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**Language as Symbol System: Islam, Javanese
Moslem, and Cultural Diplomacy**

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Abstract

Islamic diaspora throughout the world has its own characteristics depending on cultural context in each region. Observing the characteristics of the entry process and the rise of Islam in Java in the past, Indonesia can be viewed significantly through a linguistic perspective. By focusing on the narratives of how Islam was constructed in Java by kiai, we will be able to understand that the pattern of the entry process and the rise of Islam in Java emerged through “language diplomacy.” There are various symbols which later became the symbol system in Islamic languages that were contextualized to Javanese language and knowledge systems. In other words, I see that language in this context is a symbol system. These symbols are a strategy of how Islam was “planted” and developed in Java. I will compare the symbol system of the language in the Quran as the Great Tradition of Islam with a symbol system on the narratives that a kiai expressed in Javanese society as the Little Tradition. By taking some narratives that the kiai gave to the Javanese Muslims in East Java region, this paper argues that the linguistic aspect in some narratives and Quran recitation which has the symbolic system of the language have an important role in planting and developing Islam in Java. This paper is based on ethnographic research-participant observation among Nahdlatul Ulama Muslim society in East Java, Indonesia and reviews Islamic narratives in society as an important unit of analysis.

Keywords: context, Great Tradition and Little Tradition, Javanese Islam, language as symbol system, narratives

Introduction

This article is more about reviewing and explaining the narratives delivered by the kiai² (cleric) to Muslims in Java, about how Islam grew and developed in Java in the past. When lecturing on Islam and Java, the clerics always associate it with narratives about Wali Songo. Narratives about Wali Songo are the most famous narratives in Islamic history in Java, but tend to be marginal narratives because of the lack of written evidence about them. However, the Wali Songo narrative appears to be a “marginal narrative” in formal historical studies of Islam in Java, where it is the most important narrative for the Islamic community in Java.

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² Islamic religious leader in local communities

Culturally, the Wali Songo is believed to be an association of several Persian Islamic scholars (although there are more than nine peoples) who are believed to have contributed to bringing Islam from the Arab world and spreading it in the archipelago, especially Java. Not only spreading Islam in Java, these ulama were believed to have engaged in cultural diplomacy. This thought is based on the fact that according to the timeline of the spread of Islam by the ulama, socially and politically, at that time the Javanese society were under the influence of the power of the Majapahit kingdom, which embraced Hinduism. Therefore, the process of spreading Islam in Java in the past is not an easy thing. Then, how did Islamic scholars spread Islam at that time?

At the stage of its initial development or spread, Islam was not taught as a system of ritual, but rather a system of values. In other words, Javanese people in the past were not first introduced to the procedures for praying and fasting, but rather, the good values contained in Islam itself. Islam as a value system is really taught in a cultural way, which tends not to be realized by those who are being taught.

The cultural way referred to the spread of Islam by the Wali Songo, and is well known through the traces of Javanese traditional art, especially through puppet art (*wayang*) and traditional Javanese musical instruments (*gamelan*). Another way that is no less important and that will be the focus of this paper is *da'wah*, the linguistic way. In this paper I will present a number of examples of how the Quran as the basic holy book of Muslims is delivered culturally and linguistically to the Javanese people to be absorbed by the values contained in it.

Introduction: Nahdlatul Ulama and “Planting in a Far Country”

In Indonesia, especially in the context of Javanese Muslims, the largest Muslim mass organization Nahdlatul Ulama. Nahdlatul Ulama was founded by Kiai Haji Hasyim Asyari, Kiai Haji Abdul Wahab, Kiai Haji Bisri Syansuri, and some Islamic scholars in 1926. Some literature has noted that the founding of this mass organization was motivated by international issues. Bruinessen (1994) noted there are three issues and demands that constitute the international background of the Nahdlatul Ulama founding. First, the issue of the plan to destroy Prophet Muhammad's tomb by the Wahhabi government of Saudi Arabia was considered heresy. Second, Hajj pilgrims who come to Mecca must be respected, despite their different schools of thoughts. Third, the religious leader (Imam) in the main mosque of Masjidil Haram, Mecca must have a rotation of interschool thoughts (Hanafi, Maliki, Syafii, Ghazali).

