

Why Should We Use A Historical Approach to The Study of Islam in Indonesia?

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Abstract: This paper criticizes Geertz's The Religion of Java by applying two pronged tests. First, analyzing how religion places its subjects in their own historical moment. Second, interrogating text for colonial bias. Geertz's book fails both tests according to JanMohamed concepts on Geertz's binarism, he describes a division between "the civilized" and "the uncivilized" in which the civilized penetrates and eventually controls the uncivilized. In this response, I address the general applicability of this historical critic then apply it to my own paper.

Keywords: Animistic (ahangan) Muslims, pure (santri) Muslims, and Hindu-Buddhist (prijaji) Muslims.

THE issue of an ethnographic fieldwork or historical approach to the study of Indonesia is important because it concerns fundamental historical question about the way we study subjects not only empirically but also correctly. Different arguments about this issue have been put forward. This essay will consider arguments for neglecting historical approach and point some of the problems with these views. It will then put forward the introduction of intelligible paradigm which allows us to reveal the phenomena from the past up to the present or from the present date back

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to the earlier time. Depending merely on anthropological approach may lead us to desert a historical approach to the study of Indonesia as this happens to the American Anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his monograph, *The Religion of Java*. This book is the result of his ethnographic fieldwork in Muslim societies in Modjokuto, a small town originally named "Pare" in east central Java in Indonesia,¹ from May 1953 to September 1954.

Geertz argues that animistic (*abangan*) Muslims in this town were the majority, whereas pure (*santri*) Muslims were the minority. Both of these peoples (folks) depended culturally upon Hindu-Buddhist (*prijaji*) Muslims, a tiny group of Westernized and respected people (non-folks or gentry).²

Geertz, then supports his argument by considering animism as the original/primitive religion of Java, and Hindu-Buddhism and Islam as outside influences.³

Geertz bases this category on the empirical data: religious ceremonies or rituals of Muslims of this town. As a

result, Geertz finds that ceremonial safety (in Javanese, *slametan*) in Java contained some prominently animistic elements.

He says that this ritual deals with a complex and difficult belief in an unseen spirit. It also included a theory and practice for healing, witchcraft, and magic. Because Geertz finds that this ceremony was mostly practiced by Muslim peasants in Modjokuto, he categorizes them as animistic Muslims. For this variant, Geertz uses the Javanese term *abangan* Muslim.⁴

Geertz explains that these *abangan* (animistic) Muslim peasants aimed their *slametan* rituals at making the unseen spirit calm,⁵ and at gaining a condition of *slamet* (safety). The practitioners felt *slamet* or safety, when they experienced no burden in their interactions with other people. This condition also enabled the practitioners to feel emotionally balanced.⁶ Because the orientation of *abangan* Muslims had those characteristics of animism rather than Islam, Alice Dewey a friend of Geertz who was also one of the researchers of

Modjokuto, considered the *abangan* Muslims not to be Muslims anymore.⁶

The Religion of Java consists of these three variants. In the first part of his book, Geertz discusses the *abangan* variant.⁷ In the second part, Geertz describes *santri* (pure) Muslims. Geertz finds this pure variant of Islam dominant among Muslim traders and rich peasants. Geertz explains that their religious characteristics were signified by their obedient practice of basic ritual activities in Islam, and by their membership in Islam's various social organizations and political parties.⁸ Geertz says that the pure monotheism embraced by the *santris*, their intensive moralities, their rigid attitudes toward the Islamic doctrine and their exclusive intolerance, made them strange to the people of Java.⁹ For this reason, Geertz claims that these phenomena show why the *santri* Muslims remained a minority in Java.¹⁰ Geertz implies that the animistic Muslims were poor because the pure Muslims were rich peasants.

The last variant was *prijaji*. They, as Geertz describes,

were noble people who became employees of the government in Modjokuto. Their religious traditions stood for the elements of Hindu and Buddha that formed the *prijajis'* world views, ethics, and social attitudes. Most of the *prijajis* were influenced by western education, and their ancestors were Dutch-salaried civil servants. Therefore, for Geertz, although they were small in number, they held the ideological and cultural leadership of all societies. The central values of the ethics of this variant, according to Geertz, were *tri-ma* (receiving circumstances with a relaxed attitude), *sabar* (patience) and *iklas* (sincerity).¹¹

By saying that the *santri* (pure) Muslims were the minority and the *prijaji* (Hindu-Buddhist) Muslims were a small number of people, Geertz implies that animism was the indigenous belief of people in Modjokuto. He portrays Hindu-Buddhism and Islam as immigrant beliefs. Therefore, he reasons that the indigenous beliefs must have been the majority. Here Geertz supports his argument by showing that

although the *prijaji* Muslims were small in number, they were a reflective few: culturally, they were decision-makers.

