



## Javanese Santri Islam

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**Abstrak:** Islam di Jawa sangat beraneka-ragam, yang oleh Gertz dibagi secara vertikal menjadi abangan dan santri. Sedangkan secara horisontal, bisa dibagi menjadi dimensi tradisional vs modernis. Awalnya istilah santri adalah pelajar atau pengikut sekolah Islam yang disebut pesantren. Namun, kemudian istilah ini digunakan untuk menamai kelas dalam masyarakat Jawa yang berislam kuat, yang dioposisikan dengan abangan dan priyayi. Dengan adanya pengaruh budaya lokal, timbul pula percabangan dalam Islam di Jawa: Islam Jawa yang bersifat sinkretik, dan Islam modernis yang puritan. Lalu apa yang membedakan santri Jawa dari masyarakat yang lain? Pada dasarnya adalah identitas. Santri secara sadar mengidentifikasi diri mereka sebagai Muslim, dan berusaha sebisa mungkin menjalani hidup sesuai dengan pemahaman mereka sendiri terhadap Islam, entah itu berupa Islam tradisional yang sinkretik, Islam kaum modernis yang puritan, atau campuran keduanya. **Kata Kunci:** *santri, pesantren, Islam Jawa, Islam tradisional, Islam modernis, ortodoks.*

The Western aversion and distrust towards Islam runs deep, in contrast to how 'friendlier' religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism and Hinduism are often considered.<sup>1</sup> Even Westerners better informed about Islam have their concerns, so it is probably not simply a case of a 'misunderstood' religion. Many see Islam as an inherently undemocratic religion, placing restrictions on, for example, women's rights or freedom of religion.<sup>2</sup> To assert that understanding leads to tolerance is not necessarily true. Islam confronts many of the foundations of Western liberal-democratic culture, and by its very nature does not lend itself to be co-opted into the pluralistic, 'tolerant' frameworks of liberal Western societies.

Islam in Java is extremely diverse in the manner of its expression, and highly variable in terms of depth of commitment to the religion. The oft-quoted figure that 90% of the Javanese population embraces Islam is extremely misleading, and in fact, wrong. It is perhaps true that 90% of the Javanese population hold an identity card (KTP) stating that Islam is their religion. However given the lack of



religious freedom in Indonesia,<sup>3</sup> the life-threatening danger of not professing a government-approved religion, and pressure from within the Ministry of Religion and Islamists to inflate the number of Muslims in Indonesia for political reasons, this 90% figure should be summarily dismissed as an untruth.

Muslims in Java are usually divided vertically according to their level of identification with Islam; ie, Geertz's *abangan/santri* dichotomy, with the *santri* much more closely identifying themselves as Muslim. In addition to this, there is also a horizontal traditionalist/modernist dimension within Javanese Islam.

So what constitutes a *santri* Muslim in Java? And how are they differentiated from other Javanese who call themselves Muslim? Originally a *santri* was simply a student or follower within an Islamic school called a *pesantren* (literally, "place of the *santri*") headed by a *Kiai* master. The word 'santri' referred to persons who removed themselves from the secular world in order to concentrate on devotional activities and mystical matters, and *pesantren* were the focus of such devotion.<sup>4</sup> It was only later that the word *santri* was used to describe that particular class within Javanese society that identified strongly with Islam, distinct from the more nominal Islam of the *abangan* and *priyayi*. And indeed, the word 'santri' used to describe a class probably had a lot more to do with the influence of Geertz himself on how Javanese think about themselves. In fact, in common conversation, the word *muslimin*<sup>5</sup> is far more likely to be used to distinguish 'santri' Javanese from other groups within society.

Further complicating this matter is that not all *santri* are alike; within this group itself there exists a wide variety of belief and interpretation of what constitutes 'Islam'. To some extent this reflects the variety of belief held by Muslims the world over, and is generally characterised by a division between 'traditionalist' and 'modernist' outlooks. It can also be depicted as a division between an Islam that has been absorbed to become an integral part of a local culture, and a 'puritan' Islam that sees such cultural adaptation as being contrary to the original aesthetic.

Islam in Java eventually developed into two Islamic traditions that are apparent today; a Javanese Islam with its syncretic characteristics, and a 'puritan', modernist Islam. The first is an Islam within which is infused with a complex mix of animist-Hindu-Buddhist beliefs and concepts, and which is inclined to mysticism. The second is relatively freer of these syncretic accretions, and is much closer to the dogma of the defining Arabian orthodoxy.<sup>6</sup>