The Muslim mass organization of Nahdlatul Ulama has a characteristic that differs from other mass organization. Nahdlatul Ulama is considered closer to the cultural issues in Islamization in Java. The main value of the Nahdlatul Ulama organization concerns humanity, and does not discriminate among religious, racial and ethnic identities. In this part, I will focus on giving the example of how Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic Scholars (Ulama) interpreted one of the verses in Quran, so as to explain the process of how Islam entered and developed in Java. The verse is as follows:

Muhammad is the Messenger of God. Those with him are stern against the disbelievers, yet compassionate amongst themselves. You see them kneeling, prostrating, seeking blessings from God and approval. Their marks are on their faces from the effects of prostration. Such is their description in the Torah, and their description in the Gospel: Like a plant that sprouts, becomes strong, grows thick, and rests on its stem, impressing the farmers. Through them He

enrages the disbelievers. God has promised those among them who believe and do good deeds forgiveness and a great reward.

(Quran 48, 29, Bold by the writer of this paper)

The bold part above is the most important item that becomes the basic logic of how Nahdlatul Ulama Kiai informed Javanese Muslims of Islamization in Java in the past:

The Majapahit people have plants called Hinduism, like having rice fields planted with tobacco. If someone planted rice on that land, it would be thrown away, the rice would be removed. Therefore Sunan Ampel (One of Wali Songo member) has ijihad. How to grow up Islam (in Java), then He met the verse of the Qur'an above. Islam is like a plant. What plants? Plant the buds out, then get pregnant, then leave the mother. The child and mother bear fruit together, because too much fruit is brought to the market. Then what plants come out of their children first and then their mothers get pregnant? Rice. mother and child bear fruit together, get pregnant and bear fruit together

(Kiai Haji Muwafiq, Jombang, East Java 2018)

The depiction of Islam as a plant contains a very important meaning. First, in the past, the Islamic Religious Leader of Wali Songo could not spread Islam openly, because of the social and political condition at that time, rendering efforts very difficult (as Hinduism remained strong). Second, its growth requires a process. This process is a long process. The seeds of the plant are a symbol of Islamic values. The next form of this plant, is that of Islam as a ritual system. This narrative is very important to illustrate how the ulama delivered the language in the Quran to the Javanese people, in the context of explaining Islamization in Java.

The Linguistic Way: The Symbol System and Diplomacy

The language of cultural diplomacy in the spread of Islam in Java can also be seen through several Javanese terms believed to be made by Wali Songo. These terms were created by Wali Songo with the aim of making the spread of Islam less visible to the Hinduism Kingdom at that time. Referring to the previous Quranic verse, we notice a way with which to spread Islam in a place far from its origin (Arabic). Therefore, planting Islam must be done smoothly and carefully. To grow rice, it must be done underground, not above the ground or land. Kiai Muwafiq noted that if planted on the ground, it would be lost by being eaten by chicken. Therefore there are several elements in Islam that are "planted" in Java, which at that time was still thick with Hinduism. The following is a list of terms in Islam (some examples) that appear to be contextualized in Hindu culture in Javanese land:

Table. 1 Comparison of terms created by the spreaders of Islam at the beginning of the period of spread, namely between Arabic and local languages that are characterized by Hinduism

Terms in Islam	Contextualized Terms
Allah (God)	<i>Pangeran</i> , means King, a figure believed to be very powerful
<i>Sholat</i> (Praying)	<i>Sembahyang</i> (<i>Sembah Sang Hyang</i>)
<i>Muridun</i> (Student)	<i>Santri</i> (from word <i>Sabastri</i>)
<i>Mushola</i> (Small Mosque)	<i>Langgar</i> (from word <i>Sanggar</i>)
<i>Syaikhun</i> , <i>Ustadzun</i> (Islamic teacher)	<i>Kiai</i>
<i>Kalimat Syahadat</i> (Sentences of Creed)	<i>Kalimasada</i>
<i>Ghafura</i> (<i>ampunan</i> or forgiveness)	<i>Gapura</i>

To teach the first pillar of Islam, namely the sentence of creed, Sunan Kalijogo, with all his courage, taught it through wayang with the story of a Puntadewa figure who could not enter Nirvana (heaven). Sunan Kalijogo said that the figure of Puntadewa could not enter heaven because one of his talismans was left behind, causing many other heirlooms to be useless. One of the remaining Puntadewa heirlooms, by Sunan Kalijogo named after Jamus Kalimasada, is a sentence of the creed.

