

# THE CULTURE OF INTERFAITH HARMONY IN INDONESIAN ISLAM

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To be discussed at several university campuses  
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**The Asia Foundation**



WORLD INTERFAITH HARMONY WEEK



# THE CULTURE OF INTERFAITH HARMONY IN INDONESIAN ISLAM

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**WORLD INTERFAITH HARMONY WEEK**



## THE CULTURE OF INTERFAITH AND HARMONY IN INDONESIAN ISLAM

Ever since the breakup of Pakistan into Pakistan and Bangladesh, Indonesia has been practically the largest Muslim nation in the world. Even if it concerns only with the numerical aspect of the phenomenon, the designation spells the importance of the country in the Islamic world, and in that way also in the Third World. Indonesia is also a very large and complex country, constituting thousands of islands that make



Samarinda Harbor, East Kalimantan with a Mosque in the background.



A couple of different ethnic backgrounds during their marriage ceremony.



Doing Shalat at Idul Fitri 1428 H at Sunda Kelapa harbor in Jakarta.

it the largest Archipelago stretching along the equator and extending from Sabang, the westernmost town, to Merauké, the easternmost town, like from London to Teheran.

Despite all of that, it seems that Indonesian Islam lacks the proper recognition by the international scholarship, Western and Middle Eastern, which makes as if Indonesian Islam, and Indonesia in general for that matter, were a *terra incognita*. Is Indonesian Islam really a *terra incognita*? Many observers seem to hold such a view, with some reasons. Culturally speaking, Indonesian Islam is the least Arabized Islam. Arabic is of course the language of Islam par excellence, and the Muslim religious scholars ('ulamâ') read the classical religious textbooks in Arabic. But in the Archipelago they read them in such a unique way as to translate the text word by word into a semi-classical vernacular languages (Javanese



Bodobudur Temple in Magelang, central Java, is an edifice reminding us of Buddhist times in Indonesia.

and Malay in particular) and then understand the meaning and explain it in modern Indonesian languages, national or vernacular.

However, Arabic is not an important medium of communication among Muslims in the area, and Arabic script is used only very sparingly and in very particular occasion. Arabic script for vernacular languages used to be rather popular in the region, with some additional diacritics to symbolize the peculiarly local sounds and pronunciations. Such an especially designed Arabic script is called *Huruf Pego* in Javanese and *Huruf Jawi* in Malay. But the position of *Pego* and *Jawi* could not stand the onslaught romanization sponsored by the Dutch colonial government. Today Indonesians



The harbor of Potrek, South Sulawesi, with traditional boats.



Buddhists in worship. Before Islam entered Indonesia, Hinduism and Buddhism flourished rapidly.

almost exclusively use Roman alphabet, even for the purposes that are obviously related to religion.



The overhauling of boats at Gresik Harbor, East Java.  
This harbor in past days was a place where traders docked temporarily,  
and, at the same time, spreading Islam.



## Islam and the Local Culture of Indonesia

The total absence of Arabic script in public scene could deceive a newcomer to Indonesia as if the country were not Islamic at all. In some respects it may be indeed so. A visitor to Indonesia



Muslims visiting the Chinese Temple Laksamana Cheng Ho.



An Islamic symbol decorating part of the city of Cirebon.

with a certain preconceived Islam, especially its cultural and civilizational expressions, may find Indonesian Islam either unique, or different, or shallow, or even immature compared with Islam in other places. This should be even more impressive because of the sheer number of its adherents (which is very large, about hundred ninety million people) and the magnitude of the country.

It should not be of any wonder then that many scholars, notably the anthropologists and the sociologists, tend to overlook the importance of Islam in Indonesia, and stress instead the prominence of local cultures. Penders, for example, says that

Islam. . . was never able to replace traditional Indonesian civilization in its entirety. This was

▶  
A Muslim student reading an Islamic yellow (?) scripture at Ciomas, Banten.



particularly so in Java. Admittedly Islam brought change to Java, but its impact was often not very deep and many elements of traditional Javanese culture can still be seen fully alive today. After it had first filtered through the civilizations of Persia and India, Islam came to the Indies and was therefore presented to the Indonesians in a familiar mystical garb. And in most parts of the Archipelago the conversion to Islam was initially little more than a formality. The royal courts and the nobility still adhered firmly to the traditional culture into which some select Islamic concepts were gradually absorbed. The Islamic law never succeeded in completely supplanting the order, nor was the



Rita Herawati, a security guard, at the Islamic International Hospital, Yogyakarta.



