

## POPULAR RELIGIOSITY IN INDONESIA TODAY The Next Step after *Islam Kultural*?

**Farish A Noor**

S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS),  
Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore  
email: farish.noor@theglobalexperts.org

### Abstract

*The phenomenon of popular Islam is seen everywhere in the Muslim world today, and expresses itself via a host of means ranging from fashion to architecture as well as new cultural norms that are deemed Islamic. In the case of Indonesia, the expansive growth of the 'halal market'--pioneered by Islamic fashion and cosmetics-- has been a powerful variable factor, accounting for the emergence of a new Indonesian Muslim middle-class that has aspirations for upward social mobility as well as social capital. This paper locates the phenomenon of Indonesian pop Islam in the longer and broader history of Indonesia since the time of Suharto to the post-reformasi era of the present, and argues that pop Islam in Indonesia is a serious phenomenon worthy of study; as well as a good indicator of the trajectory of social development in the country. Though not everything that comes under this category may be classified as truly or wholly Islamic, the phenomenon nonetheless points to a growing sense of religious consciousness among the new urban Muslim middle-classes who see themselves as agents of change as well as religio-economic entrepreneurs.*

*[Fenomena Islam populer terlibat di mana-mana di dunia Islam saat ini, dan itu diekspresikan lewat berbagai media seperti tata busana sampai arsitektur, juga termasuk aturan-aturan yang dianggap Islami. Pada kasus Indonesia, perkembangan trend halal-haram yang dimotori oleh dunia tata busana dan kosmetik menyebabkan munculnya kelas menengah baru yang membawa aspirasi itu ke atas sebagai modal. Makalah ini menempatkan Islam populer di Indonesia pada jangka panjang dan luas sebagai fenomena yang layak dijadikan bahan studi; begitu juga arah perkembangan di negara*

*itu. Namun tidak semua di bawah kategori ini masuk dalam wilayah Islamis, namun tetap saja menunjukkan kesadaran keagamaan baru di perkotaan pada kelas menengah yang menganggap dirinya sebagai agen perubahan dan juga penggiat ekonomi agamis].*

**Keywords:** popular Islam, capitalism, middle class, popular culture

### **A. In the Wake of the *Orde Baru*: The New Demographics of Urban-Professional-Middle Class Islam in Indonesia**

*We need to seek a new vocabulary and mode of politics which is universal and yet allows us to maintain our specific group and collective identities, and sense of difference as well. Islam provides Muslims with the resources to do that.<sup>1</sup>*

A passing glance at Indonesian society today would suggest that Islam and Islamic norms and praxis have become thoroughly embedded in contemporary Indonesian society: From shopping malls that specialise in the sale of *hijab*, *kopiah*, kaftans, prayer-mats and other items related to religious rites and rituals; to the overabundance of religious symbols on TV, in Indonesian websites and pop culture. That Indonesia was a Muslim-majority country since the 14<sup>th</sup> century was well known, but the forms that popular religiosity have taken in Indonesia today are striking, and indicate to what extent the normative centre of Indonesian society has shifted over the past two decades.

Up to the early 1990s, Indonesian society seemed visibly different on the level of surface phenomena: How and why religion in general and Islam in particular have entered the public domain in the manner that it has tells us something about Indonesian history and how the country's development program has created unprecedented shifts and changes on a wider level, outside the ambit of capital-driven development orthodoxy.

Historians from Benda (1958) to Hefner (1997) have noted that Islam has always been a feature of the political landscape of postcolonial Indonesia since the 1940s. During the inter-war decades of the 1920s-1930s the forces of political Islam were mobilised for the first time in the form of movements such as the Sarekat Islam, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama. Initially these groups sought to improve and protect

---

<sup>1</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, "Democracy and the Universalism of Islam", in *New Voices of Islam*, ed. by Farish A. Noor (Leiden: ISIM International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World, 2002), p. 39.

the economic position of Muslims in places like Java, which also meant that their religio-economic activism was tinged by considerations of a more communitarian nature at the start. During the Japanese occupation and in the course of Indonesia's anti-colonial war against the Dutch (1945-1949), these Islamist movements came to the fore and played an instrumental role in the independence struggle, and in the course of doing so also demonstrated their strong nationalist leanings as movements that loved the country and sought state capture.<sup>2</sup>

During the first decades of Indonesian independence, the young nation-state was caught in a series of existential struggles that were as complex as they were violent: The rise of different political groupings in the country that spanned the ideological spectrum --from the radical left to the extreme right-- meant that Indonesia's coming-into-being was being challenged by centrifugal forces of all kinds: Local opposition movements whose politics was framed by local identity concerns struggled against what they regarded as Jakarta's attempt to impose a singular sense of universal nationhood upon all; left-wing groups battled against feudal interests, while religious groups sought to build a nation on the basis of a common faith identity. Sukarno's rejection of the demand to make Indonesia an Islamic state meant that many of the Muslim groups that had toiled during the independence war then felt betrayed, and rose up against the government accordingly.

