

# STUDIA ISLAMIKA

INDONESIAN JOURNAL FOR ISLAMIC STUDIES

Volume 15, number 1, 2008



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Indonesian Journal for Islamic Studies

Vol. 15, no. 1, 2008

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STUDIA ISLAMIKA (ISSN 0215-0492) is a journal published by the Center for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM) UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta (STT DEPPEN No. 129/SK/DITJEN/PPG/STT/1976). It specializes in Indonesian Islamic studies in particular, and South-east Asian Islamic Studies in general, and is intended to communicate original researches and current issues on the subject. This journal warmly welcomes contributions from scholars of related disciplines.

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STUDIA ISLAMIKA has been accredited by The Ministry of National Education, Republic of Indonesia as an academic journal (SK Dirjen Dikti No. 23a/DIKTI/2004).



## Harmonizing modernity with tradition

Report on the Indonesian Delegation  
of Teachers and Pesantren Heads to Japan 2007

Arief Subhan

In recent years, the Japanese Government—through its embassy in Jakarta—has run a yearly program in which teachers and pesantren heads from throughout Indonesia are invited to Japan to participate in a cultural tour of the nation. One of the program's main objectives is to strengthen ties between Indonesia and

Japan, especially in the realms of culture and education. In organizing this program, the Embassy of Japan works with the Centre for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM), its in-country partner.

The 2007 visit was themed "Development Harmonized with Traditional Culture". As well as visiting a number of

education institutions, which was the focus of the trip, the group also took a look at various types of Japanese industry, including the automotive industry that has become the icon of modern Japan. Further to this, the group was also invited to visit a number of shrines and temples — which in modern times have become a popular tourist attraction — and witness some traditional art events. What was most interesting was the *Kabuki*, the traditional Japanese theatre which continues to be popular to this day.

On the final day of the visit, the participants were asked to write about their impressions of Japan, with emphasis on the aspect of the tour which they found to be most interesting. This article, which is based on feedback from the participants, has not been written only in order to describe the perceptions of the participants towards places visited throughout the tour, but to further discuss how the participants gave meaning to what they experienced throughout the trip.

### Education Institutions

Education institutions that were visited include a primary school, an industrial high school, an agricultural high school, and a university. Of the institutions visited, participants were most impressed by the Nougie Agricultural School in Kyoto. This school provides education for prospective farmers and others seeking to work in the field of agriculture. The school boasts an impressive range of facilities including an agricul-

tural laboratory. Students at the school live in dormitories making it a perfect reference for those seeking to develop and improve pesantrens.

Muhammad Amin Adnan, head of Pesantren Amanah, Poso, in Central Sulawesi, noted that the agricultural activities taking place in the school provided inspiration for the building of an agricultural school within the confines or near his own pesantren. Such an idea, in Adnan's view, is

particularly relevant since the economy of Poso is based largely on agriculture. Such views were echoed by Said Karim from Pesantren al-Kautsar al-Khairat, also in Poso. He himself, in fact, wants to establish an agricultural school in the pesantren he manages. Yunus Muhammadi, the caretaker of Pesantren Imam Syuhodo, Solo, Central Java, has already taken this idea to the planning stage. "I'm presently in the middle of starting up a secondary school for agricultural studies so this visit is very relevant for me", he explained.

Another participant, Muhammad Adhim, a representative from Pesantren Tamirul Islam, Solo, Central Java, was extremely impressed by the student residences at the school. "The dormitory system [here] reminds me of the system in Indonesia. The difference is that in this school [the students] are not taught about religion, but only about modern agriculture. What is more important than that, this school is able to integrate both the teaching of both theory and practice in a balanced manner." Nasruddin Lahmuddin Midu, the head of the

local Poso Office for the Department of Religious Affairs, agreed with Adhim, while Fathur Rahim, the caretaker for Pesantren Manbaul Ulum, Bali, reiterated the suitability of this system for development and application in the Indonesian context, especially in pesantrens. What was impressive for Fathur Rahim was the family atmosphere. "This reminds me of a pesantren, which is also very family-oriented."

The visit and discussion at Tokyo University for Foreign Studies (TUFS) was most impressive for Abdul Shomad, the head of the Bureau for Academic Administration and Student Affairs at the State Islamic University Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta. He said that the visits to the education institutions opened the door for productive dialogue and understanding between the two countries. "I was impressed when the students who participated in the dialogue wore the *kerudung* (Muslim dress for females). They wore the *kerudung* only out of respect for their Muslim guests." This does not only indicate the increasing interest in Indonesian studies, but

further teaches us the value of tolerance and appreciating difference.

Other educational institutions that were visited were also of considerable interest, however the participants generally agreed that the most

interesting were the agricultural schools. The discussion in Kyoto University was clearly both beneficial and interesting, with participants obtaining comprehensive information about the education system in Japan.

### Temples, Tourism, and Buddhist Monks

The participants visited a good number of shrines and Temples in Japan, the most interesting of which was a Buddhist temple complex of Todaiji, or the Great Eastern Temple. It is known as such because it is situated east of Heijo-Kyo, the capital city of Japan during the Nara period (710-794). This temple has been listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage site, namely because its Great Buddha Hall (*Daibutsuden*) is reputedly the largest wooden building in the world. The hall houses a colossal bronze statue of the Buddha Vairocana (*Daibutsu*).

