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Repackaging Sufism in Urban Indonesia

JULIA DAY HOWELL

A brochure for a newly upgraded adult Islamic studies centre, Padepokan Thaha, in central Jakarta's swank Senopati district appealed to its anticipated clientele in 2005 by imaginatively speaking in their voice, revealing the likely concerns that the centre could address. Reading the brochure, we listen in, as it were, on the kinds of ruminations that have led prospective students to pick up the brochure. "What's wrong with me?" The brochure's character frets. "I pray five times a day with real sincerity, I read all kinds of things about how to find spiritual gratification in prayer...but I still have trouble getting into that deep, focused feeling (*khusyuk*)... I want to enjoy life [even] in the midst of social conditions that are wracked by crises, I want to be able to be happy under all conditions." As we

read on, we find that the prospective students are the sort of people who actually have a good deal of material security and strong bases for social respect as well. Thus the brochure's hypothetical reader confesses that his (or her) worries come "despite my everyday needs being fulfilled." "I have a high level of education... [and] I'm also respected in society."¹ These are the kinds of people who *ought* to be happy and secure if any good Muslim could. So what's missing?

What's missing, according to the brochure, is nothing less than the mystical experience of God's presence, which is accessible with the assistance of Padepokan Thaha. Padepokan Thaha offers that assistance through its Programme for Guidance of the Self towards "Tawajjuh" (*Program Pembinaan Diri Menuju Tawajjuh*). "Tawajjuh," the brochure explains, is "coming face to face with [one's] True Self" and "knowing the Creator" through *ma'rifatullah* [the highest stage of esoteric spiritual knowing in this rendering of Islam's Sufi heritage]. Initiation into the relevant spiritual practices is provided by the spiritual director of the foundation, KH Rachmat Hidayat, who also offers regular weekly classes at the centre on themes from the Quran and Hadith, such as might be found in many other well-appointed and formalized city *pengajian* (religious instruction classes). Kyai Rachmat himself has initiation from a Sufi

master whose spiritual genealogy (*silsilah*) reaches back through the legendary Javanese Muslim saint Sunan Kudus, to the Prophet Muhammad via his nephew 'Ali.

We can see from this that Padepokan Thaha is catering for Jakarta urbanities' niggling spiritual hunger by renovating what was once thought to be a dying remnant of rural, peasant society: Sufism (*tasawwuf*). That is, Padepokan Thaha offers (among other things) tutelage in esoteric practices that have been carried by Sufi orders (I. *tarekat*; Ar., *tariqa*) and in the metaphysics associated with the mystical experiences that may unfold from those practices. However, Kyai Rachmat denies that he himself is affiliated with a *tariqa* and both he and the directors of the foundation that runs Padepokan Thaha vigorously reject any idea that his teaching activities constitute a *tariqa*. Rather, as the foundation's full name indicates, it is styled as a *majelis ta'lim*, an Islam study group. This addresses the phobia many Muslim modernists (that is, in Indonesia, people aligned culturally or organizationally with the

Contrary to the common view that Sufism is somehow incompatible with "the modern," emerging new forms of Sufism signify the creative adaptation of Islam to the religious sensibilities and social demands of modern life. This article focuses on the Padepokan Thaha, a thriving Islamic studies centre in Indonesia, whose integration of esoteric spiritual knowledge with modern-style education suits the modern sensibilities of affluent and educated Muslim cosmopolitans in Indonesia.

Muhammadiyah and similar organizations) have of the supposedly archaic and authoritarian *tariqa*.

Catering to urban professionals

Indeed as an institution Padepokan Thaha is a thoroughly modern operation. It is a formally constituted charitable foundation, with officers charged with specific administrative duties, and proper accounting for its funds. The

approach to teaching is also well suited to the interests and preferred learning styles of well-educated, globally "connected" urbanities. This is signalled in the brochure we have already sampled: the Tawajjuh Programme is delivered by "teachers and facilitators" (*pengajar and fasilitator*). Kiai Rachmat is simply listed as the first of these, although his primacy and special role is acknowledged in his title "Pengasuh" (lit., one charged with the care of others). Significantly, he is not identified by the terms *shaykh* or *murshid*, which are more resonant of the authority and hierarchy in the old-time *tariqa*.