Islam did not arrive in Java in its pure, Arabian form.<sup>7</sup> One of the main reasons that Islam was able to take root in Java was due to the particular kind of Islam, Sufism, that emphasised with local traditions and customs, and was itself quite compatible with the pre-existing and highly developed Javanese mystical outlook. Islam was thus introduced with relatively little upheaval into the existing cultural, social and political structures.<sup>8</sup> In addition, amongst the Hindu-Buddhist nobility, Sufi Islam



offered a credible mysticism as an alternative or additional source of mystical power and political legitimation;<sup>9</sup> Islam could be integrated into the wider Javanese search for magical powers.<sup>10</sup>

Because of its mystical outlook, Sufi Islam was more easily incorporated into the traditional Javanese worldview. Towards the end of the 19th century the whole of Java could be considered 'Islamised',<sup>11</sup> however the intensity of this process was uneven across the island. Santri culture was much more concentrated in the trading cities of the north coast, and in cities more generally rather than the countryside.<sup>12</sup> Santri life-styles only really influenced those neighbouring rural settlements where pesantren had been established.<sup>13</sup>

With the development of the modernist movement within Islam, starting with the Wahabic movement in Egypt, and with the increasing number of Javanese Muslims undertaking the Hajj to Makkah after the opening of the Suez Canal,<sup>14</sup> came an increasing awareness that Javanese Islam had absorbed many elements which could be considered in opposition to the 'pure' Islam of Arabia. Santri's began to more consciously differentiate themselves from those holding traditional Javanese outlooks, considering them as irreconcilable with the teachings or the aesthetic expressed in the Koran, and thus increasingly polarising the santri from the abangan. Over the past two decades in particular Javanese society has undergone a process of Islamisation, moving generally towards a deeper understanding and commitment to Islam in the modernist santri style.<sup>15</sup> This has led to further polarisation of the abangan from the santri in contemporary Java.<sup>16</sup>

However, the santri should not be considered as an homogenous group, as they are themselves polarised along traditionalist/modernist lines. It is usually difficult to immediately differentiate 'mystically inclined' traditionalist santri from modernist 'orthodox'<sup>17</sup> santri. Both may well observe the five pillars of Islam, and just as importantly, strongly identify themselves as Muslim.

So what is it that differentiates the Javanese santri from the rest of the population? Essentially, differences can be reduced to identity. Santri consciously identify themselves as Muslims, and attempt as far as possible to live in accordance to their own understanding of Islam, whether this be the traditional syncretic Islam, the purist Islam of the modernist, or mixtures of both.

In terms of belief, the typical santri would adhere to the basic tenants of Islam as laid down within Koran, and the *Sunnah*, which comprises the *Syrah* (Mohammed's life story) and the *Hadith* (Mohammed's saying and customs). The Koran is considered to be the literal word of God, and thus cannot be doubted in any way. The *Hadith*, however, can be the subject of debate and difference of opinion, and it very often is. Consisting of literally hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of separate sayings and customs, and written or conveyed by numerous authors, the *Hadith* is a hotbed of contradiction, dispute, xenophobia and occasionally, downright weirdness.<sup>18</sup>

In terms of their day-to-day behaviour, the santri closely adhere to the formal requirements of the religion, the most obvious of which is *solat*, the ritual prayer undertaken at specific times five times a



day. More than anything else, it is the conscientious performance of *solat* that separates the santri from the abangan. According to Islamic law *solat* is *wajib 'ain* (absolutely compulsory), gaining merit for performance, and punishment for its non-performance.<sup>19</sup> Santri frequently live in areas surrounding mosques called *kauman*. Quite apart from providing a sense of community, living close to a mosque means that the calls to prayer are clearly heard to ensure that every *solat* is performed.

Also *wajib 'ain* is fasting during the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. During this month every able Muslim must abstain from food, drink, sex, immoral acts, and negative thinking from dawn to sunset. In contrast to *solat*, many abangan also follow the fast during this month, though perhaps not as seriously as their santri cousins. Koentzereningerat (1985) claims that Agami Jawi (abangan) Muslims who do not perform *solat* or give *zakat* seldom neglect to fast during the entire month of Ramadan, because it is in accordance with the indigenous idea of *tirakat*, of deliberately seeking out hardship and discomfort for religious reasons.<sup>20</sup>

The contemporary Javanese santri can aspire to performing the Hajj, the pilgrimage to the Holy Land, at least once in their lifetime, usually when they are older. The Indonesian government through the Ministry of Religion provides highly organised packages to the Holy Land for reasonable cost.<sup>21</sup> As a consequence, the high status associated with someone who had undertaken the Hajj in days past has now diminished considerably. The honorific title 'Haji' is now very rarely used when addressing or referring to someone verbally, though the abbreviated title ("H.") will often be used in written forms.

