

Section III. Islamic Practices in Modern Context

Previous sections have treated the historical and sociological contours of the coming of Islam to the Indonesian Archipelago. There has also been consideration of the related development of Muslim institutions and practices that have continued to respond to changes, such as the Dutch colonization of Indonesia. As many scholars have observed, however, the process of Islamization continues to this day, even though contemporary Muslims in Indonesia do not actively try to convert people of other religions. Indonesian Muslims do, however, try energetically to ‘invite’ people who share their faith to deepen their own understanding and commitment to a way of life that is spiritually fulfilling and which offers the satisfying sense of participating in religious community. The Arabic word for this kind of ‘invitation’ is *da’wah*, which can mean slightly different things in different parts of the Muslim world. In Indonesia, the idea of *da’wah* is often closely associated with learning more about Islam. These activities take place in new kinds of schools, through Islamic

‘cultural’ performances, or by way of the ‘Islamic arts,’ and they include practices that feature the Islamic Holy Book of the Qur’an, such as Arabic calligraphy or reading the Qur’an out loud with great technical artistry (Figure 12). Many Muslims in Indonesia think that by showing others that religion can be enriching, fun, and beautiful, more people will become interested in contributing to their own religious tradition. This way of thinking is being expressed in Indonesian Muslim culture through many different modes, from a musical form known as dangdut which is a favorite of young people to an explosion of popular literature about religious thought and practice.

Many Indonesian Muslims, like most religious people in general, want to apply what they understand to be the ideals of Islam to the realities of their own lives, communities, and nation. Naturally, the specific ways that these ideals are envisioned can vary among people, among communities, and among nations. In the history of Islam, there have always been people who have considered themselves to be ‘renewing’ (Ar., *tajdid*) Islamic ideals in their community, or ‘reforming’ (Ar., *islah*) their society in accord with these ideals, based on their own vision and as their own response to specific cultural and historical circumstances. Many of these ‘renewers’ in Islamic history have had a great impact on the development of Islam in Indonesia. For example, one ‘renewer’ was the great thinker, Abu Hamidal-Ghazzali (d. 1111), who wrote books that brought together ideas from philosophy, theology, law, and mysticism in a way that helped people up until the present day make sense of the role of Islam in their own experience. An example of a ‘reformer’ was Ibn Taimiyya (d. 1328), who was a member of a Sufi order, but who also wanted to counteract certain practices (like the veneration of ‘saints’ at their tombs) that he thought

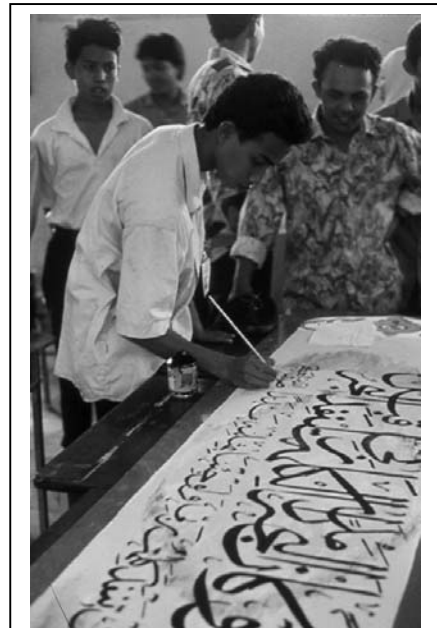


Figure 12: Students working on Arabic calligraphy for a local competition in the northern Mandar region of South Sulawesi (1994).

confused people and distorted Islamic ideals. Both al-Ghazzali and Ibn Taimiyya have inspired many Indonesian ‘renewers’ and ‘reformers,’ as have more modern thinkers from the Middle East and elsewhere who want to reinvigorate Islam in the way they understand to be the best response to the challenges of modern life that people face all over the world.

Despite differences of opinion that add vitality to any religious or cultural tradition, there are many points on which modern Indonesians have a great deal of agreement. Among these is the idea of a shared project among Muslims of exploring potential relationships between Islamic ideas and practices to other personal and community values, so that people may feel that their social and religious lives are more meaningful. This takes place not only by way of talking about these possibilities in the abstract, but more directly by ‘re-Islamicizing’ actual religious practices in which, ideally, any Muslim can take part. In other words, continuing Islamization in the form of Islamic ‘resurgence’ is occurring in Indonesia by way of reinvigorating old practices under new conditions.