Studying and teaching at the Islamic School (Pesantren) Nurul Iman, in Parul, Bogor, West Java.



Some of the Arab community at the Institute for the Development of Arabic Language in Ampel, East Java.



The atmosphere of (the night of) Takbir in Tanah Abang, Jakarta.

*'ulamâ'* (Muslim teachers) attempted to interfere too drastically with the traditional social and political status quo they were ruthlessly suppressed. Later during the colonial period the Dutch consistently supported the nobility and the adat chiefs against any encroachments on their authority by “fanatical” Muslims.

At the village level many of the old traditions were gradually covered



Participants from Aceh, training to be apprentices (?) at a Program run by the Center for the Study of religion and Culture at the Islamic University Jakarta.

with an Islamic veneer. Animist and Hindu/Buddhist beliefs and practices continued alongside and often were closely intertwined with the performance of Islamic religious duties. In many ways, then, Java was not Islamized, but Islam was Javanized. . .” Still, more orthodox Islamic pockets have existed since the fourteenth century in the coastal areas of Java, from where they have gradually spread their influence into the interior, mainly through the establishment of *pesantren*, centers of orthodox religious learning. . .

This proselytizing process intensified during the second half of the nineteenth century when as a result of improved communications more Indonesians



An old man reading verses from al-Quran at the grave of Maulana Sultan Hasanuddin who had introduced Islam, in Banten West Java.

A Surau (Prayer house/place) which has been modified in its form.





A Project for building a School which Loves Peace for the people of Ma'had Zaytun, Indramaya, West Java.



Pilgrims to a grave near Cirebon,(West Java) who are taking holy water from a huge container there. They believe this water will give them blessings.



Muslims doing Shalat together at Masjid (Mosque) Istiqlal, Jakarta.

made the pilgrimage to Mecca, where they were imbued with the more authentic spirit of Islam. Many of these *hajis* (pilgrims) on their return to Java set up *pesantren* to spread the true faith.

Yet the number of *santri*-pious, more orthodox Muslims remained relatively small compared with that of the *abangan* (the more syncretic nominal Muslims). It was the Dutch missionary Poensen who was among the first to point out this important distinction between *santri* and *abangan*. This primordial cleavage within Javanese society was



A view of Muslims in the capital city of Jakarta about to do Idul Adha prayers in the yard of Istiqlal Mosque (in the background is the Catholic Cathedral).



Salah seorang perempuan  
aktivis HTI dalam acara  
Konferensi HTI Internasional  
2007, Jakarta

SEMUA BANGGA  
*Menjadi* **IBU**  
GENERASI  
MUSLIM

DPC HIZBUT TAHRIR INDONESIA CIANJUR





A Portrait of the founder of Omas Islam Nahdhatul Ulama (NU), Jombang, East Java.

popularized in the 1950s by the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his book *The Religion of Java* (Christiaan Lambert Maria Penders, *Indonesia: Selected Documents on Colonialism and Nationalism 1830-1942*, [St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1977])

Such is the way many western social scientists look at Islam in the Archipelago. They tend to minimize the significance of Islam for the people in the region, appraising it as more or less a local religion, “religion of Java” or maybe a “religion of Indonesia.” We tried to elucidate the reasons above, one of which is the condition of being very much less Arabized than any other major Muslim nations. The western scholars are thus not entirely to blame, and they are even less so because the Islamic scholarship in the rest of the



