

## **A Small Step in Understanding the Social, Religious and Political Economy Conflicts in Rural Java**

*Humaedi, M Alie. 2008. Islam dan Kristen di Pedesaan Jawa: Kajian Konflik Sosial Keagamaan dan Ekonomi Politik di Kasimpar dan Karangobar. Jakarta: Badan Litbang dan Diklat Departemen Agama RI. xxxii + 424 pp.*

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### **Introduction**

The fact that Indonesia is the country with the largest Muslim population in the world has made it a significant laboratory for how Islam could relate with other religions and cultures. There have been numerous books written on the problematic encounters of Islam with other religions, mainly Christianity. However, to consider Islam not only as religion but as a set of cultural norms developed in the reality of its struggle in the specific context of Indonesian rural areas is still rare. Alie Humaedi's book, titled *Islam dan Kristen di Pedesaan Jawa*, is one of the few that tries to expose the complex reality of Islam and Christian rapport in rural circumstances.

In researching the relations between the two competing missionary religions, Islam and Christianity, this book does not start with a discussion of the theological differences of the two. Instead, as quoted in the very first part of the book, the writer believes what Bernard T Adeney said, that 'An Indonesian is a product of religion, modernity and traditions of his ancestors'. Therefore, the very basis of the argument of the book is grounded on the cultural aspect. Religious identity has also been influenced by this multidimensional construction that includes the theological beliefs, norms, politics and economic circumstances of the people.

The book tries to describe the relations between communities and groups in the rural Indonesia of Central Java. It is not only about religion; being a Muslim is not just an identity nor is being Christian on the other hand. There is always the generalisation, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks states, that ‘whereas the 20th century was dominated by the politics of ideology, the 21st century will be dominated by the politics of identity’ (Sacks 2002: 1)<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, in this political time, instead of asking what? and how?, people will inevitably turn to identity, such as religion, by asking ‘who am I?’ and ‘of what narrative I am a part?’

The author also clearly sees the consequences of this attitude in a location where religion is likely to be used as a political instrument to achieve the goals of individuals and groups in society. One thing is obvious; that if religion is not a part of the solution, it is surely a part of the problem. In relation to this matter, however, the narrative of the book provides us with a picture of the complexity of the rural social fabric and it is surely a clear indicator of how local politics plays a very important part in the relations between the two religions. But it is also apparent that there should be more in-depth assessment on how the relations between the two religions create tensions on several other fronts as well, such as the economic, cultural and religious.

The present reality of religions that co-exist in Kasimpar in Central Java is not a product of instant collaboration and it cannot be analysed as only a current phenomenon. With this as a basis for analysis, the book helps us to understand that the relations of the religions, Islam and Christianity, are part of a bigger picture. It is not as simple as the Huntington view—the Clash of Civilisations—and neither does it provide us with a method to compare the two competing religions. This book is a scientific endeavour to present readers with sufficient data on different aspects of religion in Central Java to enable them to see the complexity of the two religions from a different perspective.

It is not the case, as so many try to portray, that Muslim–Christian relations are only a matter of different theological beliefs. In attempting

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1 Sacks, Jonathan (2002) “The Dignity of Difference: Avoiding the Clash of Civilizations” in The 2002 Templeton Lecture on Religion and World Affairs.

to make that case, many books are trapped into discussing religion not in the context of people's cultural heritage but as two sets of beliefs that are the same in all parts of the world. Such depictions not only mislead but create irrelevant pictures that can cause bigger misunderstandings. Another approach is to see the two based only on their relations in the history of Indonesia. This approach is better and does provide clearer historical understanding but yet is not enough for there is always a weakness in being so general. Such approaches are positivistic in viewing the relations between Muslims and Christians and this is not the aim of this book.

The opening part of the book explains the complex social and cultural backgrounds of the locations chosen, the villages of Kasimpar and Karangobar in the Dieng area. In explaining the rural context of the relations between the two religions, the author also asserts that such relations are unique in every context and influenced by cultural traditions. There are two things to be considered in analysing Muslim–Christian relations in these two locations. First, the extent to which religious values and culture are lived individually or as a group, and how the two realities are implemented in the pattern of religious understanding and interpretation. Second, how the religions could be a driving force for integrating and encouraging the development of social participation in the changing communities. The changes are part of the modernisation trends found in the education system, industrial production and religious movements.