During this period, many of the studies that were done by academics --both local and foreign-- on Indonesia tended to focus on the political role that Islam was playing in Indonesia's convoluted internal politics, Benda's study in 1958 being one such example. Others such as Maryanov (1958) opined that such local forces posed a political threat to the state, and that if they were not countered and checked, would ultimately rip the nation apart.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Re: Harry Jindrich Benda, *The Crescent and the Rising Sun: Indonesian Islam under the Japanese Occupation 1942-1945* (Leiden: Foris Publications, 1985); Robert W. Hefner and Patricia Horvath, *Islam in an Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Gerald Seymour Maryanov, *Decentralization in Indonesia as a Political Problem* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958, reprinted Jakarta: Equinox Publishing, 2009). The question of decentralisation of power from the political centre to the peripheral island provinces has been a problem of a political nature since the beginning, as noted by Gerald Seymour Maryanov (1958). He argues that since the emergence of Indonesia the state has been faced with both centrifugal and centripetal demands, and the claims of the leaders of the non-Javanese island provinces have always been couched more

The impasse was forcibly broken as a result of the political crisis that took place between 1963 to 1965, where the Communist party of Indonesia (PKI), that was pushing President Sukarno in the direction of class action and confrontation with neighbouring Malaysia, was ultimately destroyed *en masse* via the pogroms and mass killings of 1965 -- in which a significant number of Indonesian Muslim activists took part. With the rise of General-turned-President Suharto, many Muslim activists in Indonesia felt that political Islam would be given a new opportunity in the country, though they would later be disappointed as NurcholishMadjid (2002) noted:

During the Suharto era many of us who were in the Muslim movements and parties thought that things would change for the better, but we were disappointed. Many Islamic groups --like the Nahdlatul Ulama and its youth wing in particular-- supported the army and Suharto because they thought that the rise of Suharto would mean an end to the Communist threat and the rise of political Islam in the country. But Suharto kept to the path that Sukarno had created in many ways. He maintained the ban on the Masjumi party that Sukarno imposed. His close allies and generals like Ali Murtopo also worked hard to keep Indonesian Muslims in their place. They made sure that Islam would never be able to rise again and that the Muslims' efforts to improve their economic and political situation were obstructed. It was during the time of Suharto that political Islam was treated with the utmost suspicion, and in many cases this even led to conflict.<sup>4</sup>

Suharto's period of rule --dubbed the *OrdeBaru* (New Order) in terms of autonomy rather than self-determination or decentralised power (pp. 14-15). Postcolonial Indonesia inherited a state that was institutionally and structurally the product of colonisation and colonial governmentality (pp. 19-21), and as such many of the power-structures and their attendant power-relations remained largely intact even after 1945. But while the Dutch had created a colonial federal state, the postcolonial Indonesian leaders opted for a centralised Republic with power invested and concentrated in Jakarta. The short-lived experiment with federalism lasted less than a year and by 1948 most of the Indonesian federal states had opted to join the Indonesian republic (then based in Jogjakarta). In 1950 the Negara Indonesia Timur NIT (based in Makassar, Sulawesi) also opted to join the Indonesian republic. Maryanov however notes that one variable factor that has always complicated the process of governance in Indonesia is the lingering effect of culture and political culture in particular (pp. 29-31). From the outset the democratic principles of the Indonesian republic and its republican constitution had to be adapted to local realities where for centuries (and even during Dutch colonial rule) democratisation was never really implemented, and in fact resisted by the colonisers and local feudal elites alike.

<sup>4</sup> Madjid, "Democracy", p. 37.

regime-- was one where Indonesia was placed firmly on the path of capital-driven modernisation and development, with the aim of creating a secular modern industrialised country. Having eliminated the Communist threat, the Suharto government and its state security apparatus then turned upon the Islamists and imposed upon the Indonesian nation a template of secularisation that was on the one hand Western-centric but without the trappings of Western democracy or liberalism. The net result was a period of rule lasting more than three decades where a centralised state dictated not only the paradigm of development but also set the standards for acceptable public behaviour (including dress) and popular discourse. Under the regime, all overt displays of religiosity were frowned upon on the grounds that they were sectarian, communitarian and possibly radically anti-state. Political Islam was effectively curtailed, and the major Islamic political parties of the country were forced to come together under the broad banner of the Unity and Progress Party (PPP, *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan*).

During this period (1970-1998) the country embarked on an ambitious development process that was sustained in part by the injection of foreign direct investment (FDI). Indonesia benefitted tremendously as a result, and the state began the process of power-centralisation, co-ordinating national development from the political centre, and the process was managed by a close circle of Western-trained technocrats (including men such as B. J. Habibie) as well as the armed forces. Instances of social revolt and uprisings were rare, and these included the TanjongPriok riots and the student demonstrations of 1974. In the outer island provinces such as Aceh, West Papua and East Timor, order was maintained via a combination of state coercion and persuasion, with development funds channelled to those provinces that abided by the directives of Jakarta. In other cases, such as Aceh, Lampung and West Papua, resistance to Jakarta's dictates often led to sudden and violent reprisals.