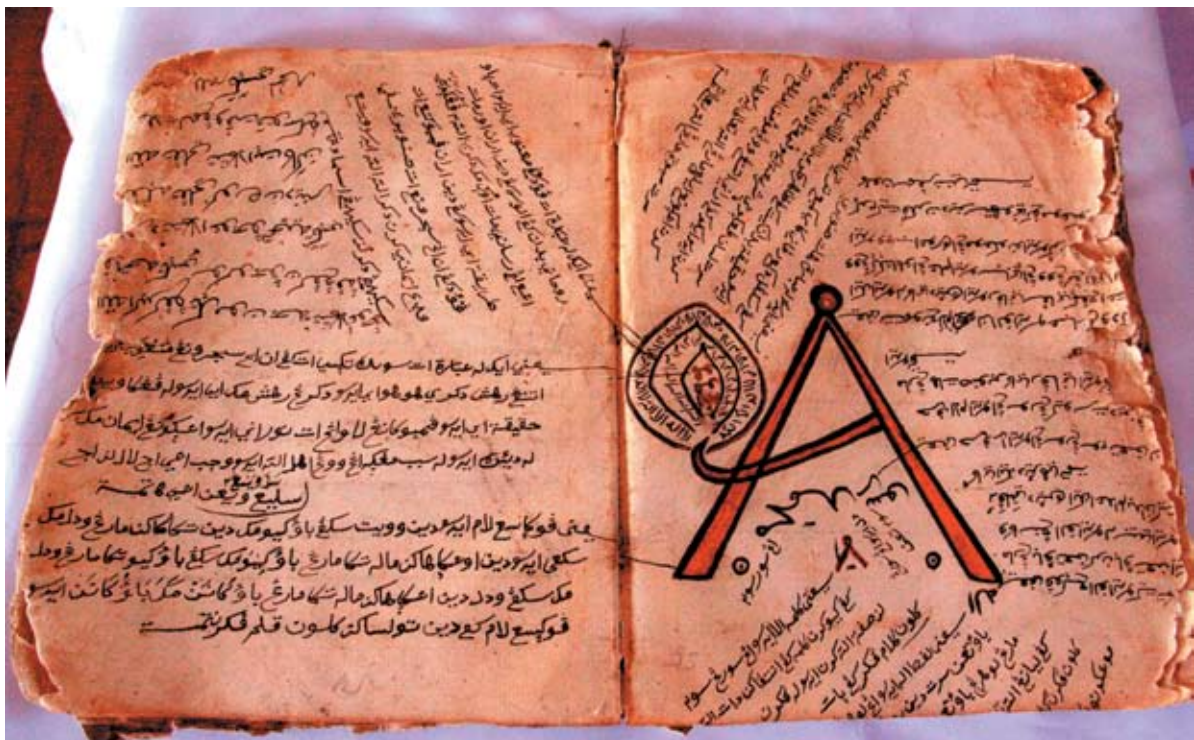
Junior High school students at a carnival to welcome the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan, in Gresik, East Java.

Muslim world (the Middle East and the continental Asia) has not had the least interest in Southeast Asian affairs until very recent times.

Even the scholars who are supposedly knowledgeable about Islam and Muslims in the area tend to consider that Islam in Indonesia is not the true Islam of the Middle East and the continental Asia. It is exotically distinctive, as exotic as the Balinese island culture (Bali is virtually the only place outside the Indian subcontinent and its immediate environment where Hinduism is the prevailing religion). Clifford Geertz, the highly noted American expert on Indonesia, mentioned by Penders, figures that Islam of the Indonesians, especially that of the Javanese, is very much not the Islamic religion as it is perceived universally, and thus the title of his masterpiece, *Religion of*



Dewi Yul reading Rumi's poetry, on the night of remembering 800 years of Jalaluddin Rumi.



An ancient scriptural text written in Arab-Melayu language. It is said that this holy book tells of the problem of tauhid, Banten Giran.

The royal Tomb of the hero, Dipenegoro,  
Makassar, South Sulawesi.



Java. He supports his argument by citing an abundance of appearances that he and his team of researchers “found” at Paré in East Java, a small town that he conceals as Mojokuto in his work. His Indonesian, particularly Javanese, anthropology has been appraised an exemplary work



Doing trade in plastic near the grave of Sunen Ampel, East Java.



▲ Acting Group, Nasyyid from Riau in the performance “Love of Ramadan” in Appreciation Café, Bulungan, Jakarta.

▼ Small children in Arab clothes reciting al-Qur’an as an activity during their school holidays in Padang, West Sumatra.



in the field, and so Geertz becomes the source of stimuli and point of references for many Indonesianists. But for Marshall Hodgson, an Islamicist and an historian from the University of Chicago, Geertz' conclusion is totally wrong and highly misleading. In his book, *The Venture of Islam*, Hodgson very harshly chastises Geertz as someone who does not know Islam but tries to discuss it in his anthropology



Members of a Marching Band in full Muslim dress. For them it is not difficult to wear such Muslim dress.



The tradition in Indonesia of going on pilgrimage to the grave of a holy person is usually done either, before beginning the Holy month of fasting, after Idul Fitri day, or on any main Muslim holy day.



An atmosphere of study at an Islamic Kindergarten in Jakarta.

and misunderstands the phenomenon very badly. Hodgson even says that Geertz has a colonial bias that tries to muffle the importance of the disturbing Islam in the colonies.

The most important study of Islam in Malaysia (i.e., Malay Archipelago—NM) is Clifford Geertz' *Religion of Java* (Glencoe, 1960); it deals with the



Muslim female activists gathering to protest about the rise in fuel prices in Jakarta.





Muslims doing Idul Fitri Prayer in a large number, on a road in Jakarta.