One kind of practice that is enjoying increasing popularity is the recitation of religious texts. There are many kinds of texts that Muslims read out loud, some in Arabic, and some in local or ‘vernacular’ languages. For example, at the tomb of Shaykh Yusuf in Ujungpandang (Shaykh Yusuf was also discussed in Section II), there is a person sitting beside the grave who helps visitors by reciting special prayers for them (Figure 13). This is the case with many tombs in Indonesia and elsewhere in this Muslim world, and relates to a very old tradition which is part of the patterns of piety that were discussed



Figure 13: Women making offerings of flowers and scented oil at the tomb of Shaykh Yusuf Makassar in Ujungpandang (1996). At the far end of the grave; specialists perform ritual acts to assist the visitors to the site, many of whom having come with children to venerate the ‘saint’ and to receive blessings. Shaykh Yusuf was active in the resistance against the Dutch and is credited with bringing Islam to South Africa during his exile there, among his other accomplishments.



Figure 14: ‘Dhikr Jum’at’ (reading of a Barzanji text) at the palace of the former kings of Goa, Makassar (Ujungpandang), South Sulawesi (1997) At one time, this reading was performed every Thursday night; now it is observed more infrequently.

in Sections I and II. There are other kinds of devotional recitations that Indonesians have been performing together for a long time, such as the reading of texts dedicated to the Prophet Muhammad, which is done on occasions such as the birthday of the Prophet, but these performances—like the slametan mentioned in Section II—also occur on other occasions when people want to assert the connection between their own lives and a Divine Reality.

The recitation of the Barzanji is one example of a religious practice that is observed by people in many parts of the Islamic world (including the Middle East), which some ‘reformers’ have seen as unhelpful to Muslims in adapting their piety to the moral and material challenges of modern life. On the other hand,

many ‘renewers’ in Indonesia see the Barzanji as a way to assert in the present their sense of continuity with the religious past of their local community, while they also express the meaning that the Prophet Muhammad holds for them as an exemplary human being. The Barzanji is performed today in a number of contexts; some of them seem very ‘traditional,’ like the ‘Royal Dhikr’ in an old palace in South Sulawesi (Figure 14), and some of them seem very ‘modern,’ as in the case of a big contest for children in reading the text out loud, sponsored by a large corporation and held on its grounds. Whether they seem ‘old’ or ‘new’ to us—or even to the people who perform them—it is important to keep in mind that today the same people are reading the same text on all kinds of occasions— both ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’—and that this connection offers the depth of ‘tradition’ to what feels ‘new,’ while it lends a ‘modern’ relevance to what seems ‘old.’

Contests, like the competition in reading the Barzanji mentioned above, are popular formats for religious expression. In Indonesia, Muslims are finding that competitions in all kinds of ‘Islamic’ arts are effective and enjoyable ways to bring together individual practice and shared values in a context that is lively and which potentially offers everyone a turn on stage. There is a special kind of competition that began in Indonesia that is now quickly spreading throughout the Islamic world today as a form of *da’wah*, which are contests in Qur’an reading, memorization, calligraphy, and comprehension (Figure 15).

Qur’an reading is one of the most important ways Muslims express their religious piety, along with the



Figure 15: A young woman reciting the Qur’an at a regional competition in the northern town of Mamuju, South Sulawesi (1994).



Figure 16: Main ‘stage’ (minbar) at the MTQ National Qur’an Recitation Contest in Jambi, Sumatra (1997). The ‘stage’ is in the form of a combined ‘traditional’ house and fishing boat of the area. There is a young woman reciting the Qur’an in the glass booth. At night, the area in front of the stage is crowded with spectators.

basic duties known as the ‘Five Pillars’ of Islam (the testimony of faith, canonical prayer five times daily, fasting during the month of Ramadhan, pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime, and legal almsgiving). Muslims recite some of the Qur’an from memory every time they perform canonical prayer, and the reading of the Qur’an aloud at other times has always been strongly encouraged. The Qur’an is understood to have been revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad by way of the oral recitation of the Angel Gabriel, and the word ‘Qur’an’ itself is a form of the Arabic word for ‘reading.’ The Prophet and his Companions are understood to have transmitted the Qur’an orally to others even before the text of the Qur’an was ever written down for the first time. Learning to read the Qur’an out loud—whether or not the meaning of

the Arabic words can be understood—is often the first kind of formal religious instruction that Muslims receive. There are special guidelines Muslims follow when reciting the Qur’an, but no limits are fixed on making the ‘reading’ a beautiful one. Ideally” the development of technical artistry helps others to feel a connection between Revelation and their immediate experience, and it is reported that the Prophet himself once stated that the Qur’an ought to be vocalized in a beautiful way.

Since the earliest times, Muslims have reflected on the Qur’an’s power to captivate when it is read beautifully, and many Indonesians see contests in the recitation of the Qur’an as a way to ‘invite’ others to share in the moving experience of religious piety, whether they choose to continue their study of Qur’an reading beyond the beginning level or not. Today, contests for the recitation of the Qur’an are popular events, being held by many kinds of institutions and professional groups. For instance, every year there is one very large national recitation competition which features a great parade with elaborate floats, performances in Islamic ‘cultural arts,’ as well as competition in recitation, memorization, and calligraphy (Figure 16).



