audience for his da'wah (preaching)—sex workers (Hidayah, 2021) and young people who live distanced from Islamic teachings.

Given this target audience, Gus Miftah adapted his choice of words to ensure his message was accepted. His sermons often include harsh or crude language. For his followers, this was considered normal in interpersonal or public communication. However, Gus Miftah seemed to overlook the fact that in the digital era, every act and message can be recorded and widely distributed, resulting in public reactions. His blunt, often vulgar style of da'wah became controversial in social media.

In early December 2024, a video circulated across TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, X, and online media. It showed Gus Miftah preaching at the *Magelang Berselawat* event at Drh Soepardi

Field, Sawitan, Mungkid District, Magelang, Central Java, on Wednesday (November 20, 2024), where he used the insult *Goblok* (stupid) against a tea seller named Sunhaji (Miranti, 2024). Although the incident and the video's viral spread were two weeks apart, it sparked widespread outrage on social media, with many accusing Gus Miftah of insulting the vendor. Initially, comments criticized Gus Miftah, arguing that as a religious preacher, he should not have spoken harshly in public. Like an incoming tide, the criticisms swelled, prompting even Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim to respond (Barir, 2024), saying a religious figure should not use such language in public.

Public scrutiny then shifted into broader questions: Who is Gus Miftah? Is he worthy of the *Gus* title? Who are his parents? What is his lineage? These questions were valid because the title *Gus* implies being the son of a *kiai* with deeper religious understanding. Gus Miftah's public profile rose in Indonesian politics when he was summoned to the home of President-elect Prabowo Subianto to be appointed as Special Presidential Envoy for Interfaith Harmony and Religious Facility Development (Putranto, 2024). Yet, within 100 days of Prabowo-Gibran's administration, President Prabowo, through Cabinet Secretary Major Teddy, issued a warning to Gus Miftah for using harsh language (Dirgantara, 2024) which caused uproar in both Indonesia and neighboring Malaysia.

Gus Miftah once claimed to be a ninth-generation descendant of Kiai Ageng Besari of Ponorogo (Pebrianti, 2024). Kiai Ageng Muhammad Hasan Besari was born in Tegalsari, Ponorogo, in 1729, the second son of Kiai Muhammad Ilyas and his first wife. His lineage connects to the founder of Pondok Pesantren Gebang Tinatar, Kiai Ageng Muhammad Besari. This unilateral claim was refuted by the descendants of Kiai Ageng Muhammad Hasan Besari. The denial was based on historical records showing no mention of Gus Miftah's family in the lineage (Rinanda, 2024).

According to genealogical data, Kiai Ageng Muhammad Hasan Besari died at the age of 100 on January 9, 1862 (Reinhart, 2021). He left behind ten children and forty-four grandchildren. His body was buried in the family graveyard, attended by local leaders and scholars. His presence in Karanggebang Village greatly influenced the spread of Islam. Leadership of the pesantren was passed to Kiai Kasan Besari in 1862 (Bruinessen, 1995). His daughter married Raden Hasan Ripangi, who became village head of Pohlimo, and another daughter, Raden Ayu Kasan Besari, became village head of Karanggebang. Kiai Kasan Anom died in 1862 and was succeeded by his younger brother, Kiai Hasan Kalipah (1873–1883). Subsequent pesantren leaders were: Kiai Kasan Anom II (1883–1903), Kiai Kasan Anom III (1903–1909), Kiai Moh. Ismangil (1909–1926), Kiai Iksan Ngalim (1926–1931), Kiai Ahmad Amin (1931–1960), and Kiai Al Yunani (1960–1964) (Reinhart, 2021).

This study employs Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotic theory, known for its triadic model: Representamen, Object, and Interpretant. Peirce’s trichotomy is used to analyze the *Gus* title among Javanese Muslims, particularly those affiliated with the NU. The *representamen* in Peirce’s semiotic trichotomy must fulfill two conditions: it must be perceivable (through the senses, thoughts, or feelings) and function as a sign that represents something else. The second component, the *object*, refers to the entity represented by the sign, whether physical or mental. The third component is the *interpretant*, or the meaning derived from the sign. Peirce also referred to it as “significance,” “signification,” or “interpretation.” This study focuses specifically on the use of the *Gus* title for Miftah Maulana Habiburrahman, a preacher and founder of Pondok Pesantren Ora Aji in Sleman, Yogyakarta. In this context, *Gus* is the representamen—understood by the public as a title for a young man from a respected family, particularly pesantren caretakers. The term *Gus* has been widely used in Java since the 17th century.

Miftah Maulana Habiburrahman serves as the object, known nationally as a young preacher with a distinct approach. He focuses his da’wah on marginalized communities who feel estranged from Islam. Most of his target audience comprises those in entertainment venues—often labeled as places of immorality in Islamic terms.

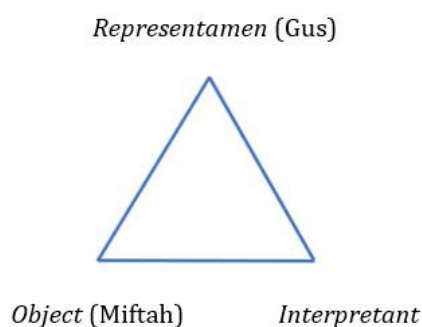


Figure 1. Object, Representamen, and Interpretant of the Term “Gus” in Gus Miftah.

