
SUFI ISLAM AND SYNCRETISM IN JAVA: AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL SECULARISM

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the influence of animism and Sufi Islam in Java. It will show that the accommodating approach of Sufism and its tolerance of syncretism was a factor in the spread of Islam in Java. It will be argued that this syncretism also opens a place for certain local forms of interreligious tolerance and prepares for what is known in Indonesia as *pancasila*. Many modern versions of secularism while porporting to be accomodating to religion have become hostile to religious belief. But Indonesian forms of secularism and pancasila emerge from these deeper religious roots, which are often overlooked. Nowadays, with greater global influence, this syncretism and religious tolerance is under threat. This paper will suggest that an appreciation of the Sufi and syncretic origins of Indonesian thought can serve to strengthen modern understandings of pancasila and secularism. This can work to mitigate hostility and sectarianism. By maintaining itself as an approach which harmonizes with Western concepts of secularism, yet with a deeper religious framework, Indonesia can maintain a tradition of toleration, which respects multiculturalism and religious pluralism in resistance to more intolerant religious movements

Keywords: Islam; Java; Sufism; Pancasila; Syncretism; Secularism

Introduction, “*Islam Nusantara*”

Prior to the advent of Islam in Java religious life took the form of animism. This was slowly influenced by the introduction of Hindu and Buddhist doctrines and practices that once combined and intertwined, offered a fertile “*syncretic matrix*”¹ for both magic and mysticism. This spiritual amalgamation also included animist practices such as, the veneration of powerful souls, spirit cults, and the worship of holy places.

Islam Nusantara or the Indonesian Islamic model is a distinctive form of Islam, essentially developed in “*Nusantara*” or the Indonesian archipelago, beginning in the 16th century, as a result of the process of interaction, contextualization, indigenization, interpretation, and veneration of universal Islamic values which adapted to the diverse socio-cultural entities of Indonesia.²

Islam Nusantara is also defined as an interpretation of Islam that takes into account local Indonesian customs and is compatible with Indonesian cultural values. This led to the implementation of “*Pancasila*” as a mechanism to establish Indonesia’s nationhood and its determination to create post-colonial national solidarity based on the respect of religious diversity and toleration. This rendered Indonesia as the most pluralistic and diverse nations in the South East Asian region. It also strengthened Indonesia’s ability to follow the basic principles of civil society.

Indonesia / Central Java: “An Empire of the Spirit”

The establishment of a monotheistic faith like Islam in Central Javanese society was the outcome of long time cultural collisions that occurred as a result of mercantile trade since the medieval era of Asia. This was done in a way which didn’t threaten the older forms of local culture, which were based on the aristocratic as well as hierarchical values

and traditions. This allowed the older religious practices to survive and maintain themselves, while simultaneously embracing and welcoming the advent of a monotheistic faith like Islam. The Islamic transitory period starts from the foundation of the earliest kingdom of “*Demak*” around 1479 after the conquest over the “*Hindu Majapahit kingdom*” and ends with the beginning of Dutch colonization of Java in 1619, during that time remnants of Hindu-Buddhist influence were very visible in the Javanese mosques.³

With each of the cultural influences that occurred, the Javanese notion of “*the Other*” or the foreigner began a slow *metamorphosis*, an amalgamation which resulted in a complex cultural as well as religious syncretism of local indigenous traditions, Hinduism, mysticism, and monotheistic Islam.

The introduction of monotheistic Islam into the region put the final touches on a unique diverse amalgamation and resulted in *Kejawen Islam (Javanism)*.⁴ The word for “*kejawen*” or “*kejawaan*” in Indonesian is Javanese-ness and Javanism. The latter word is a descriptive label for those elements of Javanese culture that are considered to be essentially Javanese, according to this religious context South-Central Javanese civilization centering in the royal courts of Surakarta and Yogyakarta, is generally known as *kejawen*. One needs to understand the advent of Islam in Southeast Asia not as an “*imported Muslims praxis and metaphysics*”⁵ but as a merging.

The result of Indonesia’s syncretic merging could also be viewed as subtle process, creating what is known as the “*two-tiered microcosm–macrocosm duality*” (*jagad alit-jagad gedhe*)⁶ where old traditions that are based on animism and social hierarchy and monotheistic Islam go hand in hand. This socio-cosmic dualism accommodated the spread of *Islam Nusantara* in Indonesia over the past centuries.

The Javanese term, “*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*” (*unity in diversity*)⁷ was created by the Javanese people themselves to emphasize their very own unique identity as well as cultural divergences. Java has been a center where mystical animism, Hindu-Buddhism, and Islam co-existed

peacefully together, moving toward a land of tolerant syncretic religion and a rather peaceful consociational melting pot.

The outcome of these powerful political and cultural influences is the perfect and unique syncretism of plural religions. This led to the creation of a society based on the belief in pluralism with provided a strong base for religious tolerance, inclusivity as well as civic morality.

