

INDONESIAN MUSLIM VALUES, PRACTICES, TERMINOLOGIES AND SYMBOLS REPRESENTED IN RICHARD LEWIS' *THE FLAME TREE*

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Abstract: Islam is one of the official religions in Indonesia, with its adherents constituting the majority of the population. Muslims in Indonesia have their own values in accord with the teachings of Islam, practiced in their daily life and adapted to the culture. Historically, Islam in Indonesia, particularly in Java, was introduced through acculturation. Today's ceremonies accompanying the implementation of Islamic teachings is an example of the daily practice that characterizes Muslims being influenced by the local culture. Moreover, in their everyday life, Muslims in Indonesia often use Islamic terminologies and Arabic words. They include greetings and expressions for starting as well as ending an activity. As for Islamic symbols, the star and the crescent on the top of the mosque dome or a Qur'anic verse put at home or in the workplace are typical representations, distinguishing the Muslims from adherents of other faiths.

Key words: Indonesian Muslim, Muslim values, symbols and terminologies

Abstrak: Islam adalah salah satu agama resmi di Indonesia dengan mayoritas penganutnya. Muslim di Indonesia memiliki nilai-nilai mereka sendiri sesuai dengan ajaran Islam, dipraktekkan dalam kehidupan sehari-hari dan disesuaikan dengan budaya setempat. Secara historis, Islam di Indonesia, khususnya di Jawa, diperkenalkan melalui akulturasi. Kegiatan upacara keagamaan yang ada dapat dilakukan berdampingan dengan pelaksanaan ajaran Islam. Hal tersebut adalah contoh dari praktek sehari-hari yang mencirikan Muslim yang dipengaruhi oleh budaya lokal Jawa. Selain itu, dalam kehidupan sehari-hari mereka, umat Islam di Indonesia sering menggunakan istilah Islam dan kata-kata dari Bahasa Arab. Diantaranya dalam mengucap

salam dan doa-doa untuk memulai serta mengakhiri suatu kegiatan. Adapun simbol-simbol yang diidentikkan dengan Islam juga banyak digunakan, misalnya bintang dan bulan sabit di atas kubah masjid. Selain itu, ayat Al-Qur'an atau penggalannya dalam huruf hijaiyah (Arab) juga banyak diletakkan di rumah atau di tempat kerja sebagai representasi khas yang membedakan Muslim dari penganut agama lainnya.

Kata kunci: Muslim, Jawa, Indonesia, nilai-nilai, simbol, istilah

INTRODUCTION

The majority of Indonesians are Muslims, which makes Islam the dominant religion in Indonesia. Moreover, Indonesia is the country with the largest Muslim population in the world. Its modern history, however, manifests a pluralistic national identity encompassing multiple faith histories.

According to the Pew Research Center report "Mapping the Global Muslim Population", dated October 8, 2009, Muslims in Indonesia comprise 88.2% of the total population, constituting the dominant majority of the population in Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan, West Nusa Tenggara (NTB), Sulawesi and North Maluku. In contrast, Muslims make up the minority of the population in other parts of Indonesia, such as Papua, Bali, East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), North Sumatra and North Sulawesi. There are other acknowledged and official religions in Indonesia—Hinduism, Buddhism, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Confucianism—which coexist and interact with each other. The country takes pride in showing the rest of the world that the majority of the Muslims in the country are tolerant moderates. Indonesia is not an Islamic state, and the constitution guarantees religious freedom.

Muslims in Indonesia, especially in Java, in practicing their religion are greatly influenced by their culture as the spread of Islam in Java by *Walisongo* (the nine holy men) was well adapted with the native culture. Furthermore, Azra (2006) in his paper "Indonesian Islam, Mainstream Muslims and Politics" points out Indonesian Islam's distinctive characteristics compared to Middle Eastern Islam: Indonesian Islam is a moderate, accommodative kind of Islam, and the least *Arabized* Islam.