To teach the second pillar of faith, namely prayer, there is a very long process. Preceded by making a call to prayer as necessary, would certainly receive opposition from the kingdom at that time. That is why the song Lir-ilir was created which in one of the lyrics reads “cah angon.. cah angon.. penekna blimbing (starfruit) kuwi.” Starfruit in the song has the meaning of five obligatory prays in Islam. When compared with the call to prayer, the sentence for the “penekna blimbing kuwi” (climb that starfruit tree!) is in harmony with the sentence in the call to prayer, “Hayya ala sholah” (Let’s establish prayer).

Another example is teaching Islamic values to farmers through the hoe (in Javanese: Pacul), a tool for farming. Pacul is an acronym of “ngipatke barang kang ucul.” In life, we must renounce the adverse. The holes for iron in the hoe are named bawak, which means if we are going to renounce ugliness, we must not forget about the crew or business. Other parts of the hoe are doran, which is the wood that stands, and which has the meaning “dungo ning Pangeran” (praying to God). Overall, from Pacul, the farmers are taught if they want to succeed in life, as prayer to God (effort and surrender) require effort.

Linguistics, Symbol Systems, and Cultural Diplomacy

Anthropological studies of Islam and Java are like “the last but not least: There are not only abundant, but also various, explanations and paradigms being used, all of which are infinitely interesting. To begin with, the first reference that can be used as an “entry point” is of course the work of Geertz (1960). From this thick description, emerge some important notes. First, discussions about Islamic life on Java, in the past and until now, are very close to the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. Second, the implication of that dualism is that Islam is

seen as a single principle that is often confronted with various local traditions. As such, the main variants of Islam appear in Java are, Santri, groups that practice Islam in accordance with the appropriate, Shari'a (which are clean from local belief rituals) and Abangan, a dominant agricultural community with complex rituals and beliefs towards ancestral spirits, and with medical practice employing magic and divination.

Regarding Geertz's work, Nakamura (1983) on the one hand said that the abangan, santri, and priayi trichotomy were not based on the same criteria. In addition, in Nakamura's other writings, he described interesting findings, which urged us to not rush to dichotomize abangan-santri. Nakamura argued that the concept of ikhlas (sincerity), sabar (patience), and slamet (safe) introduced by Geertz as the main values in Javanese society actually originated from Islamic teachings and even existed in the Quran. The above terms - ikhlas, sabar, and slamet - even come from Arabic and are sourced from Islamic teachings, and the use of these terms in Javanese is quite harmonious with the religious understanding of the original language (Nakamura 1984: 71).

For example, the term sabar comes from Arabic, *sabr*. This term appears in various verses in the Quran also with the meaning 'patient.' The term ikhlas also comes from Arabic and is contained in many verses in the Quran which means 'worship to God.' One of the surah in the Quran is classified as the most frequently read in Javanese society when performing the Slametan ritual: Surah Al-ikhlas (112th Surah in the Quran). Likewise, with the word slamet, which later according to Geertz became the origin of the term Slametan, a ritual for the abangan, is derived from the Arabic *salam* which means 'peace,' and also emanates from the word *salima* which means 'safe.' That is why in the ritual of slametan, prays for welfare and prosperity both for people who are still alive and for those who have died are always read (Nakamura 1984, 72-74). As such, we find many Javanese names originating from words in the Qur'an.

The next important note, and which will also be my analytical framework, is about the influence of Redfield's mind on Geertz's writings, namely concerning the concepts of Great Tradition and Little Tradition (Redfield 1956). Referring to Redfield, Geertz seems to only focus on Little Traditions which separate his work from the Great Tradition. The implication is that Islam in the Javanese order at the local level is considered fully separate from Islam in the Great Tradition (Islam which is in accordance with the Quran and Hadith). Nakamura also comprehensively conveyed Geertz's weaknesses at this point. Regarding Muslim communities, the differences or boundaries between Great Traditions and Little Traditions tend to create conceptual boundaries for researchers.