As a result of the political order that was achieved (by coercion in some instances) and continuity of rule (as a result of the merger of political parties and the domination of Golkar, the party of the establishment<sup>5</sup>) Indonesia managed to make the leap towards becoming

---

<sup>5</sup> Golkar (*Partai Golongan Karya*) was a catch-all party whose membership was drawn mainly from the bureaucracy and state administrative apparatus, as well as the business community. Ostensibly a secular nationalist party, it defended the five ruling principles of the Indonesian Republic (*Pancasila*) and was allowed to dominate the political landscape of the country. Though it was for all intents and purposes a state-*Al-Jāmi'ah*, Vol. 53, No. 2, 2015 M/1437 H

a developing nation. The great stride in the promotion of mass literacy meant that by the 1960s mass education was a reality and the country was witnessing the first boom in the educational sector. One of the consequences of this expansion of the higher-education sector is that it helped to create what would later become Indonesia's nascent urban professional middle class. As noted by Madjid (2002), it was this middle class that would later play a pivotal role in the Islamisation of Indonesian society from the grassroots level:

What you see in Indonesia today is the direct result of the development that began in the 1960s. In the 1960s Indonesia had its first generation of university and college graduates. When we were living under Dutch colonial rule there was no such thing as mass education on a national level, but after we achieved independence in 1945 one of the first things that we did was to build universities all over the country.... By the 1980s the same people were much older, wiser and economically independent. They were now in their 40s and not as naïve as before.... By the 1980s these Indonesians were also becoming more conscious of their Islamic identity.<sup>6</sup>

As the Suharto regime tolerated no expression of radical Islam whatsoever, the Muslim students, activists and intellectuals of the 1970s-80s turned to cultural expressions of piety and religiosity instead. This gave birth to the phenomenon of *Islam Kultural*<sup>7</sup> (Cultural Islam, as opposed to political Islam) where young educated Indonesian Muslims began to debate and articulate new understandings of Islam --both formal and normative-- via the lens of social sciences and philosophy. The 1980s witnessed the birth of this first generation of educated Muslim intellectuals and professionals, who were ironically the result of a coercive state apparatus that did not allow any opportunity structures for political Islam to flourish. Yet through their engagement with philosophy and the social sciences, they found other means to understand their own condition, articulate their religious yearnings, and express their religious identity in the public domain in a manner that seemed non-threatening to the state.

By the 1990s, this generation of pious Indonesian Muslims had

---

created and state-sanctioned party, its stand on issues such as inter-religious tolerance, economic nationalism, and the role of women in politics and the economy was often more progressive than its critics have claimed.

<sup>6</sup> Madjid, "Democracy", pp. 37-8.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

risen to assume the role of the urban middle-class, and were engaged in all areas of public life --from the media to commerce to education and the bureaucracy of the country. The conditions were thus ripe for Islam to enter the public domain via all other means save that of the front door of the state.

## **B. Popular Islam in Indonesia's Public Domain**

*The rise of Islamism was only possible when the availability of Islam could be articulated into a counter-hegemonic discourse.<sup>8</sup>*

There are two points that need to be borne in mind before we proceed any further. The first is that Islam has been a common and visible factor in Indonesian social life for centuries, and that talk about the 'sudden Islamisation' of Indonesian society has been largely exaggerated and blown out of proportion. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century Indonesian Muslims have grappled with the question of identity and have been involved in a wide range of political-economic activities that were intended to serve the objectives of nation-building, anti-colonialism and collective economic resilience and self-sufficiency. Though the overt markers of religiosity began to be seen all across the country from the 1980s, it has to be emphasised here is that Indonesia did not 'suddenly become Islamic' overnight.

Secondly it should be noted, as it has by scholars such as Bobby Sayyid (1997) that the rise of Islamism and the proliferation of Islamic/Muslim symbolism in the public domain took place only when the groundswell of public opinion had shifted to the Islamic register, and when the socio-economic conditions had changed to the point where public expressions of piety and religiosity were deemed acceptable. In this respect Indonesia's Islamisation in the public domain is similar to other instances where the public space was altered as a result of structural-institutional-economic changes, which in turn sustained the shift to new expressions and norms in the public arena. The same process can be seen in India, where the public display of newfound piety and religio-communal consciousness among Indians was partly the result of the emergence of an urban, educated Hindu middle-class.

In all these cases, the real driver for these changes in the public domain are political-economic and not necessarily religion itself. Lubeck's

---

<sup>8</sup> Bobby S. Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism* (London: Zed Books, 1997), p. 73.