The term "accomodative" here refers to the fact that Islam in Java accomodates the need and the tradition of the people living in this island.

Ceremonies and other forms of religious rituals in Java performed by Javanese Muslims are evidence of how Javanese culture got well adjusted with Islamic values. And term “the least Arabicized” tells us that Islam in Java is not overloaded by Arabic terms nor dominated by values of Arabic culture.

A novel about Indonesian Muslims, more specifically Javanese Muslims, is interesting to study as it represents their social and cultural identity. This novel portrays Indonesian Muslims in their daily practices, so that it suggests that every practice in this novel represents Indonesian Muslims in general, because a novel is not a dream nor is it guesswork, but it is an imaginative literary work based on facts.

From the previous rationale, Indonesian Muslim values, practices, terminologies and symbols found in Richard Lewis' *The Flame Tree* are intended to be discussed here as those features represent the specific identity of Indonesia Muslims.

Briefly, the setting and the synopsis of the novel may well be presented as follows. The novel tells about the story of Isaac Williams, a twelve-year-old son of American missionary doctors in Java, Indonesia. Isaac is a gifted student and has already mastered the local language. His curiosity has led him out into the community to develop a friendship with an Indonesian Muslim boy named Ismail. Despite their religious, cultural, and economic differences, Isaac and Ismail became playmates and best friends.

The story depicts the ordinary Muslims affiliated with the Muslim Organization called Nahdlatul Umat Islam in Wonobo. They are considered to be the Muslim extremists, doing actions purportedly in the name of Islam, even if those deeds are not in accordance with the Islamic teachings. The leader, Tuan Guru Haji Abdullah Abubakar, fortunately always try to guide them to the right path of Muslim. The extremist Muslims started their attacks against the American Christians in Wonobo, expressing their anti-America sentiments through the street mobs, riots, robbery and looting. Practicing a religion that preaches peace and yet has the possibility to lead to fanaticism, Tanto and Imam Ali treated the American boy badly. They forced him to undergo circumcision, although they were not qualified to perform the procedure, because they insisted that the uncircumcised male is an infidel to the Muslim faith. Tanto's wife, Ibu Halimah, reported about the wicked actions to their leader, Tuan Guru Haji Abdullah Abubakar, after the men had detained Isaac. The boy suffered from malaria relapse and Ibu Halimah was the one who took care of him by administering traditional

medicine. She strongly opposed the detention and admonished her husband to treat Isaac humanely.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

According to Praja (2007), as the world's fourth largest country and the most populous Muslim nation on earth, Indonesia hosts an array of Muslim groups ranging from traditional Muslims to highly liberal ones. The vast majority of Indonesian Muslims can be considered moderate and tolerant, but several radical groups have emerged.

In an article entitled "Javanese Santri Islam", Dean (1999) characterizes Islam in Java as extremely diverse in its manner of expression, and highly variable in terms of depth of commitment to the religion. Muslims in Java are usually divided vertically, according to their level of identification with Islam. Such is evident in Geertz's *abangan/santri* dichotomy, with the *santri* much more closely identifying themselves as Muslims. In addition, there is also a horizontal traditionalist/modernist dimension within the Javanese Islam. Further, he also explains that a *santri* was originally 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* used to refer to persons who removed themselves from the secular world in order to concentrate on devotional activities, and *pesantren* becomes the focus of such devotion. It was only later that the word *santri* came to be used to describe that a particular class within Javanese society that identifies strongly with Islam is distinct from the more nominal Islam of the *abangan* and *priyayi*.