Figure 17: Decorated Qur’an pages with Indonesian design motifs on display at the Baitul Qur’an, Taman Mini Indonesia Indah, Jakarta (1997).

The promotion of Islamic practice, and particularly Qur’an-centered practice, however, does not just happen on a large scale in the form of contests. There is, for example, an impressive new exhibit at a national amusement park outside Jakarta, Indonesia’s capital, called the ‘House of the Qur’an’ (‘Baitul Quran’). The ‘House’ features what is said to be the largest decorated Qur’an text in the world, as well as exhibits of

old religious manuscripts from Indonesia’s Islamic past, and new artistic interpretations of the

Arabic of the Qur’an in modern calligraphy, using indigenous motifs inspired by Indonesian flowers and textiles (Figure 17). Even the roof of the building is a model of a kind of stand on which the Qur’an is placed during its recitation. This gallery, like recitation contests, is a new expression of a crucial dimension of Islamic practice, based on the ‘fundamental’ experience of the revealed Qur’an; however, although it is scripture-based, it bears little resemblance to the stereotype of ‘fundamentalism’ that many people associate with religious resurgence among Muslims and other religious groups.

Techniques for teaching the ‘fundamentals’ of the Qur’an are, actually, being developed in Indonesia today as an activity that is especially appealing to young children. People are applying innovative ideas on how to ‘make learning fun’ to the tradition of teaching how to



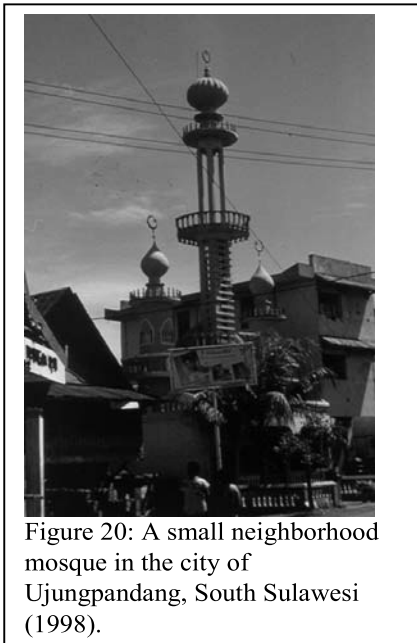
Figure 18: ‘Qur’an Kindergarten’ (TPA) practicing the reading of the Qur’an with an instructor (Yogyakarta, Java, 1997).



Figure 19: An informal women’s study group for Qur’an reading in a large mosque, Ujungpandang, South Sulawesi (1997). Notice that one of the participants has brought her grandchild along with her.

read the Qur'an, especially in new kinds of schools called 'Qur'an kindergartens' that feature varied activities such as songs that are sung in class and also disseminated on cassettes (Figure 18). Learning to read the Qur'an has become so popular, in fact, that many older people are also returning to study how to read better. For example, it is not unusual in Indonesia today to see a young child learning to read Arabic letters out loud right next to her grandmother (Figure 19).

Another practice that engages Muslims of all ages is that of the Hajj or pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca at least once during their lifetime. Indonesians are represented in great proportion in the annual pilgrimage, and even those who remain at home focus much attention on those who had the opportunity to travel to the Middle East that year.



Although Indonesia lies a great distance from Mecca, each year more and more Indonesians make the effort to fulfill this critical component of their piety. In this way, a religious activity based on the practice of the Prophet Muhammad continues to reinvigorate religious experience in the present. As they have for centuries, when Indonesians embark on Hajj today, they come into contact with other Muslims from all over the world, thus encountering the shared, global dimensions of Islamic religiosity from a distinctively Indonesian viewpoint. (For one individual's reflections on aspects of unity and diversity among Indonesian Muslims, inspired by his own Hajj experience, see Appendix III.) In a process not unlike what Ibn Batuta described centuries ago in his account of his travels (see Appendix I), contemporary Indonesian pilgrims, each with his or her own distinct perspective, return from Hajj to their local mosques and neighborhoods) with an enriched sense of their

participation in the world-wide Muslim community, as well as their own identity as Indonesian Muslims (Figure 20).

Study Questions

1. How can projects of da'wah ('inviting') be seen as an extension of long-standing patterns of Islamization in Indonesia? What aspects of these practices seem distinctively contemporary?
2. What role do some think artistic expression has to play in the cultural elaboration of current religious practice in Indonesia?
3. Describe some continuities of 'traditional' Muslim observances under 'modern' conditions.
4. Discuss the prominence of the Qur'an in Indonesian Islam, past and present.
5. How is the Hajj pilgrimage an encounter between universal ideals and lived realities of Indonesian religious life? (You may wish to consider the perspective of the pilgrim in Appendix III for examples.)