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Prayer in the Surinam-Javanese Diasporic Experience
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Western Europe
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The Surinam-Javanese community in the Netherlands is divided over the question of the prayer direction; some perform their prayers facing the East, but most turn to the West. The majority are *kejawan*, following the syncretic practices and beliefs of Java. In this community the *keblat* (*qibla*) expresses a unique diasporic experience and identity.

Prayer in the Surinam-Javanese Diasporic Experience

The main route of Javanese diaspora in the Netherlands was through Surinam. From 1890 onward, the Dutch colonial authorities in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) recruited villagers from Java as contract workers for the plantations in another Dutch colonial land, Surinam. Most of them were *kejawan* Muslims. *Kejawan* Islam, which was dominant in Javanese villages, is a syncretic Islam which incorporated old Javanese beliefs, including Hindu-Buddhist elements. The Javanese arrived in Surinam without persons learned in religion. It was not until the beginning of the 1930s that – partly through contacts with Hindustani Muslims – some realized that the Ka'ba was not located to the West, but to the northeast of Surinam. Subsequently, a number of Javanese Muslims started praying in that direction. This small group, led by Pak Samsi, encouraged people to change their direction of prayer to the Northeast, usually simplified as East. Since then, this small group has been called *Wong Madhep Ngetan* (east-*keblat* people). Later some became very critical of what was seen as the superstition and religious innovation (*bid'a*) among the Javanese Muslims. Others did not openly criti-

cize the practice of praying to the West as most of the Javanese Muslims continued to do; hence they are called *Wong Madhep Ngulon* (west-*keblat* people).¹

Javanese prayer in the Netherlands

When Surinam became independent in 1975, a number of Javanese opted for the Dutch nationality and migrated to the Netherlands. At present, over 22,000 Surinam-Javanese live in this country, concentrated in the cities of The Hague, Amsterdam, and Rotterdam.² The majority of Javanese in the Netherlands adhere to *kejawan* Islam, although a number of reformist organizations have gained some ground within the community. The organizations of *kejawan* Muslims in the Netherlands are generally cultural organizations, but several, like Pitutur Islam, carry religious names. Unlike their counterparts in Surinam, they do not have their own mosques. There are several active organizations amongst the Javanese Muslims praying to the East. One such organization is the Al-Jami'atul Hasanah, which shares its mosque in Rotterdam with the PPME (Persatuan Pemuda

Muslim Eropa) the Young Muslim Association of Europe, an organization which entertains relations with the large Indonesian traditionalist organization, the Nahdlatul Ulama. Members of the reformist Rukun Islam organization in The Hague are associated with the main reformist movement in Indonesia, the Muhammadiyah.

The *kejawan* Muslims conceive the reformists as belonging to an 'Arabic Islam'. In their attempts to preserve their Javanese identity, the question of *keblat* occupies an important position. The debate on the *keblat* that began in Surinam has been continued in the Netherlands, but the debate is not as heated as it was in Surinam. One of the reasons for this is that mosques do not serve as the centre of activities for the *kejawan* Muslims in the Netherlands: there are no *kejawan* mosques in the country. Thus as yet they are not confronted with the question of the direction of mosque's *mihrab*. Despite praying towards the West at home, when visiting a mosque, *kejawan* Muslims follow others and pray facing East. This small group argues that it is not the direction of west or east that is of prime importance, but rather the way one purifies his or

her soul. Religious devotion is regarded as having no value when one hurts and offends others. Some refer to the Qur'an (S2: 177): 'Righteousness is not to turn your faces towards the East or the West; the righteous is he who believes in Allah, the Last Day, the angels, the Book and the prophets.' The leader of the Sido Muljo, a *kejawan* organization in Rotterdam, holds that one can face in any direction, not just west or east, because God is omnipresent. In a recent radio broadcast, however, he stated that to be a devout Muslim one should apparently behave like an Arab and abandon his or her Javanese identity. He pointed to the practice of rendering certain prayers in Arabic and to the fact that some Javanese texts are written in Arabic script (*pegon*).

The head of the Pitutur Islam pleads for the continuation of the western *keblat*:

'Facing East is done according to the people of Saudi Arabia. We heard that in Indonesia our ancestors faced to the West, in the direction of the so-called Ka'ba. That was in Negari Jawi [the land of Java].'

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Having migrated to Surinam, they still maintained the westward direction of prayer. Saudi teachers told them: 'No, you should not do that. In Surinam you should face East.' But the people from Java replied: 'No, in the land of Java we faced to the West, we can not make a change. I also follow my parents. Because originally our ancestors faced to the West, we do so too. If we are forced to do otherwise, we absolutely say: No!'

The equation of Islamization with Arabization is foreign to the reformist Javanese Muslims in the Netherlands. In their eyes, the change of prayer direction follows from religious imperative and rational reasoning. They quote the verse (2:144): 'Turn your face then to the Sacred Mosque; and wherever you are, turn your faces towards it.' Since Mecca is located southeast of the Netherlands, they see no alternative but to oblige. They argue that praying and reciting in Arabic should not be considered Arabization because it is part of religion, not of culture.

Preserving Identity

The debate on the *keblat* is part of a much longer discourse on Javanese identity. Almost from the beginning of the Islamization of Java, attempts have been made to reject the centrality of Mecca and – what is seen as – the Arabization of the Javanese. Preserving identity has become an important and complicated problem for Javanese Muslims in the Netherlands as well. This is primarily due to the fact that most of the second and the third generations no longer speak Javanese, although some still understand it. Being a creator and re-creator, and transmitter of culture, the loss of the original language marks an important transformation. Moreover, they do not have diasporic memories of Java, as they were born and raised in Surinam or the Netherlands.

Today, Java is represented as a Holy Land, but also as an experience of the past generation, the first generation of the Javanese in Surinam, who are regarded as the original Javanese (*Jawa Tus* or *Jawa Asli*). The *kejawan* Muslims demonstrate a far stronger commitment to the preservation of the Javanese culture than the reformist Javanese. Their organizations focus on Javanese dances, music and songs and on the Javanese literature like the *Primbon* and *Mujarabat* literature, which combine

Javanese prediction and other popular elements, including Islamic ones. However, young people show less interest in literature.

Above all, in their resistance to the perceived Arabization of the Javanese, the *kejawan* Muslims attempt to Javanize Islam, the preservation of the western *keblat* serves as the clearest example of this quest. In the Netherlands this tendency is even stronger than that in Java at the present time. Moreover, the diasporic experiences and challenges in the Netherlands force them to contextualize their tradition. It can even be argued that they have created a new identity that is a 'Surinam-Javanese' identity, which differs in some of its manifestations from that of the Indonesian Javanese. ◆

This article is based upon observation of meetings of various Surinam-Javanese organizations and interviews with a number of their members. A larger and more detailed article will be published in Sharqiyyat, journal of the Netherlands Organization for the Study of Islam.

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Notes

1. On the Javanese in Surinam, see Joseph Ismael, *De Immigratie van Indonesiers in Suriname*. PhD dissertation of Leiden University 1949; Annemarie de Waal Malefijt, *The Javanese of Surinam: Segment of a Plural Society*. Assen: Van Gorcum Com. N.V., 1963; G.D. van Wengen, *The Cultural Inheritance of the Javanese in Surinam*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975.
2. See Yvonne Towikromo, *De islam van de Javanen uit Suriname in Nederland*. Den Haag: Amrit, 1997.