



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## Religious Reform & Polarization in Java

Ricklefs, M.C.

### Citation

Ricklefs, M. C. (2008). Religious Reform & Polarization in Java. *Isim Review*, 21(1), 34-35.  
Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17233>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)  
License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)  
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17233>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# Religious Reform & Polarization in Java

MERLE C. RICKLEFS

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Javanese society—once evidently united in its religious identity—came to be polarized along lines of religious identity. These contesting identities became politicized, which in the end led to major social violence. We may usefully ask whether anything similar is at risk of occurring in today's Indonesia.

In 2006 and 2007, I published the first two of a series of three books on the history of the Islamization of Javanese society from the earliest stages (fourteenth century) to the present. The first book argues that—after various vicissitudes and challenges—by the later eighteenth century Islam was the dominant religious aspect of Javanese identity.<sup>1</sup> It took a form which I describe as the Javanese “mystic synthesis,” a form of Sufism with three distinctive characteristics: (1) a strong sense of Islamic identity, evidently found across Javanese society, (2) widespread observation of the five pillars of Islamic ritual life—the confession of faith, five daily prayers, fasting in Ramadan, giving of alms, and pilgrimage for those who could afford it—but also (3) recognition of indigenous spiritual forces as real, including such major supernatural figures as the Goddess of the Southern Ocean and Sunan Lawu. In the course of the nineteenth century, each of these elements faced challenges until, eventually, Javanese society came to be polarized by contending religious identities, as I have argued in a second volume of the series.<sup>2</sup>

## Reform movements

The initiative for change came, in large measure, from Islamic revival and reform movements which began in Java around the middle of the nineteenth century, and which criticized many local traditional beliefs and practices. By then, a Javanese middle class was emerging. The government monopolies inherent in the colonial *Cultuurstelsel* (cultivation system) still left spaces for local entrepreneurs to exploit. These entrepreneurs—in transport, fishing, ship-building, entertainment, smithing, bricklaying, and such-

**Children study the Quran in Java, circa 1910.**



PHOTO 2469 COLLECTION OF THE KITLV, LEIDEN, THE NETHERLANDS

**Pressures for religious reform—in any society or religious tradition—may lead to greater orthodoxy and orthopraxy, but can also invite opposition, social polarization, conflict, and violence. In this context the history of the Islamization of the Javanese is particularly interesting and significant. That history reveals periods of conflict and periods of reconciliation, so it may tell us something about what circumstances make religion a source for social harmony and what circumstances make it a cause of conflict.**

like—often had connections with Arab traders in Java's cities and, most importantly, had become wealthy enough to afford the hajj to Mecca. In both ways, connections with the heartlands of Islam were strengthened and the dynamism of the nineteenth-century Middle East was more readily transmitted to Java.

Figures for the hajj traffic from Java are dramatic. Colonial statistics from the nineteenth century are hardly reliable in detail and some Javanese

undertook the hajj through places in Sumatra, such as Aceh (not yet controlled by the Dutch) or through Singapore, thereby escaping Dutch statistics. It is nevertheless clear that there was a dramatic explosion in the numbers travelling from Javanese-speaking areas to Mecca. In 1850, the colonial regime recorded forty-eight such departures and in 1851 only twenty-three. By 1858, however, the figure was 2,283. Similar numbers were found throughout the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with particularly high figures in some years: 5,322 were reported in 1898, 4,530 in 1908, 7,614 in 1911 and 15,036 in 1921 (in the last case including pilgrims from Madura).

The mystic synthesis carried on. Indeed, some of its most classic expressions are to be found in nineteenth-century Javanese literature, in mystical poems called *suluk*s and in such works as Prince Mangkunagara IV's *Wedhatama*. The latter includes passages such as the following:

*Many are the young people who boast of their theological knowledge.  
Though not yet qualified,  
they are in a hurry to show off.  
The way they interpret Arabic texts  
is like a Sayyid from Egypt.  
Every time they belittle the abilities of others.  
Such persons can be reckoned as frauds:  
where is their common sense?  
Oddly enough they deny their Javanese-ness  
and at all costs bend their steps to Mecca in search of knowledge ...<sup>3</sup>*

But out of the vast increase in numbers of Javanese hajjis was born a reform movement that rejected this mystic synthesis. The reformers had their own superstitions, of course, but they did not include non-Islamic supernatural figures, such as the Goddess of the Southern Ocean or Sunan Lawu.