A Cultural Presentation attended by music group Kiai Kanjeng in memory of 1000 days of the death of modern Islamic thinker Nurcholish Madjid (Cak Nur), Jakarta.

twentieth century, and with inner Java in particular, but much in it throws light on what happened earlier and is relevant to other parts of the Archipelago. Unfortunately, its general high excellence is marred by a major systematic error: influenced by the polemics of a certain school of modern Sharî'ah-minded Muslims, Geertz identifies 'Islam' only with what that school of modernists happens to approve, and ascribes everything else to an aboriginal or a Hindu-Buddhist background, gratuitously labeling much of the Muslim religious life in Java 'Hindu'. He identifies a long series of phenomena, virtually universal to Islam and sometimes found even in the Qur'ân itself, as un-Islamic; and hence his interpretation of the Islamic past as well as of some recent anti-Islamic reactions is highly misleading. His error has at least three roots. When he refers to the Archipelago having long been cut off from 'the centers of orthodoxy at Mecca and Cairo', the irrelevant inclusion of Cairo betrays a modern source of Geertz' bias. We must suspect also the urge of many colonialists to minimize their subjects' ties with a disturbingly world-wide Islam (a tendency found also among French colonialists in the Maghrib); and finally his anthropological techniques of investigation, looking to a functional analysis of a culture in momentary cross-section without serious regard to the historical dimension. Other writers have recognized better the Islamic character even in



Group Sholat /Prayer at a Pesantren/Islamic school of around 12.000 students.



Ritual ablution before prayers – a necessary condition of shalat (muslim prayer)



Amak Linari – a well-known Islamic figure from Lombok (“wetu telu”). The scarf tied around his head is typical of Muslim preachers in that area.

inner-Javanese religion: C. A. O. van Nieuwenhuijze, *Aspects of Islam in Post-Colonial Indonesia* (The Hague, 1959), but Geertz stands out in the field. For one who knows Islam, his comprehensive data—despite his intention—show how very little has survived from the Hindu past even in inner Java and raise the question why the triumph of Islam was so complete. (Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 3 volumes [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974], vol. 2, p. 551, footnote).

Hodgson, an internationally acclaimed expert on Islam, thus sees that the Indonesian phenomena observed by many social scientists such as Penders and Geertz as un-Islamic are actually found everywhere in the Islamic world. They are virtually universal to the religion. The case at issue seems to be the problem of acculturation of such a universal teaching as Islam to meet the requirements of



Kiai Alawi Bangkalan preaching to thousands of Muslims at the International HTI Conference in Jakarta.

the local and regional imperative conditions. This has been admittedly an persisting issue, also among Muslims themselves in many places and periods of Islamic civilization. But the fact that Islam is so diverse in the world, despite its great uniformity in many respects, is the incontestable proof of the dynamics of tension and accommodation between the universal Islam and the local cultures. From the view of the Qur'ân, the teaching of the Prophet Muhammad is the same as the teaching of all prophets (Qur'ân, 42:13), and that God has sent prophets to every nation in the world (Qur'ân, 16:36).

It is therefore theologically correct to argue that all nations have the same potential for being rightly guided indigenously, the reality that could prepare a nation for the



Two people doing shalat qobliyah Zhuhur in Ganting Mosque in Padang, West Sumatra.



Regular shadow puppet shows (Wayang) were formerly one way of spreading and sustaining Islamic religious teachings. Here in Surabaya, East Java.



Religious pilgrims still regularly visit the grave of Tjut Nja' Dien to pray to her spirit and remember the good deeds that she, as a heroine/female pioneer, did.

acceptance, and at the same time adaptation, of the more solid and more universally commended symbolism and belief systems. In modern time this “theology” has given the way for such ecumenical approaches to religion as the work of Toshihiko Izutsu and Iwanami Shoten, *Sufism and Taoism*, and the many works of Frithjof Schuon, Martin Lings and Roger Garaudy among the Muslim Europeans.

Based on that view, Indonesians, including the Javanese, have every right to see themselves as possessing the locally conceived truth or some basic elements of it that could be used as receptacle for a universally conceived truth such as Islam. In this way Islam is accepted in its fundamental convictions with some modification in its cultural symbolic expressions. And just as it is the case with Indonesians, it is also the case with the Indians, the Persians, the Turks, and even the Arabs (Islam in the



Mothers demonstrating, demanding the dissolution of Ahmadiyah.



A man waits for a passenger, ready to take him to the Sultan al-Qadri Mosque in Pontianak.

