

Section II. Patterns of Islamicate Culture in Indonesia

One element shared by the Judaic, Christian, and Islamic religious traditions is the importance placed on texts as the means by which relationships to God is expressed and interpreted. The texts of Islamicate literature and Islamic scholarship, and the tradition of religious learning that produced and interpreted them, played an important role in the spread and development of Islamic civilization throughout the world, including Indonesia. As Islam was carried into new societies, 'Islamicate' literary activity resonated with local needs and conditions. In this way, many of the various local languages of the Indonesian Archipelago experienced remarkable literary development under the influence of Islam, as new genres, themes, and narrative elements were introduced. This occurred alongside the 'Islamicizing' transformation of a number of Indonesian languages, as a flood of Arabic and Persian loan-words came into use. A number of languages—from Acehnese (Sumatra) to Ternatean (Moluccas) and Wolio (Sulawesi)—came to be written in the Arabic script, and, in so doing, many of these languages were being expressed in writing for the first time in history (figure 6).

During much of the early period of the Islamization of Indonesia, literacy was still limited; a number of popular texts came into circulation that were read aloud to large groups on special occasions. Many of these texts took the form of narratives about the Prophet Muhammad and other important figures in Islamic religious history. These stories helped people to learn more about their faith and also invited their audiences to consider the moral lessons contained in them. In some cases, famous Arabic poems about the life of Muhammad were adapted into languages like Malay, such as the *Burda* of the thirteenth century Egyptian poet al-Busiri, which was rendered early in Malay literary history. In addition to this, other texts were recited in their original Arabic language, although few in the audience were probably able to understand the meaning word-for-word. Both the *Burda* and a similar eighteenth century work, known locally as the *Barzanji*, are commonly recited in Arabic in some areas of the Indonesian Archipelago during celebrations such as the Prophet's birthday, weddings, and circumcisions. There are many other texts which relate to the Prophet, especially in the Malay genre known as *Hikayat* ('Stories'), which offers vivid and embellished accounts of episodes from Muhammad's life, ranging from the cutting of his hair to the delivery of his last words from his deathbed. In addition to texts treating the life of Muhammad, there are also recited narratives about other prophets that are common to all three Abrahamic faiths. One example is the story of Joseph (Ar. Yusuf), which was traditionally recited in Java and the nearby island of Madura for both entertainment and edification. There are also texts that recount the lives of other Muslim figures, including medieval 'saints' from the central Muslim lands. In Java, one important body of texts relates stories of the Wali Songo and the 'Nine Saints' (mentioned above in Section I). These include various episodes, the most popular of which may be that of the 'Council' at which the Wali Songo tried and punished the notorious heretic, Siti Jenar (A translation of a version of this narrative is in Appendix II.). These accounts use the frame story of the 'Council' to



Figure 6: Batik cloth from Jambi, Sumatra (nineteenth century?), decorated with bird motifs and the Name of God ('Allah') in Arabic.

accommodate a series of vignettes which are characterized by theological and mystical speculation; in these accounts, religious material is often expressed through the dialogue of the story. This literature offers much insight into the religious and intellectual world of Muslim Java in which they were composed. Another group of Indonesian Muslim texts recounts the stories of figures associated with the early history of Islam in seventh century Arabia. There are, for example, Minangkabau and Acehese (Sumatra) works about the Prophet's grandsons, Hasan and Husayn, and also a major Malay hikayat on the heroic champion of the faith, Muhammad Hanafiyyah. The extensive cycle of tales revolving around Muhammad's uncle, Amir Hamzah, has been expounded in various versions in a number of languages, in addition to becoming a fundamental part of the repertoire for a form of rod-puppet theater from West Java known as wayang golek.