(1986) study of the changing norms and mores among the urban Muslim workers of Nigeria have pointed to the same findings, that religious identity-politics becomes a factor in situations where new class and occupation subject-positions create new opportunity structures for social mobility, and then contribute to growing (middle) class aspirations.<sup>9</sup> Lubeck and Britts (2001) go on to note that in cases of countries in the Muslim world that experienced rapid economic development and foreign capital-driven globalisation from the 1980s to the 1990s, one of the net results was the creation of civil society actors and agents who were identifiably Muslim, and who chose to identify themselves as Muslim --placing their religious identity to the foreground as a marker of identity and intent.<sup>10</sup>

By the late 1990s, Indonesian society had experienced three decades of rapid development that permanently altered the shape and contours of the public domain: Higher education had created a new generation of educated Indonesian Muslim professionals; globalization and mass media had exposed them to alternative worldviews and a range of counterfactual possibilities; and at the same time Indonesians were plugged into a global network of Muslim communities that were interlinked via the media and online communications architectures. The financial crisis of 1997 was the catalyst that led to the eventual overthrow of the Suharto regime, but as Hefner (2000) has noted, this was a popular public uprising that was both democratic and Islamic at the same time; the leaders of the peoples' opposition movement then coming from strong Islamist backgrounds such as Amien Rais of the Muhammadiyah movement.<sup>11</sup>

During the first decade that followed the fall of Suharto (1998-2008) Indonesia was caught in a whirlwind of global and domestic events that momentarily cast the entire nation in a negative light. Following the attacks of 11 September 2001, Indonesia was rocked by a series of events: the Bali bombings placed the country on the global map; the violence between Muslims and Christians in Ambon and the Moluccas gave the impression that centrifugal militant forces were about to tear the country

---

<sup>9</sup> Paul M. Lubeck, *Islam and Urban Labour in Northern Nigeria: The Making of a Muslim Working Class* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> Paul M. Lubeck and Bryana Britts, "Muslim Civil Society in Urban Public Spaces: Globalization, Discursive Shifts, and Social Movements", in *Understanding the City: Urban Studies Contemporary and Future Perspectives*, ed. by John Eade and Christopher Mele (London: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2002), pp. 305–35.

<sup>11</sup> Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2000).

apart. A succession of weak presidents had failed to rally the country together, until the victory of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono introduced a period of calm from 2004-2014.

Yet despite the negative image that was associated with Indonesia and Indonesian Islam, it was during this same period that millions of ordinary Indonesian Muslims turned to Islam as a marker of identity. During the *Orde Baru* era the expression of personal piety and/or personal religious identity in the public domain was largely frowned upon. But by the first decade of the 2000s Indonesian society witnessed a proliferation of Muslim symbols and norms in the public arena: popular preachers like Aa Gym (Abdullah Gymnastiar) began to make the headlines and became celebrities in their own right, preaching to thousands of followers on TV; in urban centres like Jakarta the phenomenon of ‘hotel Sufis’ became popular with Sufi orders (*tariqa*) organising mass prayer sessions in hotels; pop stars and musicians like Sakti Aria Seno (of the hugely popular band *Shila On 7*) joined the *Tablighi Jama'at* movement and changed his name to Salman al Jogjawy; and the sale of Muslim fashion (dubbed *Busana Islam*) soared across the country.

These developments reflect the extent to which the socio-cultural landscape of contemporary Indonesia has changed with its political economy: apart from the growth of the higher education sector, the emergence of an indigenous Muslim middle class happens to be one of the most striking features of Indonesia today, and it has become manifest in the new social norms that now dominate in both its urban and virtual spaces. Coming at a time when globalisation has also helped the creation of a global Muslim market (dubbed ‘the Muslim Dollar’) and where countries like Malaysia have been trying to position themselves as centres of Islamic Finance, Indonesia’s embrace of Muslim/Islamic branding is a visible trend that remains understudied.

From a social sciences perspective, it is interesting to note that the new Muslim middle class of Indonesia has evolved in a manner that does not conform to simple typologies or neat categorisations. Though earlier scholars like Geertz (1976) had tried to introduce neat binary oppositions between those regarded as eclectic/syncretic and those who were more formal in their piety,<sup>12</sup> what we see today is a more complex and nuanced phenomenon of devout and pious Indonesian Muslims who are attempting to work with and engage with globalisation, modernity, and

<sup>12</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

Western culture. Even a random sampling of contemporary Indonesian pop culture on TV or the internet will provide examples of Indonesian Muslims who have no difficulty in combining Muslim dress, manners and ethics with ostensibly non-religious and non-devotional activities from kick-boxing to karaoke to bungee-jumping.

Furthermore, the expansion of the Muslim public domain has also created vast new sectors for an emerging market that caters to the interests and demands of the Indonesian Muslim consumer who wishes to consume and to maintain his/her Muslim identity in the process. This has contributed to the tremendous growth of the Indonesian popular Muslim market, creating the phenomenon of 'pop Islam' that has been so well studied by Muller (2010, 2013, 2014) in neighbouring Malaysia as well.<sup>13</sup>

Our focus will now turn to a recent example of such pop Islam in Indonesia that received global recognition and acclaim, while also confounding many scholars and analysts. It is perhaps one of the clearest examples of how the agents and actors of everyday Islamisation in Indonesia are grappling with the question of identity and faith in the context of a complex changing world, and how it has produced a phenomenon that is itself complex and difficult to neatly categorise: the Miss Muslimah pageant.