Crucially, religious schools increased dramatically in the nineteenth century. Again, colonial statistics are not to be relied upon in detail, but the trend is clear. In 1863 the statistics recorded nearly 94,000 students at Islamic *pesantrens* in Java; in 1872 the figure was over 162,000. In 1893 the figure for Java and Madura was reported as over 272,000.<sup>4</sup> Many of these schools taught little more than reading the Quran by rote, while others promoted the Javanese mystic synthesis. But many, particularly on the north coast, were vehicles for the reform movement.

## Reactions

Not everyone welcomed reformist ideas. Most Javanese villagers evidently found Islam in a more demanding style, with burdensome demands for piety and orthopraxy, unappealing. So for the first time—as far as can be known from the surviving evidence—a group emerged in Javanese society who began to distance themselves from their Islam-

ic identity and adherence to the five pillars. These were the *abangan* (literally, the brown ones). This was a derisory term invented by pious Muslims (who called themselves *putihan*, the white ones) for their less observant neighbours. These *abangan* undoubtedly formed the majority of Javanese. Carel Poensen, a missionary who spent thirty years in Kediri, converted very few Javanese but wrote valuable—and tediously voluminous—reports back to the Netherlands, observed in the 1880s that many villagers found this reformed Islam “too burdensome, too bookish, and that in a foreign language!” He observed that, “Basically, people are beginning to become less religious and pious.”<sup>5</sup>

The emergence of the *abangan* was not the only negative reaction. More remarkable was the growth of Javanese Christian communities for the first time. In the early nineteenth century, European Protestant missionaries began to be allowed to proselytize among Javanese, but they won few converts. The missionaries found it difficult to bridge the cultural and linguistic gap between themselves and Javanese. More successful were pious Christians of mixed European-Javanese ancestry and a few charismatic Javanese. The most remarkable exemplar of the former was C.L. Coolen, born to a Javanese mother and a Russian father c. 1773. He had a European wife and family in Surabaya, but moved to the interior of East Java where he had at least one Javanese wife and more children. At Ngara he created the first Javanese Christian community, beginning in the 1830s. He presented Christianity in a profoundly Javanese garb, including a dubiously orthodox version of the Christian creed, sung like a Sufi *dhikr*: *I believe in Allah the one / There is no God but God / Jesus Christ is the Spirit of God / who excels in his power.*<sup>6</sup>

Among the Javanese charismatic preachers, Kyai Sadrach was the most successful. He, too, presented Christianity in a Javanese style, while Islamic reformers were—in Mangkunagara IV's words—denying their Javanese-ness. He challenged Islamic *kyais* to debate and, thereby, converted them and their followers. Between 1870 and 1873 he is said to have converted almost 2500 Javanese. His relations with the European missionaries, however, were chequered. They regarded people like Sadrach and Coolen as near-heretics, if not actually heretical. Neither of them was quite as remarkable as Kyai Ibrahim Tunggal Wulung, who was tall with long hair and wispy beard, spoke in riddles, said he had been converted to Christianity by magical means and claimed his own magical powers. The converts of people such as Sadrach and Tunggal Wulung were locally called *Kristen Jawa* (Javanese Christians), as opposed to the smaller numbers converted by European missionaries, who were called *Kristen Londo* (Dutch Christians). By 1900, there were probably around 20,000 Javanese Christians. This was a tiny proportion of the 20 million or so Javanese, but it denied the equivalence between being Javanese and being Muslim.

Yet even this was not the most extreme reaction to the reformed Islam. In the Kediri area—and perhaps elsewhere, though we have no surviving evidence—an anti-Islamic intellectual movement emerged. This is encapsulated in three remarkable books that depict the conversion of the Javanese to Islam as a civilizational mistake, brought about by perfidious conduct on the part of the original bringers of Islam to Java (the *walis*) and the first Sultan of Demak. *Babad Kedhiri*, *Suluk Gatholoco* and *Serat Dermagandhul* were written in the 1870s, within a couple of decades of the first signs of the Islamic revival in Java. The denunciation of Islam and its leading figures—from the Prophet himself to local divines—was comical, crude, and sometimes obscene. The writers of these books regarded the true Javanese religion as the *agama buda*—the pre-Islamic “Buddhist” religion—to which the Javanese should return. In *Dermagandhul*, but not in the other two, it is said that this restoration of the true Javanese faith would be achieved by conversion to Christianity. When these books were brought out in print in the earlier years of the twentieth century, they produced considerable political uproar.