Source: Researcher’s Compilation

“Gus” is a representation of a kyai’s (Islamic cleric’s) son who leads a pesantren (Islamic boarding school) and is expected to inherit the leadership as a future kyai. The title “Gus” refers to someone who has received special Islamic education, either directly from his parents or from studying at another pesantren, and is expected to possess a sufficient understanding of Islam. The scholarly level of a “Gus” is generally above that of the average santri (Islamic student) studying at a pesantren led by the kyai or his father. The presence of “Gus” figures in society, particularly in East and Central Java, where the population commonly studies Islamic teachings under the Islamic mass organization Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), is notable. NU is the largest Islamic mass

organization in Indonesia. Although it lacks an organized membership database, the majority of Muslims in rural East and Central Java follow and study at pesantren affiliated with NU.

NU has many followers, but they do not carry membership cards. Thus, NU administrators created a classification: *structural NU members*, those actively involved in NU and who serve as administrators, and *cultural NU members*, Muslims in rural areas who actively participate in religious and social activities, such as Quran recitation under NU kyai, but are not part of NU's organizational structure. Cultural NU members outnumber structural ones significantly.

This large number of cultural NU members makes the NU mass attractive for various interests, particularly political ones. Since the 1984 Congress in Situbondo, NU declared a return to the 1926 charter (*khittah*), meaning NU no longer participates in politics as an institution. Political matters are left to individual decisions, and NU structural administrators do not mobilize NU mass for political purposes.

The vast NU mass thus becomes a kind of market segment with potential in the business dimension—not as consumers per se, but as a target for business product promotion. Business activities often piggyback on religious events that draw large crowds, primarily for brand image building.

In this context of brand image building, personal branding is also applicable. A person wishing to be known by the public must be present amid the masses—ideally, on stage and gaining public attention. At least two requirements must be met for successful and memorable personal branding: first, identifying personal values; second, associating oneself with another brand.

The object of this writing is Miftah Maulana Habiburrahman, a santri from Lampung, Sumatra, who entered the public sphere as a preacher of Islam, equipped with religious education from pesantren. Miftah attended *Aliyah* (equivalent to senior high school) at Pondok Pesantren Pembangunan Bustanul Ulum Jaya Sakti, and continued his studies at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Huda Sragen. With this background, he emerged as a preacher in Yogyakarta.

Miftah identified himself as a young preacher in Yogyakarta, cultivating a personal brand that appeals to the general public—particularly young people in morally questionable places like nightclubs, karaoke lounges, and brothels—by using diction distinct from other preachers. This approach became his personal trademark.

In the second stage of personal branding, after personal identification, Miftah associated himself with another brand. As a santri raised in pesantren with NU traditions, Miftah naturally remains close to the large NU masses in Indonesia. However, this massive NU following remains *taqlid*—obedient and loyal to the advice of kyai who lead pesantren. NU members follow the teachings of NU figures, especially kyai and their sons (*Gus*).

This leads to the third stage in Peirce's trichotomy: the Interpretant. Miftah felt the need to claim descent from a prominent NU kyai, intending to associate himself with the NU structural brand. NU kyai typically have traceable genealogies. For example, Gus Dur gained popularity by being introduced as the grandson of NU's founder. Muhaimin Iskandar, or Gus Ami, is also known as the grandson of one of NU's founders.

The genealogy of NU founders and elder kyai in Java has strong magnetic power among NU masses. This has led many kyai's children in East Java to use the title "Gus" to show their NU lineage. This seems to have encouraged Miftah to publicly claim that he is the ninth-generation descendant of Kiai Ageng Muhammad Hasan Besari.

By adopting the prestigious name of Kiai Ageng Muhammad Hasan Besari, Miftah positioned himself in the public eye as part of the noble bloodline of prominent pesantren in East Java. His claim is reinforced by his origins from Ponorogo, despite his family later moving to Lampung. The use of "Gus" in his name, becoming "Gus Miftah," created a strong personal brand among Indonesian Muslims.

Gus Miftah introduced himself to the public through religious events he led. Public trust increased when he established the Ora Aji Islamic Boarding School in Yogyakarta. The public interpreted the title "Gus" as legitimate, considering his claimed descent from a renowned East Javanese kyai and his efforts in developing Islam by founding Ora Aji.

Gus Miftah became increasingly agile in socializing with regional and even national elites. He was familiar with Indonesia's 6th and 7th presidents and also had close ties with ministers in Joko Widodo's cabinet. During the presidential election, Gus Miftah served as a campaign team member for the Prabowo-Gibran ticket. As part of the winning team, he was appointed Special Presidential Staff for Religious Moderation.

However, his elite political status and reputation as a prominent Islamic figure suddenly diminished when he went viral for insulting an iced tea vendor during a religious sermon. He subsequently resigned from his special staff position, and the public began to question the authenticity of his claimed descent from Kiai Ageng Muhammad Hasan Besari.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study on the use of the title Gus for Miftah and his claimed genealogy as the 9th descendant of Kiai Ageng Muhammad Hasan Besari, using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic analysis, the following conclusions can be drawn: (1) The title Gus is specifically designated for young men who are descendants of Islamic boarding school caretakers, particularly those affiliated with the NU mass organization; (2) Gus has become a symbol of an honorable title, causing the public—both structural and cultural NU communities—to show respect and obedience to his advice; and (3) Based on data, reference books, and statements from

the family and descendants of Kiai Ageng Muhammad Hasan Besari, Miftah Maulana Habiburrahman has no blood relation to Kiai Ageng Muhammad Hasan Besari and is not a descendant of a kyai with NU lineage. Therefore, the title Gus carried by Miftah is questioned and doubted by the public.

The public should be cautious in following Islamic teachings from preachers who claim genealogical ties to prominent kyai or NU founders. This semiotic study is based on data from reference books and digital media; further in-depth research is needed on Kiai Ageng Muhammad Besari, as genealogical records in the existing books end around the 1960s.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researcher would like to express sincere gratitude to all parties involved in this research, especially to Gunadarma University and TribunNews.com. It is hoped that this work will contribute to the advancement of knowledge and serve as a reference for future research.

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