The Criticism of historical approach to Geertz's empirical-data-based argument

Geertz's generalization that culture comes from *prijaji* Muslims implies a historical shortcoming. I refer to a criticism by the American historian Marshall G. S. Hodgson of the University of Chicago.¹² He says that Geertz's anthropological techniques of investigation disregard the historical dimension.

I agree with Hodgson's criticism because, as Evans-Pritchard states, social cultural anthropology lacks recorded history. Therefore, an anthropologist does not always locate his subject historically.¹³ I use this criticism to create a "historical imagination" that culture also comes from the folks.

To support this argument, I will briefly explain the Indonesian government policy in economy from 1950 to 1954. I refer to *Sejarah Nasio-*

nal Indonesia VI (National History of Indonesia VI) written by two Javanese historians, Marwali Djoened Poesponegoro and Nugroho Notokusanto.

The authors describe that the Indonesian government in Jakarta during 1950 and 1954 enforced *Gerakan Benteng* (Bastion Movement) which aimed to change the economy in Indonesia from a colonial economy to a national (folklorist) economy. The Indonesian government encouraged and supervised Indonesian businessmen, traders, and peasants to develop their economies. The government encouraged them to compete with foreign companies.

The government also offered the natives administrative positions in both local and central administrations (Jakarta). This policy penetrated into Java, where the *Javasche Bank* (Javanese Bank) was nationalized or taken over by the government from foreign stake holders in 1952.¹⁴

The penetration of nationalization of economy might have further encouraged both rich peasants (and traders)

and poor peasants to constantly interchange economic goods and services. In such circumstances, the pure Muslims in Modjokuto must not have been isolated from the other Muslim societies. In addition, Poesponegoro and Notokusanto show that nationalization of economy in Indonesia was firstly conceptualized in 1950 by Sumitro Djojohadikusumo (d. 2001). He was a Muslim who was born in 1917 in East Java and an active member of a Muslim political organization named Masyumi (Majelis Syura Muslim Indonesia); it is a Council of Indonesian Muslim Association that existed from 1945 to 1960 which aimed to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia.¹⁵

Since Djojohadikusumo was an active member of Masyumi whose goal was to campaign for the implementation of *shari'ah* (Islamic law) in Indonesia, I can draw a conclusion that Djojohadikusumo was a pure Muslim. So this simple history of Djojohadikusumo has led me to say that Djojohadikusumo took a part in the *shari'ah* campaign in Indonesia through Masyumi. This im-

plies that he is a devoted or pure (*santri*) Muslim; however, he contributed to conceptualizing the economy of Indonesia from 1950 to 1954 when Geertz performed his fieldwork in Pare. Therefore, an educated man, like Djojohadikusumo, comes from *santri* or pure Muslims and thereby the culture could also drives from them.

Hodgson also notes another Geertz's error: colonial bias. I agree with Hodgson because Geertz, as J. Samuel Preus says, applies Edward Burnett Tylor's evolutionary approach to anthropology.¹⁶ His approach shows a colonial bias because it asserts that the progress in civilization comes first from the civilized.

He describes that there were Good Deity (the civilized) and Evil Deity (the primitive). The cultural forms of the civilized sunk into the primitive. As a result, the primitive has the ability to perfect herself.¹⁷

A. Jan Mohamed says that the literature that describes such dialectical interchange between the civilized and the native was colonialist. This

is why I agree with Hodgson. According to Jan Mohamed, colonialist literature shows the expectation of the civilized that the native should behave according to the civilized's own behavior.¹⁸

I argue in favor of Jan Mohamed because Geertz's argument implies this colonialist text. Geertz situates the folks (animistic/*abangan* and pure/*santi* Muslim peasants) as an image of the westernized Hindu-Buddhist (*prijaji*) Muslims. Jan Mohamed calls such description "imaginary."

I argue that this imaginary description excludes the inner feeling and real experiences of the subaltern. I support my argument with Terry Eagleton and John Berger. Eagleton defines the term "imaginary" "literally untrue" and figuratively "visionary" and "inventive"¹⁹ truth.

Eagleton says that the feeling and experience described in the imaginary literature are ambiguous.²⁰ Here, John Berger's criticism of the meaning of the arts meets with Eagleton's definition of imaginary literature. Berger says that the art²¹ is created

for commodity; for the desire of the buyers (ruling class). Therefore, the art depicts ambiguous experiences.²²

Thus, the inner feeling and experience of the colonized or the oppressed disappears in the imaginary text and art. This exclusion becomes a regular phenomenon or practice; none could escape from it. Therefore, Berger reasons it as a "bogus religiosity."²³ Eagleton regards it as a "modern religion of science."²⁴ Imaginary theory is, then, religion with no real spiritual value. An imaginary theorist does not describe the religion to the degree that one should surrender to God, but to succumb to another god or spirit: the West and its capitalism.