Externally, differences in dress are nearly always apparent in the contemporary santri. *Muslimah* in particular stand apart from non-santri by the wearing of a *jilbab* (full headdress covering the head, ears, and neck, leaving only the face visible). Older *muslimah*, or for the more 'liberal' female santri, a less severe *kerudung* is often substituted, covering only the head leaving much of the hair, neck and ears still visible. Headdress is worn whenever the *muslimah* is outside the house, or whenever she is in the presence of any males apart from her husband, sons, father and brothers. (Some *muslimah* are less strict about this within their own home.) *Muslimah* will frequently absent themselves whenever male guests come to visit, partly due to the reserve that the *muslimah* is expected to show, but often also because they do not want to go to the trouble of wearing their head-dress in order to meet the guest.

Islam defines an *awrah*,<sup>22</sup> or areas of the body considered 'private', for both sexes. The *muslimah* must cover all her body, except for her face and hands.<sup>23</sup> Long, loose-fitting dresses or slacks are usually worn, though in Java many *muslimah* also commonly wear jeans along with a long, loose-fitting shirt. Basically, the female form must be so covered as to obscure the shape of the breasts,<sup>24</sup> hips and buttocks, so as not to arouse the passions or attention of males. This concept of the *awrah* is also extended to female behaviour, with the *muslimah* expected to guard ('cover') her voice and her physical movements, and to avoid drawing undue attention to herself.



The Javanese santri male also wears certain types of clothing, however these are not prescribed by Islam, traditional or otherwise, nor are they worn all the time. The male *awrah* is much less restrictive, between the waist and the thighs, but it is generally considered more polite to completely cover the body, arms and legs. The gamis is a type of loose-fitting, long-sleeved, round-collared shirt worn by santri men, often for formal religious occasions or for Friday Prayers where it is accompanied with a chequered sarung. The *peci*, though not traditionally associated with Javanese Islam, must nowadays be considered part of male santri dress, although abangan Muslims also frequently wear it.<sup>25</sup>

Santri will frequently pepper their speech with expressions of an Arabic flavour, even (perhaps especially) when communicating with non-Muslims or abangan. *Bismillahirrahmanirrahim* ('In the name of God the All Merciful') is an expression used before the commencement of any task, however large or small. This phrase precedes every *surah* within the Koran. The use of this phrase is, however, not limited to santri Muslims; abangan Muslims also frequently use it. Tasks such as starting a motorbike, driving a nail into a wall, sex, speeches, and the slaughtering of meat animals, will all be preceded with *Bismillah* as a remembrance that everything, every action and every word, should be done for God in the name of God.

*Assalamualaikum*, along with its reply, *Waalaikumsalam*, is used when meeting, greeting and farewelling people, and is also frequently used as a formal opening greeting for speeches.<sup>26</sup> Strangely, use of this expression by public officials has declined dramatically since the fall of General (Ret.) H.M. Soeharto in May of 1998.

Santri consider any expression of certainty about the future to be slightly arrogant, and very often use the term *Insyallah* ("God willing") to prefix any statement of positive intent or prediction, or agreement to do something. This expression is also sometimes used as a polite way of saying 'no', or for expressing ambiguity in answer to a question pertaining to something to be done in the future. *Insyallah* also expresses what some see as a rather negative fatalism, allowing Muslims to avoid personal responsibility.<sup>27</sup>

Contemporary santri Islam, in fact modernist Islam in general, is very much an 'outward' religion. The inner dimensions are generally not stressed, and when they are spoken of it is in terms of a very separate 'compartment' of Islam. The modernist aesthetic has had a big impact upon the more mystically-inclined traditionalist Islam, especially over the past two decades. Ritual, outward social behaviour, language and religious identity overshadow the inner dimensions. Sufism and the *tarekat*, although acknowledged, are now viewed with either suspicion or awe. For the vast majority of santri Muslims the only link to mystical dimensions and practices is at funeral ceremonies, where *dhikir* mediation is performed.

Santri Islam in general emphasises ritual, whilst mysticism, in whatever its form, stresses inner, spiritual, or the vertical axis of religion. Santri are thus often perceived as emphasising the material,



literal, or the horizontal axis. The mystic aspires to direct experience with God rather than mere belief or mechanical ritual. Sufi texts make a distinction between *lahir* (outer aspects) and *batin* (inner aspects), and that the outer meaning of the Koran concerns the regulation of outward behaviour (*lahir*), whilst its inner meaning (*batin*) concerns the mystical path and the quest for knowledge about Allah.<sup>28</sup>

Mysticism and magic have always formed a basis of culture for all Javanese, irrespective of their professed outlook. Santri Muslims will often make reference to indigenous beliefs, even whilst at the same time invoking the superiority of Islamic belief. Many avowedly modernist Muslims sometimes ascribe matters to Islam that in fact have their basis within traditional beliefs. At the unconscious level many Javanese beliefs linger in the minds of the santri; Nyi Roro Kidul, the Goddess of the Southern Sea, can still strike fear into their hearts, as can the power of *Kejawen* mystics. Many santri see no contradiction in consulting a *dukun* to cure their ailments, or in believing that *guna-guna* (“black magic”) is often used in matters concerning love relationships, or that *manusia harimau*, people who transform themselves into tigers, inhabit some villages. Indigenous beliefs may tend to fill some of the spiritual vacuum left behind by modernist Islam.