The implication is that anthropologists may only tend to focus on Little Traditions, namely everything they encounter in the field during ethnographic research, but may deny the Great Tradition, which in this case are the main sources of the Islam: Al-Quran, and Al-Hadith, which are actively studied and often referred to as normative sources by Muslim societies (Nakamura 1984, 74). Introducing the concepts of Great Tradition and Little Traditions, Redfield stated:

Great Traditions' are processed and developed in schools or temples, 'Little Traditions' run and survive in the lives of the uneducated in the village community. The tradition of philosophers, theologians, and writers is a tradition that is developed and inherited consciously; while the traditions of small people are things that are accepted as is

(Redfield 1956, 70)

Redfield developed a pair of concepts “Great Traditions” and “Little Traditions” after describing farmers as part of the community. He saw how in the 19th century, anthropologists began to study groups in primitive societies as an integrative unit (self-contained integrated wholes). These groups in society are functionally related systems (Redfield 1956, 4-6). Referring to this, anthropologists should begin to see that communities, in this case the varied Muslim community in Java, must be seen as part of a larger system in the world of Muslim society. However, in this context, I put the concept of Great Tradition and Little Traditions in the corridor of language as a system of symbols. In other words, on the one hand there is a Qur’an which contains language as a symbol system, and on the other hand the guardian *songo* and *kiai* make all forms of language (songs, performances, everyday terms) as languages as a symbol system (in Javanese). Hence, in this case, the Qur’an is seen as an element of Great Tradition and Java is seen as an element of Little Tradition: Both are not two separate things, but are interconnected.

Eickelman (2001) suggests that researchers, rather than focusing on the dichotomism of Islam as the high culture and folk religion, must focus on the elements that exist between them by observing religious practices in the local context. Eickelman, Varisco (2005) proposed that studying Islam as a textual religion or studying Islam by departing from the problems that exists in books will lead to obscuring the social aspects of Islam. Therefore, as I began with, the emic principle is an important aspect to take into account during field research. In researching Muslims, Varisco suggested prioritizing involved observations so as to follow the debates and dynamics of discourse about Islam in the society he studied, rather than “measuring” the local practices of Islamic society studied in accordance with the parameters of textual Islam (Varisco, 2005, 141).

Maranci (2008) states that to examine Islam in the local context, what needs to be the focus of attention is Muslims themselves, not Islam. Maranci began his book, *The Anthropology of Islam*, with interesting - imaginary conversations. The conversations are written before examining the “text” and “context” of Islam and Muslim societies. Here, an anthropologist needs to find the most basic elements of the Muslims he studies. A fundamental element according to Maranci is that Muslims develop their emotional attachment as Muslims. In other words, Muslims are those who feel Muslim and Islam is a network map of discourse. Theoretically, Maranci revealed important reflective questions that need to be considered, namely whether the title of the study of *The Anthropology of Islam* is correct. More precisely, when compared with *The Anthropology of Islam(s)* or *The Anthropologist (ies) of Islam*. Whatever the answer, Maranci implies that the importance is for us to realize the diversity and complexity of Muslim life in this world, especially if studied according to an anthropological perspective.

Meanwhile, Marsden and Retsikas (2013) argue that items such as discourse on Islam are always produced, reproduced, and transformed, in variations according to a very broad local context. Therefore, an anthropological researcher who studies Islam in society rather than using an approach that views Muslims as stable, would benefit by learning the articulation of Islam into “everyday experience.” Marsden and Retsikas state:

In relation to the study of Islam, scholars from a variety of disciplines with great sophistication and understanding of texts and religious life are always embedded within social life, power relations and modes of authority. More recently, scholarship has been shown to be important for the Islamic discourse

and Hadith: they reflect, rather, influence of local and regional influences and traditions

(Marsden and Retsikas 2013, 3)

Fernando (2015) expressed the concept of “Everyday Islam,” which suggests that most of what is expressed by Muslims is a manifestation of Islam itself in the local context. There are two things that concern Fernando’s main concern; first is the concern for heterogeneity and communality among Muslims, and second is the attention to the dominance of social structures among the Muslims studied. Bowen (2012), who agreed with Fernando, noted that the dynamic aspects of normative texts (scriptures) need to be considered when examining Islam in society. Therefore, Bowen suggests that it is important to examine religious practices and to explore their understanding to get a pattern of how sacred norms (scriptures) are understood by a society in a certain space and place.