To help readers' understanding, the opening part of the book tries to answer the questions based on the problems defined. The first consideration is how Christian and Muslim religious groups have encountered one another (historical dynamics and conflicts) in the villages of Kasimpar and Karangobar. Second, why the religious symbols are packaged to interpret social facts and basic myths in the competition to rule the economic and political resources. Third, how also the inheritance of the trauma of ex-Communist Party (PKI) members influences the social relations between the religious groups. Finally, it also tries to explain the

social dynamics of how social conflicts are resolved based on religious radicalism in the lives of the rural communities.

There are some more explanations in the first part of the book that give a brief overview of all and yet are deep enough to provide a conceptual framework of why the book needed to be written. There is a discussion of the effects of religion in the new regions that are being opened up. Also there is quite a good overview of the effect of gaps or *anomi* of political economy that so much shapes the social history of many villages in Java. There are very good explanations, too, of the role of tradition and myths in the Dieng area. The tradition is essentially a combination of *naluri* and *pisah*.<sup>2</sup> In latter part of the book, these two elements of local tradition play important roles in driving the two trends of religions; to purification (or exclusiveness) and to accommodation (or inclusiveness). There are some explanations of radicalism and ideological hegemony that could pave the way to more understanding by readers of the complexity of the problems discussed in the book.

### **Uncovering the Social Dynamics of Muslim–Christian Relations in Rural Java**

The content of the book is centred on the concept of *naluri* or great tradition. This is very real among people of different religions and subcultures in the villages of Kasimpar and Karangobar. The effort to present the often overlooked reality is one of the themes of the content of the book. The daily reality that so unites and separates the communities of the two religions, Islam and Christianity, is explained comprehensively from three angles, that is, social conditions, religious interaction and political–economic realities. These three angles have been in constant dialogue with the great tradition, do not stand separately from one another, and are all part of the dialectical condition of the villages.

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2 The concept of *naluri* is not well explained in the first part of the book but more comprehensively later. *Naturi* is a great tradition, which unifies some differences among all sections of the society regardless of religion and factions. On the other side, *pisah* is another tradition that separates sections of the society, even internally, in one tradition of religion, whether Islam or Christian.

Social condition that blend so much with myths of local ‘guardians’, Muslim and Christian, colour the religious dynamics in Kasimpar and Karangobar. These figures of myth and oral history have played a principal part in forming the social outlook of the communities. The three sources of the great traditions are the figures of *Ki Ageng Pandersan*, *Ki Cerbon Purbojati* and *Kiai Sadrach*. Each one of them has been always a reference to any variant of religion and tradition in the villages. The first is a reference for Hindu and local religion believers, and the second is for Islam, *Syarekat Islam* and *Nahdlatul Ulama*. *Kiai Sadrach* is a core social image that relates to the oral history of a leader of Protestant Christians.

People relating to these mythical figures do more than identify with them: the myths reinforce traditional rights and proof of ownership on the part of those who invoke them. However, it is quite interesting to see also that in chapter 3, this myth of guardians of respective religions and their variants could serve as a uniting factor for the people. The myth has a very important where in retelling the great tradition of the people, there is a sense of equality among the three major variants of religious beliefs. All the three figures are part of the common cultural discourse among all. At best, the myths could provide a common denominator among different religions in these villages.

Apart from the above discourse, social conditions are much influenced by education and health systems. An education system is one of the likely factors in creating competition between religions. A Christian school that had been in the area for quite a while was later challenged by Islamic efforts to provide boarding schools for Muslim pupils. The health system also is an area for competition between the two, especially at times when the government could not provide good service. Different organisations from the two religions came to the villages in Dieng to cater to health and education needs that are not met by government agencies. These social welfare providers in turn help create more potential rivalry among religious followers.

Interaction of religious groups has been affected by their social conditions, yet the religions presented in the books are the ones that

have already long history of struggle in the villages. The Christians in the villages, mostly followers of the Javanese Christian Churches (GKJ), claim their indigenous origin from Sadrach. Muslims, similarly, have three different major variants of Nahdahtul Ulama, Sarekat Islam and Muhammadiyah, where each has its own particular strategy and concept of religious practice in the villages. Some areas in Dieng then have a clear religious demarcation that tends to segregate people in their cultural and daily activities. However, it is a fact that within each religion there are factions that compete internally with one another.

