

Book Review

Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization from the Fourteenth to the Early Nineteenth Centuries, by M.C. Ricklefs (Norwalk, CT: EastBridge, 2006), 275 pp. (English). Price \$25.44.
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ABANGAN-ISLAM OR MAKING ISLAM INDIGENEOUS?

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I

To welcome the birthday of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) this year, I wrote a facebook status in Javanese about praises to the Prophet, on Tuesday, 14 January 2014:

Kangjeng Nabi miyosipun wonten Mekkah/Tanggal rolas dino Isnain Taun Gajah/Ingkang Romo Asmanipun Sayid Abdullah/Ingkang ibu Dewi Siti Aminah. (The Prophet was born in Mecca/On Monday, 12 of Elephant year/whose father's name was Sayyid 'Abd Allāh/and whose mother's name was Sitī Aminah).¹

Next day, on Wednesday, 15 January 2014, until 3 PM, I had 17 comments and 105 likes on that status. One of My Facebook friends, Agus Susilo, commented:

Subhanallah, abangku ini fasih sekali melantunkan syiir Jawa untuk mendadah sejarah lahirnya Sang Pencerah. Tembang itu dulu selalu aku lantunkan sebagai puji-pujian di setiap mau melaksanakan shalat jamaah di langgar kampungku di Sragen, Jawa Tengah. Kenangan masa kecilku yang indah di sebuah kampung kecil pinggir Bengawan Solo. Terimakasih bang telah mengingatkanku atas tembang itu.

(Allah the Mighty! My old brother is indeed so fluent that he can sing Javanese words to celebrate the birthday of the Enlightener. I used to sing these words as praises to the prophet before performing congregational prayers at my small mosque at my village, Sragen, Central Java. This is the beautiful memory of my childhood at a village near Solo River... Thank

¹ My Facebook status, Tuesday, 14 January, 2014.

you very much, my old brother, who has recollected me to this words).

The other one, Hama Faizin, gave his comment as well:

Dulu, waktu kami kecil, kami menyanyikannya menjelang shalat berjamaah di mushallah. Sekarang entah. Suara itu lamat-lamat hilang (A long ago, when we were children, we sing this song before performing congregational prayers at small mosque. We do not know anymore today. Now, this sound seems disappear slowly, but factually).

And, a Sundanese, Ahmad Suherman, gave his praises for a comment in his mother tongue:

Nabi urang sararea/Kangjeng Nabi anu mulya/Muhammad jenenganana/Arab Quraisy bangsana/Ramana Raden Abdullah/Ibuna Siti Aminah/Dibabarkeuna di Mekkah/Dinten Senen Taun Gajah (Our prophet/The holy prophet/whose name is Muhammad/Quraish is his clan/His father is ‘Abd Allāh/His mother is Siti Āminah/He was born in Mecca/On Monday of the Elephant year).

This religious song, according to Bunyamin or Abun, my table tennis friend from Singaparna, Tasikmalaya,² and Susi Hamilah, my personal secretary, is similar to a Betawi song entitled “Siti Aisah,” which also has a religious message. The fact that these songs have similarity in some aspects shows us about the contiguity among ethnic cultural groups in Indonesia. Conceptually, however, we are surprised at the development of these local religious songs. Because of this, we are able to experience how penetrative Islam is to penetrate into the culture segment. It can be seen, particularly, by using the Benedict Anderson’s perspective about the process of disseminating the ideas of nationalism and the resurgence of *nation-state* by translating religion books from the *sacred language* into local language.³ Definitely, in Europe citizens’ experience, local language (*vernacular*), by degrees, becomes the national language. In contrast, in our country, the national language has been very dominant since 1920s though,⁴ the local languages do not disappear. Thus, back to the topic, the Islam penetration into the root of local culture is revealed by those songs. In simple view, we can call it as the process of *vernacularization of Islam* (the expressing of Islam messages in local languages). On the other hand, in “comprehensive” view, those songs show us the fact that the Islam track

² On Bunyamin or Abun, see Fachry Ali, “Konvensi Politik Sunda”, *Republika*, 26 November, 2013. See also Fachry Ali, “Toward Sundanese Political Convention?” *The Jakarta Post*, Tuesday, December 17, 2013, 7.