According to Saifuddin (2015), there are some important notes about symbols and interpretations in a culture. First, the important concern of this approach is the meaningful interpretation of human practice. This approach distinguishes between making explanations and seeking understanding. Explaining means identifying the common causes of an event, while understanding is a process of determining the meanings of an event or social practice in a particular context. The purpose of a study is to reconstruct meaning, and to look for the significance of events, or social practice.

The interpretive approach in anthropology, for example in this study, shows several things. Individual actions and beliefs can only be understood through interpretation, which, with that interpretation, I as a researcher seek to find meaning or significance of an action or an understanding / belief about something about the people studied. There is a vast diversity of cultures with regard to the way social life is conceptualized, and these differences automatically create diversity in the social world (Little 1991, 68-69 in Saifuddin 2015, 212).

Regarding Little’s opinion above, we can see, for example, how a kiai conceptualizes Islam in Java as “planting crops in a distant land.” In the context of other cultures and societies, perhaps the choice of words that have meaning, can be different from those taught by the kiai in Java. This is why, what was written by Ernest Cassirer (1944), although very classic, still remains relevant today: Without a complex system of symbols, the human ability to think relationally cannot occur. “Humans no longer live solely in the physical universe, humans live in a symbolic universe. Language, myth, art, and religion are part of this universe. That part of the universe is like a variety of threads that are woven together to build webs of symbolic webs. All human progress in thinking and experience softens and strengthens these webs” (Cassirer 1976, 20 in Saifuddin 2015).

Reading the quote above, I as a researcher fully realize that the Quran as a Muslim scripture, is a symbol system of language and a religious system which contains a complex system of symbols. In just one verse, there are many hundreds or even thousands of books that attempt to interpret. These thousands of interpretations, referring to Cassirer above, are nothing but human efforts to “soften and strengthen” the webs of symbols and meanings in Islam.

For Muslims widely, the language contained in the Quran is often said to be a symbolic language. Indeed, there have been many people who have translated verses in the Quran and each of them makes commentaries. Actually, the books made by the scholars show two things: First, what is written by the ulama and kiai regarding the interpretation of the Quran is nothing

but the result of his interpretation of the verses of the Quran. The interpretation is certainly obtained through a learning process that is not short. Second, not everyone can interpret, and even write a book that contains the translation of the verses of the Quran. Only people who have authority can do it.

Conclusion

Islamization in Java was taken not through violence but through a cultural approach, one of which was in the linguistic perspective. According to the narratives delivered by the kiai as cultural intermediaries, the spread of Islam through language channels is a form of cultural diplomacy between Hindu influences, Javanese culture (in this case Javanese language), and Islamic values themselves. Language becomes the most effective way to penetrate the human mind, in this case to instill Islamic values to the Javanese community without explicitly stating that the values instilled are Islamic values. This is because Islam was conveyed and spread in Java as a value system, not a ritual system.

The Qur'an and the language contained in it as a form of the Great Tradition are translated into Little Traditions in the form of everyday terms in Javanese. In some cases, these terms manifest in songs and performances that we can still witness in the present. It was all formed by the guardian song, famous scholars who were believed to have spread Islam in Java. Hindu influence still exists in Little Traditions but is only limited to "clothing," while "the inside" is Islamic. This is the reason that Islamic values are more easily accepted by Javanese people who at that time still received much Hindu influence.

The process of "translating" the Qur'an as a Great Tradition into a product of Little Traditional languages cannot be conducted carelessly by people, but only those who have high knowledge. The process of "translation" of the Great Tradition into Little Traditions is also because the Qur'an and languages which are contained in the verses themselves are symbolic systems that are very complicated and require interpretation. Therefore only certain people can interpret and make it into other forms to preach or disseminate the teachings of Islamic values, namely those who have received Islamic education.

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