Daily economic activities of the people in Karangobar and Kasimpar are also shaped by the demography of the population. The Chinese, who have been the main actors in economic activities in the villages, at one time were in competition with Sarekat Islam in controlling commercial interests. This has affected also the social condition of Muslims and Christians. In addition to daily economic activities, the ownership of land plays an important role in further rivalry. The economic success of Christians, especially in Kasimpar, is greater than the Muslims because Christians own more land. In Karangobar, despite having less land, the Christians were able to reach the same level of economic wellbeing as their Muslims fellows. This economic factor again shows the close competition between the two religions is very real, which is apparently disseminated not only in religious convictions but also in daily activities in the local economy.

Political participation in the villages serves as another indicator of religious interaction. Ideologies and parties are closely associated with religious groups and different Islamic parties have had success with the endorsement by some charismatic leaders of Islam. Christians have been traditionally voters for secular nationalist parties or Christian parties. Religion is closely linked to the people's political affiliations. It is interesting to note that in several elections, people in these villages do not have consistent trends in their political choices. The result at national elections is different compared with the local one. And surely, there is an element of religion playing an important part in the political participation in rural Dieng.

By reading the description of the conditions of the villages in Dieng, the reader is supplied with information that enables an understanding of the close association between the socio-religious life of the communities and the political and economic activities of the people. In chapter 3, the author tries to convey that, in fact, there is a significant role of myth in the economic and political struggles of the people. The great traditions of each community have affected almost all aspects of the life of the people. Not only *naluri* and *pisah*, as elements of the great tradition, bring out legitimate outcome in the spiritual and social spheres, but more so they affect the economic and political lives of the people. It is true that in the case of these villages that a standardised myth is able to bring cohesion among different aspects of life of the people.

It is then becoming more complicated, not only do the great traditions of *naluri* and *pisah* play substantial roles in the communities, but they also affect the consequences of the mass conversions of people to Christianity. The Christian churches were the beneficiaries of the conversions of ex-Communist Party members who become Christians after the party was declared illegal. The Christian churches in the villages then had a dilemma: such conversions were considered more political than spiritual. This dilemma is not experienced so much by the Muslim groups, for they clearly stand in the position of anti-communist—none or very few ex-Communists converted to Islam. This conversion to Christianity does provide a reason for greater historical enmity between the two. The fact that after 1987, Christians made very few conversions and Islam none makes situation more problematic. The very few conversions listed officially in the period create a status quo condition, where the followers of the two religions feel safe to say that they are either Muslim or Christians because they follow the traditions of their ancestors.

Another fact regarding religion in these villages, that there are several variants of each. At least there are three kinds of identity which are found alike in both religions. It is not simply the variants of Geertz, but more so related to the quality of religious practice among the people. The identity of the first-class variant is called pious Muslims and Christians. The second is called Muslim and Christian *Naluri*, where the great tradition

influenced their ritual and faith more so than the pure form of religions. The third is so called 'ID card' Muslims or Christians, where they are only officially listed in their national ID card as followers of religions but do not or very little practise the rituals of their respective religions.

In describing the different variants of religions, the writer tries to qualify not only their theological aspects but also communal commitments to their respective groups. This means the typologies of identity shown in this book are closely related to the prevailing social relations among the communities. Some are very strict in following their religion because of their faith, family and ancestral traditions; some are half or partly pious because of their receptiveness to the great traditions of myth and a willingness to blend with local aspirations of *naluri*. These variants have also created internal tensions among followers of religions in the villages. Some feel that they are better than others, and some feel they are more acculturated and indigenous than others. The reality of the existence of variants has provided fertile ground for potential conflict.

Despite the existing religious variants found, the chapter continues the theme that economic and political realities of the people are very much grounded in their affinity with their religion. The access to and distribution of wealth faces challenges when related to the religious background of the actors. In almost all economic activities, religion is the issue that can create disharmony, especially from those who can profit by exploiting this. Also in political struggles, religions and their variants again play a very significant role. In summarising the context, the writer says that religious groups in Kasimpar and almost all villages in Dieng use religious and emotional ties in their political participation (p. 202). This is also true in the local context of politics. The support of each religious group has played a very decisive role in electing the village chief. This again is evidence of how religions are so much a part of all activities in the villages. The fusion of religion and economic and political activities is seen in all aspects of the life of the people.

### **The Anatomy of Conflict Described in Local Context**

The account of conflict making is the most important part of the book. Therefore, in chapters 4 and 5, the book gives a full description of the conflict between the followers of Islam and Christianity from the local experience. The local interpretation of religions has shaped the understanding of the people in the two villages relating to one another. The book does not try to present an account of the conflict in terms of the universal version of the religions but rather in terms of local traditions, struggles and practices that have made the two religions unique in this context. There are reciprocal relations between religions and the social, political and economic contexts that are intertwined and produce a unique modification of any religion in the locality. This reality is a challenge to the idea of external radicalism that is often brought to any local context of religions. In the case of Kasimpar and Karangobar, such radicalism is the root and result of revitalisation of mindsets that are so much related to internal efforts of Islamisation and Christianisation.