In Central and East Java, where the performing art of shadow puppetry (wayang kulit) has traditionally been popular, the very invention of the art form of the shadow puppet theater (as well as of other key aspects of 'classical' Javanese culture) has been ascribed to Sunan Kalijaga, one of the 'Nine Saints' (Wali Songo) referred to above in connection with the Islamization of Java. While the material performed in these settings is ultimately derived from older Hindu-Javanese tradition, Islamic attitudes and ideals have also permeated this art form. A short distance further to the east, on the island of Lombok, the shadow puppet theater has been even more markedly shaped by Islam; for example, the local performing art form of wayang sasak bases itself largely on the cycles of tales dealing with Muhammad's uncle, Amir Hamzah, much like the West Javanese example mentioned above. Through performances such as these, generations of Indonesian Muslims have come to learn about their faith in ways that entertain as well as instruct, while simultaneously maintaining vibrant and enjoyable elements of religion in everyday life.

Puppet shows and recitation of special texts have been traditionally performed on various occasions, including but not limited to major rites of passage, such as weddings and circumcisions (figure 7). Local custom has often had a great influence on observances conducted on such special days. Consider the practice known as the slametan, which is a special ritual meal performed by people in Central Java, the same area known for the music of the gamelan and the shadow-puppet theater. The slametan is held on a number of kinds of occasions, including the expression of thanks for good fortune received. The slametan was at first misunderstood by many foreign visitors to Indonesia, who did not recognize it as an 'Islamic' ritual because -- with its plates of heaping rice-- it probably did not fit expectations (and maybe even stereotypes) of characteristics of Islam in the Middle East. The more one looks carefully at the slametan, however, the more it seems to be a distinctly 'Islamic' practice. For example, the very word slametan is based on an important Arabic word from the Qur'an, and this kind of celebration is

found among Muslims all over Asia, where it is further associated with their practices of the earliest Muslims. The slametan, then, fits naturally with both global Islamic practices



Figure 7. A Muslim bride and groom at their wedding in East Java (1991).

as well as the local culture of Muslims who live in Java.

In addition to such local community or family-oriented activities, there are other collective practices which Indonesian Muslims observe together with their fellow believers all around the world. Like much of the rest of the Muslim world, Indonesians celebrate these observances in ways adapted to their own cultural setting. This is certainly the case with the two great feast days, the first the feast of the Pilgrimage (Ar. *Id al- Adha*; Ind. *Hari Raya Karban*), and the other that of the Breaking of the Fast (Ar. *Id al- Fitr*, Ind. *Lebaran*). The same is also true with the less explicitly canonical commemorations, such as the Prophet's birthday (*Mawlid*) and the beginning of the Muslim New Year (*Muharram*). Because these two latter celebrations are not considered formal holidays with prescribed rituals (like those that are standardized for the two feast days), significantly more room is left for their extension and elaboration in terms of local tradition.

An example of a celebration of a Muslim holy day that has been integrated extensively with local culture is the *Tabot* observances in the Sumatran city of Bengkulu (figure 8). The *Tabot* takes the form of a ten-day festival each year to mark the period between the Muslim New Year and the day of 'Ashura' (the tenth day of the month of Muharram), on which Muhammad's nephew Husayn was martyred in Iraq in the year 680. This latter event is commemorated throughout many parts of the Muslim world, and is done so in differing ways in various places. In many regions, including Indonesia, a simple meal of porridge is



Figure 8. The grand procession of the *Tabot* festival commemorating the tenth day of the Muslim Month of Muharram in Bengkulu, Sumatra (1992).

taken communally after evening prayers. In Shi'ite Iran, large spectacles are held in the form of elaborate passion plays which re-enact Husayn's tragic death. In some parts of India and Pakistan, processions move through the streets with colorfully-decorated wooden and paper floats representing the coffin of Husayn being carried to its place of final rest. In some cases, these observances have been influenced by Hindu *Puja* celebrations, and in these settings, they can occasionally take on a carnival, as well as a mourning atmosphere. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the British East India Company established a fort at Bengkulu to help their peppertrading ventures on the Sumatran coast, and the British brought with them soldiers and laborers from India to work there. Many of these Indians never returned home, but instead married in'to local families from Bengkulu. As a result of this, over time an 'Indian style' celebration of this Muslim holiday -which was increasingly mixed with elements of local culture such as music and dance -- has become an essential part of what many people in Bengkulu think of as their 'culture' (figure 9).