A high-ranking court servant with holy offerings at the Palace in Solo, Central Java.





Arab world is a universal Islam adapted to the requirements of the Arab culture). And while acculturation is appropriate, the imposition of a nation's culture to another nation is not. An example for that line of thought is an excerpt from Shaykh Muḥammad al-Qâhir ibn 'Âshûr, a prominent 'âlim (scholar of Islam) from Tunisia. In his influential and widely studied work, he makes elaboration as to what is in essence the problem of the relationship between religious injunctions and cultural tradition, a thesis that addresses



A muslim student in his humble abode is absorbed in reading “yellow” holy texts in Cidangheang in Banten.



Friendly women selling their wares outside the Sunan Ampel Mosque in East Java.



Small mosques like the one above are commonly seen beside the Barito River in Kalimantan.

the problem of universal ideas versus cultural relativism:

We believe that customs of a nation, as they are customs, should not be brought to other nations to follow, and should not even be kept as such forever by the nation that has such customs. It is true that religious legislation (*tashrî'*) demands the concerned nation to observe their customs (which are the vehicle of the relevant religious legislation) if that nation does not change the customs. This is so because the connection of a religious injunction with a particular custom and the enactment of such an injunction for that particular nation is a prerequisite for them to observe the injunction as long as they are silent about something else that would be



A keeper of the Sultan al-Qadri Mosque praying after shalat Dluha, Kampung Arab, in Pontianak.

contrary to that custom (i.e., they do not change it)...

In the Qur'ân (a verse reads): "O Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters, as well as all other believing women, that they should draw over themselves some of their outer garments (*jilbâb*): this will be more conducive to their being recognized as descent women and not annoyed. But withal, God is indeed much forgiving, a dispenser of grace". This is a legislation that considers a



Sufi children at a program arranged by the tarekat group Naqsabandi Qadiriya Haqqani in Jakarta.



Muslims in Cirebon wearing clothes typical of the Palace.



Participants who have just finished reading al-Qur'an pose in the grounds of the Mosque in Padang, West Sumatra.

custom of the Arabs. Nations that do not know *jilbâb* (as their custom) are not included in such a legislation. Understanding (*tafaqquh*) of this matter and making the conjecture as to comprehend properly the intentions of the legislation in such religious injunctions



Studying reading al-Qur'an in Gontor, East Java.

would shed a bright light for us to differentiate between what is really appropriate principle behind the particulars of the religious laws (*sharī'ah*) to be taken as the principle of reference for other principles of the same value, and what is not really appropriate. The particular injunction of a religious legislation is not all the same. (Al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Qâhir ibn 'Âshûr, *Maqâshid al-Sharī'ah al-Islâmîyah* [Tunis: al-Shirkat al-Tûnisîyah li al-Tawzî', n.d.], pp. 90-91).

Penders mentions the Dutch missionary, Carel Poensen (d. 1919), as a westerner who recognized for the first time the cleavage between the more orthodox Muslims, the *santris* and the more syncretic Muslims, the



The beautiful centuries-old Grand Mosque in Sumenep, on Madura island, stands strongly, even today.



Small children beat drums before and after Friday evening prayers in Pontianak.



A group of worshippers after having performed the history of the birth of the Prophet.

*abangans* among the Javanese. It may be worthwhile to note here that for the Javanese to call oneself a *santri* implies a pride and honor, while only very rarely someone calls himself *abangan*, and quite often it is enough to denigrate a person by calling him an *abangan*. There is indeed some hostility between the two groups of the Javanese, but to consider one group as Muslim and the other as not really Muslim is too far fetched an interpretation of the cultural phenomenon. And if such an interpretation were



Habib Assegaf surrounded by his followers and students, numbering around 12,000, who receive his teachings free, never paying even a penny, at Ponpes Nurul Iman, Parung, Bogor, West Java.



Muslim students of various cultural backgrounds, languages and countries in Gontor, East Java.



A synthesis of Chinese culture is seen in Laksamana Cheng Ho Mosque in Surabaya, East Java.



valid for the Javanese circumstances, it should then be valid for practically every Muslim nation and community in the whole world. And if such were the interpretation for the Islamic circumstances, it should be also the interpretation for any other religious phenomena.

As a missionary, Poensen saw the difficulty of forming a Christian community among the Javanese he recognized as are mostly Muslims. He discovered that the Javanese village feasts and religious feasts are practically identical, and the folk customs and religion were too closely interwoven. Poensen even saw the positive aspects of Islam for the Javanese “because of its opposition to headhunting, the burning of the widows and the Hindu caste system. He could