The modern feel of this *majlis ta'lim* is also evident in the brochure's description of the Tawajjuh Programme's instructional methods (*metode*), namely: "discussion/dialogue (sharing)" (*diskusi/dialog [sharing]*), "lecture" (*kuliah*), and practice (*pengamalan*). "Practice" is briefly explained as performing certain devotional rituals (*ibadat*), making clear the programme is built on a firm religious base, but also alluding to notions of self-development and learning through one's own experience that are central to modern-style general education. To make it clear to prospective participants that the discussions and lectures will use best-practice, university-style educational methods, the brochure also explains that the facilitator and participants will be "on the same level" (*sejajar*) in "discussions," and after lectures there will be a question and answer period. It is hardly coincidental that so many English language loan words are used in the brochure: they signify Padepokan Thaha's positive engagement with an international world of business, management and teaching practices, such as patrons employ in their professional lives.

The efforts of Padepokan Thaha's directors to accommodate modern urban life-styles and the interests of specifically cosmopolitan urbanities is evident in the range of its programmes, their regular scheduling to accommodate the leisure-time planning of busy urbanities, and the content of the programmes. Monthly schedules are printed showing the topic, times (weekday evenings), and session leaders for its five regular programmes, which, in addition to the Tawajjuh Programme (a residential course done only once by any given student), include "Routine Religious Study" ("Pengajian Rutin"), "Book and Film Discussion" nights, "Quran Reading Study," and the "Post Tawajjuh Programme" for initiates. While the Quran Reading programme and the "Pengajian Rutin" cover core skills and topics common to other *majelis ta'lim*, albeit with some differences in choices of texts and commentary, the book and film discussion nights cater to the distinctively broad range of "spiritual" interests of Padepokan Thaha's cosmopolitan clientele. This is evident from book club choices like Achmad Chodjim's best-selling study of the legendary (and some would say heretical) Javanese Sufi saint Shaykh Siti Jenar, followed by Farry Aprianto's book *Enrich Your Everyday Life*, and Eknath Easwaran's *Conquest of Mind*. Film choices like "Little Buddha" and "The Passion" also show that Padepokan Thaha programme planners are trying to help students make sense of popular culture representations of other religions in a way that is consistent with the universalism of Kiai Rachmat's Unity of Being (*wahdat al wujud*) metaphysics.²

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COURTESY OF PADEPOKAN THAHA

To judge from the packed audience hall at Padepokan Thaha and the traffic jams caused in the street out front by patrons' late-model sedans and four-wheel-drives on evenings when the regular *pengajians* and special lectures are on, this new-style centre for Sufi studies has indeed accurately identified a social need and suitably catered for it. The centre is flourishing. Other "Padepokan" functioning under the guidance of Kiai Rachmat and with the same institutional structure and core programmes have also opened elsewhere in Jakarta (Padepokan Esa in Bintaro) and in other parts of Indonesia (in Bogor, Bandung, Batam, Pekanbaru, Surabaya, and Bali). Padepokan Thaha directors put the number of people in Jakarta who regularly attend functions at around 4,000.

Adaptations to modern life

The "Padepokan" associated with Kiai Rachmat are not unusual in teaching some form of Sufism in upmarket quarters of the major Indonesian cities, except, perhaps, in offering initiations through the same city-based charitable foundation that supports Islamic learning in an organizationally formalized setting. Most institutionally modern foundations and businesses offering *tasawwuf* studies as part of a broader programme of Islamic studies for adults in Indonesia do not have practicums, much less initiations; but they nonetheless commonly acknowledge the value of cultivating deep devotional feeling in one's prayers and the virtues of ethical reflection associated with various Sufi disciplines. Such modern Islamic study providers may also help their students locate appropriate individual instructors and workshops, and some have offered excursions to rural *tarekat* with introductions to spiritual directors there. There are also independent groups with more of a practice orientation to Sufism. The variety and articulation of new institutions through which middle-class and elite Indonesian urbanites are now accessing "Sufi" teachings is described in my chapter in the forthcoming volume *Sufism and the "Modern" in Islam*.³