### **C. The Fairer Side of Islam: Beauty as a Virtue: Spiritual Beauty as *Dakwah***

*O children of Adam, We have bestowed upon you clothing to conceal your shame and as adornment. But the clothing of righteousness --that is the best.*<sup>14</sup>

The Miss Muslimah pageant was the brainchild of Eka Shanti, who was herself once in the media world by virtue of having been a television presenter in Indonesia. After a dispute with the management of the TV company over the question of whether she could wear a headscarf while

---

<sup>13</sup> Dominik M. Müller, "An Internationalist National Islamic Struggle? Narratives of 'Brothers Abroad' in the Discursive Practices of the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS)", *South East Asia Research*, vol. 18, no. 4 (2010), pp. 757–91; Dominik M. Müller, "Post-Islamism or Pop-Islamism? Ethnographic Observations of Muslim Youth Politics in Malaysia", *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde*, vol. 59 (2013), pp. 21–84; Dominik M. Müller, *Islam, Politics and Youth in Malaysia: The Pop-Islamist Reinvention of PAS*, Contemporary Southeast Asia Series (London: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> The Quran, 7:26.

presenting television shows, she left her job and moved into the domain of Muslim entrepreneurialism, venturing into other non-media domains before she came up with the idea of the Muslimah Pageant.

First held in Indonesia in 2011, the pageant was initially open to Indonesian contestants. The fact that it became an instantaneous hit with TV viewers propelled Eka Shanti and the organisers into the limelight, and made the Miss Muslimah contest a household word. Due to popular demand, the pageant was repeated and opened to non-Indonesians as well. It was held again in 2012, but the contest in 2013 was the one that truly made it internationally famous. The timing of the 2013 pageant coincided with the Miss World contest that was to be held in Bali the same year, which led to public protests by hardline Islamist groups such as the *Front Pembela Islam* (Islamic Defenders Front) and the *Hizbut Tabrir Indonesia* (HTI). The contrast between the two pageants --relatively close to each other in terms of timing and both being held in Indonesia-- was striking, but the radical hardliners who condemned the Miss World contest in Bali also turned against the Miss Muslimah pageant in their anger.

In the end, the 2013 Miss Muslimah pageant was held successfully and safely in Jakarta, and the winner was Obabiyi Aishah Ajibola from Nigeria. The following year the pageant was held again and the winner was the Tunisian computer engineer Fatma ben Guefrache, who in the course of her victory speech pleaded for peace in the Arab world and called for a free Palestine. What had begun as an attempt to create a new space for Muslim female identity had by then become an international phenomenon with political meanings encoded into it.

In the context of our own on-going work on patterns and modalities of public religiosity in the public domain we interviewed Eka Shanti and members of the Miss Musliman committee in March 2014.<sup>15</sup> The interview with Eka and her team of consultants and managers took place at her apartment-office in downtown Jakarta. Based at a plush and exclusive condominium complex, the entire operation lent the impression of being up-market, luxurious and exclusive. But the actual management of the beauty pageant was done very professionally, and both Eka and

---

<sup>15</sup> This was part of a documentary project by Channel News Asia (CNA) that resulted in a six-part documentary series entitled *Inside Indonesia*, which looked at the state of contemporary Indonesian society in the period leading up to the elections of 2014. The series was hosted by the author and began airing just a week into the Indonesian election period.

her advisors were attuned to the latest fashion trends and consumption patterns in contemporary Indonesia. To begin with, she responded to the first round of questions with an observation about how the popular market and female consumption patterns had changed over the past decade in the country:

We are pragmatic and realistic about this, because this (Miss Muslimah) pageant comes at a time when Indonesians are also more religious than before. If you look around you, you will see that the *jilbab* (headscarf) is now worn by most Muslim women across Indonesia. No, it is not a negative trend, and it is not something that is conservative or *kampong* either. Look at who is wearing the *jilbab* now: women who are professional, with university education; women who are politicians, ministers, businesswomen like me, doctors, lawyers. So *jilbab* has now become a positive sign of women's identity, and for professional women you can be Muslim and progressive at the same time. This is what we want to show to the world, that Muslim women in Indonesia are not poor, we are not kept at home. That is a good message to send out to the world. Also when you look at what our women are wearing and buying today, you see they think as Muslims when they shop at the malls. In the past we used to think that to be beautiful you have to look this way, that way, we followed the fashion magazines from overseas. But now, look at how we shop and consume. Do you know that *halal* cosmetics is now the biggest and fastest growing industry in terms of women's consumption? *Halal* cosmetics is what Indonesian women are buying now, and it is the fastest growing sector of the market. Do you know that today in Indonesia *halal* cosmetics is the number one cosmetics in the country? In terms of profit, *halal* cosmetics out-sells all the top five major international brands in Indonesia today, including *Guerlain*, *Shiseido*, and the rest put together.

