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Negotiating Islamisation and resistance : a study of religions, politics and social change in West Java from the early 20th Century to the present

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INTRODUCTION

Domestic and foreign observers as well as most Indonesians nowadays upheld the notion that Sundanese Muslims are more observant than the Javanese which suggests that Sundanese society is also more Islamic than its Javanese counterpart. This notion may be interpreted in various ways. If we look at the historical development of the West Javanese religious setting, this perception is not entirely off the mark. In the past, the Sundanese have observed their religion piously,¹ but if we adopt strict Islam as the measure to look at this development and we remove from Islam all non-Islamic elements, we may be forced to conclude that many people in West Java have only just recently turned 'real' Islamic. Before that they were Muslims but not quite as observant of 'pure' Islam as often perceived. Some of them indeed observed the performance of the five pillars of Islam but at the same time they observed *adat* practices not rooted in the Quran and the hadith.

This perception is interesting but more interesting is why it is important that the Sundanese need to be considered as being Islamic? Or why the Sundanese were, and are perceived as Islamic? In this book I attempt to show that the question can only be answered by understanding the intimate relationships between Islam and Sunda² in the way the Sundanese observe their religion. We shall see how Islam and Sunda as different cultural categories negotiate their places among Sundanese society. By doing so we may discover the elements that unite Islam and Sunda (*adat*) and what reasons - for instance fear of Communism, changing government

¹ Th. van den End, *Sumber-Sumber Zending tentang Sejarah Gereja di Jawa Barat 1858-1963* (translated from *History of Dutch missions of Christian Churches in Jawa Barat Province 1858-1963*) (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2006), p. 159.

² The term 'Sunda' is used in this book in this context to denote Sundanese *adat*, culture and religious pre-Islamic beliefs.

policies and increased Islamisation - may be responsible for the disintegration of this unity.

This study aims to show how Islamisation took place and how it was contested and negotiated. I will do so by discussing religions, Sundanese culture, *adat* and politics as important variants. This study also discusses how dramatic political changes caused religious changes and how these caused cultural, political and social changes. This means that readers will be presented with the dialectics between Islamisation and other faiths in which political contexts played important roles.

Hypotheses

This study not only analyses the negotiations and the relations between Sunda and Islam, but also intends to examine the conflicts between Islam and other faiths, especially *Aliran Kebatinan* (AK), as a unified religious system, and Christianity. This study departs from the working hypothesis that there is always a coherent dialectics between cultural categories in society on the one hand, and negotiations between the state and these cultural categories, on the other. There is a continuous and intimate negotiation process between Islamisation and the indigenous *Aliran Kebatinan*, Islam and Christianity, and Islam and Christianity in tandem against the *Aliran Kebatinan*. In this book I demonstrate when the unified religious system in West Java was threatened. I pay attention to Islam and *Aliran Kebatinan* as important parts of the religious and cultural setting of Sundanese society because the Sundanese used to think in terms of Islam, culture and *adat*. Contrarily, some Muslim Sundanese, especially Modernists, Revivalists, and Islamists, now think that when they violate Islamic norms, local norms should be replaced by Islamic ones. This put pressure on the adherents of *adat* and changed their perception to thinking that Islam, imported from Arabia, was something harmful to their identity. The findings of this research suggest that shifting political contexts cause social and cultural changes in society. These changes are the results of negotiations and adjustments necessary for the formation of a new political agenda distinct from that of the previous political set-up. In both, the state and religious leaders play a crucial role. I am convinced that a clear

picture of the political, social, and religious processes that instigate and sustain these changes is vital for understanding how these changes may lead to social integration, disintegration and conflict.

Organisation of this Book

Chapter One provides the historical background of the negotiation and dialectical relationships between Islam and other faiths and how these relationships influenced each other. This chapter seeks to demonstrate the significance of religious practices and how *adat*, mysticism and myths were well preserved within these practices ultimately shaping a distinct Sundanese religious identity. It also analyses the history of the integration, interaction and contest of Islam and other beliefs in Sundanese society. In discussing the origins of Christianity in the area, for example, I observed the formation of the Christian communities and how they flourished across West Java.