Islam in Java eventually developed into two apparent traditions: a Javanese Islam with its syncretic characteristics and a 'puritan', modernist Islam. The first is an Islam infused with a complex mix of animist-Hindu-Buddhist beliefs and concepts, which is inclined to mysticism. The second is relatively freer of these syncretic accretions, much closer to the dogma of the defining Arabian orthodoxy. However, the *santri* should not be considered as a homogenous group, as its members are themselves polarised along traditionalist/modernist lines. It is usually difficult to immediately differentiate 'mystically inclined' traditionalist *santri* from the modernist 'orthodox' *santri*. Both may well observe the five pillars of Islam and strongly identify themselves as Muslims. Essentially, the differences can be reduced to identity. The member of *santri* consciously identify themselves as Muslims and attempt as far as possible to live in accordance with their own

understanding of Islam, whether this be the traditional syncretic Islam, the purist Islam of the modernist, or mixtures of both.

Moreover, those belonging to *santri* will frequently pepper their speech or communication with expressions of a highly Arabic flavour, even (perhaps especially) when communicating with non-Muslims or the *abangan*. *Bismillahir-rahmanir-rahim* ('In the name of God the All Merciful') is an expression used before the commencement of any task, whether large or small. The use of this phrase is not limited to *santri* Muslims, though; *abangan* Muslims also frequently use it. Tasks such as starting a motorbike, driving a nail into a wall, speeches, the slaughtering of meat animals, or even sex will all be preceded with *Bismillah* as a reminder that everything—every action and every word—should be done for God and in the name of God.

Assalaamu 'allaikum, along with its reply *Wa 'alaikumsalam*, is used when meeting, greeting and bidding to farewell to people. It is also frequently used as a formal opening greeting for speeches. *Santri* adherents consider any expression of certainty about the future to be slightly arrogant, and they very often use the term *Insyallah* ("God willing") to prefix any statement of positive intent or prediction, or any 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 may see as a rather negative fatalism, allowing Muslims to avoid personal responsibility.

Javanese *santri* Islam, however, 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. Many traditional practices and ceremonies are still performed, 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 Indonesian Islam needs to be considered on its own terms, and not just as a branch of Middle Eastern Islam.

In term of value, Ebady (2005) defines Muslim values as those that are created as part of the culture of the Muslim communities. These include the Muslims' day-to-day interaction among themselves along with their outlook on Islam's rules and regulations. The values they formulated may or may not be in accord with Islam. In addition, the symbol emerges from cultural

diffusion and the spread of Islam to the Javanese Muslims who ruled a large area and also put symbols that have become associated with Islam. The symbols are meant to distinguish Islam from other religions. Meanwhile, Islamic terminologies are commonly used by the Indonesian Muslim community. The words are in Arabic. In this study, Muslim terminologies refer to the terminologies used by the Muslim community in Java which are associated with Islamic terminologies, particularly in the Arabic language.

METHODOLOGY

The study uses the method of qualitative research, designed to deal with the complexities of meanings in social contexts. Qualitative research methods are naturalistic (not controlled) and more focused on problems of validating than on those of reliability and generalization. According to Locke et al. (1987) the intent of qualitative research is to understand a particular social situation, event, role, group or interaction. Further, qualitative research is fundamentally interpretative. This means that the researcher makes an interpretation of the data and filters the data through a personal lens situated in a specific sociopolitical and historical moment. The study uses the data taken from Richard Lewis' novel *The Flame Tree*. The analysis proceeds as follows: (1) reading and re-reading the novel, from the first page to the last one, to facilitate recall of the highlight contents; (2) marking the page numbers and paragraphs to ease the reference; and (3) using an operational form list to simplify the analysis. The listed data comprise the following: text, page number, and functions of texts (roles, values and practices, symbols, and terminologies). Aside from reading the novel, the researcher also reads other materials and literature related to it, in order to get additional information that supports the objectives of the study. Like other qualitative methodologies, this study does not use any set of prescribed step-by-step procedure since there is no hard and fast rule in employing qualitative research. Bernard (2000) states that in qualitative research there are several approaches to analyzing the data. This study uses an interpretive analysis. It means that the process is laden with the researcher's attitude and beliefs as well as the assumption that there is no ultimately 'correct' interpretation. Interpretations are open, dynamic and subject to change. The researcher continually interprets the words of the texts to understand their meaning and their directives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Indonesian Muslim Values and Practices

The existing Muslim values in Indonesian society underwent a relaxed enforcement of Islamic laws (Ebady, 2005). When there is relaxation then a distorted concept of freedom is adopted; it gives the Muslims the courage to challenge the Islamic laws and present their own philosophy as to why following the laws is not necessary. They make excuses to oppose the laws and create their own.