Pancasila as the National Doctrine of Post-Colonial Indonesia

This “*Islam Nusantara*” or “*Kejawen Islam*” (*Javanism*) led to the principle of “*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*” (*unity in diversity*) a principle which eventually transformed Indonesia into “*An Empire of the Spirit*” and “*A Pillar of Tolerance*” that accomodated a plurality of religions.

The related doctrine of “*Pancasila*” is composed of five principles that are inseparable and interrelated. in Javanese society, there are several ways to prevent conflict, and maintain “*plural order*” as well as social harmony. According to Alexander Seran, former president President Sukarno’s concept of Pancasila involved the idea that the struggle for recognition requires a kind of Habermasian communicative action in order to preserve cultural identities while establishing universally validating principles of morality. It also involves a dialectic process in negotiating different cultural worldviews involving economy, culture, and politics. And it involves the recognition that we must meet cultural diversity *half-way* through the use of a suitable “*moral grammar*”⁸ to construct better arguments for all affected and to increase the capacity for all parties to make decisions which benefit them equally. So “*Pancasila*” is compatible with the search for a *moral grammar*, through which the dreams of a new world can be built, and the vision of this so-called new world is the world that is nonetheless “*secularized*” and based on inclusivity, divergences, variations as well as plural religious toleration.

To achieve this goal is not al all an easy task. There is much resistance to the idea that “*syncretic religion*” is a key towards the process of demystifying divergencess and variations or tolerance in Indonesia, and if so what kind of additional social mechanisms are needed?

Kejawen Islam (Javanism) or *Nusantara Islam* is perhaps the preferable answer to unlock any rising social or cultural tension which keeps on arising as a result of extremism or radical political ideologies entering into public discourse by the fundamental groups who adhered their intransigent stance on *Hannabite / Wahabite Reform* or above all the ever increasing *Global or Neo-Salafist Revival*.⁹ The rise of all these opposing factions clearly poses such modern threats to the cultivation of pluralism in Indonesia and rendered the spread of “zero tolerance” rather than the much more preferred cosmopolitan atmosphere of “consociational divergences”

Religious Pluralism Under Siege : Indonesia’s Worrying Prospects

The *Nusantara* archipelago, which used to enjoy a tolerant atmosphere has unfortunately deteriorated into a breeding ground for some forms of extremism in the post-World War II period. This has led to the rise of a more “puritanical” form of the Islamic faith or “*Political Islam*” to develop and gain more acceptance amongst the locals who used to practice religious tolerance in the past. The advent of “*Political Islam*” in the shape of “*Hanbalite*” and “*Wanhabite*” reform began to grow and become more intense over the last few decades in this once harmonious region.

According to a recent study, the development of a new form of “*Puritanical Islam*” in the second half of the twentieth century is currently taking place notably in the Central Javanese region, a land which used to enjoy peaceful harmony. The multicultural religious coexistence in the region in the past centuries is now under threat due to the rise of extremism.

One example of the spread of radicalism is the group *Jemaah Islamiyah* or *Jl*. In recent years, the faction has emerged as a fairly powerful group. It originated from the “*Darul Islam*” a well-known militant group in Indonesia that was highly active in their fight against the Dutch Forces in the 1940s and also against the Indonesia government during 1950-1965 with the aim to establish a *Islamic Caliphate* in Indonesia.¹⁰

The co-founder of *Jemaah Islamiyah* are *Abdullah Sungkar* and *Abu Bakar Baasyir*, two notable Muslim scholars whose ultimate goal is the implementation of Islamic law or “*Shariah*”. They established what is also known as *Pesantren AL-Mukim* or the “*Pondok Nguki*”¹¹ in *Solo, Central Java* which later on metamorphosized into a center of radical ideology in the region. This is the roots of the advent of new Islamic movements such as “*Global Salafism*” or home-grown “*Jihadism*” in Indonesia, which began to subvert and destabilize regional security and ultimately obstructed religious pluralism in the area once known to the rest of the world as a nation of “*Pancasila*” where great cultural resilience and religious toleration went hand in hand.

Sufi Mysticism And Cultural Assimilation

For Indonesia to maintain its tradition of civic tolerance and its role as a multicultural nation, secularism must be rethought and appreciation must be given to the long tradition which involved the influence of Sufism and syncretism. In order to understand how this is possible, we need to look back at how Sufi mysticism was assimilated by the locals into the Central Javanese region. Monotheistic Islam came to the Indonesian archipelago in the 13th century and was introduced by Sufi Saints, nomadic teachers who later produced many written treatises, among all of these notable works is the concept of “*Tasawuf*” in Sufism, which is also a special term for mysticism in Islam.

