

Tina Schott

## Syncretism in Indonesian Islam

Every year on Suro 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 Java Sea, the home of the Goddess of the Ocean.

Actually, Suro 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,

*Tina Schott is a freelance journalist living in Indonesia since 2002. Before, she wrote for the German magazines Stern and Hörzu. She is particularly interested in the social and cultural background of developments in South East Asia. She is a member of the correspondents' network [www.weltreporter.net](http://www.weltreporter.net).*

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 syncre-

tism. 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 older beliefs.

### Aceh: Terrace of Mecca

The first kingdom to adapt Islam was the state of Perlak – today's Aceh province that was so 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 to adopt 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 in the countryside. Very important, for example, are the selamatan 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 wali songo, 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 exam-

ple, 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 at Surakarta's Kraton Mangkunegara.

Although Yogyakarta's Kraton is strictly oriented towards Islam, the Sultan there, too, attends rituals like the above-mentioned Labuhan ceremony, «Syncretism often is 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 Machasin, 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 Nahdlatul Ulama.

The Nahdlatul 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 Muhammadiyah, the oldest mass organisation of Indonesian Islam founded in 1912.

While the Muhammadiyah propagates a pure, moralistic Islam and opposes any fusion with other traditions, the majority of NU members tolerate syncretistic Islam. «Many of our legists are very tolerant towards syncretistic elements. Nevertheless 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 brotherhoods. It promotes cooperation between all teachings. Its spiritual leaders (the Indonesians call them kyai) 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 predominant. A very important role in the development of the NU towards modern democracy was played by Abdurrahman Wahid, grandson of the organisation's founder. Wahid led the NU from 1984 until 1999 when he became the first democratically elected president since Soekarno. His name stands for greater democracy in Indonesia, including freedom of expression and religious tolerance.

In contrast to the NU's teachings, the Muhammadiyah only accepts the authority of the Quran and Sunnah and opposes the Sufi brotherhoods. The 30 million members of the second largest Muslim organisation in the world see 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 Muhammadiyah was more tolerant toward syncretistic interpretations 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 professor Abdul Munir Mulkam, Deputy Secretary of

the Muhammadiyah's central directorate in Yogyakarta. «This is because people's knowledge is developing more and more. Their education and consequently their rational understanding of certain natural and social phenomena have increased. In former times, natural phenomena were always seen in a magic context, while there is now a more realistic 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 Yogyakarta and at the Muhammadiyah University in Surakarta, believes in education. His organisation has established a whole school system from kindergarten 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 Muhammadiyah and the NU have remained important and influential powers in politics in Indonesia. While most of the Muhammadiyah's members come from the middle class establishment in the urban areas, NU followers mainly originate from the countryside with their biggest networks in Central and East Java. There one finds a very high tolerance of any syncretistic form of belief, from animism to black magic. «I am a syncretist and proud of it», NU teacher Machasin stated. «I was born as a Javanese – and if I say Javanese, it always means that Hinduism and Buddhism are involved and other ancient traditions that were here before any of the big religions reached Java.»

Although I was educated as a Santri and learned Islamic teachings, I do not know what percent of what I learned was really Islamic and how much originates from those Javanese traditions», he confessed.

Of course, it is not only on Java that people practice syncretism. One can find it all over the archipelago. The Muslims on Kalimantan, for example,

are very devout, although they still observe a lot of ancient animist customs. Or take the Minangkabau people in West Sumatra, a strongly Muslim group, whose traditional law allows matriarchal 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 system 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 oppose 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 initiate 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 Ciciek, spokeswoman of the Muslim women's organisation Rahima in Jakarta. «Only by practising our religion with tolerance towards other people, we all can really live in peace together.»

Not surprisingly, Indonesian Islam is often regarded condescendingly by other Muslim countries. 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, though 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 follows all the required rituals, but does not feel the

faith inside, he does not fulfill his task completely. Neither does somebody who – the other way around – says that he needs only the spiritual essence, but not the formalities. Somebody 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 Machasin explains.

Another Muslim movement in Indonesia opposing 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 members of this group of modern Muslim intellectuals went to pesantrens (Islamic boarding schools) and later studied at one of Indonesia's State's Institutes of Islamic Studies. There, a whole new world of different interpretations of faith and truth opened up in front of them.

Although the movement is relatively small, it arouses much controversy among conservative Muslims. The group emphasizes the ethics of Islam, stating that a literal interpretation of religion in their opinion «kills Islam». Life is not as static as a text, the Islamic teachings have to be seen in the context of changes in times and society: Truth is something relative and therefore has to stay open, inclusive and pluralist. The biggest problem of fundamentalists, in the NIL's view, is that they are unproductive, exclusive and out-dated.

### Fatwa calling for Ulil 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», Ulil Abshar Abdalla, 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 contextual in understanding. Its universal values must be translated into certain contexts, for example the contexts of the Arabs, the Malays, Central Asia et cetera. But the forms of Islam that are contextual only express culture and we are not obliged

to follow them.» Thanks to this text, published in Indonesia's biggest daily newspaper Kompas on November 18, 2002, the ultra-conservative Indonesian People's Ulama Forum in Bandung issued a fatwa calling for Ulil to be killed. This group of religious scholars called the text an insult to Islam and said that anybody who insulted Islam should be sentenced to death.