In the case of Islam, there is tension between the more cultural Muslim groups of NU and other groups, Sarekat Islam and Muhammadiyah, who would not like to see 'additional' cultural elements added in the form of Islamic ritual. Such things like the prayer of *Qunut*, as a way of praying to heaven for the NU followers, has been declared heretical by others. Also *tahlilan* and *slametan* which are closely related with the symbols of the local great tradition have been judged to be not part of pure Islam. This creates internal tensions in the orthodox faction of Islam, which does not want to include any influence of the local traditions into the practice of authentic Middle Eastern or 'universal' Islam. The heterogeneous practice of Islam must contend with the fact that there are some Muslims who once were members of the Communist Party (PKI). This group of people is not welcomed, rejected even, by the larger Islamic community for they are not only considered as anti-God followers, but also they are stigmatised as being *kemaruk* or greedy because the Communists were very active in claiming the lands of the people.

A similar set of circumstance is also found among Christians. The arrival of mainstream Christianity in the form of the Javanese Christian Church (GKJ) has led to the eradication of some practices of the ‘cultural’ Christians, who are closely associated with *Kiai Sadrach*. The ritual of *Selasa Selapanan*, which is clearly following the path of *Sadrach*, was considered heretical and banned. Also the ownership of some artifact related to older Christian movements was discouraged. Even in funerals, no Christian is allowed to mix the pure church rituals with any traditional belief or customs. It is only in *Slametan dandan omah*, or the ritual that goes with moving into a new house (house warming), that the Church allows some cultural practices to be included as long as they are not in opposition to the accepted rules and regulations. There is still a *naluri* involved in the practice, which is part of the great tradition of the people. Despite being in two minds about the conversion of ex-communists to Christianity, the Church does accept this group even though many are stigmatised by their fellow Christians.

The local political economic conditions are a closely related to following the variations that map ‘the other’ in society. When the religious differences are understood, it is then easier to understand the struggles of the people in politics and commerce. Being ‘other’ in the local economy is first obvious in the division of housing: Christians live in the better areas of the villages but the Muslims can not. Other divisive issues are inheritance and marriage, which serve to exacerbate conflict. Marriage has become problematic, it is getting harder for mixed marriages to be arranged under national law and one party has to get converted before the marriage. Another troublesome issue that divides the two community is the necessary cooperation of the two in cultural ceremonies and activities, and with activities for young people who have been so much segregated because of their religious affiliation. In this aspect, there is an embedded resistance and silent conflict between the two religions. As a matter of fact, the feeling of being ‘other’ is played on by all religious groups in the villages.

Apparently, the situation is not conducive to developing inclusive relations between Islam and Christianity. It is noted that the social

relations between the two religions has become formal and far less casual than once it was. The encounters of the two are getting harder in everyday neighbourhood relations. This silent disharmony is strengthened with the teachings of the religious leaders and their accusations of commercial and political control by the other denomination. There is also the exclusive claims to truth included in the religious perspective of the external actors, which endangers the indigenous cultural norms of social relationships. The outcome of this situation is a growing radicalism among the two. The fact that Christians and Muslims have both been evangelistic has resulted in the 'silent protest' of radicalism where lines of communication have been cut. Another radicalism that springs out of this situation is the negative discourse toward one another in everyday life. This kind of radicalism shows its effect when it appears in open and bloody conflict between the two, which helps explain their deep enmity.<sup>3</sup> This state of affairs with the two religions has proven that creating sense of religious 'otherness' can cause divisive social relations among the people.

Chapter 5 of the book is the apogee of the discussions. Interpretation of all spheres of life has been related to religious conviction that lead to radicalism. The religio-politics of Islam and Christianity have deeply entangled the public spheres in the struggle for political and economic supremacy. Each group in such power plays has been increasingly radicalised. Despite radicalism, the situation is not always driven to conflict, but it could function as a trigger for possible conflict. In the case of the villages of Kasimpar and Karangobar, religion is the identity used to achieve domination in the struggles.