The ultimate goal of “*Tasawuf*” is to have a direct and close relationship with God. The essence of “*Tasawuf*” is the awareness of the existence of communication and dialogue between the human spirit and God.¹² This created a kind of individualize worship which was tolerant to other belief systems.

The indigeneous people of Central Java held mystical views before the advent of monotheistic Islam, and held on to their tradition very tenaciously, whether it came from the local culture or the teachings of Hinduism or Buddhism which had arrived centuries earlier. With this similarity of beliefs between Islamic mysticism and the local mystic beliefs

allowed the teachings of Sufism and Islam to be easily assimilated into the indigenous culture and was gradually accepted by the locals without much resistance.

The spread of Islam since the 13th century occurred rapidly in Indonesia ever since, yet mystical ideas have been warmly welcomed in Java. It had energized a new mysticism as well as “*syncretic dynamics*”¹³, both in terms of cultural, scientific, as well as the social life of religious communities.

The Sufis also adopted the use of symbols, concepts, and ornaments which clearly derived from a syncretic mixture of Hinduism, Buddhism, and animism. This led some to comment that what is practiced by the Javanese cannot be outrightly labeled as Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism, since “*Javanese religion is a Javanese religion*”,¹⁴ it managed to manifest and unravel its syncretic uniqueness over the past few centuries and still continues to do so, even as it is under threat.

Moreover, there are also many examples of syncretic assimilation or “*religious inter-contextualization*”¹⁵ or intertextuality of Sufi mysticism in Central Java. This tendency towards inter-contextualization is a precursor to modern ideas of secularism with its tolerance of individual belief. The core of Sufi mysticism is the belief that humans could overallly establish a direct and overarching personal relationship with God and the supernatural through peaceful methods such as performing meditation and harmonizing their unified self with the almighty. This form of syncretism also has the effect of fostering gender equality.¹⁶

Despite all of the political turmoil in the region, the process of decolonization as well as the adoption of civic mentality in Central Java Indonesia has proven to be a successful process, since occurred in a stabilized realm, that allowed religious pluralism to exist “*agonally*” and “*prudentially*”.¹⁷

In addition, the public’s strong faith in the national doctrine of “*Pancasila*”, and a secularized ideal, has allowed Indonesia to develop into an important regional hub in Southeast Asia, a diverse region which relies upon religious pluralism and toleration.

Types of Secularism

Secularism is a paradigm which has been developing in the West since the 18th century. The French term *laïcité* however stands for modern secularism, derived from a gradual political process of secularization as social transformation. It also demonstrates how *religiosity* is contrasted to economic globalization. The processes of secularization emphasizes individual choice rather than social conformity, drawing a sharp boundary between religion and secular politics.

The term *laïcité* has formed constitutional principle of secularism in France, which is manifested under *Article 1* of the French Constitution and is commonly interpreted as discouraging religious involvement in government affairs, especially religious influence in the determination of state policies. It also forbids government involvement in religious affairs, and especially prohibits government influence in the determination of religion, however secularism in France does not preclude a right to the free exercise of religion. It simply reflects a policy based on the 1905 French law proclaiming the separation of church and the state. In such a system, political and religious compromises and reconciliations must be put to the test, hence “*French-Style Laïcité*”¹⁸ or secularism was considered a suitable method for further political reconciliation.

The philosopher Chantal Mouffe introduced the importance of divergences rather than differences, since divergence implies a tension between positions. This philosophical framework of divergences rather than differences enables civil society to achieve a goal where one could easily embrace civic morality within a global order, involving inclusivity and *overarching democratization*, which has lately become the heart of any tolerant community or society. Therefore the ideal of secularism according to “*French-Style Laïcité*” and pluralistic democracy is considered a model “*conducive*” to the understanding of religious divergences and variations, against which Indonesia could develop its own tradition.

Yet we see a weakness in Western concepts of secularism which stray from a respect for community and for religious belief. This is why secularism needs to be interpreted according to local models. Especially

models which appreciate diversity, tolerance and the peaceful resolution of conflict within religious frameworks. These local models of pluralism and secularism are increasingly important. Especially faced with problems arising from the raging pandemics, global warming as well as extremism and radicalized political doctrines which are on the rise.

This syncretism fostered by Sufi mysticism, created a more relaxed atmosphere which harmonized with local traditions leaving them relatively intact. All of these great syncretic mechanisms could act as positive measures for the nation to achieve religious pluralism, while learning how to sustain the former traditions. Indonesia must enable the nation to take a more *tolerant civic platform* under the pillar of secularism, which could also match their goal of solidarity according to the principle of “*Pancasila*” which had always respected divergences and religious diversity. This paradigm had also proved to reassert itself in the national doctrine of *Pancasila*, where state’s integration under the promotion of national solidarity respected not only religious diversity and toleration, but also enhanced secularism as well as civic mobility, because once achieved Indonesia’s polity could become a consummate example of such a matured secularized civil society to rival models of secularism in the West. A *synthesis* of multi religious variables, which is applied under a state *secularized* framework possess dual empowerments in deradicalizing extremism, sustaining old traditions, and addressing social problems.

