Tina Schott

Syncretism in Indonesian Islam

Every year on Suru 1st, the Javanese New Year, huge processions of ceremoniously dressed people climb up the Merapi, the most active volcano in the world, which is situated just north of the ancient city of Yogyakarta in Central Java. The people, led by the Sultan and his family, bring flowers and fruits, colourful decorated cones of rice and other gifts to be thrown into the smoking cauldrons to ask nature's forces to protect them from any kind of disaster. The same ritual, called Labuhan, is repeated at Parangtritis Beach, which is situated exactly at the southern end of the magic line that runs from Merapi through the Sultan's palace in Yogyakarta to the South Sea, the home of the Goddess of the Ocean.

Actually, Suru 1st matches Muharram 1st, the Islamic New Year every year not just by accident. Most of the worshippers in the Labuhan ceremony, including the Sultan of Yogyakarta, are professing Muslims.

220 million muslims

Indonesia has the biggest Muslim population in the world. Around 90 percent of the 220 million Indonesians declare themselves — at least on paper — to believe in Islam. The religion, though, arrived relatively late in the archipelago nowadays called Indonesia with Arab and Indian traders. Until today many Indonesian Muslims practice a rather syncretistic Islam mixed with cultural and older religious traditions, which is often criticised by religious purists.

There are various interpretations of syncretism. Mostly, it describes the combination of different religions in a contradictory whole. This may be a mixture of thoughts and ideologies of different origins without an inner unity, or else the fusion of mythological and other cultural elements with the teachings of different religions. Often, the word syncretism carries a negative connotation. Critics of it tend to the opinion that syncretists only chose elements from religions and ideologies which they feel comfortable with, whether they fit together or not. Consequently, syncretists are often blamed for being opportunists — in both religious and political questions.

To understand the syncretism in Indonesian Islam, one has to look at the history of the country with its almost 14,000 islands. The first inhabitants were animists who practised ancestor and spirit worship. The first agricultural societies developed a code of behaviour which became the basis of customary law, called adat, which is partly practised

Until today. There are still some peoples left who are animists, as in West Papua or the Mentawai Islands.

When Hinduism and Buddhism spread through the archipelago, they overlaid this ancient culture from the beginning. The two religions, whose earliest remains in Indonesia date back to the fifth century, were also often intertwined and fused with each other and with other beliefs.

Aceh: Terrace of Mecca

The first kingdom to adopt Islam was the state of Perak — today's Aceh province that was badly struck by the Tsunami of December 26, 2004. Up till now, Aceh is still called the 'terrace of Mecca' due to its strong belief. In the 15th and 16th century, Islam spread first to Java, then across Kalimantan and Sulawesi to the Spice Islands in the east as well as to South and West Sumatra.

Until the 18th century Islam in Indonesia was mainly practised by the elites. Although the common people had the religion of their rulers, they continued above all to observe a mixture of their old religious and local traditions. This syncretistic religion is still very common especially on the islands of Sumatra and Java. Very important, for example, are the santrani rituals. Seven days, forty days and a hundred days after the death of a relative, the whole family gathers to remember him. The people express their respect to the dead by wearing traditional clothes.

On the densely populated island of Java, on which half of all Indonesians live, Muslims divide into two main groups: the rather purist, Arab-oriented Santri and the Kejawen — who are also Muslims officially, but who practice a mixture of animist, Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic and local traditions.

These Javanese Muslims believe that the first Islamic preachers in Java were the nine holy men who possessed not only deep knowledge of Islamic teaching but also supernatural powers. Kejawen, however, is not an organized religion but the name for groups practising this syncretistic belief. While in 'pure' Islam for example, women are not allowed to mourn at the grave of a dead person, in Kejawen it is especially the women who prepare the whole funeral ceremony. Dancing, shadow puppet plays and other traditional arts are very important to most Javanese people, while Islamic purists frown on them.

In Javanese thinking, the main target in life is to find the balance between macrocosm and microcosm. The center of the macrocosm is God, the Creator, but his representative in earthly society is the raja (king) or sultan within his kraton (palace).

While the Sultans of Yogyakarta have promoted a rather pure Islam for centuries, the families of the Sultans of Surakarta stand by Kejawen. «My Lord is neither Muslim, nor Christian, neither Buddhist, nor Hindu. He respects all his people with their traditions and beliefs. Therefore he is Kejawen», proudly proclaims a tour guide of Surakarta's Kraton Mangkunegara.

