

Southeast Asia

JULIA DAY HOWELL

News coverage on Indonesia since the resignation of former President Suharto has been filled with images of sectarian violence and separatist agitation linked to 'fundamentalist' Islam. The ascent of Abdurrahman Wahid, former head of the 'traditionalist' Muslim clerics association, the Nahdlatul Ulama, to the Presidency of the nation at first suggested a shaky vigour in 'moderate' expressions of Islam. But as his second year in office begins, grave doubts loom as to the strength of the middle ground between so-called 'secular' and 'extremist Muslim' forces.

Telling the future of this nation in turmoil is fraught with difficulties, not least because of the likely manipulation of religious sentiment by cynical contestants for power. Attempts to understand how popular commitments grounded in religion become mobilized in political contests are also hampered by our limited vision of what religion *means* in daily life in Indonesia today. Not only are terms such as 'fundamentalist,' 'traditionalist,' and 'secular' loosely defined and likely to carry inappropriate implications when reading from the experience of one country to another, but even within Indonesia the religious landscape has been rapidly changing. Some 'traditionalists' (like the pluralist Wahid) are looking incongruously progressive, while 'modernists' (such as in Muhammadiyah) have been accused, even by their own avant-garde, of getting stuck in outmoded visions of reform.

While differences still nettle relations between 'traditionalists' and modernists, remarkable commonalities have nonetheless emerged. These have been best documented in the areas of public piety in the Muslim community at large and in the debate amongst the intelligentsia on interpretation in Islamic law. The rapid spread of literacy through the state school system, especially since the 1970s, and the requirement that pupils study their nominated religion (in nearly 9 out of 10 cases, Islam) at every level of formal studies, have made for a more doctrinally informed and 'bookish' *ummat*. At the same time, the depoliticization of religion under Suharto's New Order lowered social barriers between 'strict' Muslims and others. These factors, plus the rising world prestige of Islam after the Iranian Revolution, supported an efflorescence of popular piety that has cross-cut old religious/secular party politics and runs across the social class hierarchy. Veiling has spread from the *kauman* (the old 'strict Muslim' quarters of cities) to the university campuses; employees in Jakarta office towers as well as batik manufacturers in Solonese *kampung*s take time off for Friday services. As for intellectual engagement in issues of interpreting and applying Islamic law in a modern society, the degree of convergence in approaches is signalled by the frequent use of a single term, 'Neo-Modernism,' to characterize both progressives within the 'traditionalist' camp (such as Wahid) and those coming out of the Modernist movement (such as Nurcholish Madjid).

The upsurge in interest in Sufism

What is perhaps the most surprising change in contemporary Islamic religiosity, however, and one that has played a significant role in convergences in popular piety and jurisprudence, is an upsurge of interest in Sufism. Particularly remarkable is the fact that this interest is evident in the cities, not just in the countryside, and is pursued by cosmopolitan sophisticates as well as by provincials. Being a modern Muslim in Indonesia does not necessarily imply *salafi* fundamentalism; 'outward'

signs of intensified piety may well betoken a new commitment to 'inner', Sufistic engagement with the faith.

Some of the most influential sociological representations of the Islamic world in the 20th century, notably those of Ernest Gellner and Clifford Geertz, cast Sufism as a predominantly rural phenomenon. At mid century they saw it fading away along with tribal and peasant life as Muslim societies underwent modernization. In these views, Sufism, originally propounded by urban sophisticates, after its distant heyday receded into the hinterlands and was compromised by its tolerance toward folk customs. Once a disciplined path of asceticism for spiritual purification, Sufism became in these constructions a set of magical practices suited to inspiring petty political loyalties; once a means of mystical knowing, it became merely a form of quick emotional release through suspect rituals.

Gellner argued that the 20th century was particularly fateful for Sufis. Although they have always been vulnerable to purification movements led by urban clerics (*ulama*) because of their lax attitude towards customary practices and the spiritual pretensions of reckless *syechs*, before the 20th century chastened Sufis were able to rebound. However, after the turn of the 20th century, he observed, modernist reform movements took a more uncompromising approach, seeking to delegitimize Sufism entirely and to establish legalistic (or 'scripturalist') constructions of Islam as definitive of orthodoxy.

Geertz's highly influential ethnography of Javanese society around the town of Pare in the 1950s graphically illustrated this image of Sufi decline in the face of Modernist reform. The traditional centres of Muslim education he observed (the *pesantren* or *pondok*) were cast as vehicles for basic learning in law and theology, while the Sufi orders (*tarekat*), once commonly associated with these schools, appeared to have nearly died out. Not only were there very few *tarekat*, but his characterization of the ones he did observe as 'a kind of old man's *pondok*'¹ strongly suggested they would not be around much longer. When those elderly, poorly educated farmers passed away, so would Java's Sufi orders. The Javanese penchant for esoteric learning might well survive in the numerous syncretic mystical groups (the *golongan kebatinan* or *kepercayaan*), but not within the fold of Islam.