Concluding Remarks : on “Prudential Tolerance”

The growing energy and social dynamism of Central Java Indonesia and its unique syncretic religion is so marvelously captivating, since it responds to the challenge of inclusivity unlike any other cultural tradition. It provides a model of an approach to diversity which harmonizes with secularism based upon local traditions. But unlike Western secularism it is not tainted by anti-religious sentiment.

Although modern political mechanisms are needed to supplement the wisdom of local culture, they must be used “*prudentially*” and must adopt certain level of tolerance in order to guarantee proportionate

macrocosmic transformation, free from the resurgence of extremism.

The native Javanese culture, with its resilient nature, its tolerance as well as its flexibility has survived through the test of time, despite colonialism and imperialism. The lesson of Javanese culture is a living testimony that divergences would not be manipulated by government policies, but become the natural basis of voluntary civic actions, rooted in indigeneous cultural identity.

The historical synthesis between monotheistic Islam and Javanism practices in Indonesia represents “*a sociology of a pluralistic cosmos*” this rendered *Islam Nusantara* or Javanese Islam as a multi-ethnic Islam, resistant to radicalized discourses. This is important because Indonesia must now take a syncretic approach to curb extremism, since the old platforms has become inadequate. The new platform of interfaith dialogue or syncretic approaches must also be both agonal as well as prudential. The path towards the achievement of civil society, requires that multicultural sectors are systematically renegotiated to “*deconstruct*” obsolete and oblivious orthodoxies, and are replaced by inclusivity and multilateral civic mobilisation.

A *secular* Indonesia, which historically emerged as a more relaxed and harmonious society, should be a model of a post-colonial mature nation who could fully embrace the mantle of civil society, and could become a perfect example to other struggling state entities around the world. Such a prudential society which is able to gaze beyond the polemical issues of politicized discourses and sectarianism, has now become a new necessity, “*Sufi mysticism*” in conclusion is not only a possible approach to “*deradicalize*” extremism, but should also allow us to appreciate the value of syncretism and its ability to underpin the modern practices of secularism. Indonesia by absorbing both the local traditions together with the strong belief in the Islamic faith, in a syncretic environment, is the model of a global pluralist society.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Niels Mulder, “*Mysticism in Java : Ideology in Indonesia*”, 46.
- ² Ibid, 46.
- ³ Hee Soo Lee, “*Javanese Muslims’ Tolerance and Flexibility through Syncretic Ornamentation*”, 22.
- ⁴ Niels Mulder, “*Mysticism in Java : Ideology in Indonesia*”, 26.
- ⁵ Ibid, 26.
- ⁶ Stephen C Headley, “*Durga’s Mosque : Cosmology, Conversion and Community in Central Javanese Islam*”, 10-11.
- ⁷ Hee Soo Lee, “*Javanese Muslims’ Tolerance and Flexibility through Syncretic Ornamentation*”, 28.
- ⁸ Alexander Seran, “*Pancasila and the Struggle for a Moral Grammar*”, 35.
- ⁹ Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, “*Salafist Transformations Significance, Implications and Prospects*”, 22.
- ¹⁰ สุรชาติ บำรุงสุข, “แนวคิด-ยุทธวิธี ขบวนการก่อการร้าย เจไอ (JI : Jemaah Islamiyah)”, 16.
- ¹¹ สุรชาติ บำรุงสุข, “แนวคิด-ยุทธวิธี ขบวนการก่อการร้าย เจไอ (JI : Jemaah Islamiyah)”, 16.
- ¹² Wiwi Siti Sajarah, Sarah Hajar Mahmudah, “*The Role of Philosophical Mysticism in Islamic Indigenization in Java*”, 6.
- ¹³ Stephen C Headley, “*Durga’s Mosque : Cosmology, Conversion and Community in Central Javanese Islam*” 10-11.
- ¹⁴ Niels Mulder, “*Mysticism in Java : Ideology in Indonesia*”, 53.
- ¹⁵ Niels Mulder, “*Mysticism in Java : Ideology in Indonesia*”, 57.
- ¹⁶ See for example the work of George Quinn, *Bandit Saints of Java*. Quinn points out that while many mosques in Java practice segregation of men and women, the shrines devoted to the Sufi Saints do not, and are often administered by women.
- ¹⁷ For a discussion of agonal democracy, see Chantel Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. New York: Verso. 2013.. Agonal democracy or radical democracy is based upon conflict.
- ¹⁸ Christopher A. Lizotte, “*The Geopolitics of laicite’ in a Multicultural Age : French Secularism, Educational Policy and the Spatial Management of Difference*”, 91.

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