

## THE IMPACT OF ISLAM

*by James Peacock*

High, thick, whitewashed walls shade pedestrians and bicyclists from the late afternoon sun as they pass by the palace of the sultan of Surakarta, a city which lies in central Java, at the heart of Indonesian culture. Just beyond the far end of the palace, a noisy market is beginning to quiet down. In the open-air courtyard of the palace mosque, scores of merchants and artisans bathe their hands and feet, then kneel and perform the evening prayer of Islam.

Inside the walls stands the palace itself, in which the now-powerless sultan and his family still reside. The entire palace complex is laced with narrow alleys leading to small courtyards, and beside one, 12 men of all ages sit with eyes closed: They are the *Sumarah*, a meditation group. In the corner of another courtyard is a small table, the shrine of a resident mystic, and on that table are figurines: the Buddha, the Hindu god Siva, the Virgin Mary, and the all-powerful clown-god of Java, Semar. On the other side of the wall, the mystic's automobile, a 1957 Chevrolet, boasts hood ornaments of the same figures. Notably absent are any insignia of Islam: the star and the crescent, the green flag, or a picture of the *Ka'bah* (the holy stone of Mecca).

Together with Jogjakarta, a few miles to the west, Surakarta is one of the two surviving sultanates of Indonesia, remnants of the greatest Islamic empire of Southeast Asia, the second Mataram. This mighty kingdom reached its peak in the 17th century, when it was subdued by the Dutch. It went on, under Dutch protection, to elaborate a refined courtly culture that became the base of modern Javanese civilization, which is only partly Islamic. Thus, in the sultan's palace there coexists a variety of religious traditions, ranging from the rather orthodox Islam of those who pray at the mosque to the mixed—strongly Hindu, Buddhist, and magical—worldview expressed by the resident mystic who claims to cure the sick by reciting Indian mantras that enable him to project a searing light from his belly.

Looking beyond the sultanates, we encounter everywhere a scrambled pattern: In Indonesia, Islam is woven into a rich religious tapestry.

Yet, to change the metaphor, is not the desert-born faith of Muhammad a strange transplant in this lush tropical archipelago? Here we have a monotheistic faith, first shaped by the

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harsh nomadic life of warring tribes in the Saudi desert, transferred thousands of miles to a complex nation whose civilization was based on a pantheistic Hindu-based philosophy of social and cosmic harmony. Even so, the desert religion took root. Nine out of 10 Indonesians now identify themselves as Muslims, and Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim nation. Yet, as the saying goes, scratch a Javanese Muslim and you'll find a Hindu; scratch him again, and you'll find an animist. Islam in Indonesia is unlike Islam in Iran, or Malaysia, or anywhere else.

Until approximately the time of Christ, the religion of the native tribes scattered across the archipelago was animistic: Swirls of spiritual energy were seen to pervade the atmosphere, appearing here and there in a tree, rock, animal, or demon. Hindu ideas were brought to the islands during the first millennium B.C. by traders following the maritime routes of South Asia. When seagoing Muslim merchants—not warriors—came to Indonesian ports in the 13th century, their kind of Islam could compete because it was not a rigid faith imposed by the sword, as was so often the case with Islam elsewhere, but a speculative religion of the imagination. The mysticism of their creed appealed to the Hindu princes, as did the prospect of luring Muslim traders to their ports to be taxed.

### **Burying Buffalo Heads**

Islam mingled with the existing Javanese-Hindu civilization—physical evidence of the merger can be seen in Java's oldest mosques, which resemble the present-day Hindu temples of Bali—and gave rise to the second empire of Mataram. The Dutch stripped the empire of its military and political power in the 17th century, but its culture lives on even now. As political scientist Benedict Anderson has noted, the Javanese are today so conscious of their refinement that unruly children are described as "*durung Djawa*"—"not yet Javanese"—rather than, as we might put it, "not yet adult."