It should be remembered that there is considerable diversity, even within Indonesia, as to how such commemorations are observed, varying not only according to geographic and cultural situation, but also along ideological lines. The *Tabot* is celebrated

only in Bengkulu and one other small city in the area, whereas less elaborate observances are much more common in other parts of the Archipelago. In the case of the commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, some Indonesian Muslims hold gatherings at which certain texts are read aloud, such as the Burda and Barzanji (mentioned above). Some more strongly reformist-minded believers may object to such public recitations altogether, not finding a precedent for them in the Qur'an or the practice of the Prophet himself. Nevertheless, in a place such as Central Java, many will go to the large park in front of the Sultan's palaces in the royal cities of Surakarta and Yogyakarta to celebrate Sekaten and Garebeg Mulud; this is a week-long period of public fairs and entertainment that link a symbolic day of the Muslim calendar with official state ceremonies. Here (as in the case of the polity of Buton mentioned above), an intricate pattern of Islamic ideas and local cultural tradition has evolved which seems to include almost all dimensions of social experience.

From the fourteenth century on, many societies in the Archipelago integrated Islam into their most basic institutions, including political, legal, and educational systems. Along with instances in which Islamic cosmological theories and popular celebrations were employed in ways consistent with local ideals of political power, an Islamicizing transformation also occurred in the area of law. The rulers of some Southeast Asian sultanates established courts in which Islamic law was locally interpreted and applied.

Such institutions differed from place to place where they were in effect, but it is certain that they established traditions of Islamic legal practice in a number of centers (such as Aceh, Banten, Buton, Java, Kalimantan / Borneo, and elsewhere), representing in these areas a further dimension of the ongoing process of the Islamization of social institutions in Indonesia.

Wherever they were put in place, Islamic courts drew their functionaries from the much larger circles of religious scholars (ulama). All religious scholars, are required to study law at least to a certain extent, but only a few qualified legal scholars actually chose to participate actively in the more formal institutions of the formal application of Islamic law. Many of these



Figure 9. Children dressed as key Islamic figures; part of a music and dance performance for the Tabot festival in Bengkulu (1992).



Figure 10. 'Masjid Goa' ('Katangka Mosque') in Makassar (Ujungpandang), South Sulawesi. It is said that this mosque stands on the site of the first to have been established the area, built in the sixteenth century.

religious scholars elected instead to remain independent scholars, sometimes teaching in mosques located in the busy ports or other urban centers (figure 10), or in independent rural centers of study known in Java as pondok pesantren. Although these institutions were occasionally located in remote areas of the countryside, they nonetheless maintained something of a 'cosmopolitan' outlook by way of extensive networks connecting them to similar institutions of Muslim learning around the Archipelago and abroad. For instance, many of the leading families of religious scholars in Java and Madura were related through an elaborate web of intermarriage. Beyond this, there was great emphasis placed on the highly-valued bond between students and their teachers, and these ties linked rural scholars with colleagues thousands of miles away.

Long-distance networks were also a result of the fact that a number of eager Indonesian students of religion had traveled to the Middle East in order to study with renowned teachers in centers such as Mecca, Medina, Cairo, and Damascus, as well as the scholarly towns of Yemen in southern Arabia. Such extensive travel in the quest for knowledge by Indonesian scholars is documented from the first part of the seventeenth century, if not earlier. In addition to this, Muslim scholars from India and the Middle East found their way to various parts of the Archipelago, where they attracted new students. Some of these individuals spent years as itinerant teachers, moving from one port to the next; others eventually settled in new homes, sometimes marrying into prominent families, which afforded them further influence among circles of the local political and mercantile elite.