³ Benedict R. O’G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 67-79.

⁴ In this regard, Muhamad Yamin can be considered the main actor. The discussion on the role of this figure in the issuance of Bahasa Indonesia as national language in detail, see Maman S. Mahayana, “Muhammad Yamin: Indonesia dalam Imajinasi”, *33 Tokoh Sastra Indonesia Paling Berpengaruh*, ed. Jamal D. Rahman, et. al., (Jakarta: Kelompok Penerbit Gramedia, 2014), 45-76.

which not only penetrates into the culture, but it also gives the content and sense into the imagination space of citizens who get used to speaking in local language. However, it reveals the *confession* about the faultlessness of a person—and it functions as the role model and worship—which is not originally from themselves. Essentially, are not those songs a *hagiography*, the narration that idealized the figure narrated in local language?

In short, does not it mean “making Islam indigenous” (pribumisasi Islam)—using the phrase introduced Abdurrahman Wahid—when the spirit of religious precept or messages which is in truth indigenous to “foreign country” covered in a *frame* of local culture that can be understood by the citizens?

II

By that approach, probably, we can portray more special perspectives in *abangan* “concept.” In a conversation with M. C. Ricklefs two or three years ago in Jakarta, this Australian historian conveyed his wonder about inadvertence of politico-sociological aspects, as Robert Jay believes, in *abangan* concept—that is assumed that it had occurred in Demak since 16th century. In his masterpiece, Jay wrote about the Islamic variant in Demak Empire era stating that this does not change his conviction or that of his audience that they are all true Muslims and *abangan* at the same time.⁵ By looking up in the Java-Dutch dictionary written by J.F.C. Gericke and T. Roorda firstly issued in 1847, Ricklefs did not find out the vocabulary *abangan* indicating the name of a social group within it. In 1901 issue, the *entry* of this phrase with the meaning above appeared in the dictionary:

In the red, which is what the *santris* call an ungodly person who does not carry out his religious obligations from the red or colourful clothing and the red lips (probably from chewing betel), in contrast to the *wong putihan* as *santris* call themselves.⁶

With this definition, the historical context of the outward period of the phrase *abangan* can be more detected responsibly. And also, the definition *abangan* in Java-Dutch dictionary—which has been translated into English—above, can be concluded that *santris* identifies and defines themselves as the loyal Muslim clan, meaning that being able to do the religious command, and agree with the procedure that has been set. Meanwhile, *abangan* clan only admits that they are Muslim without transforming the attitude and behavior appropriate with the “new” precept. In other words, if we strictly rest on the definition, precisely, *santri* clan

⁵ Robert R. Jay, *Religion and Politics in Rural Central Java* (New Haven: Yale University, 1963), 9.

⁶ M. C. Ricklefs, “The Birth of the Abangan”, *Polarising Javanese Society: Islamic and other Versions (C. 1830-1930)*, ed. M. C. Ricklefs (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2007), 86.

who endeavours to “holed up” or “leave” the tradition and local culture are utterly religion-oriented not coming from their clan and territory. The other way, *abangan* clan shows more the attitude of “affair.” Even though they officially admit as Muslim, they still have a feeling of reluctance to leave their old practices and “old traditions.” What is the “old tradition” concretely?