Javanese santri Islam is not monochromic; there is great variability in the way that it is expressed, and in the depth of commitment and knowledge of its adherents. However indigenous mystical beliefs persist in the subconscious of all Javanese, and many traditional practices and ceremonies are still performed,<sup>29</sup> albeit only in a formal manner. Javanese society has become increasingly ‘santrified’ over the past few decades, and the modernist expression of the religion has greatly influenced, outwardly at least, the more mystically-inclined traditionalist Islam. Despite this apparent modernity, however, Indonesian Islam needs to be considered on its own terms, and not just as a branch of Middle Eastern Islam.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Keith Eames *et al.*, *Social and Religious Trends in Asia Pacific Security*, <http://www.acdss.gov.au/acdss/confrnce/1998/98social.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Eames *et al.*, *Social*, [www.acdss.gov.au](http://www.acdss.gov.au).

<sup>3</sup> Of course, there is ‘freedom of religion’ in Indonesia, unfortunately there is no freedom from religion.

<sup>4</sup> Robert J. Kyle, Honors thesis ‘Rethinking Javanese Mysticism: A Case Study of Subud Mysticism’, Dept of Archaeology and Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, Australian National University, Canberra, 1995, [http://artalpha.anu.edu.au/kylero/RJK\\_hp/chap1.htm](http://artalpha.anu.edu.au/kylero/RJK_hp/chap1.htm).

<sup>5</sup> Or *muslimah* when referring to females.

<sup>6</sup> Kyle, [www.artalpha.anu.edu.au](http://www.artalpha.anu.edu.au).

<sup>7</sup> Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Javanese Ethics and World-view: the Javanese Idea of the Good Life* (Jakarta: PT. Gramedia, 1997), p. 35.



<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Kyle, [www.artalpha.anu.edu.au](http://www.artalpha.anu.edu.au).

<sup>10</sup> Magnis-Suseno, *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>15</sup> M.C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c.1300* (London: McMillan, 1993), p. 308.

<sup>16</sup> Some authors take a quite different view of this, claiming (like Ricklefs: 308) that the divisions between the aliran are now less clear, and that such terms as *santri* and *abangan* are now anachronisms. I don't go along with this view; the recent elections should, I think, be proof enough that the aliran are alive and well in Javanese society.

<sup>17</sup> I use the word 'orthodox' here to indicate the Arabian rather than the traditionalist Javanese orthodoxy.

<sup>18</sup> A few modernist Muslim authors, in all seriousness, go as far to say that the Hadith should be completely abandoned. See Kassim Ahmad, *Hadith: A Re-Evaluation*, (Tucson: Monotheist Productions International, 1986).

<sup>19</sup> Mohammed Rifa'i, *Risalah Tuntunan Shalat Lengkap* (Semarang: CV Toha Putra, 1976), p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Koentzereningerat, 'Javanese Religion' in *Javanese Culture* (Singapore: OUP, 1985), ch 5, p. 370.

<sup>21</sup> This last year the cost for an ordinary pilgrim was less than Rp20.000.000, covering air fares, accommodation, food, and guidance. Pilgrims usually stay in the Holy Land for a total of three months.

<sup>22</sup> Or *aurat* in Bahasa Indonesia.

<sup>23</sup> This too, is subject to wide interpretation. As a side note, in supposedly austere Malaysia the arms of Muslim (ie, Malay) women are nearly always left exposed, due almost certainly to a problem of language. In Malay, 'hand' and 'arm' are often not differentiated, being referred to singularly as 'tangan'. This also extends through to Malaysian English, where the word 'arm' is rarely used, and the word 'hand' used to mean either the hand or the arm or both.

<sup>24</sup> For most Javanese women this does not present a great challenge.

<sup>25</sup> I think it would be difficult nowadays to find a non-Muslim wearing a *peci*, and indeed I personally know of some Javanese Christians who would not be caught dead in one, so strong is the Islamic identification. Strangely, I have known several *santris* who strongly deny the *peci*'s solely Islamic association, insisting that anyone can wear one regardless of their religion.

<sup>26</sup> Muslim boutiques in Java sell "Assalamualaikum" doorbells. Even Islam has its kitsch.

<sup>27</sup> John Bousfield, "Islamic Philosophy in Southeast Asia", in MB Hooper (Ed.), *Islam in Southeast Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 1983), p. 99.

<sup>28</sup> Kyle, [www.artalpha.anu.edu.au](http://www.artalpha.anu.edu.au).

<sup>29</sup> One such example is the *tingkeban* ritual marking the passing of six months of pregnancy that is celebrated by many *santri* women.

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