Islamic laws contain these inherent values, principles, and priorities: prayer, fasting, charity, hajj, hijab, modesty, kindness as well as practices of observing the obligations to parents, emphasizing the importance of marriage, attending the religious activities at the Islamic centers and mosques, gaining knowledge, and even undergoing circumcision. All of these are designed to build spiritually healthy individuals and society. When the performance of these actions is relaxed, then a void is created and followers become receptive to outside and often un-Islamic ideals.

The Muslim values cited in the novel are the practices that prevail among the Javanese Muslims. One of those practices, implemented in accordance with Islamic teachings, is the required circumcision of young boys, usually done for those in grade school. Toorn (1995) mentions that circumcision is a collective term which denotes various types of operations on human genitalia, male as well as female. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, the practice of circumcision has been an original cultural feature already being practiced before the advent of Islam. It is also practiced by non-Muslims and people who never have any contacts with Islam.

There is a ceremony during which a circumcision is performed on boys, and this is often followed by festivities after the ritual. All practices in connection with circumcision ceremony are of pre-Islamic origin. From this point, it is common that young boys, Muslims or non-Muslims, who do not undergo circumcision during their grade school years are usually mocked by their peers.

Ismail, an Indonesian Muslim boy, underwent circumcision during the age when boys usually go through the ceremony. Isaac, an American Christian boy, has not yet been circumcised although he was of the same age. Ismail calls him an infidel because he has not undergone circumcision at his age.

"...Hey, by the way, I had my circumcision ceremony when you were in America."

"I'm sorry I missed that," Isaac said. "I would have loved hearing you crying and wailing."

Ismail looked offended. "I didn't make a sound." His expression turned sly. "So when are you going to have the blanket taken off your worm?"

Isaac said loftily, "Worms with blankets grow to be bigger snakes."

"Infidel," Ismail said, flashing his grin and punching Isaac's arm (Lewis, 2004, p. 10).

Other pages show how the young American boy has been living in Javanese society, but not yet circumcised. He gets teased by his Javanese peers, and other Javanese Muslims. He is often ridiculed and considered as infidel by others who are disappointed knowing that the young boy has not undergone circumcision yet. They want to perform circumcision by themselves.

Udin said, "A true infidel. Look at that thing. An uncircumcised worm in the blanket."

"Hey, I know, we can circumcise him ourselves," someone said, and tugged hard on his foreskin. (Lewis, 2004, p. 152)

Moreover, circumcision is performed by one who has enough experience in doing so, and not just any ordinary person. Nowadays, in Indonesia, the circumcision may be done, using traditional or non-traditional ways, by doctors or experts.

Ismail added, "Of course, I think you'd had to be circumcised by a cleric, but that's probably the only ritual you'd have to observe." (Lewis, 2004, p. 69)

From these, it can be understood that circumcision is one of the Muslim practices prevailing in the Javanese society of Indonesia, considered to be an obligation for young boys, either Muslims or non-Muslims.

Another value existing in the Muslim society is respect. In their daily interaction, Muslims should respect others, whether fellow Muslims or non-

Muslims. In the novel, the value of how the Muslims interact with the Christians is illustrated in such a way that Muslims can also be teachers or officers in a Christian institution. Page 20 paragraph 1 details how a Muslim, Mr. Suherman, becomes a teacher in a Christian school, while page 22 explains how a Muslim can also attend a Christian church. Both of the descriptions show that Muslims can be part of Christian activities as long as they are not bothering and not being involved in the religious worship.