The central Buddha statue has been recast several times for various reasons throughout its history, while the *Daibutsuden* has been rebuilt

twice due to fire damage. The main building (*Daibutsuden*) which exists today was actually built at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (1709), and in spite of its huge size it is claimed to be only thirty percent of the original size.

During the rule of Emperor Shomu (724-749), Todaiji was the central shrine for more than 60 provinces (*kokubunji*) throughout Japan. Besides being a place of worship and Buddhist rituals, Todaiji was also a centre of study for prospective *bhiksu*, or Buddhist monks. In 1190, Honen, the founder of the first independent branch of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism (*Jodo Shu*), was asked to teach in the Todaiji Shrine by Bhiksu Shunjobo Chogen, the *bhiksu* responsible for the reconstruction

of Todaiji after a fire in 1180. While teaching, Honen also put on display the paintings of *Kangyo Mandala*, best known in the West as "The Five Chinese Masters of Jodo Shu."

Interestingly, what was most enlightening for the participants was not the beauty of the temple itself, but rather the dialogue that took place at the temple between the participants and Bhiksu Morimoto, the senior *bhiksu* at Todaiji. Morimoto, who studied previously at al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, had a very good understanding of Islam and was thus easily able to .

The participants' interest in inter-religious dialogue — or it might be said inter-cultural dialogue — should be noted here. Interest in such dialogue shows that dialogue with groups from other religions or cultures is not only important for heads of madrasahs and pesantrens, but also very interesting. The positive response to this dialogue shows that the participants are a group of Muslims who are open to new ideas and differences in society. For a number of the participants, the dialogue with Bhiksu Morimoto represented the first time participants had

had such discussions with an individual or individuals of another culture or religion.

Nasruddin Lahmuddin Midu, a participant from Poso—one who has seen first hand conflict and inter-religious violence — sees Bhiksu Morimoto as a shining example of a religious figure who should be emulated by others. "This is because he really appreciates difference," said Nasruddin. Rini Nurfatimah agreed that much could be learned from the example of Bhiksu Morimoto besides his ability to understand Islam. "He is a *bhiksu* who is modern and moderate in viewing religious differences. He also places emphasis on the importance of *comparative study of religion* as a subject that should be taught at religion-based education institutions." Inter-religious group harmony, dialogue, common understanding between members of religious groups is the basis of the primary argument suggested by Bhiksu Morimoto in dialogue. In Kyai Ketut Mahdudin Jamal's own words, "Bhiksu Morimoto possesses considerable insight and respects diversity. I think he is most fitting to become a world leader."

### Traditional Arts

*Kabuki* is a type of traditional theatre in Japan. When compared with traditional art in Indonesia, *Kabuki* has not changed as drastically as has the *wayang orang*, a kind of dance drama theatre in Javanese tradition. The difference is that while *kabuki* is still largely popular amongst locals, *wayang orang* has declined in popularity; and while *kabuki* is identified with a form of Japanese culture that is noble and progressive, *wayang orang* is associated with being behind the times.

The group was invited to watch *Kabuki* performance in the *Kabuki-za Theatre*, located in Tokyo. The theatre was first opened in 1889 with a seating capacity for 1,824 people. Over two decades, *Kabuki* became the biggest and most popular theatre in Japan. In 1921 the building caught fire — because of a short circuit in the electricity — however it was renovated 1923, and has since been renovated a number of times to ensure that the theatre keeps up with the times.

The group also had the opportunity to see a *kimono* fash-

ion show in Kyoto, in a central shopping district where tourists flock to year after year. All types of *kimonos* can be found there, as well as textiles and material for making *kimonos*, not to mention traditional Japanese nick-nacks for the souvenir seeker. For those who are interested in this type of thing, *kimonos* in bright colours and a blend of beautiful and natural Japanese designs can be bought directly from the market. Despite a good level of interest in the *kimonos* on the part of the participants, the relatively high price of the *kimono* appeared to be the deciding factor in the participants' choice to spend their Yen elsewhere.

The *kimono* show is a manner of promoting something traditional in a modern setting. This enables the *kimono* to maintain its relevance and popularity in a modern context. Such an approach to promoting traditional art and culture naturally provided participants with inspiration and lessons for promoting their own art and culture in Indonesia. This is particularly true



of the pesantren culture: the challenge is how to present pesantrens in the modern context and relate it to the demands of modern society. The

appearance of modern technology, however, in and around many pesantrens is an indication of a positive change in the right direction.

### Changing Perceptions

This two-week visit to Japan by heads of madrasahs and pesantrens undoubtedly was one that changed the visitors' perceptions. Siti Nurfatimah was extremely factual in expressing her new-found perceptions. She explained that Japanese society is one that is "disciplined, honest, and friendly. The culture of lining-up, keeping a city clean, and an atmosphere of complete order in the train stations are all indicators that cannot be ignored." Nurfatimah's views were agreed upon by the vast majority of the participants. Although the participants knew prior to their departure that Japan was a country that other Asian nations look up to, it was living

amongst the people and experiencing the culture first hand that enabled participants to really understand the differences today between Japan and Indonesia. "When I see how the culture of lining up is here at the bus stop, I can really tell the difference between the Indonesian culture of lining up and that of Japan," said Siti Makbullah.

Most of the participants said that Japan was in many ways not how they had imagined it prior to their visit. This in itself is proof that perceptions have been changed. This will naturally be of great benefit to cooperative efforts between the Indonesian and Japanese peoples in the future.