Although Yogyakarta's Kraton is strictly orientated towards Islam, the Sultan there, too, attends rituals like the above-mentioned Labuhan ceremony. «Syncretism is often understood as something negative, but in reality, it just takes some elements from an older culture or religion and links them to a new culture or religion. This is something very human», says Professor Nasabaha, Dean of the Faculty of Postgraduate Studies at the State Institute of Islamic Studies (IAIN), Sunan Kalijaga in Yogyakarta.

Influenced by the origin

«In my opinion, there is no pure Islam. When people for example read the Quran, their reading will be influenced by their origin and culture — and so their interpretation will blend with their own traditions. In the case of Islam, I see syncretism as something positive as long as we treat it rationally», the scholar continues, who is also a leading figure in Nahdatul Ulama.

The Nahdatul Ulama (NU), with 40 million members, is the biggest Muslim organisation in the world. It was founded by a Javanese Muslim scholar in 1926, originally to strengthen Islam against the growing nationalist and communist
movements in the country, but also to oppose the
reformist MuslimiMadhyah, the oldest mass orga-
nisation of Indonesian Islam founded in 1912.
While the MuslimiMadhyah propagates a pure,
moralistic Islam and opposes any fusion with
other traditions, the majority of NU members to-
erate syncretistic Islam. «Many of our legists are
very tolerant towards syncretistic elements. Ne-
evertheless some would like to purify everything
that is not Sunni», says Professor Machasin.

Muslim organisation for democracy

The NU represents a traditionalist orthodox
Sunni Islam, but also brings together Sufi bro-
therhoods. It promotes cooperation between all
teachings. Its spiritual leaders (the Indonesians
call them kiai) can be either legal scholars or Sufi
shaykhs and are believed to be blessed with great
spiritual power. The organisation also promotes
acceptance of all four traditional schools of law,
although in Indonesia the Shafi`i school is predo-
ninant. A very important role in the development
of the NU towards modern democracy was played
by Abdurrrahman Wahid, grandson of the
organisation’s founder. Wahid led the NU from 1984
until1999 when he became the first democrati-
cally elected president since Soekarno. His name
stands for greater democracy in Indonesia, inclu-
ding freedom of expression and religious toler-
ance. In contrast to the NU’s teachings, the Mu-
hamdiyah only accepts the authority of the
Quran and Sunnah and opposes the Sufi brother-
hoods. The 30 million members of the second la-
largest Muslim organisation in the world see them-
sew themselves as a socio-religious movement that seeks
to strengthen people’s morals and purify their faith
from syncretistic elements caused by – in their
view – outdated pre-Islamic ideas.

To begin with, however, the Muhamdiyah
was more tolerant toward syncretistic interpre-
tions of Islam. It was only in the 1990s that the
organisation made itself into the hardliner, which
it is still usually seen as today. «But nowadays we
have become more tolerant again», states profes-
sor Abdul Munir Mulkam, Deputy Secretary of
the Muhamdiyah’s central directorate in Yogyak-
arta. «This is because people’s knowledge is de-
veloping more and more. Their education and con-
sequently their rational understanding of certain na-
tural and social phenomenons have increased. In
former times, natural phenomena were always seen
in a magic context, while there is now a more rea-
listic perception. And although particular rituals are
still practised, the understanding of them is on a
more rational level.»

Abdul, who is also a lecturer at the IAIN Yo-
gyakarta and at the Muhamdiyah University in
Surakarta, believes in education. His organisation
has established a whole school system from kin-
dergarten to university with the aim of providing a
modern but truly Islamic education focussing on
moral teachings. «I myself understand syncretism
as something neutral, as a historical process. We
cannot forget our historical memory. This fact only
proves that our concept of values changes all the
time.»

Hinduism and Buddhism involved

Until today, both the Muhamdiyah and the
NU have remained important and influential po-
ers in politics in Indonesia. While most of the Mu-
hamdiyah now tends to be politically active, the
NU has made a conscious effort to remain indepen-
dent. The NU is in a class establishment in the urban areas, NU follo-
wers mainly originate from the countryside with
their biggest networks in Central and East Java. There one finds a very high tolerance of any syn-
cretistic form of belief, from animism to black ma-
gic. «I am a syncretist and proud of it», NU teacher
Machasin stated. «I was born as a Javane and – if I say Javane, it always means that Hinduism
and Buddhism are involved and other ancient tra-
ditions that were here before any of the big reli-
gions reached Java.