The non-westernized are to be westernized for the benefits of the westernized. The culture originates at this top (the westernized *prijaji* Muslims). This is, I think, the religion of Java that Geertz implies in his *Religion of Java*.

Arnold J. Toynbee's intelligible field of historical study

The period between 1930s and 1960s was the time when European or Western scholars wrote their histories in terms of unidirectional ethnocentrism; civilizations come from above, the West, as we find it in Geertz's monograph of *The Religion of Java* published in 1960.

He based his fieldwork on Muslim societies in Mojokuto from 1953 to 1954. Nevertheless, there was a work, composed during that period, which does not justify this ethnocentrism: Toynbee's *A Study of History* which was published in 1934, and it was republished in 1935 and 1956.

For this reason, Toynbee receives appreciations from other scholars. For example, J. L. Hammond says in the *Manchester Guardian* that Toynbee's approach is the rare tool that scholars need. The rare intellectual equipment needed for so Herculean a task the advantage of experience of public life and contact with foreign scholars and politicians.²⁵

Another appreciation to Toynbee comes from Lord Samuel in John o'London's

Weekly. Samuel regards Toynbee's book as a huge scholarship that can only be done by "a writer with an alert mind and a lively pen."²⁶ Though he wrote not specifically about Indonesia but Great Britain, his denial of dubious generalization is worth receiving attention from us, and that is why I explain briefly about his historical approach that he calls "intelligible field of historical study."²⁷

This approach also has positioned Toynbee's work as a rare and distinct from others, as Hammond and Samuel appreciated.

I understand the term intelligible used by Toynbee here refers to his conceptualization that Great Britain is culturally not isolated though it seems geographically to be isolated. In other words, he explains the fact that the geneses of civilizations of Great Britain interact with foreign influences.

In this case Toynbee classifies that English history is internal history and distant, while foreign influences of other countries are external relations [external histories].

He calls these two resources intelligible field of historical study that should be taken into historical account.

This intangible approach of Toynbee to the study of history is similar to his theory that is impossible for Toynbee and us as historians to understand English without reference to other histories or other countries, and in turn, it is impractical to study of the geneses of civilizations of other histories without reference to the English history. From this intelligible paradigm, A. Toynbee does not feel worried about researching the geneses of civilizations of Great Britain either from the present date back to the earlier times or from the past up to this moment as long as he bases his histories on the intelligible data.

In implementing this idea, Toynbee directs his thought backwards over the general course of English history that is interconnected with other histories as he lists them in the following principle points or chapters as follows: 1. The establishment of the industrial system of economy

since the last quarter of the eighteenth century of our era. 2. The establishment of responsible parliamentary Government since the last quarter of the seventeenth century. 3. The expansion overseas from the third quarter of the sixteenth century with piracy and to a worldwide foreign trade, the acquisition of tropical dependencies and the foundation of new English-speaking communities in overseas countries with temperate climates. 4. The reformation since the second quarter of the sixteenth century. 5. The renaissance, including the political and economic as well as the artistic and intellectual aspects of this movement since the last quarter of the fifteenth century. 6. The establishment of the feudal system since the eleventh century. 7. The conversion of the English from the religion of the so-called "Heroic Age" to Western Christianity since the last years of the sixth century.²⁸

From this list we can see that Toynbee starts his study on the geneses of British civilizations from the recent ti-

mes in the last quarter of the eighteenth century backwards to the last sixth years of the sixth century.

At glance, we as his readers, might assume that the more we look back the less evidence do we find of the geneses of English civilizations. In fact, since Toynbee's approach is based on the intelligible paradigm, he pulls up to combine diverse data, from which he was able to reveal the hidden data that he calls "half a dozen isolated communities of barbarians in the common weal of a nascent Western society".²⁹

As a result Toynbee finds the geneses of civilizations be interrelated between England and other countries. For instance, he discovers the fact that not only England but also had firstly everywhere in the other countries, like the Mayan Civilization with Man's conquest of the tropical forest of Northern Guatemala,³⁰ invented the agricultural technique. This intelligible approach is the way Toynbee dedicated his life as a research professor of international his-

tory in the University of London.

We understand, then, that Toynbee might conclude differently from Geertz that culture can be invented everywhere in the same time by different countries; it is not dominated nor invented only by England.