### Right to choose

Ulil, indeed, provoked a large public debate with his article, in which he attacked fundamentalists and their sticking to Shari'a law, while defending people who choose their own form of religion. «What must be followed are the universal values that underlie these practices [of Shari'a]. These values protect the freedom of religion and thought, possessions, family and descendants and honour. How these values are translated into spe-

cific historical and social contexts is the business of Muslims themselves», the intellectual stated.

In plain language, according to Ulil, any oppression of minorities is against the principles of Islam. Consequently, everybody has the right to choose himself what he believes in – even if it is a syncretistic blend of religious and cultural elements. «Every value of goodness, wherever it may be, and its truth is also a value of Islam. Islam (...) is a generic value which can be in Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Taoism and local animist beliefs, etc. It could be that the truth of Islam can be found in Marxist philosophy», the Muslim scholar wrote in the same place.

«I no longer look at the form, but at the content. Islamic beliefs and practices followed by people who call themselves Muslims only as a cloak and a form, are not what is important. What is important are the values hidden behind them.»

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1 Marsden, W. 1986.

2 Dobbin, C. 1983.

3 Ronkel, P. S. v. 1914. Eigene Übersetzung.

4 Van Ronkel übersetzt manabeh irrigerweise mit dem Indonesischen menebas, „Unterholz auslichten“, was keinen Bezug zu den jährlichen Arbeiten auf Reisfeldern hat. Vgl. auch Znoj 2001:322.

5 Kol, H. H. v. 1914. Offenbar handelte es sich bei den beiden Hidschra-Reisanbaukalendern um verschiedene Varianten. Während in Minangkabau der dritte Monat der Erntemonat war, war es in Jambi der neunte. Beide Kalender bewirken, dass die wichtigste Festperiode arbeitsfrei bleibt. In Jambi ergaben sich aus den unterschiedlichen Vegetationsdauern zwischen Tiefland und Hochland Unterschiede von bis zu drei Monaten. Damit überall die Ernte kurz vor oder während des Ramadan erfolgte, musste im Tiefland im vierten Monat, im Hochland aber stellenweise schon im ersten Monat angepflanzt werden.

6 Dare, H. 1986.

7 Klerks, E. A. 1897.

8 Anonymus. 1904.

9 Raay, E. F. J. v. 1902:1f.

10 Anonymus. 1889.

# Heinzpeter Znoj Der heilige Krieg auf den Reisfeldern

## Der Hidschra-Kalender zur Vorbereitung des antikolonialen Widerstand

In Sungai Tenang und In Serampas im Hochland Zentralsumatras ist ein weltweit einmaliger Agrarkalender in Gebrauch. Reis wird hier durchwegs im ersten Monat des islamischen Lunisolarkalenders, Muharram, angepflanzt. Dies hat zur Folge, dass sich der Anbauzyklus je-

des 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 grosse Ernteeinbussen mit sich bringt. In unmittelbarer Äquatornähe im bewaldeten, regenreichen Gebirge Zentralsumatras sind die Jahreszeiten nicht sehr ausgeprägt, so dass ein ganzjähriger Reisanbau durchaus möglich ist.

### Schwankende Erträge

Die Ernterträge schwanken jedoch infolge der Phasenverschiebung zwischen Reisanbauzyklus und Jahreszeiten, wie mir die Bauern in Sungai Tenang berichteten. Der Gebrauch des Hidschra-Kalenders dürfte die durchschnittlichen Ernterträge gegenüber dem optimalen jahres-

zeitlichen Anbau um rund 20% reduzieren. *Heinzpeter Znoj ist Professor für Ethnologie an der Universität Bern. Nach dem Studium von Ethnologie, Neuerer Deutscher Literatur und Philosophie an der Universität Bern unternahm er mehrere Feldforschungen in Sumatra und Java über Themen der ökonomischen und politischen Anthropologie. Das letzte Projekt war den Diskursen über Korruption in Indonesien gewidmet.*

zeitlichen Anbau um rund 20% reduzieren.

Weshalb die Reisbauern dieser Region die offensichtlichen Nachteile ihres eigenwilligen Agrarkalenders in Kauf nehmen, ist nicht leicht zu erklären. Ich werde in diesem Artikel zeigen, dass die Gründe dafür letztlich historischer Na-

tur und im heftigen antikolonialen Widerstand in weiten Teilen Sumatras zu suchen sind. Dieser formierte sich seit dem Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts im Zeichen des Islam. Dabei bediente er sich gelegentlich des islamischen Kalenders zur militärischen Koordination der bäuerlichen Bevölkerung, welche sich ansonsten nur schwer für gemeinsame Widerstandsaktionen hätte mobilisieren lassen. Aus bestimmten Gründen, so werde ich zu zeigen versuchen, ist dieses Zeitregime im Reisanbau in Sungai Tenang und Serampas bis heute – 100 Jahre nach Ende des antikolonialen Widerstandes – beibehalten worden. Längst nachdem die historische Erinnerung an die Ursachen seiner Einführung verschwunden ist, stellt es heute eine in der kollektiven Praxis verkörperte unbewusste Erinnerung an eine Periode dar, die von religiöser Erneuerung, charismatischen Bewegungen und einer beidem zugrunde liegenden, tief