The spread of Sufism amongst the intelligentsia

That this might not have come to pass (or perhaps never was impending) was impressed on my attention in the late 1980s after having spent some years researching the mystical groups and their association with the Hindu and Buddhist reform movements. It was at that time that I met the respected Gadjah Mada University economist and former Rector of the Universitas Islam Indonesia in Yogyakarta, Professor Aceh Partadiredja. By then he was himself a new member of the Tarekat Qodiriyyah-Naqsyabandiyah (TQN)

centred on Pesantren Suryalaya in West Java. He introduced me to several young lecturers, including my research colleague Drs. Subandi, MA, and other young Yogya professionals involved in TQN and other orders. I learned that the widely reported Islamic revival on the campuses (and elsewhere) included an intense interest in 'inner' religiosity. It seemed that in the 1980s *kebatinan* (literally 'inwardness' but more broadly 'mysticism outside the fold of Islam'), had largely failed to attract the younger intelligentsia, but Islamic devotionism and Sufi mystical practices were engaging them. Sufi books were amongst the fastest selling of the religious titles; students organized lectures on Sufism along with other Islamic topics; and orders like TQN were attracting members of the educated middle class and even Jakarta elites.

Through the surveys we carried out on the Yogyakarta and Tegal regional branches of TQN Suryalaya in 1990 and 1997, we were able to confirm the involvement of well-educated, occupationally middle-class people, both old and young, in this order. In 1997, nearly two-fifths had junior high or high school education, and just over 10% had at least some tertiary education. Five had actually done an MA and one had a PhD. Occupations covered the full spectrum; and ages ranged widely, from 16 to 97, with the bulk of the membership between 35 and 64. Substantial numbers of women were in the survey, along with men. Significantly, both the overall membership numbers for these branches and the proportion of urbanities grew over the 1990s.² This *tarekat*, at least, was hardly 'an old man's *pondok*' confined to a disappearing peasantry.

The new 'neo-Sufism'

Although demographic survey data on other orders are not yet available, several scholars, including Martin van Bruinessen, have recorded their impressions that Sufis orders are enjoying a new appeal in urban areas. Zamakhsyari Dhofier and others have also provided evidence of the continuing vitality of Sufi devotionism in the *pesantrens* at mid century and the vigour of the *tarekats*. Indeed in 1957, at the very time that Geertz was engaged in his Javanese field project, the Nahdlatul Ulama formed its first council to coordinate the affairs of the *tarekats* run by member *ulamas*.

Apparently there is something to Anthony John's wry comment about Sufi orders, that 'Rumors of their impending death...are very much exaggerated'.³ But the issue of the appeal of Sufism to cosmopolitans needs to be taken beyond the study of Sufi orders, and even beyond the devotional life of the *pesantren*. Indeed a whole range of novel activities identified with 'Sufism' or *tasawuf* are now popular in Indonesia's major cities: from reading reflective and 'how-to' spiritual books, to attending academically-styled private courses, to joining informal prayer groups or healing workshops using *dzikir* chanting, to accepting the spiritual direction

of non-traditional teachers outside the conventional *tarekat*. The key features of these new-style 'Sufi' activities are their stated link with *shari'a*-based Islam, their pursuit of an experiential or 'inner' dimension to religious life, and a moving away from, or even rejection of, the supposed hierarchy, authoritarianism and 'other worldliness' of conventional *tarekats*.⁴ This last feature distinguishes the Neo-Sufism of past generations (that attempted merely to distance Sufism from idolatrous local practices and reassert the centrality of the *syari'a* without attempting major institutional change) from this new 'Neo-Sufism'. The new 'Neo-Sufism' (as some indeed call it; it is also called 'Tasawuf Positif' or 'Practical Sufism') responds specifically to the new conditions of Indonesian urbanism. Notwithstanding the ideological imperatives of nation building for an unambiguous, prescribed religious identity, people are propelled into privatized styles of religiosity by their experiences of social and geographical mobility, exposure to global economic forces and cultures, and participation in international cultural activities. ◀

Notes:

1. Geertz, Clifford (1960), *The Religion of Java*, Glencoe: The Free Press, p. 182.
2. Howell, Julia Day, Subandi and Peter L. Nelson, 'Indonesian Sufism, Signs of Resurgence', in: *New Trends and Developments in the World of Islam*, edited by Peter B. Clarke (1998), London: Luzac Oriental; and Howell, Julia Day, Subandi and Peter L. Nelson, 'New Faces of Indonesian Sufism: A Demographic Profile of Tarekat Qodiriyyah-Naqsyabandiyah, Pesantren Suryalaya in the 1990s', forthcoming.
3. Johns, Anthony, 'Tareqah', in: M. Eliade and C. Adams (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Religion* vol. 14, New York: McMillan, pp. 342-352.
4. See also the talk by Jalaluddin Rakhmat's 'The Revival of Sufism: Does It Help? A Glance at the Modern Sufi Associations in Indonesia' (ISIM web site).

Julia Day Howell is a senior lecturer at Griffith University's School of Asian and International Studies, Brisbane, Australia.
E-mail: J.Howell@mailbox.gu.edu.au