Conclusion

From the post-colonial criticisms by Hodgson, Jan Mohamed, Eagleton, and Berger, I think that Geertz's evolutionary approach leads him to have an ethnocentrism-complex: considering one tradition to be superior to the other. This approach is not relevant anymore for the study of religion (Islam) in Indonesia which contains the world's largest Muslim population.

Minimizing traditions into the civilized and the native might exclude its cultural diversity. Therefore, a new paradigm of looking at religion or Islam in Indonesia is worth developing. This paradigm is an intelligible historical approach which was conceptualized by Arnold J. Toynbee and merges both internal histories

and external influences to see that other people or folks have also potential to become culture makers. To get this sight, a fieldworker should consider not only empirical data but also this intelligible field of historical study.

In addition, the combination of these two paradigms (anthropology and history) might provide a fieldworker enough knowledge both of the past and the present.

This combination of two paradigms might have fulfilled the suggestion of George Lamming, whose writing is a foundational post-colonialist text. He suggests investigating and projecting the inner experiences of the subaltern (West Indian community) through writing (novel).⁵¹

Endnotes

1. Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, (Illinois: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1960), pp. 1 and 383.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 6, and 227-228.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 228.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-14.
5. *Ibid.*
6. A.G. Dewey, *Peasant Marketing in Java*, (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, Inc., 1962), p. 33.
7. Clifford Geertz, *op. cit.*, p. xi.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
10. Clifford Geertz, "Religious Change and Social Order in Soeharto's Indonesia", in *Asia*, (New York, No. 27, Autumn, 1972), p. 71.
11. Clifford Geertz, *The Religion*, *op. cit.*, pp. 6, and 240-241.
12. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), Volume 2, p. 551, foot note.
13. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Essays in Social Anthropology*, (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe INC, 1963), p. 25.
14. Marwati Djoened Poesponegoro and Nugroho Notokusanto, *Sejarah Nasional Indonesia VI*, (Jakarta: PN Balai Pustaka, 1984), Volume IV, pp. 240-241. The authors of this book refer to the old documents.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 26, 120, 133, 144, 151, 155, 168, 214, 215, 216.
16. J. Samuel Preas, *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud*, (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1966), p. 151.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 148-149. compare to Bruce Lincoln, *Holly Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 20.
18. Abdul Jan Mohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory," in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith, and Helen Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 19.

19. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: Introduction*, (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1996), second edition, pp. 15-16.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.
21. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1977), p. 21, 86-87.
22. See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 54-55. Here, the position of boy kneeling and that of woman sitting while not turning her back to the spectator had nothing to do with kissing.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 21, and 23.
24. Terry Eagleton, *op. cit.*, p. 106.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 487 (back cover)
26. *Ibid.*, p. 487 (back cover)
27. Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History: Introduction: the Genesis of Civilizations*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), Volume I, 7th impression (edition), p. 18.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 18-19.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 484.
31. George Lamming, "The Occasion for Speaking," in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith, and Helen Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 7 (Introduction), and 16. My experience in making acquaintance with the students of The Department of Islamic History and Civilization of Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University from 2006 to the present when I have been a secretary to the department has led me to understand a gap that the students of this department face in the

study of history. The problem would be; the students think of jobs after they graduate on one hand, and they should accomplish their academic assignments, namely writing their undergraduate theses before they graduate, on the other. This paradox has shaped their minds to finish quickly their theses thereby having less desire to write them by tracking carefully primary data or old manuscripts. Doing historical approach to them seems to waste their times to find jobs outside their academic assignments. This paper will consider this attitude to be a myth that the students should shatter and convince them that writing a good thesis in this department is one of the best steps to find job. Therefore, this paper may inspire these students to use historical approach in the wider context.

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Abu Barzah al-Aslami meriwayatkan bahwa Rasulullah saw. bersabda,

﴿لَا تَزُولُ قَدَمَا عَبْدٌ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ حَتَّى يُسْأَلَ عَنْ أَرْبَعٍ عَنْ عُمْرِهِ فِيْمَ أَفْنَاهُ وَعَنْ شَبَابِهِ فِيْمَ أَبْلَاهُ وَعَنْ مَالِهِ مِنْ أَيْنَ اكْتَسَبَهُ وَفِيْمَ أَنْفَقَهُ وَعَنْ عِلْمِهِ مَاذَا عَمِلَ بِهِ﴾

"Pada hari kiamat nanti, dua kaki seorang hamba tidak akan bisa melangkah sebelum ia ditanya tentang empat perkara: digunakan untuk apa umurnya? Dihabiskan untuk apa waktu mudanya? Dari mana ia mendapatkan hartanya? Digunakan untuk apa hartanya tersebut? Dan digunakan untuk apa ilmu yang didupatkannya?" (HR Tirmidzi dan ad-Darimi)