Without an awareness of all this, one cannot begin to understand Indonesia. Only by looking to the tradition of self-examination through meditation, for example, can we fathom why, in the spring of 1946, General Sudirman, the 31-year-old Commander of the Indonesian Army, responded to a national crisis by asking his soldiers to fast for three days. Similarly, only Indonesia could produce a Sukarno, who wrote under the pseudonym of the shadow-play hero, Bima; named his female paratroopers *Srikandi* after a shadow-play heroine; and compared running his nation to the staging of a *wayang* (the shadow

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play) of which he was the priestly puppeteer. Sukarno's successor, Suharto, who is also Javanese, is less theatrical but perhaps no less mystical. It is said that he consults a seer, and that when he went abroad in September 1970, a buffalo head was buried at each far-flung extremity of the archipelago to ensure that the nation would hold together in his absence.

#### *Statistik vs. Fanatik*

Java is at the center of this enduring culture. Historically, when the people of the outlying islands have sought a counterweight to Javanese cultural domination, they have turned to Islam. Purist Muslims have always been a threat to the central authorities; Indonesians clearly recognize the purists as a distinct and often dissident subculture. Those who (in anthropologist Clifford Geertz's phrase) hunger for "an Islam of the book rather than of the trance" are known as *santri*. Thus, the 130 million Muslims in Indonesia divide into two broad categories: the *santri*, and the others, the majority who not only ignore the "Five Pillars" of Islam (that is, they neglect the five daily prayers, the Ramadan month of fasting, the religious taxes, the pilgrimage to Mecca, and perhaps even the affirmation of faith in Allah and Muhammad), but also blend their Muslim beliefs with strains of Buddhism, Hinduism, animism, and other religions and ideologies. Overall, perhaps one-third of Indonesia's total population is *santri*; away from Java, however, on the sparsely settled outer islands, *santri* is often the dominant type.

This division is implicitly political: The purists see themselves as members of *Ummat Islam*, the worldwide community of believers, while the others, looking inward, hold themselves to be part of an exclusive Indonesian—or Javanese—civilization. Hence the *santri* deride the majority as "*Islam statistik*"—that is, Muslim in name only—while they in turn are taunted as "*Islam fanatik*," or more simply, "Arabs," pointing up the purists' habit of affecting Arabic styles and larding their talk with a pious Arabic "*Inshallah*"—"if God wills."

The split is also economic. In the countryside, many landlords and landowners are *santri*; in the cities, the purists tend to

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*A puppet from the wayang (shadow play). As many as 350 such puppets may be used in a typical all-night performance. To the right: The good king Yudistira, who never fights or raises his voice.*



From Wayang Purwa by H. Ulbricht. Reproduced by permission of the author.

be traders, often housed in a special *santri* quarter located near mosque and market. The rich *santri* (and many are rich) tend to attribute their financial success both to faith and to hard effort. One businessman from Surabaya told Clifford Geertz, "All I do is work and pray, work and pray; and it only takes a few minutes to pray." This Asian puritan concluded that "those who are poor are poor mainly because they are lazy, stupid, or sinful."

Throughout the 20th century, the devout minority has tried to make Indonesia less Javanese and so more Islamic. The rivalry between the Javanese and Islamic cultures has most often taken the form of a tug-of-war for political power between the Javanese-dominated central government and the outlying, more *santri*-oriented islands.

At this point, the Jakarta regime appears to be the victor in the struggle. Not only have the Islamic groups been unable to establish an Islamic state, but they have never won a majority in the Indonesian parliament, not even in the relatively free elec-

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tion of 1955. And Islam, like all organized religions in the nation, has been brought into the Ministry of Religion, the largest department in the regime's burgeoning bureaucracy. Although it is dominated by *santri* Muslims, the ministry also represents Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. Such control exacts a certain aesthetic toll: Indonesia's emerging bureaucratic culture has crept into Islam and is reflected in the new Muslim style, with its uniformed youth groups, training camps, and terminology drawn from management courses.

But then the Muslims' strength lies far from the cosmopolitan capital, in thousands of *santri* communities. Before 1965, the Communists could compete with the Muslims, but today not even the Army can match the cradle-to-grave reach of the 6-million-strong *Muhammadijah*. This *santri* religious-welfare-state-within-the-secular-state extends throughout the archipelago and includes schools, hospitals, and the most vigorous women's movement in all of Islam.