The other case studies in that volume (which span the Muslim world from Africa to Asia, as well as Muslim migrant communities and universalist movements in Western societies) provide us with a useful cross-cultural perspective on contemporary adaptations of Sufism in Indonesia. Viewed in this broader context, it appears that Indonesian Muslims are hardly alone in working changes in the *tariqa*. Rather, we can see the many new forms Sufism is taking there as part of a global panorama of creative adaptation of Islam to the religious sensibilities and social demands of modern life.

Surveying this global panorama, it is evident that in the global housecleaning and rebuilding of contemporary Islam that we have witnessed over the twentieth century, Sufism has not been thrown out; instead, like other strands of the Islamic heritage, it has been selectively reconfigured. In Egypt and West Africa, Muslims enthusiastically patronize conventional *tariqa* but turn them to novel social purposes like interest articulation in new democratic polities. Elsewhere, in Turkey, Muslims affiliated with the Gümüşhanevi branch of the Naqshbandis find no good

at all in initiations and esoteric knowledge, but want to save the Sufi orders (the *tariqa*) as vehicles for teaching ethical formation and carrying out social service activities. Hamka, a leading twentieth century Indonesian Muslim intellectual, considered that all that could be done without the *tariqa*, which should be given up to disencumber modern Muslims from dysfunctional traditional attitudes (in his phrase, keeping "*tasawuf* without *tarekat*"). Other Muslim scholars in India and the Middle East, fired by Salafist zeal for ridding the faith of all heretical inventions, have gone even further than Hamka, rejecting even the word *tasawuf* as a heretical invention; yet the Salafis have been prepared to approve particular Sufi practices (purification of the heart [*tazkiya*] and remembrance of God [*dhikr*]) identified by words found in the Quran.

Just as Sufism around the world now encompasses a range of institutional forms, spiritual practices and social engagement, and all that in diverse combinations, so too do we find in Sufism today a considerable variety of stances towards Islamic law. In the Muslim world over the course of the twentieth century, spreading religious literacy and Sufi engagement with the Islamic reform movements have generally made for increased emphasis on the core obligations of the faith, but universalist Sufi movements like the International Sufi Movement, sprung from the Chishti order after its founder Hazrat Inayat Khan moved to the West, cutting "Sufism" loose entirely from Islamic law and an Islamic identity.

What patterns can we detect in all this variation? For one thing, Sufi tradition is being carried forward into the twenty-first century, but we can no longer identify it exclusively with the institutional complex of the conventional *tariqa*. While that survives, and such *tariqa* are even vigorously assuming new functions in many parts of the world, here and there its structure is being modified to suit modern sensibilities (as exemplified by Padepokan Thaha). It is also being disassembled, as it were, with its scholarly teaching functions assumed by the likes of universities and religious booksellers, its facilitation of group devotions taken up by impresarios of *dhikr akbar* led by celebrity preachers at major urban mosques, and its ethical formation and social work agendas assuming scripturalist-reformist organizations and a few stripped-down, no-mystical-nonsense Neo-Sufi orders. The search for mystical union is probably not well catered for outside the *tariqa*, and perhaps not so much even in many of those. In any case, it probably represents only a small niche-market. But if the growth of this market in the West in the last few decades is anything to go by, the Padepokan Thaha's of the Muslim world will have a secure place in the future amongst Muslim cosmopolitans.

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Discussion evening at Padepokan Thaha, Jakarta 2006

Notes

1. For further details on Padepokan Thaha, see, Julia Day Howell, "Urban Heirs of Ibn al-'Arabi and the Defence of Religious Pluralism in Contemporary Indonesia," *Australian Religious Studies Review* 18 no. 2 (2005): 197-209. See also www.thaha.net.
2. Op. cit. Howell 2005:202.
3. "Modernity and Islamic Spirituality in Indonesia's New Sufi Networks," in *Sufism and the "Modern" in Islam*, ed. by Martin van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell (London: IB Tauris, in press).