Chapter Two observes what reasons factored behind the rise of anti-Islamic sentiments and analyses how these sentiments challenged religious visions. Readers should keep in mind that anti-Islamic sentiments were not caused by fear of Islam as a faith. Rather, this negative sentiment seemed to be the consequence of reinforcing Islam as an ideology and a totalitarian way of life. Persatuan Islam (PERSIS, Islamic Union) leaders insisted on the importance of a purified tradition and thus called upon Muslims to strictly and exclusively abide to the Quran and the Prophetic tradition (*Sunnah*). In this tradition *adat* no longer had any place and thus was excluded from it. This social setting sparked signs of antagonism toward Islam especially opposition led by *Aliran Kebatinan* leaders. They condemned Muslims' intolerance that harmed the existing tradition. Despite this opposition, Islamisation continued.

Chapter Three questions how the New Order regime sought total control over society through the politics it adopted, on the one hand, and facilitated *Dakwahism* and missionarism on the other in the end causing religious and social changes. While the authoritarian regime successfully imposed a political straightjacket on society, *Dakwahists* addressed the religious and spiritual needs in society and channelled its political aspirations through social and cultural

projects. This injected a sense of urgency into both Islamisation and Christianisation, which in turn saw the increased presence of Islamic activists and Christian evangelists. What I am concerned with is how the rise of religious activism, producing Islamism and evangelism, brought about rivalry and conflict between Muslims and Christians. From the Muslim perspective, I observed the way the cultural dimension of religion increasingly became significant when the political aspects of religion dwindled. In this context I demonstrate the way politics caused religious changes and how religious changes caused social and political changes.

Chapter Four is to answer questions about the role educated Muslims played in changing society; that is how Muslim students of the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB) Islamised their fellow secular students and by so doing promoted a dramatic shift in the campus's sosio-religious environment. The Salman mosque was selected as a case study to explore how its *dakwah* project initiatives gained significance and ultimately succeeded in not only changing the student's world view but also that of society at large.

As Chapter Four deals largely with a more urban phenomenon, Chapter Five discusses the dialectics and contest of Islam with the *Aliran Kebatinan* in rural Lembang. It examines the process of Islamisation and answers the question of how Islam entered rural areas and built its institutions. This chapter goes back briefly to the development of Islamic institutions from the 1950s in three different villages across rural Lembang and discusses the effects of *dakwah* institutions and organisations on deeper Islamisation.

Chapter Six observes Christianity's upsurge and Muslim activists' response to it. What I emphasise in this part is that non-Sundanese and non-Muslim ethnic and religious attitudes (Chinese, Batak and Christianity) turned into reasons for tension and conflict between Muslims and Christians. It seems obvious that Muslims voiced their protests against what they called Christianisation, which involved Chinese and Batak Christians in Bekasi. I address the issue whether this conflict is primarily ethnic or religiously inspired or perhaps both. The book ends in Chapter Seven which contains the Conclusion.

Methodology

Study Focus

This study focuses on three important variants: Islam, *Aliran Kebatinan* and Christianity. Please bear in mind that you will continue to encounter these three categories in all the chapters of this book because they are at the centre of this dissertation. This study covers only a particular period of time, that is from the early twentieth century to the present, with an emphasis on the period after 1965. The book presents historical reviews in Chapters One and Two to demonstrate the continuity of and changes in the Islamisation processes. Since Muslim society consists of various different groups, I included local-level case studies which were strategically selected. Thus, to mention some examples here, I studied *Aliran Kebatinan* in Lembang, Sumedang, Subang and Kuningan. Student's increased involvement in Islam was studied in Bandung at the ITB campus. Conflicts between Islam and Christianity were observed in Bekasi. The integration of Christianity in Sundanese society was studied in Cianjur while conflicts between Islam and *Aliran Kebatinan* were studied in Sumedang and Subang.