The one teacher excused from pledging was the new Indonesian language and culture instructor, a Javanese man who spoke perfect BBC English, and from whose amber skin wafted English Leather cologne. The principal, Miss Augusta, asked the teacher to introduce himself. He said that his name was Mr. Suherman, that his father was a banker, that he'd grown up in London, and that he was a Muslim but was honored to be teaching in this Christian school (Lewis, 2004, p. 20).

"...Out of the sanctuary's other side strode Mr. Suherman. He waved a greeting at Isaac, who blurted, "I thought you were a Muslim."

"I am, but that does not mean I cannot attend church," Mr. Suherman said. He bent close, humor rising in his clear black eyes, and said, "Are you praying with the others for my salvation?" (Lewis, 2004, pp. 22-23).

The novel describes how Muslims, who consider others or non-Muslims as infidels for being not in the same faith, are still respecting others because they realize that not everyone can be a Muslim. The novel gives a clear understanding of how Muslims respect Christians implying that in an imperfect world, at least a handful of infidels must be allowed to exist as there are good infidels and bad infidels.

"*Hai*, little Isak, it is true that you are an infidel, but it is also true that not everyone can be a Muslim. In a world that is not paradise, those must be at least a handful of infidels allowed to exist. Hmm?" He patted Isaac on the back, his calloused hands rough against Isaac's neck. A small smile played across his lips and then disappeared. "But let me tell you, little Isak, that there are good infidels and bad infidels. Which are you? (Lewis, 2004, p. 54)"

Respecting others is manifested not only in attending American Christian activities but also in visiting the American Christians who are grieving. Page 88 describes how Muslims sympathize with Americans who are grieving because of the 9/11 attack that killed thousands of people. Although the perpetrators of the 9/11 attack were Muslims, most Indonesian Muslims were against it. It is clearly shown as the *haji* and many other people express their grief and condolences for the American tragedy. They bring dozens of wreaths to be stacked beside the gate, near the signage of the hospital that is run by American Christian missionaries, and also the surroundings of the American compound.

Moreover, although it is actually not in accord with the Islamic value, the Javanese Muslims sometimes still believe in the mystic. For instance, Mas Gatot, an Indonesian Muslim, who lives in Java, is the one whom other Muslims considered as a mystic. Indeed, the worship of the spirit of *keris* blade (a graceful dagger) and the practice of seeking magic charms from *dukun santet* (witches) are also known in the Muslim society in Java. Although they understand that Islamic teachings do not allow Muslims to believe in no one else but the God Almighty, they still believe in such mystical things.

B. Indonesian Muslim Terminologies and Symbols

The symbols associated with the Muslim community include the plaque bearing an Arabic inscription, as if everything that contains an Arabic inscription is to be considered part of Islam. For example, Pak Harianto posts on his barber's wall mirror the plaque bearing the Arabic inscription, a phrase from the Qur'an, "*Bismillah Ar-Rahman Ar-Rahim*", meaning "In the name of Allah the Compassionate, the Merciful". People would assume that Pak Harianto is a Muslim from the symbols he put on in his workplace.

In addition, in their daily interaction, Indonesian Muslims often use terminologies associated with Islam, particularly in the Arabic Language. Common among *santri* or non-*santri*/Muslim *abangan* alike is the use of "*Assalamu 'alaikum*" to greet others along with the reply "*Wa 'alaikumsalam*" instead of the use of the Indonesian language for greeting.

To show their sympathy for sorrow or condolence, Indonesian Muslims often use the Islamic jargon "*Innalillaahi wa innaa ilaihi raaji'un*" meaning "In the name of Allah, to Allah we belong, and to Him is our turn". Such words are not only expressed by *santri*, it has also become common words for Muslims in general during times of suffering or sorrow, while

“*Masya Allah*” is often spoken by Muslims to express astonishment or surprise.