Underlying the Miss Muslimah pageant enterprise is a firm understanding of the political-economy of Muslim society today and Indonesia's Muslim society in particular. The concerns that Eka expressed demonstrated an awareness of both local sensibilities --including the middle-class aspirations of many urban Indonesian Muslims-- as well as the political realities of the country and the international arena. From the outset, she insisted that the pageant was meant to show to both Indonesia and the world that Islam was a religion that emancipated society and which stood for beauty and peace.

When you watch the TV these days, all you see are reports about terrorism and terror attacks here and there. Now the world thinks that all Muslims are terrorists and that Islam means violence, means terrorism. That is not

true, and we want to show the world, and to show to Muslims too, that Islam stands for beauty. But the beauty of Islam is not something that is only physical. Yes, of course the girls who enter the pageant are beautiful, but they are not being judged by their looks. The judges are meant to judge the beauty of their character. This is what we want to show to people, to educate people about that beauty is not just about having beautiful eyes or fair skin, but real beauty is within. Because Islam has received so much bad publicity today, we feel that this is an important message for the world to hear: that Islam is a religion of beauty, not violence.

Just how such a standard to inner beauty is to be gauged and measured remains unclear, for Eka agreed that there was no means to quantify or measure it. But the pageant is in the format of a reality programme where the activities and behaviour of the contestants are publicly viewed, lending the tournament a somewhat voyeuristic aspect that she felt was compensated by the activities that were encouraged as part of the pageant's norms:

When the contestants arrive, they are all put together in a dormitory setting. Here is where their real character is seen. That is what we are looking for: Muslim girls of good character, piety, charity, virtue. So you see it is not like the Miss World contest where they show their bodies and walk around half-naked. Here for our contest the girls have to show how much they know about Islam. They are judged on their ability to read the Quran beautifully. They are tested about their knowledge of Islamic history, culture and civilisation. We want to showcase true Muslim women who don't simply look good, but are also good inside. The most important test is the test of their character: how pious they are, how honest, how kind, how charitable. So as part of the pageant we take them to places like orphanages and schools for poor children, to let them see how hard life can be for the poor and the homeless; and also to see how they respond. In situations like that you can see how good a person is inside.

To what extent the organisers and managers of the pageant are aware of the metaphysical aspect of their working definition of 'inner beauty' remains uncertain, though they readily admitted to the difficulty of trying to estimate or measure a variable such as piety. However the discussion of metaphysics was never truly avoided as she emphasised time and again that the pageant operated according to a logic that was not material-physical, but rather spiritual. To underscore this further, Eka noted that for future pageants the committee in charge was seriously contemplating including contestants who would be entirely covered by

an all-body *burqa*:

Last year there was an application by a girl who wanted to take part in the pageant, but she was wearing an all-body *burqa*. At first we rejected her, because in that case none of us would even know what she looked like. Because the pageant is watched by everyone, including men, then it would be impossible for the contestant to take off her *burqa* even for one minute. So we decided to reject her then. But now, we are reconsidering again. Because you see, what we are trying to promote is the idea that beauty lies in the heart of the person, in the *insan*, the soul; and not in the body. So after debating about this, the committee has decided that for future pageants we will accept contestants who choose to wear the *burqa*. In any case, we are all wearing *jilbab*, so who are we to tell her (the contestant) that she cannot wear the *burqa*? If we want to judge the inner beauty of a person, then we need to be fair to all the contestants.

Yet notwithstanding the organisers' attempts to project a different understanding of beauty --one which they regard as being in accordance with Islamic aesthetics and spirituality at the same time-- Eka admitted that one of the major obstacles to the beauty pageant program from the outset was the perception of the public and the religious authorities of the country. From the very beginning, Eka and her committee members were eager to win the support and approval of religious figureheads in the country, and their endorsement of the project as something that was in accordance with their religious beliefs and values:

At the start, when I announced that I wanted to do this, there was some negative reaction from the Muslim community. People began to joke, and say things like what kind of beauty pageant is this, what will the girls be wearing? There were also those who said we were in danger of trivialising Islam, and making Muslims look silly. Why was there even a need for a beauty contest, they asked. So we began to meet our critics, and I and the committee approached many people from the religious schools, as well as popular preachers and religious leaders. We explained to them why we wanted to do this, why we felt it was important that we show another side of Islam that the world does not get to see. We also argued that it was important that even Indonesians understand the beauty in Islam, and that Islam is not a religion of violence and terrorism. Thankfully we were successful, and even though some people still criticise or ridicule us for what we are doing, the really important religious thinkers and leaders understand. So that's how we became so successful, to the point where other countries took notice of us, and there were invitations from countries like Malaysia and Brunei too. We are negotiating with

the authorities there, and also engaged in dialogues with them to explain what the contest is all about. If we are successful, then the pageant will be able to travel to other countries as well.