Literature

The historical part of this study as presented in Chapters One and Two refers primarily to the works of the following leading scholars: Ricklefs, Van Bruinessen, Steenbrink, Hefner, Van Dijk, Wessing, Rinkes, Pijper, Lombard, Van den End, Lubis, Ekadjati and many others. Their observations on the issues in this book are important to understand Islamisation and its dialectical relations with *Aliran Kebatinan* and Christianity as they developed from the past into recent times. From these sources I learned how they understood the way Islam spread across West Java and how it was either accepted, confronted or opposed.

Numerous materials have been used to understand how PERSIS embraced Islam as an ideology by challenging nationalism, Christianity and *adat* to achieve "the ultimate goal of religious life

according to Islamic doctrine”³ They include Federspiel’s *Islam and Ideology* (2001),⁴ Pijper’s *Fragmenta Islamica* (1985), Noer’s *Gerakan Modern Islam* (1990),⁵ Hassan’s *Islam & Kebangsaan* (1984)⁶ and so on. PERSIS’s claim of Islam as the only true ideology, which implies the annihilation of other world visions including Sundanese syncretic *adat*, provoked anti-Islamic sentiments among Sundanese *Penghayat*, the “*abangan*” of the Sundanese. In understanding social polarisation, Ricklefs’ *Polarising Javanese Society* (2007) is a must read book. He argues that the antagonistic relationship between *abangan* and *putihan* or Javanist and *santri* dates back only to the nineteenth century (1830-1930) after the Revivalists challenged the ‘mystic synthesis’ most Javanese commonly accepted.⁷ Ricklefs’ latest publication *Islamisation and Its Opponents in Java* (2012) sheds an even brighter light in understanding the political, social, cultural and religious history of Java from 1930 to the present.⁸

As this study examines the conflictual and oppositional relationship in Sundanese society, particularly between *Penghayat* and Muslims, I had to observe the function of religion in society and what the reasons are why religious communities polarise and why at certain times and under particular circumstances. Particularly relevant here is why the *Panghayat* opposed the increasing Islamic presence. Geertz’ article on “Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example” (1957) helps in analysing religion in rural Javanese society,

³ G.F. Pijper, *Fragmenta Islamica: Beberapa Studi tentang Sejarah Islam di Indonesia 1900-1950*, translated by Tudjimah and Yessy Agusdin from *Studiën over de geschiedenis van de Islam in Indonesia 1900-1950* (Jakarta: UI Press, 1985), p. 127.

⁴ Howard M. Federspiel, *Islam and Ideology in the Emerging Indonesian State: The Persatuan Islam (Persis), 1923-1957* (Leiden-Boston-Köln: Brill, 2001).

⁵ Deliar Noer, *Gerakan Modern Islam di Indonesia, 1900-1942* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1990).

⁶ A. Hassan, *Islam & Kebangsaan* (Bangil: Lajnah Penerbitan Pesantren Persis, 1984).

⁷ M.C. Ricklefs, *Polarising Javanese Society: Islamic and Other Visions c. 1830-1930* (Singapore: Singapore University Press; Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press; Leiden: KITLV Press, 2007).

⁸ M.C. Ricklefs, *Islamisation and its Opponent in Java: A Political, Social, Cultural and Religious History c. 1930 to the present* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012).

“as simple uniformity of religious belief and practice characteristic of an earlier period,⁹” enabling a comparison with the changes as they took place in Sundanese society. In this article he discusses why belief and ritual that used to function to reinforce “the traditional social ties between individuals, through a manner in which the social structure of a group is strengthened and perpetuated through the ritualistic or mythic symbolization of the underlying social values upon which it rests” are disrupted. Geertz argues that this is because of what he observed as “an incongruity between the cultural framework of meaning and the patterning of social interaction, an incongruity due to the persistence in an urban environment of a religious symbol system adjusted to peasant social structure.”¹⁰

Hefner studied Islamisation in mountainous Pasuruan, East Java in ‘Islamizing Java?: Religion and Politics in Rural East Java’ (1987). He analysed how the Javanists, the strongest opponents to Islam, turned away from Javanism and embraced Islam after the Javanist tradition declined everywhere under the New Order.¹¹ This decline was the result of, among others, an increase in *dakwah* activities which progressively became “especially strong in the altered political climate under Soeharto, official support from the government to Islamisation and the sweeping social changes in rural society that caused Islam’s appeal increasingly became relevant for

⁹ Clifford Geertz, ‘Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example’, *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 59. No. 1 (Feb., 1957), p. 36.

¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 53. Geertz exemplified his thesis by presenting the story of a conflict which is illustrative. The conflict arose during a funeral ceremony between Karman, a member of Indonesian Marhaen Association (Persatuan Marhaen Indonesia; PERMAI), the *Penghayat* political party, and a Modin, a Muslim official authorised to conduct the funeral ceremony for Karman’s relative, Paidjan. The funeral was disrupted because the Modin who was a member of the Masyumi party, refused to lead the rites just after he learned that Paidjan was a PERMAI member and thus not considered to be a Muslim. After negotiation, the Modin eventually agreed to lead the funeral rite according to Islamic law after Karman agreed to produce an official letter that the deceased was a Muslim.

¹¹ Robert W. Hefner, ‘Islamizing Java? Religion and Politics in Rural East Java’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 46. No. 3 (Aug., 1987), pp. 533-554.

its moral depth.”¹² This study intends to provide an understanding of Islamisation in rural West Java.

Fieldwork

A leading expert on the study of Islam, H.A.R. Gibb (1895-1971), posited that: “...it is not the masses but to the leaders that we must look if we are to judge the present tendencies in religious thought.”¹³ Based on this I decided not to refer to literature only, but to go into the field and I conducted interviews with all sorts of people who were witnesses or even key players in the whole process which I am describing. By doing so I was able to talk with the respondents face-to-face. This technique is invaluable especially when one works on a specific case study for which primary and secondary sources are rare or even unavailable. It is often the case that respondents provided me with documents and archives not available in any library. The informants were moreover so kind as to advise me what relevant persons to interview on certain issues. I conducted interviews in Jakarta, Bekasi, Bandung, Lembang, Subang, Sumedang, Kuningan, and Ciparay between July 2008 and March 2011. I first went to these places in July and November 2008, and again in April and August to October following year. In 2010 I did my fieldworks from May to July and from October to November. I went to West Java again in January and March 2011 to conduct some more interviews. In addition to conducting interviews, I also attended anniversaries held by the *Penghayat* in Bandung and made personal visits to their residences to exchange thoughts.

I hope that this study gives its readers the following contributions: *First*, understanding the intimate relationships between Islam and Sunda (*adat*) and the pattern of integrations and conflicts between Islam and *Aliran Kebatinan*. *Second*, understanding the patterns of integrations and conflicts between Islam and Christianity in West Java. *Third*, discovering the importance of the dramatic political changes that occurred at the national level for the

¹² *Idem*, p. 549.

¹³ Boland, *The Struggle of Islam in Modern Indonesia*, VKI Vol. 59. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971/1982), p. 3.

creation of the political setting for religious adjustments at local levels. By focusing on the local, this study seeks to make a scholarly contribution towards both local and national policy development, particularly in today's politically decentralised Indonesia. *Fourth*, this study confirms the Islamisation of West Java, namely as "a process of deepening commitment to standards of normative Islamic belief, practice and religious identity."¹⁴ Moreover, this study discovers the important roles played by educated Muslims, both Modernists and Traditionalists, and reveals how Islamisation took place and how it was contested and negotiated. *Fifth*, from this study I learned that in Sunda, the dynamics of religious resurgence and of social changes from below are largely determined by the regime's political programme made to sustain the rulers and to control society. In the absence of strong policies on religions, tension and conflict between people of different religions will continue to erupt, thus West Javanese society will most likely be polarised along religious, and maybe, ethnic sentiments unless the state adopts policies designed to maintain social harmony in the multicultural society of West Java.

¹⁴ See Key Analytical Terms.