Although I was educated as a Santri and learn-
ed Islamic teachings, I do not know what percent
of what I learned was really Islamic and how much
originate from those Javane traditions», he con-
fessed.

Of course, it is not only on Java that people prac-
tise syncretism. One can find it all over the archi-
pelago. The Muslims on Kalimantan, for example,
are very devout, although they still observe a lot
of ancient animist customs. Or take the Minang-
kabau people in West Sumatra, a strongly Mu-
slim group, whose traditional law allows matri-
archal rule, which usually should presuppose the
male supremacy inherent in Islam.

Strong women

Actually, Muslim women in Indonesia are
quite strong despite the dominant patriarchal sys-
tem that exists in all classes and religions
throughout the country. They are allowed more
freedom than women in other Islamic countries.
They do not have to wear headscarves (except in
Aceh), nor are they segregated – and most oppo-
se the Shari’a and fundamentalist movements.
Muslim men in Indonesia are only allowed to
marry two wives and even then the first wife has
to consent to the second marriage taking place.
Throughout Indonesia, it is the women who in-
itiate divorce proceedings.

More often than not, Indonesian women are
deeply rooted in the various traditions of their own
culture. «The oppression of women has as little to
do with Islam as the so-called Holy War», says
Farha Cicek, spokeswoman of the Muslim wom-
an’s organisation Rahimah. «Only by practising our religion with tolerance towards other
people, we all can really live in peace to-
gether.»

Not surprisingly, Indonesian Islam is often re-
garded condescendingly by other Muslim coun-
tries. Although religion exerts much influence on
politics, Indonesia has always remained a secular
republic. Islamic parties have tried many times to
introduce Islamic law, but until now, none of the
bills brought in has ever passed the nationalist-
dominated parliaments. Shari’a, for example, thou-
gh often discussed, is only applied in a few areas in
a moderate form.

Spiritual essence

«Sometimes I think it is precisely too much
formalism that endangers Islam. If somebody fol-

faith inside, he does not fulfill his task complete-
ly. Neither does somebody who – the other way
around – says that he needs only the spiritual es-
sence, but not the formalities. Someone who
prays five times a day but does not care about his
human behaviour is as mistaken as somebody
who cares about his spirituality, but does not pray»,
NU scholar Machsin explains.

Another Muslim movement in Indonesia op-
posing an Islam that is too literal – meaning an
interpretation of the Quran sticking to word-to-
word translations and superficial formalism – is
the Network Islam Liberal. Almost all the mem-
bers of this group of modern Muslim intellectuals
went to pesantrens (Islamic boarding schools) and
later studied at one of Indonesias State’s Institu-
tes of Islamic Studies. There, a whole new world
of different interpretations of faith and truth ope-
ned up in front of them.

Although the movement is relatively small, it
arouses much controversy among conservative Muslims. The group emphasizes the ethics of Is-


Fatwa calling for Ullt to be killed

«We need an interpretation of Islam which is
able to distinguish between the elements in it
which are the creation of a local culture, and what
are fundamental values», UlltAbdur Abadlla, the
head of the Network Islam Liberal once wrote in
an essay. «We must differentiate in the teaching
of Islam between what appears as the influence
of Arab culture and what does not. Islam is con-
textual in understanding. Its universal values must
be translated into certain contexts, for example
the contexts of the Arabs, the Malays, Central Asia
cetera. But the forms of Islam that are context-
ual only express culture and we are not obliged
Der heilige Krieg auf den Reisfeldern

Der Hidschra-Kalender zur Vorbereitung des antikolonialen Widerstand

In Sungai Tenang und in Serampas im Hochland Zentralsumateras ist ein weltweit einmaliger Agrarkalender in Gebrauch. Reis wird hier durchwegs im ersten Monat der islамischen Lunisolarkalender, Muharram, angepflanzt. Dies hat zur Folge, dass sich der Anbauzyklus jedes Jahr um elf Tage nach vorne verschiebt, so dass er wohl in den einen Jahren, wie es aus landwirtschaftlicher Sicht ideal ist, während der Regenzeit beginnt, in anderen aber während der Trockenzeit, was zwangsläufig mehr oder weniger gute Ernteerträge mit sich bringt. In unmittelbarer Nähe bewaldeten, regenreichen Gebirge Zentralsumateras sind die Jahreszeiten nicht sehr ausgeprägt, so dass ein ganzjähriger Reisanbau durchaus möglich ist.

Schwankende Erträge