### Islam Absorbed

Such a disparity between Islam's power in the communities and its relative weakness in the political center prompts the question: Is Suharto's Indonesia like the Shah's Iran? Yes, as the Ford Foundation's Sidney Jones has observed, in that both nations have had "an authoritarian regime committed to rapid development along capitalist lines, an overwhelmingly Muslim population, and a growing income distribution gap based partly on the influx of oil revenues."

Such parallels are, however, overshadowed by differences. No religious upheaval seems imminent in Indonesia. The country's Muslims are too few, when they are *santri* purists; too well-integrated into the regime and into national life, when they are not. And *santri* concerns are less political than those of the Ayatollah Khomeini. When in 1979 I asked a *Muhammadijah* leader about the parallel between Iran and Indonesia, he replied, "We seek not an Islamic state, but an Islamic society." Candid or not, the statement accurately reflects what is possible for Islam in Indonesia.

Muslims can and do influence the government—as in 1973, when they forced Suharto to water down a proposed "Indonesian" marriage law that discouraged Islamic polygamy and endorsed interfaith unions; and again in 1976, when they had the country closed to the aggressively evangelical missionaries of Jehovah's Witnesses. They have never triumphed in national elections, but the Muslims' capture of one-third of the popular

vote in 1971 and 1977 makes them the government's strongest competitor. Even so, it seems unlikely that the Muslims will become more than what they are: a powerful opposition group dedicated not to taking over the government but to exemplifying the proper life guided by the will of God.

Around the world, there are three types of Islamic societies. In the first type, a single ethnic group, believing in Islam, dominates a nation's culture, laws, politics, and foreign relations. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan come to mind as examples. In the second type, Islam is the faith of an ethnic majority in a racially dualistic society. Malaysia, with its preponderance of Malay Muslims and large, relatively prosperous Chinese minority, exemplifies this mixture. (Indeed, the Malay phrase "*masuk Melayu*," which literally means "to become Malay," means "to become Muslim.")

Indonesia's society embraces a more complicated relationship between religion and ethnicity. The two crisscross. A member of the Indonesian (as opposed to the Chinese, Indian, or European) ethnic group is not necessarily a Muslim. Hindu-Buddhistic culture thrives on Bali and has been revived on Java; myriad religions of the type we once called "pagan" flourish

*Balinese legong dancers, as drawn in 1955 by the Balinese artist I Rudin. The traditional dances, theater, and gamelan (Indonesia's distinctive percussive orchestra) live on today throughout Java and Bali.*



Courtesy of Rijksmuseum voor  
Volkenkunde, Leiden.

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throughout the islands; 12 million Christians live on the islands of Flores, Ambon, Timor, and Java, and among the Minahasans of Sulawesi and the Batak people of Sumatra. Yet some Bataks are Muslim, just as some Indonesian Chinese are Buddhist and others Christian.

The Minangkabau people of the Sumatran highlands show the intricate weave of religion and local tradition. Though fervent Muslims since the 19th century, and a major force in modern Islamic reform movements, the Minangkabau have never given up their matrilineal customs. Even today, it is their women who own and supervise their houses, shops, and fields.

All this complexity makes it difficult to generalize about Indonesian history and politics. While the factionalism of its practitioners sometimes threatens to fragment Indonesia, the Muslim faith is one of the archipelago's few persisting inter-island bonds. The peoples of Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi, Kalimantan, and (especially) the less-"Indianized" eastern islands differ enormously in custom and history, but they are united in being committed in some fashion to Islam.

Perhaps the most telling fact about Indonesia is that centuries ago its Hindu people *absorbed* Islam, unlike the people of India, who made the Hindu-Muslim split a source of lasting bitterness. Indonesia's traditional tolerance is expressed in the proverb, "*lain desa, lain adat*"—which loosely translates as "for each village, a different custom." But the goal of the post-independence governments of Indonesia has been rather different—as is expressed in the national motto, "Unity in diversity." It is a unity within which Islam is, again, absorbed, though in this case the absorption is backed by the state. Islam is one element within the Ministry of Religion, one judicial and educational system among several, one political coalition among three, one philosophy mixed into a diverse worldview.

The palace complex of Surakarta is, indeed, a microcosm of Indonesian culture: The minaret of the sultan's mosque rises above the palace, but down below, among the courtyards and verandas, Islam is assigned to one place among many.

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