Meanwhile, the *priyayi* (the elite of Javanese society), upon whom Dutch rule depended for its day-to-day administration, were enthusiastically embracing the modernity brought by the European presence, the other major new force in Java. The Javanese newspaper *Bramartani* began to be published in Surakarta in 1855. Its pages contain articles, advertisements, and correspondence showing how *priyayi*, along with Chinese and European readers of the paper, were adopting lifestyles and ideas far removed from those of either Islamic reformers or *abangan* villagers. The faith of the former found almost no place in the paper and the superstitions of the latter were ridiculed. News from across Java and the Indonesian archipelago and further afield—elsewhere in Asia,

the Americas, and Europe—filled its pages. The technological advances of the nineteenth century were admired. The contribution of the Dutch regime to educational modernization won much praise. *Priyayi* emulated Europeans in setting up reading clubs, attending European-style social occasions, wearing European clothing, and decorating their houses in Dutch style, and wrote to *Bramartani* about it.

## Polarization

Thus, by the late nineteenth century, Javanese society was polarized along religious and social lines in ways which do not appear to have existed before. Islamic (both Sufi and more Sharia-oriented) reformers who sought reconstruction of Javanese religious and social life, adherents of the old mystic synthesis, the majority *abangan* villagers, the first few Christians, writers who thought that conversion to Islam in the first place had been a mistake, and *priyayi* elites who thought the modernity of Europe preferable to Islamic reform (many of them still adherents of the mystic synthesis), represented contending forms of Javanese identity. Until the late nineteenth century, there is little evidence of real conflict, barring the burning of some early churches by Muslim neighbours. But conflict was soon to develop.

In the opening decades of the twentieth century, these contending Javanese identities became institutionalized in modern and particularly political organizations. Thereafter they became more rigid and conflictual. Thus was born the so-called *aliran* (streams) political system of Indonesia, where political, religious, social, and cultural identities were defined by vertical *aliran*, more than by social class. The earliest organization was Budi Utomo, led by *priyayi* who were unconvinced that Islam had been a good idea for the Javanese. For the *abangan* there were the Communist (PKI) and Nationalist (PNI) parties, the latter being particularly a *priyayi* party. For devout Muslims there were both religious organizations (Muhammadiyah for Modernists, Nahdlatul Ulama/NU for Orthodox followers of the Shafi'i school) and political parties (Sarekat Islam, Masyumi, etc.).

By the time of the Revolution and throughout the first twenty years of Indonesian independence, political competition increasingly pitted more devout Muslim adherents of NU and Masyumi against *abangan* followers of PKI and PNI. Propaganda from each ridiculed and demonized the other. From 1963, direct land reform action by PKI followers in Central and East Java produced violent responses particularly from their bitter enemies in NU circles: political and class interests between the landless and landowners were thus intensified by conflicts over religious identity. In the horrific killings of 1965-6, *aliran* differences largely determined allegiances that cost the lives of hundreds of thousands in Central and East Java.

Ongoing research in Java, which I am conducting in collaboration with colleagues there, raises the question of whether a similar process of polarization is now at work. It is too early to judge; but there are similarities with (as well as differences from) what happened in the period 1830-1930. In particular, active—at times aggressive—proselytizing by devout Muslims who aim to change their society has produced opposition. In some places, there is a dialectical relationship between assertive Islamic “hard line” movements and conversion to Christianity.

Attempts by political parties to build *aliran*-defined political constituencies, however, have failed. Indeed, *aliran* seems to play little role in Javanese socio-political-religious life today, as the society becomes generally more devoutly Islamic. Today, it is important also that the vast majority of Javanese are literate and thus able to access and judge information for themselves in ways that were not available to their illiterate predecessors. So the dynamism of Javanese society carries on, and with it the inherent interest of the history of Islam in Java.

## Notes

1. Merle C. Ricklefs, *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization from the Fourteenth to the Early Nineteenth Centuries* (White Plains, NY: EastBridge, 2006).
2. Merle C. Ricklefs, *Polarizing Javanese Society: Islamic and Other Visions c. 1830-1930* (Singapore: NUS Press; Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press; Leiden: KITL Press, 2007).
3. Taken from Stuart Robson, ed. and transl., *The Wedhatama: An English translation*, KITLV working papers 4 (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1990), with minor departures.
4. This does not mean that literacy was high in Java. The 272,000 students reported in *pesantrens* represented barely one per cent of the total population.
5. C. Poensen, “lets over den Javaans menschen,” *Kediri*, July 1884, in Archief Raad voor de Zending 261, held in the Utrecht city archives (het Utrechts Archief).
6. Sutarmanto Soediman Partonadi, *Sadrach's Community and its Contextual Roots: A Nineteenth Century Javanese Expression of Christianity* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1990), 135. My translation differs slightly from Sutarmanto's.

Merle C. Ricklefs is Professor of History at the National University of Singapore.  
Email: hisrmc@nus.edu.sg