One of the phenomena noted clearly in this chapter is the post-1998 revival of Islamic radical groups at the time of the fall of the authoritarian New Order regime. With the new openness, not only Islamic and Christian political parties became legal but also some new Islamic radical movements appeared. These radical revivalist movements could share the same vision and mission as the Islamic parties. Therefore,

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<sup>3</sup> According to the writer there have been 32 incidents of open conflicts from 1930 to 2005 that can be related to this form of radicalism.

the source of radicalism is almost legalised in the national platform. It affects people in rural Dieng because it revives the group identity that had roots of radicalism before 1998. There have been at least three kinds of radicalism mentioned in this part: silent protest, stigmatisation of other groups and terror. All of which are externally driven toward the other group or religion. Internally, there is also another form of radicalism, which is internal revivalism.<sup>4</sup> In this mode of radicalism, it is the internal effort to bring back the religion to its pure, authentic beliefs and practices. However, this internal radicalism could also serve as fuel to fire potential conflict.

The interests of party and religious ideology have made the people more separated or *pisah* from one another. The encounters of Islam and Christianity in local Kasimpar and Karangobar are not as harmonious as in other Javanese settings. The social harmony had been destroyed when the great traditions of the people were changed by radicalism, which only serves the interests of the respective religion. External and internal radicalism of all religions has paved a way to separate them from others. The identity of the people is forced to leave the cultural indigenous family–kinship relations which have been enjoyed by most people in the villages for some time.

Although the conflict is triggered by religious radicalism, the root of the radicalism is not simple. Different patterns of radicalism when analysed deeply are related to politics and the economy. The relevant incidents show that the potential violence in the name of religion is very real when it comes to the struggle for political and economic resources. In fact, the process between economy and religion is managed well through political media, which have their own interests (p. 351). In brief, the map of the social conflicts of religious groups in rural Dieng could be seen as the diminishing influence of local tradition and local factors that help unite the people. Internal and external radicalism of each religion has excluded the role of *Islam Naluri* and *Kristen Naluri*, which could

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4 The Indonesian word used in this book is ‘Revitalisme’, which in English share the revivalism of the revivalist group, as compared to any revival movements in Islam and in Christianity.

bridge the two competing radical groups in the society. Unfortunately, the social function of the uniting *naluri* group has been neglected as a way to reduce conflicts and create a more harmonious society with less radicalism.

### **Conclusion**

As stated in the conclusion of the book, the radicalism that leads to conflict in rural Java not only gives a unique picture of the locations chosen to study but it also opens the possibility to the spread of radicalism as rural areas that are besieged by encroaching urbanisation. It is worth noting that religious radicalism and conflict are not stand-alone phenomena; there are always numerous related factors that could cause such conditions. Therefore, reading the book makes us aware that several scenarios need to be considered. Agreeing with the author we always need to see the similar potential problems elsewhere in Indonesia not from a limited perspective of religious clashes. There should be a deeper analysis related with economic approaches, political involvement, religious identity, and cultural approach. The case of Kasimpar and Karangobar should teach the lesson that there are always a unique condition in describing the social fabric of a society. Despite rural Java being known for its harmonious tendencies among religious groups, there is always potential to develop radicalism that produces conflict in any area because of the struggles for physical space and needs, economic and political.

With his cultural approach to understanding the social reality of rural Java, the author tries hard to present a society using a Geertzian approach of analysing deeply and he comes out with a 'thick description' of the selected groups. Despite the similarities of the topics of religion, culture and politics, this book conveys some more information that could help us understand the reality of the people in rural Java. However, the strength of this book lies in its effort to describe and analyse the recent conflict from a social and historical point of view. Ample data are supplied to build a composite picture from the oral history and local myths and

combining them with economic, political and religious history to ensure objectivity. In spite of it being complicated for the general reader, this book will prove to be very informative. Several more other research projects can be inspired from the data in the book.

Finally, reading this book will provide all with awareness of the potential divisive factors in all of our tradition. The great tradition that culturally unites us could be so influenced by external values that could easily make separate or *pisah* from one another. In the pluralistic society of Indonesia, these encounters of different religions have forced us to know others better as never before. This is true especially in a situation where two or more religions in the same area have become competitors or even rivals to the truth. A potential conflict can be elevated to the detriment of a community's tolerance and understanding is eroded gradually to a condition where enmity is the only outcome. This book makes us aware that in any pluralist society we all need instruments to know the 'otherness' of the people who are different from us. Religiously different is one thing but not the only thing that could lead to conflict. In practice, we are encouraged to raise questions about evaluating our own and other tradition, about the 'truth' and about why we need to still live side by side as neighbours who could traditions and values that lead to the common good.