An American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz—who first introduced the phrases *abangan*, *santri* and *priyayi* to the academic terms—believes it as *true folk tradition* in Javanese citizen. In his explanation about *abangan*, Geertz wrote:

Thus today the village religious system commonly consists of a balanced integration of animistic, Hinduistic and Islamic elements, a basic Javanese syncretism which is the island’s true folk tradition, the basic substratum of its civilization.⁷

To give the contexts, we need to figure out why Geertz named *village religious system* as the life view studied by *abangan* clan. It happened because in a struggle to beat out *the religion of Java*, Geertz figures out three social structures acted by different cultural groups: rice field or village, market and office. While, village is acted by *abangan* clan, market — the calculative and impersonal area to transact stuffs and service — is acted by *santri* clan. The last one, office, which is the authorized area in administration and decision-making process that influences public, is acted by *priyayi* clan. In each social structure, the cultural and self-belief system are prevail. This is what we call as “variant of Javanese religion.”

Intellectually and academically, these formula and construction seem or feel “exotic”. Furthermore, when Geertz says that the axis of syncretism is the village life pattern, he gives *caution* that only few farmers practice syncretism, and urban people are not sure to practice it. However, colour or motif rice field still become the standard of that syncretism. Geertz wrote:

... but many urban people—mostly lower-class displaced peasants or sons of displaced peasants—do.⁸

It means that urban people who still believe in syncretism are they who concern on rice field world, particularly if we notice the people whom Geertz meant: *lower-class displaced peasants or sons of displaced peasants*. Here, although those people have become urban people, the track of village characteristic and influence—which became *basic substratum* of *village religious system*— could be still detected.

However, what is actually *village religious system* applied by *abangan* clan? Geertz answered:

⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 5.

⁸ Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 5.

The abangan religious tradition, made up primarily of the ritual feast called slametan, of extensive and intricate complex of spirit beliefs, and of a whole set of theories and practices of curing, sorcery, and magig, is the first subvariant within the general Javanese religious system which I shall present below.⁹

Based on that paragraph, the religion tradition *abangan*, therefore, rest on ritual feast called *slametan*. Meanwhile, the belief of spirit and healing or indigenous or mysterious theory is the smallest part in the system of “the religion of Java.” Because of limited space and time, we only need to take a look at some ritual examples or *slametan* ceremony in the thing the so-called “the religion of Java”.¹⁰ First is Slametan Kelahiran (Born Day Slametan). One of the parts in the ceremony is the food dedication to prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in order to all participants of *slametan* process is running well. The food dedication is addressed to *Dewi Pertimah* as well. Geertz says that this figure is “*The Hindu Goddess, Fāṭimah*” —i. e. *Muhammad’s daughter with a Hindu title!*¹¹ Second, still in the *slametan* context, the food is a dedication to eight *walis* (saint) who spread Islam in Java, particularly Sunan Kalijaga.¹² And then, the other half, the food is given to the *danyang of the village*.¹³ All about this, Geertz gave a conclusion:

What is immediately striking even in these few examples, however, is the rich mixture of Islamic, Hindu-Budhist, and native spirits, deities and culture heroes into one grand syncretism.¹⁴

III

Beside the food to worship the village spirit (*danyang*), by looking at the *slametan* ceremony or kenduri which is the ritual to dedicate the food to Prophet Muhammad SAW and each saint (*wali*) who spread Islam in Java, can this “*abangan* religion” be said distinctive and different from the “right” Islamic practice? Or this is the process of “Islamization” that has not been finished yet—like what has been shown in comprehensive dissertation that belongs to Bambang Pranowo?¹⁵ Do not this honor to “Dewi Pertimah” which is truly the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter (Siti Fāṭimah) remind us about the influence of Shi‘ah rather than Hindu’s goddess, as Geertz described? And, does not the name of “Dewi Pertimah”

⁹ Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 5.

¹⁰ Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 39.

¹¹ Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 39.

¹² Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 39.

¹³ Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 40.

¹⁴ Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 40.

¹⁵ Bambang Pranowo, *Memahami Islam Jawa* (Jakarta: INSEP dan Alfabet, 2009).

also remind us about the name of “Dewi Sitī Āminah” or “Raden Abdullah,” Messenger’s parents, as sung in Prophet Muhammad’s hagiography in Javanese and Sundanese in the beginning of this paper?

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