The Miss Muslimah pageant was, from the outset, an attempt by Indonesian Muslims to assert their own sense of religio-cultural identity while also cornering a key sector of the domestic market (both in terms of consumer goods like cosmetics as well as media air-time). That it caught the world by surprise was evident in the manner in which the pageant was featured in major newspapers and TV channels all across the world, including in North America and Western Europe, as well as the Muslim world. But this was a pageant that was also attempting to make a point about Muslim exceptionalism and difference, and for its organisers at least it had managed to do that as well. Eka Shanti spoke of her own satisfaction with the contest and its results:

For us, the real proof of our success came when the winner of the 2013 World Muslimah Pageant was Obabiyi Aishah Ajibola, from Nigeria. It was an amazing moment, we were all in tears. It was incredible because Obabiyi was from Nigeria, and the pageant was in Indonesia. People thought “no, she is African, she cannot possibly win”. But she won the highest number of votes and everyone was so happy. The judges were children --orphans-- and they were all given the chance to vote live on TV through a secret electronic voting system. So nobody knows who voted for whom, but it turned out that the kids really loved her, and she won the majority vote. This, for us, was proof of what we were trying to show: during the tournament the girls were taken to places like mosques, schools and orphanages. Obabiyi was touched by what she saw at the orphanage, and the orphans were touched by her kindness too. I think that’s why she won: she had a kind heart and children never forget kindness. Children are good judges of people’s character that way -- hey saw that she was a beautiful person inside.

For now the Miss Muslimah pageant seems set to continue and may soon be staged in other Muslim countries as well. It has turned out to be one of the most marketable and exportable products to come out of Indonesia in recent years, and crucially it was perhaps the most positive story to be told about Indonesian Islam, since the half-decade of negative reporting on radicalism in the country from 2001 to 2006. That it was and is a phenomenon that is organic and specific to Indonesia today is evident, but the final question that needs to be addressed is where the Miss Muslimah pageant --and all other manifestations of

popular Islamic culture-- is to be located within the broader framework of today's modernity.

#### **D. Conclusion: The Location and Co-ordinates of Popular Islamic Culture**

In concluding we return to Marshall Hodgson's (1974) term *Islamicate*,<sup>16</sup> which denotes phenomena and epiphenomena that may bear allusions or references to a particular belief system, but which are linked less to the theology and/or orthodoxy of that particular faith and have more attachment to the normative practices of the people who belong to that faith community. The term has come into common usage now, and examples of what constitutes Islamicate are numerous: the Taj Mahal for instance is widely cited as an example of Islamic architecture, though it was shaped more by the culture of the Moghuls whose own popular beliefs and religio-spiritual praxis was eclectic and hybrid by any standards. Though many people --Muslims included-- continue to see the Taj Mahal as an exemplary model of classical Islamic architecture, few have considered the rather obvious fact that as a mausoleum it stands in stark defiance of Islamic injunctions against the glorification and fetishisation of the dead and their burial places. There is in fact nothing Islamic about the Taj Mahal, but it emerged from the bosom of a culture that was profoundly shaped and informed by Islam --hence the use of the term Islamicate to describe it.

The same may be said of the phenomenon of pop Islam in Indonesia today, as with the rest of the Muslim world. Since the end of the Cold War era the Muslim world has been witnessed to the emergence and growing popularity of goods and commodities that are sold as being ostensibly Islamic in some way or another: there has been the phenomenon of Zam-Zam Cola (which was meant to be the alternative to Coca Cola), Islamic Jeans, Islamic rap music, Islamic game shows and talk shows on TV, Islamic banking and finance, Islamic science and knowledge, Islamic websites and Islamic alternatives to Facebook, and now thanks to Eka Shanti and her team of promoters, the Miss Muslimah pageant.

That all of the above come under the general heading of Islamicate is rather evident as all these things --from consumer durables to art

---

<sup>16</sup> Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

to material culture to pop entertainment-- find their identity defined (wilfully or accidentally) via an association with Islam. That some of these commodities are sold to Muslims on the basis that they are Muslim products, made by Muslims, and to be consumed by Muslims, underlies yet again the existence of an economy that is both financial and discursive: the Muslim global market that exists today within the broader ambit of global capitalism and capital-driven development is not a revolutionary enterprise that seeks to overthrow the logic of Capital, but rather find its own niche and support itself while operating within that economic network and discourse.

But here we ought to note that there are in fact two economies at work, which mutually support each other. The financial-commercial aspect of pop Islamism is grounded in real political-economic realities and is driven by the same profit-seeking impetus that drives Capitalism in general; while on the other hand the logic of (Islamic) identity-formation that is contained in popular Islamicate culture/products is an instance of identity-politics being translated and transformed into accessible goods and services, the purchase of which affirms consumption choices that in turn affirm religious identity. Thus *Homo Islamicus* and *Homo Economicus* come together in pop Islam, where the purchase and patronage of Islamicate products and services becomes an effective means of 'purchasing' one's identity in the public domain, and of making a statement about one's (religious) identity in the public arena of consumption. One is what one buys; and to buy into Muslim/Islamicate products/services/pop culture affirms one's Muslim identity too.