Accompanying this movement of people was also a movement of ideas. The subjects studied from foreign teachers or in far-off centers of learning were selectively adopted and adapted to local needs, creating a unique Indonesian version of global Muslim traditions of education. A certain corpus of texts gained favor in circulation in the Archipelago, disseminating ideas not only in the field of legal studies, but also in Arabic grammar, religious mysticism, dogmatic theology, and Qur'an interpretation. Since the primary language of international Muslim scholarship was and remains Arabic, most subjects were taught in that language. However, over time a number of these works were translated, interpreted, or otherwise adapted into Malay or local languages in order to aid those less proficient in Arabic, such as beginning students. Later, some authors (Indonesians and also those who came originally from outside the Archipelago) composed original works of Muslim learning in such languages as Malay, Javanese, Sundanese, Buginese, and Makassarese, all of

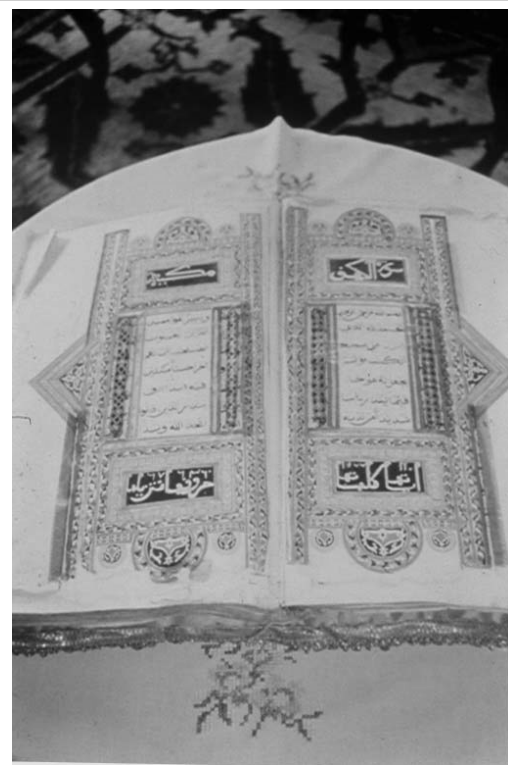


Figure 11. An illuminated Qur'an manuscript from the former Sultan's palace library in Sima, eastern Indonesia.

which written in the same Arabic script (just like European languages like English and Spanish are all written in the 'roman' script). Collectively, these writings came to be referred to as the 'Yellow Books' (Ind. kitab kuning) because of the yellowed paper on which they were printed. These works were the mainstay of pesantren (religious school) curriculum well into the twentieth century, and they have only recently been begun to be displaced by other works.

One text which remains a constant, undisputed object of attention in all circles is the Qur'an (figure 11). As Muslims believe it to be the actual Word of God delivered in Arabic, its position as the foundation of all Islamic learning and culture is absolute. In fact, learning to read and memorize the text of the Qur'an has always been the first step in a Muslim's education in Indonesia -- as is the case in all parts of the Muslim world. Many students from the pondok pesantren ('traditional.' religious schools) did not choose to pursue higher studies such as those in law mentioned above, but instead they chose to focus their entire careers around the text of the Qur'an, either as professional reciters or as local teachers who specialized in the instruction of the Qur'an for children. The continuities of institutions and practices under modern conditions -- not just religious education, but also the other aspects of Islamic culture described in this section -- are the subject of Section III to follow.

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Study Questions

1. What are some of the sources for Islamic narratives in Southeast Asia and how have they been adapted to local cultural conditions?
2. What kinds of institutions have contributed to the consolidation of Islamicate civilization in its Indonesian context?
3. How would you describe the development of educational networks in the Indonesian Archipelago and the larger Muslim world?
4. What is the role of the Arabic language and script in the development of Islamicate culture in Southeast Asia?
5. Describe the way in which Muslim life cycle rituals and calendrical observances have been transformed and adapted to the particular geographic and cultural situation of Indonesia.
6. Read the narrative of 'The Council of the Wali Songo' in Appendix II. What aspects of this account would you identify as moral instruction, religiously oriented entertainment, and/or the expression of a local Javanese Muslim identity?