The term *haji* is attached to the Muslim men who have made the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca. Bahtiar (2009) stated that for the people of Indonesia, the title of *Haji* or *Hajjah* is used as a marker for the completion of a series of religious pilgrimage (hajj rituals), and this usually becomes attached in front of his name. For example, the novel refers to the Muslim leader as Tuan Guru Haji Abdullah Abubakar.

Parallel to the use of *haji* to address Muslim males, Muslim women who have made the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca are called *hajjah*. The novel also mentions *Hajjah Wida*, *Ibu Hajjah Yanti* as examples of the common terminology used by Indonesian Muslims. The *Haji* and *Hajjah* are not required titles in Islam, but these terms are commonly used as terms of address in Indonesian society.

Meanwhile, Muslim men also have their own dress code. The novel provides the common view of Muslim men wearing *sarong* and *peci*, which traditional Muslims wear as their daily attire. *Sarong* and *peci/kopiah* also often distinguish Muslims from other religious groups in society. Another accessory worn by Muslims is the turban, usually for the *kiai* or *imam* or Muslim leaders. It is a man's headdress consisting of a long piece of cloth that wraps the small cap and head covering hair. The *kiai* is thus commonly seen wearing *sarong* and *peci* cap completed by his turban.

The identified symbols in this novel are the symbol of colors attached to the dress code of Muslims. Page 88 paragraph 2 describes the dress code for an occasion of grieving, when Muslim women are supposed to be wearing black dresses. Black is associated with grief, sorrow, and condolence. The girls from the *pesantren* are described as wearing green dresses and *jilbabs*. The color green has a special place in Islam and is often used to distinguish it from other world religions, so that this can be commonly found in mosques and other important places. Since the Nahdlatul Umat Islam *pesantren* is one example of Islamic schools or institutions, the green color has become associated with it.

Regarding the symbols used by the Muslim community to represent their faith, however, Islam is so strict on the concept of “no other gods” but Allah and no images of any kind. That is why there are no official symbols or images that have a special place in Islam. The crescent moon and star are an internationally-recognized symbols of the faith of Islam, although technically

symbols of the Ottoman dynasty, which have come to be thought of as symbols for Islam even by Muslims.

“...The central dome soared hundreds of feet into the air, thrusting a pure gold star and crescent insignia up to the clouds...” (Lewis, 2004, p. 26).

The star and crescent can be frequently seen in mosques in Indonesia as the places of worship for Muslims. The five points of star are sometimes associated with the five pillars in Islam, while the moon crescent represents the new month of the lunar system. The Islamic calendar follows the phase changes of the moon. In Indonesia, a mosque usually has a central dome where the loudspeakers are placed to broadcast *adzan*, a call for prayer. The star and crescent symbols are used to distinguish Islam from other religions.

Cornell (2007) states that clothing in Islam, is governed by the principle of modesty. Men must cover themselves from the waist to the knee; women are required to protect their modesty in the presence of persons (outside the family). In deference to the man whom she is eligible to marry, a Muslim woman dresses modestly by covering the entire body, except the face and hands. Women's garments are supposed to conceal the figure done, by wearing a form that is loose and does not accentuate the body.

The Indonesian Muslims can be distinguished as well from the dress they wear. Indonesian Muslim women are commonly seen wearing the headscarf called *jilbab* with its varieties along with the long dress with long sleeves. Those who are wearing such clothes with *jilbab* are considered to be the *santri*. They consciously identify themselves as Muslims and attempt, as much as possible, to live in accordance with their understanding of Islam.

CONCLUSION

The novel *The Flame Tree* by Richard Lewis clearly depicts Muslim practices and values that prevail in the Indonesian Muslim community and nicely co-exist with Javanese culture. It also proves that Muslim values and practices, symbols, and terminologies “operate” together showing specific ways of life of Muslims in Indonesia. They reveal that Indonesian Muslims are moderate Muslims with great social tolerance, and yet at the same time distinguish them from adherents of other religions.

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