To ask whether the Miss Muslimah pageant is 'Islamic' therefore misses the point, for neither the pageant nor its organisers and promoters have ever claimed that this was a religious event; going to a pageant is hardly the same as going to the mosque for prayers. What makes it Islamic is not the theology behind it --though theology is appealed to when it comes to defending what the pageant regards as an Islamic notion of inner spiritual beauty-- but rather the fact that this was an event invented, patronised and popularised by Muslims who now have embraced it as part and parcel of Muslim life in modern-day Indonesia. It becomes part of the identity of the larger Muslim community when it is seen and accepted as a common and popular event for and by Muslims that appeals to their sensibilities, and when it seems to reflect their aspirations as well. That makes it a Muslim pageant --as its name implies-- and not an Islamic one.

The question that follows from the observation above is: if popular

Islamicate culture today (in Indonesia and every other Muslim country/community worldwide) is meant to serve as a collective communal identity-marker that denotes a particular identity, does this in any way suggest that a Muslim space-habitus has truly created? And where does this locate popular Islamism/Islamicate culture in relation to the secular Capitalist order that it juxtaposes itself against?

To locate popular Islamic culture and phenomena today would mean placing it within a dialectical relationship with what it sees at its constitutive Other; and this has often come to refer to Western culture and all things associated with it, notably liberalism, secularism, and the cultural-historical experience that contributed to the development of the West all the while. Yet as in all instances of such oppositional dialectics, identity-formation is embroiled in a mutually-supportive relationship where the constitutive Other becomes the necessary condition of possibility for identity to emerge in the first place, for without the Other the Self is also undefined and undetermined. If this was the case, then it could be argued that pop Islam --despite its claims of alterity and difference-- is caught in a referential relationship with the Other that it seeks to both reject and mirror at the same time. Again this becomes evident when we consider the extant examples of Muslim consumer products that are found in the market today: Zam-Zam Cola was meant to be an alternative to Coke, but in presenting itself as an alternative it also confirms the pivotal and definitive status of Coke as 'the real thing'.

The Miss Muslimah pageant which we have looked at is likewise caught in a dialectical relationship that is mutually supportive and circular: conceived and presented as an alternative to Miss World, it seeks to foreground an Islamic/Muslim sensibility and purports to conform to Islamic/Muslim standards of aesthetics and spiritual beauty. But in the manner that the pageant is organised and presented, as well as how it has been received and consumed by the public, there remain evident similarities between the two: the staging of events, the presentation of the contestants, the climactic conclusion that often ends with a tearful acceptance speech, etc. These similarities remind us of the fact that all attempts at radical reversal --even in instances of violent and radical revolutionary-militant politics-- often lead to a reconstitution of the same, and the confirmation of the dominant paradigm that was challenged at the beginning. By virtue of it being seen and presented as an 'alternative' to Miss World, the Miss Muslimah pageant repeats the same tropes and symbolic order of the former, confirming its own location as a

component of a circular dialectic and thus reminding us of the fact that Pop Islamicate culture today --and all other alternative 'lifestyle models' currently on the market-- comes at a time when Muslim society worldwide is located in the context of a capital-driven globalised world where the developmental paradigm remains hegemonic. If this means that the Miss Muslimah contest and its fans are caught in the same logic of capitalist development themselves, then it should come as no surprise, for after all, Muslims are here in the modern world, and Indonesian Muslims are very much part of today's (hegemonic) modernity too.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Benda, Harry Jindrich, *The Crescent and the Rising Sun: Indonesian Islam under the Japanese Occupation 1942-1945*, Leiden: Foris Publications, 1985.
- Geertz, Clifford, *The Religion of Java*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.
- Hefner, Robert W., *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*, New York: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Hefner, Robert W. and Patricia Horvatic, *Islam in an Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia*, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1997.
- Hodgson, Marshall G.S., *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilisation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.
- Lubeck, Paul M., *Islam and Urban Labour in Northern Nigeria: The Making of a Muslim Working Class*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Lubeck, Paul M. and Bryana Britts, "Muslim Civil Society in Urban Public Spaces: Globalization, Discursive Shifts, and Social Movements", in *Understanding the City: Urban Studies: Contemporary and Future Perspectives*, ed. by John Eade and Christopher Mele, London: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2002.
- Madjid, Nurcholish, "Democracy and the Universalism of Islam", in *New Voices of Islam*, ed. by Farish A. Noor, Leiden: International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM), 2002.
- Maryanov, Gerald Seymour, *Decentralization in Indonesia as a Political Problem*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958.
- Müller, Dominik, "Post-Islamism or Pop-Islamism? Ethnographic Observations of Muslim Youth Politics in Malaysia", *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde*, vol. 59, 2013, pp. 261–84.
- , *Islam, Politics and Youth in Malaysia: The Pop-Islamist Reinvention of PAS*, Contemporary Southeast Asia Series, London: Routledge, 2014.
- , "An Internationalist National Islamic Struggle? Narratives of 'Brothers Abroad' in the Discursive Practices of the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS)", *South East Asia Research*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2010, pp. 757–91 [<http://dx.doi.org/10.5367/sear.2010.0017>].
- Sayyid, Bobby S., *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism*, London: Zed Books, 1997.